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Statistical and ethnographic data on child marriage in the Roma population in Serbia

Note by UNICEF*

Abstract

In Serbia, child marriage is rare within the general population and, according to statistical data from UNICEF's MICS surveys, concentrated mostly among poorer families in rural areas and girls with lower levels of education. However it is very common in Roma settlements – segregated communities predominantly or exclusively occupied by the ethnic Roma population – where more than half of girls are married before the age of 18. Child marriage fuels underage pregnancy among Roma girls. Almost 40% of girls from Roma settlements give birth before the age of 18, and 5% do so before the age of 15 – far higher than the proportion of underage girls in the general population.

On the other hand, qualitative ethnographic research undertaken in 2017 in Roma settlements at 5 locations across Serbia highlights poverty, social exclusion and gender inequalities as key factors underlying child marriage. However it also shows that the practices and circumstances in which they occur vary considerably from community to community and also offers insight into the interplay of these factors at individual, family and community level.

This paper presents some of the challenges of designing tailored interventions that adequately respond to the specific factors, local dynamics and structural causes of child marriage, and calls for closer cohesion between quantitative and qualitative data collectors in order to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

*Prepared by Ms. Ana Prodanović (UNICEF), Mr. Ivan Đorđević PhD (Institute of Ethnography, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts) and Ms. Ljiljana Gavrilović PhD (Institute of Ethnography, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts) Correspondence: aprodanovic@unicef.org)
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I.   Background

A.   Rationale

1.   Child marriage – marriage under the age of 18 – has garnered increasing global attention in the last decade in recognition of the devastating consequences it has on girls and the scale of the problem, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. An estimated 14.2 million girls worldwide marry before the age of 18 each year. Over 700 million women alive today were child brides.

2.   Child marriage is a fundamental violation of a child's human rights. It has devastating consequences for girls, disempowering them within their communities and in their own homes, harming their health and psychological wellbeing through early sexual activity and pregnancy, introducing risks of sexually transmitted diseases and maternal mortality, excluding them from education, and denying them the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Concerns further extend to the limitations for girls' career and vocational advancement, as well as risks of intimate partner violence, abuse and exploitation. The persistence of the harmful practice of child marriage holds back girls, women and the communities they live in, and is itself a key factor in many places in intergenerational cycles of poverty. Child marriage also affects boys, but to a lesser degree than girls.

3.   Recognising the need for global action, in 2013 the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution to strengthen efforts to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage. This was followed up in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in 2015, which set out the goal of ending child, early and forced marriage globally by 2030. The issue of child marriage is addressed in a number of other international resolutions, conventions and agreements.

4.   As part of this global effort to end child marriage, UNICEF engages with governments, civil society organisations and communities to bring an end to harmful traditional child marriage practices. In order to design and target its field interventions, UNICEF relies on empirical evidence. While the availability of reliable statistical data is crucial, this type of evidence does not always allow for clear strategic conclusions when designing specific programmes and policies. In addressing child marriage in Serbia, complementing statistical figures with qualitative research has been a useful way to overcome the limitations of quantitative data.

B.   The emergence of data on child marriage in Serbia

5.   Until recently, child marriage in Serbia was not receiving much attention on the social policy agenda. With the exception of a few civil society organizations' research and reports, no reliable data could be found in literature on the prevalence of child marriage. Unsurprisingly, very few interventions had been implemented, and almost all of them were undertaken by civil society organizations. The implemented interventions were largely limited to recognizing the problem, which constitutes the very first step in addressing this harmful practice. In light of that, UNICEF's situational analysis on child marriage (2016)[1] concludes that effective practices for combating child marriage, particularly in the Roma population, have yet to be created and implemented in Serbia. UNICEF subsequently embarked on a process of designing a programme towards ending child marriage.

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[1] UNICEF, Child Marriage in Serbia – an analytical report, 2016

6. With data that was made available by UNICEF through the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) in 2014[2], a clear picture on the prevalence of child marriage in Serbia had emerged. It became obvious that child marriage was somewhat of a concern in the general population (with a prevalence rate of below 7% among girls), but was showing particularly worrying scope in the Roma[3] population (with a 57% prevalence rate among girls). However when faced with the challenge of designing a policy and programme intervention that would specifically target Roma girls, this data did not suffice.

7. It became clear that for meaningful and effective inter-sectoral cooperation and creating successful programme interventions on this issue, it was necessary to better understand the different social, cultural and economic determinants that perpetuate child marriage in Roma communities. Hence UNICEF undertook additional ethnographic research to be able to design tailor-made interventions that target the specific risk factors and consequences of child marriage and build on existing resources in a given community.

C. Purpose

8. The purpose of this paper is to present some of the differences between data on child marriage in Serbia produced by three different datasets: a large-scale statistical population-based household survey (MICS), secondary analysis of statistical survey data and empirical qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with respondents. It highlights the strengths and limitations of different types of data collection and analysis for developing programme interventions to address child marriage.

II. Methods

9. In order to understand the value of different types of data for formulating policy and programme interventions on child marriage, we compare three datasets: nationally representative MICS survey data for Serbia from 2005, 2010 and 2014 (with data available separately for the general population and the population living in Roma settlements), a secondary (bi-variate and multivariate) statistical analysis of MICS 2010 survey data aiming to understand child marriage risk factors in the general and the Roma population, and qualitative ethnographic research undertaken with 70 respondents from Roma communities at 5 localities across Serbia in 2017.

10. For the purpose of this analysis, we focus on the inter-relationship between two data variables: child marriage and enrolment in education.

A. Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)

11. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) is an international research programme developed by UNICEF, in collaboration with other UN agencies, and is carried out every five years in more than 100 countries around the world in order to ensure international comparability, continuity of research and time series data. Some of the most important indicators which are calculated from data collected

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[2] Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, UNICEF, Serbia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2014 and Serbia Roma Settlements Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2014

[3] Roma are an ethnic minority in Serbia (with a population of 147,604 according to the 2011 census) and in other parts of the region. Roma are widely socially marginalized and subject to stereotyping and discrimination based on their ethnicity, their physical features, and their low socio-economic status.

in this study are indicators about the conditions in which children grow and develop, malnutrition and obesity and the final aim to preserve and promote the health, growth and development of children.

12. In Serbia, MICS has been conducted in 1996, 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2014. The 3 latest rounds of MICS offer data on child marriage. From 2005 onwards, alongside a nationally representative sample, a MICS survey of Roma settlements has also been conducted to assess the wellbeing of Roma women and children, as it was known that the demographic situation is significantly different in Roma settlements, when compared to the general population.

B. Secondary (bi-variate and multivariate) analysis of MICS data

13. A recent study based on secondary analysis of MICS data4 aimed to assess the risk factors associated with the practice of child marriage among females living in Roma settlements in Serbia and among the general population, and to explore the inter-relationship between child marriage and school enrolment decisions.

14. The study was based on data from the nationally representative MICS household survey in Serbia conducted in 2010 – and a separate survey of households living in Roma settlements in the same year. For each of them, the study estimates a bivariate probit model of risk factors associated with being currently married and currently enrolled in school based on girls 15 to 17 years of age.

C. Ethnographic research based on semi-structured in-depth interviews

15. Ethnographic research conducted by UNICEF's partners (Roma Women's Centre - Bibija and Institute of Ethnography of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts) in Roma communities in 2017 and aimed to understand the intricate framework of marital decision-making in localised contexts.

16. The research5 took place at 5 localities across Serbia and explored the influence of different social, cultural and economic factors on child marriage among the Roma population in Serbia. This included the internal logic of loss and gain as understood by the Roma community itself, and particularly how this logic is interpreted and assimilated by different groups within the Roma community.

17. It was based on a grounded theory and multi-sited ethnographic approach and included 70 respondents. The research relied on semi-structured in-depth interviews for narrative accounts of lived experience.

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[4] Hotchkiss, D. R., Godha, D., Gage, A. J., & Cappa, C. (2016). Risk factors associated with the practice of child marriage among Roma girls in Serbia. *BMC International Health and Human Rights, 16*, 6. http://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-016-0081-3

[5] To be published in November 2017 and made available at https://www.unicef.org/serbia/knowledge_centre.html

III.   Findings

A.   Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data

18. MICS data for Serbia from 2014 reveals that among women age 20-49 years, 7 percent were married before the age of 18 and there is a difference between urban and other areas (5 percent in urban and 10 percent in rural areas - see Graph 1). A difference is also notable regarding the education of women, with 35 percent of those with primary education and less than one percent with higher education married before the age of 18.

Graph 1: Child marriage in Serbia (2014)
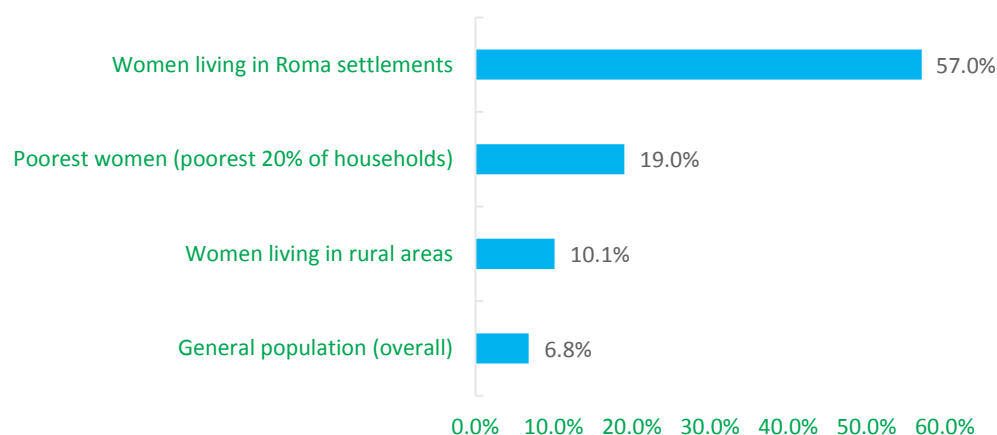
Graph 1 source: Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, Serbia (2014)

19. For Roma settlements, the data reveals 43 percent of young women aged 15-19 years are currently married or in union. Seventeen percent of women aged 15-49 were married before age 15. The percentage of women age 15-49 who married before age 15 is much higher among women with no education (26 percent) compared to women who have secondary or higher education (4 percent). 57 percent of women age 20-49 were married before the age of 18 years with a similar pattern of disparity by education level.

20. A comparison of MICS data on women married before age 18 over time shows that the prevalence of child marriage in the general population is declining, while in Roma settlements it is growing (see Graph 2).

Graph 2: Child marriage in Serbia (2005, 2010, 2014)

Women married before age 18
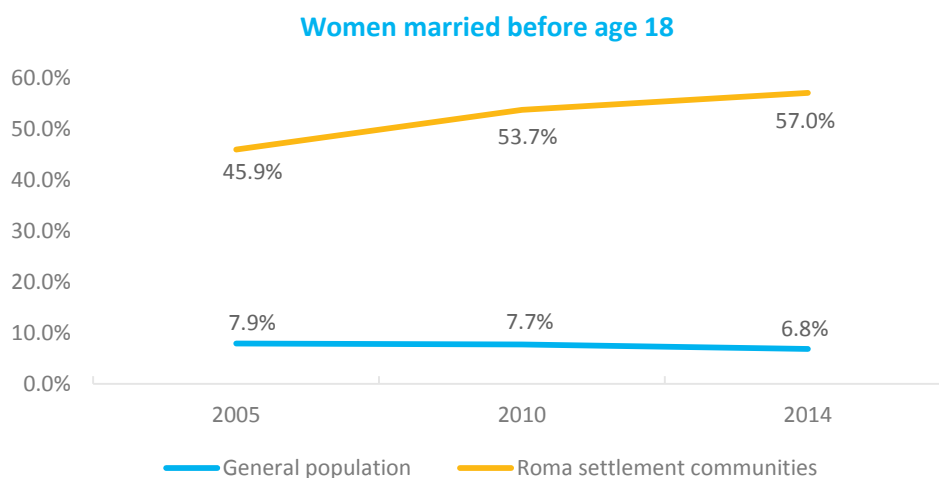
21. While the MICS survey data point to a clear need to address child marriage, it was not possible to draw conclusions about specific risk factors that need to be addressed. The next dataset attempted to shed more light on this.

B. Secondary analysis of MICS 2010 data

22. The secondary analysis of MICS data takes effort to explore in more detail the interdependence of child marriage and school enrolment, relying on a conceptual framework consisting of country-, community-, household-, and individual-level factors that are assumed to play crucial roles in determining whether households decide to marry off their daughters prior to the legal age of marriage.

23. For the nationally representative sample, the results provide some support for the hypothesis that decisions about girls' current school attendance and child marriage are interdependent. In other words, it points to the likelihood of common unobserved factors influencing decisions about girls' current school attendance and child marriage.

24. For the sample of females living in Roma settlements, there was only weak evidence of the influence of common unobserved factors on both outcomes. However, the authors conclude that trade-offs are being made between marriage and schooling in both groups, significantly more so among the general population, and that, in the Serbian context, it is not appropriate to disregard the possibility that school decisions are influenced by the timing of marriage. (See Graph 3)

Graph 3: Percent of women living in Roma settlements age 20-24 first married before ages 15 and 18, by educational attainment (2010)
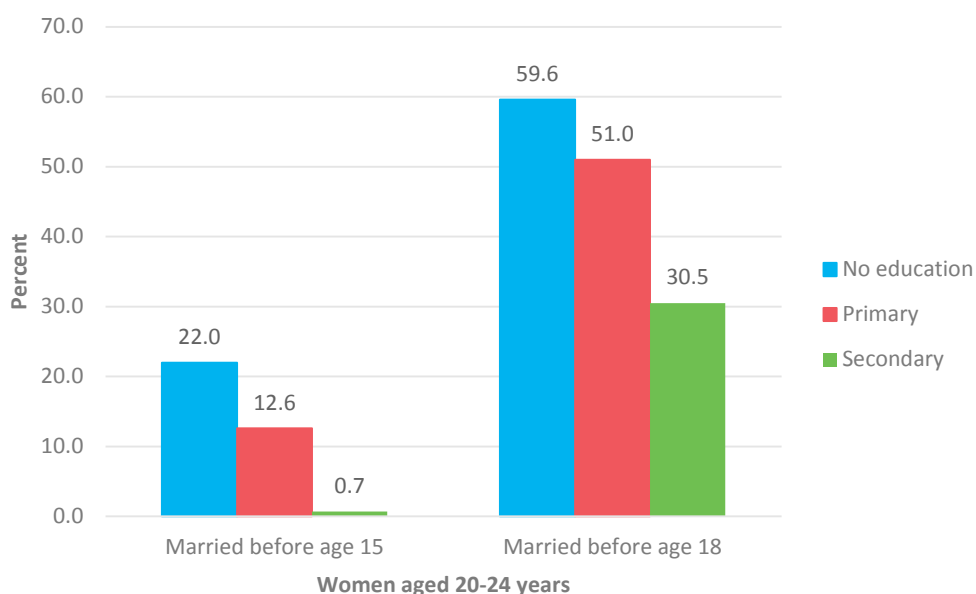
25. These findings are consistent with the arguments made by other researchers regarding the interdependent nature of marriage timing and school enrolment decisions, due to the possibility that many of the same unobserved factors that influence the timing of marriage also influence schooling decisions. The study elaborates that these factors could include parents' educational attainment and aspirations for children, perceptions regarding the returns to schooling, availability of employment opportunities, and the degree of bargaining power of the girl.

26. In this case too, the data obtained indicates a strong need for designing programme interventions that address the interdependency of child marriage and education, but does not identify the unobserved factors with certainty. The study has a number of self-reported limitations.

27. The limitations include the following:

    (a) The sample size of girls 15 to 17 years of age is relatively small, which reduced the power of the analysis.

    (b) The cross-sectional nature of the data prevented the study from determining the actual temporal ordering of marriage and school enrolment decisions, and the types and characteristics of household members that played roles in the decisions.

    (c) The analysis of the determinants of child marriage and school enrolment included a number of community-level indicators that were generated based on individual-level data from each sample cluster in the MICS data sets. While these factors may suggest the presence of a social norm, they do not necessarily establish the presence of a social norm.

    (d) Individuals' perceptions of the boundaries of their community may not necessarily coincide with the boundaries of the sampling cluster. Individuals living in the same sampling cluster may not necessarily experience the same set of area influences especially in urban areas and outside the Roma settlements.

28. The study concludes with a need for further research on child marriage among the Roma and other marginalized sub-groups in Europe, based on panel data, combined with qualitative data, to assess the role of community-level factors and the characteristics of households where girls grow up on child marriage and education decisions.

29. The next research effort – an ethnographic study - was able to address many of these limitations, to make real-life connections and thus close the gaps between different sets of statistical data.

C. Qualitative research through semi-structured in-depth interviews

30. The qualitative research in Roma communities aimed to ascertain risk factors that influence the practice of child marriage and to identify factors of change that could lead to decreasing it by obtaining insight into the practice of child marriage from members of the Roma communities themselves. Some of the key themes explored through their narrative accounts include:

    (a) What is marriage, in their view?

    (b) How are decisions on marriage taken?

    (c) What is the role of social norms in their community?

    (d) What is the role of education from their perspective?

    (e) Are there examples of good practice and what are they?

31. The findings point to two main factors for extending education and delaying marriage. One is the perspective that higher education offers for their future, which depends on the possibility of employment in the local community. The second is the strength of the patriarchal model wherein which the family's economic sustenance is the exclusive responsibility of the male members.

32. Places with poor industries provide poor incentive for education, even primary education. In Novi Bečej, for example, most Roma live off social welfare or grey economy. Therefore school is really forced upon the community:

    > "But for us for this evening school, in order for us to go, they wanted to knock off our social welfare, to knock off the child support, they would even do that because of school, if you don't go to school then you don't get to see a doctor. Well, when we heard that, then everyone had to go to school. Just so they note down you're there."

    Novi Bečej, woman N, 32

33. Completing secondary school mostly doesn't even cross people's mind, and this is true for both girls and boys:

    > "Well I don't know of anyone who finished it. I don't know that anyone did. Nobody is there, I don't know anyone. You know how it is with us. As soon as they are 15, then they don't allow her to go to school any more, so that nobody steals her. Because that happens too. And for boys it's a time to get married. And girls as soon as they turn 14, their parents don't allow them to go to school.. Some want to go, but when the parents tell them it's not allowed, then they can't. What can she do? Nobody sees any purpose to it, that they will find a job, that they will work, there's nothing in it. And it's always been like that."

    Novi Bečej, woman D, 55

    > "He (son) used to go to school, he finished eight grades, but didn't go to secondary school. For us there is no secondary… It doesn't pay off to go, they don't want to go, and

we don't want it either… To know how to write, read, calculate and that's enough. It doesn't pay off."

Novi Bečej, woman M, 39

34. On the other hand, in places with a stronger economy where there are employment opportunities, education is considered important, and primary school compulsory:

"To finish school… in today's time, if you don't finish at least primary school.. even with a broom you can't work anywhere. You can't not complete it, you have to complete at least eight grades."

Vranje, woman SM, 30

35. Here, there is awareness that completing secondary school is also desirable, to the extent that even married boys and/or girls complete it, as shown by examples from Pirot and Vranje:

"We accepted her (daughter-in-law, 17 years), but I told her that you will finish school. If you're getting married, you're staying here and will be going to school until you finish secondary… and that's what we did. She went from home to school… I used to go to parent's evenings for her."

Pirot, woman J, ??

"..That was first term, it was over and then I got married and went to school. And my friends would, you know, like… hey, dude, how come you're married and coming to school? Afterwards the teachers came to know as well, you know, they said, why are you all complaining, what's not clear? Well, we live, they say, in this place with Roma and we know that they get married at 14 or 15. Why are you surprised, he said. And so later, I completed the second term."

Vranje, married couple

36. This type of influence of economic perspective on the length of education, i.e. the preferred age of marriage is completely compatible with research findings in post-socialist Hungary, where, in the period after 1989, as a consequence of loss of jobs and employment opportunities, there was a rapid pauperisation of the Roma population, a drop in the educational level and, simultaneously, an increase in child marriage.6

37. While due to limitations in the scope of this paper, it is not possible to consider other factors and nuances on the inter-relationship between child marriage and educational enrolment that are evident from the qualitative research findings, it is clear that just a few narratives of lived experience from community members undoubtedly offer detailed and causal explanations that could not be obtained through statistical analysis.

IV.   Discussion

38. Good-quality quantitative data is a pre-requisite to large-scale national fact-finding. It has the strength to move and mobilise all levels and breadth of stakeholders. It points to the scale of issues

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[6] Durst, Judit. 2002."Fertility and childbearing practices among poor Gypsy women in Hungary: the intersections of class, race and gender". *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 35, 457–474

that otherwise cannot be ascertained through other means of objective assessment. It offers all the possibilities of disaggregation and coverage.

39. But quantitative data, however reliable, does not fit all the requirements for monitoring transformative outcomes that require individual and social change. Indeed, such change is hardly possible in the first place without the in-depth understanding that contextualised, personalised research offers us.

40. Child marriage is an issue that encompasses many layers of individual, familial and communal identity, aspirations, motivations and norms. It is entrenched in specific local circumstances and risk factors that cannot be addressed without an understanding of their cause-and-effect relationships.

41. Taking action that targets the intricate causes and triggers of such an unwanted practice becomes much more straightforward and confident when we come to know how it actually plays out in the lives of children and their families, and when we hear from them exactly how child marriage could be stopped.

V. Conclusion

42. The monitoring of outcomes on human development will be an important undertaking for every government that is intent on meeting the SDGs by 2030. Furthermore, the action that needs to happen by then will be an important element of the ability to demonstrate improvement on those outcomes. The quality of such action will undoubtedly determine how swiftly the SDGs can be reached, and action will be more comprehensive and targeted if it is based on a cohesive combination of quantitative and qualitative data.

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