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CARE | Serbia

Addressing Roma Child Marriage in Serbia through UNICEF Partnerships

PIA 2501

**MEMO**

**To:** UNICEF Serbia

**From:** Allison Reefer, CARE Country Director for Serbia

**Date:** 8 October 2014

**Subject:** Child Marriage in Roma Communities in Serbia

**Executive Summary**

In Serbia, Roma communities face poverty, discrimination, and many other social problems. One of the major issues facing Roma children, especially girls, is child marriage, a problem that has yet to be effectively addressed in Serbia. The United Nations Children’s Rights and Emergency Relief Organization (UNICEF) has been working in Serbia to promote children’s rights and has already established various partnerships to tackle these issues.

Through the development of a new Partnership to Prevent Child Marriage in Roma Communities, UNICEF can create a multi-layer approach that will strengthen government policies, create awareness, educate Roma communities, and ensure complete education of Roma children in order to target the problem of Roma child marriage in Serbia.

**Problem**

Despite policies working to increase the rights of both children and Roma, child marriage continues to be a problem in Roma communities in Serbia, especially because of gaps in laws regarding children and the marginalization of Roma throughout the country.

**Background**

The issue of child marriage in Roma communities in Serbia is part of the bigger issue of poverty in and discrimination against Roma groups in Europe, as well as the issue of child marriage on the global scale. In the 2011 census, 147,604 people in Serbia identified themselves as Roma (Open Society Foundations); however, international and non-governmental organizations estimate this number to actually be anywhere from 300,000 to 500,000 (Minority Rights Group International, 2014). Roma are typically marginalized in society, and they are one of the poorest groups in Europe. In 2011, around 90 percent of Roma in Europe lived below the national poverty line of the country their respective countries (UNDP, 2014). Roma children are especially vulnerable, with only about 15 percent completing “upper-secondary general or vocational education,” and only a little over 50 percent of Roma children are enrolled in school (UNDP, 2014). In Serbia, many of the children who do attend school are placed in schools for students with learning disabilities. Lack of access to education and other services, such as health care, employment, adequate housing, and even electricity and clean water, are also major issues for Roma in Serbia (Minority Rights Group International, 2014).

Roma girls and women face high amounts of discrimination in both their own communities and Serbian society, which contributes further to high child marriage rates. Roma communities often do not encourage girls to attend or finish school. Few Roma women receive college degrees, and only around three percent of them even finish secondary school (UNDP). Girls are also often subjected to virginity testing, and dropout rates for Roma girls are especially common during puberty because parents worry that social activities will lead to increased risk of girls losing their virginity. Girls’ virginity is seen as important to keeping the family’s honor. Roma communities also sometimes practice arranged marriages. When Roma women marry, they move in with their husband’s family and are viewed as property of their husband and their in-laws (UNFPA, 2012). In fact, in some communities, the traditional practice of buying the bride is still performed (OECD, 2012). Roma women rarely own property and are generally expected to perform domestic labor work in the home and community.

Because of a lack of education and social services, Roma girls have a much higher chance of becoming child brides. In a survey of Roma in Serbia, 14 percent of Roma girls were married before the age of 15, while 44 percent were married between the ages of 15 and 18. Child marriage percentages vary with location, at 52 percent in rural areas and 40 percent in urban areas. In comparison, only about 19 percent of Roma boys were married between the ages of 15 and 18, a number that is still significant but much lower. Additionally, 24 percent of the Roma girls reported being married to men who were five to nine years older. About one-third of the girls aged 15 to 18 had already had a child, and many more were pregnant or trying. Younger Roma women were much less likely to be using a form of contraceptive. They also face the issue of domestic violence from their husbands and in-laws, as at least one-fourth of Roma men reported believing that beating their wives was acceptable under certain circumstances (UNFPA, 2012). In general, child brides are rarely able to finish their education, have a higher risk of being abused, have a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, and have a greater chance of dying during childbirth (CARE, 2014).

Laws exist that would prohibit most of these child marriages, but because Roma are typically undocumented and without citizenship, the problem is often ignored or unknown. According to Serbian law, a minor is anyone aged 14 to 18 years of age; a child is anyone under the age of 14; and the age of consent is 14 (UNFPA, 2012). Marriage laws state that the legal minimum marriage age is 18, but exceptions may be made under specific circumstances for people ages 16 and above. The law also stresses the importance of consent within marriage, without pressure or force. Roma marriages are rarely registered, which is how they fall outside of many of the marriage and legal age laws.

Roma in Serbia face many problems, but child marriage is a result of the larger problems of gender inequality and lack of access to education in Roma communities. Roma have been a key focus of development in Serbia for several years, and many other European countries have begun to make a difference in these communities through policy changes, education, and intentional programming. In September 2013, the United Nations General Assembly Human Rights Council created the first resolution on the problem of child, early, and forced marriage (Girls Not Brides, 2013). As one of the co-sponsoring countries, Serbia should make this problem a priority as part of its larger efforts toward Roma social inclusion, gender equality, child rights, and basic human rights.

**Policy Approach**

On a global scale, education is one of the primary ways of preventing child marriage. In completing secondary school, girls are six times less likely to be married underage (CARE, 2014). School completion is a problem in Roma communities, but the issue of gender discrimination must be addressed in order to emphasize the issue of girls’ education. Economic crisis and poverty are also contributors to child marriage, both of which are problems that Roma in Serbia face. Additionally, Roma marriages usually fall outside of the legal system because they are unregistered and Roma are typically undocumented, creating another layer for the problem that needs to be addressed. Approaches to preventing child marriage vary by country, implementing organization, and situation.

In Hungary, the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) uses research, reports, and advocacy to create awareness and educate about child marriage in Roma communities. These reports are used by key actors in development to understand the problems that Roma children face in their communities and to target better strategies for child protection against issues such as child marriage (Protection Project, pg. 49, 2013). Similarly, the Bulgarian organization Amalipe used surveys, awareness, and partnerships among relevant organizations to eliminate stereotypes about Roma culture, emphasize the importance of eliminating child marriage, and collaborate cross-organizationally and cross-country in working towards the prevention of Roma child marriage (Amalipe, 2011). Education and skill-building are tactics used by the National Child Labor Project in India. Children learn about their rights and gain skills that will be useful in future jobs and careers. Extracurricular activities are also used as a way to educate the children and to restore their childhoods (Protection Project, pg. 82, 2013). Save the Children uses cash transfers as a form of prevention of child marriage through protection of children as a whole. Because economic crises and conflict create greater vulnerability for children, the organization provides cash transfers for lower socio-economic families in both emergency and non-emergency situations. Reducing economic vulnerability is shown to provide greater protection for children, including preventing child labor, child soldiers, and child marriages (Protection Project, pg. 24, 2013). In the case of Serbia, cash transfers might not be the most effective solution because Roma do not face the problem of conflict, and they have ongoing economic distress that should be addressed in more sustainable ways.

As an international, intergovernmental organization, UNICEF can use its partnerships with the government and non-governmental organizations to establish a multi-layer approach to preventing Roma child marriage in Serbia through addressing policy gaps, promoting gender equality, continuing economic development, and ensuring education completion for Roma children.

**Policy Recommendation**

Through UNICEF partnerships and collaboration, CARE proposes a multi-layer approach to addressing the issue of child marriage in Roma communities in Serbia. Because UNICEF partners with various organizations to promote child protection and rights, this could would be an already-established method of getting key actors involved in the process. In developing a Partnership to Prevent Child Marriage in Roma Communities, UNICEF can address several factors that contribute to the problem and are important to addressing the issue. Through this partnership, UNICEF will work to raise the age of consent and strengthen laws relating to child marriage, conduct surveys and create reports to educate key actors and Serbian citizens about Roma culture and the general problem of child marriage, educate Roma communities about the role of women and girls in order to promote gender equality, and provide incentives and resources to keep Roma children and school and to improve the quality of their education.

UNICEF has established a relationship with the government of Serbia to address issues of child rights and protection. Through this partnership, UNICEF will propose and advocate for raising the age of consent and strengthening policies that relate to child marriage. This should be implemented as part of the government’s existing Plan of Action for the Implementation of the National Strategy for Improving and Promoting Gender Equality 2010-2015, which aims to address the issue of child marriage in Roma communities (Gender Equality Directorate, 2010). Another part of this strategy is to find a way to encourage registered marriages among Roma communities, which would help to ensure that the marriages were within legal rights and create accountability. This can be done through increasing Roma access to and trust of the Serbian government and providing incentives for them to go through a legal marriage process.

Another partnership will be established with the European Roma Rights Centre to conduct research and surveys within Serbian Roma communities on the prevalence of child marriage, attitudes about child rights and gender equality, and other issues that could be contributing to the existence of child marriage. These reports will be useful for any key actors involved in the prevention process, as well as for educating citizens about Roma communities in order to eliminate primeval stereotypes about Roma culture and raise awareness about child marriage. Having this information will help shape policy changes and national programs that target Roma and child marriage. Increased awareness can also help to prevent discrimination against Roma and to create an urgency about addressing problems that Roma face so that programs and policies to help the communities are actually carried through.

UNICEF will also establish a partnership with CARE to provide education about child rights and gender equality to Roma communities. CARE already works in Serbia to promote child rights, empower youth, and provide greater market access to marginalized groups, and we work in other countries to raise awareness and education about child marriage. By helping Roma understand the benefits of education, gender equality, and child protection, attitudes about these issues can be changed. Although problems such as child marriage, forced labor, poverty, and even domestic violence are often seen as being embedded in Roma culture, organizations such as ERRC and Amalipe have shown that these attitudes can be changed through awareness, advocacy, and education within Roma communities. Changing these attitudes is a key part of preventing child marriage, and the promotion of gender equality and children’s education can also promote economic growth and well-being within Roma communities.

Finally, UNICEF will partner with civil society organizations and NGOs such as Roma Education Fund that work to improve education quality of Roma and keep children in schools to completion. Education can build human capital of Roma children, which will allow them to obtain better jobs and do better economically. Education is shown to decrease child marriage, and it also promotes economic growth, another prevention method to child marriage. If parents know that their children, particularly girls, will be able to have a good income in the future to support their families, they will be less likely to arrange a marriage and sell their daughters as brides for financial security. Organizations such as the Roma Education Fund provide financial incentives for Roma children to stay in school, which would also help Roma families with financial security (Roma Education Fund, 2014). Private sector organizations will also play a role in this aspect of prevention by providing skills-training and scholarships for Roma children.

Through UNICEF-created partnerships with the government and various organizations, Serbia can prevent child marriage in Roma communities with a multi-layer approach that will also target economic growth, social inclusion, and gender equality for Roma. This will be a major step toward development in Roma communities and in Serbia as a whole.

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