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SERIES OF WEBINARS

A thousand ways to solve our problems: Preventing and responding to violence against women from an intersectional perspective

*Ending violence against women in the Western Balkans and Turkey:
Implementing Norms, Changing Minds*

WEBINAR 4: Intersectional solutions to end violence against Roma women and girls

Following the International Roma Day

Date and time: 9th of April 2021, 10:00 a.m to noon CEST (GMT+2)

Background paper

This document aims to provide a snapshot of the situation of Roma women and girls in the Western Balkans and Turkey, with an emphasis on issues related to violence against women (VAW) and domestic violence (DV) to inform and facilitate discussions to be held during the webinar “Intersectional solutions to end violence against Roma women and girls” on the 9th of April 2021 following the International Roma Day. This webinar is the fourth in the series of webinars “[A thousand ways to solve our problems: Preventing and responding to violence against women from an intersectional perspective](#),” organized by the European Union, the Council of Europe and UN Women, and designed to provide a space for knowledge sharing and discussion on how to prevent and respond to VAW from an intersectional perspective, acknowledging and addressing the specific issues faced by minority and marginalized women in the Western Balkans and Turkey.

This document’s main sources of information are the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women Concluding Observations and Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) baseline reports, when available. The document also relies on the research work undertaken within the EU-UN Women regional programme “[Ending violence against women and girls in the Western Balkans and Turkey: Implementing Norms, Changing Minds](#)” and the Roma Inclusion Index 2015.

The document also highlights many obstacles and issues that prevent Roma women and girls from benefiting from quality and accessible services, enjoying decent economic benefits, and participating in decision-making arenas.

What is intersectionality?

The concept of intersectionality was first coined in 1989 by Black feminist activist and academic Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw offered intersectionality as a tool to contextualize the specific ways African-American women were being subjected to both sex and race discrimination and the barriers they faced when trying to seek redress for this. Since then, the term 'intersectionality' has been used to understand women's experiences at the intersection of a number of simultaneous oppressions.¹

Intersectionality recognizes that individuals can experience discrimination on the basis of multiple and intersecting identities. Specifically, CEDAW and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (also known as the Istanbul Convention) have observed that ethnic minority women, elderly women, women living in rural or remote areas, disabled women, migrant women, women in prisons and women and girls on the street are particularly vulnerable to disadvantage and discrimination. Discrimination and violence faced by these women is characterized by a unique simultaneous combination of several factors, and not by the simple addition of these factors. Accordingly, intersectional feminism centers the voices of those experiencing overlapping, concurrent forms of oppression in order to understand the depths of the inequalities and the relationships among them in any given context. Intersectional feminism offers a lens through which we can better understand and address disparate impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in communities around the globe, but also international protests against racism and discrimination. Taking an intersectional feminist approach to the crises of today helps to seize the opportunity to rebuild better, stronger, more resilient, and more equal societies, by not only turning the tables on gender injustices, but rooting out all forms of oppression. It serves as a framework through which to build inclusive, robust movements that work to solve overlapping forms of discrimination, simultaneously.²

At an international level, CEDAW is committed to eliminating all forms of discrimination and achieving gender equality so that all women can exercise and enjoy their human rights. This implicitly includes a commitment to understanding and addressing intersectional discrimination. Under CEDAW, if sex and gender is one of the bases for discrimination, it is necessary to examine how other identities and factors contribute to discrimination. At a regional level, the legally-binding Istanbul Convention, which came into force on 1 August 2014, is considered a milestone in the fight against VAWG in Council of Europe countries. The Istanbul Convention likewise incorporates a theoretical framing of "intersectionality," as it recognizes the specific problems of women and girls exposed to multiple or intersectional discrimination and specifically urges parties to "take into account and address the specific needs of persons made vulnerable by particular circumstances" (Istanbul Convention, Article 12, part 3).

SITUATION OF ROMA WOMEN IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY: AN INTRODUCTION

According to official statistics from the Western Balkans and Turkey, there are around one million Roma in the region, representing one per cent of the region's total population.³ However, the average estimation claimed by Roma CSOs and collected by the Council of Europe estimates the Roma community at over 3.5 million. This gap is explained by different statistical systems across the region and the lack of ethnically disaggregated data for various reasons (legal obstacles, lack of official request, etc.). Gender disaggregated data are even less common or missing altogether, as is the case

¹ [The value of intersectionality in understanding VAWG, UN Women, 2019](#), page 3

² [Intersectional feminism: what it means and why it matters right now, UN Women, 2020](#)

³ [Roma Integration Regional Cooperation Council, The Size of the Roma Community in the region](#)

in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. Data collected and analyzed in the Roma Inclusion Index 2015⁴ covering the Western Balkans indicate that while some progress was made in some countries in a few domains, gaps between Roma and the total population remain significant, especially in the domains of education, employment, health and housing.

A significant number of Roma women in the region live in poverty, are socially excluded and economically dependent on their partners, and live in an extended family household, most often with the family of their partners/spouses. This situation makes it more difficult for Roma women to exit the cycle of violence, because many of them feel that if they leave their partner, they will have no place to go or they will not be able to care for themselves and their children.⁵

VIOLENCE AGAINST ROMA WOMEN: AN ISSUE EXPLAINED BY WIDESPREAD PATRIARCHAL NORMS AND POOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Despite Western Balkans countries' ratification of the Istanbul Convention (with the exception of Kosovo*, which recently amended its Constitution to include the Istanbul Convention in the list of directly applicable legal instruments for the protection of human rights), and despite a lack of sex-disaggregated data on Roma women in the Western Balkans and Turkey and the prevalence of VAWG among them, many observations, including from CEDAW and GREVIO, highlight the heightened risk of all forms of violence and discrimination for Roma women due to widespread patriarchal norms in their communities and poor socio-economic conditions.

All forms of violence encountered by Roma women were exacerbated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. As informed by the UN Women rapid assessment "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on specialist services for victims and survivors of violence in the Western Balkans and Turkey: A proposal for addressing the needs," Roma women living in isolated, deprived communities and substandard settlements became even more isolated due to movement restriction measures.⁶ They also faced more difficulties to access institutions responsible for responding to VAWG due to restricted work regimes. Hence, outreach efforts relied on Roma mediators, persons of trust or local coordinators, as they could visit women in their communities and be an entry point for reporting violence.

Even under normal conditions, the reporting rate of violence is very low among Roma women and girls due to fear of retaliation from their abusers, shame, minimization of survived violence, and economic dependence on partners due to difficulties to find employment resulting from prejudice against Roma women. As highlighted in the "Regional report on discrimination of Roma women in the area of healthcare, child marriages and support and protection in cases of domestic violence,"⁷ the most common reason preventing Roma women to report violence is linked with their experience of discrimination among general and specialist service providers.

⁴ [Roma Inclusion Index, 2015](#), page 14

⁵ [Regional report on discrimination of Roma women in the area of healthcare, child marriages and support and protection in cases of domestic violence, UN Women, 2019](#), page 53

⁶ For the European Union, this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. For UN Women, references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

⁶ [Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on specialist services for victims and survivors of violence in the Western Balkans and Turkey: A proposal for addressing the needs, UN Women, 2020](#), page 14

⁷ [Regional report on discrimination of Roma women in the area of healthcare, child marriages and support and protection in cases of domestic violence, UN Women, 2019](#), page 53

Moreover, as particularly highlighted by CEDAW Concluding observations in Albania⁸ and Bosnia and Herzegovina,⁹ Roma women and children are disproportionately represented among victims of trafficking, particularly for the purpose of sexual and labour exploitation, as well as forced begging, despite recent measures adopted by governments to address this issue, such as the action plan for combating trafficking in persons for the period 2016–2019 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The CEDAW Committee also regrets the lack of information about the number of reports, prosecutions and convictions in cases of trafficking across the region.

The level of recognition and perception of different types and manifestations of violence is strongly linked to the level of education and socioeconomic status of Roma women.¹⁰ GREVIO notes the widespread need for more long-term and regular awareness-raising campaigns to lift existing taboos around sexual violence, but also to raise awareness more generally on the other forms of violence that women experience at the hands of men. In this regard, GREVIO welcomes the joint work between authorities in Montenegro and international partners to conduct awareness campaigns on VAW in twelve Roma settlements.¹¹

Although additional temporary measures targeting vulnerable groups, and more particularly Roma women, were adopted in the Western Balkans and welcomed by GREVIO and CEDAW, most of them remain insufficient to prevent and address VAW within Roma communities. In Albania for instance, GREVIO did not find any evidence indicating that policies targeting certain vulnerable groups, such as the National Action Plan for Integration of the Roma and Egyptians for the period 2016-2020, sufficiently mainstreamed measures to prevent and combat VAW.¹² In Montenegro, the Action Plan for Gender Equality (2017-2021), the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptian Population in Montenegro (2016-2020), and the Action Plan for implementation of the United Nations Resolution 1325 Women, Peace and Security (2017-2018) fail to provide a holistic approach and neglect to consider forms of VAW other than domestic violence. Sexual violence and rape, especially outside of the family context, currently seem to receive very little policy attention.¹³ In Serbia, the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma in the Republic of Serbia (2016-2025) does not contain comprehensive measures for the protection of Roma women from VAW.¹⁴

PREVALENCE OF CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGES HIGHER AMONG ROMA COMMUNITIES THAN GENERAL POPULATION

Child, early and forced marriages (CEFM), also present in the general population, is a prevalent form of gender-based violence within the Roma community in the region. Among other factors, CEFM is explained by poverty, social exclusion, lack of education and patriarchal relations still widespread in Roma families, which manifest in the control of women's bodies and their sexuality.¹⁵ In North Macedonia, data from 2011 show that 22 per cent of girls in the Roma community are married. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, five out of ten Roma women were married before turning 18. In Montenegro, marriage before the age of 18 is more common among Roma and Egyptian women, at 56 per cent, compared to 6.2 per cent in the general population. Similarly, in Serbia, 57 per cent of girls from the

⁸ [CEDAW Concluding observations on the fourth periodic review of Albania, 2016](#), paragraph 24

⁹ [CEDAW Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019](#), paragraph 27

¹⁰ [Regional report on discrimination of Roma women in the area of healthcare, child marriages and support and protection in cases of domestic violence, UN Women, 2019](#), page 36

¹¹ [GREVIO baseline report on Montenegro, 2018](#), paragraph 75

¹² [GREVIO baseline report on Albania, 2017](#), paragraph 17

¹³ [GREVIO baseline report on Montenegro, 2018](#), paragraph 23

¹⁴ [GREVIO baseline report on Serbia, 2020v](#), paragraph 16

¹⁵ [Regional report on discrimination of Roma women in the area of healthcare, child marriages and support and protection in cases of domestic violence, UN Women, 2019](#), page 34

Roma community were married before turning 18, compared to 7 per cent in the majority population.¹⁶

Inadequate institutional response and inefficient enforcement of the law increase the frequency of CEFM and perpetuate impunity and lack of awareness on the issue. Although legal frameworks in the Western Balkans protect girls against CEFM, these regulations very often fail Roma girls, as CEFM is treated as a Roma 'custom' instead of a violation of Roma girls' rights, and professionals fail to deal such cases without prejudice and stereotypes. As such, reluctance to report Roma girls' prolonged absence from school was reported in Montenegro, although such absences indicate an urgent need to prevent/act against CEFM.¹⁷ In Montenegro, CEDAW is concerned about the legal minimum age of marriage being set at 16 years old.¹⁸ Additionally, in Montenegro, out of the 50 cases of forced marriage that have come to the attention of the Centre for Roma Women's Initiative and/or the authorities, none have led to an indictment.¹⁹ In North Macedonia, despite legislation prohibiting marriage for girls under the age of 16 and the safeguards in place for marriage involving children between 16 and 18 years of age, CEFM remains persistent.

Once married, girls are often unable to leave the relationship, even in situations of DV and sexual exploitation, due in part to the payment the bride's family receives for the marriage, which can range from 1,000 to 6,000 EUR. If they run away or attempt to return to their previous home, the parents would be required to return the money.²⁰

Recent intervention strategies targeting girls at risk of CEFM have been implemented in the Western Balkans and wait to bear fruit. In Serbia, efforts were invested to set up a National Coalition for Ending Child Marriage, uniting all relevant institutions and CSO and planning to intensify training for professionals on the protection from CEFM as well as more support for Roma girls, their families and Roma organizations.²¹

STEREOTYPES IMPEDE ROMA WOMEN'S ACCESS TO SUPPORT SERVICES

All GREVIO and CEDAW observations in the Western Balkans point out that stereotypical beliefs about Roma women often result in insufficient responses from the authorities. A large number of Roma women who reported violence encountered unprofessional, inappropriate and discriminatory reactions from professionals, some of whom even refused to provide assistance. In Montenegro, GREVIO reported cases of Roma women encountering skepticism and denial from women's support service providers due to their poor socio-economic background, leading officials to think they are seeking material advantages (free accommodation or food) instead of genuine protection.²² These experiences of discrimination, as well as stories of discrimination from other Roma women, prevent women from reporting violence, putting them at risk of escalation of violence and ultimately femicide.

Furthermore, Roma women generally face difficulties to access shelters and their services due to the overall limited places. In Montenegro, although efforts have been made in the past to reach out to Roma women to ensure they benefit from shelters' services, shelters are often filled to capacity, and many women seeking refuge cannot be accommodated.²³ In Serbia, most shelters will only accept

¹⁶ [Regional report on discrimination of Roma women in the area of healthcare, child marriages and support and protection in cases of domestic violence, UN Women, 2019](#), page 28

¹⁷ [GREVIO baseline report on Montenegro, 2018](#), paragraph 150

¹⁸ [CEDAW Concluding observations on the second periodic report on Montenegro, 2017](#), paragraph 20

¹⁹ *Ibid*, paragraph 221

²⁰ [Regional report on discrimination of Roma women in the area of healthcare, child marriages and support and protection in cases of domestic violence, UN Women, 2019](#), page 24

²¹ [GREVIO baseline report on Serbia, 2020](#), paragraph 18

²² [GREVIO baseline report on Montenegro, 2018](#), paragraph 18

²³ *Ibid*, paragraph 128

service users on the basis of an official referral by the local Centre for Social Welfare, where stigmas and perceptions of Roma women seem to affect their chances of being referred to a shelter. Although some shelters do accept women who self-refer, they will be asked to cover the cost of their stay – presenting an insurmountable obstacle for most Roma women.²⁴

GREVIO also raises the alarm on the high representation of Roma children under state care in Serbia, revealing a worrying practice of removing Roma children from their mothers for seemingly lacking parental inability instead of focusing on supporting Roma women to build a life without violence and providing them with access to comprehensive support services, such as shelters that can house both the mother and the children.²⁵

When accompanied and supported by Roma women’s organizations or Roma health mediators, Roma women survivors of violence tend to receive better support from service providers and a better outcome. However, GREVIO notes with concern the non-systematic presence of Roma health mediators and the growing isolation faced particularly by Roma women’s organizations as they face obstacles both from within their communities and outside. Indeed, examples of cooperation between institutions and Roma women’s organizations remain rare. Rare example includes the establishment of an inter-sectorial commission at the local level in Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to improve the socioeconomic status of Roma women and men in the areas of healthcare, education, prevention of violence, social issues, while institutions at the state level, primarily the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees and the Gender Equality Agency recognize the Roma Women’s Network for its implementation of activities aimed at a general improvement of the status of Roma women and men in society.²⁶ In Serbia however, none of the policy documents adopted in recent years envisage cooperation between state actors and women’s CSOs that run specialist services.²⁷

AREAS OF RECOMMENDATIONS BY CEDAW AND GREVIO

To address and prevent gender-based discrimination and violence against Roma women:

- Address the underlying causes of gender-based violence against women and develop specific measures to sensitize women and men from Roma communities on the criminal nature of gender-based violence against women;
- Address the root causes of trafficking by enhancing educational and economic opportunities for women and girls and their families, in particular among the Roma community, thereby reducing their vulnerability to exploitation by traffickers;
- Conduct research on the prevalence and causes of gender-based violence against Roma women and girls, ensuring that it covers older women and rural women and girls.

To guarantee Roma women and girls’ access to education and reduce the risk of CEFM:

- Enhance the accessibility and quality of education for all children and address the disproportionately low enrolment and completion rates at all levels of education among Roma girl victims of child marriage, gender-based violence or trafficking;
- Adopt and implement further targeted policies and programmes to overcome the educational barriers faced by Roma women and girls, and take effective measures to retain them in school and increase their attendance at the primary and secondary levels;

²⁴ [GREVIO baseline report on Serbia, 2020](#), paragraph 129

²⁵ *Ibid*, paragraph 171

²⁶ [GREVIO report submitted by Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2020](#), page 18

²⁷ [GREVIO baseline report on Serbia, 2020](#), paragraph 35

- Continue to raise awareness among Roma communities about the harmful effects of CEFM on the education, health and development of girls;
- Establish a system to track all cases involving child marriage among stateless children, in particular Roma girls.

To guarantee Roma women's access to services:

- Map the capacity of domestic violence shelters and to ensure practical access for all women, in particular for Roma women;
- Take measures to prevent stigmatization and prejudice against Roma women among medical practitioners;
- Integrate Roma health mediators into the public health-care system;
- Prevent and eliminate the practice of charging illegal fees for public health services;
- Ensure access to affordable and high-quality health care and family planning and sexual and reproductive health services;
- Increase the political support for the role of women's CSOs providing support to Roma women, including at the local level.

Crosscutting recommendations:

- Strengthen the application of temporary special measures targeting women belonging Roma communities, including in political and public life, as well as in the areas of education, employment and health;
- Conduct research on the situation of Roma women and girls in all aspects of life and adopt a plan of action targeting them in order to redress their situation;
- Ensure formal and permanent consultation processes and cooperation between the national machinery and CSOs, including those representing the interests of Roma;
- Redouble efforts to ensure access to birth registration across the State party and ensure that public authorities uphold the rights of Roma women to acquire, change and retain nationality in all proceedings covered by legislation on citizenship;
- Accelerate the equal representation of women, including Roma women, in all areas of political and public life, in particular in decision-making positions, at the national and local levels, and in the armed forces and foreign service, and allocate adequate resources for the implementation of such measures.