


Case Study  
*- Child, Early and Forced Marriage –*

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## INTRODUCTION

The activities of Roma Women's Network of Serbia are focused on eliminating the negative social phenomena of child, early and forced marriages, which are present in the Roma community. It is a fact that child, early and forced marriages also occur among the general population in Serbia, often among the poorer population and in rural areas, but this practice is, nevertheless, very frequent in Roma communities, where, according to UNICEF's MICS research data, more than half of girls get married before the age of 18. Child marriage is often accompanied by early and frequent pregnancy and childbirth, resulting in higher than average maternal morbidity and mortality rates. Worldwide, pregnancy-related deaths are the leading cause of death for girls between the ages of 15 and 19, both married and unmarried. Neonatal mortality among children of very young mothers is higher (sometimes twice as high) than among children of older mothers. Child marriage also contributes to higher rates of school dropout, especially among girls, forced exclusion from school and an increased risk of domestic violence, in addition to limiting the enjoyment of the right to freedom of movement. The payment of dowries and bride prices, which varies among practising communities, may increase the vulnerability of women and girls to violence and to other harmful practices<sup>1</sup>.

The Roma Women's Network of Serbia worked with the community in order to prevent child, early and forced marriages and to raise the awareness of the Roma community about the harmfulness of such marriages.

This Child, Early and Forced Marriage Case Study aims to call attention to the issue of child, early and forced marriages in the Roma population in Serbia. It will familiarize us with the position of young girls in the events of child, early and forced marriages, with how those marriages took place and how the competent institutions reacted.

In this way, the Roma Women's Network wishes to achieve our common goal, which is to raise the visibility of Roma women in our society, and especially to draw attention to the issues of child, early and forced marriages in the Roma population.

Early marriage as a Roma tradition is a stereotype, as it is primarily influenced by poverty, lack of access to education and health care, and living in patriarchal families. By creating this Case

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<sup>1</sup> Par. 20 - 24 of the Joint General Recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and No. 19 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on Harmful Practices

Study, the Roma Women's Network of Serbia wants to send the following message: EVERY CHILD HAS THE RIGHT TO A CHILDHOOD. LET'S PUT AN END TO CHILD MARRIAGES"

This Child, Early and Forced Marriage Case Study was created from August 1, 2022 to July 31, 2023, within the "Institutional Support for the Work of the Roma Women's Network of Serbia" project supported by the OAK Foundation. The OAK Foundation's support for the RWN's work is focused on public advocacy for the improvement of the position of Roma girls at the local and national level in the Republic of Serbia. The project idea follows ratified and adopted international and national documents pertaining to women's and children's human rights and creates conditions for their adjustment and application. The Network is focused on putting an end to the practice of child marriage that is still present in the Roma community.

### *DEFINITIONS / CONTEXT*

Child, early and forced marriages are forms of violence that constitute a gross violation of the rights of children, especially girls, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. They endanger the psychophysical health of girls and expose them to the risk of statelessness, domestic violence, and human trafficking.

For the purpose of preparing this case study, the definitions of child, early and forced marriage will be used, which are in accordance with the definitions of the United Nations<sup>2</sup>.

***In this Child, Early and Forced Marriage Case Study, the term child marriage will include all three forms of violence against children.***

**Child marriage** is a marriage in which at least one of the parties is a child, i.e. a human being below the age of eighteen.

**Early marriage** refers to marriages involving a person aged below 18 in countries where the age of majority is attained earlier or upon marriage. Early marriage can also refer to marriages where both spouses are 18 or older but other factors make them unready to consent to marriage, such as their level of physical, emotional, sexual and psychosocial development, or a lack of information regarding the person's life options.

**Forced marriage** is any marriage that occurs without the full and free consent of one or both of the parties and/or where one or both of the parties is/are unable to end or leave the marriage, including as a result of duress or intense social or family pressure.<sup>3</sup>

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia<sup>4</sup> guarantees the realization, direct application and protection of human and minority rights and freedoms. Among other guaranteed human and minority rights and freedoms, the Constitution guarantees the right to life<sup>5</sup> and the

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<sup>2</sup> Preventing and Eliminating Child, Early and Forced Marriage – Report of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, A/HRC/26/22, 2014, available at: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/26/22> accessed on March 4, 2022.

<sup>4</sup>Official Gazette of the RS", No. 98/2006

<sup>5</sup> Article 24 of the Constitution

inviolability of physical and mental integrity<sup>6</sup>, prohibits slavery, servitude, human trafficking and forced labour, which also includes sexual exploitation<sup>7</sup>, guarantees the right to personal freedom and security<sup>8</sup>, the right to legal personality (legal capacity) upon turning 18<sup>9</sup>, the right to decide freely on entering or dissolving a marriage and to enter into marriage based on the free consent<sup>10</sup>, as well as the freedom of everyone to decide whether they shall procreate or not<sup>11</sup>. The Constitution specifically guarantees the rights of the child, especially emphasizing the right to protection from psychological, physical, economic and any other form of exploitation or abuse<sup>12</sup>. Parents have the right and duty to support, provide upbringing and education to their children, and their parental rights may be revoked or limited only by the ruling of the court, if this is in the best interests of the child<sup>13</sup>. Families, mothers, single parents and any child in the Republic of Serbia enjoy special protection in the Republic of Serbia, while children under 15 years of age may not be employed, nor may children be employed at jobs detrimental to their health or morals<sup>14</sup>.

The Republic of Serbia has ratified almost all key international treaties, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>15</sup> with Optional Protocols on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography<sup>16</sup>, and on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts<sup>17</sup>; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women<sup>18</sup>; the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages<sup>19</sup>; the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention)<sup>20</sup>, the Council of Europe Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (the Lanzarote Convention)<sup>21</sup>, as well as the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Article 25 of the Constitution

<sup>7</sup> Article 26 of the Constitution

<sup>8</sup> Article 27 of the Constitution

<sup>9</sup> Article 37 of the Constitution

<sup>10</sup> Article 62 of the Constitution

<sup>11</sup> Article 63 of the Constitution

<sup>12</sup> Article 64 of the Constitution

<sup>13</sup> Article 65 of the Constitution

<sup>14</sup> Article 66 of the Constitution

<sup>15</sup> Act on Ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ("Official Gazette of the SFRY - International Treaties", No. 15/90 and "Official Gazette of the FRY - International Treaties", No. 4/96 and 2/97)

<sup>16</sup> Act on Ratification of the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, with the Convention on the Rights of the Child ("Official Gazette of the FRY - International Treaties", No. 7/2002)

<sup>17</sup> Act on Ratification of the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts, with the Convention on the Rights of the Child ("Official Gazette of the FRY - International Treaties", No. 7/2002)

<sup>18</sup> Act on Ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ("Official Gazette of the SFRY - International Treaties", No. 11/81)

<sup>19</sup> "Official Gazette of the SFRY - International Treaties and Other Agreements", No. 13/64

<sup>20</sup> Act on Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence ("Official Gazette of the RS - International Treaties" No. 12/13.

<sup>21</sup> Act on Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse ("Official Gazette of the RS - International Treaties", No. 1/2010)

<sup>22</sup> Act on Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings ("Official Gazette of the RS - International Treaties", No. 19/2009)

For more than a decade, Serbia has been in the process of joining the European Union, within which it is obliged to fully harmonize its legal system with the *acquis* of the EU.

## *METHODOLOGY*

**The methodology of this Child, Early and Forced Marriage Case Study analysis was conducted** by interview as the basic method of data collection in qualitative research. The sample respondents were chosen based on previous workshop activities and the knowledge of network members / activists in the field.

For data collection, a case study model was used, which included data on the age of the respondents, their family status and environment, employment, education, childbirth, experiences of violence in the primary family, experiences of violence in adulthood, as well as attitudes that demonstrate the understanding of child, early and forced marriage and the attitude of the respondents towards it. The interviews were conducted in the field. The expected result of applying this research technique was to obtain material that shows the experiences, attitudes and life stories of the respondents. In this regard, the collected material, i.e. the stories of the members of the surveyed community, taking into special consideration the actions and non-actions of the competent institutions, represented the basis for the preparation of the case study. The interviews were conducted individually and separately with each respondent. In addition, based on their own assessment of the situation in the field, the researchers had the opportunity to adjust the methodology of the case study in the directions that delved deeper into certain important questions or opened new ones and which arose during the interviews with the respondents. The intention was to conduct a conversation with the respondents. In certain situations, the conversation could be diverted from the main topic, but at the same time, it would provide a lot of important information that the researchers would not have found out if they had only followed the pre-prepared methodology of the case study.

In total, 28 trained activists worked on the case studies, and they collected and processed 31 case studies in their local self-government units.

The local self-government units in which the case studies were conducted are as follows:

Pirot, Zajecar, Kostolac, Valjevo, Sabac, Kragujevac, Vranje, Leskovac, Novi Becej, Bujanovac, Novi Sad, Krusevac, Aleksinac, Ljubovija, Kovin, Babusnica, Bela Palanka, Belgrade - Karaburma, Belgrade - Zemun, Novi Becej, Belgrade - Veliki Mokri Lug, Zabalj, Pancevo, Belgrade - Zvezdara, Smederevska Palanka.

**Objectives of case study analysis:**

1. Identification of the age of entering into child marriage and all accompanying consequential events/occurrences;
2. Identification of the main factors that influence the existence of child marriage as a practice;
3. The influence of family and community on attitudes towards child marriage;
4. Respondents' attitudes towards child marriage looking back at their own child marriage;
4. Respondents' views on early pregnancies, gender-based violence and virginity of future brides;
5. Action / inaction of competent institutions, types of their activities.

**The field research at the planned locations was carried out by the Roma Women's Network team made up of the following organizations:**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Contact e-mail</b>
Romska ženska inicijativa – Zabalj	<a href="mailto:zivka.fan82@gmail.com">zivka.fan82@gmail.com</a>
Udruženje Romkinja Amarilis - Novi Sad	<a href="mailto:udruzenjeamarilis@gmail.com">udruzenjeamarilis@gmail.com</a>
SURZS - Šabac	<a href="mailto:sofka.vasiljkovic@gmail.com">sofka.vasiljkovic@gmail.com</a>
Mali princ – Belgrade	<a href="mailto:office@maliprinc.org.rs">office@maliprinc.org.rs</a>
Inicijativa romskih studentkinja - Ljubovija	<a href="mailto:marina.vrganj@gmail.com">marina.vrganj@gmail.com</a>
Bela Romkinja - Novi Sad	<a href="mailto:sladjja.vulin@gmail.com">sladjja.vulin@gmail.com</a>
Romkinje sa sela – Pirot	<a href="mailto:romkinjesasela@gmail.com">romkinjesasela@gmail.com</a>
Inicijativa - Zaječar	<a href="mailto:merdzicaleksandra@gmail.com">merdzicaleksandra@gmail.com</a>
NVO Sastipe - Vranje	<a href="mailto:kurticolivera@gmail.com">kurticolivera@gmail.com</a>
LERO - Leskovac	<a href="mailto:laurarzm@gmail.com">laurarzm@gmail.com</a>
Roma Daje – Belgrade	<a href="mailto:Romdae@yahoo.com">Romdae@yahoo.com</a>
Ženski prostor –Niš	<a href="mailto:zpc@zenskiprostor.org">zpc@zenskiprostor.org</a>
Uspešne zene Kostolca – Kostolac	<a href="mailto:cokic80@gmail.com">cokic80@gmail.com</a>
Udruženje Roma Novi Becej	<a href="mailto:danica.jovanovic09@gmail.com">danica.jovanovic09@gmail.com</a>
Roma Danica Pancevo	<a href="mailto:danica.jovanovic09@gmail.com">danica.jovanovic09@gmail.com</a>
Romnjako Ilo – Zrenjanin	<a href="mailto:danica.jovanovic09@gmail.com">danica.jovanovic09@gmail.com</a>
Interglobalni centar Kragujevac	<a href="mailto:zmsvetlanakg@gmail.com">zmsvetlanakg@gmail.com</a>
Papusa – Kovan	<a href="mailto:sona263@gmail.com">sona263@gmail.com</a>
Udruženje Most 014 – Valjevo	<a href="mailto:udruzenjemost014@gmail.com">udruzenjemost014@gmail.com</a>
NVO Ternipe – Pirot	<a href="mailto:nvoternipe@gmail.com">nvoternipe@gmail.com</a>
Udruženje Roma Zora - Babusnica	<a href="mailto:dekidana@yahoo.com">dekidana@yahoo.com</a>
Amaro Drom - Smederevska Palanka	<a href="mailto:zdravka.nasput@gmail.com">zdravka.nasput@gmail.com</a>
Udruženje Roma Nada - Zajecar	<a href="mailto:udr.rom.nada@hotmail.com">udr.rom.nada@hotmail.com</a>
Inicijativa Manuela – Bela Palanka	<a href="mailto:alicmanuela87@gmail.com">alicmanuela87@gmail.com</a>
Bibija Romski zenski centar – Belgrade	<a href="mailto:rzc@bibija.org.rs">rzc@bibija.org.rs</a>
Ruz - Kostolac	<a href="mailto:radojka79@hotmail.com">radojka79@hotmail.com</a>
Udruženje Romkinja Bujanovac	<a href="mailto:ismaili.asima@gmail.com">ismaili.asima@gmail.com</a>

## *RESPONDENTS' LEGAL SECURITY AND WELLBEING*

Working on child marriage implies that this is an extremely sensitive topic, which requires access to respondents' personal stories, as well as a high level of empathy and sensitivity from the researchers. Since the researchers were entering the private sphere of the respondents' lives, the question of mutual respect and trust was crucial not only for the quality of the obtained material, but above all for establishing such a relationship in which the respondents will recognize the sincere effort put into preparing this case study - that it aims to present their experience and attitudes about child marriage and that it is carried out for their own personal and their communities' benefit. The basic principle of work before conducting interviews was set even before the start of activities on the case study, and it concerned the participation of respondents who are under the age of 18 and who entered into child marriage. It was decided not to include them in the research. The interviews with them could threaten their legal security, and on the other hand, the statements of girls under 18 years of age could damage their position within the family community. The interviews with them must under no circumstances jeopardize their safety and security, nor must they suffer any consequences. The fact that the activists of Roma organizations were also researchers with whom the respondents had previously had positive experiences was of key importance in establishing trust between the respondents and the researchers. Previous work with the respondents and a high level of trust allowed them to be willing to talk about deeply intimate topics such as child marriages. In addition, the respondents were told that, if for any reason they decide that they no longer wanted to participate in the interview, they could stop it at any time. The respondents expressed their desire to remain anonymous and to have guarantees that their personal data will not be publicly available in any form. We had one respondent who requested that even the place where she lives not be mentioned in the questionnaire.

## *SITUATION ANALYSIS IN SERBIA*

**The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey on the Situation of Women and Children in Serbia and the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey on the Situation of Women and Children in Roma Settlements in Serbia, 2019** - Report on research findings, Belgrade, the Republic of Serbia: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia and UNICEF - indicates that about 4 percent of young women aged 15 – 19 are currently married or cohabiting, and that percentage rises to 13 percent among women from the poorest households. Among women aged 20 – 24, 1 percent got married before the age of 15, and 6 percent before the age of 18. Early marriage is more common among women with a lower level of education from other settlements and from the poorest and materially deprived households. In total, 34 percent of young women aged 15 – 19 from Roma settlements are currently married or cohabiting, but this indicator rises to 41 percent among women from the poorest households. Sixteen percent got married before the age of 15, and 56 percent of women aged 20 - 24 got married before the age of 18. Among women aged 20 – 24, getting married before the age of 15 and before the age of 18 is much more common among those with only primary education than among those with secondary and higher education. Every fifth woman with primary education (21 percent) gets married before the age of 15, compared to 2 percent of women with secondary or higher education. In addition, early marriages are more characteristic of women from poorer households. Women from the poorest 60 percent of households were twice as likely to marry



before age 15 as women from the richest 40 percent of households (20 vs. 11 percent). Seventy-three percent of women from the poorest households got married before the age of 18. The highest percentage of married or cohabiting young women marry their peers (who are 0 – 4 years older) – 56 percent in the 15 – 19 age group and 64 percent in the 20 – 24 age group.<sup>23</sup>

Data from the Republic Institute for Social Protection show that during 2022, centres for social work identified 203 child victims of child marriage, of which 9 (4.4%) were boys, and 194 (95.6%) were girls. In all previous reporting periods, the highest number of Roma children affected by child marriage was observed. Of the total number of children, 128 (63%) are of Roma ethnicity - 6 boys (0.4%) and 122 girls (95.6%).

Among the identified children, the age of 16 and 17 years predominates (143 children, 70.4%), but the number of 60 (29.6%) children under the age of 16, who are particularly affected by child marriage at that extremely low age, is not negligible. In the Roma population, the percent of girls under the age of 16 is significantly higher and it amounts to 38.2%.

In 48 cases (17 Roma children), the centres gave a finding and opinion at the court's request for a formal marriage (which are almost always in favour of the marriage, even though children are under 18 years of age), which indicates that experts have a mostly formal approach to this matter.<sup>24</sup>

**The results of the Research on the Prevalence of Child Marriage in Serbia conducted by the Roma Women's Network of Serbia reveal the situation on the ground.** When asked how old they were when they first entered into a marital or cohabiting relationship, 1,485 respondents answered that they got married as minors, which is 49.27% of the total number of married respondents. The respondent who got married the earliest was only 11 years old at the time. Before the age of 14, a total of 76 respondents got married (5% of the number of respondents who got married as minors). A total of 486 respondents (33%) got married as younger minors (14 -15 years old), while 923 beneficiaries (62%) entered into a marital or a cohabiting relationship as elder minors (16-17 years old). Sixty-two percent of respondents who got married as minors gave birth to their first child before reaching legal adulthood. Of that number, most respondents gave birth to their first child between the ages of 15 and 16 (almost 50%).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/publikacije/mics6-istrazivanje-visestrukih-pokazatelja-za-2019-godinu>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.zavodsz.gov.rs/media/2493/4-izve%C5%A1taj-o-radu-csr-db-2022.pdf>

<http://www.zavodsz.gov.rs/media/2292/3-izve%C5%A1taj-o-decijim-brakovima-2021.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> <https://rzm.rs/mesec-romskog-zenskog-aktivizma/>

## LEGAL AND STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA RELEVANT TO CHILD MARRIAGES

### Laws

The **Family Act** prescribes conditions for entering into marriage and obstacles against entering into marriage<sup>26</sup>, including the minimum age for marriage, and prescribes that marriage cannot be concluded by a person who has not reached the age of 18, but that the court may, for justified reasons, allow for the concluding of marriage to a minor who has reached 16 years of age, and who has reached physical and mental maturity necessary for performing rights and duties in marriage<sup>27</sup>. The Family Act also prescribes that marriage may not be concluded by a person who is not of free will<sup>28</sup>.

**In terms of criminal law**, child, early and forced marriage are explicitly or implicitly sanctioned through several criminal acts: *Domestic Violence*<sup>29</sup>, *Neglecting and Abusing a Minor*<sup>30</sup>, *Coercion into Marriage*<sup>31</sup>, *Cohabiting with a Minor*<sup>32</sup> and *Human Trafficking*<sup>33</sup>.

The **Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Law Protection of Juveniles**<sup>34</sup> contains special protective provisions for child victims of certain criminal offences, including the criminal offence of common-law marriage with a minor, certain criminal offences against sexual freedom and the criminal offence of human trafficking.

The **Law on Social Welfare** defines the field of social protection as an activity whose goal is to provide assistance and empowerment for an independent and productive life in the society of individuals and families, as well as to prevent the emergence and elimination of the consequences of social exclusion<sup>35</sup>, through, among other things, the prevention of abuse, neglect or exploitation, i.e., elimination of their consequences<sup>36</sup>. The Law specifically recognizes as beneficiaries of social welfare services a child and a young person whose health, safety and development are at risk due to family and other life circumstances, i.e. if it is certain that without the support of the social protection system they cannot reach the optimal level of development, and among other things if there is a risk that they will become a victim or if they are a victim of abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation, i.e. if their physical,

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<sup>26</sup> Articles 15 - 24 of the Family Act

<sup>27</sup> Article 23 of the Family Act

<sup>28</sup> Article 24 of the Family Act

<sup>29</sup> Article 194 of the Criminal Code

<sup>30</sup> Article 193 of the Criminal Code

<sup>31</sup> Article 187a of the Criminal Code

<sup>32</sup> Article 190 of the Criminal Code

<sup>33</sup> Article 388 of the Criminal Code

<sup>34</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS", No. 85/2005

<sup>35</sup> Article 2 of the Law on Social Welfare

<sup>36</sup> Article 3 of the Law on Social Welfare

psychological or emotional well-being and development are threatened by the actions or omissions of parents, guardians or other persons who directly take care of them and if they are a victim human trafficking<sup>37</sup>.

In 2019, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans' and Social Affairs issued the **Instruction on Procedures of Centres for Social Work - Guardianship Authorities for Protecting Children from Child Marriage**<sup>38</sup>. The Instruction directs the guardianship authorities to act in accordance with the law, professional work standards and culturally competent practice, taking into account the best interests of the child. The instruction further refers to the application of immediate intervention measures, as well as protection measures and services: informing and counselling, referral to other services and institutions, material support, corrective and preventive supervision over the exercise of parental rights, temporary guardianship, initiation of proceedings for removing the guardian, initiation of court proceedings, filing of criminal charges for criminal acts such as Neglecting and Abusing a Minor, Cohabiting with a Minor, or Human Trafficking. In addition, the guardianship authorities are instructed to assess the situation and needs of the child and take the measures mentioned above when giving an opinion to the court in the process of approving the conclusion of a marriage to a minor under the age of 18.

### **Strategic documents**

The **Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma in the RS (2016 - 2025)**<sup>39</sup>, under the Specific Objective 5: Improving access to social protection services and the availability of financial benefits for the purpose of reducing poverty and increasing the social inclusion of Roma in the local community, and under the Operational Objective 1: In the social protection system, implementing solutions that prioritize family support when providing support to children at risk, including special support for Roma families. The following measure is planned: Improving the prevention and support system with the aim of reducing the number of child and forced marriages and minors' pregnancies in the Roma community.

The **National Strategy for Gender Equality for the Period from 2016 to 2020**<sup>40</sup>, under the Specific Objective 2.6 - Improved position of vulnerable women and women affected by multiple discrimination, provides for a measure regarding child, early and forced marriages: Actively work to prevent early and forced marriages, especially of Roma girls and young women, and provide support to young women and young mothers to continue their education. The Action Plan 2016 - 2018 provides for the measure 2.1.5. - Prevention of early, child marriages, especially in the Roma community (activities: education, support teams for combating early marriage of girls and young girls at risk).

The **Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence for the Period 2020-2023**<sup>41</sup>, in addition to early and forced marriages, also recognizes child marriage as a

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<sup>37</sup> Article 41 of the Law on Social Welfare

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2019-06/Deciji%20Brakovi%20Instrukcija0001.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> [https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2018-11/Strategija\\_za\\_socijalno\\_ukljucivanje\\_Roma\\_i\\_\\_Romkinja\\_2016-2025.doc](https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2018-11/Strategija_za_socijalno_ukljucivanje_Roma_i__Romkinja_2016-2025.doc)

<sup>40</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS", No. 4/16

<sup>41</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS", No. 80/2020

violation of human rights that threatens the development of girls and often leads to early pregnancies and social isolation, while insufficient education and low professional training perpetuate gendered nature of poverty. Some of the Strategy's desired changes are defined as the development of services for prevention, direct support and protection of children from vulnerable groups, including for children exposed to child, early and forced marriage (development of identification and early warning systems, expansion and provision of sustainable financing of existing services). Under the Specific Objective 3: Normative framework, institutional and organizational mechanisms for the prevention and protection of children from violence, provided for in the measure 3.1: Strengthening of systemic and institutional response mechanisms to all forms of violence against children, within which activity 3.1.1 is also planned: Amending the Family Act so that it contains: (1) An explicit prohibition of corporal punishment, (2) Clearly formulated measures within the framework of corrective supervision over the exercise of parental rights, (3) A prescribed obligation to establish interdepartmental cooperation in the area of prevention of violence against children and protection of children, (4) Removal of the provision that allows the conclusion of a child marriage with a court's permission.

The **Strategy to Prevent and Suppress Human Trafficking, Especially Trafficking in Women and Children and to Protect Victims, for the period 2017 – 2022** contains a chapter related to the prevention and protection of children from human trafficking and exploitation in pornography and prostitution and provides for specific activities and tasks under the Specific Objective 8.5. It has no special provisions regarding child, early and forced marriages.

The **Strategy for Prevention and Combating Gender-Based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence for the Period 2021-2025**<sup>42</sup>, as part of the measures to achieve Specific Objective 3, also provides for the measure 3.1: Ensure full, efficient and effective criminal law protection of women against gender-based violence against women and domestic violence. The expected effects of this measure are the national legislation harmonized with international documents pertaining to the suppression of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence, as well as the same group of persons enjoying criminal law, family law and preventive protection against all forms of domestic violence. One of the indicators of the results of this measure is the number of reports of forced marriage.

The **Action Plan for Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights**<sup>43</sup> provides measure 3.4.4.20 as one of the measures: Adoption of a new **General Protocol for the Protection of Children from Abuse and Neglect** with the aim of harmonization with the best practices of the EU. The measure 3.4.4.21 provides for: Development of new special protocols for the protection of children from abuse and neglect and creation of conditions for their compulsory application, especially in the areas of: actions of judicial authorities in the protection of minors from abuse and neglect; protection of children in social protection institutions from abuse and neglect; actions of police officers in protecting minors from abuse and neglect; action of the health care system to protect children from abuse and neglect; protection of children and students from violence, abuse and neglect in educational institutions. These measures are planned to be completed by the end of the second quarter of 2021.

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<sup>42</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS", No. 80/2020

<sup>43</sup> Available at: <https://www.mpravde.gov.rs/files/Revidirani%20AP23%202207.pdf> accessed on June 12, 2021

## RESULTS/CASE STUDIES

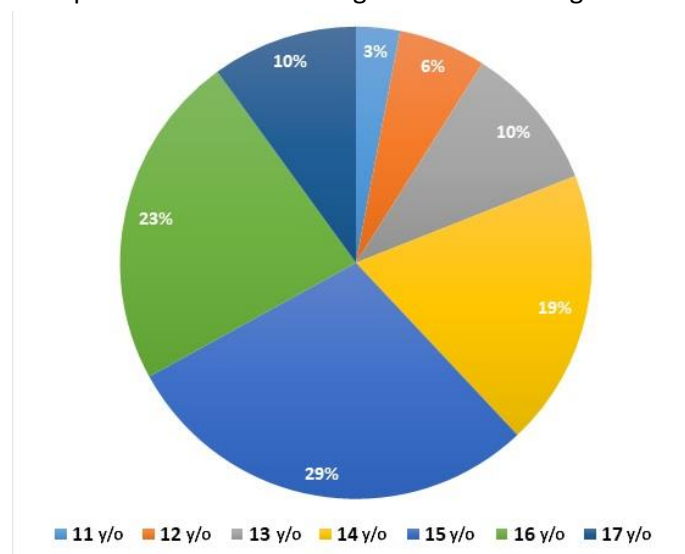
The following statistical reports and our respondents' stories are intended to indicate the influence of all complex factors that have an effect on the decision to enter into child marriage. Special attention was given to those topics that reveal internal processes in the respondents themselves, the internal pressure and the pressure arising from social and cultural norms of their community, the economic situation, as well as gender-based violence. Through their stories, we will show how they entered into child marriage, their subjective experience of the act itself, and all further life events and decisions that resulted from entering into child marriage. On the other hand, we will describe how the competent institutions reacted or failed to react.

### Entering into marriage and the age of the respondents when entering into child marriage

Early marriage and child marriage put girls in a position to take on all female duties in their household and the community's expectation that they become mothers as soon as possible. In such families, the patriarchal structure is fully preserved, in which the mother-in-law is the central authority figure of the family. Before getting married, young girls generally have no idea what awaits them in marriage, or at least they do not think much about it. When, in rare cases, mothers do talk to them about marriage, it is mostly about the difficulties of adapting to a new environment, the expectations that the new family has of them, the obligation to fulfil the demands of the husband, father-in-law and mother-in-law, and the obligation to take on all household chores.

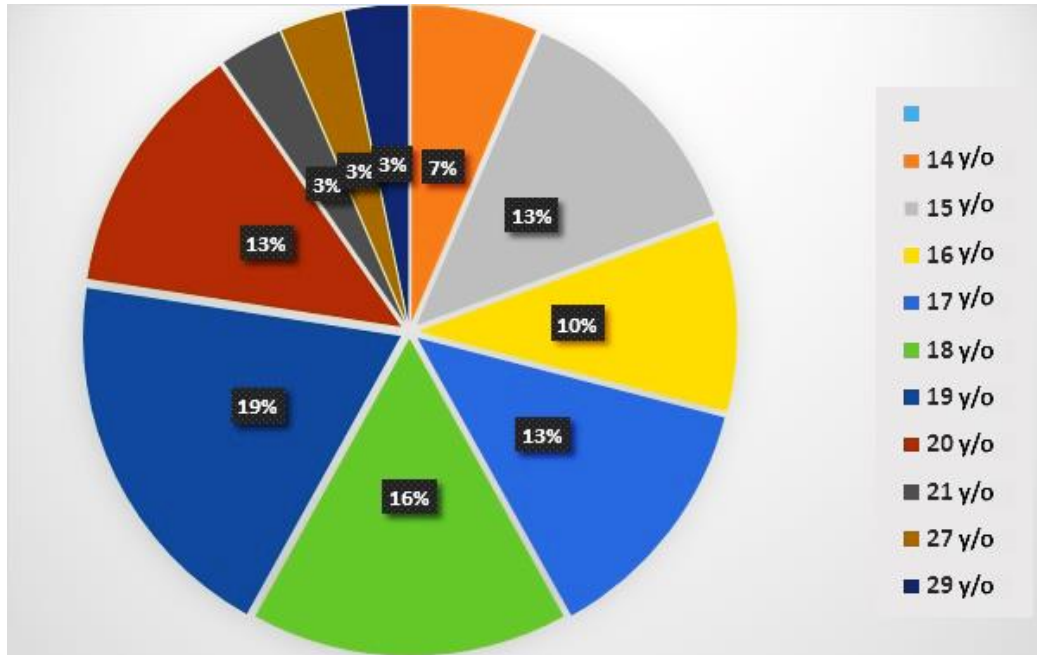
Most respondents entered into child marriage at the age of 15 (29%), at the age of 16 (23%), at the age of 14 (19%), at the age of 13 (10%), at the age of 17 (10%), at the age of 12 (6%) and at the age of 11 (3%) (Chart 1).

**Chart 1:** The age of the respondents when entering into child marriage



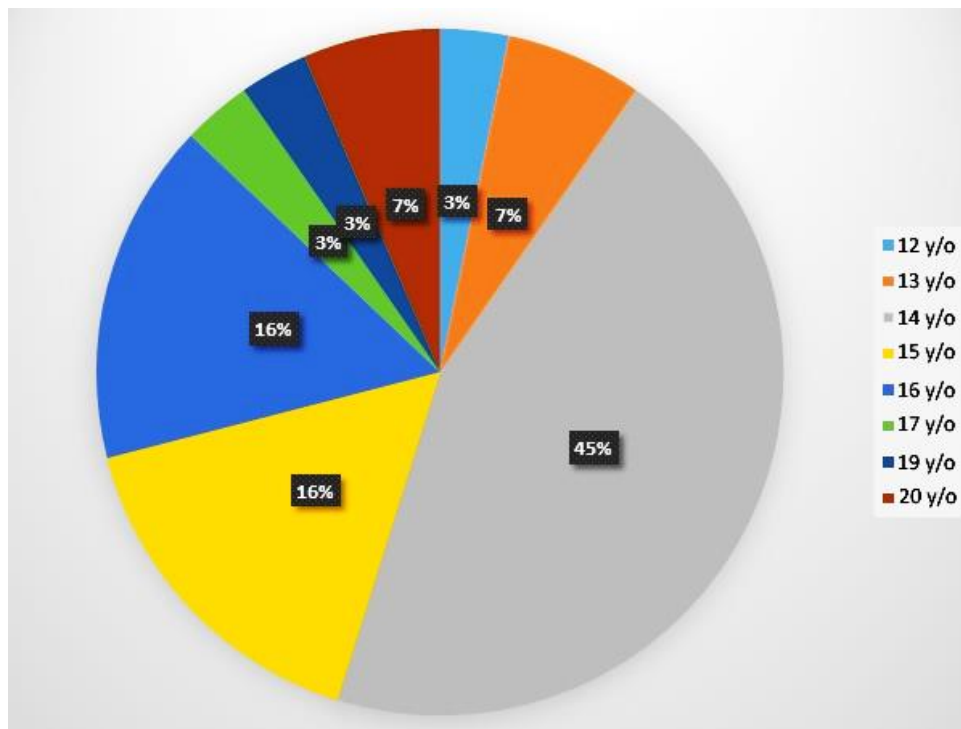
The age of the respondents' partners, with whom they entered into a child marriage, ranges from 29 (3%) to 14 years of age (6%). In most cases the partners were 19 (19%) and 18 years old (16%). (Chart 2).

**Chart 2:** The age of the respondents' partners, with whom they entered into a child marriage



In addition, the age of their mothers when they got married indicates the dominant prevalence of child marriage among them as well. Child marriage was entered into at the age of 14 (45%), at the age of 15 (16%), at the age of 16 (16%), at the age of 20 (6%), at the age of 13 (6%) and at the age of 12 (3%). (Chart 3).

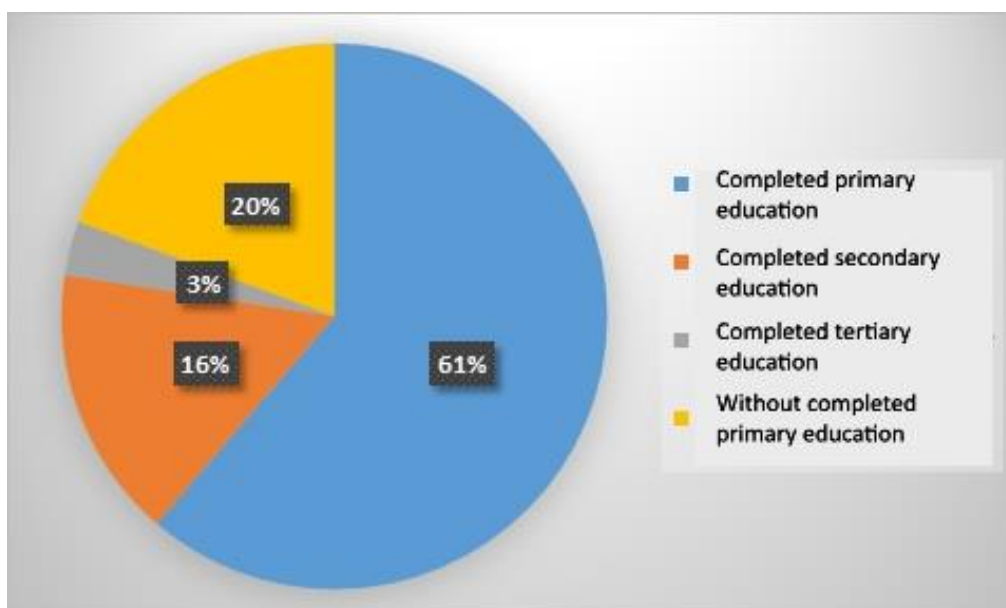
**Chart 3:** The age of the respondents' mothers when they entered into marriage



**Respondents' education levels**

Five respondents attended primary school but did not finish it (early dropout) and one respondent did not go to school at all (20%). Nineteen (61%) respondents completed primary school, 5 (16%) respondents completed secondary education, and only 1 (3%) respondent completed higher education (Chart 4).

**Chart 4:** Respondents' education levels



Data analysis showed that there is a statistically significant correlation between the age at which the respondents entered into child marriage and exclusion from formal education. None of the respondents who entered into a child marriage before the age of 17 completed secondary education, except for one respondent who left the child marriage and continued her education. Respondents who left education early and did not finish primary school are predominantly those who entered into child marriage at the age of 14 or younger.

Eight respondents abandoned their education when they got married, 16 respondents abandoned their education before marriage, and 2 respondents abandoned their education after marriage.

In 15 cases, the decision to leave school was made by the parents, in 3 cases it was made by the partner/husband, in 4 cases they made the decision themselves and in 4 cases the decision was made by someone else (uncles, etc.)

1. ) When asked if someone from the school reacted when they interrupted their compulsory primary education, four respondents answered that someone did and described the events:

*They called my mother and said that I should continue going to school even though I got married. I didn't want to and it stayed like that. After that, no one called or insisted that I go.*

*Yes, the school reacted. The principal called my mother to come to school. My mother was threatened with fines, which she agreed to pay but did not send me back to school.*

*The class teacher wrote a letter to my parents to inform them that I wasn't coming to school, but they answered that I got married and that I didn't want to go to school any more, and that was the end of it.*

*My family paid a fine, but no one came to our home. When my father received the citation, he had to go and give a statement about why I left school and he had to pay the fine. That's how it was back then.*

As evident from their stories, none of the respondents was sent back to school to continue the compulsory primary education.

2. ) The most common reasons for leaving school can be classified into the following reasons, which they stated:

*We were a big family and since I was the oldest, I had to take care of my sisters. I had to go to the market with my father to sell goods because my father was a seller and because my mother wasn't able to since she was having a new baby every year. I also had a nephew whom I also had to look after since he wasn't my mother's grandson, but the son of my half-sister on my father's side, as she remarried and left the child to us to look after. It was a*



*hard life for me living with my parents. I was a ten-year old girl who had to start taking care of her sisters, doing the housework, selling at the market and fairs. It was really difficult.*

*My parents forbade me to go to school so that I would not fall into the temptation of meeting other men.*

*They arranged my marriage with my future father-in-law and mother-in-law. And then my parents simply told me that I would be moving in with them and that I wouldn't be going to school any more.*

*They never enrolled me in school. I didn't even receive a call for enrolment, so that was it. My parents wouldn't enrol me anyhow because they did not have means to put me through school. My brother was going to school and they had to have enough for him, but we all struggled a lot. My brother started going to school. Poor soul, he was going there hungry, and eventually he ended up in a hospital. So sad.*

c) When asked about their opinion on how much the interruption of education affected their further life and how it further reflected on their life, the respondents gave the answers that can be summarized below:

*At the time, I didn't consider dropping out of school to be such a bad thing. However, over time I learned that it was a big mistake. As I had problems with physical and psychological abuse, if I had finished school, maybe I wouldn't have suffered that abuse. Maybe I would have a job, earn my own money and take care of my children and myself. My financial and material needs would be taken care of.*

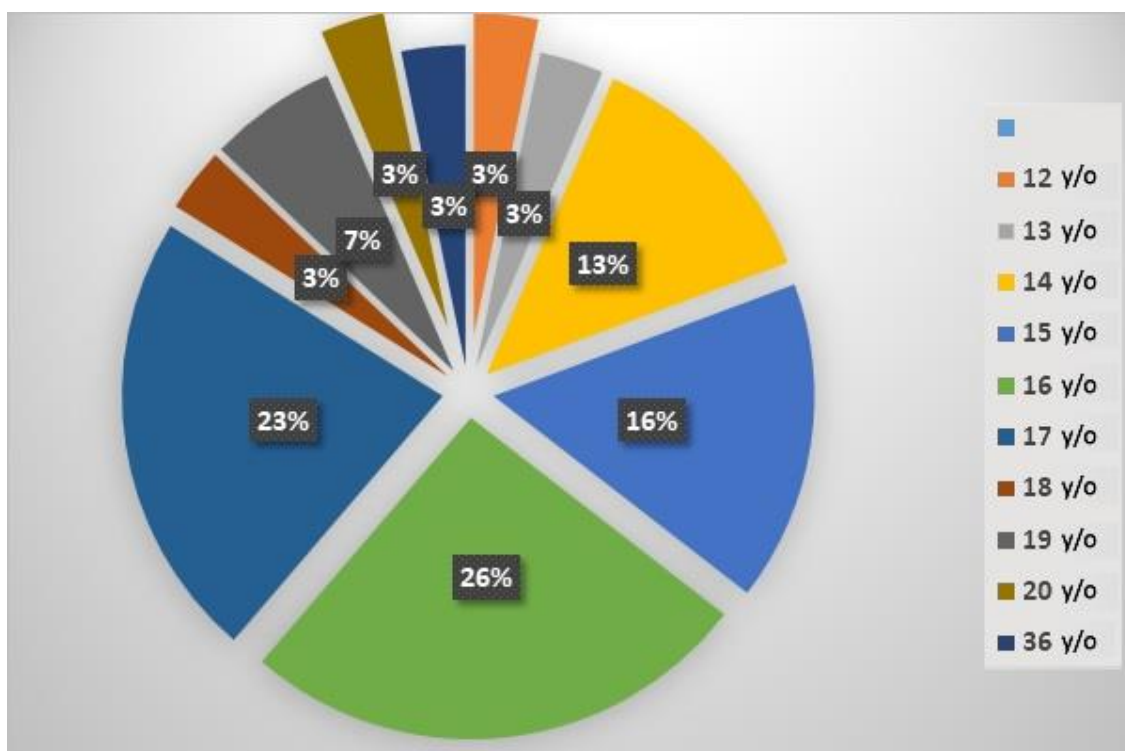
*It had a lot of impact on me. My education came to an end and so did my childhood. All of a sudden, I was becoming a woman. Later, I was not able to fill out the application for child allowance. I partly filled it out, but not entirely, because the questions were not clear to me. I have become stupid and I'm ashamed of it. When the child started school, only then did I understand what school meant. I couldn't help him because I needed someone to teach me first. I know how to read and write, I can do a little math, but I don't know how to solve math problems. It's embarrassing. They didn't teach us anything else in primary school. They let us, Roma, sit in the last bench and they tell us to just be calm and we will have a passing grade. What could I have learnt that way?*

*My life would probably be better in every sense. Back then, you could get a job anywhere you wanted, even with just primary school. I think that if I had stayed in school then, I probably wouldn't have even gotten married until the completion of primary school. My parents could have provided that much for me. I don't know. I'm sorry that I didn't go through it, that I didn't go on school trips. Later, I would feel embarrassed when I would run into my classmates and my teacher.*

## Pregnancy

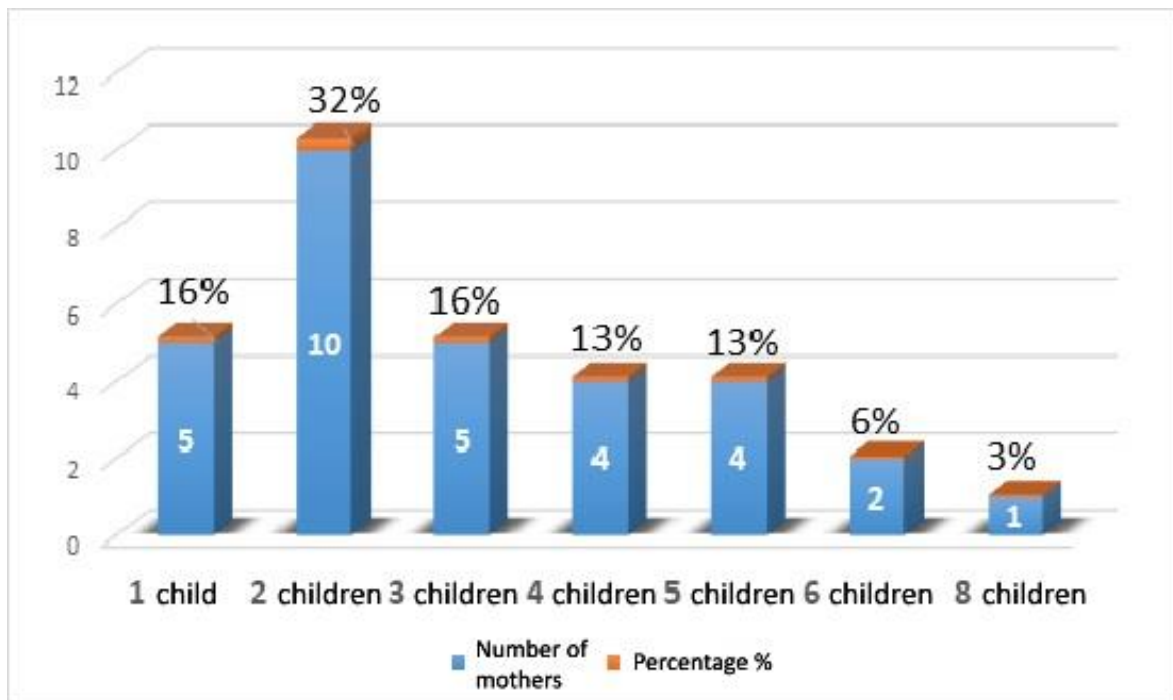
One of the important characteristics of child marriage is early pregnancy and childbirth. From the moment they arrive in a new family, they are expected to have a child, and only when they give birth do they occupy a more relevant position in the family. The highest percentage of births among respondents was at the age of 16 (26%), 17 (23%), 15 (16%), 14 (13%), 13 (3%), 12 (3%)... (Chart 5)

**Chart 5:** The age of the respondent at the time of the first childbirth



Many pregnancies are one of the significant phenomena of child marriage. What was observed during the interviews was that the respondents who had one child whom they gave birth to at an early age (13 - 16) were the ones who did not have more children, which could imply the consequence of early pregnancy and childbirth. Out of a total of 31 respondents, 5 gave birth to 1 child, 10 gave birth to 2 children, 5 gave birth to 3 children, 4 gave birth to 4 children, 4 gave birth to 5 children, 2 gave birth to 6 children and 1 gave birth to 8 children (Chart 6).

**Chart 6:** Number of children born per respondent



The following two examples vividly illustrate many pregnancies and births and the relationship between the community and the health care system, as well as their experience of early pregnancy.

1. The respondent entered into child marriage at the age of 13. She gave birth to five children. She had her first child at 14, and then at 16, 18, 21, and 25.

*I was very young. I didn't even know what a gynaecological examination was. I was embarrassed when I went for the first time. It was a very unpleasant experience. I gave birth to healthy children, but those were different times back then, now there are all kinds of diseases. It is better to give birth after the age of 18. Your body is different and you know more.*

*The doctor just said that it was very early for me to have children, but that it was fine since I was healthy. This is normal for you people. That was when I went to the doctor to give birth. I didn't go before that.*

2. The respondent got married at the age of 14. She gave birth to eight children. First at the age of 15 and the other seven when she was between 15 and 27 years old.

*I'm against early pregnancies. It's not healthy and you are inexperienced and ignorant. Early marriage took away my childhood and my education. The marriage has turned into violence and negative things just keep coming.*

*The doctor told me that child pregnancy is risky and not healthy for my body.*

The role of the partner's parents in pregnancy planning is also a common occurrence in child marriages, and this is illustrated by the following example where the respondent, who is now 24 years old, states:

*My in-laws wanted me to get pregnant right away, at the age of 12. They took me to a doctor and he was angry that we came to see him for that. When I got pregnant at 13, they brought him gifts. I saw that they brought him some wine and all kinds of things. In the end, nobody did anything, and I gave birth normally, in the hospital.*

*The doctor was mad that I got pregnant and told my mother-in-law that it was not good, but that was all.*

The respondents also emphasized, in addition to negative comments on early pregnancies, the importance of having a child when it comes to status in the family, because as they say:

*Pregnancy is important for preserving family relationships. Many things have changed after my first child was born.*

*My husband would often come home drunk from work and beat me. After my first child was born, many things have changed, as I gave birth to a male child.*

*My mother-in-law stopped mistreating me after I got pregnant.*

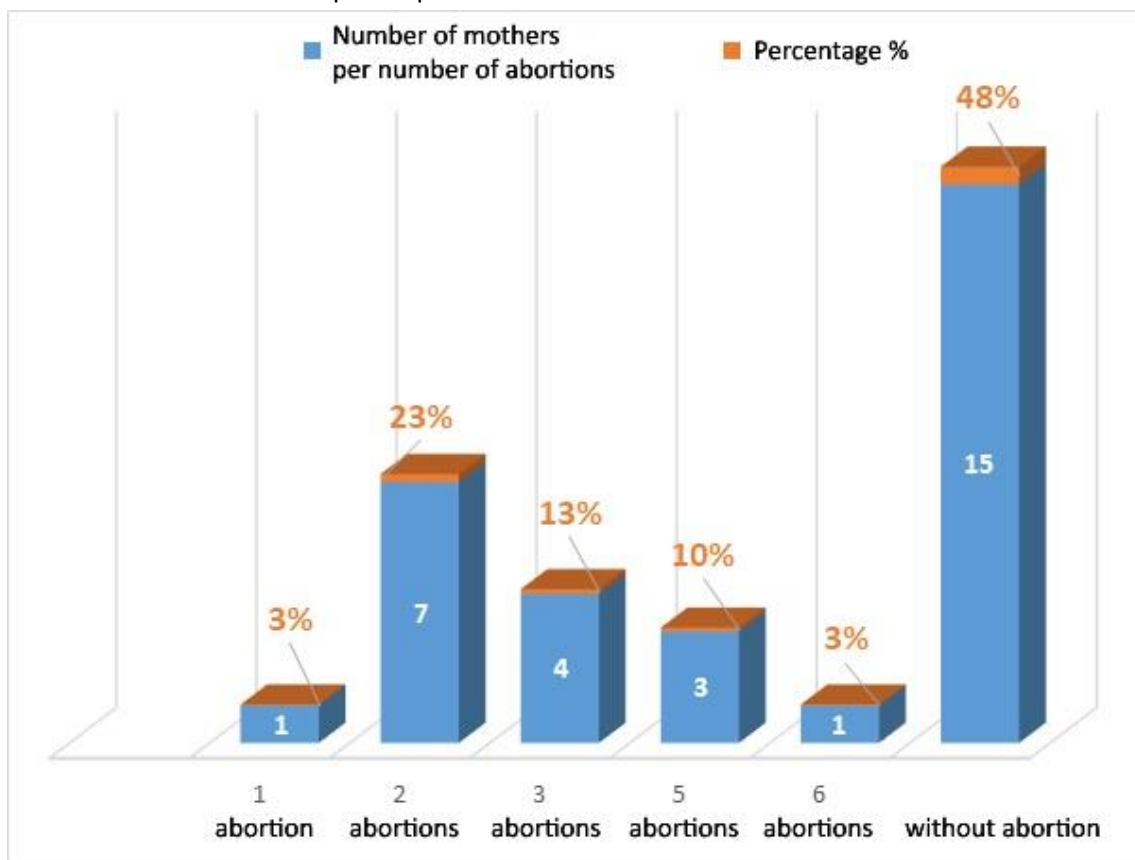
What should be especially emphasized is the complete absence of conversations about marriage and sexual relations, primarily with the mother but also with other relatives. The absence of conversation significantly affects the reproductive health of young women. The fact that our respondents had no knowledge about the sexual act itself tells us that they are not informed about how to protect their own health. Abortion is the only method of contraception (Chart 7).

*I didn't know anything about the first wedding night. I didn't know what was expected of me. Except that I had to go in the room with him while the others were sitting in an adjacent room. I felt ashamed. (The respondent was 14 years old at the time)*

*We couldn't do it because I didn't want to. Then two women, his aunts, came and stayed there until we succeeded. And we did eventually. (The respondent was 12 years old at the time)*

*It would have meant a lot to me if someone had talked to me and explained in a simple way what the first wedding night is, what is done and in what way. That once you get married, everything changes, and you are no longer a child. There is no more playing, housework awaits you. (The respondent was 15 years old at the time)*

**Chart 7.** Number of abortions per respondent



### **Experiences of gender-based violence**

Most of the respondents had experiences of domestic and intimate partner violence (in 22 cases), and in 17 cases they were victims of violence in the primary family. Violence was perpetrated by father, stepmother, brother, partner, father-in-law and mother-in-law. Depending on whether they suffered violence in the primary or secondary family, the abusers varied. (Table 1). New data confirm that surviving violence in childhood, including violence through exposure to domestic violence against the mother or other close family members, is a strong predictor of recurrence of this pattern in the secondary family. The correlation between girls' exposure to their mothers' abuse and the experience of mothers staying in the

family despite violence is especially significant, as it is a model that is later retained in their own partner relationships and passed on to new generations.

**Table 1:**

Violence in primary family	Number of cases	Who was the abuser in the primary family	Violence in marriage	Number of cases	Who was the abuser in the secondary family	When did it begin
YES	17	Father Brother Stepmother	YES	22	Partner Mother-In-Law Father-In-Law	Immediately after entering into marriage, in all cases of violence
NO	14		NO	9		

Most often, the violence started immediately after the respondents got married or started cohabiting with a partner.

*I lived in constant fear. He was jealous and he kept threatening me that I must not leave him. He was jealous and mentally abused me every day, calling me a whore and a bad mother, telling me I was stupid. I was too ashamed of what my family and my surroundings would think if I were to get a divorce.*

*The problems started after our first child was born. I didn't want to sleep with him, so I also suffered sexual abuse. I still suffer abuse from all my family members, but I don't report it. My husband has been beating me from the very start. My father-in-law ended up beating me, as well.*

*I also suffered violence from my early childhood. It continued after I got married, even though I escaped my father's beatings. My husband gave me a home, but the violence continued.*

### **Talking about violence / Reporting**

The majority of respondents who suffered gender-based violence (22) did not share their negative experiences with anyone, mostly due to feelings of shame, economic dependence and lack of support from the primary family, but also because of the desire to maintain the family unit, despite it being violent and dysfunctional.

The reasons for staying in a violent domestic environment can be summarized as follows:

*I didn't have where to go with my children, as I have many of them (8). Who would take me in? And I was also afraid of my husband. I was afraid he would hurt the children and me.*

*Because of the kids, so I would not separate them from one another and so some other woman would not abuse them. He loved the kids and they loved him. I didn't have with*

*what to support them or where to take them. And when he first kicked me out, he married the girl he was dating, but she didn't take care of my daughter and she left very quickly, so I came back. And it was always the same story.*

*I suffered all those years because of my children, when they were little. Now they are grown, and I am ashamed of what my son-in-law and daughter-in-law would think. Life goes on. My nerves are a wreck, I have a problem with my thyroid gland and my blood pressure. I am no longer healthy.*

*A woman should not suffer, but what can she do when she has children and does not have the support of her parents and is financially dependent? Everyone's priority is what people will say.*

*My family judged me for eloping with him (at 15 years old), so I had nowhere to go. I had to endure it.*

*They mostly stay and suffer. At least we Roma do. It's humiliating to go back to your parents. They will consider you a whore, and you don't have a job, a house, so where can you go with your children?*

*I had no one to turn to to help me, alone with a small child I had nowhere to go and no way to survive. My neighbours were very judgemental and they were all blaming me. Even I started to think that I was not a good wife for him, that I needed to do more around the house, work harder in general for him to be satisfied.*

**Observation of the interviewer for the previous case:**

*The respondent never even considered the possibility of reporting her abusive partner for violence.*

The reasons for not reporting the violence to the competent institutions were given by the respondents (Table 2).

**Table 2:**

<b>Reasons for non-reporting</b>	<b>Number of non-reporting by reasons</b>
Fear	8
Belief that it won't happen again	7
Distrust in institutions	4
Inability to live independently	6
Belief that they will harm the children	7
Something else	8

Experience with authorities that are competent to act on reports of violence:

*I reported him to the police, but the trial was taking long and I couldn't wait.*

*I reported him to the police, they arrested him, and he was in custody for 16 days until I dropped the charges.*

**Observation of the interviewer for the above case:**

*During the interview, traces of violence can be seen on the respondent and it is possible that she is still suffering violence.*

### **Positions on early marriage and the cult of virginity**

Insisting on honour in the Roma community, among other things, is insisting on prohibiting premarital sexual relations for girls in all Roma communities. Without a doubt, that is precisely one of the significant reasons for early marriage.

The attitudes of the respondents about early marriage and its connection with the cult of virginity are reflected in the following statements:

*The customs are something that follow all Roma girls - they are the worst, and no one asks you how you feel about them. No one talks to a girl about what awaits her and what marital duties are. What's important is that a girl does not fall in love and brings shame to her family. When it comes to Roma girls, it is very important that they are virgins, because that is how you know if she has brought shame to the family.*

*Adults are responsible for the early marriage of girls, they make the arrangements and bring the girls into their families. In many families, it is important that the girl is a virgin when she comes to them.*

*I think some girls get married early because they still think it's a tradition. And it doesn't matter what consequences it has and what they all go through, what they have to do. They think that's how it should be. And they suffer all kinds of things, they are mistreated in every way possible. Many of them are aware that there is another side, that is, the more beautiful side of life, called Freedom.*

*Some girls marry some rich men out of convenience. In the beginning, everything is fine and going according to their plan until later they realize that they made a mistake. Because life is short and they live it selfishly with the wrong person. They live, laugh, eat, drink, walk, but everything inside them is dead.*

*In my house, I had no one to talk to about the sadness I felt for my mother who had passed away. And that is why I left. Many girls leave because their parents are strict and do not let them see boys. They think that they can only be with him if they run away. Some other girls' parents marry them off and do not let them go to school so that they "don't get tainted", so they marry them off as early as possible. Among Roma, it is important that a girl is a virgin when she gets married. Especially in villages and smaller towns.*



## CASE STUDIES

### I Case Study

#### **Observations of the interviewer**

*This story was very difficult for me. The respondent spoke the entire time through tears as we sat and talked for two and a half hours. The hardest things for her were the death of her grandmother and the arrival of her stepmother. She remembers those moments very clearly. Badly missing her siblings. She recounted the first wedding night in detail. It was a very difficult story, going to the gynaecologist, getting stitches, giving birth, breastfeeding the baby, mental and physical violence by her husband. She had a very difficult life. She is diabetic, still on pills, has a thyroid disease. She is a strong woman, a real mother, she always tries to keep the household clean. I found it the most touching that she shared her life story with her children. She would often sit with them and tell them that they had to get an education, especially her daughter. Her 20-year-old daughter graduated from high school and her son is also a high school student. Her children are very well mannered and well behaved and they consider their mother a saint. Her daughter got a job, is working, and has no plans to get married.*

The respondent is 34 years old and entered into a child marriage at the age of 13. Her mother got married at 14. The primary family consisted of grandfather, grandmother, father, stepmother, brother and sister. She did not finish primary school. She completed first three grades of primary school. The partner with whom she entered into a child marriage was 19 years old and he had also not completed primary school. The family she arrived to had nine members and consisted of grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, two sisters, brother and her partner.

The decision for her to enter into a child marriage was made by her grandfather, and she cites the following as the reason for her marriage:

*Her mother was killed in a car accident, so her grandmother took over the care for the children. When she started the third grade, her grandmother suddenly fell ill. Soon, the grandmother was placed in a hospital, so she had to miss school to take care of her younger brothers and sister. She would work all day long, cook, do laundry, chop firewood on a stump, while father and grandfather worked from morning till night as day labourers. However, at night, when everything was finished, she would do the homework that her teacher sent to her through other pupils. She was a good student, among the best. When after a month the grandmother was discharged from the hospital, she was happy thinking that she would be able to return to school and that she would help the grandmother after school. Her grandfather told her that she had to miss school for a few more days to help her grandmother until she got a little stronger. Instead of grandma getting better, she was getting worse day by day. She couldn't do anything around the house, she couldn't even prepare lunch. After about fifteen days, grandma got seriously ill, she remembers that an*

*ambulance came and the doctor told grandpa that grandma won't be around much longer since she had cancer.*

*She spent that entire evening in tears. Grandpa came to her room and said he had to take her out of school because grandma was very sick. Therefore, she never went back to school. Grandma was immobile for almost a year, and she no longer had the strength to perform everyday tasks. One evening, dad brought in a new wife, and I was relieved to think that I was going to go back to school and my interrupted childhood. To make matters even worse, the stepmother was an alcoholic, who drank from early in the morning. The misery was even greater. The stepmother abused her and her siblings, while the grandmother cried helplessly, but they didn't say anything to the father so he wouldn't get angry. Grandma passed away after a few months. Another loss. The day before her thirteenth birthday, her grandfather came home drunk and told her that the next day he would have guests come to her birthday party, so she needed to clean the house well. On her thirteenth birthday, the suitors with whom her grandfather had already arranged her marriage came to their house. Grandfather cried and said that it would be better for her. She did not suspect that they would take her away that very evening. Right after lunch, they took her away and she was not even aware of what was happening to her. The first wedding night was the hardest. She was left with major traumas, because in the morning she had to go to the gynaecologist to get stitches. She didn't even get to know her husband well because he was working all day. She missed her siblings terribly, but she had support from her mother-in-law, who was a wonderful woman.*

Due to her grandmother's illness, she had to leave school because there was no one to take care of her sick grandmother, brothers and sister. Her grandfather made the decision. Nobody from her school reacted. She is aware of how much it would mean to her if she finished school and says:

*Leaving school has made me a housewife from an early age, while I was a good student. If I were lucky, if I had a healthy family, now I would be a real lady, I would have my own job, I would not depend on anyone. Because a woman who doesn't have her own money is nobody and nothing but a servant.*

She gave birth for the first time at the age of 14, and she had another child at the age of 16. The husband decided on the pregnancies. During the period of childbearing, she did not have the support of her husband. As she states:

*When I had my first child (a daughter), my husband would come home drunk every night, he did not want to accept the child since it was a girl. Day by day, it got worse, he would come home drunk, insult me, and after a few months he started abusing me physically. I kept quiet, I never complained to my grandfather because I didn't want my daughter to grow up without a mother but with a father who didn't want her. The situation got a bit better*

*when I gave birth to our second child, a son he wanted so much, but even then, he would find a reason to drink. He would spend everything he earned on alcohol.*

She had five abortions between the ages of 17 and 29. Nobody from the health care system reacted when she showed up pregnant and underage and no health care worker told her about the harmfulness of early pregnancies to health and the potential risks for the baby, nor about the harm to health due to frequent abortions.

She suffered violence both in her primary family and later in her partner's family. As she states:

*He abused me emotionally, physically and sexually. He stopped a few years ago, when my son grew up.*

She has never reported violence, nor would she ever report it. She believes that this would make the situation worse. She does not trust institutions and does not want to humiliate her children. As she states:

*She never even thought of reporting him. She has nowhere to go with the children, and she believes that her husband would not allow her to leave with the children and he would kill her. She lives with him only because of the children and hopes that she will be happy with them.*

As reasons for staying in a violent marital union, she states:

*I didn't have the support of my closest relatives, there was poverty in the family I left, but the biggest reason is that I didn't want my children to grow up without parents, especially to live with a stepmother. My husband is currently being treated for alcoholism and my mother-in-law is very ill, but I hope that my husband will change.*

She believes that no woman should let someone mistreat her, but as she says:

*But when a woman has nowhere to go, she has to suffer and keep quiet. It is different when a woman has her own job, when she is independent. She should not suffer violence under any circumstances.*

Asked how she would evaluate her decision to get married today - did she make a positive or negative decision and why?

She answered:

*Early marriage takes away your right to life. You skip the best period of your life, which is childhood. During childhood, your personality is formed, you enjoy playing, and the only thing you have to worry about is school.*

*Early marriage leaves psychological and physical consequences and makes a woman permanently handicapped.*

Asked what kind of support she would have appreciated and from whom when she found herself in a situation of early child forced marriage

She answered:

*If the grandmother had been alive, she is sure that the early marriage would not have happened, she would have finished school and her life would have taken a different direction. Since her grandmother was however not alive, the support of her father, which unfortunately she did not have, would have meant a lot to her.*

Asked for her opinion on why girls get married early and whether it has anything to do with the cult of virginity or not, she has the following point of view:

*That it's mostly the girls from poor families and the daughters of divorced parents that get married early, thinking that if they get married they will have everything. Most of them marry abroad, and the girls in a foreign country suffer the most violence. There are exceptions where girls voluntarily leave their parents' homes. There are cases where parents do not allow their children to marry so early, but now the institutions react somewhat differently, they return them to their parents but the girls run away again at the first opportunity.*

*In the past, it was very important that the girl does not bring shame to her parents and to a family she joins. Today's youth has changed that, but it is still happening in some cases.*

## II Case Study:

### **Observations of the interviewer**

*The respondent is a young woman who experienced physical and emotional abuse from early childhood. The abuse continued even after entering into marriage. She entered into early child marriage at the age of 15, of her own free will, wanting to escape from poverty and abuse by her father. She found a young man who provided her with a home, but the violence continued. Her mother-in-law and her husband often beat her, they told her that she was a whore like her mother who left her father, while she left him to save her life. She says that now she doesn't get beaten, but sometimes she gets into an argument with her husband, and her mother-in-law is old and she can't do her any harm any more. However, she must look after her, take care of her and serve her. A positive side of this story is that she is aware of the bad effect early marriage has on young girls. She speaks openly about it and sends a clear message to the people around her.*

The respondent is 30 years old and entered into a child marriage at the age of 15. Her mother got married at 12. The primary family consisted of mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle, brother, two sisters and her. She finished primary school. The partner with whom she entered into a child marriage was 15 years old and he has also completed primary school. The family she arrived to had five members and consisted of mother, father, brother, sister and him.

The decision to enter into a child marriage was made by her and her partner and she cites the following as the reason for her marriage:

*We met at some kind of celebration. We saw each other at birthdays, weddings, once we went to Kalemegdan together.*

*The abuse by my stepmother was the trigger for me to decide to run away with my current husband, who proposed to me on some birthday party. I was only thinking about how to get away and escape from my father and stepmother. I got married thinking that I escaped from the agony that I had been experiencing for years.*

She left school in the eighth grade, at the end of the first semester. Because, as she says:

*We didn't have time to wait until I finished the eighth grade. I was in a rush to just get away from my father and stepmother, and he was in a rush because he fell in love with me. He told me that I would finish the eighth grade after supplemental exams, like him, and that's how it was.*

No one from the system reacted to her dropping out of primary school, even though, as she says:

*Dad let them know that I got married and that was it. I finished primary school, eighth grade, after taking supplemental exams, because I got married after the first semester.*

She is aware of the importance of education and says:

*My education came to an end and so did my childhood. All of a sudden, I was becoming a woman. Later, I was not able to fill out the application for child allowance. I partly filled it out, but not entirely, because the questions were not clear to me. I have become stupid and I'm ashamed of it. When the child started school, only then did I understand what school meant. I couldn't help him because I needed someone to teach me first. I know how to read and write, I can do a little math, but I don't know how to solve math problems. It's embarrassing. They didn't teach us anything else in primary school. They let us, Roma, sit in the last bench and they tell us to just be calm and we will have a passing grade. What could I have learnt that way?*

She gave birth for the first time at the age of 16, and then at the age of 17, 21 and 26, respectively. Her opinion on early pregnancies:

*They are bad because the woman is young and still developing. If the mother is not sufficiently developed, the baby or the mother herself can get sick. It's also bad because you*

*don't know how to do anything when it comes to the baby, so your mother-in-law literally takes your child away from you, like mine did. She couldn't do that with my other children. I didn't let her, as I was a bit more mature and managed to raise them myself as best I could.*

She had three abortions when she was 20, 23 and 27 years old. Nobody from the health care system reacted when she showed up pregnant and underage and no health care worker told her about the harmfulness of early pregnancies to health and the potential risks for the baby, nor about the harm to health due to frequent abortions.

She suffered violence both in her primary family and later in her partner's family:

*In addition to the daily struggle with poverty, I was exposed to beatings together with my mother and sisters. On one occasion, my father locked me in a shed, shaved my head and eyebrows and kept me locked up all night. I was 13. The reason for that was that I cursed at him and pushed him away while he was beating his mother. Very soon after that, my mother left us and moved to Germany. I stayed to take care of my sisters, but my father soon got remarried and brought into the family our stepmother who also beat and mistreated us. The abuse by my stepmother was the trigger for me to decide to elope with my current husband, who proposed to me at a birthday party. Thinking only about how to get away and escape from my father and stepmother, I got married believing that I had escaped from the agony that I had been experiencing for years. However, the violence continued, this time by the mother-in-law and the husband. It started immediately after marriage and has been going on for 15 years.*

She did not report the violence because:

*I don't think anyone would help me and I have nowhere to go with my children. He would beat me even more after that. I was afraid, and I am not able to live independently with the children.*

She stayed in a violent marital union because of:

*We stay and we suffer. At least we Roma do. It's humiliating to go back to your parents. They will consider you a whore, and you don't have a job, a house, so where can you go with your children?*

Asked what kind of support she would have appreciated and from whom when she found herself in a situation of early child forced marriage

She answered

*If I had my mother's support, if she had taken me with her to Germany, we would have a peaceful life and I would have learnt some trade there. I would never have married or I would do it only later. I'm not angry with my mother, as she had nowhere to take me. It's good that she saved herself, my father might have killed her. I hear that he also beats my*

*stepmother. If only I had somewhere else to go to live, I wouldn't have gotten married. I was a child who needed a safe home and peace.*

*Children should grow up and play, not give birth to children, have sexual relations. It's terrible and traumatic, it's absolutely not for a young girl. Cooking, cleaning the house, washing clothes outside in the winter is too much for a 14 - 15 year old child. Beatings are also a regular occurrence. That's what early marriage brings you. God forbid.*

Asked for her opinion on why girls get married early and whether it has anything to do with the cult of virginity or not, she has the following point of view:

*It's how it is since old times. Other girls go to school, and we Roma women get married so as not to lose our virginity and bring shame upon our family. That is the only reason. If I hadn't run away with my husband, my dad would have found someone for me and married me off so I wouldn't bring shame upon him.*

*Virginity is very important. That is why our girls get married early. The family is humiliated if she loses her virginity before marriage.*

Asked how she would evaluate her decision to get married today - did she make a positive or negative decision and why?

*Negative. In addition to beatings and psychological torture, you have to clean, cook and serve. Your school and childhood are interrupted, you become the mother of a child whom you are not allowed to take care of because you are young and do not know anything, your mother-in-law takes away your child.*

### III Case Study:

#### Observations of the interviewer

*The respondent was fully comfortable confiding in me, since we have already had workshops where mothers talked about their lives and they always told us that it is easier for them when they tell someone how it was for them when they know that we will not pass it on to some institutions, that we will not endanger their lives nor their family. We had to interrupt the interview several times because members of her household kept interfering. She spoke for about two hours. She wasn't afraid, but when she couldn't say something or had a lump in her throat while speaking, I tried to help her loosen up, insert a joke or two to make the situation more relaxed.*

The respondent is 38 years old and entered into a child marriage at the age of 14. Her mother got married at 15. The primary family consisted of grandmother, mother, father, three sisters. She did not finish primary school. She completed the first grade of primary school. The partner with whom she entered into a child marriage was 16 years old and he had also not completed primary school. The family she arrived to had ten members and consisted of father-in-law, mother-in-law, 4 brothers-in-law, 2 sisters-in-law, grandmother and husband.

The decision for her to enter into a child marriage was made by her parents, and she describes how it all took place:

*When I was 12, my parents discussed with my grandmother that I should get married. During those two years, while they were going to the markets in different cities, they were looking for a husband for me. On the day I turned 14, instead of celebrating my birthday, they found some people and invited them to our house. Those people arrived in two cars. While they were making arrangements, my parents called me at one point and said: this is your future husband, you should marry him, he is a good person. One of these people paid my parents money and some gold jewellery for me. After that, my mother packed me a bag of clothes and I went with them. I was very sad that day – it was my birthday, and I was going to people I did not even know. My mother told me not to worry and that she would come and pay me a visit. I took it very hard. My mother only came to visit after a few months.*

She only completed the first grade of primary school and as she states:

*I did not attend school except for the first grade of primary school. I remember that my mother said that it was a dangerous environment and that someone might spoil me and that it was important to honour my religious beliefs and preserve my fertility. While everyone went to school, I stayed at home looking after my siblings and taking care of them. I only know how to write my name and I don't know how to read and write. It's hard that today I don't know how to write and I don't know how to help my children with their education. I have no job opportunities and if there is education for adults, my husband did not allow me to go to that school because of other men. My children go to school now until eighth grade and they know how to read and write.*

The school reacted to her not coming to school, but as she states, this did not lead to her returning to school:

*The school once sent the Centre for Social Work over, so I stayed with my aunt for a while, then I returned to my parents, and after that, no one came to ask why I wasn't going to school.*

She gave birth for the first time at the age of 14, and she had another six children between the ages of 17 and 27. The husband decided on the pregnancies. During the period of childbearing, she did not have the support of her husband. She had five abortions between the ages of 16 and 36. Nobody from the health care system reacted when she showed up pregnant and underage and no health care worker told her about the harmfulness of early pregnancies to health and the potential risks for the baby, nor about the harm to health due to frequent abortions.

Her opinion on early pregnancy:

*I do not agree that a woman should give birth early, but she should not give birth late in life either. I now have a gynaecological condition because of it. A woman needs to use*



*protection without her husband knowing so that she does not give birth to so many children because her health cannot be restored afterwards.*

She suffered violence both in her primary family and later in her partner's family. As she states:

*I've been held back from saying how I feel because I have no time for myself and I have no rights, my husband and children come first. I don't have the right to spend money as I see fit because they say I'm ignorant and illiterate. I've never bought any clothes for myself, it was always somebody else's hand-me-downs. The violence was happening until I became a mother-in-law, which was five years ago.*

She has never reported violence, nor would she ever report it. She believes that this would make the situation worse. She does not trust institutions because she does not feel protected. As reasons for staying in a violent marital union, she cites: distrust in institutions, inability to live independently, belief that it would harm her children. As she states:

*It is not that terrible that she had no rights as long as her children are not suffering now. A woman should not let anyone beat her, but when she has nowhere to go, she feels that she has to stay there. In another country, she says, it is different - women have a house for their children and themselves, and if she had stayed there, she might have had reported it.*

She illustrated her position on early marriage as follows:

*No one needs to get married early, but somewhere around the age of 20, so that they finish school and become mature and good people.*

*Our parents don't always have bad intentions and sometimes we should listen to them. But we should also go to school, become women who have jobs, who work and listen to their husbands.*

*I had a mother-in-law who mistreated me a lot. She asked me to do everything around the house for all the members of the household, prepare food, wash clothes, clean after everyone, and when my father-in-law would come everything had to be neat and tidy. I had to serve and obey my husband and all the family members. I had never seen a man before and then for the first time I ended up in bed with a man I did not know. I had to obey my parents. I had six children with him. I went with him to seek asylum in Germany, we would go together to markets to sell stuff, and when he was away, I had to cope with looking after our children and all other family members.*

Asked what kind of support she would have appreciated and from whom when she found herself in a situation of early child forced marriage

She answered:

*A house, money for her and the children from the state and parents. If her mother had agreed to take her back, she would have returned to her parents.*

Asked for her opinion on why girls get married early and whether it has anything to do with the cult of virginity or not, she has the following point of view:

*They should not get married when they are children but when they finish school it is time to get married. A girl should preserve her integrity and virginity, and if she wants to go to school and get a job, she can do all that, but she should preserve her virginity before marriage.*

*Virginity has to do with early marriage, she believes it is mandatory. A girl should be a real maiden when she enters into a marriage.*

***The previous three case studies vividly described the social and societal environment in which girls entered into child marriage. Starting from the family environment they left, to the secondary family they came to and the reaction of competent institutions in the life events that resulted from child marriage.***

#### **IV Case Study**

##### **Affirmative example**

There are good practice examples of girls leaving child marriage and empowering themselves for further life, although as confirmed by the examined sample, these examples are few. For this reason, through a case study, the following life story of one of the respondents is presented.

##### **Observations of the interviewer:**

*With this example, I wanted to show how one mistake does not have to destroy one's whole life. When there is support from the family all mistakes can be overcome and then the environment, the other people's attitudes, gossips and non-acceptance do not matter. Everyone agreed on this woman's second husband, including her - so that her and her parents would not make the same mistake again. Her parents intentionally introduced her to her second husband and left it up to them to decide: if love happens, it happened, and if not, then nothing. Why did the parents get involved? After that early marriage, when she was a student, she met a young man: a drunkard, layabout, prone to fights, and again it was a wrong choice. Maybe due to inexperience, when she was a high school student she did not have any fun, she didn't go out. The young man she married was cultured, graduated from high school, an only child in a good financial situation. They tried to open a company together, in Serbia, but failed. He made a decision, sold the family house, and they went abroad and worked hard together while raising their two sons. Epilogue: One son graduated abroad as a SAP Consultant, the other finished a trade school. Now they are a happy family, successful and respected.*

The respondent is 50 years old and has a degree from the Faculty of Philology. At the age of 15, she entered into a child marriage even though her mother got married at the age of 19. Her primary family consisted of her father, mother, brother and sister. The partner with

whom she entered into a child marriage was 19 years old and was a car mechanic, with a high school diploma.

She herself made the decision to enter into a child marriage and she cites the following reason:

*I started the first grade of high school. I didn't settle into school and at the end of the first semester I failed all my classes except for music and physical education. I couldn't go home. How could I tell my dad? Dad was abroad for work and mom came back home with kids with the intention of opening their own business and returning from abroad. They already had a company that was located in the yard of their house and where my uncle worked. My future husband worked for my uncle in that house, and it's where we met and started dating. I fell in love.*

*When she realized that her parents would find out about her school failure, she thought that the best solution was to marry the young man she was dating. I just called my boyfriend and said: I can't go home, I have to run away from home and I want to get married. So she just went from school to his house in the village and got married.*

By deciding to get married, she automatically stopped going to school, because that is why she got married in the first place. No one from the system reacted to her dropping out of school. As she states:

*That marriage didn't last long enough for the institutions to find out about it. The school did not react, so neither did the other institutions. After a couple of months, she returned and already in September started going to high school again.*

*She spent about six months in that marriage, unaccustomed to household duties, life in the village, she missed her friends, mom, dad, brother and sister, and even school. She had realized her mistake and was just waiting for her parents to approve her return. From a well-to-do family, she came to a family that barely made ends meet, and at the same time, she encountered an environment that did not accept her at all due to the prejudices that she married into a non-Roma family. There was no violence in the marriage and they treated her with respect. She tried to adapt to the new situation, her parents started contacting her, but the people in the village did not accept having a Roma woman in the neighbourhood - for God's sake how could that have happened that someone has married such a person? She did not become pregnant in that marriage.*

*After a couple of months, she returned to her parents and already in September started going to high school again.*

*She finished the same high school she dropped out of. She graduated from the Faculty of Philology, but got married in the third year of college. She graduated from the Faculty when her older son started primary school.*

Asked how she would evaluate her decision to get married today - did she make a positive or negative decision and why?

*Negative. Her opinion is that solving the problem in this way was not good because it had created an even bigger problem. I should have talked to my parents to tell them that I didn't manage in my new surroundings and to ask for help, but I found the wrong solution.*

*She believes that it is her own fault that she did not ask for the support of her parents even though she had the support of both of them. Sometimes you should talk to your parents and not keep silent about it. It would all be different if she did not hide her problem.*

*Now, as a sensible and successful woman, she is against early marriages and early pregnancies, aware of how much pregnancy affects a woman's health, and tries very hard to explain to girls in her surroundings the importance of physical maturity.*

Asked for her opinion on why girls get married early and whether it has anything to do with the cult of virginity or not, she has the following point of view:

*I think that girls mostly get married because of poverty, because of taboo topics that are not discussed in the family, because of the insufficient level of awareness of parents who think less about the happiness of their child, whether it is a boy or a girl, and more about reducing the poverty of the family. I think that parents should talk more with their children, that they should be open, that their children should consider them someone to whom they can tell anything. I do it now with my sons, we talk openly about everything, so that they don't experience what I did.*

*Virginity is important depending on the area, whether it is urban or rural, and that is increasingly changing in favour of not acknowledging the cult of virginity. It is also very important which group is in question. Generations of young, educated people are not concerned with the cult of virginity, they have fun, do as they please and get married when they want and with whom they want. The trend is the ever-increasing educational status of our youth, which also raises awareness about the harmfulness of early and arranged marriage.*

*The respondent comes from a family where everyone works. Her mother worked abroad when they were little and when they returned to their home country they opened the company in the mother's name, so it is normal that she also works to have her own money and not depend on anyone.*

***The presented case study just showed us how important the support of the primary family is if a female child wants to leave her partner.***

***The support of her parents and her wish to finish school and go forward were the key factors in her further unhindered life journey.***