



REPUBLIC OF
SERBIA



THE SUMMARY OF THE SPECIAL REPORT ON DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CHILDREN



***TIL THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN, LET ALL REMEMBER
THAT I AM A CHILD, YOUNGER OR OLDER***

***JUST LIKE I WALK OR BREATHE THE AIR
IT IS FOR ME TO THINK, READ AND WRITE***

***AND AS THE GRASS GROWS AFTER RAIN FALLS
ALL SHOULD KNOW THAT I HAVE MY RIGHTS***

***TO WHOM IT WASN'T CLEAR UNTIL NOW
EVERYTHING I THINK I WILL SAY LOUDLY***

***IN ORDER THAT THE CONSCIENCE OF PLANET EARTH CAN BE CLEAR
FOR ALL CHILDREN OF THE WORLD, ALL RIGHTS ARE THE SAME***

Author of the song Nikola Čuturilo

taken from the book My Rights, illustrated Convention on the Rights of the Child adapted for children, UNICEF in Serbia, available on the website: <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/za-svako-dete-svako-pravo>

INTRODUCTORY SPEECH



Distinguished Members of Parliament,

Dear readers,

Mankind owes the Child the best it has. Even without this guideline from the first Declaration of the Rights of the Child of the League of Nations of 1923, I am convinced that almost a century later we will all agree that respecting and promoting children's rights is a fundamental guiding idea of our society. This means that the fight for the rights of the child must be daily: children have the right to childhood, education, a healthy and quality life, a safe, secure, and equal environment, with the awareness that they can reach their full potential. It is up to us to really provide those conditions and to be committed to it all 365 days of the year. In short: respect, protection, and equality.

Both our youngest and our oldest face different discriminatory actions, situations, and attitudes because of their age. Discrimination based on age is at the top in terms of the number of complaints we receive. However, the institution of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality does not act only in individual cases, noting problems, but proactively points to them and at the same time offers possible solutions. Therefore, with this Special Report on Discrimination against Children and the previous one on discrimination against the elderly, we complete the picture and provide possible solutions to the identified problems through various recommendations. And they are: aging population on the one hand and fewer children and young people on the other, children as a social group at increased risk of discrimination, including those at multiple risk, ages from early life to adolescence and early youth, circumstances brought about by modern life trends and the digital age, the situations they face, the conditions in which they live, a large number of children at risk of poverty, neglect, exclusion, domestic violence...

"Children from cities, children from villages, red, yellow, black and white, all raven girls and boys, of different languages and different personalities, have the right to life and hope, to grow in peace, happiness and work."
(ABC Book of Children's rights ", Ljubivoje Ršumović)

We do not have a law that applies exclusively to children, but a large number of regulations govern their rights. Declaratively, we are always for every kind of support and help to children. However, when it comes to the practice, whether it is about law enforcement, or whether it is a class in which our child is with a child with disabilities, developmental difficulties, a rare disease, a Roma child, then a problem arises. Inclusion, but not next to my child, that is what we're shown by real life and various research, because there are still parents and teachers who think that "different" children have a place in special schools because they cannot "fit into society". There are other obstacles: insufficient availability of various types of support necessary for adequate inclusion of children with disabilities such as personal companions, pedagogical assistants, transportation to school, life in informal settlements without adequate conditions for growing up, early leaving school, early and forced marriages, unsafe digital environment etc. The Internet has occupied the whole world and children use it almost constantly, becoming addicted to games and social networks through which harassing messages or threats are sent, and access to inappropriate content is easy. Elementary school is free, but private tutoring cost money, and such tutoring is inevitable for almost all children.

Inequality showed yet another face at the time of the pandemic. Namely, children of all ages, their parents, and teachers, were faced with online classes. Although it was neither simple nor easy for anyone, children with disabilities, the poor, Roma, children from informal settlements, rural areas, etc. had a special problem in the form of digital exclusion. In other words: where there are no basic living conditions, where there is no electricity, where there are no material means for a computer, it was almost impossible to follow the classes.

Children in institutions live by different rules. Unfortunately, there are still children who spend their whole lives in social care homes, although it is encouraging that the number of children placed in institutions is decreasing. Therefore, the process of deinstitutionalization should be accelerated because every child should live in a family environment, and while they are in accommodation, the conditions and quality of health, educational and other necessary services should be improved.

Little people, whom we call "children", have their great pains and long sufferings, which they later forget as grown-ups and wise people. Actually, they lose sight of them. And if we could go back to our childhood, like the elementary school bench we left a long time ago, we would see them again. Down there, from that angle, those pains and those sufferings live on and exist like any reality. (Collection of short stories "Children", Ivo Andrić)

Increasing property differences in society, everyday communication, which is often characterized by an aggressive tone, are reflected in children. We are witnessing peer violence that manifests itself in various forms and intensities. We all become aware of that, and we think about it mostly only when we hear and see about it in the media. Intolerance, violent behavior and discriminatory relations between children and young people are increasingly becoming an acceptable pattern of behavior. Teenage girls and boys insult, belittle, and even abuse their peers because of their appearance, wardrobe, financial situation and everything else that does not fit into the desired image of a certain peer group. This desirable image lives on an Instagram account where everyone is "beautiful, smiling and rich" without a single problem. It is an imposed digital identity that is often the complete opposite of real life. Creating two personalities in one child went to far, at a time when they are searching for themselves, their identity. In addition to all that, they are greatly influenced by the reality show "culture" which, with its distorted version of life and vulgar portrayal of a person, has become part of the everyday environment in which children and young people grow up. Therefore, we should not be surprised and appalled by their copied version of life but react and set the boundaries of what is allowed and acceptable. The generations to come must learn that freedom of speech can never be hate speech, that domestic violence is a crime, that racism and fascism are forbidden ... the generations to come must learn that diversity is not a threat but a treasure for every society. Until it's too late.

Your children will become who you are, so be who you want your children to be. (David Blay)

Negative and sensationalist, that is how the dominant media image could be described, in which there is usually no space or interest in affirmative stories. With some honorable exceptions. Children reach the public if they are the perpetrators of an incident, abuse, or a car accident. Rarely will the front page be won by a girl or a boy who has achieved top results in a competition, and even less often they will be shown as role models for their peers. Hence probably the perception of "today's" children as uneducated, ruthless, aggressive. And it's not like that, children are much better despite the wrong values that are "appreciated" and all the injustices and doubts they encounter growing up, and I'm sure everyone who reads these lines will remember a positive example from their environment. Most children, however, know that quality is something worth fighting for and that what matters is what kind of person you are and what you know and can do, not how much money you have and what you look like.

This report of ours was made with the goal of changing things for the better every day and making Serbia a better place to live. And continuity and faith are important. We are not short of it. Things are slowly changing - from allocating more money for children suffering from serious and rare diseases, more drugs and aids on the positive list, reducing the number of children in institutions, to opening new and renovating old kindergartens and schools with modern teaching equipment, buying modern technology for our blind and visually impaired children and children with hearing impairments, and to much greater inclusion of children from informal settlements in the education system and lower rates of early leaving school ... I know that it is not fast enough as we would like, but it is not good, even more, it is demotivating if we do not praise what we have accomplished. We could do it now having experience, both faster and more efficiently.

And we could, each of us, find better ways to encourage children to develop values of respect, compassion, comradeship, to talk about diversity through perception and a positive attitude, rather than negative valuation and rejection. Perhaps the easiest way to teach them that we are not all the same, but that we should all have the same chances, opportunities, and conditions. There are no strategies and laws that can be effective, if first, with proper upbringing, we do not enable our children to become responsible people who will not agree to discrimination, insults, and exclusion of others. In that fight, parents and schools are of key importance, but also all institutions, organizations, media, and individuals, who must be guided by the best interests of children in this, the most responsible task for the whole society.

Children listen to us even when we whisper. Let's not forget that! I believe that esteemed MPs will approach this report with this very idea.

The future of each and every one of us depends on what our children will be like.



Brankica Janković
Commissioner for the Protection of Equality

ABSTRACT

Discrimination is unlawful behavior, unjustified distinguishing or unequal treatment, or omission, exclusion, restriction, or preference of persons, or groups of persons, or persons close to them, due to some of their actual or perceived personal characteristics. Discrimination can be directed towards different persons or groups of persons, having in mind their personal characteristics, and it can occur in all areas of social life. If discrimination is not adequately and timely suppressed, it can seriously affect the development of society as a whole.

In recent years, the Republic of Serbia has built an adequate anti-discrimination legal framework and ratified the most important universal and regional agreements in the field of human rights and non-discrimination, that is, established a comprehensive and coherent system of legal protection against discrimination, including civil, criminal and misdemeanor protection mechanisms. In addition, an important place in the system of protection against discrimination belongs to the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality (hereinafter: the Commissioner).

The Law on Prohibition of Discrimination regulates the general prohibition of discrimination, forms, and cases, as well as the procedure for protection against discrimination. As a special case of discrimination, Article 22 of this law regulates discrimination against children so that every child or minor has equal rights and protection in the family, society, and the state, regardless of his or her personal characteristics or personal characteristics of parents, guardians, and family members. It is forbidden to discriminate against a child or minor based on health, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual characteristics, ethnic origin, nationality, marital or extramarital birth, publicly calling for giving preference to children of one sex over children of the other sex, and distinguishing based on health status, financial status, profession and other characteristics of social status, activities, expressed opinion or beliefs of the child's parents, guardians, and family members.

Analyzing the practice of the Commissioner through complaints and other actions, but also considering the situation in terms of achieving children's equality through numerous reports and research of domestic and international bodies and organizations, it can be stated that in terms of improving the position of children much has been achieved, but that discrimination is present in today's society and that it is caused by numerous factors that need to be clarified in order to find effective ways to improve the situation and improve their position.

Parents in a real race against time, in some cases single, divorced, sick, or with insufficient means of subsistence, schools in the process of reform, teachers often dissatisfied with their status, teaching content that does not sufficiently follow modern trends, while children live faster, in advance, already in the 22nd century and spend too much time on the Internet and social networks, in search of identity and values. The pattern of behavior among teenagers is increasingly becoming disparagement of peers because of their appearance, wardrobe, financial situation, disability, and the goal unattainable - the glamorous life of an influencer and the look from Instagram and TikTok. In search of good make-up, wardrobe, and filters on Instagram, children give their data if someone asks, they imitate YouTubers, regardless of the fact that these values are not always in line with those they learn about, they depend on social networks. In real life, children with disabilities have the most problems, as well as

the poor. We have not forgotten the children in institutional accommodation either. Of course, peer violence and any other violence or abuse deserve special attention. The situation may be different if we look at the present state and focus more on the promotion of true values, culture, dialogue, and tolerance, learning, sports, various life opportunities ... One example of a good approach is the introduction of free sports schools in the City of Belgrade for children from first to fourth classes in 12 Belgrade municipalities, with the aim of enabling all children, regardless of financial status, to play sports, acquire healthy living habits, as well as to actively spend free time in the company of peers and learn new skills, which directly or indirectly leads to greater responsibility, comradeship, and tolerance. For many years, the Commissioner has traditionally been implementing the action *Equally towards the goal* within the Belgrade Marathon, with the aim of promoting an inclusive society and equal participation in sports for all citizens, especially people with disabilities, children, and youth. Every involvement of children in sports is extremely important and multifaceted, which the Commissioner points out by implementing the action *Equally towards the goal*, because in addition to helping to develop motor skills, it affects physical and mental health, encourages independence, making friends, and coping in various life situations.

In the period covered by this report (from 2014 to the middle of the current year), the situation regarding the position of children has improved, and significant progress has been made in terms of exercising rights in practice. At the institutional level, the Committee on the Rights of the Child of the National Assembly, and the Council for the Rights of the Child of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, as the highest legislative and executive bodies, monitor and work on their improvement. Also, in 2020, a special Ministry for Family Care and Demography was formed, and the Strategy of Encouraging Births and a new Law on Financial Support to Families with Children were adopted in that area, which regulates numerous incentives for births, families, and children. In the field of education, regulations have been changed at all levels from preschool to higher education, in order to improve the content and curricula and meet the needs of the labor market, dual education has been introduced, affirmative measures are being implemented for enrolment of children with disabilities as well as Roma children, net education rate was increased, digitalization in education is implemented as one of the priorities of the Government, online teaching was effectively implemented immediately after the introduction of the state of emergency. In the field of health care, the vaccination rate has been increased, the coverage of immunization of children in Roma settlements has increased by 19 percentage points (in the period from 2014 to 2019), the mortality rate of infants and children under five years in Roma settlements has been reduced. Budgetary fund for the treatment of diseases, conditions, or injuries that cannot be successfully treated in the Republic of Serbia was founded, the Law on Biomedically Assisted Insemination was adopted, as well as the so-called Zoja's law (Law on Prevention and Diagnosis of Genetic Diseases, Genetically Conditioned Anomalies and Rare Diseases), the number of mandatory neonatal screenings and the amount of funds for these purposes were increased, and the Program for Rare Diseases in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2020-2022 was adopted, which proposes the foundation of a center for early child development... In the field of social and family-legal protection, numerous services in the community have been developed, the Decree on dedicated transfers as an instrument of support to local self-governments in the development of missing services has been adopted, the process of transformation of social protection institutions for children has been initiated and the number of children in institutional accommodation has been reduced, especially those up to three years of age, the extent of foster care has been increased, work

on amendments to the Family Law and the Law on Social Protection has been started, etc. The Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence was adopted, as well as the Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence for the Period from 2020 to 2023, the system of prevention, protection, and support in such cases was improved, the National Coalition for Ending Child Marriages was formed. Violence has become more visible and is more openly talked about, which indisputably leads to its timely prevention.

On the other hand, there are problems that need to be clarified in order to find effective ways to further improve the situation. Thus, there is no single, comprehensive law on children, although the rights of the child are listed in a number of regulations, and the process of drafting this law has begun. The validity of the National Action Plan for Children expired in 2015, and a new document of strategic importance in this area has not been adopted. When it comes to the capacities of individual systems, in previous years the Commissioner pointed out in its regular annual reports the need to improve the quantitative and qualitative capacities of social protection institutions so that they can respond to all tasks in time and provide a quality mapping of needs, recognition of social exclusion and timely activation of all forms of support and assistance. It is also necessary to work on strengthening the capacity of other public services, which was especially evident during the health crisis caused by the coronavirus, primarily in the field of health care, education, social care for children, science, culture, inspection work, etc. enabling the exercise of all rights continuously, in full and within a reasonable time.

Specific problems stand out in some areas. Thus, a number of children are still not covered by preschool education, the rate of early school leaving is still significant, especially when it comes to Roma children, there are problems with inclusive education in practice, there are no mechanisms to provide additional support in the educational process according to the needs, especially in rural and less developed areas, there are still cases of segregation, that is, classes in which the majority of students are Roma. Access to health care especially for children living in informal or remote settlements is limited, health mediators are not institutionalized within the health care system, services related to early childhood development are insufficient, which are just some of the problems in the field of health care. A large number of children are still placed in social protection institutions, there is a lack of continuous community services to support families and children, no strategic document for the development of social protection has been adopted, a large number of children are at risk of poverty regardless of the existing system of financial social assistance and financial support to families with children, cooperation between the health and social care system, education and local self-government is not fully established to solve all the individual problems of social protection beneficiaries. There is also violence, abuse, and neglect of children, and peer violence takes various forms - from mockery, provocation, giving derogatory names, spreading rumors and gossip, belittling and rejecting, to beatings and physical attacks. Child, early, and forced marriage, as well as child labor, are extreme forms of violence, which require special engagement.

Last year and this year, we are facing a health crisis caused by the coronavirus worldwide. This crisis has especially complicated some of the already existing problems and exacerbated some of them. Measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus, online classes, restriction of movement, etc., affected the position of all citizens, including children. Availability of health and social care services, various challenges on social networks that can lead to abuse and peer violence, the emergence of new phenomena such as applications

that read clothing and footwear brands and enable discrimination based on the financial situation of children who do not have branded clothes, etc., are at the same time some of the reasons for compiling this, the sixth special report, and the second report on discrimination against children, which was implemented by the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality on their own initiative with the support of UNICEF.

This report presents the position of children primarily through the practice and activities of the Commissioner undertaken in relation to the promotion and protection of children's equality, with the aim of providing a comprehensive public insight into the situation in this area. The Commissioner's practice includes dealing with submitted complaints, on the basis of which, along with various reports and research, the degree of discrimination, its characteristics, and forms, most frequent victims and perpetrators, as well as mechanisms for achieving and protecting equality are considered. The report also gives examples of recommendations for measures to achieve equality, initiatives, announcements, and warnings, but also lists other activities as examples of affirmation of children's rights and non-discrimination principles, such as the *Youth Panel*, as well as the competition for the best literary, artistic work and photography for students of senior grades of primary schools *Bridge of Understanding - Intergenerational Solidarity* (some photographs and artworks are presented in this report), etc.

The practice of the Commissioner shows that age is listed as the basis of discrimination in citizens' complaints as one of the most common personal characteristics during the entire period of the Institution's work. This basis for discrimination was among the top five grounds for the frequency of complaints, in addition to gender, disability, nationality, or ethnic origin. The number of complaints due to age discrimination is increasing from year to year or at least remains at approximately the same level. Thus, age as the basis of discrimination was the second in terms of the number of complaints in 2016, 2017, and 2018. In 2019, this basis of discrimination was the fourth most frequent and was stated in approximately 10% of the total number of complaints. In 2020, discrimination based on age is the second most common accounting for 14.8% of the total number of complaints.

Bearing in mind that age discrimination covers all generations, in early 2021 the Commissioner submitted to the National Assembly a *Special Report on Discrimination against Senior Citizens*, which covers the position of persons over 65 years of age, while this special report examines the position of children, and together with the previous report forms a specific whole in the observation of discrimination based on age. Also, at the end of 2019, the Commissioner submitted to the National Assembly a *Special Report on Discrimination in the Field of Labor and Employment*, which, to the greatest extent, examined the position of the working population, that is, the population aged 15-65. In 2013, the Commissioner took a closer look at the situation of children, when the first *Special Report on Discrimination against Children in Serbia* was submitted to the National Assembly. Bearing in mind that the respect and promotion of children's rights is a fundamental leading idea of a society that cares about the future, this special report was prepared.

It should be highlighted that discrimination against children is in relation to the position of certain population groups of specific personal characteristics, regardless of age. Thus, for example, discrimination against persons with disabilities is reflected in all ages, and the diversity and number of problems they face every day classify persons with disabilities as one of the most vulnerable groups in all aspects of social life, regardless of age.

Discrimination against members of the Roma ethnic community is also present in almost all areas of social life, especially when it comes to children, women, and girls.

Age discrimination often occurs in combination with another basis of discrimination as multiple discrimination. Multiple discrimination is discrimination against a person on the basis of two or more personal characteristics - for example, a child with a disability may be discriminated against on the basis of both age and disability. Due to the particularly severe consequences it causes, multiple discrimination is classified by law as a severe form of discrimination. During the years, a certain number of complaints were submitted to the Commissioner, in which several personal characteristics were stated, among which, in a large number of cases, age, disability, birth, health condition, etc. were indicated.

The description of the situation in this report is given first through an overview of the demographic picture and projections of population trends, which show that Serbia belongs to the demographically old countries, characterized by depopulation and negative natural growth with the prospect of further population aging. The report further outlines the international and domestic normative framework related to the exercise of various rights of special influence on the position of children, with special emphasis on the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* and *Concluding Observations on the Second and Third Periodic Reports of the Republic of Serbia on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child of the Committee on the Rights of the Child*, throughout the report. In the Republic of Serbia, the rights of the child are regulated by numerous regulations in various areas. However, there is no single law that would regulate all the rights of the child, although certain actions for its adoption have begun. Also, the duration of one of the most important strategic documents, the National Action Plan for Children, expired in 2015, and a new document of the same character has not been adopted yet. On the other hand, a solid institutional framework for the protection of children's rights has been built, from the Committee on the Rights of the Child of the National Assembly, the Deputy Protector of Citizens in charge of monitoring children's rights, the Council for the Rights of the Child, to line ministries, state bodies and organizations in the areas of organized support to citizens, independent regulatory mechanisms, and the civil sector.

The report also provides an overview of population policy measures and the system of measures and programs implemented with the aim of harmonizing the demographic picture of the population. Population policy measures are presented both in the Republic of Serbia and in some countries where the implementation of various measures of this policy has achieved certain results. An overview of the report, analysis, and research of international and domestic bodies, organs, and organizations related to the position of children are given in the continuation of this report, with the aim of pointing out certain problems and trends in overcoming them in modern conditions. Special attention is paid to the realization of children's rights during the crisis caused by the coronavirus, both from the aspect of international bodies and organizations, as well as domestic ones. What follows is a more detailed overview of the situation in terms of exercising children's rights in the field of education, health, social and family law protection, as well as in terms of protection from violence. Also, an overview follows of the Commissioner's practice by years, which includes dealing with complaints, but also other activities undertaken with the aim of pointing out the position of children and its improvement. The report presents some examples of recommendations, opinions, initiatives, warnings, and statements of the Commissioner, as

an illustration of the response to cases of discrimination against children in various areas and on various grounds.

Based on this situation, key problems and recommendations for improving the situation were presented, given at the end of the report instead of a conclusion. The Annex to this report provides *General Comment No. 25 on the rights of the child in relation to the digital environment*, which was adopted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in March 2021. This Comment states, among other things, that the digital environment is becoming increasingly important in most aspects of a child's life, including in times of crisis, as almost all social activities increasingly rely on digital technologies. The digital environment provides new opportunities for the realization of children's rights but also increases the risk of their violation or abuse.

A recognizable feature of the demographic development of the Republic of Serbia for decades is that the number of newborns is significantly below the level required for natural population renewal, which is why depopulation and demographic aging are present. This situation is a consequence of a long-term decline in the fertility rate, a high mortality rate, as well as migration trends. At the level of the Republic of Serbia, the rate of natural increase of population became negative in 2002 and, according to the 2011 Census of Population, Households, and Dwellings, is -5.2 ‰. As many as 160 local governments have a negative natural increase of population, 30% of women between the ages of 30 and 34 are childless, and as many as 43% in Belgrade. The process of demographic aging of the population is manifested by low and constantly decreasing share of young people and a high and continuously growing share of the elderly in the total population. The share of persons over 65 years of age in 2019 was 20.7%, and those under 15 years of age 14.3%. Such trends, together with migration, affect the reduction of the participation of the working-age population (15-64) in the total population. The projections of the Republic Bureau of Statistics indicate that in the next 30 years, the population of the Republic of Serbia will continue to age demographically, regardless of the variants of the projections. The *Strategy of Encouraging Births* (2018) states that the population in the Republic of Serbia is most likely to decrease by 28% by the middle of the century, in the absence of stronger immigration flows and minimal changes in birth rates, and the share of the population (aged 65 and over) would increase by almost 50%.

Demographic processes, that is, population movements, are influenced by population policy measures, which include a system of measures to regulate the population and harmonize it with the economic, political, and other development goals of the country.

The *Strategy of Encouraging Births* sets, as a long-term general goal of sustainable demographic development of the Republic of Serbia, a stationary population, that is, a population in which the next generations will be the same size as the existing ones. One of the most important stimulative measures of population policy in the Republic of Serbia is the parental allowance, which refers to the reduction of the costs of raising children. In addition, there are other measures, such as child allowance, compensation for earnings during maternity leave and leave from work to care for a child, compensation for the cost of stay in a preschool institution for certain groups of children, and other measures. Regarding the *Law on Financial Support to Families with Children*, which regulates most population policy measures in the Republic of Serbia, the Commissioner pointed out inconsistencies in regulating certain issues, as well as inequalities in the exercise of certain rights, both when

opinions were given in the process of passing this law and in the process of its amendments. Also, during the application of this Law, in order to improve the content of measures, the Commissioner initiated the procedure of assessing the constitutionality and legality of some provisions, and the Constitutional Court, by its decision, determined the unconstitutionality in specific cases. The Commissioner also gave a recommendation regarding the instructions of the competent bodies on the application of the decisions of the Constitutional Court, and the instructions were clarified and amended after the intervention of the Commissioner.

The Commissioner's practice, but also numerous studies indicate that in addition to financial measures of population policy, it is necessary to pay special attention to the need for equal distribution of responsibilities between the sexes when it comes to childcare, as well as encouraging greater use of measures aimed at men – fathers (e.g. the right to leave from work to care for a child). It is not uncommon for absences from work due to pregnancy and parenthood to have a negative impact on the employment status of women, the possibility of advancement and professional development, up until the termination of employment. Such patterns of behavior in the labor market have a negative impact on the safety of women, their position throughout the working life, both at work and in the family.

Also, according to the data of the Republic Bureau of Statistics for 2019, observed by age, persons under the age of 18 were most exposed to the risk of poverty (28.9%), as well as persons aged 18 to 24 (25.6%).). By type of household, the highest rate of risk of poverty in the Republic of Serbia was for persons in households consisting of two adults with three or more dependent children (51.9%), followed by persons in households consisting of single parents with one or more dependent children (41.6%). Understanding the dynamics of poverty is extremely important for understanding the position of children because it can be one of the key structural causes that affect the exercise of children's rights. About 120,000 children (aged 0-18) and 40,000 young people (aged 19-24) lived in absolute poverty in 2017, according to a UNICEF report *Situational Analysis of Children and Adolescents in Serbia*.

In 2019, two MICS surveys were conducted in the Republic of Serbia, namely: *Serbia MICS 2019* and *Serbia - Roma settlements MICS 2019*. These surveys provide statistically reliable and internationally comparable data for key social indicators, aimed primarily at women and children as groups of the population who are at increased risk of discrimination. The results of this research are a very important database for many indicators related to the health, development, and education of children, youth, and women. Some of the most important findings from this research are that significant progress has been made in increasing vaccination rates, net education rates, as well as in reducing infant and child mortality rates in Roma settlements compared to previous research. However, some of the data obtained are of concern, such as data on child marriage rates in the population of girls and young women from Roma settlements, which are still extremely high - more than half (56%) of women aged 20-24 married before the age of 18, and 16% before the age of 15. Also, one in five children under the age of 5 (21%) in general, and six out of seven (84%) children under the age of 5 in Roma settlements in Serbia live in households with three or more items of material deprivation. These data indicate the need for action of all socially organized systems of support to citizens in the direction of implementing measures of demographic and population policy, as well as measures related to poverty reduction and improving the position of children.

The current situation of the Covid-19 pandemic at the global level, during 2020 and 2021, pointed to the need to establish a balance between protecting the health of the population, respecting human rights, and minimizing economic and social turbulences in all countries affected by the health crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic confirmed the need to pay special attention to emergencies when human life and health are endangered, to create measures to support certain social groups that are at increased risk of discrimination, to establish procedures and rules for such situations, and to encourage volunteer work and social responsibility. When it comes to children, it is especially important to enable the realization of all rights (primarily to education, health, and social protection) to all children at the required level, while providing available information and communication about this crisis in a child-friendly way. With the recommendations of measures and initiatives sent to the Government and line ministries, the Commissioner pointed out various problems during this crisis and proposed concrete solutions for overcoming them in practice (some examples of the Commissioner's actions are given in the text of this report). The Commissioner also pointed out the need to reconcile work and parenthood, as well as to provide an appropriate level of education and offer the necessary support to children, especially during a state of emergency.

This report deals specifically with the areas of education, health care, social and family-legal protection, as well as the protection of children from violence, bearing in mind that these areas are of the utmost importance for the realization of children's rights - to education, upbringing, and socialization, as well as their healthy and overall physical and mental development. One of the most significant problems identified as common to all areas, and also in the Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child is the lack of a single database on the needs, as well as scope and content of children's rights, which makes medium- and long-term policy planning difficult in all areas.

Education is a key system in which the rights of the child are realized. With regard to inclusive education, progress has been made in the past, especially when it comes to the development and harmonization of the legislative framework. However, data from various reports and research show that legislation is developing much faster than practice. Namely, in practice, there are various problems, cooperation of all necessary actors is not sufficiently established and developed - educational institutions, local self-government, at the national level, other actors at the level of local self-governments, there is a lack of financial resources to provide additional support, especially at the level of less developed and underdeveloped municipalities, which was confirmed through the practice of the Commissioner.

Ten years of experience in the field of inclusive education in the Republic of Serbia have shown the continued existence of individual cases of segregation when it comes to Roma children, as well as the lack of appropriate support when it comes to children with disabilities or children in institutional care. There is a need for further work on ensuring accessibility of space and public transport, as well as textbooks and teaching materials, but also the need for further training of teachers regarding the realization of children's rights, support measures, and ways of accessing individual students in relation to their characteristics. Over the years, the Commissioner has pointed out the need to encourage the adoption of equality and tolerance among all students by removing numerous ingrained stereotypes and prejudices about various social groups and social phenomena, which would certainly reflect in reducing violence and building a more tolerant society.

The education of Roma children in the previous period was encouraged by prescribing various measures for enrolment and support of education, as well as the prevention of school dropouts, which is represented to a greater extent in this population. Of special importance in this sense is preschool education and upbringing, which contributes to greater participation in the further educational process. The research *Application of Affirmative Measures in the Field of Primary Education of Roma Men and Women in the Territory of AP Vojvodina* provides data on the increase in the number of Roma children enrolling in preschool programs (273% in the period 2006-2016), leading to an increase in first-grade primary school enrolment (146%), as well as an increase in the number of Roma children enrolling in secondary school (on average 10% per year). However, the inclusion of Roma children in primary education is still lower than the general average, and the dropout rate is significantly higher than this average, which has lifelong consequences for both society and individuals.

A significant number of support measures have been developed and piloted through project activities, but they have not yet been fully established as systemic solutions. The number and variety of planned support measures aimed at inclusion, attendance, and participation in education, indicates the openness of the innovation system, but also the need for systemic solutions for certain support measures throughout the territory, not only in some local governments, which are, as a rule, better developed.

In modern conditions of rapid technical and technological changes, digital skills are of special importance. According to the data of the competent ministry from 2018, 51% of people aged 15 and over are computer illiterate. Children in Serbia have digital skills, but not digital competencies. Digitization in education is one of the priorities of the Government, bearing in mind that these skills are necessary for employment, productivity, creativity, and success, along with information security and online security. Understanding online safety is one of the most important digital skills, especially considering that children access the Internet at an early age. According to some data, every third child is exposed to some content or event on the Internet that disturbed it, and most of that content is related to aggression. Bearing in mind that the modern digital age is inconceivable without ICT tools, it is necessary to continuously direct children to the correct and safe use of the Internet, which is the primary task, among others, of the educational system. In addition, among the dominant forms of peer violence, was violence committed through social networks and ICT tools, and thus one of the forms of combating violence against children, primarily peer violence, is digital education.

The Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia until 2030 defines the framework for the development of this area and foresees a number of activities in order to realize the envisaged goals. Among other things, this Strategy envisages the improvement of teaching and learning in accordance with modern achievements and prescribing compulsory secondary education in order to improve the capacities of all future generations, and the realization of this goal could indirectly contribute to solving the problem of child marriages. This strategy also envisages the creation of conditions for sports and enhanced teaching and extracurricular content, the development of professional instructions for the formation of school sports sections, and the popularization of women's sports in particular. Having in mind the position of the Commissioner that the popularization of sports activities for all children is of extreme importance and in many ways essential, because it helps develop motor skills, affects physical and mental health,

encourages independence, making friends, and coping in various life situations, the implementation of these activities could have multiple effects on improving the position of children.

In addition to providing opportunities for learning and progress, children need to be provided with a stable environment for growth and development that includes good health and proper nutrition. Improving the health and well-being of children are the priorities of every country's health policy. Numerous research connects health in childhood with health outcomes in adults and investing in children's health is one of the measures that lead to the development of society. In Serbia, access to health care through health insurance is wide, and health services are available to the entire population, including all vulnerable groups. However, according to Eurostat, 10.5% of Serbia's population has unmet health needs (compared to the EU average of 4.5%), and inequalities in the health care of groups at increased risk of discrimination compared to the general population still exist. According to the results of the *Survey of Multiple Indicators of the Position of Women and Children in Serbia in 2019*, the mortality rate of infants and children under five is twice as high among Roma than in the general population, and compared to 95% of children aged 36-59 months in the general population who keep developmental pace with their age, in the Roma population this percentage is significantly lower and amounts to 83%. 80% of children aged 24-35 months in Serbia received all the recommended vaccines, while 69% of children received all the vaccines on time. However, only 63% of children aged 24-35 months in Roma settlements received all the recommended vaccines. The birth rate of adolescents is 12 per thousand women aged 15–19, while the birth rate of adolescents of the same age in Roma settlements is 163 per thousand women of the same age. In order to improve the development of the youngest generation, special attention is paid to the group of women and children living in Roma settlements, for which health mediators are engaged, but whose status is not systematically regulated nor is there a sufficient number of them.

In the previously mentioned *Situational Analysis of Children and Adolescents in Serbia* based on a survey on child development in 2018, it is stated that between 8-12% of young children in the population aged 0 to 6 have developmental risks, while an additional 5% already show delays or development issues. Families living in poverty, families living outside urban areas, children of lower educated parents, and children who do not have access to pre-school education are more likely to have developmental delays or disabilities. Development counseling centers have been established in health centers to provide a range of services, including a comprehensive assessment of motor, psychosocial, sensory, speech and communication, as well as cognitive needs of children. The formal criterion for opening a development counseling center is that the municipality must have at least 8,500 preschool children, however, in practice, due to the low birth rate, many local governments do not have enough children to meet these criteria. In connection with this topic, the establishment of the National Centre for Early Childhood Development and Inclusion was announced, which will provide a comprehensive approach to all issues and interventions related to early childhood development, which is especially important for children with developmental delays, but also for their parents. Such a center and providing services to families with children can significantly prevent the segregation of children and provide support to families with children at risk of relocation, especially given that according to most research, the first three or five years of life form the basis, creating and determining up to 70% of the child's later development. Such a center and the work that is done in the center should be accessible to

all children, evenly throughout the Republic. On the other hand, and especially having in mind the demographic picture of Serbia, the fact that the Republic Health Insurance Fund has been financing the IVF program under certain conditions since 2006 is of great importance, and an unlimited number of attempts are financed for the first child. Also, at the initiative of the Commissioner, the list of medicines and aids that are procured from the funds of the obligatory health insurance has been expanded on several occasions.

In the case of diseases, conditions, or injuries that are curable and cannot be successfully treated in the Republic of Serbia, there is a possibility to approve treatment abroad at the expense of the Republic Health Insurance Fund. However, if the funds are not approved, treatment abroad is possible from the Budgetary Fund for the treatment of diseases, conditions, or injuries that cannot be successfully treated in the Republic of Serbia. This budgetary fund was established in 2014 to provide additional institutional assistance for the treatment of children and adults abroad. Funds from the Budgetary Fund are also used to treat rare diseases. In Serbia, progress has been made in recent years on this issue - the so-called *Zoja's law*, the number of obligatory neonatal screenings has increased, the amount of funds for these purposes has increased, *the Program for Rare Diseases in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2020-2022* has been adopted and the work on the national register of rare diseases has been intensified. However, it is necessary to work on further improvement of the situation, for which consistent implementation of the Action Plan for rare diseases, timely diagnosis, treatment, and improvement of the quality of life of persons suffering from rare diseases is important. The practice of the Commissioner also points to the problems of parents and children suffering from rare diseases, as well as the needs and problems in exercising the right of children in institutional care to appropriate health care. Several reports looked at the position and realization of the right of children in institutional care to health care, and the report *Forgotten Children of Serbia* states, among other things, that institutions are primarily focused on meeting basic needs without necessary rehabilitation and stimulation, which leads to worsening of children's condition and has negative consequences for their health and life.

In the practice of the Commissioner from the procedures conducted on individual complaints of citizens, there was a problem of uneven practice when it comes to providing escort to children in hospital treatment, which was provided only to mothers and possibly other female family members. Regarding this problem, the Commissioner recommended to the health institutions measures for achieving equality to enable the parents (guardians/adoptive parents) of the child who is being treated to stay in the health institution under equal conditions, without making a difference in terms of gender or any another personal characteristic which is important for children and their attitude towards gender roles, but above all, it makes it easier for the family to organize life activities in such circumstances.

Gaining insight into the health habits of school children and a better understanding of the social context, communication through electronic media, self-assessment of health and health problems, injuries, and peer violence, eating habits and experiences of physical appearance, oral health, physical activity, and risky behavior were the goals of the publication *Results of the research on behavior related to the health of school-age children in the Republic of Serbia in 2018*. The research shows, among other things, that a large proportion of minors do not follow the advice on healthy nutrition and that two out of three adolescents do not eat quality food, that over two-thirds of students feel nervous, irritable, in a bad mood, or have other mental problems once a month, which should be paid extra

attention. Also, sexual behavior among minors can be risky, bearing in mind that according to some research on teenagers who have sex, one in four does so without protection. Over the years, the Commissioner pointed out through regular annual reports the need to improve knowledge about health, sexual and reproductive health, through regular education and upbringing.

Providing assistance and empowerment for an independent and productive life in the society of individuals and families, as well as preventing the emergence and elimination of the consequences of social exclusion is the basic goal of the social protection system. The percentage of children who use the services of the social protection system is continuously high. In the period 2010 - 2019, the number of children in Serbia decreased by 10.8%, and at the same time in the social protection system, the number of children increased by about 22%. According to the data of the Republic Institute for Social Protection, children make up 25.8% (187,635 children) of the total number of users of the social protection system, and among them, more than 54% are from the group of materially endangered persons. The continuously high representation of materially endangered children in the records of social work centers shows that the system of material support is not sufficient to get out of poverty, but other types of support are needed for these families. These children, that is, their families, are entitled to financial social assistance and allowance for assistance and care of another person, and in addition, they can exercise other rights such as compensation for the cost of staying in preschool, increased child allowance, regressed payment of utilities, status of energy protected consumers, etc., with the right to social protection services. However, in the case when some of the members fit for work gets employed, the amount of financial social assistance is adjusted under certain conditions, and the final amount of funds available to this family does not change at all. This system is unstimulating for employment and families remain in the circle of poverty.

On 31.12.2020 in the records of the centers for social work, there were 4,499 children under guardianship protection, and the center for social work, as a guardianship body, applied guardianship protection measures to 617 children during that year. Among the reasons for the application of guardianship protection, deprivation of parental rights dominates, often due to deprivation of legal capacity.

Institutions in the field of social protection, centers for social work in cooperation with schools, health institutions and other actors should respond institutionally to the growing needs and increase in the number of users of the social protection system. The data show that the number of employees in these institutions has decreased below the prescribed norms in recent years, that the insufficient number of employees and the weakening of the capacity of institutions cause the inability to perform tasks and improve work. The Commissioner pointed out the problem of the number of employees in social work centers by giving a recommendation in which they noted the need to strengthen all (quantitative and qualitative) capacities of social work centers and other social protection institutions so that they could respond in a timely manner to all social and family-legal protection tasks, and provide a quality mapping of needs, recognition of social exclusion and timely activation of all forms of support and assistance.

Social protection services include assessment and planning services, daily community services, independent living support services, counseling-therapeutic and social-educational services, as well as accommodation services. Accommodation services are among the most

represented social protection services, while non-residential services in the mandate of local self-governments are insufficiently and unevenly developed. Accommodation services are provided to children and young people in 20 institutions, namely children and young people without parental care, children and young people with disabilities, and children and young people with behavioral disorders. The results of some research indicate that in previous years, although the Law on Social Protection regulates that a residential institution for children cannot have more than 50 beneficiaries, some institutions exceed that number, do not have sufficient adequate living conditions, including inadequate access to health care and education programs, as well as rare rehabilitation programs.

The process of deinstitutionalization of children without parental care and children with serious developmental and health problems, that is, children with disabilities, began in 2001 and is still ongoing. During this period, the ratio between children placed in institutions and children in a less restrictive environment, that is, in family accommodation - in a foster family or children who use other open forms of protection - has changed significantly. In 2001, about 70% of children were placed in institutions, while today this ratio has changed greatly, and 90% of these children are now placed in foster families and only 10% in institutions.

In 2020, a total of 5,774 children without parental care used the services of family and children's home accommodation, and this number has slightly varied in the previous 10 years. The number of children in foster care has decreased by about 47% in this period. In 2020, 758 children began to use family and children's home accommodation services, 116 children were placed in children's homes, and 642 children in family accommodation. The number of children starting to use the accommodation service has decreased by about 25% in the past five years, according to the data of the Republic Institute for Social Protection.

Accommodation services and material benefits are important but only partial solutions that do not affect the solution of other problems and obstacles in families. Without systematic long-term investment in services intended and aimed at children and families, the desired goal cannot be achieved, that is, getting out of poverty, material deprivation, discrimination, psycho-social problems, and the like, as a result of which children suffer the most. The Commissioner constantly points out that it is necessary to improve the system of social protection and financial support for families with children in order to enhance the efficiency and quality of assistance for overcoming social and life difficulties, create conditions to meet the basic living needs of individuals and families, as well as measures for the protection of families with children and for improving relations between beneficiaries of financial assistance and employment services, while continuing the process of deinstitutionalization and improving the availability and diversity of support services.

The Commissioner's practice in dealing with complaints also indicates stereotypical patterns of behavior in certain procedures in which children are placed under guardianship in cases of parents with disabilities, or when parents are members of the Roma community and/or poor. In some cases, no comprehensive needs assessment is performed, and children are relocated as a result of the stereotype that, for example, people with disabilities do not have the capacity to be parents or that children in Roma settlements are neglected and abused. Such attitudes, prejudices, and stereotypes must not be incorporated into the views of experts, who must base their views on universally accepted human, civil, children's rights, the rights of persons with disabilities, etc.

Also, when considering the above data on the number and structure of children who are in some way separated from the family environment or parents, the question arises of the effectiveness of interventions of guardianship authorities and other systems, as well as whether the level of assistance and support to children and parents is secured that is necessary in order to respect the child's right to live with his parents. This issue arises not only in the context of the number of children without parental care but also in the context of the structure of assistance and support provided to families, parents, and children, which is mainly based on material financial assistance, or through ineffective corrective supervision of parental rights.

Data on the implementation of services for children with disabilities, such as respite accommodation, daycare services, home assistance, personal companions, and supported housing, show an increase in the number of users. Thus, in 2020, 107 children used daycare services and 94 home assistance services, which is certainly a significantly small number in relation to real needs.

Community services focused on strengthening the family, play an important role in supporting children, promoting social inclusion, and preventing the separation of the child from the family. A special problem is the lack of funding for these services at the local level, as well as the fact that the services are implemented as project activities, for some time, without pre-ensured sustainability. After the completion of the project, the services are no longer funded, and the users are left without the necessary support.

The limited number and type of services, as well as the duration of services, which usually do not cover the entire calendar year, that is, the organization of services in the scope that does not meet the needs, indicate the need to stimulate the establishment of new service providers. This situation also indicates the need to provide support to already licensed service providers, in order to enable them to respond to the expressed needs in terms of scope and quality of services themselves.

The Commissioner has repeatedly pointed out all these problems through opinions in specific cases, recommendations of measures for achieving equality, warnings, and announcements. The importance of social protection services and services in the field of education and health, such as family assistant, respite accommodation, occasional foster care-shared care, personal companion, pedagogical assistant, marriage and family counseling, development counseling, parenting schools, socio-educational services that support responsible parenting, etc., was especially emphasized.

We are also witnesses of cases of newborn children being left in conditions that endanger life and health, as well as infanticide. In some EU countries, in order to prevent such cases, within legal regulations, the possibility of the so-called "anonymous birth" and the so-called "warm rooms for babies" is prescribed, which can be a way to solve this problem and implies the possibility of giving birth inside or outside a health institution and leaving the child in safe conditions, so that more permanent protection measures can be taken.

According to the data from the Unified Personal Register of Adoptions on the implemented adoptions of the competent ministry, since the introduction of this Register in 2006, a total of 1,939 adoptions have been realized (1,692 domestic and 247 foreign). The prevailing motivation of potential adopters from Serbia is to become realized as parents, and the

attitudes about the desirable characteristics of the child they want to adopt are that it is up to 3 years of age, healthy with good development potential, no significant genetic burden, and not of Roma nationality. These facts indicate a relatively high level of reduced tolerance for diversity, which is not expressed by adopters in foreign adoptions, and although such attitudes are slowly changing, it is necessary to work with possible adopters from Serbia on a change of motivation and education.

The right to protection from all forms of violence is a fundamental right of every child. The Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly and unambiguously defines the rights of the child in this area, in particular: the prohibition of torture and deprivation of liberty; prohibition of corporal punishment; ban on child trafficking; prohibition of exploitation of a child for prostitution; prohibition of exploitation of a child for pornography; prohibition of the use of narcotics, tobacco, alcohol and other psychoactive substances and drug abuse; prohibition of a child's participation in games of chance; protection of the child from violence in printed material and by use of information and communication technologies (ICT); special measures of protection against violence.

According to the results of the research *Violence against children in Serbia - determinants, factors, and interventions*, violence that mostly affects girls are child marriages, sexual exploitation, and violence, as well as human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Boys are more affected by child labor in rural areas and peer physical violence in urban areas, although there is also data on sexual violence among boys. Two groups of children are particularly at risk of violence, namely children living and working on the streets and children living in social care institutions. Among the determinants of the existence of violence against children are, among others, economic underdevelopment, social exclusion, and poverty, social conflicts, gender regimes, cultural factors, migration, abuse of digital technologies, discriminatory attitudes towards children with disabilities, and others.

According to the data of the Republic Institute for Social Protection, in 2020, the number of reports of domestic violence against children registered by the Centre for Social Work was 8,365. Compared to 2011, the number of reports of violence against children in 2020 increased by 140.6%, the number of reports of emotional violence increased by 221%, sexual violence by 121.8%, physical violence by 152.2%, and neglect by 89.4%. This is in fact only the number of reported cases of violence against children at the Centre for Social Work, which is a consequence of the method of registration and does not show other child victims, indirect victims of violence, and witnesses of violence. The Centre for Social Work receives the largest number of reports of violence from internal affairs bodies (over 70%), while the number of reports from health and education institutions is negligible, and these institutions by nature engage in close contact with child victims or witnesses of violence.

In 2019, the centers for social work recorded 172 child marriages, and 141 in 2020. In both years, the significant majority were girls (over 95%), although there were also boys. Also, most of them were Roma and in all cases, they were not included in the educational process, which hinders their development. Serbia has launched an initiative called the National Coalition for Ending Child Marriages, but a system for monitoring them has not yet been established, therefore more significant results would be achieved by establishing this system, strengthening intersectoral cooperation and coordination, providing adequate means for continued implementation of activities on harmfulness of child marriages, and measures of support for girls and women, victims of child marriages, etc. When looking at child labor as

a form of violence, in 2020, a total of nine child victims of child labor abuse were registered in social work centers, which most often occurs within the primary family by parents. In such cases, measures of civil liability are taken against the parents, deprivation of parental rights, and the children are removed from the threatening environment.

The extent of the occurrence of peer violence (emotional, physical, digital), as a part of general violence against children, is also significant. Peer violence manifests itself in various forms and intensities, but it usually becomes visible only when individual incidents gain media attention. Peer violence often occurs in schools and can have a number of negative, even lifelong consequences for the child towards whom it is manifested. In modern conditions, children and young people are particularly exposed to violence on the Internet, that is violence that arises from the use of digital technologies and can take place on social networks, messaging applications, gaming platforms, and mobile phones. ICT tools have a number of advantages that are manifested through opportunities to connect, create new relationships, exchange information, follow trends, etc., but there are also a number of problems such as violating user privacy, security, and they can ultimately cause addiction. Bearing in mind that the modern digital age is inconceivable without ICT tools, it is necessary to continuously direct children to the correct and safe use of the Internet, in a systematic and comprehensive way.

Regarding cases of peer violence, the Commissioner has repeatedly reacted with warnings, pointing out that communication models characterized by scandals, violence, verbal insults, uncritical glorification of money, and instant fame are not limited to the adult world, but are rapidly spreading among children and schools causing enormous damage to the younger generations.

Based on data on cases of violence against children, domestic violence, and the results of research on domestic violence, it can be concluded that the problem of violence is still a serious problem that needs to be addressed. The Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence has achieved certain effects and improved the coordinated action of the system's institutions in providing protection against domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence, but the victim support system needs to be further strengthened. The data also point to the need to intensify the preventive response so that violence does not occur, or when violence occurs, to the need for timely, comprehensive, and continuous response in order to mitigate or eliminate the consequences for the victim. The content and scope of preventive activities and timely response depends on the sensitivity of employees in all activities (primarily health, social protection, and education) to violence, but also the trust of citizens, that is, victims and family members and the immediate environment in institutions. Improving prevention and trust in the institutions of the system is ensured by continuous activities and increasing the sensitivity to the occurrence of violence, but also by increasing the expertise and responsibility of professionals in the system.

Based on the insight into the relevant available data on the situation regarding the achievement of children's equality, considering the key problems that have manifested themselves over the years in the Commissioner's practice, as well as the results of research and reports, the following recommendations are given to prevent discrimination and promote children's equality:

LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

- *Adopt a strategy and operationalize measures and activities in terms of exercising rights, social inclusion, poverty reduction, and other issues related to improving the position of the child, as well as coordinated action of institutions of the system, civil society organizations, and other actors.*
- *Adopt a regulation on all rights of the child, promotion of these rights, and supervision over the work of public authorities in their implementation.*
- *Strengthen the role of the Council for the Rights of the Child of the Government and coordinate activities at the intersectoral, national, and local levels related to the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, complying with the recommendations of the Concluding Observations on the combined Second and Third Periodic Report on the implementation of the Convention and the recommendation of the National Assembly Committee on the Rights of the Child.*
- *Carry out an analysis of the impact of various measures and activities at all levels (national, provincial, and local) on the demographic situation and harmonize the implementation of these measures and activities with the objectives of the Strategy of Encouraging Births.*
- *Trough the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children enable the realization of equal rights to benefits and other rights for all users (e.g. women entrepreneurs). Consider increasing the scope and amount of child allowance.*
- *Create measures for harmonization of work and parenthood and equal sharing of household responsibilities, encourage greater participation of fathers in the use of leave from work for childcare.*
- *Conduct periodic analyses of the effects of poverty reduction measures and supplement or ammend them as needed. Pay special attention to the effects of implementing support measures for children who are at higher risk of discrimination (children with disabilities, from informal and non-formal settlements, "children of the street", children from underdeveloped, rural areas, etc.);*
- *Improve the functioning of public services in the field of health, social protection, social care for children, housing, education, inspection, justice, internal affairs, etc., in terms of staffing and strengthening the quantitative and qualitative capacity of these bodies (appropriate number and continuing education for work with children) in order to be able to ensure the timely activation of all forms of support and protection in accordance with the needs.*
- *The Ministry in charge of social protection to develop strategic documents and operationalize measures and activities in the field of social protection related to the process of deinstitutionalization and development of services in the community. Improve the social protection system by amending the Law on Social Protection in order to improve efficiency and create conditions for meeting the basic living needs of individuals and families, improve the availability and diversity of support services and precisely define the role and responsibilities of local self-governments.*

CRISIS SITUATIONS

- *Establish clear procedures for the actions of bodies, organizations, and institutions in crisis situations. Pay special attention to providing access to regular health services and therapies, examinations, and psychological support during crises, providing social protection services and especially the rights of children in residential institutions, as well as quality and complete education at all levels including internet access and accessible electronic learning devices for each child.*
- *Make information on crisis events, ways of dealing with and overcoming these situations available to children and adolescents in an adjusted way and adjusted means.*

PROTECTION AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

- *The Ministry in charge of judiciary to prescribe the manner of keeping records of courts on final judgments and decisions rendered in litigations for protection against discrimination, in misdemeanor and criminal proceedings related to discrimination and violation of the principle of equality, as well as the manner of submitting data to the Commissioner.*
- *Improve the competencies of professionals working with children and decision-makers in health and social protection, judiciary, internal affairs, and other services, for the implementation of preventive measures and actions in cases of discrimination, violence, abuse, and neglect of children.*
- *Improve the competencies of teaching staff and other experts working with children in education on recognizing and responding to discrimination, the functioning of the system for prevention and protection against violence in schools, as well as on the rights of the child. Introduce contents in the curricula at teacher training faculties that contribute to the understanding of the harmfulness of discrimination.*
- *The Commissioner to continue with the continuous implementation of training on recognizing and reacting in cases of discrimination for all actors in the system.*
- *Public media services and other media to pay more attention to educational content that deals with the dismantling of negative social attitudes towards children at higher risk of discrimination (poor, children living and working on the streets, Roma, children with disabilities, minorities, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, LGBT children, children with HIV/AIDS, etc.) and the consequences of such attitudes on the rise of violence, hate speech, harassment, humiliation, and abusive behavior.*

HEALTH PROTECTION

- *Ministry in charge of health care to intensify work on informing the public, especially health workers working with children and parents about the importance of early childhood development, availability of health services, and other opportunities related to developmental screening and assessment of child needs (guides and other materials). Through parenting schools in formal and informal settings, build parenting skills and provide support for childhood care.*
- *In the field of health, social protection, and education, establish an integrated system of fieldwork, screening, and timely referral of children to appropriate examinations. Provide an adequate number of health mediators in Roma communities.*

- *Improve the availability and accessibility of preventive and other health services, especially for children in rural areas, children living in poverty, etc., create new services in accordance with the needs. Continuously carry out activities to raise the awareness of health workers and reduce the stigmatization of children with developmental difficulties, disabilities, or rare diseases.*
- *Develop youth counseling (in areas where they do not exist) and implement age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health programs, including information on family planning, contraception, early pregnancy hazards, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, including confidential counseling.*
- *Provide timely diagnostics, medicines, and aids of the new generation for the treatment of rare diseases and improving the quality of life of patients, as well as funds for the treatment abroad of children whose treatment is not possible in the country.*
- *Establish a center for early child development and inclusion, taking into account the accessibility for children throughout the Republic of Serbia. Continue to provide and strengthen community health services.*

AREA OF EDUCATION

- *Local governments to continuously work on providing conditions for increasing the enrolment of children, especially from social groups that are exposed to an increased risk of discrimination, in preschool institutions and at all levels of education.*
- *Improve the accessibility of the education system, especially for children with disabilities, children with developmental difficulties, and children in institutional care, establish continuous cooperation and effective coordination of the education system with the health and social care system, with regular review and evaluation of measures and activities.*
- *Improve inclusive education, accessibility, and scope of support measures for students in accordance with needs, include teaching staff in specialized training programs, and provide manuals for working with children with certain health and development problems, children victims or witnesses of violence, and other children in need of specific support.*
- *Implement targeted programs to reduce dropout rates and promote education for all children, regularly monitor the effects of these programs and adapt them to the environment and living conditions of children. Define detailed and comprehensive procedures for the work of psychosocial services in schools with the aim of protecting and exercising children's right to education.*
- *Implement teaching and learning programs in order to nurture values and promote a culture of tolerance, understanding, and respect for diversity, gender equality, intergenerational solidarity, and non-discrimination of different social groups and phenomena. Introduce health education and education on reproductive and sexual health with the establishment of cooperation with the health care system.*
- *Effectively implement the goals of the Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Serbia until 2030, especially in terms of improving teaching and learning in accordance with modern achievements, introducing compulsory secondary education, as well as in terms of developing sports opportunities for all children.*

- Continue active work on digitalization in education and ensure the availability of information and communication technologies to all students.

AREA OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY-LEGAL PROTECTION

- Legally define the concept and all rights of the child in accordance with the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- Implement measures related to the deinstitutionalization of children, that is, transform social protection institutions for the placement of children.

- Consistently implement the legal provisions prohibiting the placement of children under the age of three in residential institutions and consistently implement the legal limit on the number of children over the age of three in an institution to 50.

- Implement various support programs for families and children - ensure the development of missing services and continuity in the implementation of all services in the community (services of intensive treatment of children with behavioral disorders, daycare services in the community, youth counseling, marriage and family counseling, early childhood development support, intensive support services to families in crisis, counseling and support to parents, support to families with children at risk of relocation, cross-sectoral services, etc.);

- Strengthen control and supervisory mechanisms, regularly monitor the quality of social and family-legal protection services.

- Take measures to organize help and support for children living or working on the streets and provide support through reintegration into the family or accommodation in the system of alternative care, with full respect for the best interests of the child.

- Improve the coverage, efficiency, and quality of the system of financial social assistance and financial support to families with children in order to overcome social difficulties and create conditions for meeting the basic living needs of individuals and families. Consider the possibility and consequences of changing the method of determining the amount of financial social assistance in the case of employment of family members fit for work in order to stimulate employment and getting out of poverty of these families.

- Legally regulate the introduction of prohibitions on the use of physical force as a means of educating children; the obligation to express the child's opinions and views in all administrative and judicial proceedings concerning its rights; protection of the child's right to maintain personal relations with a parent with whom it does not live and especially close persons; reviews of the adoption institute; assessments of the suitability of the potential guardian through the primary assessment of the person proposed by the parent; the possibility of "anonymous childbirth" in order to avoid unwanted consequences for mother and child;

- Specify the content and manner of realization of preventive and corrective supervision over the exercise of parental rights and time-limited deprivation of parental rights and include the obligations of parents in the restoration of parental function in the court ruling on deprivation of parental rights. Introduce accessible, comprehensive, and continuous support programs of support to responsible parenting.

PROTECTION AGAINST VIOLENCE

- Increase the content and scope of preventive activities and public awareness for recognizing, reacting, and the obligation to report violence, abuse, and neglect of children, while creating an atmosphere of trust in institutions.
- Regularly train all actors in the system of protection against violence, further improve cooperation, coordination, and exchange of information between centers for social work, health and educational institutions, the police, and the judicial system. Maintain gender-sensitive and age-related statistics on reports and processed cases of violence, analyze the situation in order to increase the number of reports and convictions in cases of violence.
- Take measures to empower children victims of violence, family members, and the immediate environment, encourage programs to prevent abuse and neglect of children with the involvement of former victims, volunteers, and the civil sector, and provide support for their appropriate training.
- Improve programs for resolving violence in schools, especially peer violence, with the exchange of experiences of good practice, conducting training, involving parents and psycho-pedagogical services from the education system.
- In the public media space and on social networks, encourage the integration of topics that educate the public on the prevention and improvement of protection against violence, abuse, and neglect of children. Implement appropriate training programs for journalists and other media workers to report on children, violence, and victims.
- Harmonize the existing Special Protocol for the Protection of Children in Social Protection Institutions from Abuse and Neglect with the standards of protection of children's rights and the content of the goals of the social protection system, in order to define the treatment of victims and perpetrators of violence.

