

**Contemporary Slavery and Racial Discrimination:  
Civil Society Support to Survivors during the Global Pandemic**

**Webinar on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery**  
*2 December 2020, 12:00 – 13:30*

**Statement: Ms. Irma Šiljak, (Programme Officer, Medica Zenica Association, Bosnia and Herzegovina)**

*[MODERATOR: Could you please explain the role of racial discrimination on victims of trafficking of minority women and children and tell us about the work of your organization in this context? What is the impact of COVID-19 on victims of trafficking and how did Medica Zenica adapt the assistance to survivors in this context?]*

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great honor and privilege to be here today with you and share some of the experiences and knowledge of „Medica“ Zenica.

“Medica“Zenica is a specialized women’s organization which for almost three decades, has been working on the territory of whole Bosnia and Herzegovina and striving to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable categories in society. Those are women and children survivors of sexual and gender-based violence including trafficking and slavery.

„Medica“ Zenica started working with victims of trafficking in 1999, when trafficking in human beings was a new phenomenon to be addressed in the post-conflict country. Medica is authorized organization by the Ministry of Security of BiH and Ministry for Human Rights and Refuges BiH, for provision of comprehensive assistance and support to foreigners and BiH nationals, victims of trafficking. Based on the experiences, the occurrence of trafficking in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be divided into 2 periods.

The first period is from **1999 until 2007**, when the majority of identified victims were foreigners and Bosnia and Herzegovina was primarily country of transit and destination and the second period from **2008 up to date**, when majority of identified victims are BiH nationals and Bosnia and Herzegovina is the country of origin, transit and destination.

Based on our experiences in assisting foreigners and BiH nationals, women and children, victims of trafficking we can say that more than 80% of our assisted BiH victims of trafficking are women and children from Roma population. The predominant reasons for high level of risk and vulnerability for Roma women and children to become victims of trafficking are:

- Limited access to information and institutions
- Limited access to health and social protection and rights
- Limited access to education
- Bad economic situation and chronic poverty
- Structural gender inequalities and
- Discrimination based on race, cultural prejudice and social stigma

I will just briefly mention one of the latest examples: *Roma girl of 15 years, a mother of 2 children, was admitted to the Safe house operated by our organization, who survived labor exploitation. However, she was exposed to multi-layered violence, exploitation and*

*discrimination since her childhood. She has never attended school, she used to live with her parents who forced her to beg and wanted to sell her and marry her off to a sixty-year old man when she was 10 years. She ran away from home and started cohabitation with a younger man who forced her to beg. She was also exposed to severe psychical violence as well and had very limited access to health protection, especially reproductive health services. The health institutions didn't make any intervention to report her case, when she as a girls of 12, to deliver her first baby. She was usually begging around nightclubs and she had to give away all the money to her trafficker (partner). With the COVID-19 lockdown she was exposed to extreme physical violence by her trafficker.*

This is one out of many examples, that shows all risk factors and reasons for vulnerability of Roma women and children to trafficking.

All these factors, especially racial discrimination and social stigma, contribute that frequently various forms of trafficking and exploitation of Roma women and children, are not properly identified, responded and prosecuted. This is especially evident in cases of forced begging, child and forced marriages.

Those forms of exploitation and violence against Roma women and children are seen as “normal and acceptable” because of Roma tradition and habits. Very often, official institutions such as the police, centers for social work, do not properly identify or qualify experienced violence as exploitation and trafficking. Sometimes, they do not undertake any actions to help Roma women and children, but just say “*that is the way Roma people live and it is normal for them*”. Even when those cases are reported, usually they are not qualified and recognized as a criminal act of trafficking, but as some form of domestic violence or neglect, which subsequently leads to mild prosecution practice and sentencing.

Therefore, civil society organizations, such as “Medica” Zenica play a very important role in both identification and provision of direct services to these women and children. Medica Zenica really appreciates all the support provided from UN Voluntary Trust Fund on contemporary forms of slavery, because it allows us to provide tailor-made support and assistance based on their individual needs, including:

- provision of safe accommodation and fulfillment of basic needs of victims sheltered in the Safe house,
- working through traumatic experiences and empowering women and children through continuous psychotherapy
- monitoring health condition and undertaking medical actions in cooperation with public health institutions
- provision of legal counseling and assistance in obtaining their rights
- inclusion into educational system of children as well as registering and obtaining birth certificates for those who have never been officially registered in public records
- provision of occupational therapy and training courses to obtain qualification
- mediation with institutions etc..

Additionally, our outreach work with Roma women and children, helps to break stereotypical beliefs and prejudice towards Roma community. Through our networking and advocacy work we put pressure on direct responders such as police, centers for social work, educational and health institutions and decision makers to properly identify, address and respond exploitation and trafficking of Roma women and children.

The pandemic of COVID-19 shed the light on the fragility of the system. The COVID-19 restrictive measures imposed by the governments (lockdown) impacted that victims could not

reach support systems such as the police, or centers for social work as well as health institutions. They could only contact us as an NGO. The focus of the police was on the implementation of the COVID-19 measures and they did not deal with survivors while the Centers for Social Work since mid-March until June stopped entirely their direct work with beneficiaries. Health institutions also stopped direct work with potential survivors. In that period, we reorganized our work: our Safe house was open 24/7. Our psychological and legal counseling centers were available through our telephone lines and we opened an additional telephone line for psychosocial support. In that period, it was even more important that we listen women and respond to their needs.

In that time, one of our beneficiaries called us and told us: *“I have no food for my children and me. I cannot work because of the lockdown and I cannot pay the rent. I am so afraid that me and my children will end up on the street. I don’t know what will happen with us. I feel that again that I am not free and that I am being controlled”*. After her call, Medica Zenica prepared a package of food, hygienic items and clothing for the woman and her children. We also managed to provide emergency financial support for covering living costs and rent, thanks to emergency funding obtained. The woman is included in individual therapy within our Psychological counseling center and children within our comprehensive educational work.

To conclude:

- Racial discrimination and structural gender inequalities, create additional risks for Roma population to be exposed to trafficking. It is necessary that government institutions and NGOs comprehensively and structurally tackle racial discrimination, because if we do not tackle these issues we create solid ground for continuation of exploitation and trafficking of Roma women and children on generational basis.
- Responding in crisis situations and reaching out to the most vulnerable and marginalized groups is of utmost importance. Crisis intervention measures and plans need to be developed as well as core or crisis funds for NGOs to be secured beforehand, so that in the period of crisis NGOs can utilize those funds for provision of immediate and timely response.

Thank you very much for your attention.