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**Acting together in face of crisis:
PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION
IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

Regional conference, 22-23 June 2021

CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS



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BACKGROUND

The regional conference “[Acting together in the face of crisis: protecting children from trafficking and exploitation in the Western Balkans](#)” was organised online on 22-23 June 2021. It brought together more than 130 participants involved in anti-trafficking policy-making and action at national and international level to discuss about child trafficking in the Western Balkans, take stock of persisting challenges and new trends, as well as identifying areas where improvements can be induced.

The conference was organised in the framework of the joint European Union - Council of Europe programme [Horizontal Facility II for the Western Balkans and Turkey](#) (2019-2022) and took into account the work carried out within the three anti-trafficking projects which are being implemented in [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [North Macedonia](#) and [Serbia](#). The projects provide support to the three countries with the aim to improving the implementation of the [Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings](#) and supporting the implementation of the country-specific recommendations of the Group of Experts on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA).

The key messages below have been developed by the conference organisers on the basis of the discussions that took place during the conference. They do not represent a consensus view of the participants, nor do they represent the official view of the Council of Europe or the European Union. The key messages are to be understood as pointers for future policy and action, and as a tool for planning future co-operation. They are followed by reports on the thematic round tables which were held after the plenary sessions.

KEY MESSAGES OF THE CONFERENCE

Children represent the majority of the identified victims of trafficking in the Western Balkans. They are trafficked both transnationally and within their own countries, often with the involvement of their families. In addition to official numbers of identified child victims, more children are believed to be trafficked in the region for a variety of exploitative purposes, including sexual exploitation, forced marriages, forced labour, forced begging, forced criminal activities and illegal adoption. Pushed into extreme situations, most of these children experience violence, abuse and multiple forms of exploitation. Traffickers target children deprived of parental care or in difficult family situations, who are homeless or placed in residential or closed-type institutions, trying to create a sense of belonging for the victim. Information and communication technologies have increased the accessibility to children, reduced the need for transportation and created new forms of exploitation.

Combating child trafficking cuts across many different areas of work. The phenomenon is linked to domestic and gender-based violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, discrimination, harmful traditional practices, and migration. Despite progress achieved at legislative and policy levels, the national responses to child trafficking and related investments in practice are not commensurate with the scale of the problem.

+ CHILD TRAFFICKING IS A PERSISTENT PROBLEM THAT REQUIRES EARLY IDENTIFICATION

Children who are victims of trafficking and exploitation need to be first and foremost identified, heard and supported without delay. The identification and assistance processes require specialised training to build trust and ensure that the special circumstances and needs of the child victims are taken into account. The identification and assistance processes should involve child protection services, psychologists, social workers, and specialised police officers and prosecutors. Hearing the child's story is undoubtedly a tool necessary to the correct identification and the determination of the child's best interests.

+ THE CHILD RIGHTS-APPROACH IS THE FUNDAMENTAL BASIS OF ANTI-TRAFFICKING ACTION

Children have the right to the determination of their best interests, when it comes to taking and implementing decisions with severe implications for them. The Council of Europe current [Strategy for the Rights of the Child](#) (2016-2021) calls on member States to inform and have children participate in the determination of their best interests. The [Council of Europe Guidelines on child-friendly justice](#) set out principles and rules that are essential to ensure that children's rights are respected and child-friendly processes are established in all proceedings affecting them.

The best interests of all children, irrespectively of their gender, race or ethnicity, disability, or immigration status, must be given primary consideration by law enforcement agencies, courts, social welfare institutions and administrative authorities implicated in anti-trafficking action. The continuity of care is essential to prevent further harm and to support the child's recovery.

+ COMPREHENSIVE AND MULTI-SECTORAL APPROACH, FOCUSING ON PREVENTION AND PROTECTION, IS ESSENTIAL TO SAFEGUARD CHILDREN

Human trafficking in general, and child trafficking in particular, requires interagency co-operation and multi-disciplinary expertise during the identification and assistance processes in order to safeguard the victims and their rights.

To promote a multi-disciplinary service culture, based on mutual trust and co-operation, and to empower practitioners, it is necessary to invest in joint training and the development of coherent working methods. Gathering feedback from practitioners who are working with child victims is important for the development and co-ordination of multi-sectoral interventions.

+ EFFICIENT POLICY MAKING RELIES ON SYSTEMATIC AND COMPREHENSIVE DATA COLLECTION AND GENDER SENSITIVE MEASURES

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia, data on victims of trafficking, disaggregated by age, gender, country of origin and form of exploitation, are made available on an annual basis and provide important evidence that informs national anti-trafficking policies and actions. Nevertheless, the lack of data according to ethnicity precludes a reliable assessment of the occurrence of child trafficking in Roma communities, where children are

highly vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation due to poverty and social exclusion, school drop-out and prevalence of early and forced marriages.

To better assess possible high risks of child trafficking and to monitor the occurrence of instances in communities where children have become a key source of income, data collection might also include criteria such as ethnicity and socio-economic situation. Efficient anti-trafficking policy, strategy and action should also consider issues such as domestic and gender-based violence in order to ensure protection of young girls. Awareness raising and cultural mediators should be used for engaging communication and action with specific ethnical groups. The Council of Europe has adopted a [Strategic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion](#) (2020-2025) which includes amongst its key priorities combating discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes against Roma as well as supporting access to quality inclusive education and training.

✚ CHILD VICTIMS OF FORCED BEGGING AND FORCED CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES MUST BE PROTECTED AND NOT PUNISHED

Children from marginal and economically vulnerable communities are at particular risk of falling victim to trafficking for forced begging and/or forced criminality. Some of them travel with their families, others have been “entrusted” or sold to other adults, who pretend to be their parents. In some cases, entire families are held under debt bondage by criminal gangs, which pushes the children into forced begging or forced criminal activities.

More outreach work in the form of multi-disciplinary mobile teams and social protection programmes that target families and children living below the poverty line should be envisaged. Training to recognise forced begging and criminality by children is important for police, civil society organisations and child protection specialists. Data collection should be disaggregated to takes account of these forms of exploitation.

Children who are trafficked and forced to commit illegal activities are sometimes arrested and treated as perpetrators, in violation of the non-punishment provision of the CoE Anti-Trafficking Convention. Specific guidance and training should be provided to prosecutors and judges to ensure that trafficked children are not subjected to prosecution and sanctions for offences they committed.

✚ UNACCOMPANIED OR SEPARATED MIGRANT CHILDREN ARE A MAJOR AND URGENT CONCERN IN EUROPE

Migrant children, particularly those who are unaccompanied or separated, risk exploitation and abuse at the hands of people they encounter in transit and at destination. They are sometimes accommodated in reception or detention facilities together with adults. The disappearance of migrant children from reception facilities is a major concern in many European states.

There is an emerging international consensus that detention of children for purely migration-related reasons contradicts various provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and cannot be considered as a measure being in the best interests of the child. Migrant children should be accommodated in safe and specialised shelters, receive timely assessment of their age and support of a guardian, and be protected from expulsion or deportation and from administrative or immigration detention.

The [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2019\)11](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on effective guardianship for unaccompanied and separated children in the context of migration sets out clear standards for effective guardianship systems. Policy guidance on [assessing the age of children in migration](#) have also been prepared to sensitize policy makers to children's rights, regardless of their nationality or migration status. To increase co-operation among member States with the aim to provide special protection and assistance to persons, including children, found to have special needs, a new [Action Plan on Protecting Vulnerable Persons in the Context of Migration and Asylum in Europe \(2021-2025\)](#) has been adopted.

ESTABLISHING CROSS-BORDER CO-OPERATION CAN HELP THE VICTIMS AND IMPROVE THE MANAGEMENT OF CASES

Transnational co-operation mechanisms established on the basis of bilateral agreements and unified standard operating procedures have proved their utility for the purpose of managing cases of child trafficking. The exchange of information during the investigation as well as the coordination of the provision of services to child victims would benefit the most of such cross-border co-operation. An interest in creating an online platform for professionals to share their experiences and practice was expressed by participants in the conference.



ROUND TABLE 1:

ADDRESSING CHILD TRAFFICKING AS A FORM OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

MODERATOR: Svetlana VLAHOVIĆ DIMANOVSKA, Deputy Anti-trafficking Coordinator, National Commission on Fight against Trafficking in Human Beings and Illegal Migration, North Macedonia

PANELLISTS: Lejla GAČANICA, Legal Advisor and Researcher, Bosnia and Herzegovina; Marija ANDJELKOVIĆ, Director of NGO ASTRA, Serbia; and Svetlana CVETKOVSKA, Chair of the National Sub-Group on Children and Head of Unit on Preventing and Combating All Kinds of Discrimination in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, North Macedonia

RAPPORTEUR: Lori MANN, International Consultant

INTRODUCTION

The round table discussion featured presentations from three panellists from three Western Balkan countries, which were followed by an open discussion. All three panellists referred to the over-representation of women and girls among identified victims of trafficking (75%-94%) in the period 2010-2020.

CHILD TRAFFICKING AS A GENDERED PHENOMENA

According to available data, sexual exploitation and forced marriage are the forms of exploitation most commonly affecting women and girls who fall victim to human trafficking. For example, in North Macedonia, these two forms of exploitation together accounted for 72% of trafficking victims, while another 12% of victims of labour exploitation were also subjected to sexual exploitation—raising the effective rate to 84%.

The documented prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) in the region was also noted to be quite high, with limited effective implementation of laws and policies to combat it. The panellists and participants identified policy and practical gaps, noting the limited efforts at national level to meaningfully mainstream gender into laws and policies aimed to combat and prevent human trafficking, as well as into child protection mechanisms. For example, the anti-trafficking legislation in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains gender-blind, and protocols and guidelines make limited reference to gender for the purpose of practical implementation. Gender-sensitivity is thus not effectively taken into consideration in victim identification, assistance provision and diverse stages of the criminal justice process. Ineffective interventions can result in re-victimisation, including re-trafficking.

THE “CONTINUUM” OF VIOLENCE

NGO data from Serbia revealed the high percentage of trafficking victims who had previously experienced other forms of gender-based violence, including sexual violence (rape, incest) and domestic violence. Underscored as a “continuum” of violence, presenters described the ways in which domestic violence functions as a push factor in prompting victims to flee their homes and their increased willingness to accept risky opportunities. Prior exposure to domestic and sexual violence also serves to normalise violent gender-discriminatory behaviours. Patriarchal familial power dynamics, such as coercive control, are exerted over children in order to exploit them. As acknowledged in other sessions of the conference, given the prevailing patriarchal social norms and the normalisation of gender-based violence in the countries concerned, many victims of trafficking do not recognise themselves as such. These social norms also impede the authorities from identifying trafficking victims as such.

Effective GBV response can thus constitute an important element in the prevention of child trafficking. Early intervention in cases of child sexual abuse, in particular, and the provision of trauma-informed assistance, can render children less vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation. Yet, as underscored by participants, GBV and anti-trafficking efforts remain institutionally separate, thus preventing meaningful cross-sector collaboration, despite the fact that they are often targeting the same groups of people.

A GBV perspective further offers gender-informed risk assessment methodologies to strengthen prevention, in which broader patterns of past violence are revealed and taken into consideration with respect to the level of future risk. The panellists recommended that risk assessments be more comprehensively integrated into both GBV and trafficking response. Finally, increased awareness of the “continuum” of gender-based violence among anti-trafficking actors could foster increased identification as well as prevention.

With respect to trafficking for the purpose of forced marriage, examples shared during the round table revealed it to occur in some cases as a coping mechanism used by families in the face of economic and social hardship and as a means of seeking marriage for disabled children. Gender-discriminatory social norms concerning sexual purity, the obligation of marriage and the commodification of women and girls underly all of these responses.

Adopting a GBV approach also facilitates the recognition of the array of other gender-based crimes occurring as part of the trafficking experience, including rape and other forms of sexual violence committed by traffickers, and forced abortion among victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Moreover, States’ obligations under international women’s rights mechanisms, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) can be drawn upon by authorities to address the gendered dimensions of human trafficking, including in judicial decision-making.

DISCRIMINATORY STEREOTYPES BASED ON GENDER AND ETHNICITY

Panellists and participants pointed to discriminatory stereotypes on the basis of both gender and ethnicity as significant barriers to victim identification and the follow-up given to cases. It was observed that traditional gender roles rendered both girls and boys vulnerable to

trafficking, while girls and boys often experienced different forms of exploitation and often had distinct needs in the recovery process. One example of the challenges posed by gender stereotypes concerned boys' disinclination to receive services or stay in shelters because it was not "macho" to be considered as a trafficking victim within the dominant patriarchal culture. Stakeholders thus decided to refrain from using the term "victim" when working with boys. They might also consider whether it is advisable to continue using the term in working with girls.

Presenters and participants within the round table discussion, but also throughout the Conference, shared examples of discriminatory stereotypes regarding minority cultures, in particular Roma communities. Multiple examples referred to ineffective responses by the national authorities due to ethnic bias and stereotypes, including police and prosecution refusing to initiate investigations and prosecutions into cases of forced marriage involving Roma girls.

The use of cultural mediators was proposed as a possible strategy for ensuring sensitivity in engaging with specific ethnic groups, and the importance of social workers and other stakeholders' ability to engage with a diverse constituency was underscored as critical for their effectiveness. At the same time, participants challenged simplistic representations of ethnic groups that masked important differences between them. Participants in the round table noted that not all Roma communities engage in early and child marriage.

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING

One of the most important characteristics of gender-based violence is that, unlike other forms of violence, it is most often perpetrated against the victim by those closest to him or her. Indeed, one of the biggest advances in tackling gender-based violence has been the ability to break through the public/private dichotomy to address violence in the family sphere. The role of parents and family members in child trafficking was referenced throughout the plenary and round table discussions as an ongoing challenge. Presenters offered diverse forms of family trafficking dynamics, including for example, "bonded" labour and marriage in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in which the debtor forces his or her children into labour and marriage contracts in order to pay off debts.

Trafficking committed by family members presents a significant challenge with respect to victim identification, the investigation and prosecution of offences, child protection in- and out-of-court, and ensuring that the child is not returned to family members involved in his or her trafficking. Long-term recovery and rehabilitation for children was also noted as a challenge, given their need for specialised, trauma-informed assistance and the budgetary implications which that entails.

While presenters noted improvements and ongoing limitations in the collection of sex-disaggregated data on trafficking victims, collecting data on the relationship between the victim and the trafficker (similar to gender-based killing) may prove useful in tailoring future prevention and response policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations can be drawn from the discussions:

- ✚ Comprehensive mainstreaming of gender and GBV into trafficking policy documents and guidelines, including with respect to, *inter alia*, identification protocols, risk assessment methodologies, and the protection provided to children in- and out-of-court;
- ✚ Breakdown institutionalised siloes operating in anti-trafficking and GBV frameworks;
- ✚ Target awareness-raising efforts to frontline responders on the “continuum” of violence and on the ways in which discriminatory stereotypes and gendered social norms impede effective identification and responses;
- ✚ Include the victim’s relationship to the perpetrator in data collection practices, and improve sex-disaggregated data collection more generally;
- ✚ Engage cultural mediators to serve as liaison persons in specific communities;
- ✚ Ensure the necessary budgetary allocations to provide meaningful services to victims of gender-based violence as a means of prevention.



ROUND TABLE 2:

PROTECTING MIGRANT CHILDREN FROM HUMAN TRAFFICKING

MODERATOR: Saliha ĐUDERIJA, Assistant Minister, Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina

PANELLISTS: Melisa HASANOVIĆ, Head of the Hadžii Cantonal Centre for Social Welfare CSW Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina; Aleksandra MICIC, Project Co-ordinator, Centre for Youth Integration, Serbia; Irena ZDRAVKOVA, Macedonian Young Lawyers' Association, North Macedonia

RAPPORTEUR: Marco BUFO, Regional Coordinator and Team Leader of CIVIPOL's Activities in the EU and German Government-funded Programme Better Migration Management

INTRODUCTION

The round table discussion featured presentations from three panellists from three Western Balkan countries, which were followed by an open discussion. Key issues discussed were: identification of unaccompanied or separated migrant children, guardianship, proper protection measures and accommodation services for migrant child victims of trafficking.

The panellists presented challenges and examples of good practice in combating human trafficking with a child-oriented perspective.

RECEPTION OF MIGRANT CHILDREN AND IDENTIFICATION OF CHILD VICTIMS

When mixed migratory flows first affected Serbia, the initial challenges were related to making different practitioners understand the difference between migrant smuggling and human trafficking, between irregular migrants, refugees and victims of trafficking. Further challenges in identifying trafficked persons were related to the rapid transit of migrants and refugees. Challenges persisted even when, due to the closure of the borders, the stay on the territory was prolonged, because the concerned persons perceived Serbia as a transit country, and they were aiming at other destinations. Panellists and participants shared challenges and successes in identifying vulnerable persons in mixed migration flows, detecting trafficking indicators, and building trust with unaccompanied and separated children, with the help of child-friendly non-invasive activities and the intervention of cultural mediators. The importance of a multi-sectoral approach in working on the ground for identifying and supporting trafficked persons, especially children, was highlighted, as well as how crucial communication, information sharing and joint action among relevant agencies are.

Work in migrant reception centres in North Macedonia where unaccompanied and separated children are accommodated is conducted on the basis of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for dealing with victims of human trafficking and SOPs for dealing with unaccompanied and separated children, and indicators for identification of victims of trafficking in mixed migratory movements. Specific guidelines and indicators for the identification of child victims of trafficking were developed and shared with all relevant agencies, including border police. A national anti-trafficking task force was established at the Ministry of the Interior with the participation of NGOs, and mixed mobile teams for outreach and identification of trafficked persons were set up. One of the problems is the fact that a single legal guardian is responsible for a disproportionate number of children, which is an obstacle to effectively act in their best interests. The importance of safe accommodation for child victims of trafficking was stressed, as a precondition for protection, psycho-social support and reintegration measures, as well as for the possible co-operation of the child with the criminal justice system. However, it is necessary to change the ongoing practice of detaining children in the temporary reception centres until they can give a statement to the authorities. Similarly, forced returns without any co-ordination with competent agencies in the country of origin is a violation of the rights of the child and a practice which under no circumstance can be considered in the best interests of the child.

Participants highlighted further dimensions of the phenomenon, such as groups of children travelling unaccompanied who are very vulnerable to disappearance from reception facilities, abuse and trafficking, or difficulties in age determination when adults declare to be minors or children declare to be adults because they have been instructed to do so. It was stressed that it is necessary that the relevant authorities provide guidance and determine procedures on how age assessment is to be conducted complementing medical examinations with the consideration of psychological, cognitive or behavioural factors.

Identification is to be seen as a process that depends also on the availability and quality of accommodation, psycho-social support and social inclusion services that can be offered, in order to meet the child's needs through an individualised approach. That means considering the personal characteristics and circumstances of the children, their age, psychological condition, language, reasons for leaving their countries of origin and current situation, the conditions they encountered during migration, the feasibility of a safe return, etc. and responses need to be credible in order to build a relationship of trust with the child.

Identification activities need to be strengthened, including by sufficient availability of trained cultural mediators and by pro-active outreach initiatives.

Multi-dimensional risk assessment, involving all competent agencies, should be conducted in a systematic way at the different stages of the identification and assistance process, including when preparing return to the country of origin, and a risk management plan has to be designed, implemented and revised accordingly.

Such responses are key for improving child protection, along with proper communication modalities and proper non-invasive practices, by trained professionals, who recognize the child as an individual, and value the resilience of children through an empowerment-oriented approach.

Participants raised questions, such as how to conduct identification of children and build a trust relationship, in the short time available, without limiting their freedom of movement. The need to understand the diverse conditions of migrant children and to provide them with child-friendly information about the procedures and their rights, in a language they understand, as well as free legal aid, were highlighted as particularly important.

The Head of the Hadzćii Cantonal Centre for Social Welfare in Bosnia and Herzegovina described their experience in ensuring guardianship to unaccompanied or separated children at the migrant temporary reception centre in their area, how preliminary interviews and needs and risk assessment are conducted, as well as age assessment. Such activities also implied determining the real identity of the adults who were accompanying some of the children, and their actual relationship with them, which often did not correspond to what had been initially declared.

A multi-disciplinary team made up of social workers, a psychologist and a cultural mediator performed those challenging tasks, in close relationship with the Services for Foreign Affairs for further processing. Difficulties were highlighted, such as having interpreters and cultural mediators available for all needed languages. Fundamental practices were mentioned, such as separating the children from adults and other children during the interviews, avoiding repeated interviews, adopting an individualised approach, fulfilling long-term needs of the child, and a multi-disciplinary approach, so that a whole range of services, including legal assistance, could be provided.

It was stressed that it is necessary to broaden the availability of legal guardians, who need to be not over-burdened and to be properly trained in order to be fully enabled to pursue the best interests of the child.

Another crucial issue is ensuring the timely appointment of a legal guardian, who can act independently with authority and uphold the child's best interests; equally important is that

age assessment is conducted adopting adequate comprehensive procedures, beyond a purely medical approach.

NEED FOR CO-ORDINATION AND TRAINING

The importance of strengthening, sharing and transferring good practices was underlined, such as family-based care for unaccompanied and separated children, a coordinated guardianship system based on trained professional legal guardians, the application of the non-punishment provision for victims of trafficking, or viable alternatives to detention for children, as well as ensuring that in possible future pandemics the lessons learned with Covid-19 are used in order to avoid that vulnerability of children is again increased.

There is a need for strong co-ordination between different national authorities, including border officials, immigration officers, social services, law enforcement, and child protection services, as well as between the agencies of different countries. The need for the agencies in the concerned countries to receive specialised training on the identification of child victims of human trafficking, including at the borders and transit areas, was highlighted.

In this context, participants agreed on the necessity to design practice-oriented training modules on migration, human trafficking, child protection and international protection, and to mainstream them in the regular training programmes of all relevant agencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✚ Design practice-oriented training on migration, human/child trafficking, child protection and international protection and embed it in regular training programmes for relevant agencies and professionals;
- ✚ Ensure the appointment of legal guardians and the availability of cultural mediators who are trained on issues of human trafficking;
- ✚ Provide guidance and determine procedures on age assessment that take due account of the child psychological, cognitive or behavioural development;
- ✚ Ensure multi-dimensional and multi-agency risk assessment considering the best interests of the child at different stages of the identification and assistance process, including when preparing return to the country of origin;
- ✚ Ensure the availability and quality of accommodation, psycho-social support and social inclusion services that can be offered in order to meet the child's needs and their best interests through an individualised approach.



ROUND TABLE 3:

ADDRESSING FACTORS UNDERLYING CHILD TRAFFICKING FOR THE PURPOSE OF FORCED LABOUR AND SERVICES, FORCED BEGGING AND FORCED CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

MODERATOR: Mitar ĐURAŠKOVIĆ, National Anti-trafficking Coordinator, Ministry of the Interior, Serbia

PANELLISTS: Mirsada BAJRAMOVIĆ, Director of the NGO Zemlja djece-Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina; Miroslav JOVANOVIĆ, Centre for Human Trafficking Victims' Protection, Serbia; Stojne DIMISHKOVSKA, Programme Manager, NGO Open Gate/La Strada, North Macedonia

RAPPORTEUR: Kamelia DIMITROVA, Executive Director of Dignita Foundation, Bulgaria

INTRODUCTION

The round table discussion featured presentations from three panellists from three Western Balkan countries, which were followed by an open discussion. Key issues discussed were data and trends of child trafficking for the purpose of forced labour and services, forced begging and forced criminal activities; underlying factors that make children vulnerable to these forms of exploitation; the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic; efforts and challenges in the prevention of child trafficking and the protection of child victims and children at risk. In addition, each panellist shared good practices from her/his own country.

UNDERLYING VULNERABILITY FACTORS

The panellists and participants discussed underlying factors that make children vulnerable to trafficking for forced labour and services, forced begging and forced criminal activities. These factors could be grouped in four categories: individual, family, community and structural level factors.

Individual level factors: among these factors were those related to the development of the child. Participants underscored that children with developmental problems and children with disabilities are at higher risk of trafficking in human beings. In addition, children who have been victims of abuse suffer from low self-esteem, which makes them more submissive to exploitation. Children who drop out early from the education system are also more vulnerable to trafficking.

Family level factors: lack of parental care and dysfunctional families were among the key vulnerability factors to child trafficking mentioned by the participants. In addition, physical and psychological abuse at home increase the child's susceptibility to exploitation and child trafficking. The increased levels of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic can lead to the increased risk of children becoming victims of trafficking in human beings.

A family history of exploitation also increases the likelihood that a child may become victim of forced labour, forced begging or forced criminal activities. Participants outlined that

sometimes exploitation is “transferred between generations“. In some cases, parents who have a low level of education, who have long experience in the informal economy or who have a history of begging, perceive these as legitimate subsistence strategies, and thus more readily put their children into exploitation in the same fields. The parents’ complicity in child trafficking was also underscored as one of the factors that increased the child's vulnerability to exploitation and also challenged protection and reintegration measures.

Community level factors: the existence of harmful traditions at community level were illustrated as factors increasing children's vulnerability to trafficking. Such harmful traditions were early marriages or the expectations that children contribute to the family income through hazardous work, such as begging, collecting garbage or even pickpocketing.

Structural level factors: poverty, unemployment, low level of education (due to unequal access to education) were key vulnerability factors mentioned by the panellists. In this sense, the economic destabilisation and uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic increased the vulnerability to child trafficking. The expectations that children would contribute to the family income increased during the pandemic, putting children at higher risk of exploitation. Such expectations were especially high during school closures.

Discrimination and social exclusion related to Roma increase significantly their vulnerability to child trafficking. It is worth mentioning that negative perceptions by public officials and their tendency to relativise child marriages and child begging as “Roma traditions” hinder the successful identification and protection of child victims of trafficking originating from this ethnic minority group.

Gender discrimination and gender stereotypes were also discussed as being conducive to child trafficking. Girls are at risk of entering early marriages by the will of their parents and then being exploited in their new families – for domestic work, begging or sexual exploitation.

DATA COLLECTION

The participants were asked to share any current research or available disaggregated data in the field of child trafficking. In the three reporting countries, children made up a significant share of the victims of trafficking.

In North Macedonia, research of the personal records of 168 victims of human trafficking for the period of 2005-2020 established that 66% of the victims were children, aged 10 to 17 (24% were children aged 10 to 14, and 42% were between the ages of 14 to 17.) 71% of the victims were female, and the most common form of exploitation was sexual exploitation and forced marriage. In addition, 30% of the victims assisted were exploited for forced labour.

Data shared from Serbia revealed that in the past five years, between 42-64% of the victims of trafficking were children. 20% of the children suffered multiple forms of exploitation, 16% were victims of forced marriage, 7% begging, 5% were victims of labour exploitation.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 35 children were identified as victims of trafficking in 2020 (24 were girls, 7 were boys, and 4 were of unknown sex), compared to 36 identified child victims in 2019. In both years, about 80% of the cases were of children subjected to forced begging.

The participant from Bosnia and Herzegovina underscored that in many cases, the criminal justice system regards potential child trafficking cases as child neglect. That is why the number of potential child victims could be higher.

PREVENTION AND AWARENESS RAISING INITIATIVES

The panellists were asked to share information on recent prevention and awareness raising initiatives. During the discussion, it was underlined that prevention efforts need to target those groups that are at highest risk of human trafficking. Awareness raising campaigns need to be accessible and understandable to risk groups. In addition, it is important to recall that the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings calls on State Parties to address vulnerabilities as part of prevention efforts. Providing equal access to education and preventing early drop out from the education system is one of the necessary measures, targeting root causes of child trafficking, that was shared by the participants.

In terms of awareness raising, a positive example was provided by a Roma NGO based in North Macedonia – Romska asociacija Luludi. Roma youth were actively involved in the design of five awareness-raising videos, their dissemination and in the community mobilisation activities. This active participation makes the material more accessible (they were made in Romani language) and adds legitimacy to the prevention effort.

PROTECTION

Participants underscored the important role of the social as well as the child protection systems in preventing child trafficking.

Social protection programmes that target families and children living below the poverty line should be envisaged as prevention measures addressing the root causes of child trafficking. On the other hand, budgetary cuts in social protection systems lead to the increased risk of child trafficking as poor families revert to risky subsistence strategies for survival.

The need to sensitise child protection specialists to overcome the high level of tolerance towards child labour, child begging and child marriages was stressed by the panellists.

The importance of the deinstitutionalisation process was relevant to all three countries, which are in the process of closing large state-run institutions and transforming them into family-type facilities for children deprived of parental care. Building up the capacity of the foster families, both through monitoring and support, is important in preventing child trafficking as well as in supporting the re-integration process of children who have been trafficked by parents and then reintegrated in foster families.

Increased barriers to reporting child exploitation, seeking help and obtaining support were reported as one of the challenges in child protection during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the panellist from Bosnia and Herzegovina noted that there were difficulties in the registration of new-born children due to anti-pandemic measures. The lack of official registration increases children's vulnerability to trafficking.

GOOD PRACTICE

The role of multidisciplinary mobile teams in identifying child trafficking for forced begging and forced labour was underscored by the panellists from Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. Having in mind BiH's highly decentralised system, the development of local level protocols for referral of child victims of trafficking was a good practice shared by the BiH panellist.

The panellist from Serbia shared the experience of developing specialised indicators for child forced labour. These indicators were especially developed for social protection practitioners.

The panellists referred to the reforms and deinstitutionalisation of the child protection system in their countries as a positive step in protecting the rights of children deprived of parental care. In terms of services for child victims of trafficking, the panellists discussed the need for specialised and also sustainable shelters for child victims, where children are not placed together with adults and are not accommodated together with child victims of domestic violence and abuse.

In the field of awareness raising, the positive practice already mentioned above was related to developing specialised materials by and for the Roma minority, as a key risk group.

On an international level, the panellist from Northern Macedonia provided an example of a transnational cases management tool and its application with neighbouring countries for identifying international child trafficking.

Finally, with regards to the judicial system's response to child trafficking, positive examples were provided by the panellist from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there is an increased number of criminal cases for child trafficking for the purpose of forced begging and forced labour. A case from 2017 resulted in a final sentence of five years' imprisonment for the parent, exploiter of five children. A case from 2020 resulted in a first instance verdict - imprisonment of 10 years for parents-exploiters of four children (7-11 years old). Another case was filed in 2021 for human trafficking of 10 child victims by six traffickers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations can be drawn from the discussions:

- ✚ The need to address root causes and vulnerabilities to child trafficking as a key prevention strategy by the countries in the Western Balkans. The role of the social and child protection systems as well as the education systems are key to addressing root causes and vulnerabilities;
- ✚ Awareness raising campaigns should be targeted to address risk groups identified through research and data collection;
- ✚ The need for more outreach work (in the form of multidisciplinary mobile teams) in view of improving the proactive, early identification of children at risk of falling victim to human trafficking and child victims of trafficking;
- ✚ Services for child victims of trafficking should be both sustainable and specialised to address their special needs and circumstances;

- ✚ Systematic efforts need to be made to address discrimination of Roma by state institutions and the judicial system. Efforts need to be made to end relativisation and acceptance of harmful practices as “normal” for the ethnic minority group. This acceptance and relativisation happen at the expense of the rights and the future of the child.