REGIONAL REPORT

on compliance with UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) relating to discrimination of Roma women in the area of healthcare, child marriages and offering support and protection to Roma women in cases of domestic violence

REGIONAL REPORT

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Romani Asocijacija Dzuvljenge thaj Ternenge
Roma Women and Youth Association

OTAHARIN

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1. INTRODUCTION

The regional report on compliance with CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention represents one of the activities in the project "Unifying the Voices for Ending Violence against Women" carried out by Bibija Roma Women's Center and UN Women during the period from July 10th, 2018 to September 30th, 2019. The project is part of the EU/UN Women regional programme on ending violence against women in the Western Balkans and Turkey, "Implementing Norms, Changing Minds." The project is focused on the unification of women's voices, national and local civil society organizations, experts, human rights' defenders, activists, NGOs and national organizations working on Roma and gender-based issues, as well as on the question of prevention and protection of women against violence.

The general goal of the project is to contribute to the development of measures directed at reducing multiple interconnected inequalities, discrimination, and violence against Roma women, as well as to reinforce the voices of Roma women to engage with, report on, and advocate for the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) and UN Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The following organizations participated in the composition of this report:

- Bosnia and Herzegovina: "Otaharin" from Bijeljina, Association of Women "Maja" from Kravica, Association of women "Romkinja" from Bijeljina, Association of women "Romska djevojka" from Prnjavor, "Zemlja djece" from Tuzla, "Budi mi prijatelj" from Visoko and CPP "Sensus" from Mostar;
- Montenegro – "Crnogorski ženski lobi" from Podgorica, "Centar za romske inicijative" from Nikšić, "Mladiinfo Montenegro" from Podgorica, "Ženska RE mreža PRVA" from Podgorica and "Klub Kulture" from Bijelo Polje;
- Serbia – "Romski ženski centar Bibija" from Belgrade, "UG Femplatz" from Pančevo, "Most 014" from Valjevo, "Praxis" from Belgrade, "Romani Cikna" from Kruševac, "Ternipe" from Pirot, "Victimology Society of Serbia" from Belgrade; "Ženski romski centar" from Veliki Crljeni, "Ženski proctor" from Niš.
- North Macedonia – "Organizacija na ženite from the Sveti Nikola Municipality, "Krizen center Nadež" from Skopje, "Novinari za Čovekovi Prava" from Skopje, "Terno Vas" from Berovo, "Inicijativa na ženi od Šuto Orizari", "Klea" and "Romska Asocijacija za Ženi i Mladi LULUDI" from Skopje.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)[1] and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention)[2] have been ratified in all countries that are the subject of this report.

1.1. Reporting to the CEDAW committee and GREVIO group

All countries which are the subject of this research regularly submit reports to the CEDAW committee on the implementation of the Convention.

The combined fourth and fifth periodic report of **Bosnia and Herzegovina** was revised by the CEDAW committee on July 19th, 2013.[3] The deadline for the sixth periodic report was in July 2017, [4] but Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted it in April 2018.

The CEDAW committee revised the second periodic report of **Montenegro** on a session on the July 24th, 2017 and requested from this country member to submit the following third report by July 2021.[5]

At the session held on November 1st, 2018, the CEDAW committee reviewed the sixth periodic report of **North Macedonia**; the key observations about this report specify that North Macedonia should submit the following report by November 2022.[6]

The fourth periodic report of **the Republic of Serbia** was reviewed in March 2019 and the deadline for submitting the following report is March 2023. [7]

Out of the countries addressed in this report, monitoring procedures on compliance with the Istanbul Convention, conducted by the GREVIO group, have only been concluded for Montenegro, who received their GREVIO recommendations on January 28th, 2019. In **the Republic of Serbia**, the monitoring procedure is in progress. The

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[1] CEDAW convention was ratified by North Macedonia in 1994, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993, Montenegro in 2006, and the Republic of Serbia in 1981.

[2] Istanbul Convention was ratified by North Macedonia in 2019, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2013, Montenegro in 2014, and Serbia in 2013.

[3] The Committee on Elimination of all Forms of Violence against Women. Concluded remarks on combined fourth and fifth periodic report of Bosnia and Herzegovina, July 30th, 2013, CEDAW/C/BIH/CO/4-5

[4] Women's Network BiH, *The information about Sixth periodic report of Bosnia and Herzegovina on applying the UN Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*, available in Bosnian on: https://zenskamreza.ba/informacije-za-sesti-periodicni-izvjestaj-bosne-i-hercegovine-o-primjeni-konvencije-ujedinjenih-nacija-o-ukidanju-svih-oblika-diskriminacije-zena-cedaw-za-dostavljanje/

[5] The Committee on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Concluded remarks on the second periodic report of Montenegro, July 24th, 2017, CEDAW/C/MNE/CO/2

[6] The Committee on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, *Key observations on the sixth periodic report of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, November 14th, 2018, CEDAW/C/MKD/CO/6

[7] The Committee on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. *Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Serbia,* March 8th, 2019. CEDAW/C/SRB/CO/4

state has submitted the report on implementation of the Istanbul Convention on July 3rd, 2018 and several civil society organizations contributed to this process.[8]

The GREVIO group will send the questionnaire[9] to **Bosnia and Herzegovina** in September 2019 and to **North Macedonia** in September 2021,[10] thereby starting the monitoring process in these two countries.

1.2. Anti-discriminatory legal framework

In addition to the ratification of these two important conventions, all countries have solidly defined anti-discriminatory legal frameworks. According to the Anti-Discrimination Law [11] in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, direct or indirect discrimination on any basis is prohibited. In **North Macedonia**, the Law on Equal Opportunities of Men and Women defines discrimination as any gender-based differentiation, abuse or limitation which jeopardizes or disables enjoyment of human rights and freedoms, [12] whereas according to the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination any direct and indirect discrimination based on, among other things, gender, race and skin color is prohibited. [13]

The Anti-Discrimination Law of **Montenegro** defines discrimination as any unjustified, either direct or indirect, way of differentiation, unequal treatment, or failure to treat one person or a group of persons in relation to other persons; exclusion, restriction or favorizing a person in relation to other persons based on race, skin color, nationality, social or ethnical origin, religion or beliefs, political or any other opinion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, health condition, disability, age, financial assets, marital or family status, membership of a group or assumptions of being a member of a group, political party or other organization, as well as on other personal features.[14]

The Anti-Discrimination Law of **the Republic of Serbia**[15] defines discrimination as any unjustified differentiation or unequal treatment or omission of one person (exclusion, restriction or favorizing) in relation to other persons or groups of persons and to their

[8] Council of Europe, *Country-monitoring – Serbia*, available at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/serbia

[9] More information about monitoring procedures: Council of Europe, *About monitoring,* available at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/about-monitoring1; Questionnaire available at: https://rm.coe.int/16805c95b0

[10] Council of Europe, *Provisional Timetable for the first (baseline) evaluation procedure: 2016-2023,* available at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/timetable

[11] "Official Gazette of BiH", Nos. 59/09 and 66/16

[12] "Службен Весник на РМ", vol 66/06

[13] "Службен весник на РМ", vol 50/2010

[14] "Official Gazette of Montenegro", vol 046/10 dated August 6th, 2010, 040/11 dated August 8th, 2011, 018/14 from April 11th, 2014

[15] "Official Gazette of RS", number 22/2009.

family members or close persons in an open or disguised manner, based on race, skin color, ancestors, citizenship, nationality or ethnicity, religious or political beliefs, sex, gender equality, sexual orientation, financial assets, birth, genetic features, health condition, disability, marital or family status, convictions, age, appearance, memberships in political, union and other organizations or any other personal or assumptive personal features. [16] Discrimination against national minorities and their members based on nationality, ethnicity, religious beliefs and language is prohibited.[17]

[16] Article 2. Paragraph 1. Item 1. Law on Prohibition of Discrimination
[17] Article 24. Law on Prohibition of Discrimination

2. METHODOLOGY

As a part of the project "Unifying the Voices for Ending Violence against Women" implemented by the Roma Women's Center BIBIJA and UN Women with the financial support of the European Union, civil society organizations from North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia have been collecting data on the field work from the beginning of January until mid- April, composing reports which were the starting point for composition of national reports. Trainings on international and national regulations that prohibit discrimination and gender-based violence, on the research procedures, as well as on the reporting obligations of in terms of reporting to CEDAW and the GREVIO group has been provided for researchers in December 2018. Research instruments were developed, i.e. guides for focus groups and interviews, and for the researchers from North Macedonia a questionnaire as well. National reports have been composed for each country, more comprehensive and detailed than regional report.

Project partners agreed that the regional report will include three important topics for Roma women – the issue of health care, child marriages, and violence against Roma women, in particular protection from violence and support in situations of violence. These topics were identified as the most pressing, based on the partner organizations' long-standing experience in the region, and keeping in mind the multiple barriers and obstacles Roma women face.

The national report of **North Macedonia** was prepared through qualitative and quantitative research. Firstly, qualitative research of the national legal framework related to equality, non-discrimination, women's rights and violence against women was presented. Quantitative research was then conducted with 120 Roma women interviewees. The questionnaire's 21 questions were divided into the three topics (health care, marital and family relations, and violence against women).

The national report of **Montenegro** was composed by applying a multi-sectoral approach, i.e. by using the combined method of information analysis from four sources: fieldwork; analysis of qualitative data collected from Roma and Egyptian women and girls; data collected through interviews with the police officers, social workers, and health care workers; and legal and institutional frameworks relevant to the rights of Roma women and girls, where analysis emphasized compliance with CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention recommendations.

The national report of **Bosnia and Herzegovina** includes analysis of the country's legal framework in relations to the standards set out by the Istanbul Convention and CEDAW, particularly provisions which set out women's and girls' equality in the area of education, health care, marriage and family relations. Various sources of data collection were used for the other part of the research, including research conducted by civil society organizations, semi-structured in-depth interviews with professionals from

relevant institutions, focus-group discussions and semi-structured interviews with Roma women, as well as case studies.

The national report of the **Republic of Serbia** is comprised of existing resources (desk research), data collected by researchers in focus-group discussions, and data from in-depth interviews with Roma women and representatives from relevant national authorities. During focus groups and interviews, Roma women shared their experiences and opinions with the women researchers, so their stories, ideas, and recommendations were the key indicator of the position of Roma women in Serbia. At the end of the report, recommendations and conclusions were made with the goal of improving the status of Roma women in the area of health care, as well as to strengthen the prevention of violence against Roma women, including child marriages.

The regional report was made by unifying the national reports and singling out the parts that are the most significant for the key three topics. When developing this report, the most attention is given to the voices of Roma women and girls from Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro. However, national reports are available for more in-depth information of the status of Roma women in specific countries, as well as more detailed information on the legal frameworks of respective countries.

Additionally, anti-discrimination laws containing provisions on prohibition of discrimination based on a huge number of personal traits, including sex, gender, ethnicity or nationality have been adopted in all countries comprised by this report. That means that (multiple) discrimination of Roma women is prohibited in all specified countries in the area of public and private life, including healthcare, marital and family relations, as well as discrimination related to support and protection of Roma women who are experiencing domestic and partnership violence.

The regional report is divided into three parts, according to the topics selected, followed by recommendations for improvement of position of Roma women in all spheres of social life. At the end of this report, five stories of Roma women were selected who, by sharing their power and emotions, leave the biggest trace on this report, and present a real depiction of the position of Roma women in the region.

3. ACCESSIBILITY OF HEALTH CARE TO ROMA WOMEN

3.1. Introduction

CEDAW sets out that member countries shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, access to health care services, including those related to family planning [...] shall ensure to women appropriate services in connection with pregnancy, confinement and the post-natal period, granting free services where necessary, as well as adequate nutrition during pregnancy and lactation.[18] Therefore, accessibility to health care is firstly related to access to health insurance and then to access to preventive and protective services.

The Constitution[19] of **North Macedonia** guarantees the right of every person to healthcare. The Constitution of **Montenegro**[20] guarantees healthcare to all citizens, with special focus on the healthcare of children and pregnant women, elderly people and people with disabilities, who are entitled to healthcare from the public revenue funds, unless they exercise this right on any other basis. When it comes to **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, organizations, funding and provision of healthcare are under the scope of responsibility of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska, ten cantons in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Brcko District and these are governed by laws on different levels of authority. In Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, jurisdictions in healthcare are shared by the federal and Cantonese authorities. According to the Law on Health Care of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina,[21] primary healthcare includes, among other things, family medicine, occupation of polyvalent patronage nurses in the community, and the protection of women's reproductive health. The Law on Health Care of the Republic of Srpska provides, among other things, healthcare in accordance with the equal opportunities to populous and nosological groups of special social and medical importance, also including women during pregnancy, childbirth and maternity up to 12 months from childbirth in accordance with the healthcare laws. [22] The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia sets out that every person is entitled to protection of physical and psychological health. Children, pregnant women, women on maternity leave, single parents with

[18] Article 12 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1249, p. 13)
[19] Article 39 Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia („Службен весник на Република Македонија" број 52/1991)
[20] Article 69 Constitution of Montenegro ("Official Gazette of Montenegro", number 001/2007 and 38/2013)
[21] Article 33 Constitution on the health care of the Federation ("Official journal of the Federation of B&H", no. 46/10)
[22] Article 8 Law on health care in the Republic of Srpska ("Official Gazette of RS "number 106/2009 and 44/2015)

children up to 7 years old, and the elderly exercise their right to healthcare from public revenues, if not otherwise, in accordance with the law.[23]

3.2. Health insurance

National reports show that most Roma in the region have access to health insurance. This finding is consistent with UNDP and World Bank research from 2017.[24] According to the Regional Roma Survey, 93% of Roma women from North Macedonia[25] have health insurance, as well as 73% in Bosnia and Herzegovina,[26] 93% in Serbia[27] and 79% in Montenegro.[28] Clearly, the situation regarding health insurance for Roma women is better in North Macedonia and Serbia than in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. It should be noted that despite legal obligations and strategic documents, undocumented Roma often find it difficult to obtain the right to primary and emergency medical care, often because health care professionals unnecessarily ask them for personal documents. The situation is particularly difficult for Roma IDPs. It has also been noted that Roma often do not have health cards because of their lack of information, difficulties to reach relevant institutions, as well as a language barrier.

In **North Macedonia**, according to the data collected by The Roma women initiative from Šuto Orizarija, about 40% of women who do not have health insurance are forced to pay for laboratory analyses during pregnancy and childbirth, despite the fact that these services should be free-of-charge.[29] Data collected by research conducted for the national report of North Macedonia indicate that only 0,5% of women interviewees do not hold health insurance card. Most Roma women state they have chosen their general practitioner, but it is a disconcerting fact that only one sixth of the interviewees have chosen their gynecologist. Furthermore, only one fifth states they have been called for the gynecology check and 12.5% of interviewees did not respond to the call.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, regardless of the variety of possibilities for health care, certain social strata of the population are not included in the insurance. (Due to the lack of recent research, data from the period between 2007 and 2009 will be used.) According to the data of Health Insurance Fund of the Republic of Srpska, 19.18% of

[23] Article 68 Paragraph 1 and 2 Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (Official Gazette of RS ", no. 98/2006)
[24] Regional Roma Survey, UNDP and World Bank, 2017, available at: https://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/rbec/en/home/library/roma/regional-roma-survey-2017-country-fact-sheets.html
[25] Roma at Glance: the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, UNDP and World Bank, April 2018
[26] Roma at Glance: Bosnia and Herzegovina, UNDP and World Bank, April 2018
[27] Roma at Glance: Serbia, UNDP and World Bank, April 2018
[28] Roma at Glance: Montenegro, UNDP and World Bank, April 2018
[29] Regional Roma Survey, UNDP and World Bank, 2017, available at: https://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/rbec/en/home/library/roma/regional-roma-survey-2017-country-fact-sheets.html

citizens[30] did not have the possibility to stamp their health insurance cards and exercise the right to healthcare in 2008. According to the data of the Institution of Health Insurance and Reinsurance of the Republic of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2007 there were 16.35% of citizens in who were excluded from the health insurance system.[31] The total data on the number of insured people are not disaggregated by to sex, although records are individual and it is technically feasible to present data this way. Data on the number of people who have health insurance is often not fully reflective of the number of people who actually have the right to obligatory health insurance.[32] Most Roma women from Bosnia and Herzegovina reported having regulated health insurance, and choosing general practitioner and gynecologist. Nevertheless, they stated that this doesn't mean that much to them as they have to pay for participation and medicines, or they have to pay for medical checks in private practices as state hospitals often do not have necessary experts.

The highest number of participants in focus groups held in Bosnia and Herzegovina who don't have health insurance live in the area of the city of Mostar.[33] A health worker interviewed from the city out-patient clinic stated that in practice he often meets Roma women without health insurance; he reported that this as most commonly because of administration issues (e.g. she did not report to Employment Office in timely manner or she had recently moved from another municipality). According to a health worker from the out-patient clinic located in a Roma settlement, the obstacles for some Roma women who don't have health insurance are their financial situation, unemployment, and exclusion from the education. The Roma mediator interviewed pointed out that Roma women had health insurance during several projects implemented by civil society organizations; however, by the end of the project, most of them no longer had health care. He believes that there are many obstacles for Roma people to exercise their right to health insurance, some due to systemic institutional problems, and some originating exclusively on Roma themselves.

Almost all focus group participants in Montenegro have health insurance. However, after comparing the opinions of Roma women and collocutors from the healthcare system, one may get the impression that Roma and Egyptian women do not use many of their healthcare rights and are not sufficiently familiar with them. The reasons for this are language obstacles and lack of information.

[30] Around 235.000 residents

[31] Around 380.000 residents. *Do univerzalne zdravstvene zaštite u BiH*, Inicijativa i civilna akcija (ICVA), 2009, available on: http://icva-bh.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Do-univerzalne-zdravstvene-zaštite-u-Bosni-i-Hercegovini-1.pdf

[32] There are employers who don't fulfill their obligations toward health care funds. The employers in the private sector, especially those who employ unqualified workforce, are amongst the ones who don't regularly pay health insurance.

[33] For instance, out of six members of one focus group, only two members had health card.

Based on the regional research conducted by UNDP, the World Bank, and the European Commission, 93% of Roma people in the Republic of Serbia older than 16 have access to health insurance.[34] However, Roma men and women who do not hold necessary documents experience difficulties in exercising the right to primary healthcare and healthcare even in cases of urgent medical assistance, often because health workers require personal documents from them, though it is not necessary to do so. The situation is especially hard for internally displaced Roma[35]. The registration of domicile is still a prerequisite for exercise of right to obligatory health insurance. In practice, it often happens that Roma women who are extremely poor, unemployed and have no access to social care, initiate the process of registering the address of a social work center as their domicile, as this is the only available possibility. Nevertheless, they are left without health insurance until their application in the social work center is resolved, and the period for resolution can range from several months to more than a year.

Women who don't have health insurance are often in a difficult position in terms of exercising their right during pregnancy and childbirth. Civil society organizations have recorded cases where women were exposed to threats that they would not be allowed to take their newborns out of the maternity hospital until they had paid for all hospital expenses, though the Law on healthcare sets out that healthcare in such cases shall be provided from the budget of the Republic of Serbia.[36]

Almost all participants of focus groups held in Serbia have health insurance cards. However, the interviewed health workers stated that they met many non-insured Roma women in their daily work, most of them being either Roma women who had moved from abroad and therefore do not hold mandatory documents, or Roma women who live in "wild" settlements and are legally invisible. They share the opinion that the problem is lack of information on their rights covered under the health insurance law, as well as lack of financial assets for acquiring necessary documents.

Despite the fact that Roma women have or can exercise the right to health insurance, Roma women in the region are met by many obstacles when it comes to exercise of right to healthcare.

> *We hold the health insurance card, but it is of no use when they prescribe us a load of tablets we have to buy and can't afford? What else could we do than sit at home and wait for the mishap to come?* (Roma woman from B&H, 26)

[34] *Obruč anticiganizma – Romi u Srbiji*, Civil Rights Defenders, Beograd, 2018, pg. 23
[35] Ibid.
[36] *Alternative report concerning Serbia to The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) for consideration at the 72Pre-Sessional Working Group (23-27 July 2018)*, Praxis, the European Network on Statelessness, European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) and Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion (ISI), 2018, pg. 6-7

We feel the worst for our children. We may be illiterate, but the least they could do is help us and give us free medicines as they can see themselves that we don't have money. Our children are not thin, skinny or weak because we do have. (Roma woman from B&H, 36)

Being a Roma woman myself, of course, I know that women often don't have a health record. What I can tell from my professional experience is that they are often irresponsible too and, on the other hand, though unemployed people have the right to health insurance card, these women often do not have money to go to the city or social services to acquire documents. (a nurse, Serbia)

3.3. The health condition of Roma women

Most Roma women from **North Macedonia** do not have the possibility to select their family doctor and instead are assigned one randomly. Some Roma women are not provided with the possibility to access gynecologist services, as North Macedonia lacks gynecology clinics. With regards to prenatal care, 21% of Roma women have attended medical check-up during their pregnancy. Most of the interviewees stated that they would visit the doctor when they needed one, which is rarely done, apart from more educated and employed Roma women, as well as those with chronic issues. They believe that bad health and shorter life span of Roma women is directly linked to poverty, and that it is the effect of unemployment and bad social and economic status. Amongst other reasons, the interviewees stated abuse, lack of education, unequal treatment, lack of awareness about the importance of regular medical check-ups, i.e. poor and underdeveloped awareness of the need to go to regular and preventive check-ups, as well as discrimination by institutions.

What is particularly concerning is the fact that in **North Macedonia**, most Roma women interviewed have never used any contraceptive method and some of them completely ignorant of contraceptive methods. Only one-sixth of interviewees uses or have been using contraceptives, whereas the other ones have never used them. Considering the fact that contraceptives are rarely used in North Macedonia, (about 12% of women use contraceptives, 1.6% of which take oral contraceptives[37]) the information obtained from the interviewees should not come as a surprise. In this respect, North Macedonia is one of the lowest-ranked countries in Europe, as contraceptives are not on the "positive list" (list of medicines that is provided free of charge) and therefore not made available to everyone. Furthermore, the country records a high percentage of abortion, where 34% of Roma women have had at least one abortion, compared to 13% of Macedonian women.[38]

[37] Plus info, Mia, *Samo 13 otsto od zenite vo Makedonija koristat kontracepcija*, April, 10th 2019, available on: https://plusinfo.mk/само-13-отсто-од-жените-во-македонија-ко/

[38] Борјан Павловски, *Проценка на состојбата по однос на сексуалното и репродуктивното здравје и правата на населението во РМ*, ЕСЕ. Скопје, 2012, pg. 85-86

Healthcare workers in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** believe that Roma women and the overall Roma population are in poor health condition in comparison to other social groups due to not having possibility for free-of-charge treatment as many do not have health insurance. A healthcare worker from Visoko stated that early pregnancies and multiple deliveries during a lifetime leave a toll on health, combined with poverty and adverse living conditions, result in deteriorated health of Roma women. An employee in the Health center in Bijeljina stated that Roma women rarely visit them; they usually come when they have a substantial problem at an advanced stage of disease. The gynecology ward records 30 to 40 patients are seen daily; however, Roma women are rarely recorded, no more than 10 monthly. The employee indicates high prevalence of pregnancies among minority Roma women and it often happens that these unwanted pregnancies are resolved by applying a non-expert solution, resulting in hard and critical states in certain cases.[39] Most Roma women who participated in focus groups are aware of some basic information about contraception, mostly acquired through educational workshops or through projects implemented by associations of citizens, but most of them do not use contraceptives.

In **Montenegro**, insufficient education of Roma and Egyptian women on healthcare and premature sexual activity, accompanied by frequent pregnancies, leaves a toll on their reproductive, physical, and mental health. Due to their unregulated legal status, as well as not knowing that they cannot be deprived of healthcare when pregnant, they often give birth outside healthcare institutions. Rarely any Roma or Egyptian women have chosen a gynecologist before pregnancy, and the focus group participants have never heard of mammography, nor have they ever been referred to this type of medical check by any healthcare worker. Healthcare workers from Montenegro state that Roma and Egyptian women see doctor when they are already sick. Because of this, health care staff are trying to turn their attention to the prevention of frequent diseases by means of campaigns conducted in Roma settlements. Poverty, poor hygiene, eating the same or unhealthy food every day, pregnancy at young age, and frequent pregnancies are the main causes of jeopardized health. There are programs in reproductive health that educate and prepare women for maternity, but these programs are not in accordance with the needs of Roma and Egyptian women and are often unattainable,[40] due to prejudice, patriarchy, illiteracy or language barriers. Only 4% of the Roma women in Montenegro use contraceptives and 14% of the women from Roma settlements have had at least one abortion.[41] Consequently, Roma women are often unable to plan their family according to their wishes, meaning they are exposed to numerous and often unsupervised pregnancies and childbirths.

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[39] In 2018 there were only four of these cases, where women survived just because they were brought to hospital. They were all Roma.

[40] *Equality of sexes in the healthcare domain*, available on: https://ec.europa.eu/epale/sites/epale/files/ravnopravnost_u_domenu_zdravstvene_zastite_-_izvjestaj_crna_gora.doc

[41] MICS, *Montenegro and Roma settlements in Montenegro, research of multiple indicators, 2013*, Unicef Montenegro Podgorica, 2014, available on: https://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/medjunarodna%20saradnja/2013%20MICS_Montenegrin.pdf

The research in Serbia shows a clear causal relationship between quality of life and the health condition of Roma people who live in poor conditions compared to the general population. In a report from 2013, CAHROM emphasizes that "the problems concerning the environment of non-legalized settlements (lack of sewage system, disposal of bulky trash, air pollution, lack of open space/ventilation in settlements) leave consequences on the health and life span of Roma people."[42] Roma people in Serbia have a shorter life span compared to the general population, the rate of infant mortality is higher, and the percentage of those who suffer from anxiety and depression is higher, particularly among Roma women.[43] Research from UNDP in 2012 showed that a significant number of Roma minority members (65%) could not afford to buy prescribed medicine.[44] Roma women believe that the causes for Roma women's poor health condition and significantly shorter life span are: living in non-hygienic settlements, difficult position of a Roma woman in their families, child marriages and child births at an early age, not visiting doctors regularly, but only when they are severely ill. Moreover, other specified causes are poverty, unemployment, hard physical work, including collecting secondary raw materials, unhealthy food and lack of money to afford children's schooling, all of which contribute to shorter life expectancy compared to overall population. The interviewed health workers and health intermediaries share the same opinion.

Very few Roma women in Serbia use contraceptives. Younger focus group participants are aware of contraceptive methods, whereas the older ones are either uninformed or reluctant to discuss it; some of them state that they are "not sure if they can use contraception at all." The researches indicate that women from Roma settlements are less informed on different contraception methods than the general population of women in Serbia.[45]

Roma women stated that they did not use contraceptives because they did not trust in them (*I don't use anything, my mother was using it and yet she had nine of us*) due to the lack of knowledge about the contraceptive methods (*I am too old for it, I am 40, I do not use anything nor have I used anything. My doctor offered me that, but I refused*), and as they often do not make their decisions by themselves (*I don't use contraceptives, my mother-in-law and husband want me to have more children, ten more*). The abortion rate is much higher among women from Roma settlements than among women from the general population. Among young women (18-24 years old) from the general population, the abortion rate is 1%, and among the oldest category (41-49) it ranges up to 30%. Among young women (18-24 years old) from Roma settlements it falls around 11% and among the oldest age group (41-49 years old) more than half of Roma women have had at least one abortion during their lifetime.[46]

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[42] *Obruč anticiganizma – Romi u Srbiji*, Civil Rights Defenders, Belgrade, 2018, pg. 23
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Marija Babović, *Rodni aspekti životnog toka viđeni iz perspektive podataka iz Istraživanja višestrukih pokazatelja (MICS)*, Unicef, Belgrade, 2015, pg. 7
[46] Ibid, pg. 10

The following paragraph portrays how certain Roma women evaluate their health condition and why they don't visit health care institutions more often:

How can I look after myself when I don't have enough wood logs to heat me in this cold... and when we are cold... both children and I... Where and how to have a bath when our sink is frozen? We didn't even have drinking water. (A Roma woman from Serbia)

Two months ago, I called the ambulance three times and explained to them that my mother was severely ill and had a seizure, it turned out it was renal seizure, but they didn't want to come. Somehow, I managed to walk with my mother to the highway and get her to the hospital where we waited for a long time to get treated. (A Roma woman from Montenegro)

I treat myself because I don't have health insurance. (A Roma woman from North Macedonia)

Sometimes, I treat myself in order to save money, medicines are expensive. (A Roma woman from North Macedonia).

3.4. Discrimination in health care

In **North Macedonia**, health care workers almost always deny the existence of discrimination. However, data indicates that some Roma men and women cannot fully exercise their right to health care, because barriers such as indirect discrimination due to non-regulated health insurance are present. [47] Women often have difficulties in accessing gynecology services due to insufficient number of gynecologists in primary healthcare, and inequal distribution to all territories of the country. In 45 municipalities there are no gynecologists in primary healthcare, and in 24 municipalities their number is not sufficient. An additional problem is a portion of women who are who are visited by patronage nurses during pregnancy and after childbirth.[48] Specifically, 35.9% of Roma women and 27.8% of non-Roma women have not been visited by patronage nurses during pregnancy and after childbirth.[49] In addition, healthcare workers are often prejudiced about Roma population, which must be addressed alongside raising awareness of Roma women to recognize discrimination.

Roma women in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** often feel discrimination in terms of how they are treated by staff in health institutions, particularly during pregnancy. The participants of the focus group in Tuzla stated that they can choose only one gynecologist and that no other gynecologist will attend to them if their chosen gynecologist is absent. Roma women who participated in focus groups stated they are

[47] Redžepali Cupi, *Diskriminacija na decata Romi, megunorodna i domašna regulativa, nacionalni politikii inistitucionalna postavenost*, Nacionalen Romski Centar, Kumanovo, 2018, pg. 44-45

[48] *Без гинеколог 45 општини*, available on: https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/bez-ginekolog-45-opshtini-vo-makedonija

[49] *Сите сме луѓе, секому здравствена заштита без оглед на етничката припадност*, ECE, 2014, available on: https://www.esem.org.mk/pdf/Publikacii/2014/Сите%20сме%20луѓе.pdf

aware of their lack of education, but that they do not deserve such treatment. They often do not receive enough information from health workers on the nature of the problem, the treatment procedure or what they should do during pregnancy. They emphasized that doctors treat them roughly because they are Roma, a generalization that results in all Roma women being mistreated. Despite this, Roma women rarely make appeals to the Commissioner for Patients' Rights or any other competent institution. Only a few participants stated that they had complained about the discrimination, mostly to representatives of centers for social work or the City Hall. However, no further action than discussion has been made and their complaints remained unresolved.

Participants of the focus groups in **Montenegro** stated that whenever they would object to long waiting, they would be the last in the line for medical check and they only be asked about symptoms without a detailed check-up or physical contact. Doctors are mostly polite, but medical staff addresses them with the loud tone of voice, giving them brochures about health they cannot read since they are illiterate; they never receive the call for mammograms, nor have they had a visit from the pediatrician or help or advice on how to take care of their babies after birth. Moreover, they have had bad experiences with the untimely arrival of ambulance car. They are prevented from hospital visits if they come in groups, with an excuse that there is not enough physical space for the visits and they often need to buy medicines prescribed by doctors that they are not able to afford. They also state that they need the support of someone who speaks Roma language when visiting doctors since they mostly cannot understand where to go for the treatment and similar issues. Employees in health institutions in Montenegro are of the opinion that there is no discrimination against Roma and Egyptian women or any other minority groups, and that all patients are treated equally. They indicate that all Roma and Egyptian have recently only given birth in hospitals, so they are consequentially entitled to subsidies that they receive after childbirths and that medical staff demonstrate higher sympathy and care for babies and nursing mothers from Roma community.

When it comes to **Serbia**, the researches demonstrate that 83% of Roma women stated they were satisfied with the way that they are treated by doctors and medical staff, whereas 10% were not satisfied and stated that the staff was impolite and rude. When asked if they had received a clear explanation about their disease and what further actions are to be taken, only 7% of them responded negatively.[50] The research has demonstrated that Roma women often don't know how to recognize discrimination, even when it is direct. This was confirmed during the focus groups conducted for the purposes of this research. Some Roma women who were not satisfied with the way they had been treated, stated that health workers don't show discrimination "evidently", but that it "exists, it has always been so, and it always will be". Medical assistance during and after childbirth was the moment when many Roma had experienced humiliating and offensive behavior from health workers. All participants of the focus group held in

[50] *Research on access to social and economic rights in Serbia for Roma women*, Praxis and Civil Rights Defenders, Belgrade, 2015, pg. 5-6

Valjevo stated that there had always been the difference in behavior of health workers towards Roma women during childbirth, but nobody talked about it and most of them thought it was normal, so they would stand aside and apologize when they experienced discrimination. Five participants of the focus group in Krusevac state that it was the childbirth room where they experienced the most unpleasant situations, while recovering from it (*When I asked the nurse to help me get up, she said: "Come on, don't whine, it's not your first time... You have children all the time"; Why don't you breastfeed that baby, at least you have as much milk as a cow*.) and one of the participants stated that only Roma women were accommodated in that room, *they did not mix us with Serbians*. The researches demonstrate that Roma people are often unaware of possibility for protection of patients' rights.[51] Only one participant complained about discrimination, while others did not and some of them had shared with their intermediary "everything that is happening to them". In spite of some of them knowing which institutions to refer to for making the appeal, it seems that many of them are not empowered enough to do so.

In the following paragraph the experiences of Roma women from the region who experienced discrimination in the accessing health care services are presented.

They create problems. I was thrown out once and they treated me very badly. (A Roma woman from North Macedonia)

We know that they segregate us by the color of the skin, we know we are Gypsies, should we be extinct because of that? (A Roma woman from B&H)

I have four children: three boys and a girl. I always take them to the doctor's and I never had a problem. But once my youngest child had gotten ill. I'd seen him scratching all the time. I hadn't taken him to doctor's, I'd only put on some cream that my neighbor had given me. After a couple of days, it got worse. He had a rash, redness and scabs all over his body. I was frightened and took him to the doctor. There was a woman doctor on duty, I came in and told her why I came. She made a facial expression and made me feel unpleasant. I started talking about how that rash appeared, how he had severe itching and what cream I had applied. She interrupted me, took a pen, used it to pull up my child's shirt, looked at me and told him "Come a little closer, but don't stand too close to me." Then she said, "this is scabies, move away kid, I'll write to you what to buy him and apply." I felt really embarrassed and said only "I'm sorry." I went out and started crying. I rang my sister to lend me some money to buy that cream prescribed by the doctor. When she gave me the cream, I went into the pharmacy in tears. The pharmacist asked me why I was crying and when I explained to her everything, she asked me if she could look at my child's rash. When she looked at him, she told us not to cry and that it wasn't scabies, but a skin infection, I forgot the name. She gave me some other cream and the child was cured. I thanked her a lot, there are still good people. (A Roma woman from Serbia)

Once a doctor saw one patient before his turn and refused to see me. She did that because I was Roma. (A Roma woman from B&H)

Almost every time I visit a health center, I experience an unpleasant situation. They look at my children with disgust, tell them they're dirty, tell me that I am dirty as well. (A Roma woman from

[51] Point 5.4. of the Strategy for social inclusion of Roma men and women in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2016 - 2025 ("Official Gazette of RS", no. 26/2016)

North Macedonia)

I will never forget it, I was very young, only 19. I was pregnant for the second time; the first child was only 2. I didn't have a landline back then, and my husband was at work. I grabbed my child, went to neighbors where they gave me a phone to call an ambulance. You know they were Serbs. I dialed the ambulance number, told them that my water broke, that I was in pain, and I started crying. "Please come, "I told them. They asked me for my address and name. When the lady heard I have Roma last name, she just told me "You filthy Gypsies, you are just breeding like rabbits. I don't have a free vehicle for you, you are just breeding and doing nothing." Can you imagine how I felt then, at that moment, with a little child standing next to me? When my neighbor saw how serious the situation was, he left my child with his wife and took me to the hospital. I remember that humiliation even today. I never felt worse in my entire life. My daughter is 22 and as far as I can see the situation hasn't changed. We were just gypsies then and we are the same now. My daughter has recently given birth to a baby, all Roma nursing mothers were accommodated in a separate childbirth room and one or two Serbian women in the other room. That is a disgrace for this country and people and there is nothing we can do. (A Roma woman from Serbia)

When you come to the appointment, they first tell you to let your hair down to check if you have lice and she can obviously see I am clean and neat. (A Roma woman from Bosnia and Herzegovina)

I was crying in pain, the midwife approached and told me: "You didn't cry when you were making the baby, now shut your mouth and stop scaring these women here. You will forget this soon, it's normal with you people, next year you will do it again, you people only know how to make children". (A Roma woman from Serbia)

3.5. Conclusion

From the available research undertaken in the region, as well as from focus group discussions with Roma women, it can be concluded that the majority of Roma women have health cards, i.e. health insurance; however, they still face numerous obstacles in access to health care. Namely, many Roma women say that because of poverty, they are unable to pay for additional medical analyses and to buy medicines prescribed to them that they cannot obtain from compulsory health insurance. Because of this, they point out that health insurance does not mean a lot to them because they are unable to obtain adequate medical treatment. Also, although the legislation related to the right to health insurance has been improved, there are still Roma women in the region who cannot exercise their right to health care. Although some of the interviewed professionals claim that "responsibility is on the Roma", such a conclusion completely neglects numerous obstacles that Roma encounter, such as lack of information on the right to health insurance, lack of the documentation required, the slowness in obtaining the necessary documentation, the lack of transportation to the competent institutions, as well as the language barrier.

In addition, difficulties in exercising the right to health care are not the only reasons for the poorer health status and shorter life expectancy of Roma women compared to

women from the majority population. Roma women who participated in focus groups, as well as the interviewed health workers, stated that reasons for the poor health status of Roma women were numerous, among them the special emphasis being placed on child marriages, early pregnancies and childbirth, pressure on women not to show any illness and that they must always act as if they were healthy, lacking awareness of the need for preventive medical check-ups, intimate partner violence that put some women in social isolation and poverty, which further prevents women from visiting doctors, and buying medicines and/or paying for additional analyses that they cannot get for free.

From the responses of Roma women and health professionals, the position of Roma women in the patriarchal family greatly affects their health status. They visit doctors only when they are very ill and when the disease has progressed to the point that treatment is difficult or impossible. Many Roma women are expected not to leave the house, to do heavy work and take care of all household members throughout the day, and often do so in difficult and inhumane conditions, without hot water, heating, and in the presence of waste materials. Also, as noted previously, child marriages, early pregnancies, and childbirths "leave a mark" on women's health. Many Roma women, due to patriarchal norms, are not able to decide for themselves about their reproduction, i.e. on the number of children and space between childbirths; it is decided by family members who do not allow them to use contraception and put pressure on them to have as many children as possible and give birth immediately after marriage, which is often before coming of age. In addition, conversations with Roma women in the region show that almost no one talks with them about contraception, and that many Roma women have no knowledge of pregnancy prevention, which is why they have no confidence in contraceptives and do not know where to get them, or how to use them. Also, contraceptives are not on the “positive list” in the region, requiring funds that many Roma women do not have, which also constitutes an obstacle to deciding on the reproduction and prevention of unwanted pregnancies. Additionally, during the delivery, health professionals often send messages to Roma women that childbirth is "the only thing they do", and that they will surely come again, without discussing available options of contraception.

Finally, a particular problem affecting the shorter life expectancy of Roma women and their poorer health status is the discriminatory treatment of certain health workers towards Roma women, especially when it comes to the use of emergency health and maternity care services, as these are services used by Roma women most often. Specifically, many Roma women in the region stated that they felt humiliated in contact with health care professionals, from refusing to give them services, to long waits for examination, to inappropriate and offensive comments regarding their ethnic origin. Despite this, the vast majority still do not feel empowered to report such cases. It can be concluded that this stems from their lack of confidence in the institutions due to the many prejudices related to the Roma population. Roma women therefore doubt that their experiences will be believed in and that someone will help them.

4. CHILD MARRIAGES

CEDAW sets out that States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women: (a) the same right to enter into marriage; (b) the same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent; (c) the same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution; (d) the same rights and responsibilities as parents, irrespective of their marital status, in matters relating to their children; in all cases the interests of the children shall be paramount; (e) the same rights to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights; (f) the same rights and responsibilities with regard to guardianship, wardship, trusteeship and adoption of children, or similar institutions where these concepts exist in national legislation; in all cases the interests of the children shall be paramount; (g) the same personal rights as husband and wife, including the right to choose a family name, a profession and an occupation; as well as (h) the same rights for both spouses in respect of the ownership, acquisition, management, administration, enjoyment and disposition of property, whether free of charge or for a valuable consideration. The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory.[52]

In North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, except in rare cases, one can get married upon turning 18 years.[53] Child marriage is forbidden and is considered illegal. [54]

The terminology on child marriage throughout the world is not uniform. The most frequent term is "child marriage", but the following are also used: early marriage, forced marriage, arranged marriage and so on. Even though they are often used synonymously, these terms do not have the same meaning. In the Report on Preventing and Eliminating

[52] Article 16 of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women

[53] In B&H it is possible to get married before turning 18, that is, when one turns 16. (Article 36 of the Family Law of Republic of Srpska, "Službeni glasnik RS" vol. 54/02, 41/08, 63/14 and Article 15 of the Family Law of Federation B&H, "Službene novine Federacije B&H vol. 35/05). In North Macedonia, in some cases under special circumstances, a minor can get married with the parents' consent (Article 16 of the Law on Family, , "Sluzben vesnik na RSM", vol. 153/2014). In Montenegro two people who turned 18 can get married. Under special circumstances, the court can let children older than 16 get married only with parents' consent (Article 24 of the Family Law, "Službeni list RCG", vol 1/07 and "Službeni list CG", vol 53/16). In Serbia, a person younger than 18 cannot get married. The same applies if the person isn't getting married under their free will. However, the court, can out of justified reasons, and let a younger person that turned 16 and is mentally and physically mature to participate in the institution of marriage (Article 23 and 24 of the Family Law, "Sl. glasnik RS", vol. 18/2005, 72/2011, and 6/2015)

[54] In B&H – illegal act „extra-marital relationship with younger minor" (Article 216 of the Criminal code of Federation B&H, "Sl. glasnik Federacije BiH" vol 36/03); in North Macedonia – illegal act „extra-marital relationship with a minor" (Article 107 of the Criminal code „Службен весник, vol. 37/96); in the Republic of Serbia – extra-marital relationship with a minor and the compulsory conclusion of the marriage (Article 190 and 187a of the Criminal code, "Sl. glasnik RS", vol. 85/2005, 88/2005 - corrected, 107/2005 - corrected, 72/2009, 111/2009, 121/2012, 104/2013, 108/2014, and 94/2016)

Child, Early and Forced Marriage of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the following definitions have been given:[55]

- ***Child marriage*** is a marriage in which at least one partner is a child. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child [56], a child is "any human under the age of eighteen, unless the national legislation stipulates the age of majority is attained earlier."[57] ***Early marriage*** is often used as a synonym of *child marriage* and refers to a marriage in which one of the partners is younger than 18, in countries where the age of majority is attained earlier or by marriage.[58]
- ***Forced marriage*** is any marriage entered without one partner's or both partners' full or free will and/or one or both parts cannot end or leave the marriage, including the case of coercion or intensive societal or family pressure.[59]

In order to avoid any doubts, we will use the term **child marriage** in this report, under which we include marriages made by two minors, as well as younger adults under any form of coercion.

4.1. Causes and the effects of child marriage

The causes of child marriages are poverty, social exclusion, patriarchal relations, unequal distribution of power, control of women's bodies and their sexuality, gender stereotypes and prejudice, as well as economic dependency of women.[60]

In North Macedonia, most Roma women think that the causes of child marriages are "something left from ancestors, according to old customs". The reasons are also found in tradition, culture, poverty and lack of information. The phenomenon of child marriage is more apparent in families with several female children, and it mostly affects girls. Roma women from **Serbia** state "indigence and poverty" as the key reasons that make girls get married as soon as possible and move into another family, i.e. "female child - someone else's worry". Roma women from **Bosnia and Herzegovina** think that families perceive marrying a daughter into a wealthier family as a way out of poverty and a way to avoid taking care of her. In **Montenegro**, Roma and Egyptian women are of the opinion that parents today are forcing their girls to get married more often than before, and that often girls do not have the rights to fight back against the decision because they do it for the welfare of their families. Parents often manipulate their children in various ways to

[55] "(Pre)rani brakovi - Životne priče Romkinja u Srbiji", BIBIJA Women Center, Belgrade, 2016, pg. 13
[56] UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 20th November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3
[57] *(Pre)rani brakovi - Životne priče Romkinja u Srbiji*, Roma Women's Center BIBIJA, Belgrade, 2016, pg. 13
[58] Ibid, pg. 23
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid, pg. 11

marry them, because they can get from 1000 to 6000 EUR for each marriage, from which they can live for some time or pay for their sons' wedding party costs. Girls married in this manner are often later found to be vulnerable to domestic violence and unable to change their situation, not even by running away or returning to their previous home, as in that case the parents would be required to return the money.

One of the key causes of early marriage is lack of or poor level of education. One Roma woman who participated in the focus group discussion from **Serbia** stated the following: *There are girls who struggle a lot at their parents'. They don't go to school because they need to watch over their siblings, cook, clean... That's why they want to run away as soon as possible, so they go somewhere where it is even worse.* A Roma woman from **Bosnia and Herzegovina** state that her daughter voluntarily wanted to get married as a child and thinks she wanted to leave the school. After a month, her daughter returned pregnant, and the mother wanted submit a request for abortion because she thought that her 16-year-old girl cannot be a mother: *I felt fear of God to do so, but I didn't know what to do with her and the baby. I'm not young enough nor I have money to support them. What could I do? My greatest desire was to become a grandmother and get grandchild, but not in that way. Thank God, there were people who helped me out, so I saved my daughter's life... If only she had studied, we wouldn't have gotten to this, that is for sure.* In addition, according to Roma women from **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, minors who get married most frequently typically only finish elementary school, and either do not enroll in high school or drop out of it in the first grade; they therefore do not meet the basic sociological, economic or social prerequisites for commencing a marital relationship.

Additionally, the cause of early marriages is also worry for the safety and protection of girls, as a way to protect them from sexual violence, to prevent premarital relationships and to prevent potential loss of "family honor".[61] Insistence on the prohibition of premarital sexual relations is almost absolute in all Roma communities and it is, undoubtedly, one of the reasons for getting married. Virginity is absolutely expected from girls and the disgrace, if a girl does not get married as a virgin, affects not only her, but her entire family. This can seriously impact the family's reputation in the community; this lead to frequent occurrences of which child marriage.[62] In **Montenegro** parents repeat the patterns they have been taught, thinking that it is the best solution for their children as their daughters' virginity is the only "value" that can increase the amount of money given for contracting a marriage. Some focus group participants from Montenegro blamed girls for deciding to "elope" from their home to enter a child marriage. In their perception, there is no other area of responsibility outside the girls themselves, such as parents' behavior, patriarchal order, or the state, which reacts late in such cases. Similarly, all participants of focus groups from Pirot, **the Republic of Serbia**, agreed that Roma girls are more frequently forced to get married than boys, due to social norms and traditions that dictates that girls must be married in order to have

[61] Ibid.
[62] *Child marriages in Roma population in Serbia – ethnographic research*, UNICEF, Belgrade, 2017, pg. 35-39

sexual intercourse. This speaks in favor of observing the concept of a "virginity cult" that is cultivated in the Roma community.

Certain Roma women interviewed from **North Macedonia** claimed that they wanted to marry as children, i.e. they got married to be with their boyfriends. Some research on child marriages in Roma communities demonstrate that in **Serbia**, like in North Macedonia, the most frequent model of entering a marriage is the one entered by will of young people, despite the girls' parents' opposition.[63] It often happens that children demonstrate refusal to return to their homes in front of the police or social workers, what practically means that their decision becomes accepted by the parents, which is also influenced by the local community. [64] The participants of focus groups discussed the aforementioned: *I wouldn't stop my daughter, if she loves him, she can go. If they have goodwill and isn't forced. The child threats to kill itself if you don't let her go. You tell her she can date him, she doesn't have to marry him, but she doesn't listen. A local woman said – if you put your daughter in chains, she would break them and run away. It's not the parents' fault.* It is very important to outline that girls, when faced by the pressure of a potential forced marriage and repressive family environment in which their "honor" and "virginity cult" are kept, decide to escape with the first boy they fell in love with, perceiving it as an exit from the potentially unwanted scenario. This is "forced volunteerism" where girls seemingly get married of their own will, but they do this because of numerous structural pressures which hinder them from making decisions outside this model of thought.[65] A participant of a focus group in **Serbia** points out: *Nowadays parents don't marry off little girls, girls run away when they fall in love. Some of them regret it afterwards, but then it's too late. They say they can't live in mother-in-law and husband's house as well as they did at their parents'.* One of the participants says: *My daughter got married when she was 13. She found a boyfriend and escaped. She has three children now. Her husband abuses her, kicks her out of the house. I told her if you cannot take it anymore, run away, leave the children, let him take care of them. I lived that life and that's why I can understand everything.*

It is important to mention that the inadequate institutional responses to child marriages and inefficient enforcement of the law increase the frequency rate of child marriage.[66] The former practice of the **Montenegrin** Center for Roma initiative from Niksic on elimination of 62 child marriages from 2015 to 2018 testifies to that statement,[67]

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[63] Ibid, pg. 53. The parents of a young boy are always informed that the new daughter-in-law is coming, and they should agree on that, bearing the fact that the young couple lives with his parents. That is how patriarchy is reflected in the relatively new situations (male side approves, while female disapproves) which represents a phase in the process of its dissolution, already seen in other environments in the Balkans. It happened that a girl was three times sent home and fourth time they let her go when they gave up.

[64] Ibid, pg. 53

[65] Ibid, pg. 56

[66] *A Shadow Report sent to the UN Committee for elimination of discrimination for consideration at the 72nd session for the Republic of Serbia*, Roma Women Network, Belgrade, 2019, pg. 44-45

[67] Mentioned cases are from the practice of Center for Roma Initiative that is the only specialized civil society organization from the area of prevention of the child marriage in Montenegro.

demonstrating there are no clear mechanisms for elimination of child marriages; competent authorities transfer responsibility to other institutions, therefore former cases did not result in legal procedures and comprehensive protection of the victims. Deficiency and imprecision in the laws, rarely taken legal actions and lenient punishment policies result in the failure to reduce the child marriage frequency rate. These inadequate institutional responses to the presence of child marriages may be the reasons why Roma women from Bijeljina, **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, were unaware that child marriage is prohibited by law.

The consequences of child marriage on girls are long-lasting. By entering a marriage, a girl gives up schooling, outlooks for her employment are reduced, and vulnerability to violence and deterioration of health, including reproductive health, are increased.[68] One of the consequences perceived by Roma women in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** is leaving the school system too early, and a similar situation is present in **Montenegro**, where a major problem is dropping out of elementary school (about 11% of enrolled Roma children, with 13.8% more Roma girls than boys, mostly because of child marriages).[69]

Roma women from **Bosnia and Herzegovina** pointed out that girls married early often endure different kinds of abuse, from mental to physical, from their husband, brother-in-law, father-in-law and others. They are often exposed to sexual abuse from their husbands if they do not want to engage in sexual intercourse, which negatively impacts their health. Additionally, married Roma women usually do not have property because it is owned by older family members. The members of focus groups from **Montenegro** state that girls meet their life partners on their wedding day, meaning they are deprived of the phases of getting to know each other, feeling affection and dating. Consequently they soon become victims of pregnancy at young age and have frequent pregnancies, which jeopardizes their health, prevents them from completing and continuing schooling, and they are often engaged in forced labor and physically and mentally abused, regardless of whether the abuse is practiced by their partner or a member of their partner's family.

I struggled as a child; I was the oldest one in the family. My parents wouldn't let me go to school, but I looked after my siblings since I was nine, while my parents worked on the field from dusk till dawn. We didn't receive social assistance; I swear Roma people didn't even know then that there was Center for Social Work. The only income were their daily wages for the fieldwork. When I was 12, I started working with my parents for the wages and I got married when I was 14. Later my sister grew up and continued my steps. And so on, five girls and one boy. I got married into a family where there were seven little children, his brothers and cousins. I worked around the clock, cooked, baked, did the laundry and was left hungry many times because when my turn came everything was already eaten. I soon got pregnant, but they didn't spare me at all. I went to the hospital straight from the field. And I lived like that for years, until I lost my health. Now I have

[68] *A Shadow Report to the UN Committee for elimination of discrimination for consideration at the 72nd session for the Republic of Serbia*, Roma Women Network, Belgrade, 2019, pg. 41-42

[69] Ministry for human and minority rights of Montenegro, *Strategy for social inclusion of Roma and Egyptian people 2016-2020 and Action plan for 2016*, available on: http://www.minmanj.gov.me/biblioteka/strategije

everything except my health. I got sick when I was 30, had a surgery on my spine, now I can barely stand on my feet, I can't even take care of myself. I've never experienced anything nice in my whole life. (A Roma woman from Serbia)

4.2. Child marriages as a part of "Roma tradition"

When asked about the causes of child marriage amongst Roma women, most Roma women from **North Macedonia** specified tradition as the most common cause, and some of them are of the opinion that "as the result of the tradition, most of these marriages result in divorce". In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the participants emphasized that the age limit has changed and the number of girls who get married after finishing elementary school is reduced; however, many of them still get married before turning 18. Despite this, most participants are of the opinion that child marriages are not forced, but are voluntary and are "a part of the tradition that shouldn't be changed".

In **Serbia**, the stereotype that connects child marriage to "Roma culture and tradition" is widespread, and is not analyzed from the aspect of patterns of inequality, exclusion, discrimination, poverty and shorter life span of Roma women. When competent institutions do not analyze the issue of early marriage through the prism of gender perspective based on children rights, it results in an absence of adequate reactions to prevention and/or punishment for breach of girls' rights.[70]

I think it was the Roma tradition, I don't support it, of course, but in some cases, we cannot influence Roma tradition and culture the tradition and culture of Roma people. (Center for Social Work representative from Serbia)

It is too early and illegal, but on the other hand, if the system stops that practice, it is questionable what will become of those girls. If she doesn't get married young maybe she won't find a partner later, because it is their tradition. We consider it a sale, but to them, it is like "buying"[71] the bride on the wedding day or a dowry. (a CSW representative from Serbia)

We have been reporting these cases, but neither police nor social services have reacted, they said it was their tradition and the culture and that they didn't have the right to react [...] There are many similar cases, but the institutions were closing their eyes, as soon as they saw Roma girls, they didn't want to talk. But if the parents were persistent, police would visit those families and ask the girl if she had been taken away by force or if she had evaded voluntary and would always ask if she loved him [...] That is why we don't trust any institution, nor do we expect help from

[70] *Alternative report concerning Serbia to The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) for consideration at the 72Pre-Sessional Working Group* (23-27 July 2018), Praxis, the European Network on Statelessness, European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) and Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion (ISI), 2018, page 11

[71] In Serbia there is a tradition of ceremonial purchase of the bride when the groom's godfather gives some money to her family on the wedding day in order to let her leave the house

them, for these cases, there is no law for Roma people, but if we stole something then we would be imprisoned, then the law is applicable. It isn't Roma tradition and we are being called gypsies. (a Roma woman)

4.3. The prevalence of child marriages among Roma women

In **North Macedonia**, there is a significant difference between different ethnicities, when it comes to married girls aged 15-19. Data from 2011 show that the national rate is 4%, while in the Roma community 22% of girls in this age group are married. The percentage of girls aged 15-19 who had childbirth on the national level is 3%, while in the Roma community it is 18%.[72] Child marriages are particularly present in Roma community in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** – five out of ten Roma women and two out of ten Roma men got married before turning 18. In the general population, almost no man (0,6%) aged 20-24 got married before turning 18, whereas one out of ten girls got married before turning 18.[73]

Child marriages in **Montenegro** are most frequently present among the Roma and Egyptian population. Before turning 15, almost 18% of Roma and Egyptian girls get married. In addition, marriage before the age of 18 is more common among Roma and Egyptian women, at 56%, whereas in general population it is 6.2%.[74] In **the Republic of Serbia**, 16.9% of the girls from Roma settlements get married before turning 15 and 57% before turning 18, compared to the majority population, where 0.8% of the younger age group and 7% for the older age group are married.[75]

In **North Macedonia**, most of the interviewees state that Roma girls enter the marriage between 13 and 16 years of age, and the age of entering the marriage is linked to the degree of education and family's social and economic status. The participants are familiar with cases of child marriages with financial compensation, i.e. girls get married "because of money and some of them evade because there are too many girls in the family". Roma women from **Bosnia and Herzegovina** state it is not unusual to for girls to get married while they are still attending school, mostly aged from 13 to 17; in the past, it used to be done at the age of 12. If it happens that the bride is too young and doesn't have the parents' approval to marry, she lives in extra-marital relationship and

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[72] Елена Чавкоска, *Брак на малолетни лица-социоекономски и правни аспекти*, 2017, available on: http://pfk.uklo.edu.mk/portal/upload/magisterski/ElenaCavkovska_kic_fev18.pdf

[73] Ministry for human rights are refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Guidelines for improvement of position of Roma children in B&H*, 2013, available on: http://www.mhrr.gov.ba/ljudska_prava/djeca_bih/default.aspx?id=4281&langTag=bs-BA

[74] Government of Montenegro, *Strategy for prevention and protection of children from violence with the Proposal for Action plan 2017 – 2021*, available on: http://www.gsv.gov.me/biblioteka/strategije?alphabet=lat%3Fquery%3DUnesite+pojam%3A&sortDirection=Desc&pagerIndex=2

[75] *Strategy for social inclusion of Roma men and women in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2016 - 2025, "Official Gazette of RS*", vol. 26/2016, special goal 5.

waits to turn 18. In **Serbia**, Roma women from the suburbs of Pirot state that girls nowadays get married mostly after turning 18, which was not the case 10 years ago. Participants of the focus group from the suburbs of Krusevac state that girls often get married before turning 18, but it is less prevalent than before.

I hated going to school and I was fed up with my mother's preaching. Everyone wanted me to finish school, but I didn't want to. I wanted something more, I wanted my family, my husband. Sometimes more the former, sometimes the latter. That is why I would often run away from home at 16 and tried to make a life somewhere else. But my mother was persistent, and she kept bringing me back. When I had the abortion, I felt empty and sad. I felt like that for a long time. Now I'm not thinking about re-marrying. I'd like to complete a hairdresser's course. I think I could earn enough then and help my mother. (A Roma girl from B&H, 16)

My mother and father got divorced when I was little, and I didn't want to live with my stepmother. I got married at a young age and then the hell broke loose. I didn't know he had been using drugs or gambled before. He wouldn't bring home anything he earned. I got mentally ill when my baby died. I even reported him once for abuse, but I withdrew the appeal. He was in custody for 30 days. Now we live together again. We get along better, but we are going to seek for asylum, life is really hard here. He has a sister in France, she promised to help us. We can barely make ends meet, we don't have enough food. I don't send children to school regularly because I don't always have detergent to wash their clothes. If they go to school dirty, the other children would laugh at them and tell they stink. (A Roma woman from Serbia, 25)

My parents had a lot of children, so they sold me to another family. I lived well in that family until they got their own baby. After that, they didn't even look after me. They didn't care where I was, what I was doing. I begged many times to have money for food. Then they decided to marry me off. They sold me. In that marriage, I had three children. I didn't have a life, no one asked me about anything. I would rarely see my husband. He had some legal issues when we came to Serbia. That was when I saw his true colors. He would beat be, abuse me. I never spoke to anybody. I didn't have any papers. In the end, I met a friend who helped me move to Germany. There I settled, got married and got two children. Sometimes I see my children who live with their grandmother. My only goal is to take my children, so they don't suffer anymore. (A Roma woman from Serbia, 29)

I had known his sister, she asked me if I would marry her brother, I said no, but my mother said yes (she took 3500 euros) and I got married at 13. I hadn't known him, but when I saw him, I didn't like him. The first thing he told me was "If you have another boyfriend, tell me, we will bring you back". I said I didn't have, as my mother said it would be like that. I didn't want to sleep with him, I defended myself and said I wanted to go home. They said: "no, your mother took the money, you can't return". My husband told me we had to sleep together because my brother and mother would beat me, and I had to be a virgin because they would send me back if I wasn't. Those times were awful. There had been so many problems and troubles, I hadn't eaten for seven days. When I heard he was ill, it was a disaster. And then I got pregnant. [...] I noticed him laughing alone in the toilet so I wanted to leave him, but my mother wouldn't let me, she told me "You won't be marrying hundred times, you chose one husband and you should

bear with it, it is his child". And so, I've kept quiet for 14 years married to him. And so on, running around hospitals. (A Roma woman from Montenegro, 28)

4.4. Institutions' reaction to child marriages

Even though child marriage in the Roma community of **North Macedonia** is widespread, one Roma woman pointed out that there were no reactions from institutions "and they are the ones who should eradicate the problem". The majority of Roma women state that institutions do not take any actions, nor, when such cases are reported, do police and representatives from the center for social work arrive and return the girl home. Most of these cases are repetitive, and institutions do not want to react since "they don't care nor do their job." Roma and Egyptian women from **Montenegro** state that the situation is slightly better than it was a couple of years ago when cases of child marriage were attributed to the custom law of Roma and Egyptian communities. They are provided with security through the existence of the Center for Roma Initiative, where girls are provided with help and shelter. However, the interviewees are not satisfied with the resolution process and processing of cases, as the girls usually return to their husbands the same day or after a couple of days and not a single competent authority wants to deal with them anymore. With regards to **Serbia**, most Roma women stated that almost no one talked to them or to their children about the adverse effects of child marriages, and that this occurrence is being discussed mostly through non-formal education of children in local NGOs or with pedagogy assistants in elementary school.

My uncle reported the case to the nearest police station, but they told him they couldn't do anything. (A Roma woman from North Macedonia)

One thing is when the child wants to go, the police knock on your door, say hello and ask the girl if she wants to stay with mother or go with her husband. If the girl says she would like to stay with husband, the police say let's come then. (A Roma woman from B&H)

Yes, they found her and returned her home, but they didn't tell me if they would come back if she ran away again. (A Roma woman from North Macedonia)

The response of the employees in institutions responsible for addressing child marriage in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** is unclear in terms of which actions they take in case of child marriages. The responses "we take all necessary actions" or "we cooperated with other institutions" may indicate that they do not have a clear picture of professional and institutional responsibility in the reporting and protecting mechanisms child marriages. Centers for Social Work put focus on abuse only, but not on the violation of children's

rights in the case of child marriages. Although professionals stated that they "had taken all the necessary actions", in Bosnia and Herzegovina there were 59 criminal cases of extra-marital relationship with younger minors (aged 14 to 16) in the period between 2011 and 2015, for which seven convictions, 50 paroles and one corrective measure were ruled.[76] Among victims, there were seven women, 41 girls and three boys. When asked to comment on the refusal of other institutions to take measures that are under their jurisdiction, a social worker said he was not able to speak about the (non)reaction of other institutions in the system of protection of victims of child marriages. This is disconcerting, given the role of the center as a protective authority.

In **Montenegro**, a police clerk states that immediately after learning about a criminal offense, the police try to get in touch with the victim and inform other authorities, firstly the Center for Social Work, and then if needed, some of the non-governmental institutions that deal with child marriage. Centers for Social Work, in the preliminary phase, have a discussion with the parents, making them aware of the dangers and harmful consequences of child marriages and familiarizing them with potential legal actions. The police also talk to the parents and warn them they may be criminally responsible if they had taken or plan to take actions which are a criminal offense. It sometimes happens that other institutions inadequately perceive the situation and wrongfully assess that it contains no elements of a criminal act, resulting in non-efficiency of institutional support mechanism that do not result in criminal proceedings.

In **the Republic of Serbia**, in spite of established mechanisms of reactive systems in the cases of child marriage, it is clear that the laws are not enforced properly because child marriages still exist in the Roma community.[77] Extra-marital relationships with a minor is a criminal act; however, only a few people who have been convicted on these grounds go to prison. In 2014, 108 people were reported for this criminal act, 77 were convicted, out of which in 56 cases the punishment was only parole, and only 13 people were convicted and imprisoned. These statistics clearly reflects the lenient treatment that this criminal act has in the legal system.[78] That is why, when being asked if there is an efficient institutional protection from child marriage in the Republic of Serbia, all representatives from institutions with which they interviewers spoke to, except one, stated that there isn't. Similar responses were given by the interviewees from **Bosnia and Herzegovina.** According to professionals from this country, there is a lack of efficient institutional mechanism against child marriages.

Some authors pointed out that the unwillingness of public authorities to vigorously intervene, prevent and penalize child marriages is due to them being "blinded" by mere negligence, or because agreeing that "it is a Roma tradition, their internal issue".[79] Legal

[76] *Sixth period report of Bosnia and Herzegovina on implementation of Convention on elimination of all forms of violence against women* (2013-2016), 2017, available on: https://arsbih.gov.ba/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/170823_VI-periodicni-CEDAW-Izvjestaj-za-BiH_Nacrt.pdf
[77] *Child marriages in Serbia – Analytical Report,* UNICEF, Belgrade, 2016, pg. 42-43
[78] Ibid.
[79] "Child marriages in Serbia – Analytical Report", UNICEF Belgrade, Belgrade, 2016, pg. 42-43

systems in the region have mechanisms in place within the various systems that should respond in cases of child marriage, e.g. schools, social services, police and public prosecutors. However, it is clear that existing laws are not properly enforced, as child marriages continue to exist in the Roma community.[80] Although child marriages have roots in some traditional practices, and are very common and widespread in some communities, they are based on patriarchal social relationships, are a serious violation of child rights and gender based discrimination, and should not be perpetuated nor reinforced in modern societies. It is a fact that societies tolerate this phenomenon, attributes it to the Roma community and does not sufficiently recognize its harmfulness.[81] The causes and drivers of child marriage in the region are similar to the causes of child marriages worldwide. Gender-based discrimination, structural inequality, poverty, lack of education, accepted cultural practices, inadequate institutional responses and many other factors contribute to the existence and maintenance of child marriage practices.[82] Specifically, Roma are often subject to different types of prejudice and discrimination at the broader social level, and are on the social margin. Such social perceptions of Roma communities in practice make their problems viewed as happening elsewhere and to someone else. As a result, the incidence of child marriages, which in the majority societies would be considered as unacceptable social practice, in marginalized communities such as Roma continue to exist. Factors such as respect for "the virginity cult", the concept of family honor, and gender roles which do not allow empowerment of women are internal constraints that operate within communities, pre-defining early marriage as a desirable social practice. On the other hand, discrimination and marginalization of members of the Roma communities by the majority is an essential limiting factor in the effort to abandon restrictions imposed by the community. [83]

If we talk about the work on abuse cases or child marriage, no matter if we speak about Roma community, I think I am competent to speak about my engagement as a social worker and not about the work of other institutions, but as you are evidently interested in that topic I recommend having the interview with those institutions and collect all necessary data. (A social worker from B&H)

The measures we take when we find out about child marriage are always in a form of advice and are, if possible, focused on the attempt to end such relationships, if possible. If not, no actions are taken, because the practice had shown that bringing charges against parents or the extra-marital partner did not yield any results. (A CSW representative)

In most cases, we do all we can. We had one case when a father sold his daughter, it had been reported, but we haven't received any information for months whether the proceedings have

[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid, str. 27
[82] *"A Shadow Report to the UN Committee for elimination of discrimination for consideration at the 72nd session for the Republic of Serbia*, Roma Women Network, Belgrade, 2019, pg. 43
[83] Ibid.

started... Sometimes we just don't receive that information. Everything is going on so slowly and should be resolved as per emergency procedure. (A CSW representative from Serbia)

I can just tell you that the institutions are remaining silent and still keeping their eyes closed before this problem. (A CSW representative from Serbia)

In the following paragraph, the stories of Roma women from the region who have had the experiences or knowledge on the futile reporting of child marriages to local institutions are presented.

My daughter got married early when she was 16. She wanted to get married. My brother-in-law went to pick her up, but she didn't want to come back to us, she wanted to stay with them because she loved him. I wanted to rescue my child from there since they were dangerous, they would often fight. They threatened me when I said she was too young to marry. I reported to social services and police that my child was too young and not fit to marry, but they told me that she was not that young and that I should take her out of there alone. They told me "this is your child, do what you want." I managed to take her out of there, but she was beaten up, what they did to her - I did not know. I had to run away with her to my mother's flat because my child's heart had got ill. They threatened me to burn me, rape me and what not if I don't return her. I addressed everyone and showed these messages on my phone, but they did not help. Social Services told me that I needed to send my child to school but I told them that they would kidnap her from school because I had their threats on my phone. Then I sent the child to the school and the next day she was gone. Even today I can't see my child, the second year in a row now, she is 18. I know she has a child, but I can't go and see her. I'm afraid to go alone anywhere because I'm afraid of their threats, I became depressed and when it hits me, I don't know where I am. My daughter cannot contact me, but I hear from others that she lives very badly, that they abuse her, she wants to come back home, but they take her baby and so on... Four weeks ago, I heard that my child got beaten up very badly, she got poisoned, so I sent an ambulance there, but they lied to the ambulance that it was a false alarm. When they saw they couldn't wake her up they called my husband and he couldn't tell me, because when I hear these things, I get a seizure, so he went there and called an ambulance. And I don't have anyone to complain to. (A Roma woman from Serbia, 40)

My daughter was 12.5 and started hanging out with a Muslim girl who was 14.5 [...] The time went by and day by day, my daughter started to change. Her face was clean, but then pimples and freckles started appearing. Before she didn't like to wear loose and wide things, but all of a sudden she started wearing long loose shirts, she always liked tight clothes [...] After two months, everything started bothering her, she didn't want to eat onions. I didn't know what was happening. So, I decided to check her room while she was sleeping. And you see, she never liked having a belly and at once I saw her belly was huge. I was stunned, I couldn't recall my own name. I woke my husband up, made a coffee, he asked me why I was so pale... I told him I had something to tell him. I told him she had a belly and he attacked me that I turned our child into a whore, even threatened to kill her. I told her to go to the doctor's, but she didn't want to. When she heard a baby on the street, she told me she was pregnant. [...] When we

asked her about him, she said he promised to marry her at 18. Then she told us she had been with three of them, and one of them promised her many things. And then he fled to the USA. Who knows what happened afterward? And what then! To kill her, it wasn't worth it then, to mutilate her, it wasn't worth it either. Then my husband started shouting and pushing her, but he didn't hit her. I defended her, but when he saw the baby for the first time, he forgot about everything. I didn't know she had had the relations with other men, I thought she only had that one friend. I didn't even want to marry her off. (A Roma woman from B&H)

4.5. Conclusion

The causes of child marriages in the region are the same, and they primarily relate to poverty, social exclusion, and patriarchal relations still widespread in Roma families, which manifest in the control of women's bodies and their sexuality. From the discussions with Roma women and interviews with professionals, it can be concluded that many Roma parents decide to marry their daughters due to the extreme poverty they are exposed to in order to "reduce" the number of children in the home they have to support. There are also still cases in the region where girls are "sold" or married for the money. However, it has been noted that this pattern is changing, and many Roma parents want their daughters to marry after graduation but stated that they "run away" and marry against parents' will, and that they cannot do anything to prevent them from doing so. It is important to note that this is the so-called "forced voluntariness" of girls to marry, a reflection of the traditional patriarchal model, which is emerging in a new form.[84] The "cult of virginity" is still highly respected and nurtured in the Roma community, and girls are expected to marry as virgins. Therefore, girls do not have an opportunity to have relationships before marriage, because they will dishonor the family and decide to "run away" with the young man they fell in love with, in order to preserve the "honor" of their family.[85] Despite the far-reaching and grave consequences of child marriages on girls' lives, especially when it comes to leaving education, economic dependence, health problems and increased risk of violence, child marriage in the region is still present in the Roma communities. This harmful practice should be eliminated, since it is unequivocally a crime and a threat to girls' human rights.

Although countries in the region have solid legal frameworks to protect girls against child marriages, in many cases these regulations do not apply to child marriages in the Roma communities. Namely, the problem of child marriages is still perceived by professionals as a problem that does not deserve much attention, and there is a significant misunderstanding of this problem among professionals who are obliged to apply these regulations. Also, the interviews with professionals showed that there

[84] *"Child marriage among the Roma population in Serbia" ethnographic research,* UNICEF, Belgrade, 2017, pg. 35-39
[85] Ibid.

is still no specific training for professionals in the region to overcome prejudices and stereotypes that lead to the justification of child marriages by Roma tradition and culture. Almost all interviewed professionals agree that there is no systemic solution for elimination of child marriages, and it is necessary for states to address this problem holistically, because otherwise child marriage in the Roma community will continue to exist in the region, with the tacit “approval“ of the states that do not take the necessary measures to eliminate it.

5. DOMESTIC AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

The purposes of the Istanbul Convention are to: protect women against all forms of violence and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence; contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women; promote substantive equality between women and men, including by empowering women; design a comprehensive framework, policies and measures for the protection of and assistance to all victims of violence against women and domestic violence; promote international co-operation with a view to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence; and provide support and assistance to organisations and law enforcement agencies to effectively co-operate in order to adopt an integrated approach to eliminating violence.[86] Parties condemn all forms of discrimination against women and take, without delay, the necessary legislative and other measures to prevent it, in particular by: embodying in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation the principle of equality between women and men and ensuring the practical realisation of this principle; prohibiting discrimination against women, including through the use of sanctions, where appropriate; abolishing laws and practices which discriminate against women. The implementation of the provisions of this Convention by the Parties, in particular measures to protect the rights of victims, should be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status.[87]

As mentioned previously, the Istanbul Convention has been ratified in all countries included in this research. In all countries, domestic and intimate partner violence has also been criminalised in domestic law, and protection measures for victims are prescribed.

5.1. Domestic and intimate partner violence against Roma women – the prevalence of violence

In **North Macedonia**, there are great differences in recognition and perception of different types and manifestations of violence, which is strongly linked to the level of education and socioeconomic status of the interviewee. More educated Roma women who were in contact with women's organizations are more likely to recognize violence in general, and different types of violence specifically. On the other hand, Roma women who are less educated or who are without formal education tend to perceive violence, isolation, and child marriage as something "normal". Some of interviewees did not recognize yelling as a form of violence and consider it to be normal: "Well we all yell

[86] Article 1 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence

[87] Article 4 paragraph 3 and 4 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence

every day"; "It's violence only if there is pushing"; "It is stress, not violence"; "It is normal when the man gets angry." Therefore, it can be concluded that some Roma women do not recognize all forms of violence, including psychological violence. A significant number of Roma women in North Macedonia justify violent behaviour, as demonstrated by UNICEF data from 2011[88] which found that 25% of Roma women condone violent behaviour from men in their lives. This is supported by responses from our interviewees. There were also indications that the awareness is slowly changing as Roma women have started recognizing certain forms of violence.[89] The interviewees recognized the following violent manifestations: hitting, abuse, inebriety, and getting beaten from their husband, son, or grandson. Despite this, only 5% of interviewees stated that the depriving the woman of money is a manifestation of economic violence; a large number of women didn't have the response, and some of them thought that it isn't violence since "the money should be shared, the family needs it."

According to UNDP **Montenegro** research from 2017, every other woman had been a victim of some form of violence at least once in their lifetime.[90] The level of violence against women from Roma and Egyptian families is even higher compared to the general population and they often have a subordinate position and have been exposed to different forms of abuse, which has led to their understanding of violent behavior patterns as completely natural. Further to this, their isolation from the rest of the population prevents them from seeking their way out of abuse through mechanisms provided by the state institutions.[91] MICS research from 2013[92] shows that 41% of women in Roma settlements think that a husband has the right to hit or beat up his wife/partner – 30% of women justified violence in cases when a woman is neglecting her children, 26% if she shows autonomy (e.g. goes out without husband's knowledge), and 21% if a woman is arguing with her husband, whereas 53% of men in Roma settlements justify violence against women.[93] Roma women who live in poor households justify violence more frequently (63%) compared to Roma women who live in wealthier households (31%). The most frequently stated reasons for domestic violence are

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[88] Министерство за здравство : Министерство за образование и наука : Министерство за труд и социјална политика, MICS - Multiple indicator cluster survey, Скопје, 2011, available on: https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS4/Europe%20and%20Central%20Asia/North%20Macedonia%2C%20Republic%20of/2011/Final/Macedonia%20%28National%20and%20Roma%20Settlements%29%202011%20MICS_English.pdf

[89] Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, *Nacionalen akciski plan za zajaknuvanje na polozbata na Romskata zena vo opstestvoto 2016-2020* (April, 2016), available on: http://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/dekada/28.7_NAP%20za%20zenata%20Romka_2016.pdf

[90] UNDP Montenegro, *Primjena zakona, mijenjanje stavova*, available on: http://www.me.undp.org/content/montenegro/sr/home/projects/Istanbul_Convention.html

[91] *Nasilje u porodici u romskoj i egipćanskoj zajednici u Crnoj Gori*, Centar za romske inicijative, Nikšić, 2014, available on: http://care-balkan.org/dok/1417014823.pdf

[92] *Crna Gora i romska naselja u Crnoj Gori, istraživanje višestrukih pokazatelja 2013*, Unicef Crna Gora, Podgorica, 2014, available on: https://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/medjunarodna%20saradnja/2013%20MICS_Montenegrin.pdf

[93] Ibid. 45% of men agree that the husband has rights to beat up his wife if she neglects her children, 38% if she goes out without his permission, and 31% if she argues with him.

tradition (32,4%), alcoholism (18,4%), poverty (6,5%), drug use (2,2%), and poor education (1,6%).[94]

Roma and Egyptian women who participated in focus groups named various types of violence that they had endured: from mental abuse to physical violence, which included sustaining a head injury with a glass bottle, broken arms, head injuries and constant beating. The children of Roma and Egyptian women are often witnesses to violence against their mothers, and the interviewees live in fear that their daughters will also become victims of child marriage, which will expose girls to various forms of violence. Witnessing violence at home has great impact on children; it socializes boys to justify and commit violence, and girls to expect violence in their future life.

There has been some research undertaken on violence against Roma women in Serbia.[95] The research from 2017[96] shows that domestic and intimate partner violence against Roma women is a serious social issue. From the total number of Roma women interviewed in Serbia, 91.9% of them have been exposed to some form of physical and/or sexual violence after turning 18. In the last incident they could remember, most of them were exposed to combined physical and psychological violence (57%) and were abused in most cases by their partners – husbands (68.4%) or their ex-husbands (15.3%).[97]

The following paragraph notes the stories of women who endured domestic and intimate partner violence.

It had started while we were in a relationship, he slapped me because he was jealous. After that we had a row, he begged for forgiveness, promised it wouldn't happen again, and of course I believed him, forgave and forgot because I loved him very much. Soon after that, we started working in the same company, so it was logical that we started living together. [...] The abuse started at work. Whenever I turned my head, moved, looked somewhere, on the break he would squeeze my hand, pull my hair, or wouldn't talk to me. He would always tell me: "Why are you looking at that guy at the assembly line, do you think I don't see that you are staring at him?" I would always tell him not to say stupid things and that I wasn't looking at anybody, but I'm not a wooden doll and I have to stretch and turn around. That used to happen every day until he kicked me with his leg on the way home. Only because a colleague asked me for a chewing gum on the lunch break. After that he apologized, I swore I would report him and end everything if that happened again. At home we talked a lot about it, I explained to him there wasn't any reason to be jealous, that he is overthinking [...] He was quiet for two or more weeks, I can't even remember now, until my

[94] *Nasilje u porodici u romskoj i egipćanskoj zajednici u Crnoj Gori*, Centar za romske inicijative, Nikšić, 2014, available on: http://care-balkan.org/dok/1417014823.pdf

[95] *Monitoring of public policies: effects on the position of the Roma Decade of Roma women in the Republic of Serbia*, Roma Women's Center BIBIJA, Romani cikna, Pravni skener (Law Scanner) and Roma Women's Center Veliki Crljeni, Belgrade, 2014, pg. 23

[96] *Shadow Report to the GREVIO committee – Violence against Roma women in the Republic of Serbia*, on behalf of Roma Women Network - Ženski prostor (Women Space) and Roma Women's Center Bibija, Belgrade, 2018, pg. 4-5

[97] Ibid.

colleague sent me a message asking if were working that Saturday [...] Then his face distorted, he jumped from the bed and hit me over the hand that was holding the phone. Then he punched me in the face, I raised my hands to cover my face while he was yelling "slut, whore, tramp". He punched me several times and breathed heavily. Now when I think about it, I get scared, I'd never seen him like that before. He took his jacket and went out. I remember it hurt a lot and I first went to the mirror to look at myself, I was all red. I wasn't crying, I was angry and thinking about what to do. I rang my friend and slept at her house. The following day I didn't go to work. (A Roma woman from Serbia, 20)

I got married at 20. I finished high school and started working. I was picking cherries. I met him over there and got married very fast. The abuse started just a couple of months after I moved to his place. It was because I couldn't get pregnant. He would hit me everywhere. Mostly on my head. Every month when I got my period, I would get beating. He would say that I was a slut, who knows with how many men I'd slept before him, I was incapable of being a mother. Then his mother would join him who would push me and throw all sorts of things at me. She said that people laughed at her, having a daughter-in-law who couldn't get pregnant. It was really horrible. (A Roma woman from Serbia, 22)

I would often sleep in stables at my neighbors'. I had a lot of things going through my head, to drown myself in the river, to go back to my parents... But no matter what I would always think of my son. How he needed me. All my neighbors knew about my troubles with my husband, even the CSW representatives. Since I didn't have a permanent job, I heard a cleaning lady was needed in a local school. I asked the director and they took me in. Now the situation is better, I'm not afraid of him, and the son has gotten bigger, so the husband is afraid of him. (A Roma woman from B&H)

It was my fault that he started beating me. I cheated on him. Everybody in the village knows about it. I'm ashamed. He'd been away for months, he was working at a construction, he didn't contact us, didn't send any money. [...] The fourth month he came, didn't talk to me or the kids, just sat in silence and smoked. When I asked him what was going on, he would yell. I heard he had found a woman somewhere and that he had been sending her money. I could barely make ends meet and he was giving another woman all his earnings, and nothing to his children. I chatted via Facebook with a man, I cheated on him and went to live with that man. [...] I told my children that I'd work there and that I'd keep in touch. [...] The children told everything to their father, didn't support me. The children even showed him my chat, all messages from the computer, I didn't even delete them. He came there, found me, and beat me up in front of him. He dragged me to the car and returned home. Since then everything is the same, almost two years now. He beats me every day, sexually abuses me, makes me do all sorts of things, and insults me. He doesn't let me get out of the house, I can't go anywhere, and no one can visit me. He has taken my phone and doesn't even let me hear my mother. Children witnessed the insults, but never the beatings. They support him. (A Roma woman from Serbia, 44)

I got married at 18, it went okay until he became an alcoholic. He molested me often, not just me, but the kids as well. [...] It is abuse. Since 2012 his alcoholism has gotten worse. And this going out with other women. Until 2015. Then he committed a criminal act. Abuse. First that I remember was when he came and asked for alcohol, I couldn't give him any because my child was sick, I'd just come from the doctor's. He grabbed my neck, started strangling me, and leaning me against the hot stove. While my skin was burning, the child started screaming and fainted. But when I saw that the

child was unconscious, I fought him, grabbed the child and started running to the doctor. He started running after us, hitting our child and I defended the child. He knocked me down, but my brother-in-law helped me. The other experience was even scarier. It was when he kicked my ill son in the kidneys with his boots. He remembers it to this day, and he cannot forgive him for that. He wanted to hit him with an axe, but I pushed children away, I wouldn't let him. If he should hit anyone, let him hit me. I asked the police to help, but they just took him to sober up and couldn't guarantee for tomorrow. I endured sexual abuse. I couldn't have relations with him when he was that drunk. It was even worse then. (A Roma woman from B&H, 47)

The violence started just after the wedding. I noticed that the others from his family were telling him how to behave towards me. I didn't have any rights, I couldn't say anything, they kept humiliating me. Especially his mother. She would say that I was from a bad family and they would forbid me to visit them. [...] For a long time I couldn't have children and I was specially molested and insulted in that period. It was just when I had my baby, who is a year old now, that I started thinking about leaving this house. But the biggest problem is that I can't come back to my family, they wouldn't take me in. He didn't beat me, but he constantly insulted me and kept me under his control. I couldn't go anywhere, he didn't give me money, and his family supported him in everything. It was forbidden to move around. I don't know why he did that, I tried to please him, but nothing I did helped. (A Roma woman from B&H, 23)

The first beatings from my husband I got when I was in the fourth month of pregnancy. It continued even when we got our baby. I endured physical and mental abuse, even a year and a half after I decided to leave that marriage. Up until then I had been forgiving him, thought that there was an option to change him, but I couldn't stay any longer. I decided to leave that hell, packed my bags, left his house with my child who was seven months old. By splitting up his violent behavior didn't stop. I reported him many times, but the institutions didn't have an adequate response. I can tell you that my child and I endured those consequences and that after three concluded cases we don't enjoy right on alimony, that is to say, for 18 years now, so my child is suffering from a form of economic violence. In all this, it is the most important that I had my family's support and I had a place to return to because I didn't have the protection of the institutions. Even though I consider myself to be an educated person, in certain moments I didn't know who to turn to. (A Roma woman from Montenegro).

5.1.1. Reporting abuse

In **North Macedonia** it is specified that anyone who has knowledge of domestic violence is obligated to report it to the police, the Center for Social Work, national SOS phone number, or relevant organization; reports can be made anonymously.[98] Around 98% of Roma women would report violence to the police, while some of them stated they would report it to the media.[99] Although most of Roma women responded that they would immediately report violence to the police, they also stated that they do not have trust in

[98] Закон за превенција, спречување и заштита од семејно насилство („Службен весник", vol. 138/2014)
[99] Especially in the TV show „Na TV sa Milenom".

the police: "It's in vain"; "They don't do anything, they just make a report." The interviewees also reported that they also do not trust other institutions, including Centers for Social Work. Information gathered from civil society organizations in the informal network *UNiTE to End Violence against Women*[100] shows that during 2017 and 2018 in North Macedonia only 1351 victims reported abuse via SOS lines. Out of these victims, 47% of them were Macedonian and 13% Roma.[101]

Research in **Serbia**[102] showed that only 27.6% of Roma women turned to an institution or organization for help immediately after the last act of violence that was committed against them, while only 8.8% of Roma women informed the police first after violence had been committed against them. In most cases Roma women did not turn to police because: they were afraid of further violence (34.9); they were ashamed (31.5%); they thought that the abuse was not serious enough to warrant calling the police (14.4%); they did not believe that the police would help Roma women (5%); and they know from experience that police wouldn't help (3%). In addition to the above, Roma women stated other reasons for not turning to the police, including: having bigger problems than the violence; fear that the abuser would take their children; not wanting to send the abuser to jail; and wanting to solve the problem on their own. Some did not even think about calling the police.[103] The fact that Roma women do not report abuse is the result of a lack of trust in the institutions, first and foremost in centers for social work. It is also the result of Roma women being unaware of services that are available to them, including shelters or possible help from local municipalities in the form of allowance or employment. Unfortunately, there are many cases where Roma women who report abuse are faced with a lack of the support from the institutions; often no one believes them, or the abuse is considered "Roma tradition and lifestyle" or "private family matters."[104]

Several Roma women from the region shared their experiences with reporting intimate partner violence to the local authorities.

> *Her common-law partner often beats her up, yells at her, offends her, he is even violent towards children. Two years ago, when she was heavily beaten up, she called the police. When the police arrived, they told them not to fight and to calm down, because if they come again, they will call center for social work which will take their children away and send them to foster home. She never called them again and now "she doesn't even think about doing that, even though the abuse is still present."* (A Roma woman from Serbia, 33).

[100] *Ujedinjavanje glasova za zaustavljanje nasilja nad ženama*
[101] Information received from the organization Кризен Центар Надеж
[102] *Shadow Report to the GREVIO committee – Violence against Roma women in the Republic of Serbia,* on behalf of Roma Women Network - Ženski prostor (Women Space) and Roma Women's Center Bibija, Belgrade, 2018, pg. 4-5
[103] Ibid.
[104] *Monitoring of public policies: effects on the position of the Roma Decade of Roma women in the Republic of Serbia,* Roma Women's Center BIBIJA, Romani cikna, Pravni skener (Law Scanner) and Roma Women's Center - Veliki Crljeni, Belgrade, 2014, pg. 24

She reported violence only when she ended up in the hospital and had no other choice. She was afraid that the abuser would kill her because he threatened to slit her throat. "I always thought it would be better, I hoped he would change because he kept promising that." She has no trust in institutions, because the police hadn't helped her the first time she called them. He just spent the night in a cell and was later released. After that he was constantly coming to the house, threatening her, hitting her in the head but in a way not to leave bruises. In the CSW they advised her to file for a restraining order which he didn't obey. The police, they just told her they couldn't do anything. She had to ask some acquaintances to threaten him to prevent him at least for a while from molesting her. When she would report the violence, the professionals were kind and fair, she didn't feel discriminated, but she had a feeling she was not being understood and that they were just formally listening to her. The authorities insisted she should report him and testify, but that report served for nothing because he didn't respect his restraining order and the police didn't do anything about it. She reported him after years of abuse, but she wasn't sure if anyone would do anything about the case, especially since no one cares about Roma women and Roma people in general. She didn't have anywhere to go, didn't have anyone to turn to. No one would have helped her if she hadn't had her sister. Both she and her children would end up on the streets. No one else offered to help. She didn't know anything about the protection against violence, but the police did tell her to go to the center for social work. However, they didn't help at all. (A Roma woman from B&H,32)

A significant number of Roma women from the region stated that they had never reported violence. Roma and Egyptian women from Montenegro stated that they do not report violence for the following reasons: fear of being left out of the community, patriarchy, shame, economic dependency, low self-esteem, and the uncertainty of adequate reaction of the institutions. In the following paragraph several stories of Roma women who haven't reported abuse are presented.

I was very young when we started living together. He started beating me at the time he started gambling and drinking. He used to do some odd jobs and spend all the money in the casino. When he gambled all the money, the abuse would get more violent. After that, he would start borrowing the money from others and ended up in debts. He wouldn't come home for days and I didn't know where he was. Sometimes the loan sharks would come to my door and threaten me and the children. I was terrified and didn't know what to do. Every time his abuse got more violent, he would promise he would change and stop beating me, but it never happened. I endured all sorts of things, both physical and mental violence, all the time. I think he used to beat me because of gamble and booze. I have three children and they saw the abuse because we live in a small house. My younger daughter is constantly afraid and can't stay alone. She also has hormonal issues. My sons are also very sensitive and are afraid of a lot of things. I reported him only once when he beat me up on the streets. One of my boys was present. No one came by to help me and I was lying in the pool of blood. My son was shocked, but he went to look for help. No one else helped me, everyone just walked past me. Although I reported the abuse, I didn't file charges against him because he promised he would change, and we continued to live together. I went to the police only once and they asked me if I wanted to file charges against him, but I refused because he is my husband and it is a disgrace to do so. (A Roma woman from B&H, 40)

I didn't report the violence, nor do I want to face problems and fines. But when I went to Otaharin I found out you can file a report when you have problems. I never reported. I intend to do so now. I will report him if he continues this way. (A Roma woman from B&H, she doesn't know how old she is)

While my in-laws were alive, our marriage was great. Later my husband got a job and we had three children, two girls, and a boy. After a while, he started drinking. We started arguing. He began to beat me. Children would cry in silence; they couldn't say anything. He never beat the children. Then I had our fourth child, it was again a girl. He wouldn't stop drinking and attacking me. When he wasn't working, he would listen to music and drink all day and I couldn't say a thing. [...] Someone from the neighborhood reported violence, so the center for social work paid us a visit. They examined me looking for visible injuries, but they couldn't find anything. I denied, saying that it wasn't true and that my husband wasn't violent. I still love him though, as he is the father of my children. After that, I suppose out of fear of being reported, my husband stopped abusing me. He is still drinking, not as much as he used to, and he doesn't molest anyone. I started working and now it's much better. I knew I could have reported him, but I didn't want to. (A Roma woman from Serbia, 42)

I haven't even thought about reporting him, it would have made him even angrier. Ever since I moved to his place, I haven't seen my parents or had a cellphone. I couldn't talk to them. He kept saying that he would send me away to my mother because I wasn't getting pregnant, so I prayed to God to get pregnant so that my husband would stop beating me. [...] I couldn't wait to get married, because I had a hard life, my parents were very poor, and his parents were wealthier. They could afford food. I didn't go to see a doctor for my injuries, but I persuaded him to take me to the doctor because I couldn't get pregnant. I ran some tests, and everything was alright with me. He didn't want to see a doctor. After a year I was still not pregnant. He sent me to my parents by bus. I was happy and sad at the same time. [...] But, after two weeks, he came for me, and I came back to him. Since then he hasn't hit me that often, he just insisted on having a baby. Two months since my return, I got pregnant and now I have a four-month-old girl. I came to visit my mother, he let me go because I have some documentation to complete. That is why I'm here at this workshop. And I'm glad I'm here. Since I had my baby, it's so different. Sometimes he pushes me and says bad things, but at least he doesn't beat me. (A Roma woman from Serbia, 22)

Most representatives from the Centers for Social Work, police, and prosecutors' offices stated that Roma women rarely report domestic and intimate partner violence, compared to women from the general population. One interviewee from the Center for Social Work from **Montenegro** hypothesized that the cause of this is respect towards Roma tradition, fear of judgment, and Roma women being uninformed. Representatives from the Center for Social Work from **Bosnia and Herzegovina** stated that many Roma women who are uneducated and economically dependent cannot see the possibility of surviving outside their family and community, hence they very rarely or never decide to report domestic violence. Police representatives from Bosnia and Herzegovina gave a

completely different response. They stated that they cannot see any difference in the way Roma women ask for protection compared to women from the general population.

Representatives of the Center for Social Work in **Serbia** stated that Roma women report abuse "in somewhat smaller number" and that they are "more likely to not break up the relationship" with the abuser. They stated that this was predominately due to Roma women's economic dependency and attachment to their children. Furthermore, they explained that Roma women almost exclusively report physical abuse, while other forms of violence are not recognized and reported as they consider them to be something "normal". Representatives of the police stated that they believe the cause of not reporting abuse is fear of the abuser and other household members, while representatives from the prosecutors' offices highlighted that the rate of reporting abuse is drastically lower in Roma women than in the general population because of their distrust in state institutions or fear of consequences.

Some Roma and Egyptian women from **Montenegro** reported abuse to their fathers, instead of the police, who later informed the police. Roma and Egyptian women tended to think that state institutions treated members of the majority population better than them; some of them think that it is "good enough" to feel protected and safe in the police station, while "it is normal that cases of violence are resolved faster when the survivor is a member of the majority population". The reasons for this are: a lack of education; long-lasting exposure to abuse; child marriage; poor life quality; poverty; hunger; and unemployment. All these factors lead to a sense of inferiority that supports the thinking pattern that the only thing important thing in life is not to be "hungry and bruised".

5.2. State's obligations in relation to protection and support of Roma women victims of domestic and intimate partner violence

Roma women tend to stay in violent marriages and often return to their abuser after leaving him. There are many reasons for this, seen as well in the general population. Some of these reasons are: their family can't take them in; they don't have a place to go back to; they do not have enough money; and that their children stay at their husband's house and therefore they are unable to see them.[105] Representatives of the institutions competent to offer protection to victims are not sufficiently knowledgeable of the specificities of gender-based violence against Roma women. Almost no one working in this field has received any additional training on the subject.

[105] *Shadow Report to the GREVIO committee – Violence against Roma women in the Republic of Serbia*, on behalf of Roma Women Network - Ženski prostor (Women Space) and Roma Women's Center Bibija, Belgrade, 2018, pg. 28

The Istanbul convention specifies to what extent the measures of protecting victims of violence are undertaken and what they should be based on. The measures set out for protection should: understand violence against women and domestic violence from gender perspective; be directed towards human rights and safety of the victim; be based on the integrated approach that addresses the relationship between the victim, abuser, and their children and environment; be directed towards avoiding secondary victimization; and empower economic independence. Although this framework is specified, several Roma women have experienced different treatment from the authorities than prescribed by the Istanbul convention.

She once phoned the police when the abuser pushed her and when she was afraid that he would beat her up. When the police arrived, they ignored her, they talked briefly with the abuser and went away. They didn't even look at her. That was when she realized she didn't have anyone to turn to because they wouldn't help her and take her seriously. She doesn't have anywhere to go, she doesn't work, has a small baby, and her family doesn't talk to her. After the police went away, she visited CSW. They laughed at her and asked her why she even married the older man. They wouldn't listen to her, especially as he hadn't beaten her. She needs someone to take her seriously and believe that she has been abused. She must be sure that if she leaves someone will help her find a place to live and a job. She says she doesn't know how other women are being treated, but she knows that Roma women don't have any rights. (A Roma woman, 23)

She reported her partner only on one occasion. When the officers arrived, she was loudly explaining what had happened. One of the policemen told her: "If you were my wife, I would cut your tongue out for yelling that much." She thinks that the policemen behaved that way because she was Roma and they think these are just "Gypsy things". She said then that she wouldn't report anything again. (A Roma woman, 33)

After being physically and mentally abused for years, she decided to go to the police and report him for the sake of her daughter. There they told her there was nothing to be done. She tried calling the police many times after that, but they would never show up. She then gave up. When her daughter grew up, she called the police to come and protect her. On that occasion the policeman yelled at the daughter for "calling him for no reason". [...] The police treated both of them very badly. No one ever said that it was because they are Roma, but they never believed she was being abused and they ignored her daughter's calls for help. Once her husband beat her up so badly that she ended up in the hospital with serious head trauma. They believed her only when her life was in danger and only then they filed a report against her husband. He got a restraining order a year ago, but he has constantly been following both of them, now they can't walk outside in the evenings because they are afraid that he would encounter them somewhere and hurt them. They keep asking the police to help them, but they ignore her again, they say she doesn't have any evidence that he's been following them. [...] She and her daughter went to Center for Social Work where they gave them a one-time allowance and nothing more. They had one individual conversation with her daughter at that was all. While she was abused, she never got anything from anyone [...] Even though she isn't with her husband anymore she is still in danger because he keeps following her and can do whatever he wants, and no one is reacting. She thinks that the treatment is not the same for everyone and that no one takes Roma women seriously. (A Roma woman from B&H, 40)

The former partner stalked her for two years, threatened her, molested her at her workplace,

physically abused her, and forcefully took her money. She has a really bad experience with the police officers because the abuser's brother is superior in special forces, so they never reacted adequately. The policemen treated her badly, telling her that she "keeps calling the police all the time", that she was provoking him and should stop doing that. They would respond to the call and try to "make them reconcile" after the incident. She says that at that moment she realized how scared she was because her life was in danger and no one was reacting. She thinks that protection mechanisms are more available to women from the majority population because they are not Roma". (A Roma woman from Serbia, 39)

I have never reported anything, ever. I was afraid of him. Who is going to protect me? Center for Social Work doesn't even protect the beggars. They never protect anyone. I've never reported to the Center, but I did go there once, and the social worker asked me: "What are you going to report when you are living in his house?" I told her that he beat me, he attacked his grandchildren. And they asked me if I lived with him and how was I going to report him if I lived there. If you want to report, you to have to move out. Where was I to go? And so, I returned, I couldn't report, because, where would I go indeed? I reported him two years ago when there wasn't a shelter here. If there had been a shelter, then I would have gone there. I even went to the police. I ran away from him for a year. I took care of my child and worked. They looked for him for two days, found him on the third day and said something to him. I don't know what they said to him. But I couldn't leave my house, go to the market, the police hadn't given me any feedback. No one offered any solution. They told me if I didn't have a house where would I go, why was I leaving him if that was his house. If then I was smart as I am now... (A Roma woman from B&H, 58)

5.3. General and specialist support services

In North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia there are several general and specialist support services for women exposed to domestic or intimate partner violence, including free legal aid, medical help, and short-term and long-term psychological support. All professionals are obliged to report any knowledge of domestic violence and inform the victim about the protection available to them. The aim of these services is to empower women and help them break the circle of violence.

However, the experiences of women's organizations from **Serbia** show that many women who turn to them and confide about the abuse that they endured are afraid of their abuser's retaliation. That is why women usually decide to talk about their experiences anonymously via telephone helpline.[106]

Roma women are often in a more difficult situation as most of them live in extended (multigenerational) families. Often when a Roma woman in this situation reports the abuse and stays at the house, she is exposed to further violence and abuse from other family members. This is one of the key factors in why Roma women rarely report abuse. In the rare cases when they do report, they often give up on pressing charges due to the

[106] *NGO report on the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence in Serbia*, SOS Vojvodina Network in cooperation with NGO's from Serbia, Kikinda, 2018, pg. 79

pressures they are exposed to by the family but also by wider community. Violence against Roma women is also rarely reported by other people. According to women's organizations, police officers do not always react to reports of violence against Roma women due to widespread stereotypes and prejudices. As a result, the police often do not believe their claims, as violence is seen as "their way of life", it is perceived as a "normal" pattern of behavior in the Roma community and it is considered that "women will return to their abusers anyways", and therefore "there is no point in taking any measures".[107]

Fieldwork has shown that representatives of the institutions in **Montenegro** have undertaken numerous trainings for fieldwork with marginalized groups, including Roma and Egyptian women, and they are willing to help them within the limits of their institutions' remit. However, Roma women are often not informed and empowered enough about their rights and institutional protection mechanisms, or they don't trust institutions, meaning that there are still barriers to reporting even when the institutions are trained on marginalized groups. Most interviewed Roma and Egyptian women in Montenegro are familiar with the procedure of reporting violence to the police and social services. They are also familiar with the purpose of the telephone helplines and shelters; however, they predominantly turn to these services later than they should have.

In the following paragraph, one experience of a Roma woman and one standpoint of a professional are presented. They present a way of offering support to women who still endure abuse despite a relatively well-written legal frame.

A Roma woman who was subjected to domestic violence after her husband kicked her out on the streets after finding a new wife, found out from some woman that one can go to the city council and ask for help. The man from the Housing Department "felt sorry for her and the kids" so he allocated them an apartment which will be paid by the city. [...] She is grateful to the city, but still thinks that the police and the Center for Social Service haven't done anything good for her. [...] She needed physical protection when she was in that situation, which she didn't get. From most of the institutions, she didn't even get the financial support that was necessary when she was out on the streets. She is especially dissatisfied by the work of CSW and their attitude towards her. They ignored her, wouldn't listen to her, said they can't do anything for her. [...] She is dissatisfied with the work of the institutions and thinks that there are no mechanisms for the protection against the abuse, especially for Roma women. (A Roma woman from B&H)

Legal proceeding of violence is processed ex-officio. If the victims withdraw charges, there is no dilemma. The problem can arise when the victim is the only witness and has no rights to testify. Then we must end the case because there are no witnesses. It doesn't matter if the victim had given the statement to the police. It can't be used in court. Then we end the case with an acquittal. If the woman is severely injured and there are many pieces of evidence that he was violent towards her, we continue the proceeding. (The court representatives from Bosnia and Herzegovina)

[107] Ibid.

It is apparent through these examples and the wider research undertaken for this report that support services to Roma women who face violence are primarily offered by women's organizations and that women turn to them for advice, especially for the psycho-social services that are necessary for overcoming the trauma.

5.3.1. Shelters

In North Macedonia, it is specified that the state is required to provide a sufficient number of adequate and easily accessible shelters for victims of abuse, especially women and their children. In North Macedonia there are only four of these shelters, run by Centers for Social Work; this number is not enough to provide a safe accommodation for all victims of domestic violence. Even though these services are free of charge for users (funded from the state budget),[108] they do not provide 24-hour protection, as employees only stay in the shelters until the end of their shifts, after which women remain alone. The services of shelters can be used by women for a period of three months, with the possibility of extending the period up to six months.[109]

Setting up shelters in Bosnia and Herzegovina is regulated by entity laws and the Brcko District Law on Protection against Domestic Violence. According to these laws, the possibility of protection from violence is provided, in the form of temporary accommodation in the shelters. In the Federation of B&H, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has not yet introduced a regulation that would prescribe criteria and standards for setting up, functioning, and financing of shelters.

In Montenegro, there are three shelters for victims of domestic violence. Two are run by women's non-governmental organizations – *Sigurna ženska kuća* (Shelter for women) from Podgorica and Nikšić telephone helpline for women and children victims of violence. The third shelter is located in Bijelo Polje and functions within the Center for Child and Family Support. This organization provides accommodation to children and a non-violent parent, which means that either of parents can reside there. There is a shelter for victims of trafficking where Roma girls and young women victims of child marriage are often accommodated.

Regulation on the conditions and standards for offering social protection services of the Republic of Serbia specifies that the purpose of the accommodation in a shelter is satisfying the basic needs of an individual or a family that requires the provision of safety in urgent situations.[110] The experiences of civil society organizations show that

[108] Article 24 of the Law on Prevention, Prevention and Protection against Domestic Violence (Закона за превенција , спречување и заштита од семејно насилство)
[109] Article 24 of the Law on Prevention, Prevention and Protection against Domestic Violence
[110] Article 26 of the Rulebook on detailed conditions and standards for provision of social welfare services ("Official Gazette of RS", no. 42/2013)

shelters in Serbia are not easily accessible to women survivors of violence due to an unequal distribution of the shelters and the fact that women must be referred to a shelter by a center for social work in order to obtain accommodation.[111] Almost all representatives of the institutions in Serbia, including those from Centers for Social Work, stated that there aren't any obstacles to accommodating Roma women in the shelters. However, one social service representative gave a different response which coincides to a larger extent with information gathered by Roma women organization: *There are no obstacles. The only problem is to accommodate older people or people who have a severe health condition because they need someone's help in everyday activities, and they cannot get it there. Problems are also limited capacities of shelters.* The interviewee stated that the number of Roma women residing in shelters varies and that *they rarely decide to go to shelters, especially if they have support in their family or community.* Roma women are aware of the existence of shelters, but they often do not dare to take the step to access them out of fear of judgment by their relatives, and the fact that they do not know what they would do after leaving the shelter.[112] There are, however, women who experienced domestic violence and were unaware of the availability of shelter services, even though this kind of support would have meant a lot to them.

They mentioned the shelter in the CSW, but she didn't want to go there "because she can't be there". She thinks she couldn't do it, couldn't stand to be excluded, her community may even outcast her. "No one likes women who run and hide." (A Roma woman from B&H, 33)

Well, I heard there was a shelter somewhere, where they keep women safe from the abusers, but I never thought about going there because it's not permanent, and where would I go after that?! (A Roma woman from Serbia, 44)

No one ever told me that there was a shelter. I know it is intended for families who have problems, but no one ever told me about it. If I had problems now, I would go to a shelter. There are women who succumb to that fear and don't have the strength to fight it. They return to their husbands and go through the same situation. You may sacrifice yourself, but you cannot expose your children to that. There are parents who abuse their children sexually. My husband stayed at his house. It was his house, and his parents' house before that. He shared it with his sister. I got alimony, he has a debt of 5600 KM[113], he didn't give me a dime. However, the court sent the enforcement decision to take his property since he hasn't been paying the alimony. Now he is selling his house. (A Roma woman from B&H, 47)

[111] Danijela Pesic, *Protection and support for women with experiences of violence – analysis of local policies in the Republic of Serbia*, Autonomous *Women's* Center, Belgrade, 2016, pg. 43

[112] *Shadow Report to the GREVIO committee – Violence against Roma women in the Republic of Serbia*, on behalf of Roma Women Network - Ženski prostor (Women Space) and Roma Women's Center Bibija, Belgrade, 2018, pg. 30

[113] Around 3000 EUR

Although it has not been researched extensively, it can be concluded that Roma women face different and numerous barriers in access to shelters. Research conducted in North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania[114] showed that Roma women, both survivors of domestic violence and activists, point to a pressing need for shelters due to the high incidence of extreme physical violence. Unfortunately, there are only few shelters in these countries, with capacities far below than what is required to serve the number of domestic violence survivors who require such services. It is no surprise then that very few Roma women are found in shelters. Roma activists indicate that besides ethnic discrimination, the other reason why Roma women are not accepted in shelters is the number of children they have. Roma women who are survivors of domestic violence have, on average, five to seven children.[115]

So far, in Bosnia and Herzegovina no analysis or assessment of the necessary accommodation capacities of shelters has been done at the level of the Federation of B&H or Republika Srpska, regarding the actual needs of the survivors for these services. According to preliminary results from the 2013 Census, and standards for shelters per capita, there is a significant lack of accommodation in nine shelters established in B&H (204 places are available, compared to necessary 834 places).[116] Also, there are obstacles in accessing this service caused by employees of Centers for Social Work. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women stated in the report after a visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina that the Centers for Social Work in both entities clearly indicated that women need not report violence to the police in order to be placed in a shelter, or to do so at any time when staying in a shelter. However, shelters cannot accommodate women unless they have been referred by the relevant institutions; that is, before entering a shelter, women have to be registered and referred to a shelter by the Centers for Social Work, which leads to an administrative procedure resulting in difficult access to shelters.[117] When it comes to Roma women, information on whether there were obstacles to their accommodation in shelters are scarce. However, a survey conducted in the region, also covering Bosnia and Herzegovina, showed that NGOs report that minority women, especially Roma women, were routinely denied access to shelters due to existing prejudice against them.[118]

Research from Serbia showed that out of 98 Roma women who needed accommodation in a shelter, 52 were not accommodated.[119] As it was concluded in the research, the

[114] Natasa Milenković, Nowhere to turn: Gender-based violence against Roma women, UNDP, 2018, pg. 11
[115] Ibid.
[116] Natalija Petric and Nenad Galic, Baseline Study: Analysis of the harmonization of legislation and public policies with the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (ETS 210), the United Women Foundation, Banja Luka, 2014, pg. 59-60
[117] Ibid, str. 62
[118] A Thousand Ways to Solve Problems: An Analysis of Existing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Approaches for Minoritized Women and Girls in the Western Balkans and Turkey, UN Women, 2018, pg. 35
[119] Danica Jovanovic, Different faces of discrimination and racism - The problem of availability of shelters for Roma women and problem of secondary victimization in accommodation, Roma Association Novi Sad, Novi Becej, 2017, pg. 60

reasons for this are multiple and can be summarized as follows: misunderstanding and non-recognition of the violence against Roma women by the institutions (minimizing the severity of the reported violence, inappropriate punishment of the perpetrators of violence, stereotypes and prejudices of professionals towards the Roma community, neglect of the needs of Roma women and children in situations of violence); obstruction regarding placement of Roma women in shelters by professionals in institutions (stating various reasons for refusing to place a Roma woman in a shelter, tightening the criteria for entering a shelter for Roma women compared to women from the majority population, leaving Roma woman to wait for a long time for a placement in a shelter) and withdrawal of Roma women themselves (fear of retaliation by abusers for abandonment, of bringing shame on family and relatives, it being only a short-term solution to the situation, having no certainty about what to do next after leaving a shelter, long period of waiting for accommodation in a shelter, etc.). [120]

5.3.2. Telephone helplines

In **North Macedonia** there are two national telephone helplines (141-700 and 15315); one is a cell line and the other land line. Both are available 24/7 and provide a free service for all. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, there is no national helpline for survivors of domestic violence. Telephone helplines are instead organized on the entity level, based on the cooperation of non-governmental organizations and entities' gender centers in providing these services.

In **Montenegro,** there has been a free national helpline for survivors of domestic violence (080 111 111) that offers services 24/7 since 2014. The national line is most frequently called by survivors themselves and sometimes by social service workers, relatives, and other citizens of Montenegro in the name of the survivor. The service empowers the survivor by offering mental and emotional support, informing them about their rights and discussing their further possibilities. There is also an available telephone helpline for trafficking victims (11 66 66).

The national helpline for survivors of violence in **Serbia** has not yet been created in line with the standards specified by the Istanbul Convention (e.g. anonymity, availability, and other criteria).[121] At the moment, this service is being offered by civil society organizations; however none of these services are available on the national level, nor are they provided 24/7, instead available mostly for 12 hours during workdays or only in the afternoon, depending on the resources available.[122] Reporting on the telephone helpline service to the GREVIO committee, Serbia stated that at the Ministry of Internal

[120] Ibid, str. 60-61

[121] *Report of the Republic of Serbia submitted in line with Article 68, paragraph 1 of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Baseline Study)*, the Government of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, 2018, page 50

[122] Article 27 and 28 of the Law on Ratification of Confirmation the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention and Combating violence against women and domestic violence

Affairs there is a free phone line for reporting domestic violence (0800 100 600).[123] However, as the country stated itself, this line does not satisfy the criteria specified by the Istanbul Convention – confidentiality and counseling.[124] At the end of December 2018, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs created a national telephone helpline 088-222-033 that is run by the Center for the Protection of Infants, Children, and Youth in Belgrade,[125] an institution that is not specialized or licensed in offering this service. With numerous complaints and irregularities, women's organizations point out that this service does not fulfill the standards specified by the Istanbul Convention, due to, among other things, recording conversations with the victims.[126]

Honestly, I have heard about these helplines, but I can't name one, I don't really know. I think it's a good idea because women could call at any time if they endure violence. I think it's better if they are anonymous. Why would everybody have to know what is going on with me? (A Roma woman from Serbia, 20)

I don't know about these telephone helplines, SOS means help... I don't know how they would help, what to tell them, how to trust them. No, I wouldn't call. (A Roma woman from Serbia, 22)

I haven't called, but I think that it could be helpful for all women. When you don't have anyone to call, you don't want to go to the police, you call them. I would call if I didn't have any other way out, even though they record the conversation. (A Roma woman from Serbia, 44)

5.4. Conclusion

Based on the discussion with Roma women who participated in this research, it can be concluded that Roma women in the region are exposed to all manifestations of domestic and intimate partner violence. Although research on violence against Roma women is very rare, it is noted that Roma women are at greater risk of domestic violence due to the widespread patriarchal norms of behavior in their community. Still, few Roma women choose to report violence. There are many reasons for this, mainly related to the lack of trust in the state authorities, fear that the abuser will hurt them even more,

[123] *Report of the Republic of Serbia submitted in line with Article 68, paragraph 1 of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Baseline Study) –,* the Government of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, 2018, page 50

[124] *Improved legislation failed protection - Independent report on the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*, Autonomous Women's Center, Belgrade, 2018, pg. 37

[125] Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, *Nacionalni SOS broj za žene sa iskustvom nasilja,* available on: https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/srb-lat/aktuelnosti/vesti/nacionalni-sos-broj-za-zene-sa-iskustvom-nasilja-0800-222-033

[126] PreUgovor, *Nacionalni SOS telefon ili gde nestade višedecenijski rad SOS telefona ženskih nevladinih organizacija,* available on: http://www.preugovor.org/Tekstovi/1428/Nacionalni-SOS-telefon.shtml; Katarina Stevanović, *Koje SOS linije stvarno rade u Srbiji,* BBC na srpskom, 16.5.2019, available on: https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-48293620

feelings of shame or even minimizing survived violence, as well as believing that the violence must be "very serious" in order to be reported. However, it seems that the most common reason why Roma women hesitate to report the violence they have experienced is due to their feeling that professionals in the competent authorities will not trust their experiences, that they will not receive help and support, and that they will be at risk of violence becoming even more severe. Also, it is important to note the fact that 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 leave the circle 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.

Some Roma women who reported violence encountered unprofessional, inappropriate and discriminatory reactions from professionals. Some of them even refused to help Roma women in situation of violence. It seems that women are most distressed by the threats that children will be taken away, and by the mistrust in their experiences of violence. It is of most concern that some Roma women who have experienced such treatment from the professionals, have decided to no longer report violence to anyone, which puts them at risk of escalation of violence, and ultimately of femicide.

Further, it should be noted that most of the time, Roma women who reach out to institutions and shelters find it difficult to receive support or services that are generally available to all survivors of domestic violence. However, if CSO representatives accompany Roma women, they receive support and tend to have better outcomes.[127]

Data on the availability of support services for Roma women survivors of violence is very scarce. However, the scarce data indicate that many Roma women are not familiar with support services, such as telephone helplines, and that they have difficulties in exercising their rights to available services due to poverty, isolation and discriminatory treatment of professionals. It is worrying to note that some Roma women in the region feel that the shelter service is not intended for them, but for women from the general population, and that some civil society organizations claim that some professionals resist providing service to Roma women. Therefore, it is extremely important for professionals to understand the specifics of violence Roma women face, to break prejudices and stereotypes about the Roma "way of life", which would certainly contribute to increasing the trust of Roma women in the work of institutions and the greater number of reports of violence.

[127] Milenkovic, N, 'Nowhere to turn: Gender-based violence against Roma women', UNDP, 2018, p. 11

6. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the national reports focusing on three topics that concern Roma women in the region the most, several conclusions have been drawn, as follows:

6.1. Accessibility of the health care to Roma women

- The health situation of Roma women is significantly worse than that of the general population due to inadequate living conditions, such as inadequate housing conditions, poverty and disadvantageous position of Roma women in the family, including early marriage and early childbirth, hard work and care for members of the extended family, which causes them to have difficulty devoting time and resources to themselves and their health. Also, some Roma women face obstacles in accessing health care due to lack of personal documents, including health cards, and they also face offensive and degrading treatment on the basis of their ethnicity and gender from health care professionals. Discrimination against Roma women in the field of health care is particularly evident when it comes to providing health care during and after childbirth.
- Roma women very rarely use modern methods of contraception, and they do not have enough information about contraception, which is the reason why they are afraid to use it. Sometimes their partners and other family members make the decisions about their reproduction and reproductive health.
- Very often, Roma women are not familiar with the mechanisms of protection against discrimination in the field of health care, and those who are aware of these mechanisms generally do not feel empowered to report the discrimination to the competent authorities.

6.2. Child marriage

- Societies in the region recognize the problem of child marriages, but often tolerate this phenomenon, attributing it to the so-called “Roma tradition”, while not sufficiently recognizing its harmfulness.
- Despite numerous prejudices and stereotypes related to child marriages in the Roma communities (such as the attribution of this phenomenon to the so-called “Roma tradition”) causes of child marriages are, first and foremost, gender-based discrimination, poverty, lack of education and inadequate institutional responses to child marriages.
- Nowadays, the most common “practice” of child marriages in the Roma community is the girl's “decision” to marry, often with harsh opposition from their mothers. However, this is a matter of “forced voluntariness”, because girls make this “decision” under the influence of a patriarchal tradition that gives crucial importance to the “cult of virginity”, otherwise the girl will be considered to have dishonored the family.

- Many professionals do not respond adequately to the knowledge of child marriages of Roma girls and do not implement and enforce the legal possibilities, influenced by the widespread stereotype that links child marriage to the Roma "culture and tradition", rather than seeing child marriage as a serious violation of children's and women's human rights. Specifically, as girls get married, they drop out of school, which dramatically reduces their chances of employment, and increases their vulnerability to domestic and intimate partner violence, deterioration of their health, including reproductive health.
- Professionals believe that there is no effective institutional protection against child marriages.

6.3. Domestic and intimate partner violence

- Available research on the prevalence of violence against Roma women shows that domestic and intimate partner violence against Roma women is a serious social problem, and that the prevalence of violence against Roma women is higher than that of women from the general population. In addition, there is still a lack of knowledge of certain types of violence among the Roma women, especially psychological violence, which is not only unrecognized, but accepted as normal behavior by husbands, sons and other perpetrators. Economic violence is almost not recognized at all, and gender-based violence is an unknown term for most Roma women.
- Roma women are mostly aware of the existence of shelters, but many of them do not dare to take such a step because they believe they would be condemned by relatives and the community, they do not trust the institutions and express concern about the lack of support after leaving the shelter.
- Many Roma women consider it important that women who are exposed to violence are aware of the existence of a telephone helpline and point out that it would be very useful if the service was available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with a guarantee of confidentiality of conversations by the providers.
- Roma women report domestic and intimate partner violence less frequently compared to the women from general population. The reasons for this are primarily due to the lack of information on the possibilities of protection and support, fear of condemnation of the community, but also the lack of trust in institutions, since professionals often do not trust their personal experiences and attribute violence to the "Roma tradition and way of life" and to "the private matter of the family".
- The employees of centers for social work, the police and prosecution lack education on gender-based violence against Roma women.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The national reports alongside this regional report demonstrate through their analysis of the legal framework and the research undertaken that the problems and obstacles faced by Roma women are very similar across the region. The recommendations given here are therefore applicable to all countries (North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia) with the indication that fulfilling these recommendations would significantly improve the lives of Roma women in the region. The recommendations are as follows:

7.1. Accessibility of the health care to Roma women

- Include all Roma women in mandatory health insurance and give them the opportunity to choose their own medical doctor and gynecologist in their neighborhoods. Increase the number of infirmaries/health centers, mobile health teams and improve the support given to medical professionals to increase the accessibility of health care;
- Regularly conduct information campaigns on sexual and reproductive health rights among Roma women so they can learn about and understand their rights and improve their knowledge about regular preventative check-ups;
- Provide Roma women with information on contraception, as well as free oral contraception;
- Invite Roma women for preventive check-ups (mammograms, screening);
- Introduce comprehensive classes in schools on sexual and reproductive health and rights;
- Conduct training to facilitate the continuous education of health workers on the position of Roma women in society and the prohibition of the discrimination;

7.2. Elimination of child marriage

- Organize regular educational programs for parents and youth about the consequences of child marriages with the goal of preventing this harmful practice;
- Create raising awareness programs in Roma communities about the consequences of insisting on virginity before marriage, with the aim of preventing child marriages;
- Provide support for Roma girls in elementary school through mentorship and scholarships to prevent them from dropping out and getting married;
- Provide education professionals with the knowledge on the prevention and combating child marriages;
- Raise the awareness of the media on child marriage with the aim of a more sensitive and human rights-based approach when reporting;
- Change the laws and raise the age limit to 18 for marriage, without any exception;

- Organize programs about economic empowerment and increase the financial independence of Roma women with the aim of preventing child marriages and domestic and intimate partner violence.
- Establish mechanisms for a coordinated and efficient response of all authorities on both the national and local level with the goal of the preventing and combating child marriage (e.g. multisectoral groups, action plans, etc.);

7.3. Protection and support to Roma women in situation of domestic and intimate partner violence

- Provide continuous education to employees in centers for social work, police, and prosecutors' office about gender-based violence against Roma women;
- Amend laws and change practices to be in line with the regulations of the Istanbul Convention, in particular in the area of providing support and protection to Roma women survivors of violence, especially shelters, telephone helplines, and the reporting of violence;
- Organize educational workshops for Roma women about recognizing different forms and manifestations of violence, including psychological and economic violence;
- Work on establishing the trust of Roma women in the institutions through inclusion in mutual activities and actions (e.g. workshops, seminars, trainings, round tables, etc.).

ANNEX - Stories of Roma women

1. A story of a Roma woman from Serbia

I went with my blood test results to my doctor, waited for about two hours, first she went on a break, then she called for everyone who came after me. I thought they had an appointment, so I went inside and asked the nurse: "How long am I going to wait, when is my turn?" The nurse answered that if I didn't want to wait, I could go home. I said to her that I wouldn't be here if I felt alright. She then sent me out of the office. I went out, what else could I do? I sat next to some women and asked them if they had an appointment, they said that they only came to bring some tests results. At that moment the nurse came out and called the name of a woman with whom I was talking to. A woman that came in only five minutes earlier. The woman turned to the nurse and told her: "But nurse, this lady came before me, let her come in, I'll wait." The nurse looked at me and responded: "Lady, where do you see a lady, tell me? Come on, get in, let her wait, what's wrong, she isn't doing anything in her life, anyway."

At that moment I stood up and asked the woman entering if the nurse was talking to me. The woman nodded, she looked embarrassed, apologized, and entered. I was so angry I didn't know what to do, if I should get inside and smack her, but then I realized that she could call the police and then I would even have to pay a fine. I waited for the woman to leave the office to ask the nurse to repeat everything she had said, but then when she came out of the doctor's office she told me: "Come in, come in, I told the doctor that you've been waiting for a long time and that you're not feeling well, she told you to just come inside and not stress about it. Look at her, a person is either good or bad, and you can see what she's like."

I entered, didn't even look at her, luckily the doctor was nice, so I decided not to comment. Just as the doctor took my results, I heard the voice of our mediator. She came by to schedule an appointment for someone and the nurse was talking politely to her. I asked the doctor if that was the mediator, she confirmed and asked her to come in. She came in, said hello, asked me how I was, and the doctor told her I was anemic, that it was good she came by because she needs to write me a request for one-time allowance because the medication is expensive.

I later explained to the mediator that I had been waiting for more than two hours and that the nurse had offended me. Mediator told me not to worry, that she would solve anything. The doctor was very surprised and couldn't believe what the nurse had said to me. The mediator told her that those were her words, it wasn't the first time she had used them and behaved like that towards Roma people. She waited for the doctor to finish the examination, thanked her, took my prescription, and went to the nurse. The mediator handed her prescriptions and said: "Come on, dear, verify these prescriptions

for this woman who doesn't do anything in her life, so she can go home, she has waited long enough here, and you can see she is healthy as a horse." I could see the nurse blushing. She then responded: "My dear, I don't know what you are talking about." The mediator responded that if she had forgotten, she would probably remember when the director called her. The mediator handed me the health card and said: "Come on, lady, we Roma people are ladies and gentlemen compared to some." We stepped outside and just as we were walking down the hall the nurse came up to us and said to the mediator: "I'm so sorry my dear, I did say that, but I don't know what happened... I swear it won't happen again". The mediator told her that it wasn't the first time, many Roma people had complained before, and she had to inform the director.

After 10-15 days, the mediator invited me to a meeting with the director of the Health Center. I went there, and present was that nurse, the doctor, the mediator, and me. I retold the story in front of everyone. She admitted everything, apologized, and said she had been impulsive, hadn't meant it in a racial way, and it would never happen again. The director then told the mediator to help me with writing the report about discrimination, and as far as the Health Center was concerned, she would receive a warning before firing and they would take I don't know what percent of her wage.

2. A story of a Roma woman from North Macedonia

She was only 15 and was a good student in elementary school. She enjoyed liberty given to her by her parents who believed that their daughter could finish school and become independent. Although they were very poor, they tried to provide everything necessary to their daughters so that they could feel equal to other kids in school. The interviewee had permission to go out with friends, visit cafés, go out on the weekends. In the eyes of her parents, she was too young to know what love is or to choose the right man for her. No one suspected she'd had a boyfriend because she was just a child.

Everyone was surprised when she came home one day with her boyfriend, announcing she would get married. Everyone was shocked and disapproved of the marriage since she was only 15 and he was 17. Neither one of them was ready, not mature enough, and besides, they were still going to school. Because of that decision, the interviewee "brought shame" to her parents and therefore there wasn't a place for her at their house. According to Roma customs she wasn't their daughter anymore and had to go to her husband's home. Without further delay, her parents went to talk to his parents, and "gave" her as a bride where she lived with his parents, older sister, and young three-year old sister.

Her parents agreed with the marriage because she wasn't a virgin anymore, so, according to the customs, she didn't belong to her father's house. In her husband's house, she was the little bride, everyone saw her that way and called her like that. On the

parents' initiative, both continued their education. As soon as the girl would return from school, she had to do chores and babysit. In fact, she was a child babysitting another child.

She closed mentally and after a year realized that her peers have different lifestyles and decided to come back to her parents' home. After a certain period of time, during which she had been condemned by the community, she decided to marry abroad. The marriage lasted a couple of months and she is now living with her parents again. She isn't going to school, battles severe depression and needs help.

3. A story of a Roma woman from Serbia

She finished elementary school, she is unemployed, mother of two – a fourteen-year old girl and a twelve-year old boy. She is living at her parents' house at the moment, with her brother, sister, and children. The abuse started eight years into the marriage when we moved away from his parents. We got along great, he and his parents were employed, we could afford anything. A month before moving out, I noticed frequent arguing between him and his father. I didn't know what it was about until one day, after a terrible row, his father decided for us to move to the house of his grandmother who had died a couple of years earlier. I cried... I didn't want to leave the house as if I had a feeling it wouldn't turn out alright, but his mother told me it would be only for a while until they cool down.

We moved out soon. Then my life turned upside down. He wouldn't come home all night. In the morning, when I would wake him up to give me the money for the groceries, he would argue. No, I didn't tell anyone. My parents were ill at the time, brother and sister – twins, they were younger than me and both are disabled.

My mother-in-law bought me a foundation that covered bruises. When I took my children to pre-school, I would apply that foundation so that people wouldn't be able to see. I would always laugh and joke with my neighbors so they wouldn't notice. One day when he came home from work, I asked him to explain what was going on, why he was behaving that way and said that if he continued that way, I would take the children away. He stood up, punched me in my nose and started kicking me. Then he said: "If I wanted to be bossed around, I would stay with my parents."

I thought it'd pass, maybe he was like that because of the row he had had with his father. His mother would come by often but only when he wasn't home. She bought things for kids, gave me money to have for myself. But every time I complained she would tell me: "It'll pass, don't leave your children, it'll be alright." However, he was acting worse as days went by. He found out that his mother was coming and giving me the money. When I wouldn't give him, he could turn the house upside down and throw at me whatever he could find. One day I told him I had the money and I would give it to him if he told me

why he needed it, and then he beat me until I fainted. I remember hearing the children screaming around me. When I stood up, I saw his mother next to me. She helped me stand up, she was crying, she sat next to me and told me the whole truth. He started gambling before marrying me, he even used to gamble away his whole paycheck on the slot machine.

“We thought he would be better, that he would stop when you move out... But he is beyond help”, his mother told me. The children were lying next to me, trembling, crying. His mother got up and said: “Now it’s enough, I’m not allowing this anymore.” She took the phone and called the police. “Now tell them everything, he should pay for this. Don’t you dare skip a single part, don’t let your children become ill.” I started crying, I was thinking where I would go now, he would kill me. I didn’t have a place to go, I couldn’t leave my children, I wasn’t going anywhere without them. I was afraid because I heard from my friend who also called the police that when she’d reported her abuser, he came home a day after and threatened to kill her. After that, no one ever came to check how she was.

After half an hour the police came. They first questioned my mother-in-law and then the other policeman turned around and told me, arrogantly: “And you, you are an adult, you need a lawyer. Why didn’t you report? My God. Mother to report her son. This can be seen only with your people.” And then I told him: “I have mouth, of course, I will speak, I didn’t want to interrupt, you wouldn’t understand us if we all talked at the same time.” The other policeman laughed and said: “You are feeling fine. Look, you sort these things out, and if needed, call us again, tomorrow other colleagues will be on duty and maybe they’ll understand you.” They turned around and left.

Now, what could I do? I couldn’t wait for him at home, he’d kill me. My mother-in-law told me to take the children, she would take me to the bus station, give me some money, and I should go to my parents’. But just as we were going to the station, there he was, probably someone informed him. He started insulting his mother, he said all sorts of things, turned around to me and said: “You know, you can leave this place only if you are dead.” He started swearing, the children were crying and screaming. Probably one of the neighbors reported since the police came. This time there were other police officers and they apprehended him at once, while mother-in-law and I went to the center for social work.

At the center for social work, they told me to wait in front of the door. After half an hour a social worker came out, looked at us and said: “I knew it was you, people, what, you had a fight... So! What else could you do, you never do anything else, just wait for the social services.” Then I told her bunch of things and said I would report her. She laughed and said: “Go ahead, that is the only thing that you ever do, anyways.”

Just as I was walking away, the police officers were at the door asking if she had taken our statements and what was the plan for me and the children. She looked at them confused and said: “No, I didn’t, they just arrived.” Then my mother-in-law responded:

“I’ve been listening to you this whole time and can’t believe what you’ve been saying.” And then she turned towards the police officer and said: “Sir, we came here right away, we’ve been waiting for her outside, the lady came out and starting insulting us on ethnic grounds, she wouldn’t let us say anything, ask her if she knows what this is about, she doesn’t have a clue, she said we got into a fight because we don’t have better things to do.” The social worker bowed her head and said quietly: “It wasn’t like that.” The officer was very kind and said that everything would turn out alright soon. They gave him a restraining order for the next 48 hours and the DA’s office took the case. They told me to go back home and if he showed up to call the police and the social worker would come the following day to visit us.

I came back home with my children, picked things up, and returned to my parents. Three days later, he called and threatened. I called the police and reported him. The same day social workers came to my parents’ house. I gave a statement, they told me that I should obey the law and send the kids to school. They said they would come unannounced to check if I had been neglecting my children and would send them without further ado to a foster family. Then I responded: “If I hadn’t taken care of my children and wanted to abandon them, I certainly wouldn’t have brought them with me.”

They have never, I tell you, never invited neither me nor children for an interview. Children talked to the psychologist at school every day. They came once and never came back again. When I applied for social help, there was another social worker, she asked how children were and that was it. Since then, they never came by. I haven’t sued him for alimony, haven’t got any call for trial but they said the DA is dealing with the case.

In the meantime, my mother and father died within three months. I’ve worked at Street Sanitation for three months, but now I’m unemployed. I receive an allowance for children. I have rights for social care for only six months within a year, but my brother and sister receive throughout the year. We applied for special care because they are invalids, but they got refused. My former in-laws come from time to time and send us money. They tell me he is now a real tramp. So, that is how I endured abuse for over a year, maybe two.

Now people talk a lot more about it than when I had to live with it. I hear there are shelters. Just the other day I hear at the market, a woman went to the shelter I don’t know where. She was there for a month and returned to her parents’. I can say that I knew my rights. I heard about it from other women, I heard it on TV, but those laws are not implemented, especially for us Roma. But I hear that non-Roma women have both support and assistance, and they tell us that it’s our tradition.

4. A story of a Roma woman from Bosnia and Herzegovina

What can I say about my life? I suffered a lot. I was born in 1981. I got married at 20. I don't know how to describe my marriage; it was a big mistake. I could have had a better life in any way. I had four children. Life hasn't been easy on me, especially before I had children. We didn't have where to live, you can only work like a slave, be everyone's servant, wash, clean, it's like you don't exist and don't get any respect, not as a daughter-in-law and not as a person. His family was like that. They never had a house, they lived where they could. I remember that in one house there was a manhole under my bed. I had a child and it had bronchitis. I gathered some money and managed to fix it. I made that room look nice.

But the problems arose later. My husband would spend almost everything he earned on drinking. I was ashamed, as I always had all the support from my family. I never wanted them to influence our relationship. I used to leave my kids thinking he would calm down. I would of course never really leave them. I never wanted to walk away, I just wanted to teach him some things. I lived like that for twelve years. Then, when I had enough, I broke into this house without having a single document. I thought we had these problems because we were living all together in one room. But now we are living alone, and the family still isn't happy. There's no unity, there's no love that we had. I endure everything alone, I enrolled my children to school alone, I raise them and feed them all by myself. He is just not here. It's like he's dead. Everybody in the village knows I've been suffering. He is good to me when he is sober, but as soon as he starts drinking, he isn't my husband anymore. When he is sober, he buys things for us, cleans the house. I watch him while he is drinking, he turns into a completely another person. It's an illness now, it doesn't matter if he drinks one or ten beers. The moment when he drinks, he is not the same person. It happened once or twice that he didn't know what he was doing. I tried to go to a psychologist when we were in Germany and they told him to stop drinking.

He would hit me a couple of times while my kids were there. My son even reported him. He would take me by my hair and drag me and hit me. What hurt him the most is that it was his child who reported him. I told him: "Well, what do you think how you behave when your child can't stand you anymore!" When the police arrived to take him, children started crying, so I had to withdraw the complaint. I had to, because of the children. He knows that because I am here in the Association with you that I know many things and many important people, and I would report him every next time. I tried talking to him many times, explaining him how he's been embarrassing me and our children who go to school. People find out who says what and who does what.

I'm mostly afraid of how he behaves when he goes somewhere. When he is here with me, I can control him. When I turned to a social worker for help, he told me that the only thing they could do was to take the children away. It hurt me a lot. I didn't understand how he thought he could take away my children when I had been fighting for them for twelve years. I expected they would offer me a shelter, and not that. My children are

nothing without me, I am their victim, I endure all this because of them. I live out of 160 KM[128] and don't go around and complain, but I make it last as much as I can. I just want to give my children love and security.

The last time he hit the little one, I told him: "You did this now and never again. Next time I'm reporting you and leaving you." Sometimes I sit and think if I love him. I mostly feel sorry for him. All that behavior he inherited from his family. He was an outcast as a kid. He didn't have anyone to teach him how to behave. All his childhood he's been watching that violence and that is how he got that habit and thinks that is what you should do. My goal is to raise my children to be honest and polite people. I hope I will live long enough to see better days for them.

5. A story of a Roma woman from Montenegro

Irena was 37 when we met her. She is from a neighboring country, has a twelve-year old son from the previous marriage. She divorced the boy's father because of long-lasting abuse which she endured. After leaving home with her son, she resided with her parents, found a job, and filed for divorce. Later she started living alone in a rented apartment. The process of divorce lasted way too long and was filled with unpleasant scenes from her husband. Center for Social Work gave an opinion that the child should be returned to the father due to him having permanent income, so the judge abided by it. After two years the court gave the custody to the father. She was given an opportunity to see her child on weekends which both she and the child experienced as a great injustice.

In that situation, Irena came for the first time to Montenegro to work during the summer, to earn for herself and her child. Working two jobs in two shifts she managed to gather a decent sum of money, so she started sending gifts to her son. At the same time, her ex-husband initiated the procedure of depriving Irena of her parental rights. According to Irena, she was never informed about this procedure. In the end, she was deprived of her parental rights and the husband became the only custodial parent. Eventually, she has found out that her ex-husband claimed at the court that she wasn't a suitable parent because she had turned to prostitution in Montenegro. Center for Social Work, and later the court, accepted that claim.

Shattered, hopeless, Irena decided to remain in Montenegro. Later she met 45-year-old Nikola from Bar, who was also divorced and had children aged 13, 14, and 15. He lived on a big farm with his children and his elderly parents. Nikola offered Irena to start living with him if she would work on the property and help him with children. She said yes, expecting to find some peace that way. Indeed, during the first couple of days, everything went smooth and without any problems. For safety reasons, as he put it, she gave him her passport and ID that he put in front of her in a metal box with other

[128] 80 EUR

important documents, locked it and kept the key with him. As he said, he would give her everything back when she wanted, but it was safer to keep it with him.

Two weeks later, Nikola started changing the conditions. He wanted her to wake up at four a.m., take care of his parents, prepare breakfast for children, work in the orchard, prepare lunch, snacks and dinner, and to look after his ill parents during the night. No matter how much she tried she couldn't manage to do everything. That was when he started threatening her and beating her. Over the following six months Irena was beaten up every day. The abuse wasn't just physical – he would offend, threaten, sexually molest her, and take her money. His parents begged her secretly to run away.

One day, Irena really tried to do so. He was away so she tried to unlock the box and take the documents. A if he suspected something, Nikola suddenly returned. He beat her up badly and broke her jaw. His children called the police when he left the house. Irena said the police wasn't in a hurry to come nor to call for an ambulance to take care of her. She has seen the police officers in that house, they were his guests, so she thinks that was the reason they were in no hurry. Later that night he was taken into custody. There they took his statement, he got a warning, and was released. First time after the attack, she met him at the police station when she was giving her statement. There he threatened her in front of everyone, asked her to "admit" that she fell and hurt herself, that the whole report was a lie. She asked him to give her back her documents, he brought them and claimed how she had always had access to them and had been free to go.

Recognized as a potential victim of multiple violence, including limited freedom and forced labor, Irena was placed in the National shelter for victims of trafficking. She has easily started communicating with the activists and readily accepted the support. Psychological support helped her a lot. She is energetic and temperamental by nature, so when she felt safe, she had to fight a feeling of immense rage, directed not only towards Nikola but also towards herself because she blamed herself for the violence she had experienced. The intensive work on her recovery, both psychological and physical, lasted for four months. In that period, the DA's office took her statement and she stated that she wanted to join the criminal prosecution.

In spite of the support of the activists during the trial, Irena constantly kept worrying that the prosecution would turn against her and punish her because as a foreigner she hadn't reported her presence in Montenegro to the authorities. This was a threat that Nikola used to scare her. The additional fear arose while giving the statement to the DA. Nikola's cousin who worked there commented out loud on the statement: "She is lying, and she will be punished for that." Besides the Shelter's activist who was with her and stood up to his words, nobody of the present officials reacted. Irena returned to the Shelter insecure and scared. After giving her statement, the trial and seeing her abuser were waiting for her. Every day brought with it more anxiety and fear and the main trial was, due to holidays, delayed for autumn. She felt better so she decided to go to her country. She still didn't have documents and they weren't found at Nikola's place during the police search. He claimed he had sent them to her and that she had destroyed them.

The embassy gave her temporary documents, so Irena returned to her homeland accompanied by the police and an activist. She was placed in a similar shelter, obtained new papers and could finally move freely.

About a month later, Irena, in agreement with Nikola, decided to withdraw the complaint filed against him and get back to Montenegro to live with him. She informed activists about her decision via telephone helpline against antitrafficking. She lives with him today. The activists say that there is small chance that the abuse has stopped, but she never asked them for help again.