

# A Childhood, not Marriage

A good practice guide  
for child marriage  
prevention for  
local communities



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Deyana Kostadinova, *UNICEF Representative in Serbia*

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### **List of abbreviations**

**MICS** Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey

**UNICEF** United Nations Children's Fund

**CSO** Civil society organization

**LSG** Local self-government

**NCECM** National Coalition to End Child Marriage

**CSW** Centre for Social Work

# Acknowledgements

The publication in front of you summarizes the knowledge and experiences of numerous stakeholders who have, together with UNICEF, participated in the implementation of the three-year project “Towards ending child marriage in Serbia” (2018-2020).

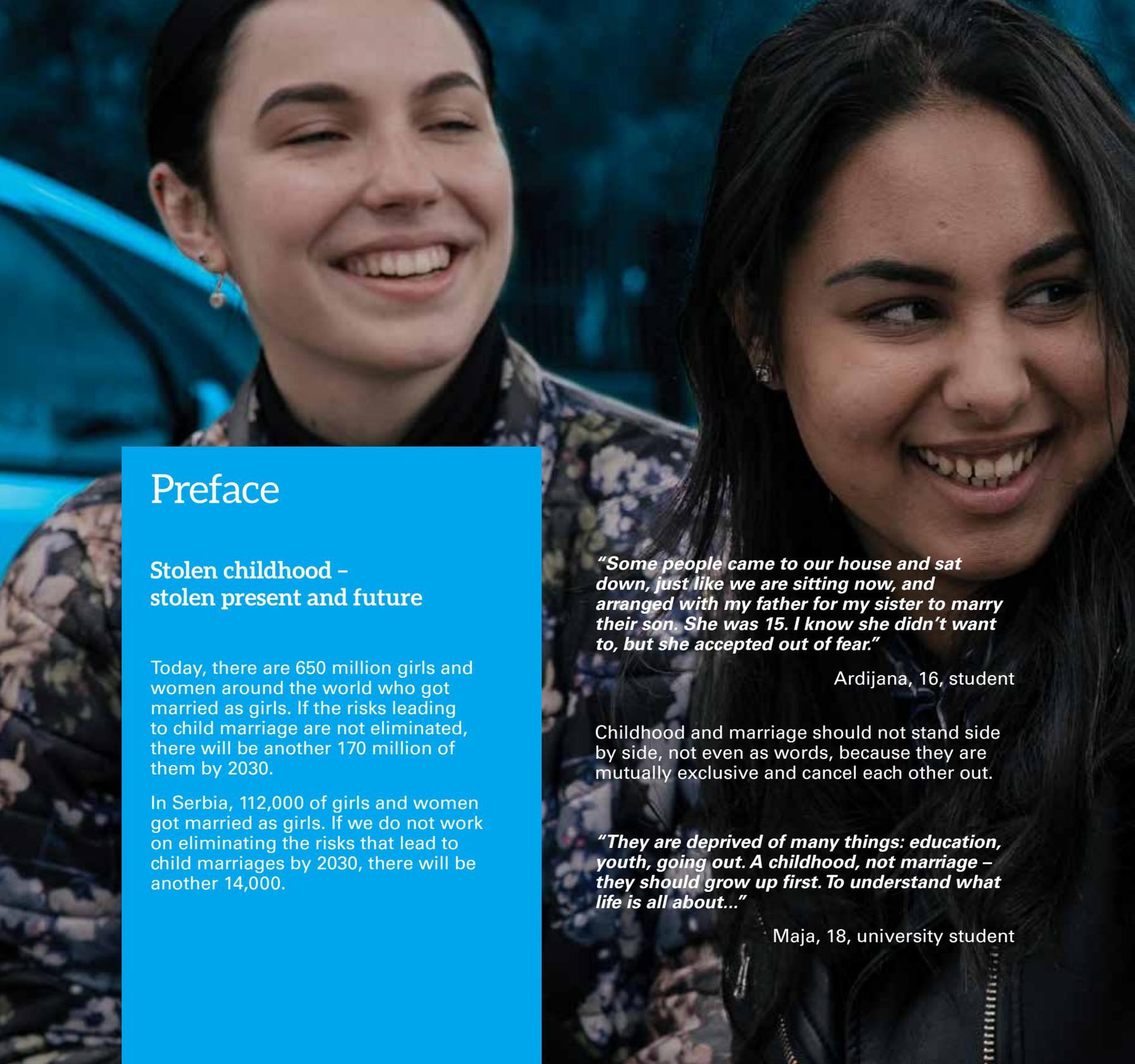
With gratitude to the Korean National Committee for UNICEF, without whose financial support this project would not have been possible, we would like to particularly highlight the partners who actively and constructively participated in this coordinated process.

We would like to thank the Coordination Body for Gender Equality of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, the Republic Institute for Social Protection and the Institute of Psychology, who contributed, within their mandates and expertise, to connecting national and local stakeholders and documenting and monitoring the results of the work at the local level. We would also like to thank them for the help in changing the mindset towards improving the systemic responses.

We owe special gratitude to the civil society organizations that worked directly with girls and their families in their communities: Association Ternipe, Association of Roma Novi Bečej, Roma Women’s Centre Bibija, Association of Roma Students, Association Novi Svet and Centre for Education Policy.

Special thanks go to all the experts and volunteers in Pirot, Novi Bečej and Belgrade who joined the wider circle of support for the fight against child marriage.

Finally, a huge thank you to all the heroines – girls and young women who were willing to tell their life stories and speak up and say “no” to child marriage

A photograph of two young women with dark hair, smiling warmly. They are wearing patterned jackets. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue. The woman on the left is slightly behind the one on the right.

## Preface

### Stolen childhood – stolen present and future

Today, there are 650 million girls and women around the world who got married as girls. If the risks leading to child marriage are not eliminated, there will be another 170 million of them by 2030.

In Serbia, 112,000 of girls and women got married as girls. If we do not work on eliminating the risks that lead to child marriages by 2030, there will be another 14,000.

*“Some people came to our house and sat down, just like we are sitting now, and arranged with my father for my sister to marry their son. She was 15. I know she didn’t want to, but she accepted out of fear.”*

Ardijana, 16, student

Childhood and marriage should not stand side by side, not even as words, because they are mutually exclusive and cancel each other out.

*“They are deprived of many things: education, youth, going out. A childhood, not marriage – they should grow up first. To understand what life is all about...”*

Maja, 18, university student



Instead of going to school and preparing for productive adulthood, a married girl is and remains economically dependent, without freedom and decision-making powers. Instead of physically and mentally developing and maturing, she gives birth and raises children with greater health-related risks for both her and her child.

***“There were a lot of child marriages where I’m from because they think it will be better for them if they marry young. Their lives are not great, their parents don’t let them go out, and then they find some comfort in that marriage. But unfortunately, it doesn’t turn out [how they imagined it would].”***

Besima, 24, factory worker

Instead of socializing with her peers, exploring options in accordance with her age and developing as a self-conscious person, the girl bears the burden of motherhood and household, most often in poverty conditions. Instead of living in a respectful and safe environment, she often suffers physical, psychological and sexual violence. These multiple harmful practices harm not only the immediate victims of child marriage, but also their children, families, the wider community and the entire society.

***“She called us once and said – get me out of here, whatever it takes. My father talked to her husband, but this [violence] happened again.”***

Ardijana, 16, student

Child marriage represents a multiple violation of rights and a severe form of violence against a child. The complexity of factors perpetuating this harmful practice requires coordinated and dedicated action towards change, which is definitely possible. This is confirmed by the results at the global level and our experience presented in this publication.

***“I think this [the marriage] is the worst possible way to try to help your child escape poverty. I firmly believe that education is the only way.”***

Marina, 36, master lawyer and activist

# Introduction

Child marriage means entering into a formal or informal marital union where one of the partners is not of legal age, i.e. is under the age of 18.<sup>1,2</sup> Both in Serbia and across the world, girls are much more likely to marry while underage than boys. Child marriage has disastrous consequences, because it deprives girls (and boys) of their rights in their communities and in their own homes, it is detrimental to their health and psychological wellbeing, it excludes them from education and prevents them from achieving their full life potential, but also the community and family potential, by perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

The Serbia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 (MICS 6) shows that 5.5% of women aged 20-24 from the general population were married before the age of 18, while this percentage is significantly higher for women from the poorest households (22.6%).<sup>3</sup> In substandard (informal) Roma settlements, as many as 55.7% of women married before the age of 18, and 15.8% before the age of 15.

Although the phenomenon of child marriage persists, change is certainly possible. At the global level, the share of women who married as children has decreased by 15% in the last decade

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, Child marriage, <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage#>.

<sup>2</sup> Institut za psihologiju, 2020. Dečiji brakovi – dve godine kasnije, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia and UNICEF, 2019. Serbia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey and Serbia Roma Settlements Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2019, Survey Findings Report, Belgrade, Serbia: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia and UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/publikacije/mics6-istrazivanje-visestrukih-pokazatelja-za-2019-godinu> p. 242.

(about 25 million<sup>4</sup> prevented child marriages). In the Republic of Serbia, we can observe that after the increase in the rate of child marriages in substandard settlements in the period from 2005 to 2014, there was a stagnation of this trend after 2015. General population data for 2019 show a slight increase in certain age groups, after several years of continuous decline, which all together points to the need to intensify efforts to end this harmful practice.

Having in mind the findings of surveys and analyses and the complexity of factors influencing the phenomenon and perpetuation of the harmful practice of child marriage, while at the same time relying on the existing experiences of civil society organizations in Serbia and examples of good practice and approaches from other countries, UNICEF has started developing a coordinated intervention in this area in cooperation with the Government of the Republic of Serbia and a number of national stakeholders. The designed strategic approach has been made concrete and tested through a three-year programme “Towards ending child marriage in Serbia 2018-2020” which was implemented at the national and local level, with the financial support of the Korean National Committee for UNICEF.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> According to the latest UNICEF estimate, 25 million child marriages were prevented in last decade due to accelerated progress in this field: <https://www.unicef.org/eca/press-releases/25-million-child-marriages-prevented>.

<sup>5</sup> Upon completion of this programme, further support to the work of the National Coalition to End Child Marriage was ensured through the joint project of UN agencies and the Government of the Republic of Serbia “Integrated Response to Violence against Women and Girls in Serbia - Phase III” (October 2020 – September 2022), supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). During 2021, with the

■ Efforts aimed at increasing the visibility and addressing this issue at the **national level** and the commitment of decision-makers to act resulted in the establishment of the National Coalition to End Child Marriage and strengthening of its advocacy role in advocating for the necessary regulatory changes and raising public awareness of the unacceptability of this harmful practice. Policy advocacy work has also directly contributed to the recognition of child marriage as a form of violence in the new national Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2020-2023 (adopted in May 2020).

■ Programme activities aimed at the **local level** were implemented in three cities (Belgrade, Pirot and Novi Bečej), where interventions for girls and their families tailor-made for the communities were developed, shaped and tested in more than 20 Roma settlements. During this process, the combined existing local potentials and resources were improved and adapted in order to verify, evaluate and document a sufficiently relevant and comprehensive set of interventions and mechanisms that should serve in the future as a model and inspiration for municipalities in Serbia facing this problem and aiming to solve it.

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support of the German Agency for International Cooperation GIZ and the Embassy of the Netherlands in Serbia, support was provided for the implementation of projects, i.e. for scaling up good practice in 8 additional municipalities in Serbia (based on the model tested through the programme, which is presented in this guide).

The publication “A Childhood, not Marriage” was designed to serve as a practical guide for local self-governments and should encourage the dissemination of evidence-based practice in environments facing this issue. The guide emphasizes the need for a coordinated cross-sectoral response and offers a systematic overview of the types of activities, ideas and examples from practice, steps in their implementation and budgeting guidelines. At the same time, one should always keep in mind the broader framework and the need for cooperation between local programmes and relevant national policies and measures in order to achieve long-term and sustainable results. Also, for the desired change to take place, it is not enough for the support to focus only on empowering girls and women; rather, the process of transforming attitudes, norms and practices should take place among all those who play an important role in ending child marriage – from boys, men, through community leaders and professionals, all the way to political decision-makers.



# Overview of the basic minimum model of the community-based child marriage prevention programme

The model of the community-based child marriage prevention programme is a set of interventions and mechanisms developed and practically tested by UNICEF and its partner organizations from 2018 to 2020. **The model is implemented at the local level and is based on synchronized action of all stakeholders in the affected community** who can, by the nature of their roles, jobs and mandates, contribute to the prevention of child marriage by influencing the attitudes, awareness, education, poverty factors, health promotion, social inclusion, and other circumstances conducive to the perpetuation of this unacceptable practice.

Although this practical guide deals specifically with programming at the local level, it is important to point out that the need for a cross-sectoral approach also applies to the national level. **Also, long-term and sustainable results can only be achieved through the synergy of national and local efforts.**

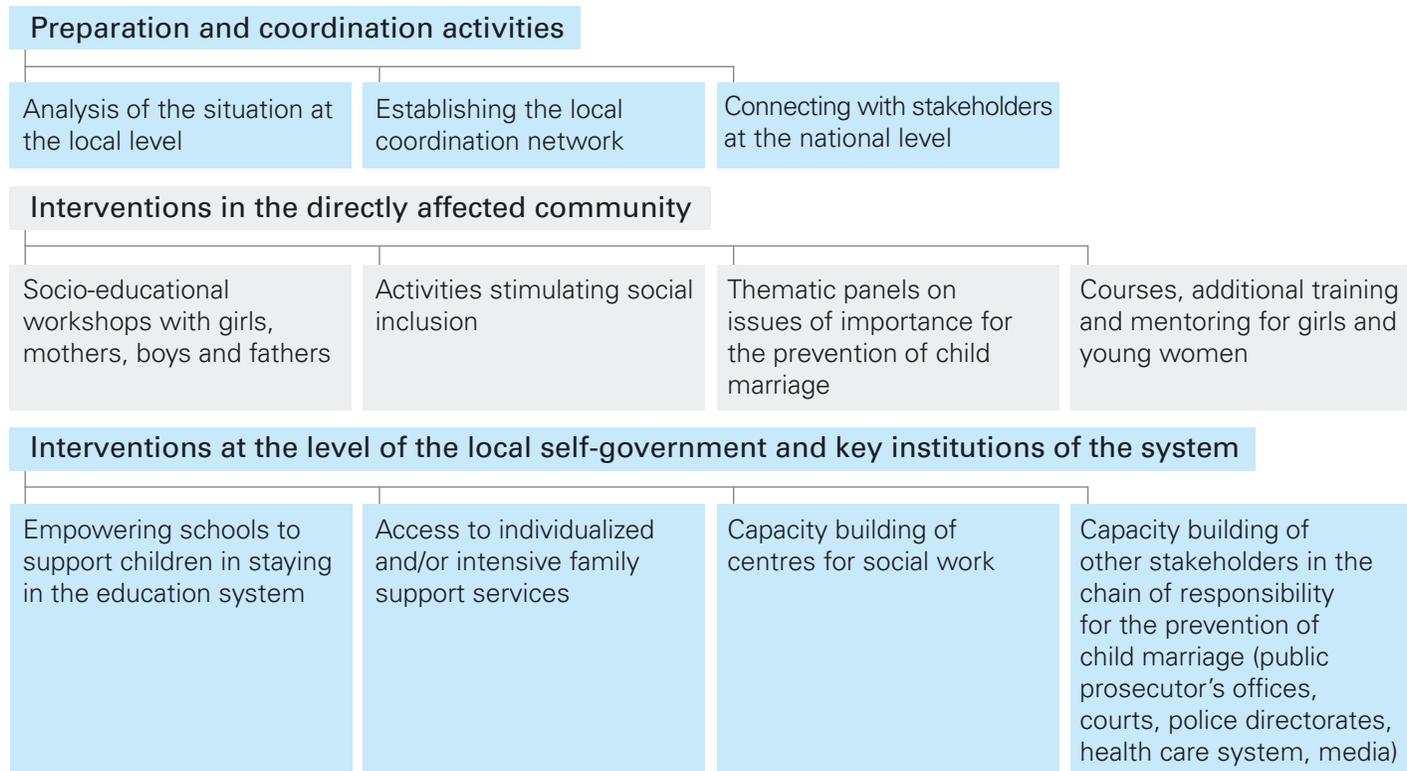
The model promoted through this programme ... truly represents a collection of good practices and interventions in the field of child protection, education, social inclusion and the health sector, because **no intervention alone is sufficient**, in any system, **to address this issue in a comprehensive manner**. The proposed model adopted by the Programme assumes that working with the Government (the top-down approach) to eliminate child marriage is not sufficient to ensure the full implementation of the existing strategies, regulations or plans at the central and local levels. Likewise, working only with women's civil society organizations to end child marriage, by empowering women and girls, is not enough to lead to a wider systemic change.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Taken from the report UNICEF (2021): Evaluation of the programme "Towards ending child marriage (2018–2020)" – Key conclusions and recommendations.

The model was developed starting from the concerning data on the prevalence of **child marriage in Roma substandard settlements**, so the programme was primarily aimed at these communities. In line with this, the **guidelines and recommendations systematized in this guide**, in the parts related to the work in the directly affected community, **are specifically related to the experiences of providing support to girls and their families from those settlements**. However, having in mind the prevalence of this practice in the general population, among the poorest women and women with low levels of education, **the majority of activities comprising this model can be adapted for the work with other vulnerable groups**.

Having in mind the complexity and severity of the consequences of child marriage, the diversity of contexts in different communities and the impact of practices of various systems on the prevention of this harmful practice, it is not possible and it would not serve the purpose to develop a universal model that would apply equally in every municipality and city. That is why this guide provides a foundation for various combinations that can be adapted to the specific conditions, needs and capabilities of each community.

At the same time, in the planning and adaptation process, one should not go below the minimum interventions that have proven to be essential through the testing process, because they represent the main, necessary part of the model where activities build on and complement each other.



# Steps for successful implementation of the child marriage prevention programme model in local self-governments

## I) Preparation and coordination activities

Before the commencement of the work on concrete interventions, some preparatory activities must be conducted to establish a good and evidence-based foundation for planning, measuring results and coordinated action.

### Analysis of the situation at the local level

Each local self-government (LSG) should first collect data that will provide insight into the prevalence of the child marriage practice and a better understanding of the position and way of life of Roma, i.e. the community particularly affected by this issue in the local community. The starting point for getting the real picture and defining the scope of the programme is the collection of **basic available sociodemographic data**.

The Centre for Social Work (CSW) is also a good source of baseline data. It can provide a range of important information, such as the number

of child marriages, communities/groups where child marriages are registered, who reports the risk and/or the already established child marriage, when the reports arrive, etc. Also important is the data on the measures that the CSW applies in such situations, the persons they work with, and the quality of such work. School data about the dropout of children can also be a useful source of information.

For the development of the programme, it is important to have **information on community attitudes and practices relevant for the prevention of child marriages**. The additional value of such a (baseline) study is also reflected in the possibility to verify whether and in what way the attitudes, norms and practices have changed after the intervention, with the same instrument. This ensures that precise and measurable indicators are established at the very start of the programme. The main steps in this process are: a) development of questionnaires, b) training of interviewers and c) data collection, processing and analysis. Some of the allies in this work can be professionals or organizations from the local community who are experienced in surveys.

If needed, national research organizations and groups can be asked for advice and support. When developing the questionnaire, i.e. when collecting information on attitudes and practices, it is important to cover several key topics: education, health, decision-making in the family, employment and, finally, attitudes towards marriage.

Within the baseline data collection, **all relevant stakeholders** in the local self-government **should be identified**, along with the **resources and experiences of the public administration and civil society** in the work with the (Roma) community, particularly on the topic of child marriage, so that cross-sectoral cooperation can be achieved in the next step.

## Establishing the local coordination network

When all stakeholders at the local level are mapped, **coordination should be established between relevant public and civil sector representatives.**

Experience confirms that it is very important for local self-governments to take a leading role in coordinating the work on the prevention of child marriage. Through its formal authority, the LSG gives legitimacy to the planned measures and contributes to the synchronized response of all stakeholders.

The composition of the child marriage prevention coordination network is flexible and may vary among municipalities depending on the available resources and the situation on the ground. However, experience shows that a coordination network should be established with the cooperation of the local self-government,

schools, centre for social work, police, public prosecutor's office, health care system and local civil society organizations working on the topic of child marriage and representatives of the Roma community. Roma health mediators, teaching assistants, Roma coordinators and municipal mobile teams, whose field experiences are often crucial, can be particularly useful.

The **media** should also be included, and it is recommended that the media representatives should be members of the coordination network from the very start. It is useful for the media representatives to get the opportunity to participate in trainings and professional meetings organized within the programme, because it further contributes to their sensitization and professional reporting. Furthermore, media representatives can be a significant ally in the development and implementation of a unified communications plan and provide support in drafting unified communication messages for ending child marriage.

Roma women's NGOs play a very important role in the functioning of cross-sectoral cooperation in the target communities. They are the key enablers that link various stakeholders and ensure a constant presence in the community.

**In municipalities where there are no active women's civil society organizations, local authorities should prioritize empowering such organizations and strengthening their role in coordination mechanisms and local teams, as well as fund their work in Roma communities.<sup>7</sup>**

<sup>7</sup> Taken from the report UNICEF (2021): Evaluation of the programme "Towards ending child marriage (2018–2020)".

The coordination network can be established as a separate mechanism. At the same time, having in mind that child marriage is a form of violence, a particularly effective solution is integrating the topic of child marriage into the work of the existing groups for coordination and cooperation in the field of response to violence at the municipal level. That is why it is worth recalling that the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence<sup>8</sup> envisages the establishment of groups for coordination and cooperation, while in the Strategy for Prevention of Violence against Children it is said that child, early and forced marriages are forms of violence that constitute a gross violation of child rights, and in that regard, it envisages the strengthening of the efficiency of cross-sectoral teams in local communities.<sup>9</sup> The General Protocol for the Protection of Children from Abuse and Neglect and the sectoral protocols provide the foundation for the development and expansion of the network of multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral community-based child protection teams. This approach sends a clear message that protecting a child from violence is a unified process and that it must gather various systems.

## Connecting with stakeholders at the national level

Connecting with relevant stakeholders operating at the national level enables the exchange of information and ideas, helps establish the cooperation, cost-effectiveness and efficiency in the approach, and also helps with identifying experts, organizations and resources in this field (if necessary) and additionally contributes to raising the awareness of this issue.

<sup>8</sup> Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, "Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", No. 84/2016, Article 25.

<sup>9</sup> Strategy for Prevention of Violence against Children 2020-2023, "Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", No. 80/2020.

The overall goal of the Coalition to End Child Marriage is to contribute to ending child marriage in Serbia, by removing institutional and social barriers to law enforcement and by promoting examples of good practice in partnership between communities, civil, governmental and private sectors and the media.

The National Coalition to End Child Marriage (NCECM) has been operational since February 2019 and is co-chaired by the Coordination Body for Gender Equality and one of the civil society organizations from the Roma community (which rotate). The Coalition brings together around forty of the most important stakeholders at the national, provincial and local levels from the public sector and civil society, and as such, it can be the most important address for cooperation and active involvement of LSGs in the work.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Contact with the National Coalition can be established through the CSO Roma Women's Centre BIBIJA (rzc@bibija.org.rs) and UNICEF in Serbia (belgrade@unicef.org).

## II) Interventions in the directly affected community

The necessary complementary activities in the directly affected community consist of: a) socio-educational workshops (at least 6 thematic workshops with girls, 6 with mothers and 2 with adult men), b) events stimulating wider social inclusion of girls and the entire affected/Roma community, c) thematic panels aimed at the people living in the affected settlements and d) courses, additional training and mentoring for girls and young women.

### Socio-educational workshops with girls, mothers, boys and fathers

The effectiveness of this type of work in the community is reflected in the flexibility of workshops that can be adapted to different environments and topics. At the same time, they are very suitable for establishing or changing attitudes and for acquiring new knowledge and skills in an interactive and group experience-based manner, which has been proven to increase the sustainability and effectiveness of the intervention.

Girls who attended the workshops and participated in other programme activities were:

- less likely to drop out of school (38%), compared to those not involved in the programme (61%),
- less likely to enter a child marriage (3%), compared to those not involved in the workshops (19.7%).<sup>11</sup>

The most important partner of each LSG in the implementation of these activities are Roma civil society organizations, which have the experience and the greatest potential to work directly and continuously with the Roma community. Women's Roma civil society organizations, whose teams consist of experienced and educated activists, are indispensable partners in the work with girls and mothers.

Thanks to the many years of experience and the trust they have earned in the community, some of them have expanded their activities and also started working with boys and men. Regardless of whether the direct work with men is carried out by a women's or another CSO, it is recommended to have men as facilitators of such workshops.

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<sup>11</sup> Institut za psihologiju (2020): Dečiji brakovi – dve godine kasnije.

### *Useful experiences for organizing workshops*

The partner organizations have, in cooperation with UNICEF, gathered many useful practical experiences that can be easily applied in other local self-governments, in line with local needs.

The practice has shown that the minimum intervention consists of six thematic workshops with girls, six with mothers and two with adult men. A particular value of workshops was observed in mixed groups consisting of mothers and daughters together, when the workshop was always used, regardless of the topic, for bonding and strengthening the bond between mothers and daughters.

The effects of the interactions and dialogue enabled by the Programme were most visible among mothers, who often expressed the wish for their daughters not to marry early, to continue their education, to achieve a significant level of economic independence and to better plan the transition to marriage and motherhood at the right age, so they don't miss the life opportunities (as they had done in their own lives).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Taken from the report UNICEF (2021): Evaluation of the programme "Towards ending child marriage (2018–2020)"

Important logistical experiences indicate that the most practical approach is to organize workshops in settlements where direct programme beneficiaries live. In addition to houses in settlements that have an adequate room, premises available to local Roma organizations and local schools can also be additional resources. The size of groups is important to ensure good dynamics and that each participant gets the opportunity to be actively involved. Experience has shown that this is achieved when the group has a maximum of 12 participants. It is especially convenient to organize workshops on weekends and in the evenings and afternoons, so as not to interfere with regular responsibilities.

### Workshop topics

#### *Workshops with girls and mothers*

Below are the essential topics that should be in the focus of the workshop part of the programme with girls and mothers. Topics can be expanded or covered in multiple sessions if there are options to do so. Scenarios for conducting workshops can be found in numerous existing programmes covering these areas. When selecting and (if needed) adapting them, one should definitely rely on the knowledge and experience of local civil society organizations.

### 1. Women's human rights and child rights, discrimination, violence

Contents that should be covered in this area include: women's rights and gender equality; the right to choose a partner; learning about the concepts of discrimination and tolerance, learning about the types of discrimination, so that participants can recognize discrimination and react properly in certain situations; child rights (education, health, protection from violence, abuse and human trafficking).

### 2. Important decisions and who makes them, freedom of choice

This thematic area covers the following contents: the role of the girl/young woman in decisions about her own education, choosing a partner, raising children; understanding the concept of traditional practice and recognizing the harmful effects; the importance and power of the influence of the surroundings on life decisions – who played the most important role in their lives in a negative or positive sense, whether they took the advice of the elders or not, whether they regretted (not) taking the advice, whether have consciously done bad things.

### 3. Education – dropping out

The topic of education can be covered within the topics related to child rights or the freedom of choice and decision-making. This can also be a separate topic which will include specific discussions on the issues of professional orientation, career guidance and guiding children for further education, on the experiences of the female participants regarding their own education, plans for further education, parental support and on dropping out from the education system.

### 4. Reproductive health

Education of girls about psychophysical development in puberty, reproductive health and general health is important in general, and particularly in the context of the harmfulness of child marriage. It is recommended to put special emphasis on the question of what reproductive health is and on topics such as puberty and adolescence, unwanted pregnancy and awareness of one's own health.

### 5. Negative and positive sides of tradition

Understanding and knowing the customs, traditions and culture of the Roma is extremely important in the context of combatting child marriage. That is why we need to work on distinguishing and understanding the real tradition and customs of the Roma people and the practices which are not part of the culture and values of that community, such as child marriage, but which are considered to be Roma customs by the majority population (and often by one part of the Roma population too).

### 6. Child marriage, forced marriage, family and family planning

The topic of child marriage is the backbone of the model, but the workshop programme should never start directly with **this topic, but this topic should rather be linked to other thematic areas** (e.g. education, learning about the importance of family planning, pregnancy and reproductive health, learning about freedom choice) or it should be reached through the analysis of the Roma culture, traditions and customs. Only that way a good foundation will be created for an additional and direct conversation about the harmfulness of the child marriage practice.

### *Workshops with men/boys*

Direct work with men in Roma settlements, as people who most often make all important decisions in the family and the community, is an inevitable segment in programmes for prevention and elimination of the child marriage practice and is complementary to workshops for girls and mothers.

In workshops organized for men, it is important to pay attention to two main topics: culture, traditions and customs of the Roma community and the link between child marriage and the cultural characteristics of the Roma people.<sup>13</sup>

Such an approach allows the topic of child marriage to be addressed indirectly by shedding light on the misconception that child marriage is a part of the Roma culture.

Workshops for girls and women in Roma settlements were not relevant only in terms of raising awareness and educating girls and women, but also in terms of **encouraging the dialogue within the community. Particularly effective and transformative were the activities aimed at the male population**, which served as an inclusive model for empowering individuals, as well as their immediate families and communities, as a way to overcome barriers and change norms and values. However, changes in individual preferences of girls, as well as the resilience of Roma communities to child marriage, (also) depend on the broader context of social inclusion.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Within the programme “Towards ending child marriage in Serbia 2018–2020”, a special programme aimed at changing the attitudes of Roma men about child marriage was developed and tested. To strengthen the capacities for change, the Roma Students Association has prepared a trainers handbook “Changing the attitudes of Roma men about child marriage”: <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/publikacije/promena-stavova-muskaraca-roma-o-decijim-brakovima-prirucnik-za-trenere>.

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<sup>14</sup> Taken from the report UNICEF (2021): Evaluation of the programme “Towards ending child marriage (2018–2020)”



## Activities stimulating social inclusion

Activities stimulating social inclusion in various ways should further stimulate personal development and interests through involvement in the life of the immediate and wider community. New experiences in that sense enrich the preventive work on ending the harmful practice of child marriage.

The main target group of these activities are girls and young women, but it is definitely useful to include the entire Roma community and the local population, depending on the type of activity and the environment. This also contributes to breaking down barriers and prejudices, and the diversity of possibilities and creative solutions easily adapts to the context of the local community.

As parental consent is often required for organizing events, especially those taking place in the wider community, it is very important that these activities are implemented by organizations that the local Roma community trusts, i.e. by activists and educators who have already established a good relationship through other activities (most often socio-educational workshops).

### ***Examples of possible activities from the experience of partner organizations that participated in the implementation of the programme***

Partner organizations have developed and implemented very diverse activities, which can be classified into the following "types"; i.e. subgroups of activities for stimulating social inclusion.

#### 1. Event "Roma to their City"

This event has been organized by the NGO Ternipe in Pirot for almost 10 years. Its main goal is to bring Roma tradition and culture closer to the wider community, and it gathers Roma associations from different cities which present a variety of Roma cultural and artistic contents. The event is a good model for activation through volunteering of girls and mothers who are direct beneficiaries of the programme aimed at preventing child marriage, as well as other community members.

#### 2. Educational trips and gatherings

These activities include, among other things, sightseeing in the city, going to the pool or skating, going to another city for a cultural event, etc. They are usually organized as an activity for girls from different Roma settlements so they can connect, expand the circle of acquaintances and friends and gain new shared experiences.

#### 3. Involvement in activities for marking important dates and promotional events in the wider community

Programme beneficiaries can actively contribute to the community in raising awareness of important health or social issues, such as breast cancer prevention, AIDS prevention, combating violence against women, etc. For example, mothers and girls can be involved in making ribbons for the breast cancer prevention campaign and participate in handing out ribbons to citizens, and boys can be involved in handing out condoms and information leaflets on HIV protection, etc.

#### 4. Creative workshops

These activities can build upon socio-educational workshops, so that the same group of participants can have the opportunity to get in-depth knowledge about some topics in a creative and fun way, while getting to know each other better and socializing in a less structured environment.

#### 5. Cultural and entertainment activities for all people living in the settlement

Such activities can contribute to the promotion of civil society organizations in the community, connect residents and increase the sense of community among them, encourage debate on important topics and provide an opportunity for community members to present their skills and achievements (e.g. organizing an open-air film or music event, exhibition of works made in creative workshops, etc.).

#### 6. Humanitarian activities

As part of humanitarian activities, programme participants can, for example, organize the collection and distribution of clothes or school supplies and thus, on the one hand, provide material support to those in need and, on the other hand, strengthen volunteering and solidarity.

#### 7. Forum theatre

Forum theatre is a form of interactive participatory theatre. In the first part, the audience is presented with a relevant social problem, such as racism and discrimination, but without showing the solution to the problem, and then in the second part, the audience is activated to offer various solutions to the presented situation. The greatest value of this activity is the engagement of participants – they think about various topics of importance for the prevention of child marriage and discuss them, which contributes to raising the awareness of the issue and to recognizing different views on the situation and different community attitudes to the issue.

Activities such as social inclusion projects, thematic forums and individual work with girls are recognized for their importance not just in terms of raising awareness and educating girls and women, but also for facilitating dialogue and enabling the continuity in community work, and consequently, establishing a relationship of trust, which will later provide space for implementing new activities.<sup>15</sup>

### Thematic panels on issues of importance for the prevention of child marriage

Thematic panels are complementary to socio-educational workshops and reach a larger number of participants. They are useful as a means for spreading information and encouraging conversation on important issues and can directly or indirectly influence attitudes of importance for preventing child marriage.

Panels are a good opportunity for professionals from various backgrounds, such as doctors, lawyers or experts from centres for social work, to get involved in the work with the community, within the settlement. Through joint planning and implementation of these activities with Roma civil society organizations, panels also contribute to the increasing trust in the institutions of the system. The best response is achieved if panels are organized within the settlements, but local schools can also be a good place for organizing such events.

Topics that can be discussed at the panels include health-related consequences of adolescent pregnancies, legal consequences for parents whose children are married, legislation, etc.

<sup>15</sup> Taken from the report UNICEF (2021): Evaluation of the programme “Towards ending child marriage (2018–2020)”

## Courses, additional training and mentoring for girls and young women

An important part of the programme for the prevention and elimination of child marriage is achieved through the support to girls and young women to complete courses, retraining and additional training, which allows them to acquire skills they can later turn into a profession and increase their independence.

An important part of this intervention, in addition to attending the course, is individual mentoring support and the availability of short trainings in professional orientation and career guidance.

The most likely candidates for attending courses and additional training are most often girls finishing primary or secondary school, or girls who have recently dropped out of the education system, as well as young women and mothers (usually up to 35 years of age).

For some girls, going to a course means leaving the immediate vicinity of their settlement for the first time, using public transport for the first time, learning about new parts of the city. It has been recognized that this experience motivates and liberates girls and that such an experience makes it easier for them to decide to enroll in secondary school.

For organizing courses, it is necessary to find and hire agencies and schools that are certified to provide this type of education. These are most often practical skills courses, and experience shows that it would be useful to consider expanding possible courses and professions, with cooperation between local self-governments and local offices of the national employment service being crucial in this regard.

When it comes to informing the potential beneficiaries, motivating them, selecting them and providing them with individual mentoring support, the key role is played by (Roma) civil society organizations that are active in the community, because they have already established a trusting relationship with the girls and their parents through the existing activities.

A particularly relevant aspect of the Programme is the mentored vocational training for girls and young women who have dropped out of the education system, including, but not limited to, those who have done so because of marriage and childbirth. This component responded well to the need to resolve the issue of early school leaving and, consequently, limited opportunities for girls later in life.<sup>16</sup>

Activists of civil society organizations are in the best position to also perform the function of mentors due to the developed sense of similarity and connection that has been established thanks to previous cooperation and experience. They provide continuous individual support to the participants – they motivate them, help them choose a course, persist in attending and successfully completing it, and find a job later. In addition to mentoring work, it is important for participants to also attend workshops in the field of professional orientation and career guidance. Depending on the size of the group, a qualified expert can be hired or an organization/institution that offers such content can be included in the programme (if it exists in the local community).

<sup>16</sup> Taken from the report UNICEF (2021): Evaluation of the programme "Towards ending child marriage (2018–2020)".



### III) Minimum necessary interventions of key institutions of the system at the local self-government level

Relying on their mandate, and in coordination with other stakeholders, the key institutions of the system play a crucial role in establishing a coordinated and supportive environment at the local level. The role of the local self-government is extremely important in creating additional opportunities for improving professional capacities, availability and quality of their services beyond what is achieved through sectoral mechanisms for funding and professional development.

The programme has shown that a successful model for ending child marriage consists of equally effective stakeholders at the local level who have it in their mandate to protect children and prevent or combat gender-based violence, with a strong child-centred approach, who work together to achieve this goal. There is no effective response to child marriage if anyone in the chain of stakeholders fails to ensure this.

### Empowering schools to support Roma children in staying in school

Early school leaving is one of the most important factors enabling the survival of the child marriage practice and significantly reduces the chances for social inclusion, employment and economic independence. Early school leaving contributes to the creation of a vicious circle because it is passed on to the next generation and thus survives in the community. On the one hand, dropping out of the education system is the cause of early marriage, because employment opportunities are limited

or unavailable due to the low level of education, and on the other hand, it is also a consequence, because entering a child marriage leads to dropping out.<sup>17</sup>

Within the previous systemic initiatives<sup>18</sup>, a model for the prevention of dropping out has been developed<sup>19</sup>, and it consists of three components: 1) early identification and response system, 2) activities related to the improvement of school capacities for prevention of dropping out and 3) activities related to capacity building of teachers, aimed at changing the school climate and culture.<sup>20</sup> All these elements are flexible and can adapt to the needs of each school.

The challenge of children dropping out from the education system cannot be addressed successfully by schools on their own without the involvement of parents and the wider community. Involvement in cross-sectoral cooperation allows schools to receive the support of local stakeholders, such as centres for social work (who probably already work with families at risk), local chambers of commerce and employment services (which can facilitate motivating students to stay in the education system by increasing employment opportunities), and local civil society organizations

<sup>17</sup> Centar za obrazovne politike, Efekti obrazovnih mera na prevenciju dečijih brakova u Republici Srbiji, p. 1

<sup>18</sup> The model was developed within the project “Preventing the Dropout of Students from the Education System of the Republic of Serbia”, implemented by the Centre for Education Policy in partnership with UNICEF in Serbia and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, thanks to funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and Uniqlo.

<sup>19</sup> Centre for Education Policy/UNICEF, Handbook for planning, implementing and monitoring of measures to prevent students from dropping out, <https://www.cep.edu.rs/izdanja/prirunik-za-planiranje-sprovoenje-i-praenje-mera-za-spreavanje-osipanja-uenika/68>.

<sup>20</sup> Centre for Education Policy, “How to Be a Caring School – A Study on the Effects of Prevention and Intervention Measures for Preventing the Dropout of Students from the Education System of the Republic of Serbia”, [http://www.cep.edu.rs/public/Kako\\_do\\_skole\\_drustvene\\_brige3.pdf](http://www.cep.edu.rs/public/Kako_do_skole_drustvene_brige3.pdf) p. 48.

(which may already be implementing some interventions, e.g. socio-educational workshops). **The local self-government can provide additional, very significant support to schools by signing with them a protocol on cooperation in preventing dropping out from the education system, which includes the involvement of employees in trainings and mentoring in the field of prevention of child marriage and the organization of targeted prevention activities and activities at the school level.**

Professionals working in the social protection and education systems, as well as those from other institutions participating in the multisectoral response to child marriage have a better understanding of the nature and causes of child marriage after participating in the Programme, they value cooperation in addressing its root causes and have better skills thanks to the new knowledge, skills and tools. Evidence suggests that programme interventions have contributed to experts abandoning common prejudice that child marriage is limited to Roma communities and that it represents a custom of the ethnic minority, rather than a special form of gender-based violence against girls, as defined by the Istanbul Convention.<sup>21</sup>

### Improving the availability of individualized support services for girls and their families

During the piloting of the model, UNICEF and partner organizations actively worked, among other activities, on individualized support for girls and their families. The experience gained in this way indicates that these activities are a

<sup>21</sup> Taken from the report UNICEF (2021): Evaluation of the programme "Towards ending child marriage (2018–2020)"

necessary component of the broader framework of interventions for preventing child marriage.

Individualized support can be organized through two complementary forms: **informal** counselling support and **professional** support (through the system of available national and local services).

### Informal counselling support

Informal counselling support consists of counselling guidance, and it is important for referring girls and families to relevant institutions and for informing them about the existing social and health care services and on how to exercise the right to cash benefits and scholarships for education, and as support in obtaining the necessary documentation.

The key partners for this type of support are local (Roma) civil society organizations. Due to the established trust and good knowledge of the environments in which these girls live, the activists of these organizations can easily get information about the risks for girls and the difficulties that their families are facing. On the other hand, girls trust them and find it easier to accept the information they receive, because the activists themselves are role models for girls and an example that they can live better lives with better education and their own work. Also, the information and advice are better understood and accepted when they come from someone close in age, i.e. from peers who are voluntarily involved in the work of (Roma) civil society organizations. It is important to note that civil society organizations are already known in the field for various other activities and have already reached a certain status in the communities where they work, which makes it easier to establish a relationship of trust with parents. **Therefore, the inclusion of such activities in projects/services funded from local budgets in a cost-effective way ensures**

the necessary link in the mechanism for child marriage prevention.

## Professional support

Professional support includes structured counselling/educational and/or therapeutic activities for individuals and families, organized within the existing national and local services (such as specialized counselling units, individual and group programmes, etc.).

During the development of the model of response to child marriage, the family outreach worker service was additionally improved, because in the previous piloting process it proved to be effective in providing support to families with children.

Family outreach worker was designed as a social protection service primarily aiming to improve the family's capacity to ensure the child's safety, protection from neglect and abuse and the conditions for his/her quality development in the family environment. A family outreach worker is a professional in the field of social protection who works with the support of the professional team of his/her institution and in coordination with the Centre for Social Work.<sup>22</sup>

The target group for this service are families with multiple and complex needs, families with the risk of child neglect, violence or removal of the child

<sup>22</sup> Republički zavod za socijalnu zaštitu/UNICEF- Pilotiranje usluge „Porodični saradnik“ i evaluacija rezultata pružanja usluge- rezime studije <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/publikacije/pilotiranje-usluge-porodi%C4%8Dni-saradnik-i-evaluacija-rezultata-pru%C5%BEanja-usluge-0> str.1

from the family, families with the real danger that the risk level for child's safety will increase, as well as families already targeted by the measures of the centre for social work. Such families often have a risk of child marriage, and the expert working with the family has the opportunity to assess the existence and intensity of the risk, thus starting preventive work, and through interventions in various fields, this work can yield good results and a possible attitude change of a family that supports the child marriage practice.

The contribution of this service can be twofold – on the one hand, prevention, and on the other hand, remediation of the consequences of child marriage. The preventive goal of the service can, for example, be applied in the prevention of neglect and abuse, when child marriage represents violence against the child and can be a consequence of the abuse of parental rights. In such a situation, the family outreach worker can, with adequate interventions or in cooperation with other outreach workers from the surroundings, prevent child marriage in some cases. When it comes to remedying the consequences of child marriage, especially when the child victim of the child marriage returns to the biological family, the family outreach worker can prepare the family and the child for the return; if the child marriage has already resulted in the birth of a child, the family outreach worker can work on strengthening the skills needed to care for the child.

**In anticipation of the necessary legal changes that should enable the systematization of this service, the support of local self-governments is welcome in order to ensure adequate resources for its implementation in the community and to connect it with other stakeholders to establish a comprehensive support system for girls and their families with the aim of preventing child marriage.**

## Capacity building of centres for social work

The Centre for Social Work is one of the most important links in the chain of preventing child marriage and its role is twofold – prevention and response. The capacities of the CSW for working with girls and families at risk can play a key role in specific cases.

Preventive work of the CSW includes two levels of intervention, first at the level of a specific case, and then at the level of work with the wider community. Working with families on various specific cases,<sup>23</sup> CSW experts can access information and identify circumstances indicating the risk of child marriage. That is why it is extremely important for CSW experts to know the child marriage risk indicators. The second level of prevention is raising awareness among the professional and general public about the child marriage phenomenon and it involves the participation of CSW experts in campaigns, panels, all kinds of meetings where this topic is discussed. Preventive activities of this kind require the joint participation of all other partner systems, institutions, organizations and prominent experts.

The response part of the intervention at the disposal of the centre for social work comes from the mandate, i.e. the duty to protect the most vulnerable members of the family and community, particularly children. In this context, the CSW must conduct all available interventions, including measures that have the remediation character – starting from the review of the exercise of parental rights, through corrective supervision over the exercise of parental rights, to proposals for deprivation of parental rights.

<sup>23</sup> These don't have to be cases of reported child marriage, but various other social protection procedures, such as procedures for determining the right to financial social assistance, cases of domestic violence or work with juvenile offenders, etc.

The most important tool for capacity building of the CSW in the prevention of child marriage are the Instructions on the manner of work of centres for social work – guardianship authorities in the protection of children from child marriage.<sup>24</sup> In addition to indicators, the Instructions also contain a set of interventions that CSR would have to implement in a specific case. For better implementation of the Instructions, identifying indicators and applying all other measures, training has been prepared for CSW experts.

Including the CSW in the coordination network at the local self-government level, timely dissemination of information, sharing information and knowledge between all stakeholders and support in specific cases can significantly increase the capacity of the CSW for preventing and eliminating the consequences of child marriage. **That is why the support of the local self-government would be very important for capacity building of the CSW through financial support for training of professionals in this field and improving working conditions in order to reach the most vulnerable girls and their families.**

## Capacity building of all stakeholders in the chain of responsibility for the child marriage prevention

For a joint coordinated response to the child marriage practice to be truly effective, it is necessary to also build the capacities of other links in the chain, primarily the judiciary, the police and the health care system. A particularly important component of the cooperation between different

<sup>24</sup> Instructions on the manner of work of centres for social work – guardianship authorities in the protection of children from child marriage, No. 5510000100-2019 14 of 20 May 2019.

systems is the regular and prompt exchange of information between all stakeholders on each specific case, and it should preferably be defined by a protocol.

It is necessary to cooperate with the courts and the public prosecutor's office on raising awareness and disseminating information about the normative and strategic basis for the prohibition and harmfulness of child marriage. It is very important to educate judicial structures about the concept of child marriage, its harmfulness, the fact that it represents violence against a child and the need to act with an understanding of cultural specifics. Highlighting the clear link between child marriage as a form of violence against children and the response systems that already exist in relation to violence against children can be particularly effective.<sup>25</sup>

When it comes to capacities of the police, it is very important to use trainings for prevention of domestic violence to make sure the police is aware of the fact that child marriage represents violence against children. Potentially useful tools for raising police competencies are specialized trainings for community policing. These trainings could be used to train police officers on how to respond to child marriage and how to act in such cases.

The health care system has a significant role in preventing child marriage by raising awareness and educating the community about the adverse consequences of child marriage on the psychophysical development of the child and the consequences of early pregnancy, i.e. through providing advice on reproductive health. In addition, it is extremely important to ensure that adolescent pregnancies are recorded and that the

obligation to report adolescent pregnancies or childbirths to the competent centre for social work is consistently fulfilled. That is why it is extremely important to raise the capacities of the health care system, primarily by involving it in the work with the community and in the coordination network, and by strengthening the network of health coordinators and additional education.

The media have a very important role in monitoring the activities implemented at the local level and have the biggest role in raising awareness among the general public (not only within the affected community but also among the majority population). The media provide support for creating a broad range of stakeholders and for raising their awareness, as well as for improving the knowledge on child marriage. It is desirable for the local media to get involved in the work of the coordination network of responsible stakeholders from the very start, because this enables the recognition and visibility of this mechanism's work, and the media get an educational role. To ensure ethical, careful, professional and accurate reporting on the phenomenon of child marriage, it would be good to organize a briefing with journalists or training of journalists, as well as to introduce journalists to the activities of the National Coalition to End Child Marriage.

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<sup>25</sup> See Part I) Establishing the local coordination network



# Cost estimation and planning

Based on the analysis of the structure and range of costs of implementing the three-year programme whose results and lessons learned are integrated into this guide, some main budgeting guidelines and recommendations are systematized here.

Since this is a programme that implies a high degree of flexibility, and the scope, intensity and duration of activities largely depend on the capacities of the local community and the number of beneficiaries of direct activities, it is not possible to reach a universal cost estimate and accurate estimate of required funds.

Based on the analysis of real costs incurred during the programme implementation, only a rough estimate of the cost can be made for a comprehensive one-year programme, which covered all three main components, in one community. This cost ranges from RSD 1,800,000 to 3,500,000 per community. At the same time, one should have it in mind that it can be both lower and higher, depending on a range of factors – number of beneficiaries involved, i.e. number of socio-educational workshops, number of girls involved in courses and additional training, distance

of locations and accompanying transportation costs, number of schools in the programme, number and type of activities stimulating social inclusion, availability of experts, number and duration of trainings for professionals, etc.

Voluntary involvement of the local population and schools or youth clubs in the organization of events can contribute to good planning and rational management of financial resources of the local community. Also, refreshments at workshops, trainings and meetings can be provided through donations from local businessmen, and transportation costs can be provided through partnerships with local transport companies. Courses and additional training can be part of individual sponsorships or linked to other programmes for stimulating the employment of particularly vulnerable groups in the community.

Participation of as many local stakeholders as possible in this type of support is extremely important because it promotes social responsibility and solidarity, and at the same time, it has an impact on raising awareness of the harmfulness of child marriage and the strength of individual and collective responsibility to prevent it.

Preparation and coordination activities make up roughly 20% of the total budget.

- Situation analysis includes the costs of questionnaire preparation, interviewer training, field research, data processing and analysis and report writing.
- Coordination envisages the hiring of at least two people who would be engaged in this activity (programme coordinator and person in charge of finances). It is assumed that the coordinator (if they are employed in a public institution or municipality) will perform this task as part of their regular job. If this is not the case, compensation must be envisaged in accordance with the resources and common practice at the LSG level. Programme coordination/management may also include the cost of work materials, communications and the organization of coordination meetings of all stakeholders

Interventions in the directly affected community make up roughly 50% of the total budget.

Due to the nature of the activities, this type of intervention is implemented in partnership with civil society organizations. In addition to the direct costs of the activities themselves (as given below), the real costs of project coordination and management should be also envisaged to ensure quality, good monitoring and reporting. That is why it is important to envisage proportional compensation for the coordinator, field activities assistant, finance assistant, as well as for the

accompanying material and technical costs of the organization.

If any activity involves the participation of volunteers, their real costs of transport, snacks/ refreshments and possibly phone use should be covered.

- **Socio-educational workshops** include the costs of fees for workshop facilitators (mandatory two facilitators per workshop, for preparation and implementation), transportation costs, refreshments for participants, renting the premises and gifts for workshop hosts (if the workshops are held in private residential premises) and work material costs. The additionally recommended costs are related to material support for workshop participants and training of workshop facilitators (if needed).

- **Activities stimulating social inclusion** usually include the costs of activity leaders (optimum is two people per activity), transportation costs (depending on whether the activities are organized in their own or another settlement, in the town where the settlements are located or even in a neighbouring larger city) and the costs of the activities themselves (which directly depends on the type of activity).

- **Thematic panels** in affected communities require planning the cost of fees for facilitators and transportation costs.

- **Courses and additional training** include the costs of training per participant (including work materials in accordance with the course requirements), cost of transportation and closing ceremony of the course (including, for example, gifts in the form of equipment or materials used to put the acquired skills in practice) and mentoring costs.

Interventions of key institutions of the system at the local self-government level make up roughly 30% of the total budget.

This group of costs is mostly related to the contribution to strengthening the professional capacities of the key institutions of the system in the local community. These costs are related to:

- organization of cross-sectoral round tables and/or sectoral trainings with the participation of local trainers and experts in certain fields or to the support to continuous professional development by enabling the implementation of relevant accredited programmes in the LSG and
- support to professionals to participate in relevant trainings, meetings and conferences organized abroad or at the national level.

In addition to the costs of training in the field of child marriage and mentoring support to employees, the support to schools for the implementation of the programmes for prevention of dropping out from the education system should also include grants for the implementation of prevention activities at the school level.

Improving individualized support to girls at risk and their families can be planned as:

- co-financing of the existing local service providers engaged in counselling work (including civil society organizations) and/or
- specialized family support service (family outreach worker).



# Završne napomene

The aim of the publication “A Childhood, not Marriage” is to facilitate a joint synchronized response of all stakeholders at the local level who can contribute to the prevention of child marriage. Only multisectoral action through synergy can ensure efficiency and results in eliminating this harmful practice. Therefore, the establishment of the coordination mechanism and its good management play a crucial role.

**It is particularly important for the programme to be based on the resources and potentials of the directly affected (Roma) community. The direct experience, knowledge, skills and strategies of the members of the affected community in facing the challenges of social inclusion are invaluable for the design and success of the programme which is based on the principles of partnership.**

In addition to the multisectoral approach, another principle must be taken into account – the systematic planning of activities starts from preparing a good analytical basis that will serve as a starting point for designing quality and mutually harmonized interventions. In addition, it is important that local self-governments always try and go beyond what is presented as the necessary minimum intervention in the model. This would additionally confirm their commitment to improving the quality of life in their communities and responsibility for those who need support the most.

**All stakeholders in the chain of prevention of the child marriage phenomenon must always keep the child’s interest in the first place and never lose sight of the fact that child marriage is a form of violence against a child and that its consequences are passed down from generation to generation.**







Svetozara Markovića 58  
11000 Belgrade  
Serbia

T: 011 3602 104  
E-mail: [belgrade@unicef.org](mailto:belgrade@unicef.org)

[www.unicef.org/serbia](http://www.unicef.org/serbia)