



**ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITY:  
HEALTH, EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT  
AND SOCIAL RIGHTS**

# **UNPROTECTED**



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Health, Education, Employment and Social Rights**

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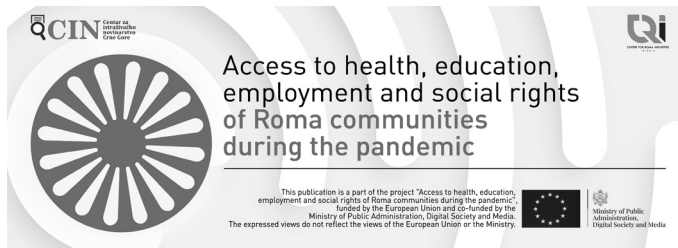
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# INTRODUCTION

This publication is the result of a two-year project: “Roma and Egyptian Community: Health, Education, Employment and Social Rights,” which was implemented by the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG) in partnership with the Center for Roma Initiatives (CRI), with the support of the Delegation of the European Union in Montenegro and the Ministry of Public Administration.

The goal of this project was to empower the Roma and Egyptian community when it comes to education, health, employment, and social rights. The particular focus of the project was on those parts of the community that are even more vulnerable - girls and women, people who use drugs, as well as those of different sexual orientations.

The research shows that specific categories in these communities are subject to multiple stigmas. They are often excluded from society just because they are Roma and Egyptian and from their communities because they are women whose task is primarily to give birth and do the most difficult jobs; girls, who are forcibly married at an early age as modern slaves; members of the LGBTQ, who are punished because of their sexual orientation...

The articles gathered in this publication are poignant testimonies about these people's lives, who are without any chances, even in their community. Thus, women are forced to give birth even when pregnancy can be fatal for them. Girls at a tender age drop out of school and suffer terror from men whom they did not choose as partners, while people who use drugs live on the streets without the opportunity to receive treatment and any hope that society will take care of them.

Life in this population is much shorter compared to the general population, and the groups we investigated live even shorter. Institutions do not deal with them properly; they are left to their own devices. Each of these stories should be a warning, an alarm to start working on improving the lives of these forgotten people.

Montenegro has a long way to go to integrate vulnerable groups. This is, above all, the job of the institutions, but also the media and the civil sector, which have a special responsibility to raise awareness of the position of Roma and Egyptians and exert constant pressure on the decision-makers to finally break out of the vicious circle of poverty, discrimination, and suffering.

**WEAK STATE SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING  
AND FORCED CHILD MARRIAGES:**



## Left in the lurch

—  —  
Andrea Jelić/Đurđa Radulović

**A boy and a girl, victims of human trafficking, did not receive adequate system support after they were rescued. This is the common fate of many other victims too**

“**T**he consequences of the horrors that my children survived in Kosovo are still visible today. This has marked them for life,” the mother of the girl, who was separated from her at the age of seven, told the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG). In a house disconnected from the electricity supply, a mother recalls years of agony during which she only had an inkling of what

two of her seven children were going through. Next to her, a healthy-looking fourteen-year-old girl and a smiling twelve-year-old boy, who looks like he’s only nine, are sitting.

The father and grandfather took the children from Montenegro to Kosovo seven years ago without the mother’s permission. There, the girl was first forced to work, and when she was only 11 years old, she was sold and married to a twenty-year-old man. She suffered brutal sexual and physical abuse.

“When they married me, they falsified my documents and lied that I was 18. I was baffled – I didn’t even know who I was anymore. I started to believe that I have grown up that much”, she told CIN-CG journalists in the presence of her mother.



Her brother, who was only five years old when he came to Kosovo, was forced by his father and grandfather to beg and do other forms of illegal child labour. The father, a heroin addict, forced his son to consume drugs, which once almost had a fatal outcome.

“Fortunately, my son was found by the Kosovo policemen in a hut. He was overdosed, unconscious, and wrapped in a blanket... They probably threw him there because they wanted to get rid of his body, thinking he was dead,” the mother, a victim of an arranged marriage herself, says. She was forced to marry a man who later destroyed her children’s lives.

The girl and her brother were lucky because they were returned to their mother. Their case has been processed. However, many similar stories remain untold, while children remain trapped.

“Although in Montenegro, arranged child marriage in the RE population is perceived as a part of the tradition, it is human trafficking, which includes the sexual exploitation of minors and physical and mental abuse. It is a serious crime, which leaves a severe trauma”, Fana Delija, executive director of the Center for Roma Initiatives (CRI), the non-governmental organization that made the most significant contribution to saving these children, explains to CIN-CG.

Although finally safe, the girl and boy did not receive the necessary institutional support. Today, they are mostly left to the support of their mother, who lives in poverty and cannot provide them with essential psychological and health care. In developed societies, children who are victims of human trafficking receive vital assistance from the state, a necessary prerequisite for everyday life.

In May 2020, the Centre for Social Work Nikšić (CSW), as the legal guardian,

placed these children in the Home in Bijela, which is not a licensed shelter for victims of trafficking in human beings. The only licensed shelter is a shelter within the NGO Institute for Social and Educational Policy, founded in 2019.

“My brother, a few friends, and I were afraid of a guardian in the Children’s Home Mladost in Bijela. The days when she was at work were horrible. She made the two of us clean the toilets and go to bed earlier – without hanging out with the other children. But all the other workers were good to us”, the girl says.

The Children’s Home Mladost denies these claims for CIN-CG. “In this case, no elements of abuse were established, and the employee was transferred to another workplace, which was an adequate response to the allegations of the children and their subjective experience while respecting their best interests.” They also stated that “no physical and psychological signs of possible violence were ever detected in children”.

CSW Niksic did not answer CIN-CG’s question based on what criteria the children were placed in the shelter in Bijela, given that it did not have the corresponding license.

The children spent about 15 months in the Children’s Home Mladost, and during that time, as the authorities of that institution claim, they were provided with intensive and professional support. “We can be proud that children of various ethnic groups are residents of the Home. They are all treated equally, and their rights are equally respected”, the Children’s Home Mladost stated for CIN-CG.

The Home in Bijela has been under public scrutiny several times due to cases of physical and mental violence against residents by employees, which have never been proven. Last year’s

report of the institution of the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms warned that in the House, “there are serious problems in the functioning of the institution and the provision of protection services for children without parental care”.

The sister and brother now attend lower classes than their peers. The fourteen-year-old girl is in the fifth grade, while her twelve-year-old brother is in the second.

Although she likes to learn and wants to be a translator, she already speaks five languages; it bothers her that she attends classes with much younger children. “Others notice that I am not like them and mock me. I am ashamed and find reasons not to go to school”, she told CIN-CG.

The support and understanding of her family mean a lot to her, but she would also like to make friends who could understand and accept her. The boy also has a socialization problem.

“There is a high risk of a girl dropping out of school due to unsatisfactory relationships with her peers, lack of motivation or shame,” Jovana Knežević, a psychologist at the CRI, who has provided psychological support to the minor, told CIN-CG. CRI is in communication with the school administration, and they are looking for solutions. “With part-time education, we would try to ensure that she finishes primary school. We will also provide a mentor for learning support”, Knežević says.

Victims of human trafficking, sexual abuse and exploitation need continuous

psychotherapeutic treatment. “It helps them to stop blaming themselves for being victims as well as to regain their self-esteem and self-confidence,” Dijana Popović Gavranović, social worker and head of the Professional Service of the Supreme State Prosecutor’s Office, explains to CIN-CG. “The act of sexual abuse and exploitation causes a feeling of humiliation, shame, and guilt, and the feeling of guilt intensifies when the violence occurs in the circle of trusted persons. All this leads to lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem”.

### **The most common victims of human trafficking are children and women from the RE population**

For crimes against children, the father was not punished as he should have been, says the mother in an interview with CIN-CG. “My ex-husband got a short prison sentence in Kosovo for human trafficking, but, as we heard, he is already at liberty and now lives there. The grandfather was a ‘mastermind’ of selling and smuggling across the border and falsification of documents. He got 5,000 for selling my daughter and was never jailed for his crimes. He has been on the run since 2020,” the mother explains.

“Grandfather is my biggest torturer and evildoer. I loved him, and I did not expect that he could do something like that to me”, the girl says.

According to the Basic Court in Podgorica data, from 2015 to 2021, three verdicts were handed down for



*Fana Delija (private archive)*

the criminal offence of extra-marital communities with minors. There are no reliable statistics on how many arranged marriages there are in Montenegro. It is known, however, that this is a serious issue, which often remains hidden in closed communities, where children are sold from a few hundred to several tens of thousands of euros.

“The most common victims of human trafficking in Montenegro are children and women from the Roma and Egyptian (RE) population,” Marko Brajović, an inspector in the crime sector, told CIN-CG.

In 2015 and 2016, there were no indictments for the criminal offence of human trafficking in the Higher State Prosecutor’s Office in Podgorica. From 2017 to 2022, a total of 14 charges were brought.

According to the data CIN-CG received from the High State Court, two final judgments were pronounced in 2019. Two persons were punished – one was sentenced to 17 and the other 15 years in prison. In 2020, another final decision was passed, and two processes from that year are still being processed. In 2021, there was also one final verdict, and the defendant was sentenced to two years in prison. A plea agreement was also concluded. Three trials for human trafficking from the same year are still ongoing. Since the beginning of this year, there have been no verdicts for this crime.

According to the GRETA’s report on human trafficking in Montenegro (2021), the experts of the Council of Europe for the fight against human trafficking state that none of the victims was awarded compensation from the perpetrator, and there were no human trafficking cases in which the defendant’s property was seized or confiscated.

### **Child marriage in Montenegro – without a legal framework**

Montenegrin legislation, as stated in the study *The Prevention of Child Marriage in Montenegro*, which CRI published with the support of UNICEF, does not explicitly define child marriage. “Nevertheless, there is an implicit definition – sets the age limit for marriage at 18, allowing, by way of exception, a child aged 16 to 18 to get married with the permission of the court, in line with the Law on non-contentious proceedings”, it is stated in that study.

The Criminal Code of Montenegro stipulates that a parent, adoptive parent, or guardian who enables a minor to live in an extra-marital union with another person or instigates them into it shall be punished by an imprisonment sentence of three months to three years.

If the act was committed by force, threat or out of self-interest, the perpetrators might be sentenced to imprisonment from six months to five years. If an offence was committed by force, threat, or out of self-interest, the offender shall be punished by an imprisonment sentence of six months to five years. It is further stated that if such a marriage is concluded, the prosecution shall not be undertaken, and if it was launched, it shall be discontinued.

The judicial practice for this criminal offence is such, as CIN-CG lawyer Marko Ivanović points out, that an extra-marital union is a union that has lasted for 20 days and not at least three years as prescribed by the Family Law. “If it were otherwise, a criminal offence against a minor aged 15, 16, or 17 would not be possible to be taken into account because they would have become legal adults before the expiry of three years”, Ivanović emphasizes.

### Trafficking in human beings has a precise gender dimension.

The Analysis of Montenegrin Case Law on Trafficking in Human Beings for 2021, prepared by the Supreme Court, states that most defendants are men. Of the 48 defendants, 42 are male. It is the same regarding convicts – men accounted for 85% of all individuals convicted of human trafficking.

The figure shows the precise gender dimension of trafficking in human beings. Of the 39 victims identified in the judgments, 26 were female, and 13 were male.

Criminal proceedings are also long. On average, they last almost three years.

The 2021 Report of the European Commission on Montenegro stated that the Team in charge of the identification, referral, and initial assistance to victims registered 52 of them. Among them were 21 women and ten children. All the children were from Roma and Egyptian communities and were victims of forced beggary or forced marriage.

According to the Report, Montenegro “needs to improve its capacity to detect largescale trafficking networks, particularly for sexual exploitation, as well as to provide a more robust criminal justice response.”

### State Department: Government fails to meet minimum standards

The State Department’s 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report states that

“the Government of Montenegro does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, but is making significant efforts to do so.”

“Shelter’s staff lacked experience in victim assistance, particularly victim confidentiality; the shelter often posted photos of victims on social media with censored faces, but other characteristics such as clothes and location are easily identifiable,” the report states.

It is also emphasized that “Police refused to refer a victim to support services due to pandemic mitigation measures and required the victim to quarantine for 28 days, during which the victim faced domestic violence.”

The GRETA report underlines the importance of a specialized child psychologist in the case of trafficked children and that every victim must have a clinical

assessment by an experienced clinical psychologist.

On a global level, human trafficking is one of the biggest problems. In the last 13 years, according to the data of the international organization of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), around 225 thousand victims of human trafficking have been identified. Of these, 49 per cent were women, 21 per cent were men, while 30 per cent were children (23 per cent were girls). Women and girls were often identified as victims of sexual exploitation, and men and boys as victims of labour exploitation.

In the 2017 Global Estimates of Modern Slavery by the International Labor



Jovana Knežević (private archive)

Organization (ILO) and the Walk Free Foundation, it is stated that there were an average of 40.3 million victims of modern slavery per day in 2016, of which 24.9 million were forced to work against their will under threat, and 15.4 living in a forced marriage. This document is a thorough study of modern slavery, which includes interviews with over 70,000 people from around the world and numerous records.

According to the Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking for the period from 2019 to 2024, Montenegro intends to improve the system of prevention, identification, protection, assistance, and monitoring of victims of trafficking in human beings by 2024, with a particular focus on children.

“I want my children to get an education and get on with life. It is difficult when there is no real help from the state in that process”, says the mother from the beginning of our story. But, by all accounts, there is a long way to recovery and inclusion not only of her children but of many other victims whose fate is unknown.

### **Shortage of child psychiatrists**

After the hearing before the state prosecutor’s office, child victims of trafficking are referred for psychological and psychiatric support.

“Not all cities in Montenegro have the possibility of this kind of support,” Dijana Popović Gavranović, social worker and head of the Professional Service of the Supreme State Prosecutor’s Office, told CIN-CG.

“We refer children, victims of trafficking, to the Center for Autism, Developmental Disorders and Child Psychiatry in Podgorica and the children’s clinic at the Special Hospital for Psychiatry in Dobrota, given that a total of three

psychiatrists for children and adolescents now practice in the institutions mentioned above. In other areas, there is only the possibility of psychological support within the existing counselling centres in community health centres, where the work is not focused on children, and there is no psychiatrist for children and adolescents”, she explained.

“State prosecutors should take all measures to reduce the number of youth interrogations as vulnerable persons”.

She adds that communication between the victim and the perpetrator of the crime should be limited, especially in cases of sexual exploitation, abuse, and violence.



**MORE THAN THOUSANDS OF TEENAGE PREGNANCIES  
IN TEN YEARS, MOTHERS AT FOURTEEN:**



## Children give birth to children



Miloš Rudović

**“The issue of teenage pregnancies is common in RE community, considering that child arrangement marriage is closely connected with early pregnancy”, Jovana Knežević, psychologist from the Center for Roma Initiatives, stated**

**S**everal thousand minors have given birth in the last ten years in Montenegro, among them 14-year-old girls. The interlocutors of the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG) point out that

these are primarily members of the Roma and Egyptian (RE) population since teenage pregnancies are tied to arranged marriages.

“They get married early, and girls are expected to give birth to their first child at 15 or 16. Fathers are also immature peers, so none of them understand the seriousness and complications of early pregnancy”, Sadije Holaj, the director of the Ulcinj Health Center and a gynecologist, warns.

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) warns that girls who marry early are exposed to health risks due to frequent childbirth, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases,

and abortions. Early childbearing is the leading cause of mortality for girls aged 15 to 19 due to complications related to pregnancy and childbirth.

Dr. Holaj also points out that teenage pregnancies carry a higher degree of mortality for both mother and child. “In addition, there are serious complications from diseases such as premature birth, hypertension, anemia, and toxemia,” she explains.

The Institute for Public Health (IPH) told CIN-CG that early pregnancy leaves health consequences in the form of a risk of giving birth again and that it is also characteristic that due to the physical immaturity of the mother, births usually end with cesarean section.

“Also, adolescent parenthood most often affects the social life of a minor. Teenage pregnancy most often leads to rapid mood swings, irritability, depression, a distorted perception of oneself and the newborn, disruptions in peer relationships and schooling,” the Institute has stated.

Research conducted by UNICEF in Bulgaria also shows that families are neither concerned nor aware of the risks of early pregnancies. Most Roma, for example, believes that young mothers give birth to healthy children and that early pregnancy is not risky for either her or the baby. Even when the mediators present them with data on the negative consequences of early childbearing, this does not significantly impact the practice of child marriage, which, according to the UNICEF document, means that customary norms are still followed.

In our country, UNICEF, in cooperation with the Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT), conducted research on multiple indicators in Roma settlements in Montenegro (MICS) several times in the last ten years. The

study showed that 18.2 percent of female and 6.5 percent of male respondents entered marriage or union for the first time before age 15. For those under 18, that percentage is 56.4, or 34.9 percent.

The percentage of young people aged 15 to 24 who had sexual relations before 15 was 19.5 percent for women and 11.4 percent for men.

One of those surveys showed that 36.9 percent of respondents in the age group of 20 to 24 gave birth to at least one child before their 18th birthday.

IPH submitted to CIN-CG data on the total number of births in Montenegro and the share of pregnant women up to 19 years old at the delivery time. The IPH said that they do not have data on the teen birth rate. According to the World Health Organization, pregnancies in girls below 20 are considered adolescents.

From 2010 to 2020, there were 80,430 births, and the share of women giving birth under the age of 19 was 3,193, which makes up around four percent of the total number.

As the number of births in the last ten years decreased by about 900 per year, from 7,820 in 2010 to 6,919 in 2020, the number of births among adolescents also reduced. That figure has dropped by more than 100 births per year, from about 370 in 2010 to 252 in 2020.

Health institutions keep records of early childbearing, so in the most significant health institution in the country – the Clinical Center of Montenegro (CCM) – 48 cases were recorded in the last five years. “The youngest minor was 14 years old,” CCM stated in the response.

However, the hospital in Berane recorded the most significant number of teenage pregnancies. In the last five years, 103 minors have given birth; the youngest mother was 15.

The director of the General Hospital “Blažo Orlandić” in Bar, Igor Karišik, told CIN-CG that in the same period, they had 15 teenage pregnancies, of which two women were 14 at the time of labor, two were 15, four were 16, and seven 17 years old. The number of teenage pregnancies in Bar has increased in the last two years.

At the General Hospital in Nikšić, there were 19 teenage pregnancies in the last five years, and the hospital told CIN-CG that the youngest among them was 15, while most were 17-year-old girls. The General Hospital in Bijelo Polje reported eleven teenage pregnancies in the last five years; the youngest mother was 16.

The head nurse of the General Hospital in Kotor, Dijana Kukuličić, told CIN-CG that they usually give birth to one or two minors yearly and that the youngest among them was 16 years old. The youngest woman giving birth at the “Danilo I” General Hospital in Cetinje was the same age, Anđelka Lopičić, head nurse of gynecology and obstetrics, told CIN-CG. In that hospital, in the last five years, there were three teenage pregnancies.

Since 2017, General Hospital in Pljevlja recorded 14 minor births; the youngest patient was 16.

### **Teenage pregnancies are reported to centers for social work and the police**

The director of the hospital in Bar, Igor Karišik, said that in the case of teenage pregnancies, the practice is to inform the police and the local Center for Social Work. The director of the Center for Social Work, Biljana Pajović, told CIN-CG that there had been three reported teenage pregnancies in Bar and one more in Ulcinj in the last

five years. She clarified that they are usually informed about the childbirth of a minor by the hospital’s gynecology department.

“The specialist workers for children and young people then go to the gynecology department, where they talk to the underage mother. It is necessary to determine where and with whom the minor lives and whether she is ready, with the help of the family, to take care of the baby adequately. It is also common to contact family members – parents, emotional partners – to confirm that the woman in labor will be provided with support and necessary assistance”, Pajović said.

She added that, if necessary, family monitoring is carried out for a certain period so that a plan of support services is drawn up for the user and the family, counseling sessions are held at the Center, and psychosocial or material support is provided.

As representatives of several centers for social work explained in an interview with CIN-CG, most reports are submitted by the General Hospital – maternity ward, or the information is offered by educational institutions or parents.

Depending on the situation and the parental acceptance or non-acceptance of the minor, the Center for Social Work can react in the following ways: if the family accepts the minor with the child, then they monitor the family situation and, through monitoring, perform advisory work and refer family members to relevant institutions. Also, the Center provides various types of material assistance and counseling. In cases where the family does not accept a minor with a child, the Center finds an acceptable form of protection for the mother and child, usually family accommodation, until the child reaches the age of three.

In the last five years, this has hap-





## PREVALENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGES

COUNTRY	WOMEN - MARRIAGE BY AGE 15		WOMEN - MARRIAGE BY AGE 18	
	GENERAL POPULATION	RE POPULATION	GENERAL POPULATION	RE POPULATION
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	0,4%	14,6%	9,5%	48,3%
MONTENEGRO	0,5%	18,2%	6,2%	56,4%
KOSOVO	0,8%	11,6%	10%	42,7%
NORTH MACEDONIA	1,4%	11,9%	10,7%	47%
SERBIA	0,8%	16,9%	6,8%	57%

Source: MICS

Grafik: Jasna Kalač

pened once, said Marija Nikčević, head of the Department for Children and Youth at the Nikšić Center for Social Work. “In the meantime, we are working on empowering and making the user independent, so they can take care of the child when the service ends. Family accommodation is provided by persons who have undergone licensed training”, she explained.

The director of the Center for Social Work in Berane, Petar Pajković, said that the hospital reported three teenage pregnancies in the last five years. “It is also important to emphasize that the hospitals usually report cases to the Center when family’s relationships are unsettled, and the parents are dissatisfied with the situation in which the minor found herself,” he explained.

In many cases, the data of the centers for social work and health institutions on teenage pregnancies do not match.

### Community barriers to contraception

Jovana Knežević, a Center for Roma Initiatives (CRI) psychologist, told CIN-CG that “it can be said with certainty

that the issue of teenage pregnancies is widespread when in RE community, considering that child arrangement marriage is closely connected with early pregnancy.”

Knežević believes that in the last ten years, there have been more teenage pregnancies, childbirths, and abortions.

When asked by CIN-CG how awareness can be raised about the dangers of teenage pregnancies and childbirths, Knežević said that since 2011, CRI had been intensively dealing with the suppression of child arranged marriages. As part of its work, it continuously points out the risks of teenage pregnancy and the consequences girls face during childbirth.

“Considering that the community of Roma and Egyptians still follow strict patriarchal norms, one of the main problems is that the community generally does not allow young people, especially girls, to learn more about reproductive health, especially regarding contraceptives,” Knežević explains.

MICS survey shows that only 4.1 percent of the respondents who were married or in a union at that time said they were using a contraceptive.

The executive director of CRI, Fana Delija, said that there is a high percentage of teenage pregnancies, especially between the ages of 16 and 18.

“Even more worrying is that cases of teenage pregnancies before the age of 16 have also been registered, which points to the problem of the legislative framework in cases of preventing illegal child marriage. When preventing child marriages, it mostly happens that ‘when returning girls to their biological parents as the best interest of the child, the arranged marriage becomes a ‘public secret,’ which results in teenage pregnancy and children giving birth to children”, she said.

“All our victims’ confessions confirm that the girls became mothers before adulthood. This does not exclude the possibility that they do not decide whether to become mothers in the early stages and during the marriage. Unfortunately, they are often victims of marital rape,” Delija says.

When it comes to health care, it is available. However, Delija points out

that we have to keep in mind that a certain number of victims from the Roma community do not have documents, so automatically, they do not have health insurance cards, and thus, the right to health education is denied.

The European Commission pointed out in the last annual report on Montenegro that all health services are not available for people without regulated legal status, including members of the RE population.

### Love marriage, in addition to her own, she takes care of three other children

Although girls are often married against their will, the case of Andrijana Kajtažaj is quite different.

She told CIN-CG that she fell in love with her husband while still in school and decided to get married because she was in love.

“I wanted to marry him since we were dating. My parents didn’t want me to get married. But now I’m happily



married, and we have seven children. I gave birth to my first child when I was 14, to my second when I was 16... and so on," said this 37-year-old in an interview with CIN-CG.

Almost all childbirths are performed in health institutions. The MICS survey also showed that 85.7 percent of the respondents had at least one examination during the last pregnancy, and 63.5 percent had at least four. This is the percentage of pregnant women in the two years preceding the survey. Of them, only 77.1 percent said that their blood pressure was measured and that they gave a urine and blood sample during their last pregnancy.

The CIN-CG interlocutor said that she had a positive healthcare experience during her seven childbirths and that her health was still excellent.

After her cousin passed away, Kaj-tazaj decided to take care of her other three children.

"They wanted to place the boys in children's home and to take the girl. The Social Center was not in favor of that. I said – I will adopt them; why not. I will raise them the same I raised my children. I'm happy. We don't have any problems", said the CIN-CG interlocutor.

### **Montenegro has the highest rate of early marriage**

Regarding the prevalence of child marriages, data from MICS research from the region's countries show that they are the most common in the Montenegrin Roma community.

Thus, in Montenegro, the highest percentage of Roma women married before age 15 is 18.2, while in the general population, that percentage is 0.5. In the group up to 18 years of age, that percentage is as high as 56.4 percent among Roma women and 6.2 percent in

the general population. In this second group, only Serbia has a slightly higher degree – 57 percent of Roma women get married by the age of 18.

This research included Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

Young Romani men and women from poorer families are at greater risk of getting married before the age of 15 compared to their peers living in wealthier families, research shows. As many as 27 percent of the poorest families marry before age 15, and 16 percent of the richest.

Young unmarried people from Roma settlements are literate in 57 percent of cases. Among those who married before 18, slightly more than half (54 percent) are literate. On the other hand, the MICS research showed that of those who married before the age of 15, only two out of five were literate (42 percent). Among young Roma who are illiterate, 45 percent are not married, one-third (32 percent) got married between the ages of 15 and 18, and almost two-quarters (23 percent) before age 15. Of those who do not attend school, more than half (55 percent) are not married, nearly one-third (31 percent) got married between the ages of 15 and 18, and 14 percent before the age of 15.

ROMA AND EGYPTIAN CHILDREN AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM:

ćelija je osnovna jedinica države  
i funkcije živih bića

juče su kosci pokosili bijele rade

JASAM ALEKSANDAR

IMAM ŽUTOK BPA ZOVE SE SNOOPY

## They finish school, but some can not write

Andrea Jelić/Đurđa Radulović

**D**espite the rising enrollment, quality education for Roma children is still a key issue

**A**lmedina is in the seventh grade of an elementary school in Bar. At the request of a journalist from the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG) to read a paragraph from the book, she reluctantly agrees, warning that she does not know how to read well. And she begins reading letter by letter.

Her brother Aleksandar, a sixteen-year-old who attends the fifth grade, takes a pen and writes a simple sentence that the journalist dictates to him – “I have a yellow dog, his name is Snoopy”. The imprecise printed letters look like they are written by someone only in the first grade. Instead of “g”, he writes “k”, and the boy gets confused and stops at the word “dog”.

Nine-year-old Petar, their brother who attends the third grade, looks shyly at the blank paper while CIN-CG’s journalists ask him to write his name, followed by different letters and numbers. After the journalists give up, he

starts writing the number four in poor handwriting. Petar does not know how to answer when asked what number it is.

These children do not attend school regularly. However, they pass grades without repetition and are expected to finish primary school on time.

They are not the only example of Roma children finishing primary school illiterate.

“We wonder how they pass the classes. The school called several times to ask why the children were absent. We explain, and that’s it,” Sabedin, the children’s father, who has three more daughters of preschool age, tells CIN-CG.

He wants everyone to finish at least elementary school.

From Elementary School “Mexico” in Bar, which is attended by 18 students from the RE population, among whom Sabedin’s children, say that teachers have different criteria for Roma students.

“Due to the poor living conditions, the teaching staff tolerates these students much more than usual,” Lejla Bubić, assistant principal of the “Mexico” elementary school, told CIN-CG.

In Montenegro, no research has been done on the level of basic skills (reading, writing, speaking, arithmetic) among children from the RE population who attend elementary school.

In the last Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS 6) done by UNICEF from 2017 to 2019, two essential skills in children were examined- reading and numerical abilities depending on various factors – such as belonging to minority populations, child labour, poverty level ...

“Findings show that children from Roma settlements are less likely to acquire foundational reading and numeracy skills than the national average. Schooling alone may not be enough to

achieve equal learning outcomes fully,” the UNICEF’s 2022 report “Educational pathways in Roma settlements” states.

The UNICEF Office for Montenegro told CIN-CG that “due to the limited capacities of Montenegrin institutions, there was no possibility for measuring the basic skills of children in Montenegro during the UNICEF MICS 6 survey.”

The following research could only be carried out around 2025,” they claim.

CIN-CG sent questions to the 25 elementary schools in Montenegro, regarding the literacy percentage of children from RE communities. Eleven schools answered, explaining that records are not kept solely for RE children, and the general literacy rates of RE students in these schools range from 70 to 90 per cent.

Elementary School “Božidar Vuković Podgoričanin,” attended by the highest number of RE students, stated that 90 percent of Roma students become literate in the first three grades.

Nevertheless, students of the Roma population often enroll in secondary school – completely illiterate.

“Students who have completed elementary school enroll the secondary schools. We have to teach them printed letters because otherwise, they cannot acquire knowledge,” Milanka Okuka, a pedagogue at the Secondary Vocational School in Bar, who also works as a mentor for RE students, tells CIN-CG.

According to the data of the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians for the period from 2021 to 2025, the primary completion rate for Roma children is 56 percent, while the high school graduation rate is only 3%.

“This difference between the primary and secondary school completion rate clearly reflects the poor quality of education of RE children, primarily during primary school. Education support to



children from RE population is low, and the children finish school failing to acquire basic literacy skills”, Biljana Maslovarić, director of the Pedagogical Center of Montenegro, who has considerable experience in working with Roma children, states for CIN-CG.

“It happens that children between the 6th and 9th grade of primary school write in block letters, mix voices and are not at the level required for the grade they attend,” states the report “Identification and mapping relevant challenges faced by Roma and Egyptian community in Montenegro”, published by ROMACTED program 2019.

The issue of the quality of education remains stagnant “regardless of the fact that”, as this report also states, “in recent years we have witnessed an increasing trend in educational enrolment “.

Biljana Maslovarić also claims that the responsibility for failures in the education of RE students should be borne by the school, i.e. the teaching staff.

“During one school year, there are three knowledge tests. The school has to take responsibility if the child finishes school after all these checks without having basic education,” she says.

### **Tolerance of irregular attendance is a disservice**

For Almedina, Petar and Aleksandar, regular class attendance is much more difficult due to the distance from their home. From the dilapidated shack on the slope of the Sutorman mountain above Bar, where they live, the first



*Biljana Maslovarić (photo: UCG)*

settlement or store is miles away and it is a 40-minute drive to the school.

Their family shares the organization regarding school transportation with their only neighbours, the Stanković family, also Roma, who raise five school-aged children.

“On the days when the children attend classes, we have to go down from Sutorman to the

city several times because everyone is in different shifts and schools. Our whole life revolves around school”, Sabedin says.

To collect money for fuel and continue attending classes, but also to help their families, these children do different jobs after school.

“We have no choice,” Sabedin says.

“Child labour is associated with poor learning outcomes, i.e. lower foundational reading and numerical skills,” according to the UNICEF’s report “Digging deeper with the data: Child Labor and Learning” from 2020.

Factors such as poverty, less educated parents, and belonging to the female gender significantly reduce the chances of Roma children to achieve foundational reading and numerical skills, according to the report “Educational Pathways in Roma Settlements” from 2022. “These children did not progress in their education, regardless of regular attendance or school completion”.

Montenegro is the only country in the latest wave of UNICEF research in which the percentage of Roma and Egyptian children who are engaged in child labour and who finish primary school is almost identical to the rate of

RE children who do not work. Unlike the other tested countries in the region, in Montenegro, the possibility of expulsion from school does not increase if the child works and therefore attends classes irregularly, according to the report “Educational Pathways in Roma Settlements”.

The UNICEF Office for Montenegro did not respond to CIN-CG’s question about whether such statistics show excessive leniency of primary schools towards students from the RE population.

“According to the Protocol that prescribes the obligations of institutions to prevent school dropouts, we are obliged to react if there is a risk of school dropouts,” stated UNICEF in a letter to CIN-CG.

According to the schools’ experiences that have responded to CIN-CG, expulsions from schools and repetition of classes are rare, despite irregular attendance.

Data from the 2018 UNICEF Multiple Indicator Survey show that Roma children from poorer families are at a lower risk of repeating a grade in primary school than children from wealthier families.

“Roma children do not repeat the grade”, claim from Elementary School “Mexico”.

“Mostly, in all classes, they do not attend classes regularly, which significantly affects their poor performance, and precisely for this reason, a minimal number of such students can read and write without problems,” assistant director Bubić says.

“There is a big pro-

blem with the non-regular attendance of RE students – over 70 percent of students do not attend classes regularly. Thus, it is impossible to assess them”, Tamara Radonjić, director of “Njegoš” Primary School in Kotor, says for CIN-CG.

Elementary School “21. maj” in Podgorica said that RE children partially achieve educational outcomes up to the third grade.

“In the fourth grade, their success is good, and from the fifth to the ninth, they achieve minimal educational outcomes.”

Almedina, Petar, and Aleksandar lack the primary education they should have acquired at school. When asked by journalists what a cell is, they claim that they are familiar with the word.

“That’s where you end up when in prison,” Aleksandar finally says.

When asked if they know what a cell is in biology, they don’t answer. None of them knows who Njegoš is, but Almedina claims she knows the word.

These children have no one to help them with the lessons they miss at school.

“We certainly cannot help them,” Sabedin, the children’s father, says.



Enes Eminović  
(private archive)

**Discrimination kills motivation**

When a CIN-CG journalist asks if he likes going to school and playing with children, a nine-year-old smiling Petar becomes serious and shakes his head.

“They have no one to hang out with and to play with. That’s why they prefer to stay here, in Sutorman”, Sabedin

explains.

According to the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians, 2021–2025, in addition to poverty, the key factors that prevent Roma students from regularly attending school are stigma, bullying by peers or employees, discrimination, and lack of personal documents required for enrolment, frequent migration.

Roma children's classroom experiences are characterized by a lack of integration and clear discrimination, according to a 2019 ROMACTED study.

"I used to go to school until 6th grade, then I started part-time education because it was simply better for me", is the statement of one of the discriminated boys of RE nationality, cited in this study.

"Discrimination makes children feel less important. Their self-esteem is damaged, and, in most cases, they stop fighting and do not try to deal with the problem... They are at an increased risk of dropping out of school," Jovana Knežević, a Center for Roma Initiatives (CRI) psychologist, told CIN-CG.

The study further states that traditional lack of integration, where RE children do not develop close social ties with other kids, also negatively affects their motivation to continue school.

"The provision of clothes and shoes, free textbooks and school supplies, the involvement of parents in the life and work of the school, free transport, peer acceptance, and teacher competence are factors that influence the children of the RE population to attend classes more regularly", Jelena Popović, director

of the Božidar Vuković Elementary School in Podgorica, says ".

"Parents, for example, often decide not to send their children to school, because they have nothing clean to wear." They are not able to provide for school supplies and living conditions which would make studying at home possible", as stated in the 2019 ROMACTED survey.



*Jelena Milić  
(private archive)*

Segregation in schools is also confirmed by the fact that members of the RE population attend only seven schools in the capital territory. Traditionally considered elite schools have almost no pupils from the RE population. Thus, the

"Pavle Rovinski" school does not have a single RE student, regardless of the relative proximity of the Vrela ribnička settlement. Elementary school "Sutjeska" has only one student from the RE population.

"We are working on enrolling them in other so-called 'elite schools, but we must also provide them with transportation to those schools," the Directorate for Education of Minority People told CIN-CG.

"Children often feel that they are not fully accepted in schools. They often say: 'They sit us in the last benches, and it's up to us to be calm and come regularly,'" Jelena Milić, director at Defendology Center for Security, Sociological and Criminological Research of Montenegro in Nikšić, points out for CIN-CG.

Currently, 202 children, mainly from the Roma and Egyptian populations, are active users of that centre. They study there, receive psycho-social support, get meals, and often come to fulfil their



basic physiological needs – to shower, get a haircut or wash and dry their clothes.

“The centre was originally not designed only for the needs of children from the RE population. Over time, it turned out that they make up the largest number of users”, Jelena Milić explains.

### **Teachers are not liable for negligence**

Allowing a student to pass a grade, even though s/he has not previously mastered the necessary skills, is punishable by the laws of Montenegro. According to the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, discrimination is considered, among other things, to be making it difficult or denying the possibility to attend classes, classification of children, pupils, participants in education, and students, abusing or otherwise making unjustified differentiation or unequally treating them.

Code of ethics, which every school has, prescribes teachers' obligation to treat each student carefully and objectively – in grading, resolving conflicts, and applying disciplinary measures.

Despite the law, it rarely happens that one of the teachers or the school management is sanctioned because the student has not mastered letters and numbers by the end of elementary school. Schools generally react and inform parents and relevant institutions when a child does not attend classes regularly.

“It happened that we send a letter to the school to check how a child is progressing or, if s/he is absent from class, whether the school informs the parents about it. From experience, I don't think schools contact parents too often”, Jelena Milić says for CIN-CG.

“If a child is absent from school, begging somewhere, several offences

have been committed”, Duška Šljivančanin, advisor to the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms of Montenegro (Ombudsman) in the field of protection of the rights of children, youth and social security, told CIN-CG.

“Several times in our reports, we provided guidelines on what should be done in such cases, and we initiated misdemeanours against the parents because they must be held accountable by law,” the ombudsman's advisor claims.

According to her, misdemeanour courts in Montenegro have a bad practice in this matter.

“In order not to further impoverish the families, they are released and not punished. It is counterproductive”.

### **Language barrier for children, Early school dropout for girls**

“The problems faced by Roma and Egyptian children are reflected in the existence of language barriers, given that education is in a language other than the mother tongue of RE children. This leads to a significant problem – some students finish school without having mastered basic reading or writing skills,” states the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians from 2021 to 2025.

In the classes of the “Njegoš” primary school in Kotor, where 29 pupils of the RE population attend, Roma and Egyptians speak to each other in the language they speak at home.

“That is why they cannot master the lessons successfully,” Tamara Radonjić, the director of that school, says.

“Milan Vuković” Elementary School in Herceg Novi told CIN-CG that they noticed limitations in reading comprehension performance among RE children.

“It is affected by these children's

language and conceptual development”.

The elementary school “Njegoš” in Kotor told CIN-CG that girls from the RE population leave school earlier.

“Despite the school’s pedagogical and psychological service engagement and the excellent cooperation we have with the Office for Disease Prevention, girls leave school earlier than boys.”

In the research by ROMACTED, gender imbalance is particularly highlighted in the reasons for early school dropout.

“The percentage of women with no formal schooling or with less than a fourth-grade primary education is significantly higher than the percentage of men, whereby even 43.2% of women have no type of education, while the same has been determined in only 22.6% of men” as pointed out into the research conducted by DeFacto, stated in the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians 2021-2025.

### **Employment of Roma school mediators and assistants a good step forward**

The improvement in the education of Roma children initiated the engagement of mediators in the social inclusion of Roma and Egyptians in the field of education, who should help children with learning, as well as be a link between parents and schools. Currently, according to the data of the Ministry of Education, there are 22 of them at the level of Montenegro – one for every 70 students.

The last school year had the same number of RE mediators. In the school year 2019/2020, there were 21, and in 2018/19, 18. During the school year 2019/20, 35 mentors were hired for 130 eighth- and ninth-grade students of the Roma and Egyptian populations. In secondary schools, 44 mentors (profe-

ssors) were employed for 120 secondary school students.

“A mechanism should be established to measure student achievement in primary education. Before the involvement of mediators in educational institutions, the results and achievements of children from those communities were not at a satisfactory level. Year after year, many Roma and Egyptian children have dropped out of school. That’s why the support of mediators is of great importance for them, especially for those with low socioeconomic status”, Enis Eminović, a mediator in the elementary school “Božidar Vuković Podgoričanin” and a long-time Roma activist in the civil sector, told CIN-CG.

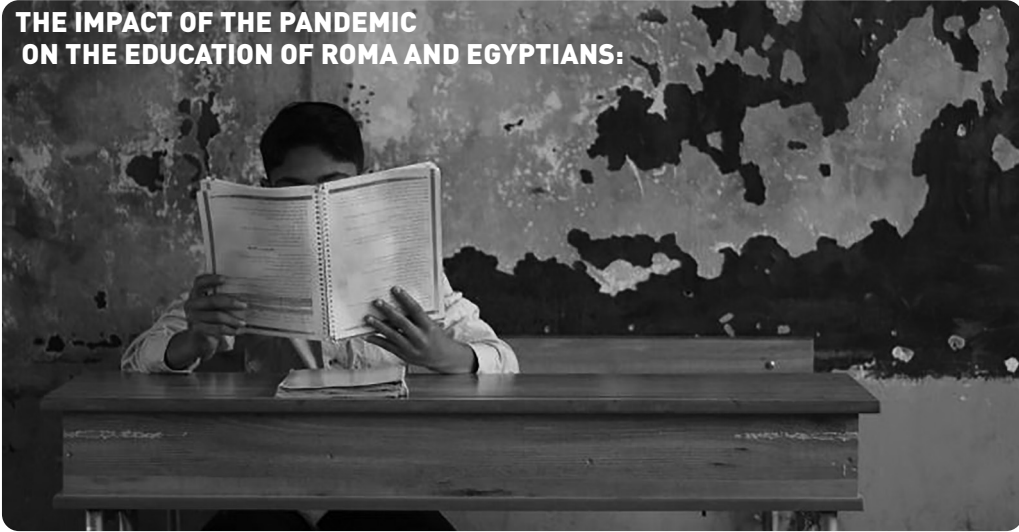
Daily, he takes care of 53 students from the third grade and 18 from the Roma and Egyptian community from the ninth grade.

According to him, the lack of communication and cooperation between educational institutions and the Roma and Egyptian communities is a serious obstacle to improving the education of the RE population.

“Insufficient awareness among parents is still an issue. The parents must gain confidence in the mediator, whose position should be urgently systematized”.

The most significant percentage of surveyed parents of the Roma and Egyptian community, as stated in the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians, do not have information on whether there is an associate in education in their community.

## THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE EDUCATION OF ROMA AND EGYPTIANS:



# Passing rate is decreasing, and there are no answers

—  —  
Andrea Jelić

**Only 11 percent of “božidar vuković podgoričanin” school students from minority populations finished the eighth grade this school year, while 92.30 percent of re students passed the same class last year. the country still does not have a fundamental analysis of the causes and consequences of the failure of the system**

**Only 11 percent of students from the Roma and Egyptian population finished the eighth grade at the Elementary School “Božidar Vuković Podgoričanin” this school year. Only a year earlier, as many as 92.30 percent of them successfully passed that class. In the 2019/2020 school year, when the**

pandemic started, the passing rate of students from this population was 100 percent in all schools, like all other children, because the Ministry of Education (MOE) made recommendations that year that all students should automatically pass the grades because of Covid.

The pass rate of students of the Roma and Egyptian population in 2021/2022 in the Elementary School “Božidar Vuković Podgoričanin” decreased in all other grades from fourth to higher compared to the 2020/2021 school year. Thus, the pass rate in the seventh grade dropped from 81.57 percent last year to only 17.86 percent this year and from 88.13 percent to -22 percent in the sixth grade. In the ninth – from 100 to 45 percent.

According to the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Montenegro, Tatjana Novović, in the circumstances of covid-19, the current issues became

more severe. They made the status of these families and their children even more vulnerable and complicated.

“There are several reasons for this – lower incomes, inadequate living conditions, missing digital aids for the inclusion of students from the Roma and Egyptian population in distance learning.” Not to mention the preschool context, which was “less important” for all children. Therefore, it is expected that the results of studies, which are already quite questionable, will be even weaker”, Novović said for the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG).

Representatives of the elementary school “Božidar Vuković Podgoričanin” also stated the pandemic as the main reason for the poor results. In this school, in the Konik settlement in the capital, of the total number of students, 50 percent or 585 students are from the RE population.

That school is not the only one where the data regarding the success of Roma and Egyptian students is worrying.

“The average final success has worsened due to many reasons: online classes, lack of digital aids – phones, internet, tablets for students, lack of possibility to take online classes, as well as to organize supplementary classes and the like,” Nikola Raičević, the coordinator for prevention of early school dropout and classroom teacher at Elementary School “Radomir Mitrović” in Berane, confirmed for CIN-CG.

In that school, which 154 students from minority populations attend, the mentoring project in cooperation implemented for three years with the NGO

Mladi Romi, aimed at helping students master the school lessons, has proven to be good. In the first two years, eighth and ninth-grade students were included in the mentorship, while this school year, due to lack of funds, the project had only ninth-grade children.

In some schools, despite irregular attendance and the absence of conditions for attending classes, they manage to move to the next grade.

“The period of the coronavirus pandemic harmed the educational achievements of all students, especially Roma and Egyptians. For these reasons, the school was more tolerant and lenient in its demands. With the emergence of the virus and the transition to online teaching, the largest number of students of Roma nationality was very little involved in teaching activities”, teaching staff from Elementary School “Milan Vuković” from Herceg Novi told CIN-CG.

As they also stated, only a small number of students from this community did not have digital equipment and were not able to make contact with teachers. “The others did not perceive it as an obligation and generally did not carry out their tasks. Their parents did not contribute to over-

coming that problem. However, even in such circumstances, they note that all students successfully finished their grades.”

From Elementary School “Mileva Lajović-Lalatović” in Nikšić, they pointed out to CIN-CG that the general success of these students in 2020 and later is somewhat better than in previous years. It was suggested to the teachers that “when



*Tatjana Novović (photo: UCG)*



evaluating the achievement of the planned learning outcomes, in the final evaluation, in addition to the results of the student's work related to knowledge, understanding or application of what has been learned, the student's effort, promptness to respond to assigned tasks on time, compliance with agreements and the like should be included... “.



*Dijana Vučković (photo: TVNK)*

“Students are provided with continuous individual support through the organization of supplementary and extra classes. Also, in cooperation with the NGO Mladi Romi, mentoring support in their work is provided for eighth and ninth-grade students and teacher-tutor support for sixth to seventh-grade students. Mobile phones and tablet computers were provided for students from low-income families to have better conditions for online classes,” they told CIN-CG from this school.

### **The non-transparency of the MEIS database harms the improvement of teaching quality**

Many schools contacted by CIN-CG emphasized that they cannot directly extract data on the success rate of students from this population. They suggested that we reach the Ministry of Education (MOE), from where, as they told us, it is possible to obtain this data through their MEIS database.

However, the Ministry did not submit figures showing the percentage of students' success in the last year. Instead, they forwarded those that show how many of them enrolled and completed primary and secondary school from 2016 to 2021.

According to these data, in the school year before the coronavirus, 2018/2019, 1,798 Roma and Egyptian students enrolled in elementary schools in Montenegro, and 89 percent of them – 1,605 – graduated. The following year, in 2019/2020, that percentage increased to 97 percent. In the 2020/2021 school year, 88 percent finished the classes. For the last year,

in which, according to our research, the passing rate dropped drastically, the MOE does not yet have data.

The statistics for high schools during the same period differ slightly, so 77 percent of them finished their classes in 2016/2017, and the following year 89 percent, while in the previous school year, the percentage dropped again to 72 percent.

“What exactly is the purpose of the MEIS database if it is non-transparent? I also tried to get some information by using it, but even after several requests, I didn't succeed,” Biljana Maslovarić, director of the Pedagogical Center of Montenegro, told CIN-CG.

During her many years of practice, she often worked with Roma children and created alternative learning methods.

“Roma and Egyptian children can achieve great results. However, it is questionable how and to what extent the resources of the competent Ministry are managed. For example, the MEIS database should, among other things, provide guidelines in how the quality of teaching can be improved, not only for Roma but for all children,” Maslovarić said.

The Ministry of CIN-CG did not answer whether and how the MEIS information system is used to assess the impact of the

pandemic on the educational system in Montenegro and what consequences it had on students.

“To get a full insight into the effects of the covid-19 crisis on education, it would be necessary to conduct a more extensive, in-depth research and to focus on several key fields to have more detailed findings on the profound consequences of the changed way of working in the education system during the pandemic,” the dean Novović says. “A comprehensive analysis would refer to all levels in the vertical structure of the educational system, to all educational fields, areas, subjects, academic achievements, as well as to the socio-emotional skills and communication competencies of students from the Roma and Egyptian population,” she points out.

“The effects of the pandemic on education is difficult, almost impossible to determine because, in addition to the pandemic, which certainly played an important role in many educational outcomes, there was also a significant number of other causes,” Dijana Vučković, a member of the National Council for Education and a professor at the University, told CIN-CG.

According to her, the impression of a large number of professionals in education is that the pandemic has temporarily prevented the planned educational achievements that would probably have been achieved under the conditions of the classroom, regular, and complete teaching.

As she stated, the Bureau for Educational Services, the Center for Vocational Education and Training, and the Examination Center, competent institutions for the implementation of research, analyzed the pandemic’s impact on the education system in Montenegro. Those results are not yet available to the public.

Vučković notes that there is also a part of knowledge, skills, and competencies that distance learning has developed in particular. “Without digital competencies,

organizing the work wouldn’t be possible. I believe that the students, as well as their teachers, improved those skills very significantly.”

### **The Ministry of Education registered 500 students outside the system**

Maybe some skills were developed during distance learning, but there were a lot of challenges as well. Although the Ministry of Education points out that only the “Božidar Vuković Podgoričanin” school, in cooperation with the HELP organization and Telekom Crne Gore, donated 70 phones in the first year of the pandemic, the school administration was unable to make contact with 100 students from minority populations. And as many as 500 were unavailable, including other secondary and elementary schools in Montenegro.

Phones and other aids for online teaching were also donated to many different schools where Roma and Egyptian children study. “These actions significantly reduced the number of children outside the system. Among other things, we also awarded scholarships for Roma and Egyptian high school students in the amount of 60 euros per month,” the Ministry points out.

As they point out, teachers and mentors were also beneficial in the first wave of the pandemic. In primary schools, 36 were engaged, and 43 were in secondary schools.

### **Only 54 percent of households have access to the Internet, while only 15 percent have access to a computer**

“With only 54.2% of households having Internet access and only 15% of them having a computer at home, online education is not available to many Roma and Egyptian children, which further incre-

ases the risk of their exclusion from the education system and the community.” the Report on the Rapid Social Impact Assessment of the COVID-19 outbreak in Montenegro states.

The Roma Education Fund opened as part of the Open Society Foundation, expects the high dropout rate of 68 percent among these children to increase due to the conditions preventing them from participating in distance learning. “The most common obstacle faced by Roma children with no access to electricity or the Internet cannot connect to remote education programs. They often don’t have computers, televisions, printers, and other things necessary for learning online”, as stated in the Open Society Foundation “Roma in the COVID-19 Crisis” from 2020.

Research by the NGO Phiren Amencana showed that, out of a sample of 360 parents with school-age children, only 13 percent responded that they had technical equipment and an Internet connection for participating in distance learning (phone, laptop, computer). The remaining 87 percent surveyed had neither the Internet nor specialized equipment, while some did not have enough devices for all the children in the family.

“That is why it can be concluded that many children from the Roma community could not adequately participate in distance learning. Roma settlements are without the necessary infrastructure as a prerequisite for the implementation of distance learning”, Elvis Beriša, executive director of the NGO, says for CIN-CG.

Apart from technical prerequisites for

successful distance learning, according to Beriša, there were other challenges – such as the lack of support in learning from parents, which is provided to RE children even in ordinary circumstances. “Parents are largely illiterate and without the necessary knowledge to help their children learn. The restricted movement also made it impossible for the mediators to do their work, regularly communicate with the families, and provide them with the necessary study materials. All of the above harmed the quality of education of Roma children and threatened the already low level of knowledge those children have after leaving the school”, Beriša concludes.

### **Out of 122 ninth-grade students, no A students**

Research by the NGO Mladi Romi for the 2019/2020 school year showed that

there is not a single excellent student in a sample of 122 ninth-grade students in Montenegro. Only one is very good, 33 good, while 88 are sufficient. “The overall average for these students is sufficient (2.23), which is particularly problematic for continuing education. Without mentoring support and the scholarship provided by the Ministry of Justice, the number of students in

high school would decrease significantly,” Samir Jaha, NGO Mladi Romi director, said.

In the last school year, there were 115 active high school students, only one of whom attended high school, while the rest were in vocational schools. According to this NGO, there were no new Roma university students last year. In some cities,



*Elvis Beriša (photo: Luka Zeković)*

there are not even high school students, such as Berane, where no member of the Roma population has enrolled in high school for five years.

According to Jaha, the main obstacles for children and young people from vulnerable groups in terms of availability, regular attendance, learning, and progress in education are the long distance to schools and the absence of organized transport, extreme poverty, prejudices, insufficient knowledge of the official language, inadequate family support, severe illiteracy in the case of mothers who spend most of their time with their children, the inefficiency of dropout prevention teams, the absence of a tutoring program, lack of adequate technical equipment, undeveloped work habits...

“We assess the quality of children’s knowledge as not good enough for elementary school, especially in the “Božidar Vuković Podgoričanin.” A special problem is children’s passing from class to class, and half of the children who finish primary school do not continue due to a feeling of inferiority. In secondary education too, we noticed students are moving to the next grades for the sake of following the procedures, especially in smaller communities.”

### **Insufficient support across the region**

A regional analysis of the impact of covid-19 on Roma in the Western Balkans, within the project “Roma Integration” of the Council for Regional Cooperation, showed that three out of four Roma children did not receive help during online

classes – neither from teachers nor from classmates. “The school dropout rate increased by 11 percent at the regional level, mostly due to the difficult financial situation of families, as every other Roma reported a reduced income,” this analysis states.



*Samir Jaha (photo: Savo Prelević)*

About 59 percent of respondents, according to the same study, said that the pandemic had influenced their school results.

“Despite the response of the WB countries to the crisis in education during the covid-19 virus pandemic, learning loss will be unavoidable and considerable, with a larger share of students falling back into functional illiteracy and potentially dropping out school. According to estimates, the percentage of students with below-average achievement in the domain of reading literacy will increase from the current 53 to 61 percent,” it is stated in the World Bank’s (WB) 2020 report “Economic and Social Impact of the Covid-19 on Education”.

The permanent impact of closing schools during the pandemic worsened the already significant educational differences between children from this and the general population due to unequal access to resources and support, warns the UNICEF report “Educational Pathways in Roma Settlements” from January 2022.

### **The global crisis in education is more severe than thought**

According to research conducted by UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, the global crisis in education is more severe than previously thought. “In low- and middle-income countries, the number of



children who cannot read and understand a simple text by age ten will rise from around 50 percent before the pandemic to around 70 percent,” states the report “The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery.” published in 2021.

Research shows that in rural Pakistan, results for primary students in grades 1-5 declined in math and reading. In South Africa, for example, second graders experienced losses of 70 percent in reading and math. Primary school children in Ethiopia learned only 40 percent in math, and the learning gap between urban and rural students increased.

In Brazil, students learned only 28 percent, and the dropout risk increased more than threefold. In India, the number of third-graders in public schools able to perform simple subtraction has fallen from 24 percent in 2018 to only 16 percent in 2020.

The learning decline is significant even in high-income countries, which quickly took measures to mitigate the pandemic’s consequences. For example, data from an 8-week school shutdown in the Netherlands showed a learning loss equivalent to 20 percent. In Switzerland, primary school students learned more than twice as fast when attending school in person compared to remote learning during school closures.

More than 370 million children globally missed out on school meals during school closures, losing what is, for some children, the only reliable source of food and daily nutrition. The mental health crisis among young people has reached unprecedented levels. Advances in gender equality are threatened, with school closures placing an estimated 10 million more girls at risk of early marriage in the next decade and at increased risk of dropping out of school. In the pessimistic scenario, Learning Poverty is expected to increase to as much as 70 percent in low- and middle-income

countries – warns the report of UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank.

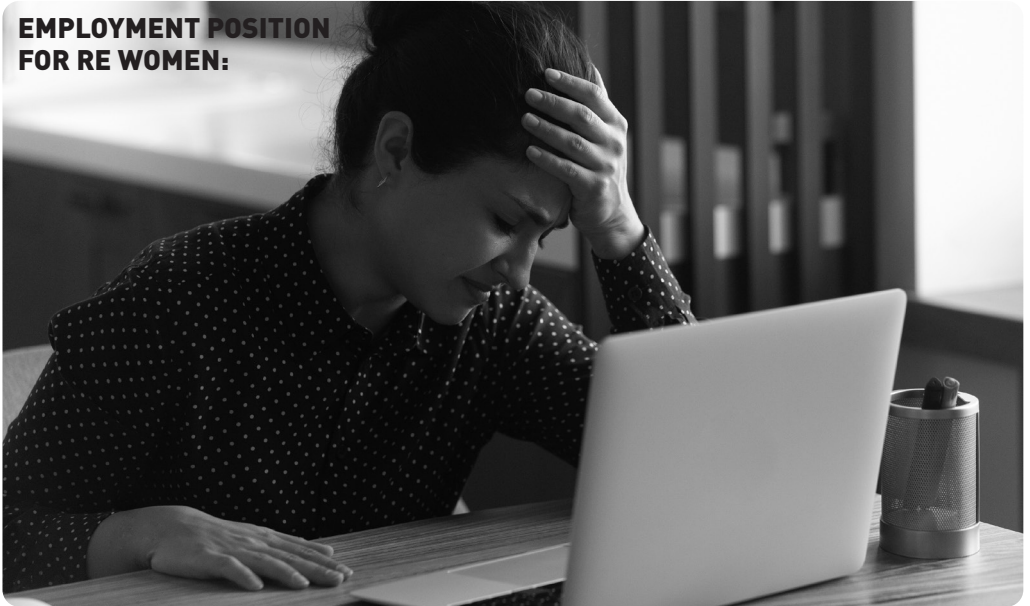
### **First to establish the damage, then plan compensation for the learning losses**

According to dean Novović, Montenegro should first establish the damage that covid-19 has caused everyone in the education system. “When it comes to children from the Roma and Egyptian population, weak points should be detected, and an action plan should be drawn up to gradually and effectively overcome the perceived problems,” she explains, adding that workshops and seminars for children, parents, teachers, as well as some models of supplementary/additional teaching, accompanied by specific written instructions could be helpful.

As noted by Vučković, the educational system would have to assess the quality and quantity of acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies from September of the next school year and, based on that, plan adequate compensation for what is determined to be missed or insufficiently adopted. She believes that teachers, with the professional support of the Bureau for Educational Services, and the Center for Vocational Education and Training, are the most competent to carry out such assessments. In essence, she says, the beginning of the next school year should be dedicated to assessing what has been learned and making up for what has not so that the consequences of something that may have been missed do permanently reflect on the learning of new material.

These assessments are crucial because many children from this community finish primary school without functional literacy, which makes it difficult for them to continue their education and keeps them in a vicious circle of poverty.

**EMPLOYMENT POSITION  
FOR RE WOMEN:**



# Unemployed for decades



Miloš Rudović

**D**ata from the employment Agency shows that last year almost the same number of female and male members from the RE community got the opportunity to get employed. however, the percentage of unemployed women is about a sixth higher than of men from the same population

**W**hen she got a job as a mediator in an elementary school in Nikšić, Velbana Naza points out that she spent more than half of her life unemployed. Unlike many others who also graduated high school, fifty-year-old Naza had one more obstacle on her way to employment – she is a member of the Roma

and Egyptian population.

“Why would somebody want to employ a gypsy? This sentence can still be heard often. I don’t know when they will stop using it”, Naza, who graduated from business school in 1992, summed up her experience of job searching for the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG).

Her example illustrates the position of women from Roma and Egyptian families on the labor market, who have a more challenging time finding a job than men from the community. Data from the Employment Agency show that in the last year, almost the same number of men and women from the RE community got the opportunity to get a job. However, the percentage of unemployed women

is about a sixth higher than of men from the same population.

On the last day of June, the records of the Employed Agency included 555 men and 643 women from the RE population under the unemployed category. Although the majority are women with completed primary education, there were also two Roma women with university degrees.

Regional research results also show that many employers believe Roma's employment negatively affects their company's working environment.

From the institution of the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms, they said that the employment rate among marginalized Roma is still worrying. In contrast, their informal employment continues to be the dominant model.

As a result of discriminatory practices, Roma and Egyptians have access, in most cases, only to the informal economy and precarious work that is poorly paid. According to a UNDP survey from 2017, 61 percent of Roma and Egyptians are employed in the informal sector, compared to 33 percent of members of the majority population. CEDEM's research from 2019 showed a high degree of overall ethnic distancing towards the Roma, which demonstrates the low level of willingness to employ members of the RE community," Sokolj Beganaj, head of the Department for Promotion and Protection of Rights of Roma and Egyptians in the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights stated.

### **Patriarchy is an obstacle to employment**

CIN-CG interlocutors indicate that men usually work and financially

provide for the family.

It is hard for women to get a job. In addition to the fact that women are forced to stay at home and take care of a large family, the barriers are prejudice, low educational status, and insufficient trust of the general population towards Roma and Egyptians. Many believe that a woman should stay at home with the children.

Members of the Roma and Egyptian nationality face multiple discrimination even within the community itself since the patriarchy is still present, which affects gender equality, Fana Delija, the executive coordinator of the Center for Roma Initiatives (CRI), points out.

"Roma and Egyptian women in 90 percent of cases depend on male family members, considering that there is a high degree of illiteracy. Also, more than 90 percent of women in this population are unemployed. Roma and Egyptian women marry and become mothers very young, so they do not have an opportunity to finish high school or college, or this opportunity is limited. But even worse is that they often do not have an opportunity to finish elementary school," Delija says.

All this causes poverty, which prevents integration and a better future.

Delija points out that community members who complete secondary education are rarely employed in the profession but most often work in utility companies or seasonal jobs.

### **Discrimination does exist**

Discrimination is most present during employment. This is one of the research conclusions of focus groups conducted for the needs of CIN-CG and CRI.

“For example, when I look for a job, I go to the hair salon, and they tell me: ‘You know what, we’ll let you know.’ Maybe it is because of the headscarf, my name, or my surname. Anyhow, discrimination exists,” said the focus group participant from Podgorica, who has completed high school.

A low level of self-initiative in the search for a job is one of the obstacles that a woman cannot provide herself with the conditions for employment.

Naza told CIN-CG that she paid for the training, which helped her get a job.

“I took the chance,” she told CIN-CG, adding that she had always wanted to work in education and was persistent.

The interlocutors emphasize that to provide adequate support to women it is necessary to develop and improve support models based on practical training. However, it is not enough to organize and implement activities without sustainability. After completing the training, it is necessary that the women are engaged in work and that this engagement lasts longer than a few months.

As for the salaries, the interviewees from the focus groups answered that there are two types of payments – to the bank account and “under the table.”

“The salaries are mostly paid into employees’ bank accounts, but there are those who work in the private sector, so they are paid in cash,” a participant from Nikšić said.

Education, the field in which Naza works, is seen by the institution of the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms as a unique opportunity for the employment of Roma and Egyptian women. The Government and the relevant ministries have been asked

to allow teaching assistants for RE students to establish an employment relationship for an indefinite period.

“The goal of the recommendations was to move the occupation of associate in social inclusion RE in the field of education from the category of occasional and unforeseen jobs to the category of permanent and systematized jobs. The recommendations were made in 2020 and still have not been implemented,” the institution warned in an interview with CIN-CG.

### **Rare examples of employment in public administration**

The representative of the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, Sokolj Beganaj, told CIN-CG that apart from him, one person from the RE community works in the Ministries of Internal Affairs, one in the Ministry of European Affairs and Labor and one in the Ministry of Social Welfare, while three people work in the Ministry of Health “in the Health Centers Podgorica, Nikšić and Berane, as associates in the social inclusion of RE in the field of health.”

Beganaj adds that the Ministry of Education hires 20 to 22 mediators in the social inclusion of Roma and Egyptians in the field of education for nine months every school year on a job opening, but not all hired persons are members of the community.

The Capital City pointed out that, for example, three representatives of the RE population work as the associates of Mayor Ivan Vuković – an administrative associate of the Mayor’s Office, an administrative associate in the city office, and a technical support associate of the Information System Center.

The Capital City also has a special

Office that deals with important issues for the RE population.

The Secretary of the Municipality of Bijelo Polje, Haris Malagić, said that one member of the RE population has an indefinite-term contract in the Office for Roma in the Secretariat for Local Self-Government. In the Utility Company, one man has a permanent contract, while four have fixed-term contracts.

One member of the RE population works in the Municipality of Berane. The RE representative in the Secretariat for Culture, Sports, Youth, and Social Welfare of the Municipality of Nikšić efficiently communicates with the community in addressing their problems.

The Municipality of Nikšić points out that projects related to the employment of members of this population were implemented but that their work engagement lasted only during the project implementation. The Municipality stated that last year a project that envisaged the awarding of grants to entrepreneurs to train and employ a new workforce, with an emphasis on RE and PwD population, was launched. However, not a single member of the RE population was employed.

In Tivat, the procedure for drafting the “Local Action Plan for the Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians in the Municipality of Tivat for 2022–2026. has begun” but, as the Municipality stated, it was not adopted due to the unstable political situation in

the city.

However, the Secretariat for the Economy organized several trainings this and last year related to the promotion of employment, which include a competition for female entrepreneurship, measures to support agriculture, workshops on irrigation and soil cultivation...

Tivat Municipality said that no members of the RE population were employed in the administration; about 10 are employed in the Tivat Waterworks and at

least 20 in the Utility Companies.

“Both companies mainly employ members of the RE population as operative employees. Female members of the RE population are primarily employed in hospitality”; it is stated in answer to the question about gender representation.

“Based on observations made in work with the RE community, as well as through conversations with users of various forms of support, we conclude that Roma women, as members of the minority community in Montenegro, are in a worse position than men,” Dijana Anđelić, project coordinator at NGO HELP, told CIN-CG.

According to her, the main reason is that underage Roma girls enter extramarital unions more often than young men; they are often victims of violence in many ways and often suffer ill health.

In the previous period, the HELP organization implemented several



*Sokolj Beganaj (photo: gov.me)*



projects to support the employment of the RE population, especially Roma women. The German government and the European Union supported the projects in the amount of around 700,000 euros. HELP said that through their programs, they provided support to about 400 Roma women.

### **A unique business incubator in RE settlement**

When asked by CIN-CG how the position of members of the RE population can be improved in the employment process, Delija said that this can be achieved “by introducing employing subsidies for hiring a certain number of members of the RE nationality.”

Bearing in mind that a large number of adults in the community do not possess a certain level of qualifications that are competitive in the labor market, it is necessary, in Delia’s opinion, to develop employment models following the degree and knowledge they possess – craft jobs, agricultural jobs, etc. It is also necessary to encourage young people who have completed a certain level of education to be employed in their profession and connect them with employers.

The institution of the Ombudsman stated that affirmative action measures for the RE community would be implemented until the position of this community is sufficiently improved.

As one of the positive examples, they pointed out the opening of the first business incubators for members of the RE population in Konik. “The conditions for carpenters, hairdressers, beauticians, electricians, and seamstresses have been created to independently and legally earn in-

come for their families.”

The Red Cross of Montenegro (RCM) said that at the very beginning, the business incubator consisted of nine members of the RE population.

They had completed vocational training for vocations registered in the business incubator. After completing the training, RCM, in cooperation with partners, supported them during the registration process. The goal was for these persons to no longer be registered with the Employment Agency but to become independent entrepreneurs.

RCM also supported the furnishing and adaptation of working space. In addition, the members of the business incubator were exempted from paying utilities. They were also provided support for paying taxes for the first two years of engaging in craft activities.

Four members of the RE population are part of the business incubator, providing tailoring, hairdressing, and beautician services.

“We have to say that this was a big step forward because since they are no longer unemployed, they are not entitled to receive social security benefits. They showed the courage to make the economic contribution to their families on their own”, the RCM told CIN-CG.

### **The lowest rate of employed Roma women in the region**

The UNDP report from 2018 on the employment of members of this community in the region shows that Roma women in Montenegro have an employment rate that is five times lower than that of Roma men and eight times lower than neighboring non-Roma women.

Montenegro had the lowest employment rate of Roma women aged 15 to 65 in the region – only three percent. Among non-Roma women, that percentage was 24 percent.

That difference was minor in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the ratio was four to six and four to 15 percent. In Serbia, it was nine to 30 percent for non-Romani women; in Albania, 11 to 22 percent; and in North Macedonia, 13 to 26 percent.

The data showed that one out of two employed Roma women had no health or pension insurance.

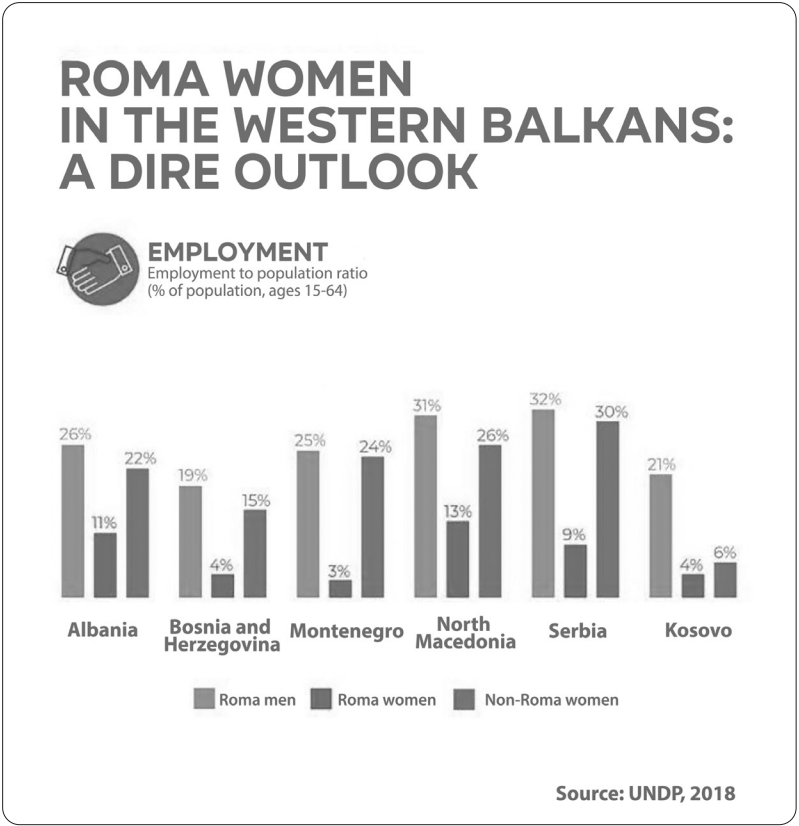
The previously published Roma Inclusion Index 2015 showed that, for example, in Montenegro, 11% fewer Roma are employed than others; if only Roma females are taken into

account, the gap is 39%.

Regarding informal work, it accounted for five percent of the total population; for Roma, it was 56 percent, and in the case of Roma women, 51 percent.

Regarding unemployment, compared to 20 percent of the general population, that percentage was 30 percent for Roma and 41 percent for Roma women. The long-term unemployment rate in the general population was 16 percent, among Roma, 24 percent, and among Roma women, 47 percent.

Montenegro had the lowest share of representatives of vulnerable groups in the companies – only four percent. At the regional level, that percentage is 17.



## HATE SPEECH TARGETING THE RE COMMUNITY:



# Legal restrictions as the only solution

  
Miloš Rudović

**No penalties for politicians spreading hate speech – they encourage discrimination and prejudice**

“Scabies,” “dirty,” and “arrogant garbage collectors” are just some of the comments that Montenegrin students, as well as some politicians, used to describe members of the Roma and Egyptian (RE) nationality. Comments on social networks pose a serious problem, and cases reported to the authorities generally remain unresolved. Interlocutors of the Center for

Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG) agree that this problem can be reduced when those who incite hatred towards the Roma community are held accountable.

The latest European Commission (EC) report pointed out that vulnerable groups, including the RE population, were increasingly subjected to discrimination, hate speech, and hate crimes.

“Roma and Egyptians are the most vulnerable and discriminated persons belonging to minorities,” the EC report states.

The Institution of the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms had its hands full this year.



The Protector acted on the complaint of the Roma Council, regarding the Viber communication of students of the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Montenegro, with the objection that it contains elements of discrimination and hate speech against Roma. The students' communication went public by sharing photos of the correspondence on the social network Instagram.

This institution determined that the disputed communication abounded with insulting and humiliating comments that ridiculed and labeled the Roma from the Konik settlement in Podgorica as "scabby" and "dirty," which, according to the opinion of the Deputy Protector Nerma Dobardžić, deepened the ethnic distance towards to this community. She assessed that the disputed communication is incompatible with the values of democracy and human rights and that, according to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, it cannot enjoy the protection of the right to freedom of expression. In the end, the institution of the Protector sent recommendations to the University of Montenegro to organize training on the prevention of hate speech for these students.

Also, this year, the Protector investigated the violation of human rights and freedoms on its initiative on the occasion of the project "Montenegro without division," which was implemented by the non-governmental organization Montenegrin Cultural Network (MCN). The reason for initiating the procedure is the presentation of Roma as workers of a utility company, while the others are shown in national costumes represented in Montenegro. This procedure is ongoing. MCN criticized those who noticed the omission, trying to justify themselves by allegedly not being able to find suitable costumes for the re-

presentatives of the Roma community. "Generally speaking, in the public space of Montenegro, offensive, discriminatory, and stigmatizing speech towards members of the RE population is more pronounced online – through comments and other types of posts on portals and social networks. Content and 'jokes' that still stereotypically portray the Roma, i.e., their way of life are often shared" the institution of the Protector stated that in previous cases, they failed to identify the perpetrators and point out the negative attitude towards this community.

### **So far no legal accountability for spreading hate speech**

Savo Niković, a member of the city assembly of the Democrats in Herceg Novi, stated at a recent session that "very arrogant garbage collectors of Roma nationality" are not doing their job well. This case was also reported to the Ombudsman. Niković then apologized for his comments, stating that he did not target members of the RE population but utility workers.

"As for public officials, they are expected to be promoters of the democratic principles of equality and inclusion and not to insult the dignity of members of minority nations in any way. Insisting on determining individual responsibility is also one of the ways to efficiently fight against all anomalies and illegalities in the public administration system. In addition, it is necessary to strengthen ethical discipline, and in cases where there are grounds and conditions for this, encourage misdemeanor and criminal responsibility", the institution of the Protector stated for CIN-CG.

Bojana Malović, a legal advisor at the NGO Action for Human Rights (HRA), said that politicians must be aware of

their influence on citizens, which makes the degree of responsibility for everything said in public discourse even greater.

“Statements like this of Mr. Niković should be sanctioned to show that such attitudes are contrary to the values of Montenegro, which are protected by its legal order. In this case, it is good and important that he immediately apologized”, she told CIN-CG.

The President of the Municipal Assembly of Herceg Novi, Ivan Otović, did not answer CIN-CG’s questions about whether he intends to raise the issue of responsibility for the defendant Niković’s comment.

The Statute of the Municipality of Herceg Novi stipulates that local officials must adhere to the code of ethics.

The party of Alekse Bečić did not answer whether the Ethics Committee of the Democrats will deal with Niković’s cases.

The President of the Municipality, Stevan Katic, told CIN-CG that emphasizing the nationality of utility company workers in Niković’s speech “does not reflect the attitude of Democratic Montenegro towards members of the Roma nationality and utility company workers.”

“His statement was reckless, which Niković himself admitted and apologized to members of the Roma nationality, stressing that it was not his intention to hurt and disparage anyone,” Katic said.

The head of the Center for Roma Initiatives (CRI), Fana Delija, said that this was not an isolated case and that even some MPs in the Parliament



*Andrija Đukanović  
(private archive)*

of Montenegro were not worried about the speech. “Some politicians publicly call with ‘a Gypsy woman for divination’. Milan Knežević, Member of Parliament, wrote on the social network Twitter: “Send the number of that gypsy woman who does fortune-telling. Maybe she knows something more.” Numerous examples could be cited, but the statements of religious leaders, such as, for

example, Metropolitan of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC) Mihailo, who described the signing of the Basic Agreement with the metaphor: “Gypsy work,” she stated, are worrying.

The project coordinator of the Roma youth organization “Walk with Us – Phiren Amenca” Andrija Đukanović, said that the increasingly frequent hate speech against Roma coming from public officials, religious leaders, and representatives of civil society is undoubtedly worrying and shows that the problem of discrimination against that community is prevalent even among those who should have greater accountability for what they said.”

If roughly speaking, we are ‘used’ to discrimination and hate speech among ordinary citizens, which does not mean that it is less dangerous, we are surprised that hate speech is present among those who should be aware of the harmfulness of this phenomenon. That is why we believe that Niković’s accountability is much more significant and that hate speech, in his case, can produce severe consequences”, Đukanović said for CIN-CG.

## Ban public action as in Belgium

Hate speech can be prosecuted criminally and as a misdemeanor. In Montenegro, two criminal offenses are applied on the basis of which one can be charged for hate speech – Inciting national, racial, and religious hatred and Racial and other discrimination.

The border between criminal acts and misdemeanors in this area is not precisely defined by law, the HRA representative points out, which creates problems in practice and leads to different qualifications of the same or similar expressions.

“Therefore, whenever hate speech has a greater reach, that is, when it can lead to more serious consequences, it should be qualified as a criminal offense. Thus, for example, for the criminal offense of Racial and other discrimination, whoever ‘propagates hatred or intolerance’ should be punished, and whoever ‘insults another’ on any grounds based on intolerance, including intolerance expressed in the form of nationalism, discrimination and hostility against minorities should be punished with a misdemeanor”, Malović states.

Malović points out that the results so far in the fight against hate speech in Montenegro are not at an adequate level and that no methods for an effective fight have been found, which is why it has become more frequent lately.

“Numerous cases

remain unprocessed, especially when hate speech comes from the political elites, which needs to be changed. Institutions must take a more decisive and harsh stance towards hate speech and adequately process each case. We are not talking here about imposing prison sentences at any cost. The problem can be solved with fines, community sentence, which have not been imposed so far, or, for example, with a court-ordered apology”, she states.

By amending the Law on Public Order and Peace and the Law on Misdemeanors, judges should be able to issue protective measure bans of phone calls, activities, or duties for six months or more for spreading hate speech. Malović states an example from Belgium, where the court declared a politician ineligible to stand for parliament for ten years for hate speech against immigrants, along with 250 hours of community work.

Delija points out that one of the ways to suppress hate speech is the active participation of the targeted individual or group in solving the issues arising from the topic of the address. In this

way, she points out, the group that is in an “unfavorable position” will be strengthened, and at the same time, the possibility of repeated victimization will be reduced.

Andrija Đukanović states that hate speech can be suppressed through sanctions and education. He believes that education is the best way for citizens to build the values of understanding and tolerance.

“It is essential that



*Bojana Malović  
(private archive)*

through the education system, children and young people are educated about Roma culture and tradition and thus overcome prejudices. The responsibility for suppressing hate speech lies with the media and public office holders who must take care of the way of communication,” he said, adding that an effective response is needed from institutions, primarily judicial ones, which must sanction cases of hate speech when they occur. According to him, harsher sanctions would have a preventive effect on suppressing future cases of hate speech because it would be clear that such a way of communication is unacceptable.

This problem is also present in the entire region. Through a regional project, the London-based organization Reporting Diversity Network (RDN) noted an increase in hate speech in the Western Balkans. One of the numerous cases is that a teacher at the economic high school in Tetovo made offensive comments on her Facebook account towards the Roma community during International Roma Day. In her post, she stated that she did not understand why the Roma people were celebrated. She further humiliated them by saying that they were lazy and wanted everything given to them without investing any effort.

“I do not understand why you feel so sorry for the Roma. There are some of them in my neighborhood, and I know them very well. If they had a little more power, they would make us – Albanians – disappear. [...] Nobody forbids their education; they do not want to work, and they want everything given to them on a plate,” she wrote.

RDN states that the fact that a high school teacher from North Macedonia makes such comments harms the public discourse in the country and encourages

hate speech against the Roma community. Moreover, as a figure who should represent authority to the students, the teacher could incite additional hatred among the younger generations of non-Roma students but also contribute to the Roma students feeling even more marginalized.

Suppressing discriminatory and hateful speech toward the RE population is impossible without an adequate response from the institutions. As noted by European officials, sanctioning those responsible and tolerating such comments create a problem.



## LIFE OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN THE ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITY:



# Pain that others don't see



Andrea Jelić

**A**lthough it is not officially recorded how many people with disabilities live in the Roma and Egyptian communities, some data indicate that the figures are worrying and the position of these people is very difficult

**E**ight-year-old twin brothers lie on an old mattress in a dilapidated house in the Podgorica neighborhood of Vrela Ribnička while swarms of flies fly around them. They don't speak, move, or smile. They cannot complain of pain. Cerebral palsy, from which they both suffer, was not treated in time.

Their lives are now seriously threatened.

They do not receive help from the state because they are stateless – they do not have citizenship or personal documents, even though they were born in Montenegro. Their father, Bidaim came from Kosovo 24 years ago. Most stateless persons in Montenegro are members of the Roma and Egyptian communities. They suffer multiple discrimination and cannot access health and social insurance, the right to disability benefits, or employment...

Bidaim failed to get documents in Montenegro because he was not registered in Kosovo and came without papers. "When I was born, my father didn't register me. He had an alcohol problem and didn't care about me. It



marked my family and me for the rest of my life because statelessness is hereditary. I don't know how to get the documents and help my children," he says for the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG).

A few minutes older brother is making slower progress. He eats only mushy food and is in great pain. He doesn't even communicate with his eyes in a stuffy room. Bidaim's second wife, Danijela, cares for them day and night. The biological mother abandoned the twins soon after birth.

Danijela and Bidaim have another son, only a few months old, and they are expecting a new baby. They need more than 30 euros per week to replace breast milk. They have no money for medicine and therapy for the twins.

"Once, the younger twin was very sick and urinating blood. We went to the hospital immediately, and I spent 12 days there with him. After that, I was neither alive nor dead. Sometimes we get medicines from some private pharmacies from the good people who work there, but they mostly turn us down because we don't have prescriptions," Danijela says.

They once received a referral from the doctor for the older twin to the Institute Dr. Simo Milošević in Igalo. They were happy about the opportunity and headed from Podgorica to the Institute. But they were sent back home because the child did not have a health card. "Then how did we get the referral in the first place? Problems with documentation are the main reason my children cannot receive treatment," Bidaim says.

If treatment starts in time, people with cerebral palsy, a neurological disorder that affects body movement and balance, can significantly improve their quality of life.

It is not officially recorded how many

people from the Roma and Egyptian community have disabilities in Montenegro. However, some data indicate that these numbers are worrying and that the situation of these people in communities that otherwise have many problems is even more complicated. It is the most difficult for those who do not have documents because they have no rights and cannot receive free treatment.

People with disabilities (PWD) in these communities are in an even bigger problem, Jovana Knežević, a project assistant at the Center for Roma Initiatives (CRI), told CIN-CG. "PWDs are at multiple risks, even becoming stateless due to lack of information, inability to visit institutions etc."

#### **A quarter of households have at least one person with a severe health condition or a disability**

In the "Analysis of the needs for establishing services for Roma and Egyptian children in Montenegro 2020", it is pointed out that a quarter of households have at least one person who suffers from a severe health condition or disability. Even 40 percent of them are in poor or lousy health. It is added that 40 percent of community members do not have health care.

The analysis also points to the problem of the need for more data. The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare does not keep records of beneficiaries of material benefits according to nationality and ethnicity. They explained for CIN-CG it was because the legal provisions regarding the prohibition of discrimination. "In the Information System of Social Welfare, there is no provision for records of beneficiaries based on nationality and ethnicity," the Ministry stated.

“If it is taken into account that people from Roma and Egyptian nationality are in a much less favorable position compared to others, then the implementation of special measures for that community would not only not be against the principle of equality, but it would contribute to the achievement of basic equality” the Analysis states.

According to the data provided by the local centers for social work for the Analysis, there are only seven beneficiaries of material allowances based on disability from the Roma and

2011 population census, a large number of members of the Roma and Egyptian communities live in those cities, and this is where their problems are most pronounced.

**A disabled girl was a victim of arranged marriage, sexual abuse, and other forms of exploitation**

Among the victims of arranged marriages, who are helped by the Center for Roma Initiatives (CRI), there is also a girl with disabilities whose uncle arranged marriage in Kosovo. CRI tackled the case in June this year.



*The house of the interlocutor from Vrela Ribnicka (photo: Andrea Jelić)*

Egyptian communities. One receives this allowance in Kotor, five in Nikšić, and one from the Center for Social Work, which covers Berane, Andrijevica, and Petnjica.

According to the Analysis, there are only four users of daycare centers for children with disabilities – three in Herceg Novi, one in the Day Care Center for the area of Berane, Andrijevica and Petnjica. These data do not reflect the actual state of affairs because many municipalities, such as Podgorica and Ulcinj, do not keep records of users by nationality, although according to the

This girl, with psychophysical development disorders, is 21 years old today. Some time ago, she was forced into marriage. She grew up with her mother and grandmother. When they passed away, her uncle took her away from Montenegro. He sold the apartment where she lived to neighbors without authorization. “According to the victim’s statement, her uncle arranged a marriage for her in Kosovo and for illegal marriage he

took several thousand euros from an unknown person. After being exploited in various ways due to her psychophysical condition, she was returned to Montenegro”, Knežević tells CIN-CG.

After arriving in Montenegro, the girl was left to her own devices. She was sleeping in front of the building where she used to live. Then, according to the testimony, she also suffered sexual abuse from different people.

After the CRI became involved in the case, the girl was placed safely, and the apartment that belonged to her after the death of her mother and grandmother

was returned to her. “We regularly have a psychological and educational conversation with her, and we support her in regulating legal documentation. She received an identity card and we are helping her receive a disability allowance,” Knežević said.

Such stories about people excluded by society often remain untold. They usually have no one to stand behind and help them.

Knežević warns that an additional problem for persons of Roma and Egyptian origin is the unresolved legal and health status.

### **Many rarely use health services due to the lack of personal documents**

“Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians 2021-2025” recorded a problem concerning the frequency of healthcare services, with almost a third of Roma and Egyptians rarely utilizing this type of service. Those who do not visit a doctor have specified the lack of necessary personal documents required for visiting a doctor as reasons therefor.

“For a group of people still obtaining documents to regulate their legal status, institutions resolve cases ad-hoc. Lack of access to ID cards dramatically affects the chances of getting health insurance by which this group is put in a challenging position,” it is stated in the document.

Bidaim works all day – repairing old washing machines and reselling iron and other recyclable waste. “Sometimes, I browse

waste containers when we have nothing to eat. I’m not ashamed because I have no options. Without documents, I can’t even receive social assistance,” he says.

They need the basic conditions for life. Children who can’t move have to use the outdoor bathroom.

Bidaim’s family turned to many institutions and organizations for help – the police, the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, and numerous organizations... The institutions have yet to answer their requests. So far, the NGO Phiren amenca – Walk with Us helped them the most. They have provided them with wheelchairs to make the children’s life a little easier.

“Due to unregulated legal status, these children are denied health care. They need special treatment that is unavailable to them,” Elvis Beriša, an executive director of the NGO Phiren amenca – Walk with Us, told CIN-CG.

According to the data of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, from the beginning of the implementation of the new Law on Foreigners, which also deals with the issue of statelessness, as of October 2022, stateless status was determined

for only nine people – six men, one of whom has since died, and three women. For 15 people, the procedure is ongoing.

These figures, however, do not reflect reality. According to the Case Study of the NGO Phiren amenca – Walk with Us, “Roma without regulated legal status during the COVID-19 pandemic” from 2021, out of over a thousand people included in the survey, as



*Marina Vujačić  
(photo: PR Centar)*

many as 198 adults and 216 children with unregulated legal status were detected.

“Most often, both parents have an unresolved legal status, but there are situations where the father or mother have status, but their children do not.” Although it was clear that the official data did not reflect the actual situation, the research revealed the devastating fact that children are at a higher risk of statelessness than adults.

According to the Directorate for Foreigners, Migration and Readmission head in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Dragan Dašić, Montenegro has mechanisms to find solutions to existing situations and prevent new cases of statelessness, as well as protect such persons. “Among them is the Law on Montenegrin Citizenship from 2008, which respected the principles of the European Convention on Citizenship, one of which is the avoidance of statelessness, as well as the recommendations of the Council of Europe on the prevention and reduction of statelessness, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on reducing statelessness...”, he states.

Dašić, however, warns that practice has shown that the response to requests for verification of citizenship status from other countries has been awaited for quite a long time. “That’s why we are breaking the legal deadlines for making decisions. Another problem is that even the answers of people without documents who apply are often not precise enough and do not contain the necessary information,” Dašić states.

According to him, at the International Conference on Statelessness, held in October 2019 in Geneva, our country, among other things, undertook to simplify the procedure for obtaining identification documents. “By introducing a court procedure to determine the time

and place of birth of persons who were born in Montenegro outside the health system, as well as by the new practice of entering in the register of children born who were abandoned by their mothers or whose mothers do not have identification documents, Montenegro has fully created the conditions for registration in the birth register for all those born on its territory,” Dašić explains.

However, in the Strategy on migration and reintegration of returnees in Montenegro, for the period 2021-2025, it is stated that the registration system in the registry of births, especially when it comes to persons outside the health system (stateless persons), is insufficiently developed. “Although, in theory, these persons had the right to citizenship of Montenegro or another state with which they have a connection, they could not register in the registry of births in Montenegro or the country of origin, which prevented them from participating in further registration activities and acquisition of other identification documents,” it is stated in this document.

A 2021 case study conducted by the NGO Phiren amenca – Walk with Us showed that 30 percent of the total respondents did not receive help from the state during the COVID-19 pandemic. All of them were persons without regulated legal status. “It is estimated that over 30,000 Roma are stateless due to the breakup of Yugoslavia... The mapping also confirmed what the official reports on Montenegro show – that the heredity of statelessness is rising. As Roma and Egyptian families generally have a lot of children, almost all children inherit an unregulated legal status. This means that in a few years, this problem will grow, and the number of stateless adults and children will multiply. Montenegro does not deal with this”, the study warns.



### **Children without personal documents have no right to social and health care**

“It is challenging for PWD members in this community to enjoy the support, especially considering the necessary paperwork to deliver to different addresses. Also, the socio-economic characteristics of the community are making the situation even more complicated. We especially emphasize the problem of inaccessibility to health care,” Beriša says.

A third of the children do not have health insurance, are not vaccinated, do not have a general practitioner, and do not regularly go for systematic examinations, according to the “Analysis of the needs for establishing services for Roma and Egyptian children in Montenegro from 2020”.

According to the Analysis, the right to social protection is almost unattainable for Roma and Egyptian children without citizenship and registration in birth registers. “The parents of these children do not have enough material and non-material capacities to independently regulate the legal status of the children in Montenegro. Even when it comes to persons with citizenship, obtaining the necessary documentation is still a problem due to the low level of education and the absence of services for providing immediate legal assistance”.

Respondents, who were contacted for the Analysis, and who are not beneficiaries of material rights through centers for social work pointed out that 72 percent of them sought help through those institutions but did not receive it, primarily due to unregulated legal status in Montenegro.

During the last year, nine Roma men and women contacted the Association of Youth with Disabilities of Montenegro

for help. “However, except for free legal counseling and available transportation, they did not contact us for other support services. For example, for support services for living in the community, the services of the Student Counseling Office or the Employment Service, although we know very few Roma men and women with disabilities who have a job”, Marina Vujačić, executive director of the Association, says for CIN-CG.

She points out that the development of support services and their availability to PWDs, especially Roma with disabilities, is at a low level or even non-existent.

Vujačić also notices a big problem in the state’s attitude towards the PWD, which she sees as a homogeneous group. “Their real needs and demands are not examined, which is why the measures most often do not contribute to real progress and improvement of the living conditions of PWDs, especially some groups among them, such as Roma with disabilities. Institutions should work more thoroughly in the field of improving their position. PWDs must be more involved in all processes that concern them, and it is not up to the state to judge what is important for them and what is not”.

Based on a 2016 study by the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, the average life expectancy of the Roma population is 55 years. “For the sake of comparison, the life expectancy of the majority population in Montenegro is 76 years, which means that when someone is born as a Roma and Egyptian in Montenegro, they are expected to live about 20 years less than those who do not belong to this community”, it is stated in that research.

The twins from the beginning of this article have less and less time. Until now, their parents have waited in vain for the



children's pain to lessen at least a little so that life would be more bearable. This community has many more sad life stories, but no one seems to hear them.

### **Good practices regulate the issue of statelessness**

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency's "Resolving Existing Major Situations of Statelessness" from August this year, Sri Lanka is cited as one of the best examples of a country tackling the long-standing statelessness problem through legal and political reform.

The study highlights the case of the statelessness of the Hill Tamils, part of the population that has long been stateless in Sri Lanka. They are descended from laborers brought over from India by the British between 1820 and 1840 to work on tea plantations. The majority of them have continued to live and work in tea plantation areas, though some have been displaced to northern parts of Sri Lanka as a result of the waves of conflict that have affected Sri Lanka since the 1980s.

Shortly after Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon) gained its independence, the 1948 Ceylon Citizenship Act and the 1949 Indian and Pakistani Residents Act were passed. Both laws discriminated against the Hill Tamils, who, according to the 1964 census, numbered around 168,000.

It was only in 2003 that legal solutions that provided for the granting of citizenship on an automatic basis and the introduction of a streamlined procedure were adopted. Thus, the problem of the citizenship of the Hill Tamils began to be solved.

In the case study of the NGO Phiren amenca – Walk with Us, "Roma without regulated legal status during the CO-

VID-19 pandemic" from 2021, it is stated that the system in Montenegro did not provide adequate ways of resolving the legal status for RE members. It needed to be clarified what documentation was required to be obtained to regulate the status. "The public call to resolve the legal status from 2015 had several shortcomings. Out of over 450 applications, only seven were accepted, while the others were rejected with an explanation that the legal status could be resolved in another country. Those people were not provided with any support but were unequivocally rejected. Another shortcoming is insufficient information among citizens. Many did not even know about the call, and they do not remember it being announced", the Study states.

According to Elvis Beriša, executive director of the NGO Phiren amenca – Walk with Us, Montenegro can solve the issue of statelessness by simplifying the process of obtaining legal status with permanent or temporary residence in the country. "Thus, stateless persons would be able to access state services (health and social insurance, disability benefits, right to employment). Hereditary statelessness should be stopped and all children should be registered in the birth register immediately after birth, based on the country of birth. "The child should receive the citizenship of the country in which they were born, without demanding the documentation from parents," Beriša concludes.

**ROMA WOMEN USUALLY DON'T DECIDE ABOUT THEIR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH:**



## They give birth and die young

Đurđa RADULOVIĆ

**A large number of pregnancies threatens the right to freedom of choice and the lives of women from the community**

**I**f I get pregnant again, I could die. That's what the doctors told my husband and me, Milana (32) says for the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG). She got pregnant 11 times, gave birth to five healthy children, and had six miscarriages. She is in poor health and seems malnourished.

She had her first son at 16, and today

she is breastfeeding her youngest child, born in 2021. She does not want any more children.

"If I could choose, I certainly wouldn't have given birth this many times," she says.

But she got married and had no choice.

"When you get married, you have to give birth."

Milana started using the contraceptive pill after her last delivery at the insistence of doctors, who consider her health condition serious. However, she does not take the pill regularly, which puts her at risk of becoming pregnant

again. Her husband, she says, does not use contraception.

“In most developing countries, the poorest girls and women have the least power to decide whether or when to become pregnant,” the United Nations (UN) reports stated.

The situation in Roma settlements in Montenegro proves that claim.

Three percent of women aged 15–49 who are currently married or in a union are satisfied with family planning with less frequent pregnancies, according to the study “Roma settlements in Montenegro” published by UNICEF in 2018. This percentage is also low among the general population but twice as high – six percent.

According to a statement by UN Women, reproductive rights allow women to have control over their bodies and decide when, with whom, and how many children they will have. Reproductive rights are human rights, and gender equality also depends on the extent to which women can exercise these rights, this organization states.

In 1997, the UN warned that denying reproductive rights kills millions of women worldwide, mostly in developing countries.

“Women of the Roma population usually do not come alone for examinations, but with one or more family members, which deprives them of their basic right to privacy. Young women generally don’t speak, but their mother-in-law or mother speaks for them,” Nataša Tomašević, a gynecologist-obstetrician from Podgorica Health Center, says in an interview for CIN-CG.

Tomašević worked for years at the Health Center in Konik, where the biggest number of members of the Roma population in Podgorica are treated.

“Women sometimes say they don’t want a pregnancy, an abortion is sche-

duled, and then they come a few months later to give birth because their partner or family didn’t allow them to have an abortion,” she explains.

According to the UN Office for Human Rights, the intervention of a third party as an intermediary between a patient and a doctor when it comes to health services is a violation of reproductive rights.

According to Tomašević, the situation is particularly complicated for women who have had multiple cesarean sections.

“Caesarean section is a risky procedure for every future pregnancy, and after a cesarean section, neither natural childbirth nor a large number of subsequent pregnancies is advised. It is advisable to wait longer until the next pregnancy”, she states.

However, Roma women often get pregnant quickly after cesarean section, which, as Tomašević warns, puts them at risk of uterine rupture, sepsis, and many other complications.

### **Uncontrolled pregnancies affect health**

According to a 2018 UNICEF survey in Montenegro, 25.4 percent of Roma and Egyptian girls aged 15 to 19 gave birth. In the general population, that percentage is one percent. According to this study, the fertility rate in Roma settlements is four and a half, meaning that most women have four or five children. For comparison, the fertility rate in the general population in 2018 is less than two, and most women have one or two children.

However, it is difficult to get accurate data on the reproductive health of Roma women, Sadija Holaj, a gynecologist-obstetrician from the Health Center in Ulcinj, explains in an interview

for CIN-CG.

“Roma patients often do not know their age or last menstrual period. Some say their current pregnancy is their sixth in a row, and there is no record of previous pregnancies anywhere,” Holaj explains.

Roma women generally do not know their Rh factor, even though they have given birth several times, Holaj says.

The Rh factor, important information about the blood group, can pose a risk to life if the mother’s and the child’s factor do not match. Then therapy is necessary.

Their pregnancies are not regularly controlled, so sometimes they just come to give birth. That is why there is a greater risk of emergency surgeries, and the maternity hospital in Ulcinj does not have an operating room, Holaj explains.

CIN-CG has already investigated the consequences of underage pregnancies on the health of Roma women.

UNICEF states that early childbearing is the most significant cause of death for girls aged 15 to 19.

“Due to psychophysical immaturity, uncontrolled pregnancy, and poor nutrition, Roma women are at high risk of premature births. Newborns are also at risk,” Holaj says.

Dr. Tomašević believes specific problems, such as hernias, occur in Roma women due to frequent pregnancies.

Statistics show that women from this population may expect poor health conditions, a high percentage of diseases, and a significantly shorter life

expectancy than the general population during their lifetime. The estimated life expectancy of the Roma population is 55 years, 21 years less than the average life expectancy in Montenegro, and 40 percent of members of the Roma-Egyptian population rate their health condition as poor, according to the 2021 analysis of the Institute for Public Health of Montenegro.

### **The high costs of birth-control**

According to the results of a 2018 UNICEF study in Roma settlements, only eight percent of women currently married or in a union use a modern method of contraception, 87 percent of them do not use any contraception, and six percent use the form of coitus interrupts or occasional abstinence.

In the general population in Montenegro, the percentage of women who do not use contraception (or their partner does not use it) is also high – 79 percent, according to UNICEF research.

Podgorica Health Center said there is only one type of contraception at the expense of the Health Insurance Fund, while the patient has to finance all the others.

“The type of contraception is recommended depending on the number of children, age, and general condition of the patient,” it is stated.

“As far as free contraception is concerned, we have one type of pill, but given the numerous contrain-



*Fana Delija  
(photo: PR Centar)*

dications for including this method, female patients mostly remain unprotected and very often have both legal and illegal abortions,” Berane Health Center stated.

“Women don’t prefer spirals and pills and are afraid of using it. They consider it unnatural and dangerous,” Tomašević points out.

Some women start using the birth-control, and then at the persuasion of their family, they stop, she explains.

However, Roma women who go abroad for a while, for example, to Germany, use contraceptives much more often than members of the community in Montenegro, she says.

Married women or those in a union living in urban areas are more likely to use any method of contraception than those living in other areas, as stated in a UNICEF study.

Through the workshops of the Family Center, the Red Cross has worked for more than ten years to improve knowledge about family planning as part of workshops on health care, Snežana Radenović from the Red Cross of Montenegro stated for CIN-CG.

Contraceptives available on the market are often unaffordable for Roma women, so the Red Cross, with the support of various donors, used to procure contraceptives. There is progress in informing women about general health, maintenance of pregnancy, and childbirth, Radenović says.

“Now, almost all the women from this population give birth in the hospital and go for gynecological examinations. When it comes to family planning and pregnancy, which are the result of social pressure, we don’t know enough about it, and it’s a topic that needs to be investigated for the majority population as well,” Radenović says.

## **Unplanned motherhood leaves serious consequences**

Early motherhood among Roma girls in Europe impoverishes their lives, puts them at risk of poor physical and mental health, and precipitates school dropouts, according to the 2020 study “Empowering Roma Girls’ Mattering through Reproductive Justice,” which refers to several EU countries. Conditions of poverty and the social exclusionary processes they suffer have a significant explanatory weight in their sexual and reproductive decisions, the study states.

Milana regrets getting married and having kids early.

“If I could go back in time, I would finish my education and get married later,” she says.

CIN-CG spoke with several young girls who recently married in the Roma settlement in Berane.

“I’m happy I got married here and ran away from a violent stepfather,” says 20-year-old Sabina (real name known to the editorial office), who has two children.

She lives in poverty, as before marriage. Her husband occasionally earns a little by doing various kinds of jobs. They live from day to day.

“I don’t have children, and I’m despondent about that,” 18-year-old Almedina (also real name known to the editorial office), who has been married for two years, tells CIN-CG. She hopes to become a mother soon. She still needs to finish elementary school. She doesn’t know what she would do except raise children.

Both girls say that their husbands are very jealous, and that’s why they rarely leave the house, and that the outside world is “a dangerous place where you can encounter problems that other men would cause them,” Almedina says.



These girls are under the strong influence of their husbands and the community, where the birth of numerous children is not called into question.

“Montenegrin society is patriarchal in general, and is expected in a marriage that a woman gives birth,” Fana Delija from the Center for Roma Initiatives (CRI) says for CIN-CG. The problem of patriarchy is even more pronounced among the Roma and Egyptian populations, she explains.

“The fact that having many children in a community is considered the greatest wealth is worrying.”

“It happens that girls are married very young and cannot stay pregnant, and they are most often returned to their biological family. Later, often, in the elderly years, they become mothers,” Delija says.

“Gender inequality is maintained in a large number of cultures through the patriarchal ideal of motherhood, which isolates women, deprives them of their identity in other areas assign them all the work of raising children and set unattainable standards”, is stated in the book “A Theory and Politic of Maternal Empowerment for the Twenty-first Century” by feminist Andrea O’Reilly.

In patriarchal societies, women who are mothers gain superiority and cultural prestige; she points out.

“Patriarchal concepts of women’s roles within the family mean that women are often valued based on their ability to reproduce. Early marriage and pregnancy, or repeated pregnancies spaced too closely together—often as the result of efforts to produce male offspring because of the preference for sons—has a devastating impact on women’s health with sometimes fatal consequences,” it is stated in the UN Office for Human Rights.

Women are also often blamed for

infertility, suffering ostracism, and being subjected to various human rights violations.

Milana hopes that she will not get pregnant again. For now, it’s left to chance rather than severe family planning. “I cannot say no to my husband; he will be jealous. I will use the pills until they disappear”, she concludes, apparently ready for all the difficulties that she could face if gets pregnant again.

### **‘Virginity testing’: Concerning practice and violation of human rights**

“Virginity testing,” a violent and painful procedure banned worldwide, is still carried out in Montenegro, as confirmed by representatives of health institutions for CIN-CG.

Parents sometimes bring their daughters to a gynecologist to check whether the girl had sexual relations before marriage.

“Roma families who bring minor girls for a gynecological examination to determine whether they are ‘ready for marriage’ are referred to a social worker – both the girl and the parents,” Jelena Knežević, a doctor from the Podgorica Health Center, told for CIN-CG.

“During the examination, we consider the rights of the patients and the confidentiality of the test results. We respect the decisions of patients”, she says.

They did not answer additional questions regarding the practice of this procedure, which violates human rights.

The CIN-CG received a similar answer from the Health Center in Berane: “Girls and boys are indeed brought here to be checked for ‘marriage readiness.’ Not that often, but it happens. Providing such information is strictly confidential, even for a girl of only 13-14 years.

Parents and guardians cannot receive such information from us”.

From the answers above, it remains to be seen to whom the information after the examination is intended and why this harmful practice is carried out in the first place.

“These kinds of examinations are usually done in situations where rape is suspected,” Dr. Tomašević said after CIN-CG asked why this examination is performed.

“The Ministry of Health does not know that virginity testing is being carried out in health centers in Montenegro. No legal regulation in the health care field prescribes the implementation of this examination, nor does it fall under the health care domain. If anyone has such knowledge, they are obliged to report it to the competent authorities for further action”, the Ministry of Health stated for CIN-CG.

CIN-CG addressed the Institution of the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms of Montenegro (Ombudsman) with a request to comment on this practice of violating human rights, but there was no official response.

“We are taken aback because we didn’t know that such a worrying practice was carried out in Montenegro. This certainly requires further investigation”, Duška Šljivančanin, adviser to the ombudsman, said in a telephone conversation.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN, in an interagency statement “Eliminating Virginity Testing” from 2018, appealed to governments to prohibit all forms and methods of virginity testing and to medical personnel not to carry out this practice under any circumstances.

“Performing this harmful and medically unnecessary test violates several human rights and ethical standards,

including the fundamental ethical principle: “first, do no harm.” Furthermore, it is stated that “In the evaluation of victims of rape, the test is likely to cause additional pain, which leads to re-traumatization and re-victimization “and that “many women suffer from serious physical, psychological and social consequences due to this practice, as well as that “in extreme cases, women or girls may attempt suicide or be killed in the ‘name of honor.”

In addition, no scientific evidence that any “virginity test” can prove whether or not a woman or girl has had vaginal intercourse, explains WHO/ UNICEF document. “The concept of virginity is not a medical or scientific term” but “a social, cultural and religious construct. The disproportionate social expectation that girls and women should remain “virgins” until marriage is rooted in stereotyped notions of female sexuality that have been harmful to women and girls globally,” the document states.

**THE GOVERNMENT DOES NOT SUFFICIENTLY ENCOURAGE THE ENROLLMENT OF MEMBERS OF THE ROMA POPULATION INTO FACULTIES:**



## Obstacles on the way to the university



Miloš Rudović

**The Law on Higher Education does not offer affirmative action for Roma and Egyptian students**

“I could have been in the fourth year of my studies instead of the first... I almost gave up. I was demotivated and discouraged that I would not be accepted at any university. And I believe that if my peers had encountered this problem, they would have given up immediately”, Roma woman Violeta Hajrizaj says for the Center for

Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG).

Before getting a scholarship at the Faculty of State and European Studies, she tried three times to enroll in other faculties, two of which were for the journalism major at the Faculty of Political Sciences.

Apart from scholarships of 150 euros per month and a dormitory, the state of Montenegro cannot boast of special support measures for students from the Roma and Egyptian population. Instead of support, there are more obstacles to the university.

“There are many obstacles, but one

of the biggest is the lack of affirmative action. This positive discrimination is still applied to people with disabilities, and the Roma and Egyptian community does not have that right”, Nardi Ahmetović, a student of the Faculty of Philology in Nikšić, said for CIN-CG.

The Law on Higher Education stipulates that affirmative action is applied to persons with disabilities when enrolling in a study program and that they are exempted from paying school fees at both state and private institutions. The Law does not include the Roma and Egyptian community, despite numerous studies showing that they are among the most discriminated citizens in society.

Affirmative action is defined as a set of policies and practices that give certain advantages to specific groups, especially members of ethnic communities, that have faced injustices and been excluded from essential processes throughout history.

This possibility is also stated in the Law on Minority Rights and Freedoms, but not in the same way as in the Law on Higher Education.

As a health mediator, Ahmetović wanted to enroll in Social Work at the Faculty of Political Science. However, as he says, he received information from the Faculty representative that their hands are tied, and they cannot apply the affirmative action policy.

That is why Ahmetović decided to study Italian language and literature at the Faculty of Philology instead of Political Science.

“If we want to have young Roma and Egyptians who will advocate for a better position of their community and the entire society, we must give them the opportunity for education and advancement,” he said.

The Dean’s Office of the Faculty of Political Sciences said that when con-

sidering enrollment requests based on the principle of affirmative action, they are guided by the Law on Higher Education. They added that from 2006 to now, the Faculty enrolled seven students, members of the Roma and Egyptian population, according to the principle of affirmative action.

Last year, the Government adopted a new Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians 2021-2025, which foresees an increase in the number of educated members of the Roma and Egyptian community at all levels.

The Ministry of Education was obliged to submit to the Government at the end of last year the Draft Law on Amendments to the Law on Higher Education, which would include an initiative related to the implementation of affirmative action for students of the Roma and Egyptian population, as can be seen from the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy. This Draft has not yet been submitted to the Government.

The Ministry told CIN-CG that a new Law on Higher Education would be drafted according to the work program.

“The draft that was done earlier is not valid. In the coming year, a new working group should be formed which will be in charge of amending the Law on Higher Education, where the question of introducing affirmative action for Roma and Egyptian students will be considered with special attention”, the Ministry of Education stated.

The Law on Higher Education stipulates that undergraduate and master’s students at public institutions do not pay tuition fees, while doctoral students at public institutions do. At private institutions, students of all study cycles pay a study fee.

In practice, this means that if a student at a public institution, regardless of

nationality, completes the academic year, the study fee is not paid. Still, in the case of a renewal, the study fee has to be paid. “While at private institutions, all students, except for persons with disabilities, pay a fee for studying,” the Ministry responded.

The Ministry of Human and Minority Rights told CIN-CG that they are advocating for the introduction of affirmative action when enrolling in the first year of studies and the exemption from tuition fees at all state and private faculties in the country. The analysis done before creating the Strategy for the field of education showed that “there is significant progress, but not yet sufficient for the complete integration of this community.”

This Ministry says that the big gap in secondary education compared to the number of children from the Roma and Egyptian communities attending primary school is worrying. “The biggest gap is when it comes to attending higher education institutions by members of the Roma and Egyptian community since a minimal number of citizens of the Roma and Egyptian community enroll in higher education institutions,” the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights stated.

As a form of affirmative action, the Ministry of Education has been paying scholarships of 150 euros per month to all Roma and Egyptian community students to increase the number of students. Scholarships are paid regardless of whether students from the Roma and Egyptian community attend private or



*Violeta Hajrizaj  
(private archive)*

state university.

For this academic year, 14 students from the Roma and Egyptian communities applied for the scholarships.

“At the University of Montenegro in the academic year 2021/22, seven RE students were enrolled, while in 2022/23 there were four RE students. We want to point out that “most of the enrolled students left their stu-

dies shortly after enrollment, ” the Ministry of Education stated.

Vice-Rector for Education of the State University Veselin Mićanović told CIN-CG that 19 students who declared themselves as members of this community enrolled at the state university in the last six years.

Most of them are at the Faculty of Philology – seven, four at the Faculty of Political Sciences, three at the Faculty of Philosophy, two at the Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management, two at the Faculty of Economics, and one at the Faculty of Medicine. At the other faculty units, no enrolled students declared themselves as students of this population. At the same time, the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Civil Engineering do not maintain a database based on students’ ethics or any other affiliation.

To increase the number of students from the RE community, the vice-rector for education says that the University of Montenegro has exempted students from this population from tuition fees. They are also trying to have an affirmative influence by implementing solutions from the Law on Minority Rights and Freedoms.



The Law on Minority Rights and Freedoms stipulates that the University of Montenegro, at the proposal of the Council of the minority, can enroll at the beginning of each academic year a certain number of students belonging to minorities, following the University statutes.

“University of Montenegro provides enrollment in each study year based on the principle of affirmative action so that the total number of places in each study program increases by one percent. Therefore, for all interested candidates, if they were below the enrollment quota, we applied the principle of affirmative action in order to stimulate them to continue their education”, Mićanović said.

When asked whether the State University intends to initiate changes to the Law on Higher Education to introduce affirmative action, Mićanović said the University would advocate for its implementation. “In current practice, as stated, the above principle was applied to encourage members of the RE population to continue their education,” he said.

### **Vasfija's average is 9.12**

Private universities have different affirmative actions for students from this community.

As of this academic year, the University of the Mediterranean has its first student from the Roma population enrolled in master's studies at their Faculty of Law.

“As until this year, we did not have a single student who was a member



*Nardi Ahmetović  
(photo: facebook)*

of the RE population there was no real need to regulate this issue by passing special acts that foresee possible financial and other benefits. Of course, in case of greater interest in the future, we do not rule out that, in addition to applying affirmative action for persons with disabilities, we will also have special entry requirements for students from this

population”, Acting General Secretary Ivana Nikolić told CIN-CG.

Tusha Vasfije has been studying since last academic year at the Faculty of Business Economics and Law at the University Adriatik. “In the first year of her studies, she showed great commitment to the education process, passing all the exams provided for in the plan and program for the mentioned year of study, with an average of 9.12. The diligent work of the colleague mentioned above did not go unnoticed, so this year she also became a scholarship recipient of the Municipality of Bar”, the University told CIN-CG.

Vasfije is also active in extracurricular activities and within the NGO “Young Roma.”

At the Faculty of Management in Herceg Novi, two students from this population are enrolled in the first year of basic academic studies – Marija Ivanova and Alija Žabelj- and one student in the second year – Mehmet Berisha.

“The faculty provided the students mentioned above with a 10 percent tuition discount, as well as the possibility of deferred payment in installments depending on the student's financial capabilities,” the University stated.

Coordinator for study programs of the Faculty of State and European Studies Igor Striković said the faculty awards scholarships to students who belong to vulnerable social groups.

The scholarship covers all tuition fees for one study year, textbooks for every subject, applications for exams, issuance of certificates and other documents, and all rights granted to students following the Law on Higher Education.

In addition, Striković pointed out that cooperation and help between students is an additional satisfaction for educational progress and an incentive to achieve the best possible results.

The scholarship holder of this faculty Violeta Hajrizaj is the interlocutor of CIN-CG from the beginning of the article. The fact that she failed to enroll in journalism studies did not prevent Hajrizaj from pursuing a career in journalism on the first Roma portal in Montenegro, RomaNet.

### **Citizens support affirmative action for RE**

The results of the Balkan Barometer regional survey showed that the citizens of Montenegro are increasingly supporting affirmative action for members of the RE community to enroll in universities.

Ahmetović hopes that the Law on Higher Education will be changed soon.

“I am sincerely sorry I couldn’t enroll in the Faculty of Political Science, but I hope affirmative action will be in force next year. I believe banning affirmative

action will demotivate the youth of RE communities because, despite their desire, they remain unequal members of society, second-class citizens”, Ahmetović says.

Hajrizaj hopes so as well.

“There are few of us, but the number grows by at least one or two every year. We should be given an opportunity and a chance”.

### **Registered at the Employment Agency with an academic degree**

In the Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians 2021-2025, prepared by the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, one of the goals is to increase the number of RE members who enroll in higher education institutions on an annual basis.

The goal is to increase from last year’s four to eight next year and to reach 15 people a year in 2025.

The document also indicates a negative correlation between the level of education and getting married before the age 18 among women. Namely, this share includes 28% of women in primary school or a lower education level and decreases to 1% among those with higher education.

“It is necessary to undertake certain activities and use the principle of affirmative action so that educated persons from the Roma and Egyptian communities who are registered at the Employment Agency do not have to wait long for employment,” is one of the recommendations from the final report on the implementation of the



*Veselin Mićanović  
(photo: UCG)*

Strategy for Social Inclusion of the RE in Montenegro 2016-2020.

In 2022, only one person with acquired higher education (bachelor's degree in pedagogy) was on the register of unemployed persons. That person declared a member of the RE population and was registered at the bureau of labor in Niksic.

The Employment Agency said that they are implementing active employment policy measures through programs intended for young unemployed persons, unemployed women, especially vulnerable groups of unemployed persons, as well as unemployed persons who do not have the knowledge, skills, and work experience necessary for an open labor market. The RE population, a sensitive group of unemployed persons, participates in active employment policy programs. This year, 15 people from the population are participating in that program, 10 of whom are women.

“As far as the direct creation of jobs, which is carried out through public work programs, seven members of the Roma population are employed, six members of the RE population are on-the-job training, while one person is included in the acquisition of professional career program and one person in the key skills acquisition program,” the Agency stated in reply to CIN-CG.

**VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING INVISIBLE TO THE JUDICIARY:**



## Sentences are rare and below a mandatory minimum

Maja BORIČIĆ

**O**nly two out of 22 final decisions for trafficking refer to begging and arranged marriage

**T**he crime was committed ruthlessly, especially since the perpetrator is the parent of the injured party. He was convicted before – for violence against his wife and children, selling the youngest child in exchange for a motor vehicle, sexual exploitation of his wife, forcing his and other children to beg...

This is the essence of the first final verdict for human trafficking related to forced begging. The judgment was only passed in 2020. The convict forced his

minor children to beg for years. If they refused, he would abuse them and their mother. He would take all the money they beg for himself.

In the last 19 years since human trafficking has been included in the Montenegrin Criminal Code (CC), only two out of 22 final convictions for trafficking refer to begging and arrange marriage. Both verdicts were below the legal minimum, the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG) found out by analyzing court practice in that area.

In the Criminal Code (CC), among other things, it is written that anyone who “recruits, transports, transfers, surrenders, sells, buys, mediates in the sale, conceals or keeps another person for his/her exploitation, a commission

of criminal activity, sexual exploitation, begging, use for pornographic purposes, entering into an illegal marriage...” commits the criminal offense of human trafficking. Penalties range from one to 15 years in prison, depending on the type of crime committed, and the most severe penalties are prescribed when the victims are minors.

Although there are few legally binding court verdicts, we are witnesses that there are many more cases of the criminal offense of human trafficking in Montenegro and that the perpetrators and the victims are often Roma.

Roma children beg on the streets every day. This represents the most widespread form of economic exploitation of children. In addition, arranged marriages are treated as part of Roma tradition, even though they are a form of human trafficking. Such cases generally pass “under the radar” of judicial institutions.

“For more than a decade, we have been pointing out unequal access to justice for victims of child arranged marriage and begging. These are two social problems that require a strong legal response from the state in their control and prevention”, Fana Delija, director of the Center for Roma Initiatives (CRI), told CIN-CG.

She emphasizes that the most common response of the judicial authorities is that there is no evidence and assesses that it is a case of poor pre-trial hearings and negligence during the investigative actions of the police and the prosecution.

“When evidence is not collected, or they are collected with a delay in its collection and execution during the process, it is expected that there will be a small number of proceedings because the perpetrator is expected to confess to the crime, to say that they

took or gave money, that is, that they deliberately exploited the child,” the director of CRI emphasizes.

That is why, Delija adds, the legal system must focus on other evidence, such as secret surveillance, undercover investigators, and more severe monitoring of information received from the civil sector.

“It should not be taken lightly that it is just ‘what Roma people do.’ It is something that society must deal with, and every child is important”, Delija says.

### **Both times, the courts reduced the punishment for the “returnees”**

The Criminal Code (CC) provides for at least ten years in prison for forced begging, for which the father of four minor children from the beginning of the article was accused. He was sentenced to ten years by the judgment of the High Court, but the Court of Appeal changed the sentence to eight.

The judicial panel of the Appellate Court, which included Zoran Smolović, Milenka Žižić, and Dragiša Rakočević, reduced the prison sentence by two years, justifying the decision by saying that the court that ruled for ten years did not give due importance to the established mitigating circumstances, i.e., family circumstances. Among other things, the number of family members abused by the convicted person was one of the reasons for the Appellate court to reduce the sentence below the legal limit.

Before this verdict, the accused was convicted five times for the criminal acts of domestic violence, rape, intermediation in prostitution, neglect, and abuse of minors...

The courts determined him low prison sentences in almost all of these cases. In one of the earlier verdicts,



he was convicted because he sold his newborn child in exchange for a car. For that, he got only ten months in prison! And the offense was not treated as human trafficking but as the criminal offense of changing family status.

He received a sentence of 76 days in prison earlier also for abusing and forcing his children to beg and for violence and forcing his wife into prostitution. For the Montenegrin prosecutor's office, this was not human trafficking but neglect and abuse of minors, domestic violence, and mediation in prostitution.

"When she refused to have sexual intercourse with the person he brought, he hit her on the back with a wooden broomstick," it is stated in the verdict.

The second final verdict for human trafficking, which refers to forced marriage, ended with a sentence of two years in prison. However, according to the Criminal Code, this type of criminal offense is punishable by at least three years.

#### **This decision became final in 2021.**

The defendant abused his twelve-year-old daughter and forced her into marriage in exchange for 5,000 euros.

The judicial panel, which included Vesna Kovačević, Vesna Jovetić, and Srđa Vujović, concluded that unemployment and poor financial condition should be taken into account as mitigating circumstances for the convicted person, so they reduced his sentence below the minimum sentence established by the law.

The convicted person is also an "old lag." The court imposed him a light penalty several times before. He was sentenced to 14 months for aggravated theft and illegally possessing weapons and explosive materials. A year later, he received a lesser sentence for a repeated

criminal offense – one year in prison.

Apart from these punishments for acts of begging and arranged marriage, in the last four years, Montenegrin courts have ruled only twice for human trafficking. One verdict of one year and two months in prison was brought as a settlement for the offense of human trafficking and mediation in prostitution. For years, the convicted woman forced several people into prostitution and took money from them. In another verdict, the mother and stepfather of the minor girl were sentenced to 15 and 17 years in prison for repeatedly raping the girl and forcing her into prostitution.

#### **No convictions for forced marriages and begging until 2020**

In the Analysis of court decisions from 2004 to 2019 in cases of human trafficking in Montenegro by the Supreme Court (SC), it was pointed out that sexual exploitation is the most dominant form of exploitation of victims. Other types of exploitation, such as organ removal, forced begging, and forced marriage, were not registered.

This Analysis stated that there were 18 human trafficking cases in which Montenegrin courts issued final decisions. Human trafficking trials in all courts lasted, on average, two years, four months, and two days.

The longest prison sentence was 17 and 15 years, while the shortest was six months.

The study concludes that men usually perpetrate human trafficking. Specifically, men accounted for 42 and women for six of the 48 defendants.

The highest percentage of victims of human trafficking are women: "Out of the 39 victims identified in the judgments, 26 were female, and 13 were male," it was pointed out in the Analysis.

That document states that of the 48 defendants against whom criminal proceedings were conducted, 40 were sentenced to prison terms, and seven were acquitted. The charges against one were dismissed due to the prosecutor's withdrawal from criminal prosecution.

The Analysis shows that convictions accounted for most of the court decisions – 40 out of 48 defendants were found guilty and sentenced to imprisonment. Seven defendants were acquitted, and the case against one defendant was dismissed because the prosecutor abandoned the prosecution.

Montenegrin nationals accounted for most (31 out of 48) of the individuals tried for human trafficking. Next came Serbia (8) and Kosovo (7) citizens. One defendant was a Ukrainian national, and one was stateless.

Most human trafficking victims were Montenegrin nationals, and eight of the 39 victims of human trafficking were underage.

“Although most human trafficking victims were Montenegrin nationals, the analysis shows that most of the cases had a cross-border dimension,” the Analysis states.

It is added that Victim Support Services are not fulfilling their role in practice, presumably due to a lack of awareness of their existence among the general public and the victims.

### **A more robust judicial response to human trafficking needed**

In the latest Report of the US State Department on human trafficking from 2022, it is pointed out that Montenegro did not fully meet the minimum standards in several key areas.

It highlights that fewer cases have been investigated and fewer suspects prosecuted than in previous years. The

### **Supreme Court: Avoid penalty mitigations**

The Supreme Court (Supreme Court) pointed out in its Analysis that the Courts have also been applying the penalty mitigation institute frequently in seven cases (concerning 17 defendants, which “should be avoided given the gravity of the crime of human trafficking and comparative law practice.”

The Analysis showed that the courts considered the following extenuating circumstances during sentencing: the defendants' circumstances, including their family circumstances/marital status, parenthood), health, age, unemployment, and poor financial standing). The Analysis adds that although the defendants' circumstances are essential, courts tend to provide general and insufficiently reasoned explanations for their decisions.

“It seems that Montenegrin courts appear to automatically refer to such circumstances not only when they sentence human traffickers but other criminal offenders as well,” the Analysis of the Supreme Court concludes.

government decreased victim protection efforts, including allocating fewer resources to the shelter, identifying fewer victims, and lacking efforts to proactively identify victims among asylum-seekers, irregular migrants, and seasonal workers.

It is also noted that children, especially Roma, are exploited in forced begging.

“Romani girls from Montenegro reportedly have been sold into marriages and forced into domestic servitude in Romani communities in Montenegro and, to a lesser extent, in Albania, Ger-

many, and Kosovo,” the report states.

The Report also criticizes the Basic State Prosecutor’s Office’s (BSPO) work, with the assessment that the Higher State Prosecutor’s Office (HSPO) should initially review all trafficking-related cases and refer cases not deemed as trafficking to BSPO.

“In previous years, Basic State Prosecutor’s Offices (BSPO) stopped some potential trafficking investigations when they secured enough evidence to prosecute under Article 210 (brokering in prostitution) and did not investigate for more subtle forms of coercion or seek additional evidence through specialized investigative techniques,” the report states.

US State Department observers continued to report that the government assigned lawyers with little or no experience to victims, including lawyers with expertise in only civil proceedings, not criminal proceedings.

It is also emphasized that there are no Romani language interpreters on the official list of court interpreters.

“Judges did not issue restitution in criminal cases or seize assets and property from traffickers towards restitution and/or compensation. Similarly, courts have not awarded victims compensation in civil proceedings, partly due to civil proceedings lasting two to five years, discouraging victims from seeking compensation,” the Report concludes.

The latest Report of the European Commission (EC) points out that people in the Roma community, particularly women and children, remain at high risk of trafficking in human beings.

“Montenegro still needs to improve its capacity to prevent trafficking in human beings,” the EC report emphasizes.

It is clarified that a more robust criminal justice response to trafficking

in human beings needs to be provided, with shorter legal proceedings, more deterrent sentences, and systematic confiscation of the proceeds of crime.

“Montenegro still needs to improve support to victims in trafficking-related trials,” the document added.

In the absence of specialized lawyers and appropriate legal advice, it is pointed out that many victims do not seek the free legal aid to which they are entitled.

It is emphasized that in the absence of specialized lawyers and proper legal advice, many victims do not request the free legal aid they are entitled to.

“In the context of the ongoing Russian war of aggression on Ukraine and the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in Montenegro, additional efforts by the Montenegrin authorities are needed to prevent the risks of trafficking in human beings,” the Report concludes.

According to the last census from 2011, 8,305 members of the Roma and Egyptian population live in Montenegro, and half are women.

Research conducted by the Center for Roma Initiatives (CRI) back in 2014 showed that in Montenegro, as many as 72.4 percent of the Roma and Egyptian population get married between 12 and 18. Those under the age of 16 are forbidden to marry under the CC, and parental consent is required until they reach adulthood.

Although this research was conducted in 2014, interlocutors from the Roma community say that not much has changed, partly because punishments for these crimes are rare, and the victims from the community are mainly invisible to the Montenegrin judiciary.

**DOUBLE DISCRIMINATION REMAINS A PROBLEM  
IN MONTENEGRO AND THE REGION:**



# LGBT Roma – Invisible in the community

Miloš Rudović

**L**GBT+ Roma are invisible, and thus their existence is somehow denied both in the Roma and the LGBT+ community, says transgender Roma woman Ana Jovanović. The Draft Law on the Protection of Equality and Prohibition of Discrimination recognizes more severe forms of discrimination, including multiple and intersectional discrimination

**R**acial discrimination is the first form of discrimination they encounter, and later in life they face discrimination based on sexual

orientation or gender identity. This is briefly the experience of Montenegrin and Balkan Roma men and women in the LGBT+ community.

“All this makes it difficult for Roma men and women to fit into a society prone to discrimination, so it very often happens that they have to hide at least one part of their identity and use it as a strategy for survival. LGBT+ Roma are invisible. Thus, their existence is somehow denied both in the Roma and the LGBT+ community,” 33-year-old Ana Jovanović, a transgender Roma woman, told the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG).

The latest European Commission report shows that the Roma and LGBT+,

along with people with disabilities, are the most vulnerable groups in Montenegro and that discrimination and hate speech against them are rising. The situation is not much different in the region.

The CIN-CG interlocutor loved to play with dolls, wear her mother's clothes and act like a girl when she was growing up. The mother never had a problem with it, but her stepfather disapproved of it, so she was taught that it was not how boys should behave.

Exactly ten years ago, this now 33-year-old woman from Novi Sad had a traffic accident when she lost her voice due to shock. Her mother noticed that she was becoming depressed and different. In the meantime, as Ana recovered from the accident, they began to talk about her feelings. "Please tell me if you are gay, I know that losing your voice is not just because of the accident," her mother said. Ana replied that she was not gay but a trans woman and her mother accepted her identity.

Although she has the support of her mother, Jovanović is often faced with double discrimination.

"The fact that I am a Roma woman and a transgender person in Serbia is enough to be discriminated in all segments of life: work, housing, health, interpersonal relationships, and the list could go on even further. However, aware of this risk, I took all possible steps to protect myself from discrimination and surrounded myself with people who support me, who come from both the Roma and LGBT+ communi-

ties," she said.

Currently, she experiences minor discrimination in the field of employment because she works for a non-governmental organization that deals with the protection of human rights.

"However, when it comes to health and education, I share the fate of every LGBT+ person, except that I have another additional burden: the color of my skin. Therefore, all the problems that come with the transition process and the legal entanglements of changing the name on the degree are absolutely the same, and I experience the same pain as all transgender people in Serbia. Given that I have just entered the transition process and am still waiting for the change of documentation I expect to face more extreme cases of discrimination in future because we live in a transphobic country," she said.

The Ministry of Human and Minority Rights is aware of the increasing presence of homophobia and racism.

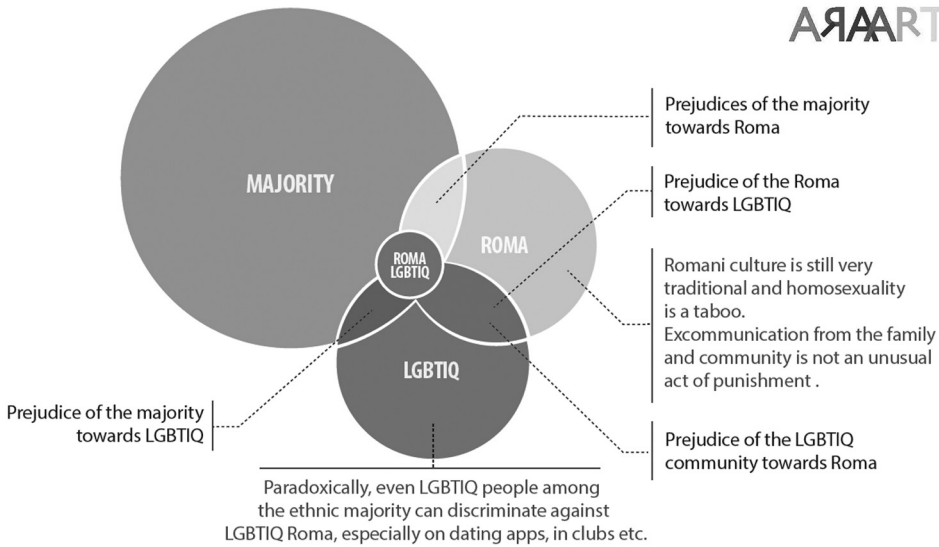
"The historical courses of racism and homophobia are quite similar. In both cases, they refer to marginalized groups. As such, they cannot influence the creation of social policies and the improvement of the societal position," the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights responded.

They also added that anti-Gypsyism and multiple discrimination are the main reasons for their social exclusion. In contrast, the reasons for their unfavorable position are high unemployment, low school enrollment, completion rates, and generally poor living



*Nerma Dobardžić Kurti  
(photo: ombudsman.co.me)*





conditions.

The Ministry is working on the new Law on the Protection of Equality and Prohibition of Discrimination. The draft of the new Law recognizes more severe forms of discrimination, including multiple discrimination, that is, discrimination against the same person or group of persons on several grounds that can be separated. In addition, intersectional discrimination is recognized, i.e., discrimination against the same person or group of persons on several grounds that interact so that they cannot be separated.

This Draft Law also foresees high penalties for perpetrators of severe forms of discrimination, ranging up to 3,000 euros for individuals and up to 30,000 euros for legal entities.

“We believe that the new Law on the Protection of Equality and Prohibition of Discrimination will be a strong backbone, which will enable us to fight more decisively against all forms of discrimination, and especially against severe forms of discrimination such as multiple and intersectional discrimination,” the Ministry stated.

The deputy protector of human rights and freedoms, Nerma Dobardžić Kurti, told CIN-CG were no cases of double discrimination based on belonging to the Roma and Egyptian communities and the LGBT+ population reported to the Ombudsman.

“Members of the Roma community and the LGBT+ community represent one of the vulnerable groups that are most exposed to the risk of discrimination,” she said, adding that the latest research by the Center for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM) speaks in support of this.

In the research presented in December, it is stated, among other things, that the most common hate speech is against Roma and Egyptians, women, and LGBT+ people.

The NGO Center for the Affirmation of the RE Population (CAREP) executive director, Nardi Ahmetović, told CIN-CG that “the Roma community is highly patriarchal and since discrimination against the LGBT+ community is a taboo, members of the LGBT+ community are afraid to come out. We also believe that some people are members of our organi-

zation and the LGBT+ community. As an organization dealing with human rights, we respect and support the struggle of marginalized groups, in this case, the LGBT+ community,” he said.

He points out that they have had no complaints or requests for help from Roma who belong to the LGBTIQ+ community.

“We believe that there are people who belong to the LGBT+ community who suffer double discrimination in the mentioned areas,” he said, adding that the Roma community respects differences even though “many problems are present within the community.”

CAREP points out that they are the only Roma youth organization that voted and supported the “Together for LGBT+ Rights” coalition. Center for Roma Initiatives is also a member of this coalition.

“I believe that soon, this topic will be recognized in the Roma community. Our organization will respect human rights and strive for the Roma community, whether it belongs to the LGBT+ community or not, with all its differences, to be equal in Montenegrin society,” Ahmetović said.

Ahmetović also stated that education is crucial, noting that the Roma LGBT+ community is not the only one that suffers double discrimination, but also its persons with disabilities.

“AraArt” is the only non-governmental organization in Europe that exclusively deals with the Roma LGBT+ minority and multiple discrimination.

According to the director of “AraArt,” David Tišer, two things need to happen to reduce double discrimination.

“First, intersectional discrimination must be addressed systematically and sustainably. We need to educate people on this topic and make them aware of the different groups of people affected

by intersectional discrimination. The second level concerns legislation,” Tišer told CIN-CG.

“The Romani LGBT+ minority faces discrimination not only on the part of the majority because of ethnicity or sexual orientation but also on the part of the Roma community, which is very traditional and perceives homosexuality as unacceptable. They are sometimes excommunicated from the family or the whole community. Consequently, they become homeless, stay on their own, without their families and friends,” the AraArt website states.

This organization also publishes the stories of LGBT+ people of Roma origin from different parts of Europe. Apart from Jovanovic, the experience of 21-year-old Marko from the Czech Republic is also shared on its website.

“I committed the first attempted suicide at the age of ten. I fell victim to bullying. Not because I am a Roma but because I am gay. Roma is at the fringe of Czech society. Gays are at the fringe of Romany society,” he shared his experience.

It is difficult to know if there are such shocking experiences in Montenegro because LGBT+ in the Roma community is still taboo.

DRUGS ARE EASILY AVAILABLE IN THE SETTLEMENT OF VRELA RIBNIČKA:



## Children victims of dealers

Đurđa RADULović

**E**ven the youngest in Podgorica's Roma settlements are exposed to illegal substances, which seriously endanger their health, further hinder socialization and escape from poverty

**I** tried marijuana and cocaine at the age of 13, Lejla, a Roma girl (real name known to the editorial office), tells the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG). She is still a minor, so the journalist obtained guardian's permission to talk to the girl.

Lejla is smiling, seems relaxed, and very approachable. Her eyes are filled with curiosity. She talks openly about his traumatic childhood, filled with

insecurity. Her mother left her, her brothers, and her sister when she was only five. The other children were even younger. After a few years, the father went abroad and started a new family. He left the children with an older relative. Lejla says that she sometimes went to elementary school, but she does not know if she finished it or if she has a degree.

"I wander with my friends a lot," she says, talking about her early teenage years.

"We begged in different cities, I didn't come home for months, we did all kinds of things," she says.

At that time, she hung out with Roma children, but also adult dealers and other criminals, among whom there were also those from other communities.

Drugs were easily available.

“There was always marijuana, cocaine, and heroin. I don’t know from where”, she recalls.

Many members of the Roma community with whom she hung out during her early teenage years were arrested for selling drugs, she explains. Some of the names from that period that she mentions, including the police inspector, were prosecuted for the criminal offense of drug trafficking, and other offenses – such as physical abuse.

Lejla saw a lot as a teenager. She recalls a friend whose body was found in Cijevna. She believes that she overdosed and was pushed into the river.

In some parts of the settlement of Vrela Ribnička, drugs are easy to find, dealers are everywhere, and the prices are several times lower than in the city; several interlocutors who wanted to remain anonymous and were involved in work with the Roma community in that Podgorica settlement, where some of our sources live, told CIN-CG.

Drug addicts also know this neighborhood.

“When I went there to get drugs, children ran after me and asked me: ‘What do you need?’” said a former addict who wanted to remain anonymous.

He used to buy heroin there.

“I could find a quarter of a gram for two and a half euros, while in other places, it was at least 10,” he says.

“People use various things here, from alcohol to illegal substances,” an

elderly resident of Vrela Ribnička told CIN-CG.

He also admits taking all kinds of things.

“There is no other way to survive all this,” he says and points with his hands to the dusty track made of macadam and gravel.

He no longer consumes anything, but his health is impaired. He claims that children take drugs from their early teenage years, and it is not uncommon to see a small child smoking.

The Police Administration did not respond to CIN-CG’s three-times request, despite numerous calls, whether there is a higher rate of drug trafficking in the Roma settlements of Vrela Ribnička and Konik compared to other parts of Podgorica. We did not even get answers to the questions of whether children are involved in the process of selling narcotics and whether it is easier to get drugs in those neighborhoods.

According to the writings of several media, the police representatives were involved in the criminal activities of drug dealing and also operated in the

neighborhoods where the most vulnerable live.

The Police Administration did not even answer CIN-CG’s question whether their employees were part of a criminal organization that operated in Vrela Ribnička.

The spokesperson of the Police Administration, Marija Žugić, confirmed for CIN-CG that the questions had arrived and were forwarded to those responsible in that institution.



*Marija Mijović*  
(photo: PR Centar/Balša Rakočević)



### Unemployment, poverty, crime...

“The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) survey conducted by the Institute for Public Health in 2019 among high school students up to the age of 16 shows that drugs are available in Montenegro regardless of the region or social status the young people come from. This research shows that almost a third of high school students up to the age of 16 believe that they can get marijuana if they want to. A fifth of them believe that they can also get MDMA (ecstasy), and 15 percent cocaine and amphetamine. The settlement of Vrela Ribnička in Podgorica, in the worst-case scenario, deviates from the average, but nothing more than that. All this is very important to emphasize in order not to continue with the stigmatization of Roma and Egyptians, who make up the largest part of the population of this settlement”, the Montenegrin Harm Reduction Network LINK told CIN-CG.

The research of the Ombudsman of Montenegro from 2018 also showed that more than 25 percent of students believe that it takes from 30 minutes to, at most, a few hours to get hold of drugs, which is a sign of easy availability.

“Field data shows that drugs are present in the settlement of Vrela Ribnička in Podgorica and that there is a perception of its availability and that it is possible to obtain it more easily than in other parts of the city. However, these are not research data

but observations from the field, so it is possible to reach wrong conclusions that would contribute to increasing the already pronounced stigmatization of Roma and Egyptians. Therefore, drugs are not ubiquitous in this neighborhood. We are only talking about an increased risk”, the LINK representatives told CIN-CG.

Drug use, as well as the age at which a person starts using drugs, cannot, in any case, be linked to belonging to a particular ethnic group, they emphasize.

“Living conditions can influence someone to start using drugs. In that context, we can only talk about the increased risk of young people from these neighborhoods taking drugs,” they said.

An article by the American Psychological Association (APA) states that numerous studies show that children who grow up in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods more easily develop a tendency to addiction. Research that included 11,000 children from 21 cities in the United States showed that those from poor communities have a higher chance of developing addiction habits.

Even if a child grows up in a financially and socially stable family, his psychological development will be significantly slowed down if he grows up in a neighborhood with a large number of unemployed people, poverty, crime, and the like. Such a child will have a greater chance of becoming an addict due to the influen-



*Dijana Milošević  
(photo: PR Centar)*



ce of the settlement, the APA article explains.

### **Drug rehabilitation unaffordable for the poorest**

When talking about the prevention of the use of psychoactive substances (PSS), this community is neglected, which shouldn't be the case, Marija Mijović from NGO Juventas tells CIN-CG.

“This community, partly due to the way of life and the high degree of stigma and discrimination that they inevitably face, do not always have access to the information they need, as well as preventive services that could potentially prevent the first use of PSS. This community is not in an enviable position when it comes to addiction rehabilitation options either, especially considering their often unregulated legal status that makes it difficult for them to access a health system that offers free addiction treatment. They can't pay for treatment options available in Montenegro,” Mijović says.

“Rehabilitation options such as treatment in Podgorica's Kakaricka Gora, an institution for accommodation, rehabilitation, and resocialization of users of psychoactive substances, are not available to all members of this community, so we appeal to provide free treatment whenever possible,” Mijović explains.

The NGO Juventas actively provides services to the Roma and Egyptians community through Drop-in centers and by holding activities aimed at psychosocial support and empowerment of members of this community, Marija Mijović added.

The Public Institution “Kakaricka gora” tells CIN-CG that the price of participation has been reduced from 330 to 230 euros and that the entire program



*predstavnici NVO Link  
(photo: PR Centar)*

is free for the citizens of Danilovgrad and Tivat because those municipalities have taken over the participation costs.

“In the hope that other municipalities will do the same according to their capabilities, we use every public opportunity to appeal for support and changes. We emphasize that the full price of the treatment at the institution is a total of 1,000 euros per month, but that the difference from the 230 euros co-payment up to the full amount is borne by the City of Podgorica, regardless of whether the clients are from Podgorica”, Dijana Milošević, director of Kakaricka gora tells CIN-CG.”

The Red Cross of Montenegro explains that for years, they have been helping Roma and Egyptians in various ways and that workshops were held to prevent addiction. The workshops were attended mainly by women.

### **There is no treatment for addiction in children**

“Our country does not have an institution that deals with minors suffering from addiction. The issue is also the lack of child psychiatrists to whom these children could be referred for treatment. There is no continuous education and work on preventing first use in children”,

Marija Mijović says.

The NGO Juventas deals with young people, but minors who use PSs. They can only be supported with the presence of their parents or guardians, she explains.

Regarding prevention, continuous and effective programs funded by the state are essential, Mijović claims.

CIN-CG approached the Ministry of Health regarding the problem of the lack of an institution that deals with addictive diseases in children, but there was no response.

“The abuse of psychoactive substances when it comes to children from the Roma and Egyptian community, due to additional poverty, can affect young people as well so that after becoming addicted, they use the cheapest drugs that quickly destroy the body,” Jovana Knežević from the Center for Roma Initiatives told CIN-CG.

The issue of the use of illegal substances further complicates social inclusion, which is already imbued with numerous challenges, Knežević explains.

Lejla spent about a year in a state institution that houses children without appropriate care. There, she stopped using opioid substances for good, but it was very challenging.

“I went wild. I was furious to be locked up there. They kept giving me pills in the evening to calm me down.”

She says she hates that period of her life.

“Older boys sexually harassed me. I didn’t feel safe...”

Today, she lives with her cousin, who is her guardian, and her younger brothers. Her cousin often reminds her that when she becomes an adult, she will have to become financially independent, Lejla says.

“I don’t know how to find a job. I can read and write, but that is not enough”,

she says.

She regrets that her younger sister lives as she did until a few years ago.

“She now lives in that world... She’s begging, wandering. She doesn’t know where she lives. She hasn’t been home for months. I hope she doesn’t take drugs”, says our young interlocutor, and her pleasant face becomes worried and sad.

### **Residents of the Ljubović Center mainly test positive for drugs**

In about 80 percent of cases, the minors who come are positive on the psychoactive substances (PSs) test, Nina Delević, director of the Ljubović Center, an institution for juveniles with behavioral problems, tells CIN-CG.

She explains that this is also the case with children who come from other institutions, such as the Department for Juveniles at the prison in Spuž.

The prison in Spuž did not answer the question of CIN-CG whether they were aware that their minor wards come into contact with illegal substances and why this happens.

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE ROMA AND EGYPTIAN POPULATION:**



## The cycle of violence

Đurđa RADULOVIĆ

**The multiple forms of vulnerability of girls and women from these communities make it difficult to escape from abusers. Shelters are often the only way out**

**“I** was forced to get married to a man I didn’t love. I was only 17, and he was much older. My husband, my brother-in-law, and my father-in-law beat me. Later, my older son was also violent towards me”, Enisa (name changed to protect identity), a Roma woman in her fifties, says for the

Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG).

She is thin and trembles when she speaks. Her life is suffering. She lost two of her five children, and two were born with disabilities. She takes care of them while her third child, a son, threatens her and behaves aggressively, making her life even more difficult.

Enisa managed to escape and leave her husband and his family. The Podgorica NGO Woman’s Safe House (WSH) helped her. “I stayed there for a year. I know that my husband was trying to find me. Luckily, I was well protected”, Enisa explains.

After she left the Woman's Safe House, she moved from Podgorica to a smaller municipality. With the help of humanitarian donations, a house was built for her, where she now lives with two children with developmental disabilities.

Now, her son, who learned behavior patterns from his father, grandfather, and uncle, continues abusing her. "His attitude towards me is such that I often thought of killing myself."

### **A high percentage of Roma and Egyptian women in shelters**

"Almost every year, 30 percent of the residents are Roma and Egyptian women," Nada Jelovac, a psychologist at the Woman's Safe House, tells CIN-CG.

Of the 38 persons accommodated in WSH in 2023, 16 are Roma and Egyptian, Jelovac says.

In the Domestic Violence Shelter in Nikšić, supported by the national SOS line for victims of violence, there is also a large percentage of Roma women. "During 2023, out of a total of 50 women and children, 22 were from the Roma population," Nataša Međedović, executive coordinator of the shelter in Nikšić, says.

"The largest number of violence cases in the Roma community remain unreported and unsolved. Even after reporting, Roma women, in most cases, return to the abuser. Poverty is a major cause," Šejla Pepić, a representative of the Roma Council of Montenegro, that protects women's rights within the community, told CIN-CG.

As one of the most vulnerable groups, Roma women are at increased risk of domestic violence, Pepić explains. Due to poverty, lack of information and education, and deeply held patriarchal beliefs, Roma women are additionally

threatened.

In the last five years, there has been no research on domestic violence in the community, and data collected ten years ago show that around 50 percent of Roma and Egyptian women considered domestic violence acceptable. The problem, according to CIN-CG interlocutors, is that women from this community often do not recognize violence.

Zumreta Nerda was a girl of Roma nationality whose death in 2022 shook Montenegro. Her unmarried husband, Dalibor Nikolić, a citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina living in Bar killed her. Zumreta suffered abuse for years. Although her family members reported her partner to the police for violence against her, she denied it out of fear. Zumreta grew up in a violent environment – her father killed her mother when she was a girl.

### **Exposed to a high degree of violence**

"Roma women usually suffer long-term sexual, psychological, and physical violence. They are exposed to intense abuse and have less opportunity to leave a violent relationship," psychologist Jelovac says.

"Parents who accept their daughters to return to family home rarely take their children. According to the principles of patriarchy by which this community is governed, children belong to the father," Jelovac explains. She reminds that most of Montenegro's population also followed this patriarchal custom.

The SOS Shelter for victims of violence in Nikšić says that Roma women suffering violence do not have the support of their primary family to leave the abuser.

"Data from 2023 show that all women from the Roma and Egyptian commu-

nities in the SOS shelter were victims of intimate partner violence. Each was exposed to psychological and physical violence – their movement, contacts, and communication were restricted, and half were forbidden to use the telephone. Two-thirds were under pressure from the family to return to the abuser, and only a quarter had some form of family support, such as, for example, emotional support or temporary accommodation”, Nataša Medojević stated.

In the Roma family, it is still considered that men and older community members should control women. That is why women in a Roma family can be exposed to violence throughout their lives without recognizing it, especially forms of psychological and economic violence; the study “Family violence in the Roma and Egyptian community in Montenegro” from 2014 states.

Most things have stayed the same since 2014.

“I am not allowed to go out alone; I have to report every step to my husband and when he is not there to my mother-in-law. The children are forced to follow me, to tell my mother-in-law where I was and what I was doing,” a member of the Roma community who lives in a settlement in Podgorica told CIN-CG.

She is in constant fear of her mother-in-law and husband. “I can’t do anything about it... I have to be careful of my actions,” she explains. She lives in extreme poverty. She begs and hunts through garbage containers for her children, husband, and mother-in-law to survive...

### **Limited access to justice**

Apart from the fact that they rarely decide to break the cycle of violence, Roma and Egyptian women have limited access to institutions that provide

support, Medojević explains. That is why access to justice for RE women victims of violence is hard to come by. “In a situation of high traumatization when it is necessary to report violence, Roma and Egyptian women must make a statement exclusively in the language of the majority community, which can be an issue, given that it is most often not their native language,” Medojević says.

For minor victims of child-arranged marriages often accompanied by violence, there is no long-term sustainable solution the state should provide: accommodation, recovery, and empowerment to get out of the violence and start a normal life, Medojević explains.

The Woman’s Safe House explains that their wards of Roma and Egyptian nationality often do not have appropriate documentation – some are stateless. Still, many of those who have citizenship also need personal documents. That is why initiating any administrative process, including court proceedings, is significantly more difficult.

Among the women of the Roma and Egyptian community, there is distrust in the work of institutions due to the lack of timely response from the competent authorities, Pepić from the Roma Council explains.

This is also confirmed by the Center for Roma Initiatives (CRI) fieldwork, which has protected girls and women in the community for years from arranged marriages and violence. “When the victims decide to report the abuser, they often have to call several times for the police to come, but it also happens that the police ask the victim to come to the police station to report the violence,” Fana Delija from CRI told CIN-CG.

Receiving justice is often unavailable to women from other communities who report violence in Montenegro. The case of Šejla Bakija, who died at 19, confirms



this. Her former violent partner killed her after she reported him to the police several times.

Penalties for domestic violence are still mild in Montenegro. The most severe sentence in 2022 imposed in Podgorica for domestic violence was two years, the Basic Court in Podgorica told CIN-CG. In 2022, 96 criminal cases for domestic violence were established in that court, of which 90 issues were resolved. Of these, 43 were prison sentences, but as many as 33 convictions were only conditional. The mildest prison sentence was 30 days.

Other sentences in 2022 for domestic violence were five sentences of imprisonment to be served in residential premises, four sentences of community service, two decisions on psychiatric treatment and custody in a health institution, and one fine. In addition, there was one decision on suspending the criminal proceedings and one on rejecting the indictment, the Basic Court stated.

From January to August 2023, 1,657 calls were made to the national SOS line for victims of violence in Montenegro, from 298 persons confirming that domestic violence is a behavioral repetitive pattern. “It is impossible to provide statistical data on the number of Roma and Egyptian women who called the SOS line,” Medojević said.

**Difficult but possible to get out**

Roma and Egyptian women come to Woman’s Safe House mostly on their initiative, Jelovac explains, which me-



Šejla Pepić  
(private archive)

ans that they are, to a certain extent, informed about the possibility of accommodation there. “They often ask the police to place them with us.” Although it seems that access to information about WSH is difficult for them, they come on the recommendation of other women from their community in Podgorica”, Jelovac says.

Unlike women from the majority population, Roma and Egyptian women are usually not interested in psychological and legal help but only accommodation. “No one in Montenegro provides psychological help in the Romani language, which presents an issue,” Jelovac explains.

RE women often feel unsafe because of the way the community functions.

“They live in large families in the same neighborhood, so they are usually afraid that word will quickly spread about where they are hiding,” Jelovac says.

During the half year that Roma and Egyptian women usually stay in WSH, this institution helps them become independent, which is often very complicated.

“It starts with collecting the papers of the women and children. We try to help with citizenship if they do not have it, renew their passports, or get documents from neighboring countries. We also explore services that can be provided through the Center for Social Work, try to enroll the children in kindergarten or school, and provide employment for the victims”, Jelovac explains. “We cooperate with a cleaning agency, so we try to hire them there, or we advise the victims to look for jobs in markets or other places, mostly as cleaning ladies.”

In addition to the service of a licensed shelter, Medojević emphasizes that in Nikšić, they also provide professional help from psychologists.

The above is encouraging, but the problem is the data that two-thirds of women from the Roma and Egyptian communities return to the abuser, which is significantly more compared to the majority population, where one in three women return, Medojević explains.

### **Younger generations are more informed about violence**

Pepić from the Roma Council emphasizes the importance of education and financial independence of women of the Roma and Egyptian population.

“We work on motivating girls and women to get an education and a job because that’s the only way to get out of poverty and fight for the rights, but also fulfill the obligations,” Pepić says.

However, the situation is somewhat better for young Roma and Egyptian women. Recently, awareness of the importance of reporting violence has increased among new generations, and the level of information about rights is higher, Pepić states.

“However, among the elderly, a few women still decide to report abuse,” she says.

“Better information about the basic rights of this population requires long-term efforts and cooperation with the community. It is important to ensure that the information is adapted to the needs and cultural contexts of Roma and Egyptians”, Medojević says. The language barrier is one of the most significant issues, so translators and mediators who can help translate into the native languages of Roma and Egyptians are crucial.

The NGO Center for Roma Initiatives



*From the previous protest  
(photo: Boris Pejović)*

(CRI) says that Roma and Egyptian women are educated on reporting violence through its mediators.

“In recent years, Roma and Egyptian women most often report violence after talking to mediators hired by CRINK in several cities,” Fana Delija says.

Enisa’s life story, from the beginning of the article, confirms that cycles of violence are repeated. Not only did she fail to provide herself with a peaceful life, but her daughter is also now a victim of violence, for which no one has yet been punished.

