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Dear madam Chair, respected panelists, distinguished participants at the conference,

I will start by saying that I am Macedonian by citizenship, Roma by ethnicity and a woman by gender coming from an isolated community in the south-western part of my country. I am one of the few, small and different persons who advocate for eliminating inequalities in the society and has the privilege to be panelist at this conference for which I express my gratitude to UNECE and UNFPA.

Throughout my working experience, often I have faced with an attitude that child marriages, are a Roma issue, in parallel with the question "Why no policy impacts Roma when almost everywhere change is happening?"

Having in mind that the first step in every solution is the recognition of the problem and messages should be transmitted as broadly as possible, my organization prepared the publication "The grey area between tradition and children's rights" as a result of broad public debates which were opened on the issue in my country involving Roma and non-Roma communities, state officials, experts from different sectors, international and national organizations.

Due to the limited time, I will not elaborate the research, methodology or activities but rather I will focus only on the findings, conclusions and recommendations which even though are of national interest, yet in a broad sense could be complementary for many countries in the region.

So let me start by answering the first question:

No, it is not a Roma issue, eventhough I confirm that especially in the Balkan countries it is perceived as such! At the same time I firmly declare that it is a harmful practice, it is a lifetime inequality and it is a form of disempowerment of girls but also of boys!

Actually this kind of ethnic stigmatization is creating the lack of action and commitment by relevant institutions who usually believe that this issue is part of our tradition and they should not interfere.

In a situation where there is a lack of understanding on the issue as a violation of children's rights, non-harmonized legislation and protocols for interventions and where the principle of "what is not penalized, is allowed", meaning informal marriages between persons who have reached age of 16 and not yet 18, applies as a legal justification for the state and the circle of discrimination is rising while defining that equality before the law for all persons is just a theory.

In an atmosphere of continuous lack of information and choices, we can notice that children think that love is the leading force in creating their future, while their parents do not know how to deal with this behavior.

On the other hand, child marriage creates lifetime inequality especially for the girls who are usually the guardians of the collectivity and by that their individual development breaks to meet family interest. In a situation of poverty nobody talks about the economic independence but rather for the survival, domestic violence becomes norm in order to maintain gender relations, education is not a priority in circumstances where employment opportunities are limited or do not exist, and early pregnancy creates the standards for care of reproductive health and at the same time endangers sexual rights.

Having all of these factors in the surrounding, the traditional law becomes above the national law, and the exception becomes a rule! That is why, dear all, we conclude the following:

1. States should clearly recognize that marriage, as well as living in an informal community between and with persons under 18 is not only a consequence but also in many cases a root cause that undermines the process of education, limits the opportunities for social integration, causes health disorders and creates gender inequality and violence.
2. Different terms are used, such as under-age marriage, juvenile marriage, etc., but because under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, "any person under 18 years old is a child", the term child marriage should be used as most appropriate.
3. A general problem in assessing the real prevalence of child marriages, is that many of them are not registered and official, therefore not considered as part of the standard system for data collection and in that manner obstacles have been created for specific policy development.
4. Ratification of Istanbul Convention is seen as relevant state action towards forming comprehensive national legislative and implementation of specific measures, as it is the case in the 32 UNECE member states at the moment, including my country.

There are different discussions on the way to move forward, yet we must note that the intensity differs from country to country and that a tailored-based approach is needed to tackle the issue in direct cooperation and dialog with CSOs. However, the common point of each country is legislation as the most secure mainstream policy for protection of the rights for all and that is why we call on the states **Firstly** to harmonize the existing legislation in order to explicitly ensure that the minimum legal age is 18 for a person to live in all forms of marital community:

- Particularly, through the Family Law it should be prohibited living of minors in informal communities or ensure that all forms of marriages under 18 years of age are permitted only in exceptional cases by a court and when it is in the best interest of the child, accompanied by efforts to strictly control the issuing of expert opinion by social and health workers.

- Regarding the Criminal Code – it should be moved the upper limit from 16 to 18 years for sanctioning the involved adults in such cases so that the relevant institutions act in concern and take measures as to crimes.

**Secondly**, without prevention and clear understanding, no problem can be overcome. In that sense, the implementation of campaigns and trainings that will sensitize the public in the context of human rights, is necessary, including services for sexual education as a way to break taboo topics and support those who do not have a choice.

**Thirdly**, tracking individual's development will provide opportunity for checking if measures are effective and how we can achieve that if not by introducing system for registering of all forms of marriages between and with persons under 18 years old:

- Concretely, through the Law on Primary and Secondary Education it should be extended the Collection of data which would include records on the conditions of risk to children when discontinuing school, particularly with regard to marital communities, formal and informal.

In order to illustrate this recommendation I will mention that my country as a reply on the list of issues and questions by CEDAW committee in relation to the sixth periodic report which is going to be addressed on the upcoming 71 session, explains that the outflow of pupils in secondary school year 2015-2016, is 1328 pupils who dis-enrolled from school, 462 of which were female; 1063 pupils left for moving to a different location or country, of which 355 were female; and 265 pupils discontinued their education, 107 of which were female.

Since the core of sustainable development goals is that no one should be left behind and especially those who were isolated for so long, even though secondary education is mandatory for all citizens, no information is provided on the 265 pupils or 107 girls who discontinued their education, why and how this children are going to fulfill their potential or receive help to be released from the cycle of isolation and often victimization.

The provided examples and recommended law changes have been prepared by my NGO and submitted to the relevant Ministers last year and before the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. We are currently waiting for the following procedural steps. This experience clearly demonstrates the importance of having a proactive role as CSOs in shaping the narrative for ethnic minorities as a way forward to de-stigmatize issues and open space for full implementation of the rights-based approach in every community and in every case, since by protecting one life, we can protect many lives in a row!