

GENDER ASPECTS OF THE LIFE COURSE

SEEN THROUGH
MICS6 DATA



 MICS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents an analysis of MICS6 data from a gendered life-course perspective, focusing on the following aspects:

- ▲ Gendered patterns of child-raising practices and support to children’s learning processes;
- ▲ Gender differences in key pathways during children’s development, including their learning and schooling, and in their exposure to harmful practices that can prevent full development, such as violent disciplining methods, child labour, early marriage and childbearing;
- ▲ Well-being related to sexual and reproductive health and rights;
- ▲ Feeling of safety and non-discrimination; and
- ▲ Subjective well-being observed through life satisfaction and feeling of happiness.

The analysis is based on the assumption that gender-specific situations, problems, needs, as well as gender gaps and inequalities are age-related and influenced by the differences in access to resources specific to different stages in the life course. Unequal access of boys and girls to these ‘resources’ can bring unequal life chances later on in their lives and can open gender gaps that will grow in complexity as they move further through the life course. Respecting UNICEF categorization of childhood phases, this study is structured around the following age groups of children and women: children of age 0–4 years, who are in the phase of early childhood; children of age 5–14 years, who are in the phase of middle childhood and early adolescence; children of age 15–17 years, who are in late adolescence; women of reproductive age as a whole (15–49), with various age disaggregation depending on different aspects.

Coming into the gendered world — gendered practices of parental childcare

Children are born in a gendered world, and their earliest experiences are linked with remarkably gendered childcare practices. The mothers are those who are dominantly engaged in daily activities with children and who provide main support for learning. **While 99 per cent of mothers engaged in one or two household activities** (such as preparing food or cleaning the room) with their children during the three days preceding the survey, **only 20 per cent of fathers did the same.**

Among mothers there are no differences based on different background characteristics — a very high proportion across different groups equally engage in daily activities with children — but there are differences among fathers. The proportion of fathers engaged with children in daily activities increases with education and with higher wealth status, and it is higher in urban compared with other areas, as well as in households in which mothers are employed compared with those in which mothers are not in employment.

Mothers do not discriminate children by sex in their engagement in daily activities, while fathers’ engagement shows differences: a higher proportion engage with sons than daughters. These patterns are systematic across different groups of fathers: even fathers with higher education, who engage with children in the highest proportion, engage in a higher proportion with sons than daughters.

In Roma settlements, the gap between mothers’ and fathers’ engagement is even bigger, as only 2 per cent of fathers engaged in one or two household activities with children, while 98 per cent of mothers did the same. Low engagement of fathers is consistent across different groups and equally marginal when it comes to the engagement with sons and daughters.

The gaps in mothers’ and fathers’ engagement in learning support is also big, although somewhat smaller in comparison with domestic daily activities. Not only do mothers engage in support to learning in a higher proportion than fathers, but they engage on average in a greater number of activities (5.3 vs. 2.9).

The low proportion of fathers engaged in support for learning shows no significant changes over time.

Engagement of mothers and fathers in Roma settlements is lower in comparison with the national sample. A higher proportion of mothers than fathers engage, but there are certain differences in the type of engagement: fathers engage in somewhat higher proportion with children in learning than daily domestic activities, while mothers engage more frequently in domestic than learning activities.

Starting life with relative gender equality — gender differences in early childhood (age 0–4)

Boys and girls start their lives mostly as equals. In most of the monitored aspects there are no significant gender gaps. There is a significant increase in attendance of early education among both boys and girls of age 36–59 months in the general population, but still very low attendance and inconsistent trends among children of same age living in Roma settlements. Gender gaps are not significant, except among children living in households from the poorest wealth index quintile. In this group only 5 per cent of boys were attending early education compared with 20 per cent of girls.

A large proportion of children are still disciplined using violent methods such as physical or psychological violence. Gender differences are not present in practices, but to some extent they are visible in parental attitudes justifying corporal punishment. Specifically, in the national sample of children 0–4 years, 44 per cent were subjected to some form of violent discipline during the month preceding the survey, without significant gender differences. However, parents are more likely to justify corporal punishment in the case of upbringing boys rather than girls, and particularly so among parents with low education and from poorer households.

Gender differences are visible in early development outcomes and are in favour of girls, among whom the Early Childhood Development Index (ECDI) is somewhat higher than among boys (99 per cent vs. 96 per cent). This difference is the result of a difference in the domain of social and emotional development and not in other domains. Among children living in Roma settlements the ECDI score is lower (89 per cent), with gender differences appearing only in regard to the domain of literacy–numeracy and in favour of girls.

Growing gendered life-course differences in middle childhood (age 5–14)

During middle childhood, gender differences grow in certain aspects, particularly in the area of children’s engagement in economic activity, household chores and child labour.

Gender differences in education appear among preschool children and manifest as somewhat lower education attendance of girls than boys in certain groups, such as children living in non-urban settlements, children with a mother that had no schooling or completed only primary education, with an economically inactive mother and in deprived households. Among children living in Roma settlements, the gender gap is also in favour of boys (89 per cent attend education compared with 71 per cent of girls).

Gender gaps disappear during mandatory primary school, and in the general population a very high percentage of children (almost 100 per cent) attend and complete school, without gender differences. These differences will reappear later, in secondary school, but only in some groups of children, such as those from the poorest households, among whom boys leave school earlier than girls.

Among children living in Roma settlements, primary school attendance and completion is lower, and data indicate a remarkable dropout of girls in the transition from the seventh to eight grades of primary school.

Parental engagement in school, and their supervision, shows certain gendered patterns. Basically, indicators point to firmer control and more engagement of parents in the schooling of boys than girls. A higher proportion of mothers than fathers assist children in homework, and a higher proportion of boys than girls are recipients of such assistance.

A significant proportion of children are still raised using violent disciplining methods (44 per cent in the national sample and 69 per cent in Roma settlements), with no prominent gender differences. However, unlike the practice, parental attitudes show some gendered patterns, with a higher proportion justifying use of corporal punishment on boys than girls.

Child labour as well as participation in economic activities and household chores are highly gendered. Not only is the prevalence of child labour different between boys and girls (higher among boys), but also the nature of child labour is different: for boys it is more related

to engagement in economic activities above a specific age threshold, while among girls is more related to engagement in household chores above a specific age threshold.

Transition to adulthood: gender differences in adolescence (age 15–17) and early sexual and reproductive life of adolescent and post-adolescent women (age 15–19)

Adolescence is the turning point from childhood to adulthood. Transition from primary to secondary education is important in the life of adolescents and sets foundations for later prospects for education and overall socio-economic well-being. Secondary school attendance is high among children from the national sample and without significant gender differences, except among children from the poorest households, where many more girls than boys stay out of school. In Roma settlements, secondary school attendance is very low and with gender differences indicating lower attendance of girls.

Child labour is less prevalent among adolescents compared with younger children and, in the national sample, participation of girls in economic activities that are not child labour is lower than among boys, but their engagement in child labour is higher (though at a low level of 1.3 per cent). Among adolescents living in Roma settlements, girls are also less engaged in economic activities and in child labour.

In the national sample, every tenth girl aged 15–17 and every third woman aged 18–19 years have started sexual life. A higher proportion of girls living in Roma settlements start sexual life early: one third of girls aged 15–17 years and more than two thirds of women aged 18–19.

Unmet need for contraception is higher among women in the national sample than among women living in Roma settlements and among unmarried than married women.

There is slight increase in early marriage among women aged 15–19 in the national sample between 2014 and 2019 (from 0.3 per cent to 1.1 per cent), and a significant decrease among women of the same age living in Roma settlements (from 15 per cent to 13 per cent).

Early childbearing (before age 18) has disappeared in the general population of women aged 15–19 and is stagnant among women of same age in Roma settlements (at around 3 per cent).

Well-being of women in reproductive life-course stages (age 15–49)

Autonomy in decisions related to women's sexual and reproductive health and rights is important for planning different life-course transitions: from one education level to a higher one, from education to the labour market, between different career stages, from single life to marriage, towards parenthood, or from different interests in life that require time or other resources. The proper timing of marriage and childbearing is crucial for planning these various transitions, and MICS provides relevant data for the analysis of these aspects.

MICS 2019 data indicate that a high proportion of women are aware of modern methods of contraception, but the use of these methods is still low. More women rely on traditional methods than on modern methods, but other methods are used in a higher proportion among unmarried (who are usually younger) women than married women, women in urban areas and women with higher education. Among women in Roma settlements, modern contraception is used in very low proportion, although a very high proportion of women are aware of these methods.

There is a significant decrease of unmet need among married women in the general population, but stagnation among women living in Roma settlements. Abortion is on the decrease among women in the general population as well as in Roma settlements.

Early marriage is in stagnation among women aged 20–49 in the general population and women living in Roma settlements. Early marriage and early childbearing decrease the likelihood of achieving higher levels of education, being in employment, and providing a living standard free from deprivation.

Although the majority of women in both the general population and Roma settlements make autonomously informed decisions on their sexual and reproductive health, there are still women who are denied this right, and their proportion is higher among women with low education and in the poorest households.

Attitudes justifying intimate partner violence are present in a very small percentage of women in the national sample and in a higher percentage of women living in Roma settlements.

Every eighth woman feels unsafe after dark in her neighbourhood, and feelings of unsafety are more prevalent among younger women and among women in Roma settlements.

Only a small proportion of women reported experience of discrimination, and the most frequent form was gender-based discrimination. The proportion of women who experienced discrimination during the last year was higher among women living in Roma settlements, but the most frequent form reported was discrimination based on ethnicity.

Women are in general relatively satisfied with their lives, scoring life satisfaction on average at 8 on a scale of 0–10. Life satisfaction decreases with age and increases with education and living standard. Women living in Roma settlements are on average less satisfied with their lives, and a lower proportion are happy compared with women in general population. Early marriage and early childbearing decrease life satisfaction among women in the national sample as well as among those who live in Roma settlements.

INTRODUCTION

Background, objectives and scope

The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) is a precious resource for gaining knowledge about the situation of children and women related to the human development aspects of their lives. This includes the enabling environment and preconditions that allow children to develop to their full potential. In this regard, the well-being of women is crucial to create a thriving environment. However, the well-being of women must also be seen in terms of their own quality of life and potential for personal development, and not only in regard to child development.

Following MICS 2014, a gender analysis of the situation of children and women from the life-course perspective provided additional insights on gender disparities among children and differences between groups of women, paying attention to intersectionality.¹ This report presents a new analysis of this kind based on MICS 2019 data, though somewhat more narrowly focused on several aspects:

- ▲ Gendered patterns of child-raising practices and support to children's learning processes;
- ▲ Gender differences in key pathways during children's development, including their learning and schooling, and in their exposure to harmful practices that can prevent their full development, such as violent disciplining methods, child labour, early marriage and childbearing;
- ▲ Well-being related to sexual and reproductive health and rights;
- ▲ Feeling of safety and non-discrimination; and
- ▲ Subjective well-being observed through life satisfaction and feeling of happiness.

The life course approach

The life course approach is grounded in the desire to understand social pathways of individuals and groups, their developmental effects and their relation to personal and social-historical conditions. These pathways are structured by social institutions.² Exploring how children and women of the same age access certain resources over time, or how different age cohorts of women and children access important resources during the same period based on their background and (depending on that) move through life-course stages, is key to understanding how their life pathways are shaped and if well-being is achieved along these pathways.³

In the life course approach, concepts of trajectories and transitions are considered as central descriptors of the life course.⁴ Trajectories refer to long-term involvement in or connection to social institutions and corresponding roles. They can be charted by linking institutionally defined roles or 'states' over time and are often characterized by specific events with definable sequence, duration and order (schooling, career, parenthood, etc.). The concept of transition refers to specific events that move an individual into or out of various institutional contexts and corresponding role configurations (getting married, dropping out of school, etc.). Each of these indicates movement from one set of roles to another or a change in an individual's socially and institutionally defined roles.⁵

¹ UNICEF, *Gender Aspects of Life Course in Serbia Seen through MICS Data*, Belgrade, 2015, available from <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/1231/file/MICS%20gender%20aspects.pdf>.

² Mortimer, J.T., Shanahan, M.J. (eds.), *Handbook of the Life Course*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, New York.

³ UNICEF, *Gender Aspects of Life Course in Serbia Seen through MICS Data*, Belgrade, 2015, pp. 19.

⁴ Elder, 1985, cf. from Macmillan and Eliason, 2002, cf. UNICEF, *Gender Aspects of Life Course in Serbia Seen through MICS Data*, Belgrade, 2015.

⁵ Ibid.

Conceptual and methodological remarks

Like in the previous study, the analysis in this study is based on the assumption that gender-specific situations, problems, needs, as well as gender gaps and inequalities are age-related and influenced by the differences in access to resources specific for different stages of the life course.⁶ Unequal access of boys and girls to these ‘resources’ can bring unequal life chances later on in their lives and can open gender gaps that will grow in complexity as they move further through the life course. Assuming that, besides some universal resources, development and well-being require life-stage-specific resources, the analytical framework in this study has been structured around sets of age groups that were in same life-course phase during the survey. Respecting UNICEF categorization of childhood phases, this study is structured around the following age groups of children and women:

- ▲ children of age 0–4 years, who are in the phase of early childhood;
- ▲ children of age 5–14 years, who are in the phase of middle childhood and early adolescence;
- ▲ children of age 15–17 years, who are in late adolescence;
- ▲ women of reproductive age as a whole (15–49), with various age disaggregation depending on the different aspects.

As was noted in the previous study, MICS data have both advantages and limitations. The advantages of such a framework include high gender sensitivity of data (this is one of the most gender-relevant and sensitive of the large-scale international surveys); the possibility to provide more detailed and intersectional analysis due to the large samples, which enable disaggregation in many aspects, examining different groups of children and women by their background characteristics; the possibility to examine trends, due to the availability of data from previous MICS cycles (2010, 2014); a life-course appropriate approach, which enables monitoring of age-relevant indicators across the samples of children and women of different ages; and the availability of data for the most marginalized population — Roma living in Roma settlements — who can be invisible in standard statistical surveys.⁷

Key limitations that were taken into account when the analytical approach for this study was designed include:

- ▲ availability of sex-disaggregated data only for children — in the 2019 MICS, as in 2014, there are no data on men above the age of 17 years and a gender analysis could not be applied, but only a women-focused analysis;
- ▲ partial comparability of data over time — some aspects of children’s and women’s situation are not included in all three surveys (2010, 2014, 2019); definitions and measurement have changed for some indicators, not allowing for comparisons;
- ▲ relatively strong focus on sexual and reproductive health regarding adult women, which predefines the scope of the analysis, excluding some dimensions important for women’s well-being that are not covered by the MICS survey in Serbia (often due to the fact that these aspects, such as employment, social inclusion, access to information and other resources, are already well-covered by official statistics).

Confidence intervals are used as a measure of statistical significance, in line with MICS methodology.

Structure of the study

The study is structured around life-course phases, but it starts with the gendered environment in the family in which children are born and raised. The first chapter describes the gendered child-raising practices, as these are the first and key experiences through which children learn about gender roles and develop a relationship with mothers and fathers. From the perspective of women and men, the gendered child-raising practices reveal different responsibilities and structure of their own life-course pathways related to parenthood, revealing big gender gaps. The second chapter focuses on the early life experiences of children aged 0–4, mainly in terms of early education, supervision and discipline practices, and early development outcomes. The third chapter is dedicated to middle childhood

⁶ For more on age, cohorts and other aspects of life course approach, please see, UNICEF, *Gender Aspects of Life Course in Serbia Seen through MICS Data*, Belgrade, 2015, pp. 19–22.

⁷ Regular statistical surveys usually do not include Roma settlements in their samples. MICS is specific in this respect as it targets population living in these settlements. The study labels will distinguish ‘Serbia’ for the general sample and ‘Roma settlements’ for Roma living in these settlements.

and early adolescence (age 5–14), with focus on education, child discipline and child labour. The fourth chapter describes gender differences in adolescence, as well as key aspects of early sexual and reproductive life, while aspects such as discrimination, safety and subjective well-being are analysed in the following chapter, together with other age categories of women. The fifth chapter is centred around women of reproductive age (15–49), with different age disaggregation depending on the various aspects and specific indicators. It includes insights into sexual and reproductive health and rights, experiences of discrimination, safety, and subjective well-being.

COMING INTO THE GENDERED WORLD — GENDERED PRACTICES OF PARENTAL CHILDCARE

WHAT WAS EXPLORED?

- ▲ Mother's and father's support to children aged 0–4 in daily activities
- ▲ Mother's and father's support to children aged 0–4 for learning

KEY FINDINGS

- Children are born into a gendered world, and their earliest experiences are linked with remarkably gendered childcare practices.
- Mothers are those who are predominantly engaged in daily activities with children and who provide the main support for learning.
- While among mothers there are no differences based on different background characteristics — they equally engage in daily activities with children in very high proportion across different groups — there are differences among fathers. The proportion of fathers engaged in daily activities with children increases with education and with higher wealth status, and it is higher in urban compared with other areas, as well in households in which mothers are employed compared with those in which mothers are not in employment.
- Mothers do not discriminate children by sex in their engagement in daily activities, while fathers' engagement shows differences: a higher proportion of fathers engage with sons than with daughters. These patterns are systematic across different groups of fathers: even fathers with higher education — the group in which the highest proportion of fathers engage with children — engage in a higher proportion with sons than daughters.
- In Roma settlements the gap between mothers' and fathers' engagement is even bigger, as fathers very marginally engage in daily activities with children. Their very low engagement is consistent across different groups and is equally marginal when it comes to their engagement with sons and daughters.
- The gaps in mothers' and fathers' engagement in learning support is also big, although somewhat smaller in comparison with domestic daily activities. Not only do a higher proportion of mothers than fathers engage in support to learning, they engage on average in a greater number of activities.
- The low proportion of fathers engaged in support for learning shows no significant changes over time.
- Engagement of mothers and fathers in Roma settlements is lower in comparison with the national sample. A higher proportion of mothers engage than fathers, but there are certain differences in engagement in learning compared with domestic activities. Specifically, fathers from Roma settlements engage in somewhat higher proportion with children in learning than in daily domestic activities, while mothers engage in somewhat lower proportion in learning than in daily domestic activities.

While the usual perspective in analysing MICS data on early childhood is from the perspective of the child, our analysis starts with a view on the family setting in which children are raised during their earliest stage of life. This influences their early experiences, perceptions and initial understanding of the world around them, including of gendered roles and practices. Therefore, the analysis starts from the angle of the parents and their roles that shape this most important care and development environment in the first several years of a child's life.

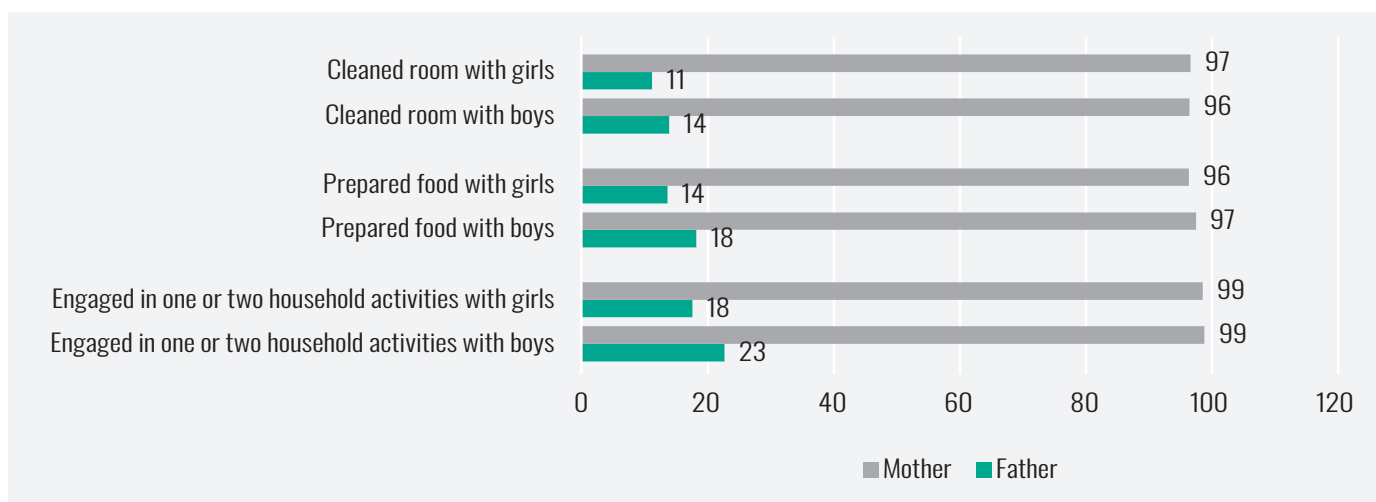
Support for daily activities

The disproportionate engagement of mothers and fathers in daily activities with children is striking. While 99 per cent of mothers engaged in one or two household activities (such as preparing food or cleaning the room) with their children during the three days preceding the survey, **only 20 per cent of fathers did the same.** This is partly the consequence of the generally low engagement of men in household activities, and partly of their low engagement in childcare. Mothers' engagement is systematically high across different groups defined in terms of background characteristics, while among fathers certain differences are noticed:

- ▲ A higher proportion of fathers in urban areas engage than fathers in other areas (25 per cent vs. 13 per cent).
- ▲ Fathers with higher education engage in much higher proportion (33 per cent) than fathers with secondary (16 per cent), primary or no education (16 per cent).
- ▲ Fathers engage in higher proportion when mothers are employed (24 per cent) than if they are economically inactive (16 per cent) or unemployed (10 per cent).
- ▲ Fathers' engagement decreases with household material deprivation: in households not facing any deprivation, 25 per cent of fathers engaged in one or two household activities with children; while 18 per cent of fathers living in households facing deprivation in one or two items engaged; compared with 14 per cent of fathers living in very deprived households (deprivation in three or more items).
- ▲ Similarly, fathers' engagement increases with wealth: while in the poorest households 12 per cent of fathers engaged in one or two household activities with children, in the richest households 35 per cent of fathers engaged.

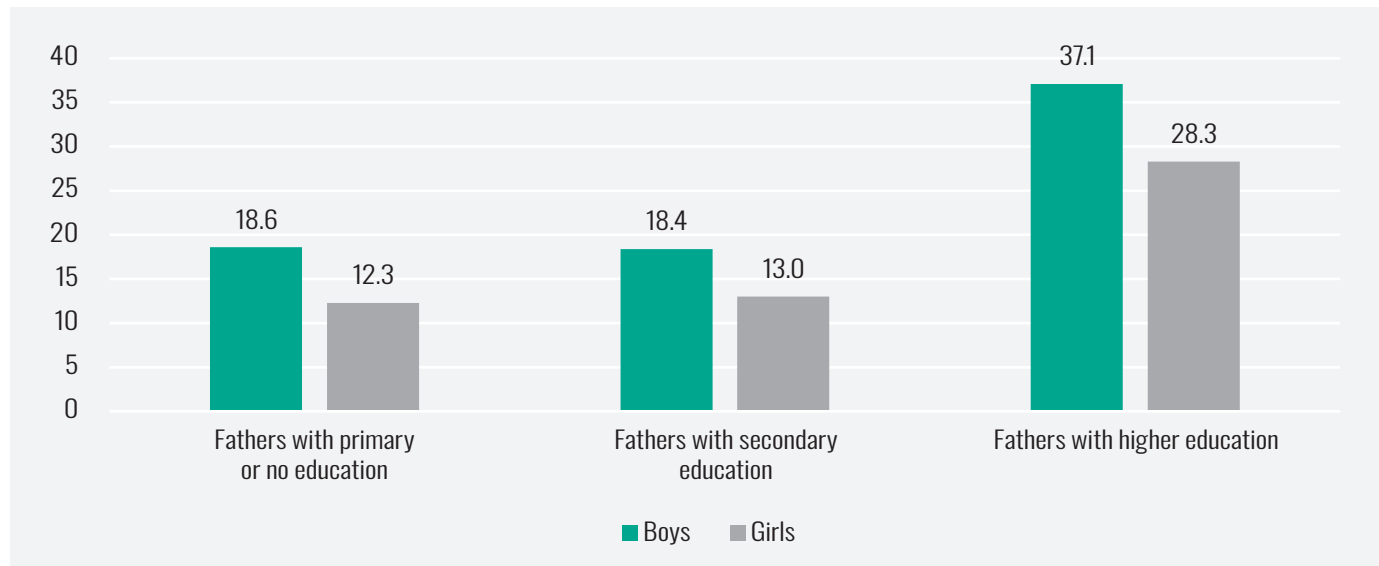
While mothers equally engage with boys and girls in household activities, there is tendency among fathers to engage with boys in a higher proportion than with girls (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of children aged 1–4 years with or for whom a father or mother has engaged in one or two household activities during the last three days, by type of activity and sex of children, Serbia, 2019



Different engagement of fathers with boys and girls is systematic across different groups defined in terms of living area, wealth and education. For example, although there is a difference in the proportion of fathers engaged with children depending on the father's level of education, regardless of the level of education, fathers will engage more with boys than girls (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of children aged 1–4 years with or for whom a father has engaged in one or two household activities during the last three days, by sex of children and father's education, Serbia, 2019



In Roma settlements, gaps in mothers' and fathers' engagement are even bigger, as only 2 per cent of fathers engaged in one or two household activities with children, while 98 per cent of mothers did the same. While mothers' engagement in daily activities with children is systematically high across different groups, fathers' engagement is systematically low across different groups, and there are no groups which show significantly smaller gaps between mothers and fathers. For example, while among fathers with secondary education 3 per cent engaged in daily activities, among fathers with no education 4 per cent engaged. Fathers in Roma settlements do not discriminate children by sex, as their engagement is systematically low with both sons and daughters. For example, while 1.4 per cent of fathers engaged in activities with boys, 1.8 per cent engaged in activities with girls.

Support for learning

Consistent with the patterns of mothers' and fathers' engagement with children in daily activities, there are also big differences (although somewhat smaller) in their engagement with children in support for learning, which includes activities such as reading books or looking at picture books, telling stories, singing songs, taking children outside the home, compound or yard, playing with children and spending time with children naming, counting or drawing things. While 91 per cent of mothers engaged in four or more learning activities during the three days preceding the survey, 40 per cent of fathers did the same. Not only do a higher proportion of mothers engage in learning support activities, they also engage on average in a higher number of activities than fathers. While fathers on average engaged in 2.9 activities, mothers engaged on average in 5.3 activities.

There are differences in engagement of fathers depending on their background characteristics:

- ▲ Fathers from urban areas engaged in higher proportion than fathers in other areas (46 per cent vs. 33 per cent).
- ▲ Fathers with higher education engage in higher proportion (54 per cent) than fathers with secondary (41 per cent) or primary/no education (28 per cent).

- ▲ Fathers engage in higher proportion when mothers are employed (46 per cent) than when they are unemployed (43 per cent) or economically inactive (27 per cent).
- ▲ Fathers' engagement decreases with household material deprivation: in households not facing any deprivation 48 per cent of fathers engaged in four or more learning activities with children, while 39 per cent of fathers living in a household facing deprivation in one or two items engaged, and 29 per cent of fathers living in very deprived households (facing deprivation in three or more items) did so.
- ▲ Fathers' engagement increases with wealth: while in the poorest households 25 per cent of fathers engaged in four or more learning activities with children, in the richest households 53 per cent of fathers engaged in such activities.

Unlike engagement in daily domestic activities, engagement in learning activities shows no differences between boys and girls: mothers and fathers engage almost equally with boys and girls. Significantly different engagement of fathers with boys and girls is found only in the group of fathers with no education or who completed primary school, where fathers engaged in four or more learning activities with 34 per cent of boys and 18 per cent of girls.

Comparative data for 2014 and 2019 indicate no changes in fathers' engagement: in both years, 37 per cent of fathers engaged in four or more learning activities. While there are no changes in the proportion of engaged fathers, there is a trend of diminishing differences in engagement with boys and girls. While in 2014 41 per cent of fathers engaged in four or more learning activities with boys and 32 per cent with girls, in 2019 38 per cent of fathers engaged with boys and 36 per cent with girls. In other words, the difference in engagement with boys and girls diminished from 9 percentage points to 2 percentage points.

Although mothers' engagement is more even across different groups than fathers', there are certain differences, mainly depending on the mother's education and material deprivation faced by the household:

- ▲ Mothers with higher education engage in higher proportion (93 per cent) than mothers with secondary (91 per cent) or primary/no education (81 per cent).
- ▲ Among mothers living in households not facing any deprivation, 94 per cent engaged in four or more learning activities with children, compared with 92 per cent of mothers living in households facing deprivation in one or two items and 85 per cent of mothers living in very deprived households (facing deprivation in three or more items).

In Roma settlements the level of engagement of mothers and fathers is on average lower. While 11 per cent of fathers engaged in four or more activities with children, 45 per cent of mothers did so. Mothers tend to engage slightly more with girls than boys (48 per cent vs. 41 per cent), while fathers do not 'discriminate' — their engagement is equally low with boys and girls (11 per cent and 10 per cent). Unemployed fathers tend to engage in higher proportion than employed or economically inactive fathers (19 per cent vs. 9 per cent and 11 per cent, respectively). Mothers with secondary or higher education tend to engage in higher proportion than mothers with primary education or those without schooling (65 per cent vs. 43 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively).

STARTING LIFE WITH RELATIVE GENDER EQUALITY — GENDER DIFFERENCES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD (AGE 0–4)

WHAT WAS EXPLORED?

- ▲ Early childhood education (36–59 months)
- ▲ Availability of learning materials
- ▲ Child supervision
- ▲ Child discipline
- ▲ Development outcomes observed through the Early Childhood Development Index

KEY FINDINGS

Boys and girls start their lives mostly as equals. In most of the monitored aspects there are no significant gender gaps:

- Enrolment in early education (age 36–59 months) has increased remarkably between 2010 and 2019 among both boys and girls, and the gender gap is insignificant.
- Gender gaps are absent regarding the availability of learning materials, such as books for children and toys, but it is important to note that every fifth child does not have at least three books for children, and every sixth child does not have at least two types of playthings.
- In Roma settlements, gender equality in early education actually means low enrolment of both boys and girls.
- Violent disciplining practices among children aged 2–14 are in stagnation between 2014 and 2019 following a significant decline between 2010 and 2014, and there are no significant differences between girls and boys in the proportion of children who were exposed to any violent discipline.
- Among children aged 1–4 years there are no significant gender differences in exposure to violent disciplining methods in the general population as well as in Roma settlements.

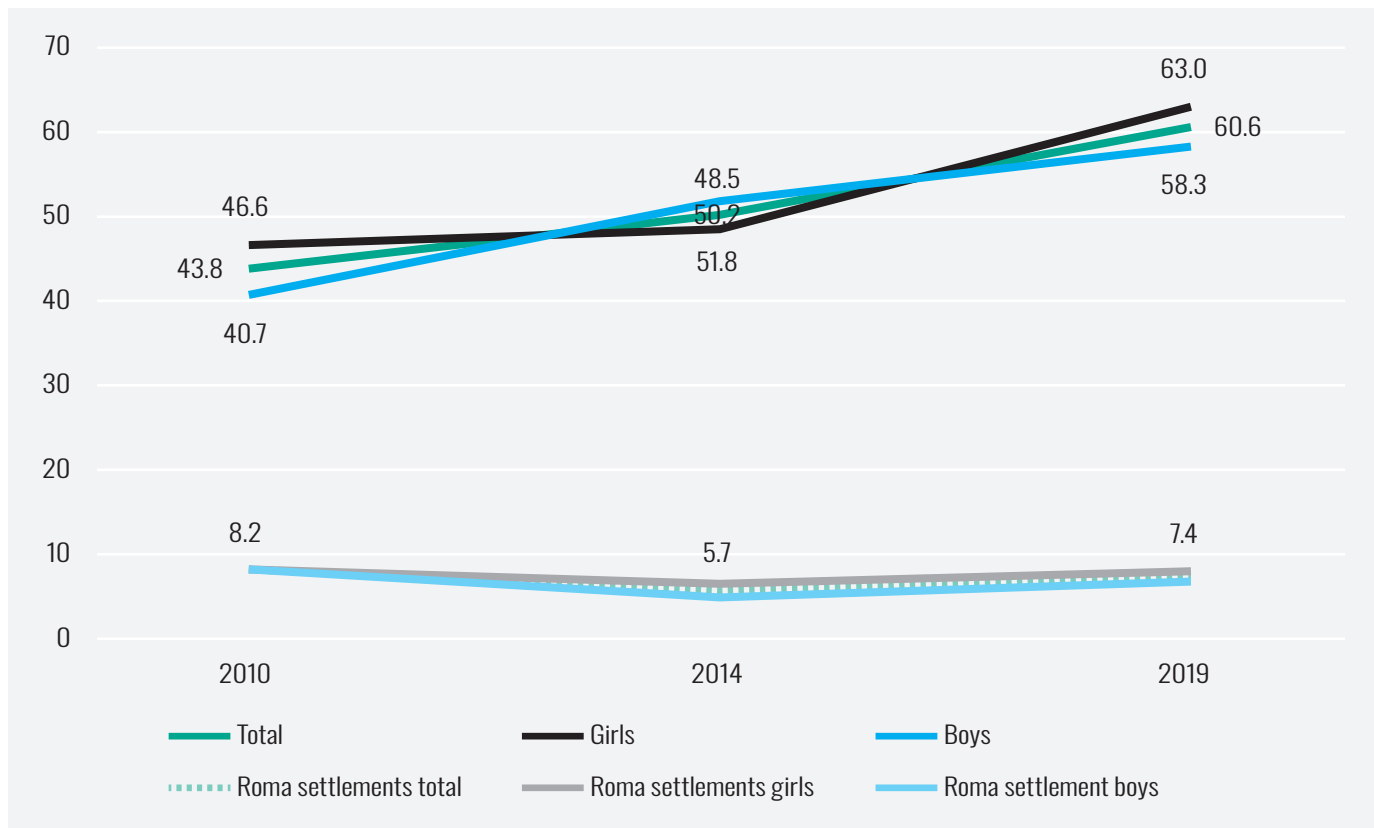
However, some gender differences start to emerge even in this early stage of children's lives:

- While practices show no significant change in the proportion of children exposed to violent discipline, the parental attitudes that justify such practices are on the increase, and these are gender biased, as physical punishment is more frequently justified in upbringing boys than girls.
- Early development outcomes are in favour of girls, and the reason for this is differences in the emotional and social domain and learning domain but not in other domains, including numeracy, literacy and physical development.

Early childhood education

There has been a significant increase in attendance in early education among both boys and girls of age 36–59 months in the general population, but still very low attendance and inconsistent trends among children of same age living in Roma settlements (Figure 3). **The gender gaps are not significant, except among children living in households from the poorest wealth index quintile.** In this group only 5 per cent of boys attended early education compared with 20 per cent of girls.

Figure 3. Percentage of children aged 36–59 months attending early childhood education, by sex, Serbia and Roma settlements, 2019



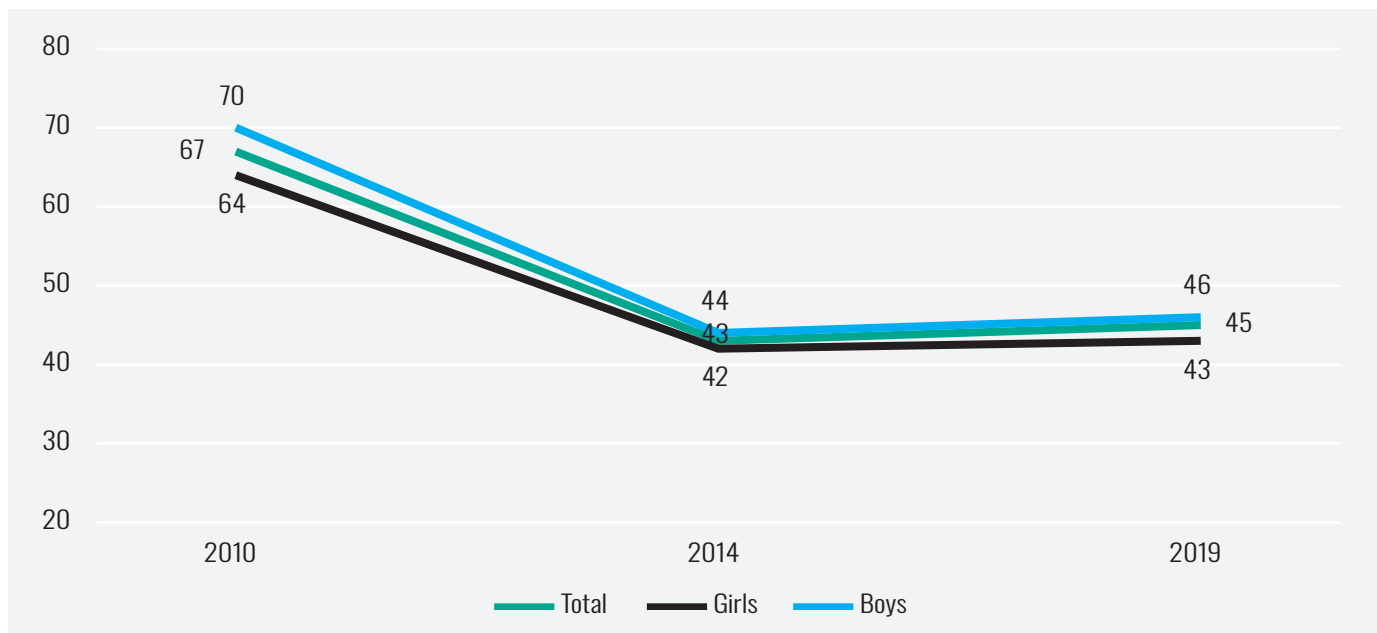
Learning materials such as children's books and toys are important for child development. In the national sample of children under 5 years, every fifth child (22 per cent) has not at least three children's books and every sixth child has not at least two types of playthings (toys from the shop or household objects or objects found outside that are used for playing). **There are no gender differences in availability of learning materials in the general sample and across different groups of children**, defined in terms of their backgrounds such as area of residence, mother's level of education or economic activity status, and within the groups of different level of wealth. Besides, differences between boys and girls in their use of homemade, purchased or found objects are not statistically significant.

In Roma settlements, the proportion of children who have at least three children's books is very low — 8 per cent — while the share of those who have 10 or more books is only 2 per cent. The share of children who have two or more types of playthings is 66 per cent, with no gender gap. The only gender difference is seen regarding homemade toys, as a higher proportion of girls than boys have such toys (11 per cent vs. 7 per cent).

Child supervision and discipline

Data on trends in prevalence of violent disciplining methods are available only for the broader age group of children (2–14 years). These trends indicate a **significant decline in the proportion of children being exposed to any violent disciplining method between 2010 and 2014, but then stagnation between 2014 and 2019** (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Percentage of children aged 2–14 who experienced any violent discipline method (physical punishment or psychological aggression), 2010, 2014, 2019, Serbia

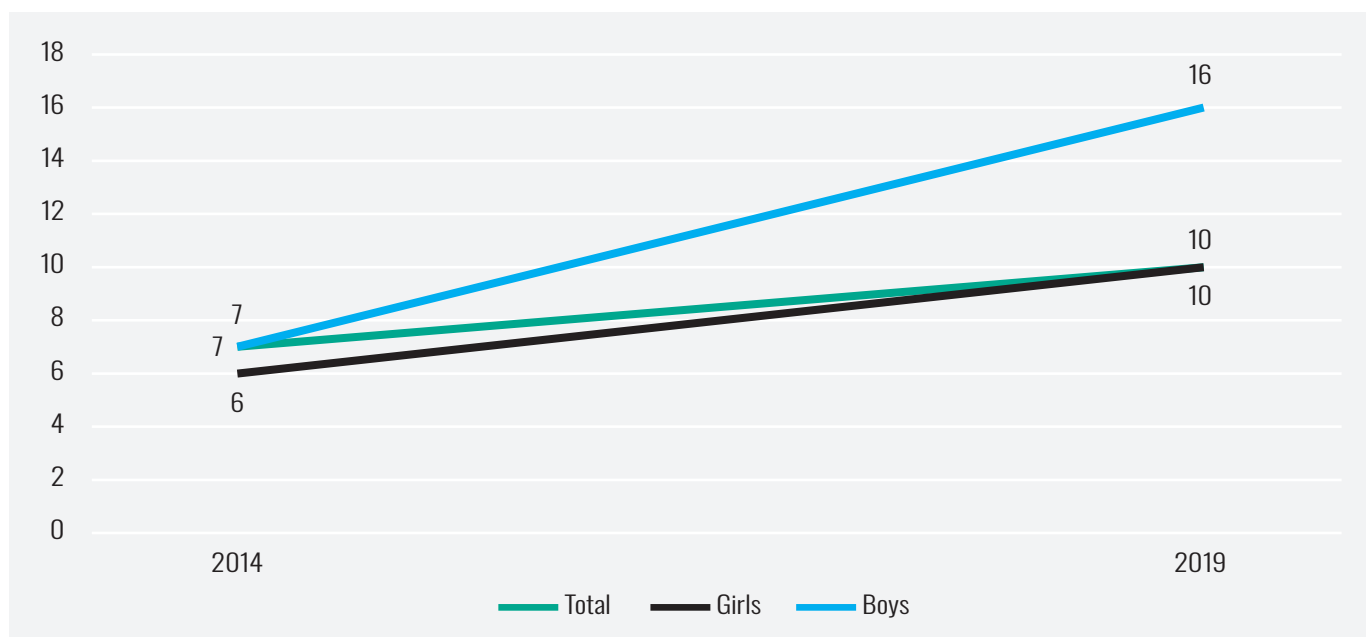


Among children aged 1–4 years, 44 per cent were subjected to some form of violent discipline during the month preceding the survey. The gender difference is not statistically significant, as 45 per cent of boys and 42 per cent of girls were exposed to some form of violent discipline. Psychological aggression is a more frequent form of violent discipline than physical punishment: 37 per cent of children were exposed to some form of psychological aggression while 24 per cent of children were exposed to physical punishment. Inadequate supervision as a form of neglect was registered among 3 per cent of boys and 4 per cent of girls.

In Roma settlements the prevalence of violent child discipline is higher, with 65 per cent of children subjected to some form of violent discipline in the month preceding the survey. Gender differences are not statistically significant despite the 4 percentage point difference: 67 per cent of boys and 63 per cent of girls were subjected to such discipline. Psychological aggression was found among 56 per cent of children, physical punishment among 45 per cent of children, while inadequate supervision was found in 3 per cent of children, without significant gender differences.

Interestingly, the prevalence of violent discipline practices is higher than the prevalence of attitudes approving such practices. While in 2019 20 per cent of children experienced some form of physical punishment, only 9 per cent of parents justified corporal punishment. Unlike the practice, which shows trend of decline between 2010 and 2014 and then stagnation between 2014 and 2019, trends in attitudes show a significant increase between 2014 and 2019 (data for 2010 are not available) in the proportion of parents who justify physical punishment of children (Figure 5). Gender differences were not statistically significant. During same period there was a decrease in the proportion of parents/caregivers in Roma settlements who justify physical punishment, from 11 per cent in 2014 to 8 per cent in 2019, but this change was not statistically significant.

Figure 5. Percentage of respondents who believe that physical punishment is needed to bring up, raise or educate a child properly, Serbia, 2010, 2014, 2019



This discrepancy between practices and attitudes is visible also when children aged 1–4 are the focus. While 24 per cent of children under 5 years were exposed to physical punishment by parents/caregivers, only 9 per cent of parents/caregivers justified physical punishment.

Besides, **attitudes are more gendered than practices**. While differences in the proportion of boys and girls who were physically punished are not statistically significant, **there is a higher tendency among parents to justify the use of physical punishment on boys than on girls** (11 per cent vs. 7 per cent). This difference is particularly big in the group of children whose mothers have only primary education or are without schooling, among whom 24 per cent justify physical punishment of boys and only 6 per cent justify such punishment of girls. The same tendency was found among households living in Roma settlements: while 8 per cent of parents justify physical punishment, a higher proportion justify its use on boys than on girls (12 per cent vs. 5 per cent).

Early development outcomes

Development outcomes at this stage of life are in favour of girls, as the Early Child Development Index (ECDI)⁸ score is higher for girls than boys (99 per cent vs. 96 per cent). The difference is significant, and it is the **result of a difference in the domain of social and emotional development and not in other domains**. However, it should be noted that differences are not significant in urban areas (98 per cent for boys and 98 per cent for girls) but only in other areas (93 per cent for boys and 99 per cent for girls).

In Roma settlements the ECDI score is somewhat lower than for the general population of children (89 per cent vs. 97 per cent). **Significant differences between boys and girls appear in the domain of literacy–numeracy**, as 9 per cent of boys and 16 per cent of girls are on track for development in this area. However, **gender differences in the overall ECDI scores are not statistically significant**.

⁸ The MICS framework monitors the developmental status of children by the Early Child Development Index, which combines indicators of development in four domains that are considered milestones of child development: literacy–numeracy, physical, social–emotional and learning. The ECDI is composed of 10 items and is calculated as the percentage of children who are developmentally on track in at least three out of four domains.

GROWING GENDERED LIFE-COURSE DIFFERENCES IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD (AGE 5–14)

WHAT WAS EXPLORED?

- ▲ Participation in organized learning among children one year younger than the official primary school entry age
- ▲ Preschool Preparation Programme (PPP) attendance
- ▲ Attendance and completion of primary school
- ▲ Participation in school activities
- ▲ Support for learning at school
- ▲ Support for learning at home
- ▲ Prevalence of violent disciplining methods
- ▲ Child labour

KEY FINDINGS

- Participation in organized learning among children one year younger than the official primary school entry age is high with no gender gaps in the general population. However, gender differences are present among certain groups, where a higher proportion of boys than girls are systematically included in preschool education: in non-urban areas, among children whose mothers have no education or completed only primary school, among children with economically inactive mothers and children living in deprived households.
- Attendance in organized learning among children in Roma settlements is lower than in the general population, with the same type of groups as in the general population showing gender differences in favour of boys.
- A gender gap is present in PPP attendance, and it is mainly attributed to the gender gap in non-urban areas.
- The attendance rate in PPP is lower among children living in Roma settlements than among children in the national sample, with consistent gender gaps in favour of boys across different groups.
- Gender gaps disappear in during mandatory primary school, and in the general population a very high percentage of children attend and complete school, without gender differences. Gaps reappear later, in secondary school, but only in some groups of children, such as the poorest households, in which boys leave school earlier than girls.
- Primary school attendance and completion are lower among children living in Roma settlements, and data indicate a remarkable dropout of girls in the transition from the seventh to eight grades of primary school.

- Participation of children in various activities related to school and education besides the basic classes shows no prominent gender differences, except in regard to the higher participation of girls than boys in school sections and clubs among both children in the national sample and children living in Roma settlements.
- Parental engagement in school, their supervision, awareness on school management or participation in various school activities, such as parental meetings with teachers, school events and similar, show certain gendered patterns. Basically, indicators point to firmer control and more engagement of parents/caregivers in the schooling of boys than girls. However, the reasons for that remain unknown.
- In Roma settlements, a higher proportion of parents of girls are aware of school management, while in other aspects the differences are not statistically significant.
- A higher proportion of mothers than fathers assist children in homework, and a higher proportion of boys than girls are recipients of such assistance.
- Almost half of children aged 5–14 years were exposed to some form of violent discipline, without significant gender differences. In Roma settlements the proportion of children exposed to violent discipline is higher than in the national sample, but also without significant gender differences.
- Child labour and participation in economic activities and household chores are highly gendered. Not only is the prevalence of child labour different between boys and girls (higher among boys), but also the nature of child labour is different: for boys it is more related to engagement in economic activities above a specific age threshold, while among girls it is more related to engagement in household chores above a specific age threshold.

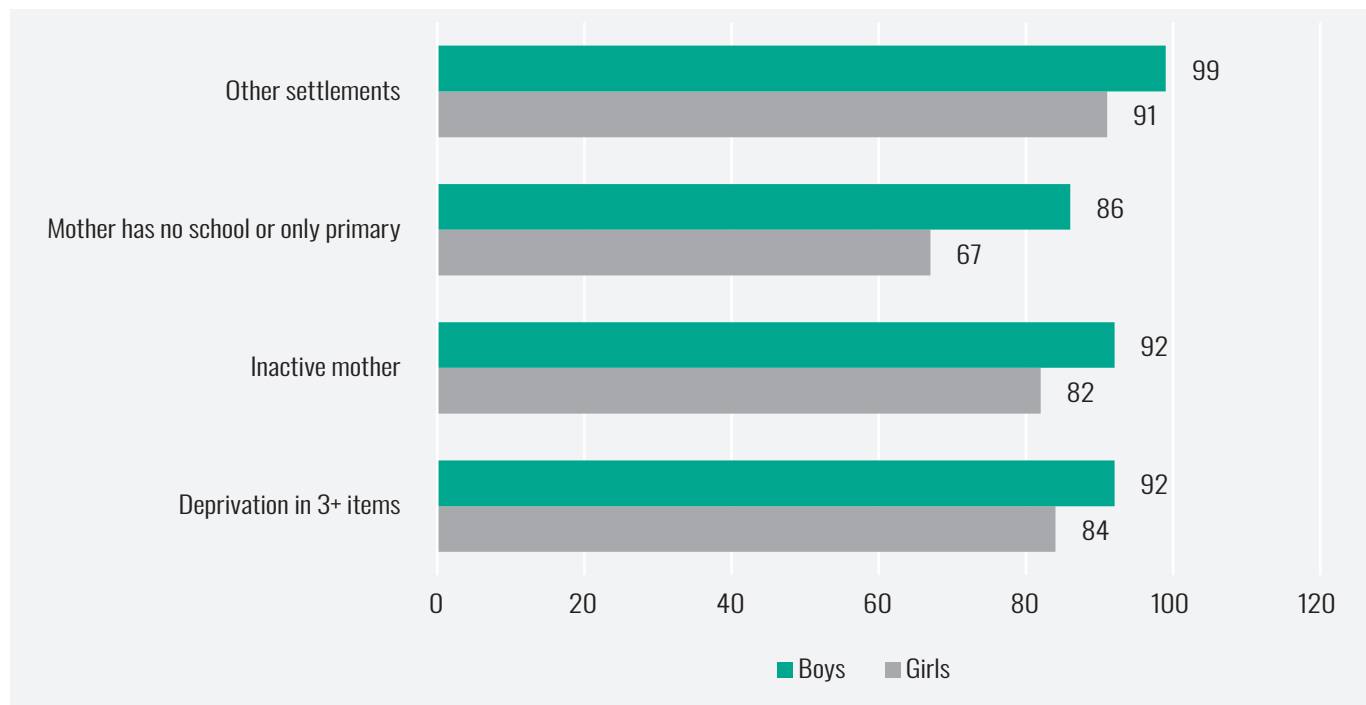
Participation in education, parental support and schooling outcomes

Participation in organized learning one year before primary school

Participation in organized learning among children aged one year younger than the official primary school entry age is high in the general population of children (97 per cent had been attending either an early education programme or primary school), and gender gaps are found only in some groups: among children living in non-urban areas, among children whose mothers have no education or completed only primary school, among children with economically inactive mothers and among children living in deprived households. These gender gaps are systematically in favour of boys (Figure 6).

In Roma settlements the net attendance ratio is still lower (76 per cent), with a gender gap of 6 percentage points (79 per cent vs. 73 per cent in favour of boys). The gender gap is big in 'other' (non-urban) areas (89 per cent vs. 71 per cent in favour of boys) and among children whose mothers have no schooling (72 per cent vs. 36 per cent in favour of boys). It is systematic and appears among children from the poorest and richest households alike, always in favour of boys.

Figure 6. Percentage of children one year younger than the official primary school entry age at the beginning of the school year attending education, early childhood education programme or primary education (adjusted net attendance ratio), by background characteristics, Serbia, 2019



Preschool Preparation Programme

The attendance rate in the Preschool Preparation Programme (PPP) is high in the general population, with 93 per cent of children attending or having attended PPP at the time of the survey. However, there is a significant gender gap in PPP attendance, with 90 per cent of girls and 96 per cent of boys attending or having attended this form of education. Insights from the disaggregated data indicate that this gap can be mainly attributed to the gender gap in PPP attendance in non-urban ('other') areas, where 90 per cent of girls and 99 per cent of boys were attending PPP during the survey.

The PPP attendance rate is lower among children living in Roma settlements (77 per cent), with a statistically significant difference between girls and boys (71 per cent vs. 84 per cent). Although the gender gap is present in urban areas (83 per cent vs. 72 per cent in favour of boys), it is particularly big in other areas (85 per cent vs. 65 per cent in favour of boys). The gap is highest among children whose mothers have no education (76 per cent vs. 44 per cent in favour of boys). It is systematic across groups defined based on different background characteristics, and it appears among children in deprived and non-deprived households, the poorest and richest.

Gender gaps in PPP attendance require further exploration. The question is why gender gaps appear systematically in this regard, as they are absent in very early education (age 1–4) and, later, in primary school. As gender gaps are limited to groups facing various risks of social exclusion — due to living in less populated areas, lower human capital (education), exclusion from economic activities and poorer material conditions — it can be assumed that some practices or attitudes related to the timing of education and the importance of education in that stage of childhood are evaluated differently by parents in relation to boys and girls. However, this question remains unanswered in this analysis.

Primary education

Primary education is mandatory, so whatever reasons parents might have to evaluate differently the importance of education for boys and girls are overridden by the obligation to enrol children in primary school and ensure their regular attendance and completion. Therefore, the high net attendance ratio for both girls and boys (99 per cent and 100 per cent), without gender gaps, is not surprising. Completion rate of primary school is also very high, without gender gaps in the general population of children (100 per cent for both girls and boys).

However, among children living in Roma settlements, overall primary school participation and completion is much lower. The net attendance ratio for primary school for boys is slightly higher than for girls (93 per cent vs. 91 per cent). The difference between girls and boys is remarkable in regard to the gross intake rate to the last grade of primary school (53 per cent for girls and 71 per cent for boys), which can indicate early school leaving by Roma girls, just before completion. Gender differences are absent in regard to primary school completion rate, at 64 per cent for both girls and boys.⁹

Participation in school activities

Generally, there are no significant differences between boys and girls in participation in different paid and free-of-charge school-related activities, such as private lessons for classes, extended school stay, sports, foreign language lessons, music classes, remedial classes, extra classes, school sections and clubs and similar. **The only gender difference** related to participation in such activities is regarding the **participation in school sections and clubs**, with 50 per cent of girls and 33 per cent of boys participating in such activities.

The same tendencies are found among children in Roma settlements. While their overall participation in school-related activities is lower, a gender gap is present only in relation to participation in school sections and clubs, with 24 per cent of girls and 16 per cent of boys participating in such activities.

Support for learning at school

Support for learning at school is monitored by MICS in several aspects of parents' engagement and support: receiving report cards for children, participating in the Parents' Council of the school, being familiar with decisions made by the Parents' Council, attending a school celebration or sports event, meeting with teachers to discuss their child's progress or attending parent-teacher meetings. The support for learning shows certain gendered practices. Generally, some **indicators point to firmer control and more engagement of parents/caregivers in the schooling of boys than girls**:

- ▲ Adult household members will more often receive a report card for boys than girls (97 per cent vs. 93 per cent). This difference is significant for the overall sample of children, but it is particularly prominent in households facing material deprivation in three or more items, where a report card was received for boys in 97 per cent of cases and for girls in 86 per cent of cases.
- ▲ Adults in the poorest households will more often meet with teachers to discuss their child's progress in the case of boys than girls (97 per cent for boys and 81 per cent for girls).

It is not possible to conclude, based on available data, if this stronger parental involvement and supervision in boys' school performance is the result of worse performance of boys in school in comparison with girls, or higher concerns and significance assigned to the schooling of boys, or possibly both.

In Roma settlements, gender differences are present more in the area of awareness of school management (participation in the Parents' Council or being informed about the Council's decisions) than in other aspects. Data indicate that **a higher proportion of parents of girls than parents of boys are aware of different aspects of school management**. For example, 82 per cent of

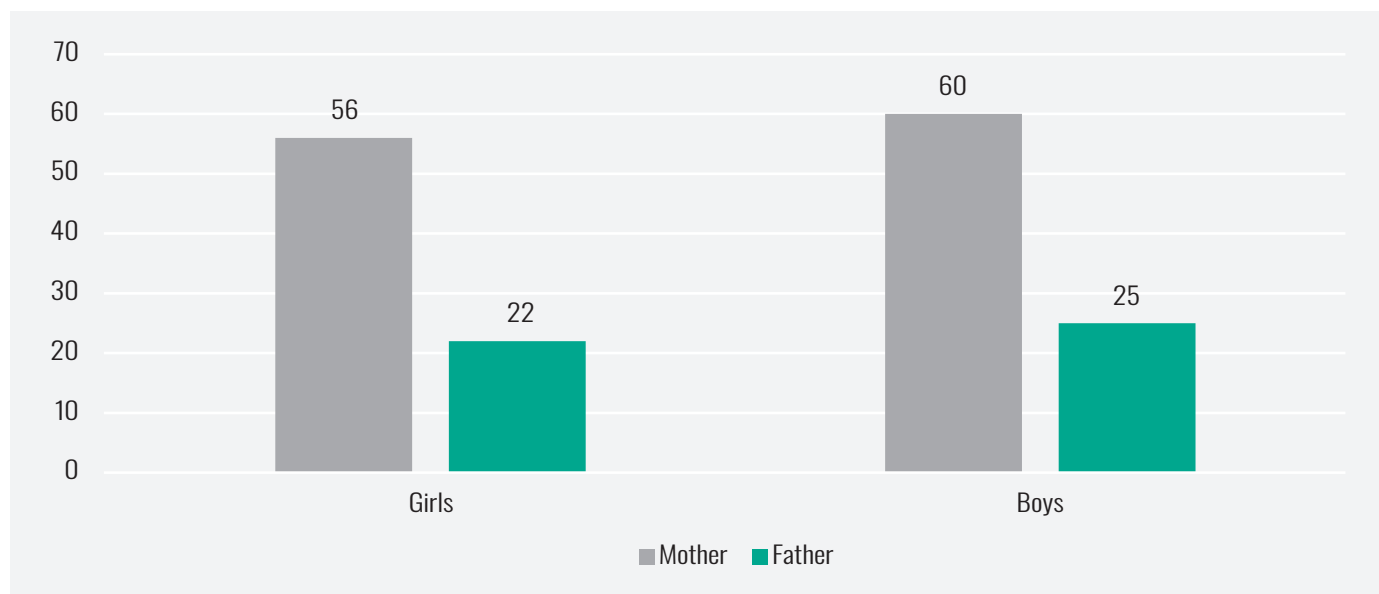
⁹ Completion rate of primary education represents the percentage of a cohort of children three to five years above the official age of the last grade of primary education, that is the percentage of children who are 12 to 14 years old, who completed primary education.

parents of girls are aware that the school has a Parents' Council compared with 72 per cent of parents of boys. Parents of girls are familiar with decisions made by the Parents' Council in 65 per cent of cases, while parents of boys are familiar in 55 per cent of cases. For the other aspects, such as parental supervision and involvement in activities, the gender differences are not significant.

Support for learning at home

When it comes to learning support at home, gendered patterns of different engagement of mothers and fathers are again very visible. In the national sample of children aged 7–14 years, 23 per cent receive assistance in homework from fathers and 59 per cent from mothers. **The tendency to receive more assistance from mothers is the same for girls and boys, while from the parents' perspective there is a visible tendency to assist boys slightly more than girls** (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Percentage of children aged 7–14 years who receive help with homework, by gender and by person helping, Serbia, 2019



The differences are particularly present in urban areas, where 71 per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls receive help with homework. Among children living in Roma settlements, there is no significant difference in the proportion of boys and girls receiving help with homework (60 per cent and 62 per cent, respectively), but there is a significant difference in the proportion of children receiving help from mothers or fathers (41 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively).

Child discipline

Violent discipline methods are still highly prevalent among children aged 5–14 years, as 45 per cent of children of this age were exposed to some form of violent disciplining methods (psychological or physical) during the month preceding the survey. There are certain differences in the proportion of boys and girls exposed to some form of violent discipline (47 per cent of boys and 43 per cent of girls). Every tenth parent/caregiver justifies physical punishment, with a **somewhat higher proportion of parents of boys than girls approving such violence** (11 per cent vs. 9 per cent), although the difference is not statistically significant.

A higher proportion of children living in Roma settlements are exposed to violent discipline methods than children in the national sample (69 per cent), with differences between boys and girls (72 per cent vs. 65 per cent). A somewhat lower proportion of parents

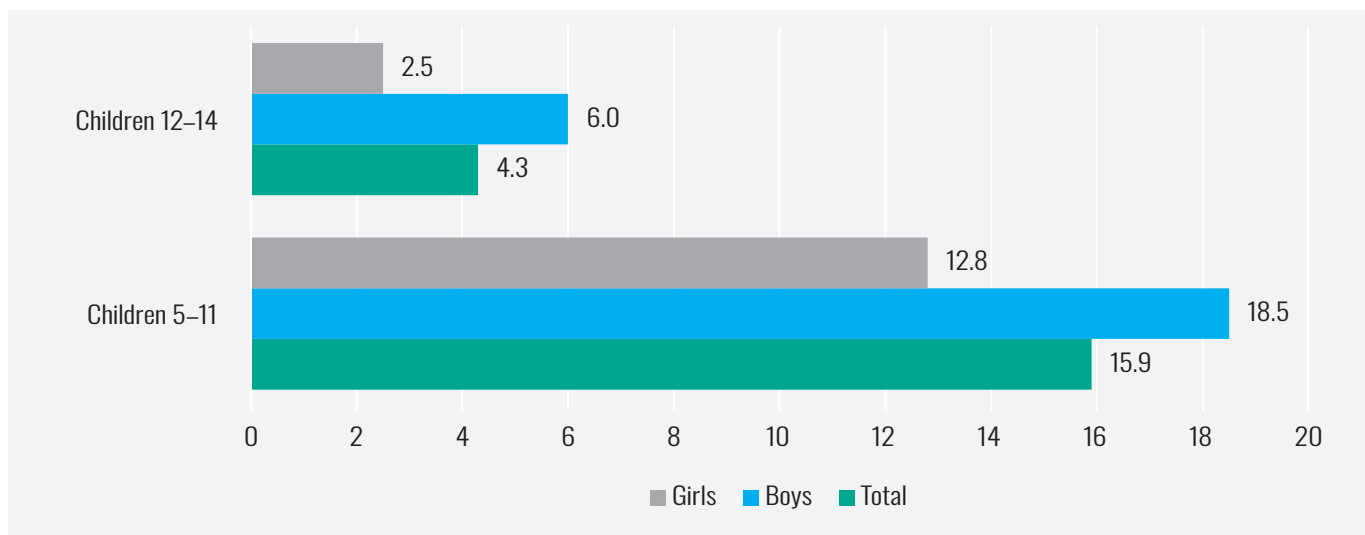
from Roma settlements approve of physical punishment (8 per cent), with a small difference in regard to boys (9 per cent) and girls (7 per cent).

Child labour

According to Serbian Labour Law, the age of 15 years is set as the threshold for employment.¹⁰ The MICS methodology defines child labour as participation in economic activities and household chores at or above age-specific thresholds.¹¹ Unlike child labour, which can prevent optimal development of children, economic participation below specific age thresholds can be important for early experiences of economic activities and labour socialization. And the area of economic activities and household chores is one of the areas with the most remarkable gender differences, which are established exactly in this middle stage of childhood and reproduced throughout the later life-course stages.

Trends in the prevalence of child labour cannot be monitored due to the change of definition between 2014 and 2019 (hazardous work is excluded from the latter). In 2019, 15.9 per cent of children aged 5–11 years and 6 per cent of children aged 12–14 years were engaged in child labour (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Percentage of children engaged in child labour, by age and sex, Serbia, 2019



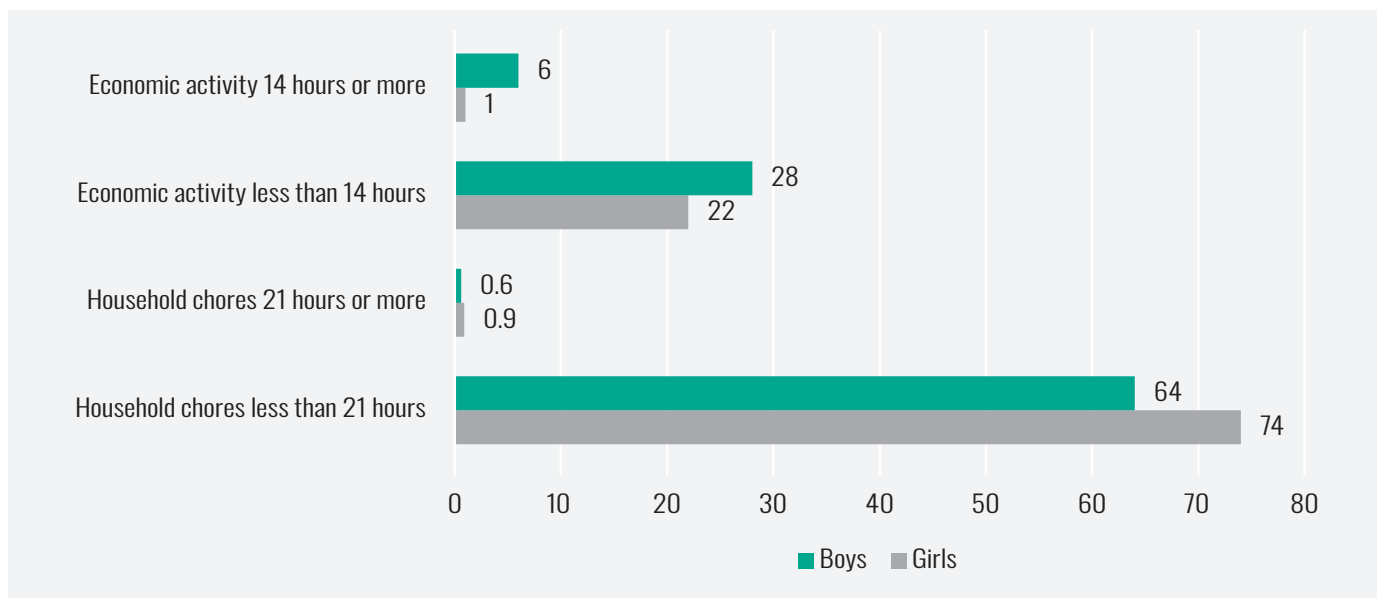
Among children aged 5–11 years even one hour of weekly engagement in economic activity is considered child labour, so the prevalence of child labour is higher than among children aged 12–14 years.

Child labour is more prevalent among boys than girls, as is participation in economic activities that are not child labour (below the age-specific threshold). Among children aged 12–14 years, participation of girls in economic activities below and above the age-specific threshold (14 hours or more) is lower than among boys, but participation in household chores below and above the age-specific threshold (21 hours or more) is higher. Therefore, not only is the level of engagement in child labour different for boys and girl but also the nature of child labour. **For boys, child labour means more engagement in economic activities, while for girls it means more engagement in household chores** (Figure 9).

¹⁰ Minors can be employed only with the consent of their parents or guardians but only if the job does not include hard physical work, work underground, underwater, at heights or in jobs that could negatively impact their health and life. Minors can be employed only with the approval of a health institution, which confirms that work is not dangerous for the life and health of the child.

¹¹ These thresholds are: for age 5–11, one hour or more per week; for age 12–14, 14 hours or more for participation in economic activity; and 28 hours or more for household chores, for both age groups (UNICEF, 2014: 201).

Figure 9. Percentage of boys and girls engaged in economic activity and household chores below and above the age-specific threshold, Serbia, 2019



Therefore, the data indicate that girls are better protected from child labour but also less exposed to early labour socialization when taking into account engagement in economic activities that are not considered child labour.

Among children in Roma settlements, as in children from the national sample, child labour is more prevalent among boys than girls in the younger age group (5–11), at 8 per cent and 4 per cent, while in the older age group (12–14) it is almost the same (5 per cent among boys and 4 per cent among girls).

TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ADOLESCENCE (15–17) AND EARLY SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE LIFE OF ADOLESCENT AND POST-ADOLESCENT WOMEN (15–19)

WHAT WAS EXPLORED?

- ▲ Secondary school attendance and completion
- ▲ Child labour
- ▲ Early sexual behaviour
- ▲ Use of contraception and unmet need
- ▲ Early marriage and childbearing

KEY FINDINGS

- Secondary school attendance is high among children from the national sample and without significant gender differences, except among children from the poorest households, where much more girls than boys stay out of school.
- In Roma settlements attendance in secondary school is very low and with gender differences indicating lower attendance of girls. The secondary school completion rate is also higher among boys than girls, indicating higher dropout among girls.
- Child labour is least prevalent among adolescents, and in the national sample participation of girls in economic activities that are not child labour is lower than among boys, but their engagement in child labour is higher.
- Among adolescents living in Roma settlements, girls are also less engaged in economic activities and in child labour.
- In the national sample, every tenth girl aged 15–17 and every third woman aged 18–19 years have started sexual life. A higher proportion of girls living in Roma settlements start sexual life early: one third of girls aged 15–17 and more than two thirds of women aged 18–19.
- Unmet need for contraception is higher among women in the national sample than women living in Roma settlements and among unmarried than married women. Every seventh sexually active but not married woman aged 15–19 has an unmet need for contraception, while among married women of the same age every tenth woman needs but does not use contraception. Among women of the same age in Roma settlements, an unmet need for contraception was found for every fourth unmarried and every fifth married woman.

- There is a slight increase in early marriage among women aged 15–19 in the national sample between 2014 and 2019 and a significant decrease among women of the same age living in Roma settlements.
- Early childbearing (before age 18) has disappeared in the general population of women aged 15–19 and is stagnant among women of the same age in Roma settlements.

Adolescent age is a turning point from childhood to adulthood. According to UNICEF's classification, the population aged 15–17 belongs to the category of children. However, at the same time, girls of this age belong to the so-called contingent of reproductive age women, and indicators on their sexual behaviour, sexual and reproductive health and rights, discrimination and subjective well-being are monitored as among adult women. For these reasons, and in order not to repeat findings, part of the picture about adolescent girls is presented in this chapter (education, child labour, early sexual life, use of contraception, early marriage and childbearing), while other aspects, such as safety, discrimination and subjective well-being, are presented in the next chapter dedicated to all women of reproductive age. Besides, various indicators related to sexual and reproductive health and rights are available for the broader category of adolescent and post-adolescent women, so women aged 18–19 are included in these parts of the chapter as well.

Gendered patterns of secondary school attendance and completion

The transition from primary to secondary education is important in the life of adolescents and sets foundations for later prospects for education and overall socio-economic well-being. MICS data on effective transition to secondary school indicate **high transition of children in the general population to secondary school** (95 per cent) **with no significant gender differences** (96 per cent for girls and 94 per cent for boys). At the same time, they indicate a **lower transition of Roma children** (55 per cent), **with a gender difference in favour of boys** (62 per cent vs. 47 per cent).¹²

Secondary school attendance is high among children from the general population, without significant gender differences: the net attendance ratio is 93 per cent for girls and 95 per cent for boys. **Gender differences are visible among children living in 'other' areas**, where 9 per cent of girls of secondary school age are out of school compared with 6 per cent of boys. Gender differences are most prominent **in the poorest households**, where 22 per cent of girls compared with 14 per cent of boys are out of secondary school. Among those who attended secondary school there are no gender differences in completion rate, as 97 per cent of girls and 98 per cent of boys completed secondary school.

In Roma settlements, secondary school attendance and completion are much lower and, at the same time, with gender gaps, indicating **early exclusion of Roma girls from education**. The secondary school net attendance ratio was 30 per cent for boys and 27 per cent for girls, while the secondary school completion rate was 69 per cent for boys and 62 per cent for girls.

Child labour

As reported in the previous study,¹³ opinions are divided about the role and impact of work in adolescence on adolescent development. Some developmental psychologists hold that work experience in adolescence poses major opportunity costs, distracting young people from school and other beneficial activities. In their view, adolescent employment should be discouraged.¹⁴ According to others, early jobs can be a mechanism through which young people acquire knowledge about the labour force, form occupational values, learn how to behave appropriately in the workplace, and acquire skills that will facilitate their adaptation to work and enhance the likelihood of

¹² Data for children living in Roma settlements are based on 25–49 unweighted cases and should be interpreted with caution.

¹³ UNICEF, *Gender Aspects of Life Course in Serbia Seen through MICS Data*, Belgrade, 2015.

¹⁴ Greenberger and Steinberg, 1986, Steinberg and Cauffman, 1995, quoted from Jeylan et al., 2002.

later success in the labour market.¹⁵ As already mentioned, according to the labour law in Serbia, adolescents are eligible to be employed after reaching age 15. For this age group, MICS classifies work experience as child labour if work is performed during the week preceding the survey for 43 hours or more, while there is no threshold for household chores.

Child labour is least prevalent among adolescents compared with the younger categories of children. Although in this age group, similarly to the younger groups, girls have lower economic participation than boys (26 per cent vs. 37 per cent), **the prevalence of child labour is higher among girls than boys** (1.3 per cent vs. 0.0 per cent).

In Roma settlements, participation of girls in economic activity that is not child labour is lower than for boys (12 per cent vs. 32 per cent) but, unlike children from the national sample, **child labour is more prevalent among boys than girls** (7 per cent vs. 2 per cent).

Early control and autonomy over sexual and reproductive health

Some transitions that occur early in life may have lifelong implications for life's trajectory by shaping later events, experiences and future transitions. Early marriage and adolescent childbearing is a well-documented example of a transition with lifetime consequences.¹⁶ Various research in the context of developed countries shows that early childbearing is linked to lower educational attainment, limited employment prospects and lower income in adulthood.¹⁷

Sexual behaviour and use of contraception

Every tenth adolescent girl (age 15–17) had experience of sexual intercourse and one in a hundred had such an experience before age 15 years. During the year preceding the survey, 6 per cent of adolescent girls had sexual intercourse and 0.4 per cent had multiple partners. None of the girls who had multiple partners used condoms during sexual intercourse, which warns of the risk of sexually transmitted diseases.

The percentage of those who had sexual intercourse is almost four times higher in the next age cohort (18–19), where 38 per cent of women had sexual intercourse, and 1 per cent of women in this age group had first sexual intercourse before age 15. More than a third of women had sexual intercourse in the 12 months preceding the survey (34 per cent), while 4.3 per cent had multiple partners and none used a condom during last intercourse. In 2.5 per cent of cases, the sexual partner was 10 or more years older and in 87 per cent of cases that was a non-marital, non-cohabiting partner.

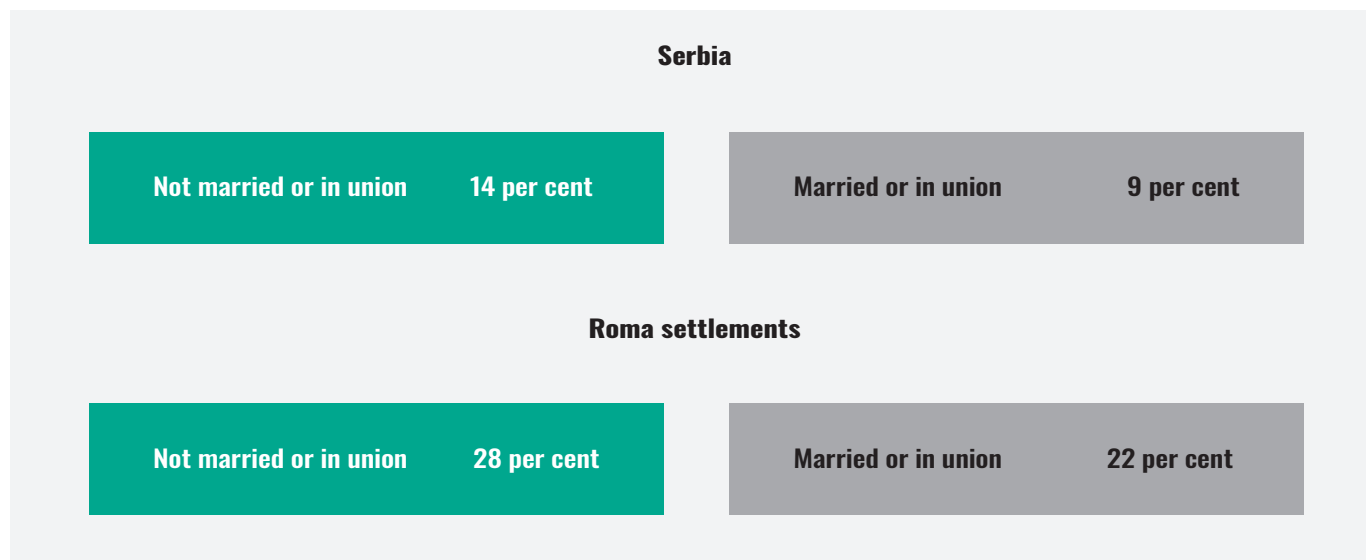
MICS explores the knowledge on contraception among women who are currently married or in union, but due to the very small number of adolescent girls and even young women of 18–19 years with such status (in total 15 girls/women) data are not available for this group. This is also the reason why the informed decision on health care indicator (SDG 5.6.1) cannot be calculated for girls 15–17 or women 15–19 in the national sample.

Among all women aged 15–19 years (including those unmarried or not in union, which amounted to 308 women), 80 per cent never used contraception and the main reason is that they were not sexually active (in 97 per cent of cases). In addition to that, 2 per cent wanted to get pregnant, 0.2 per cent said their partner was against it, and 0.7 per cent lacked knowledge. **Unmet need for family planning was higher among women who were not married or in union than among women who were married or in union** (Figure 10).

¹⁵ Jeylan et al., 2002.

¹⁶ Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn and Morgan, 1987, quoted from Elder et al., 2002: 8

¹⁷ Uhlenberg and Mueller, 2002, cf. UNICEF, *Gender Aspects of Life Course in Serbia Seen through MICS Data*, Belgrade, 2015.

Figure 10. Unmet need for contraception, women aged 15–19 years, Serbia and Roma settlements, 2019

A higher proportion of girls living in Roma settlements start sexual life early. Almost every tenth girl aged 15–17 (9 per cent) had sexual intercourse before the age of 15 years, and 30 per cent had experienced sexual intercourse at some point, while 26 per cent had such an experience during the year preceding the survey. This is mainly sexual life within early marriage, as only 30 per cent of those who had had sexual intercourse had done so with a non-marital, non-cohabiting partner.

In the 18–19 years age group, 18 per cent of women had sexual intercourse before age 15. More than two thirds (69 per cent) had experience of sexual intercourse, 64 per cent had that experience during the last year, and none used a condom during last intercourse. In 5.8 per cent of cases the partner was at least 10 years older than the woman, and only in 10 per cent of cases was it a non-marital or non-cohabiting partner. No girls/women in either age category had multiple partners during the last year. This is probably the consequence of early marriage and strong norms that prohibit sexual intercourse outside of marriage.¹⁸

Due to the higher number of girls aged 15–17 years living in Roma settlements who are married or in union, information is available about knowledge on contraception. According to MICS data, all these women (100 per cent of 112 women) were familiar with any contraceptive method, 96 per cent were familiar with any modern method and 85 per cent with any traditional method.

Among girls aged 15–17 years living in Roma settlements who were married or in union, 81 per cent used no contraceptive method, 2 per cent used any modern method, and 17 per cent used any traditional method. Among women aged 15–19 living in Roma settlements who never used any contraceptive method, the most frequent reason was that they were not sexually active (73 per cent), followed by desire to get pregnant (23 per cent), lack of knowledge (3 per cent) and side effects of contraceptives (0.4 per cent). Among women of the same age who were married or in union, 60 per cent never used any method of contraception, and among them 86 per cent because they wanted to get pregnant, 10 per cent because of lack of knowledge, 2 per cent because of side effects of contraception, 1 per cent because they did not have sexual intercourse and 2 per cent for other reasons. **Only 9 per cent of them had consulted a gynaecologist on contraception.**

Like among young women in the national sample, **unmet need for contraception** among women aged 15–19 living in Roma settlements **was higher among women who were not married or in union than among those who were married or in union** (Figure 10).

¹⁸ See more in: UNICEF, *Child Marriage among the Roma Population in Serbia: Ethnographic research*, Belgrade, 2017. Available from: <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/921/file/Child%20marriage%20among%20the%20Roma%20population%20in%20Serbia.pdf>

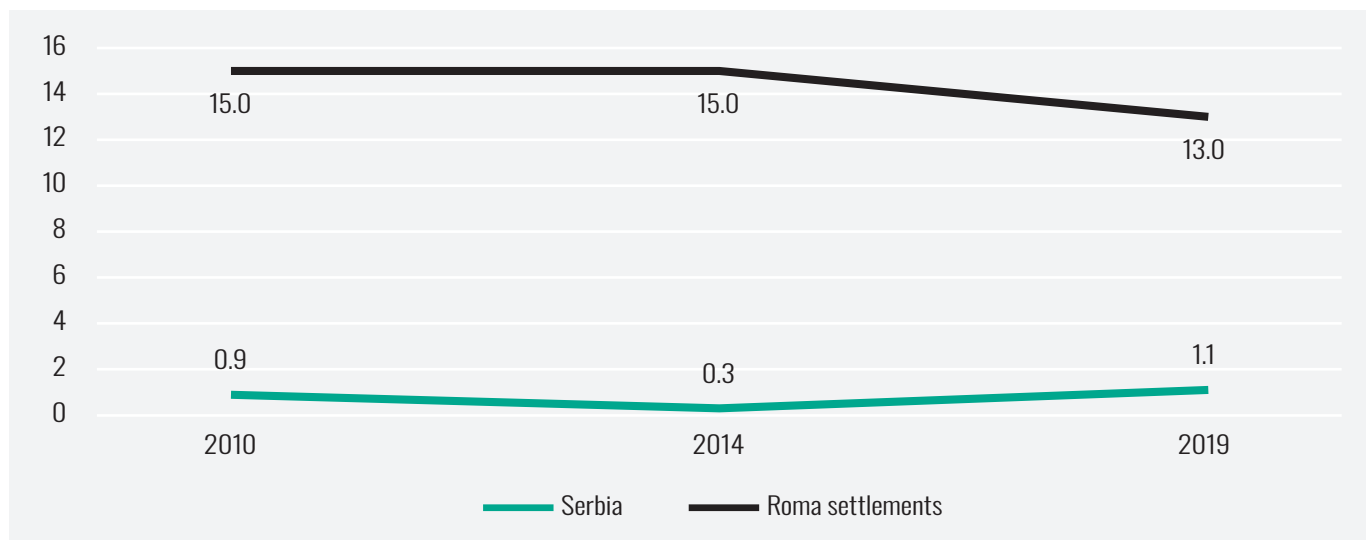
In Roma settlements, 42 per cent of women aged 15–17 years and 58 per cent of women aged 15–19 years claimed they make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care (SDG indicator 5.6.1), which is less than for whole population of women in Roma settlements of reproductive age (15–49), among whom 68 per cent make such decisions. This indicates a **lack of power to make autonomous decisions among a significant portion of young women living in Roma settlements**. Autonomy in deciding on sexual intercourse has been denied to 12 per cent of women of this age living in Roma settlements, who cannot say ‘no’ to their partners/husbands if they do not want to have sexual intercourse. In the same group of women, in 57 per cent of cases the decision on contraception is made jointly by the woman and husband, in 11 per cent of cases it is made by the woman alone, but in 3 per cent of cases by the husband alone.

While among girls aged 15–17 or women aged 15–19 in the national sample none had had an induced abortion, among women aged 15–19 in Roma settlements the total induced abortion rate (TIAR)¹⁹ for the last five years was 7, and 0.5% of women had had at least one induced abortion.

Early marriage and early childbearing

There is a slight increase in early marriage among women aged 15–19 years in the national sample. While in 2014 0.3 per cent of women in this age group got married before age 15, in 2019 this was 1.1 per cent. Contrary to that, **there is a decrease in early marriage among this age group in Roma settlements**, as in 2014 15 per cent of women aged 15–19 got married before age 15 compared with 13 per cent in 2019 (Figure 11).

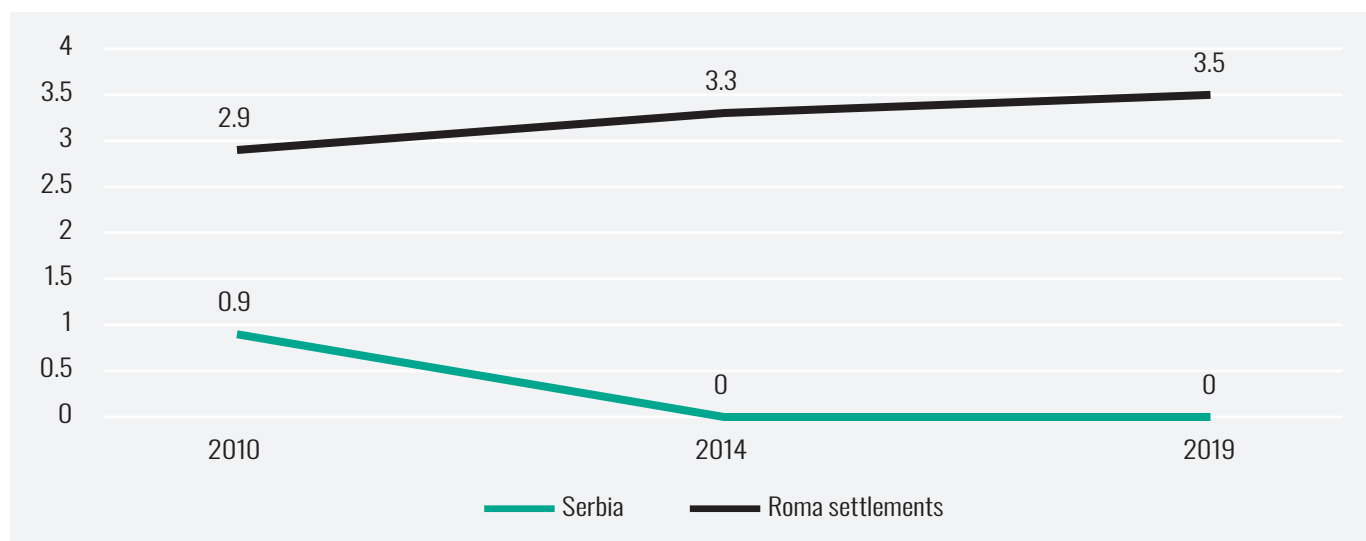
Figure 11. Percentage of women aged 15–19 years who first married or entered a marital union before their 15th birthday, Serbia, Roma settlements, 2010, 2014, 2019



Data from 2019 indicate **disappearance of early childbearing among women aged 15–19 in the general population, but stagnation or even a slight increase among women of same age living in Roma settlements** (Figure 12).

¹⁹ Number of induced abortions per 1,000 women of that age.

Figure 12. Percentage of women aged 15–19 years who had a live birth by age 15, Serbia, Roma settlements, 2010, 2014, 2019



In the general population of women aged 15–19, the adolescent birth rate (SDG indicator 3.7.2)²⁰ has declined from 22 in 2014 to 12 per 1,000 women of that age in 2019. **In Roma settlements it has increased** from 157 in 2014 to 163 per 1,000 women of that age in 2019.

In 2019, 2.5 per cent of women aged 15–19 had had a live birth or were pregnant with their first child; whereas in Roma settlements, 31 per cent of women of the same age either had had a live birth or were pregnant with their first child during the survey.

²⁰ Number of births among women 15–19 per 1,000 women of that age group.

WELL-BEING OF WOMEN IN REPRODUCTIVE LIFE-COURSE STAGES (15–49)

WHAT WAS EXPLORED?

- ▲ Use of contraception and unmet need for family planning
- ▲ Abortion
- ▲ Early marriage
- ▲ Early childbearing
- ▲ Informed decision on health care
- ▲ Feeling of safety in their neighbourhood
- ▲ Attitudes towards intimate partner violence
- ▲ Experience of discrimination
- ▲ Subjective well-being: life satisfaction and happiness

KEY FINDINGS

- A high proportion of women are aware of modern methods of contraception, but the use of these methods is still low. More women rely on traditional methods than on modern methods, but other methods are used in a higher proportion among unmarried women (who are usually younger) than married women, women in urban areas and those with higher education.
- A very low proportion of women in Roma settlements use modern contraception, although a very high proportion of women are aware of these methods.
- Unmet need for contraception among married women in the general population has decreased significantly but has stagnated among women living in Roma settlements.
- Early marriage is in stagnation among women aged 20–49 years in the general population and women living in Roma settlements. Early marriage and early childbearing decrease the likelihood of achieving higher levels of education, being in employment, and providing a living standard free from deprivation.
- Abortion is in decrease among women in the general population as well as in Roma settlements.
- Although the majority of women in both the general population and Roma settlements make autonomously informed decisions on their sexual and reproductive health, there are still women who are denied this right, and their proportion is higher among women with low education and in the poorest households.
- Attitudes justifying intimate partner violence are present in a very small percentage of women in the national sample and in a higher percentage of women living in Roma settlements.

- Every eighth woman feels unsafe after dark in her neighbourhood, and feelings of unsafety are more prevalent among younger women and among women in Roma settlements.
- Only a small proportion of women reported experience of discrimination, and the most frequent form of discrimination was on the basis of gender. The proportion of women who experienced discrimination during the last year was higher among those living in Roma settlements, but the most frequent form of reported discrimination was based on ethnicity.
- Women are in general relatively satisfied with their lives, scoring life satisfaction on average at 8 on a scale of 0–10. Life satisfaction decreases with age and increases with education and living standard. Women living in Roma settlements are on average less satisfied with their lives, and a lower proportion are happy than women in the general population.
- Early marriage and early childbearing decrease life satisfaction among women in the national sample as well as among those who live in Roma settlements.

Autonomy and control over transition to marriage and motherhood

Women's autonomy in decisions related to their sexual and reproductive health and rights is important for planning different life-course transitions: from one education level to a higher one, from education to the labour market, between different career stages, from single life to marriage, towards parenthood, or from different interests in life that require time or other resources. The proper timing of marriage and childbearing is crucial for planning these various transitions, and MICS provides relevant data for the analysis of these aspects.

Use of modern contraception and unmet need for family planning

Contraception and family planning data are important because they provide various indications on the control women have over their reproductive function, which is at the core of control over their entire life course. Pregnancy and motherhood demand plenty of women's resources: biological, economic, knowledge, skills, time, energy and commitment. When childbearing is planned, women can better manage different resources so their transition to motherhood does not limit their life opportunities. From the perspective of the child, it enables better quality care and, therefore, better prospects for child development.²¹

According to 2019 MICS data, women are well informed about modern methods of contraception, as almost all women from the sample are familiar with at least some modern method (99.7 per cent), including all married women. However, **the use of modern contraception is still low**, as 62 per cent of married women and 75 per cent of women not married or in union who are sexually active had been using some method of contraception. A higher proportion of the latter use modern methods than married women (56 per cent vs. 21 per cent), but this is probably due to the age difference, as younger women, a lower proportion of whom are married or in union, use modern methods in higher proportion than older women. For example, 70 per cent of sexually active not married women aged 20–24 were relying on modern contraceptives, compared with 39 per cent of those aged 35–39.

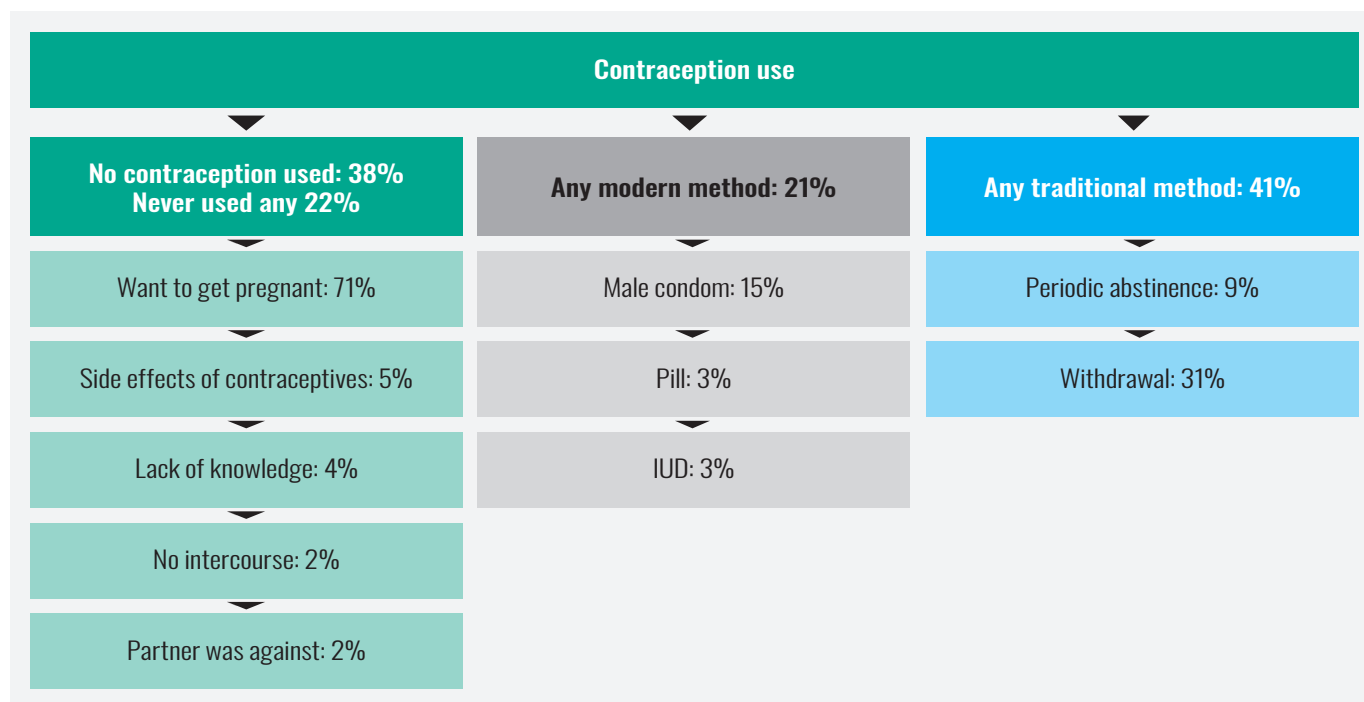
There is **no significant change** between the three MICS cycles (2010, 2014 and 2019) **in the proportion of women who are married or in union and who are using (or whose partner is using) any modern contraceptive method**: 22 per cent, 18 per cent and 21 per cent, respectively.

The most frequent modern method is the male condom, while the most frequent traditional method is withdrawal. While 38 per cent of married women were not using any contraception at the time of the survey, 22 per cent had never used any method of contracep-

²¹ UNICEF, *Gender Aspects of Life Course in Serbia Seen through MICS Data*, Belgrade, 2015.

tion. The most frequent reason among married woman for not using any contraception is their desire to get pregnant, with a smaller proportion of other reasons (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Use of contraception, method of contraception and reasons for not using any contraception, women aged 15–49, Serbia, 2019



Modern methods of contraception — which are more effective and provide more reliable family planning, ensuring greater control over life-course stages for women — are used in a higher proportion by some groups of women:

- ▲ Women in urban areas compared with women living in other areas — 24 per cent vs. 17 per cent among married women and 58 per cent vs. 52 per cent among not married women;
- ▲ Women with higher education compared with women with secondary and primary level education (27 per cent vs. 20 per cent and 11 per cent among married women and 67 per cent vs. 41 per cent among not married women²²);
- ▲ Women with three children compared with women with fewer than three children (25 per cent vs. 23 per cent among women with two children and 19 per cent among women with one child), but also compared with women with four or more children (15 per cent).

Unmet need for contraception refers to fecund women who are not using any method of contraception but who do not want to have child, whether because they wish to postpone the next birth (spacing) or because they want to stop childbearing altogether (limiting).

Unmet need among married women aged 15–49 in the national sample has decreased significantly from 15 per cent in 2014 to 9 per cent in 2019. For women not married or in union, data are not available for 2014, but in 2019, unmet need for contraception was at 15 per cent among such women.

²² Data are not presented for not married women with no or primary education as the number of such women who are not married or in union but who are sexually active is small (13 women).

Knowledge of contraceptive methods is also high in Roma settlements, as 98 per cent of women are familiar with any method, and 97 per cent with any modern method of contraception. However, only 60 per cent of married women use any method of contraception and, as is the case in the national sample, the traditional methods prevail: 56 per cent use some traditional method and 7 per cent some modern method.

The reasons for not using any method are most often sexual inactivity (41 per cent), desire to get pregnant (38 per cent), lack of knowledge (8 per cent), side effects (5 per cent), husband was against (3 per cent), too expensive (0.9 per cent), religious reasons (0.3 per cent) and other (3 per cent). Among married women the main reason was desire to get pregnant (61 per cent), but also side effects (8 per cent), husband was against (4 per cent) and less for other reasons. Only 20 per cent of married women consulted a gynaecologist on contraception and only 1.4 per cent, the family doctor.

There is no significant change between 2014 and 2019 in the proportion of women using modern contraception among women living in Roma settlements (7 per cent in both years), as well as in the proportion of married women with unmet need (14 per cent in both years).

Abortion

Abortion indicates the (in)effectiveness of family planning. **Abortion is in decrease among women of reproductive age in the national sample.** The percentage of women with at least one induced abortion during their lifetime was 15 per cent in 2014 and 11 per cent in 2019. The proportion of women who had at least one induced abortion increases with age and is highest in the oldest age group (45–49), where almost every fourth woman had had at least one abortion (24 per cent). The proportion of women with at least one induced abortion was higher among:

- ▲ women with no or only primary education (28 per cent);
- ▲ employed than unemployed and inactive women (12 per cent vs. 10 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively), which might point to uncertainties and fragile employment position of many women who opt for abortion in fear of losing their job or consequences of an interrupted career due to childbearing;
- ▲ women living in the poorest households (15 per cent).

Among women in Roma settlements, 28 per cent of women had at least one induced abortion, which is somewhat **lower than in 2014** when it was 31 per cent. The proportion of women with at least one induced abortion is higher among:

- ▲ women living in other areas compared with women living in urban areas (33 per cent vs. 25 per cent);
- ▲ older women — among those aged 45–49 years, more than half (54 per cent) had had at least one abortion;
- ▲ women with no education compared with women with primary and secondary education (31 per cent, 28 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively);
- ▲ employed than unemployed and inactive women (39 per cent, 30 per cent and 23 per cent, respectively).

However, there is no difference between women living in the poorest and richest households (28 per cent and 27 per cent respectively).

Informed decision on health care

Recognizing the importance of the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of women and their ability to make autonomous decisions related to their SRH and family planning, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development included as one of the targets universal access to SRH and reproductive rights (SDG target 5.6). This is based on the assumption that women and girls who can make choices and control their reproductive lives are better able to access good quality education, find decent work and make free and informed decisions in all spheres of life. MICS provides data for measuring progress towards this goal, based on SDG indicator 5.6.1, which measures the proportion of women who make informed decisions about their SRH and reproductive rights, taking into account three aspects: autonomy to decide on sexual intercourse, use of contraception and autonomous decision on their own health care.

In the national sample, 96 per cent of women who are married or in union make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care. Insights in intersectionality indicate that, to a certain extent, **a lower proportion of women who make their own informed decisions is found among women with primary or no education (89 per cent), economically inactive women (93 per cent) and women in the poorest households (89 per cent).**

Among women living **in Roma settlements, the proportion of married women who make their own informed decisions is lower (86 per cent), and it is particularly low among women from the poorest households (77 per cent).**

Early marriage

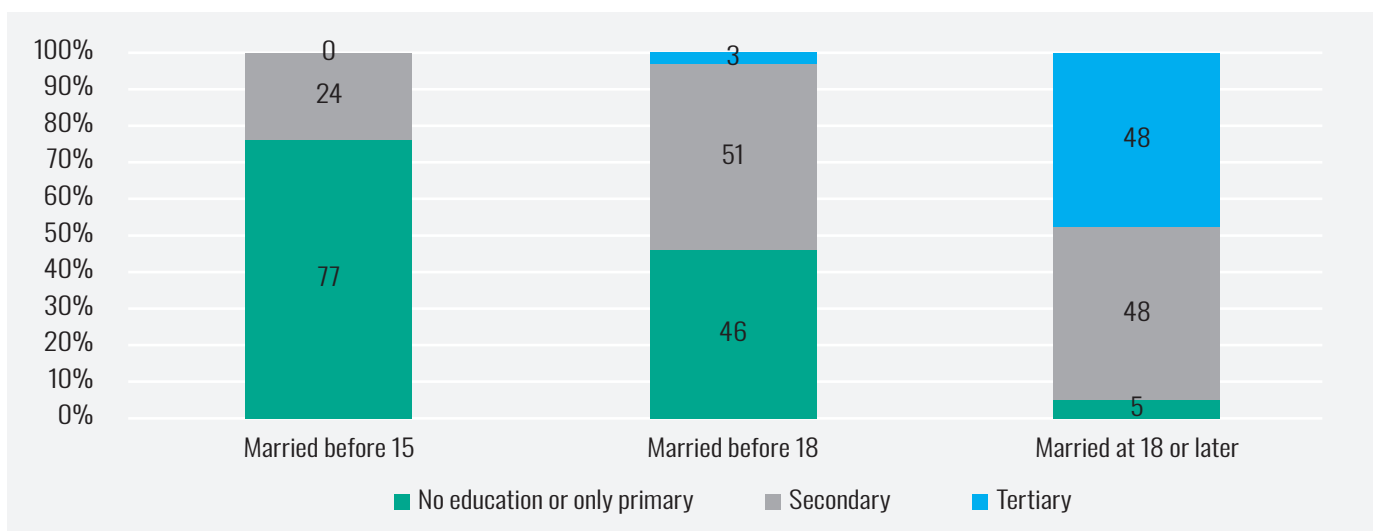
The early marriage rates are stagnant in the national sample of women aged 20–49 years. The percentage of women who got married before age 15 increased slightly (from 6.8 per cent in 2014 to 7.9 per cent in 2019), as did the share of those who got married before age 18 (from 0.8 per cent to 1.4 per cent), but these changes are not statistically significant.

Marriage before age 15 is found in a **higher proportion among women with primary education or without any education (13 per cent).** Marriage before age 18 is found in a higher proportion among **women living in other settlements compared with women living in urban settlements (14 per cent vs. 5 per cent), women with primary or no education (44 per cent)** compared with women with secondary (9 per cent) and higher (0.6 per cent) education. The proportion of women married before age 18 also increases with age: 6 per cent of women aged 20–24 years got married before 18, compared with 13 per cent of women aged 45–49 years. Early marriage is often a strategy to cope with poverty, and it is found in a higher proportion among the poorest (24 per cent) and most deprived households (16 per cent).

There is also **stagnation in early marriage among women aged 20–49 living in Roma settlements.** In 2019, 55.7 per cent of women of that age were married before 18 and 16.4 per cent before age 15.

Early marriage limits the chances of educational achievement, employment and consequently the material welfare of women. Chances to achieve secondary or tertiary education are very low for women who got married before adulthood, and particularly among those who married very early, before age 15 (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Percentage of women aged 20–49 years married early and level of education attained, Serbia, 2019



The effect of early marriage on economic activity and employment is the same. The share of employed women is much higher and the share of those unemployed and inactive much lower among women who did not marry before age 18. Women who got married very early, before age 15, have particularly low chances of being in employment (Figure 15).

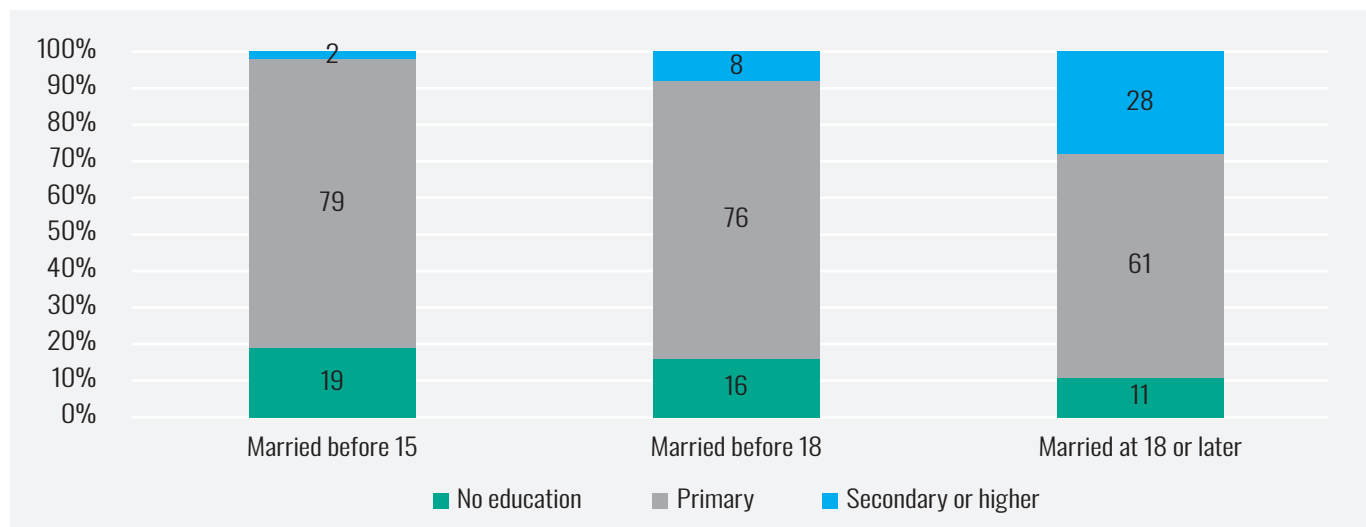
Figure 15. Percentage of women aged 20–49 years married early and economic activity, Serbia, 2019



Consequently, the likelihood of living in a deprived household is higher among women who married early. More than half of women who married before age 15 (57 per cent) live in households deprived in three or more items, compared with 41 per cent those who married before 18 and 19 per cent of those who married at age 18 or later. The average wealth index score is 1.7 among women who married before 15, 2.2 among those who married before 18, and 3.4 among women who married as adults.

In the case of Roma women, vulnerability due to early marriage intersects with risks of social exclusion, which manifests, among other things, as exclusion from the education system and early school leaving. Women who marry early have very low chances of achieving secondary or higher education (Figure 16).

Figure 16. Percentage of women aged 20–49 married early and level of education attained, Roma settlements, 2019



Among women living in Roma settlements, early marriage has no such effect, probably because of the very severe obstacles that women face in economic participation more generally. More than half of women are economically inactive, regardless of whether they married before age 15 (52 per cent), before 18 (56 per cent) or at age 18 or later (56 per cent). Only a small proportion of women are employed, with even a slightly higher proportion among women who married early: 31 per cent among those who married before 15, 28 per cent among those who married before 18, and 27 per cent among those who married as an adult.

Similar to the effects on education, the effects on material standards are not so prominent. Women who married as adults have slightly higher chances of living in non-deprived households: 11 per cent, compared with 7 per cent among women married before 18 and 4 per cent among those married before age 15.

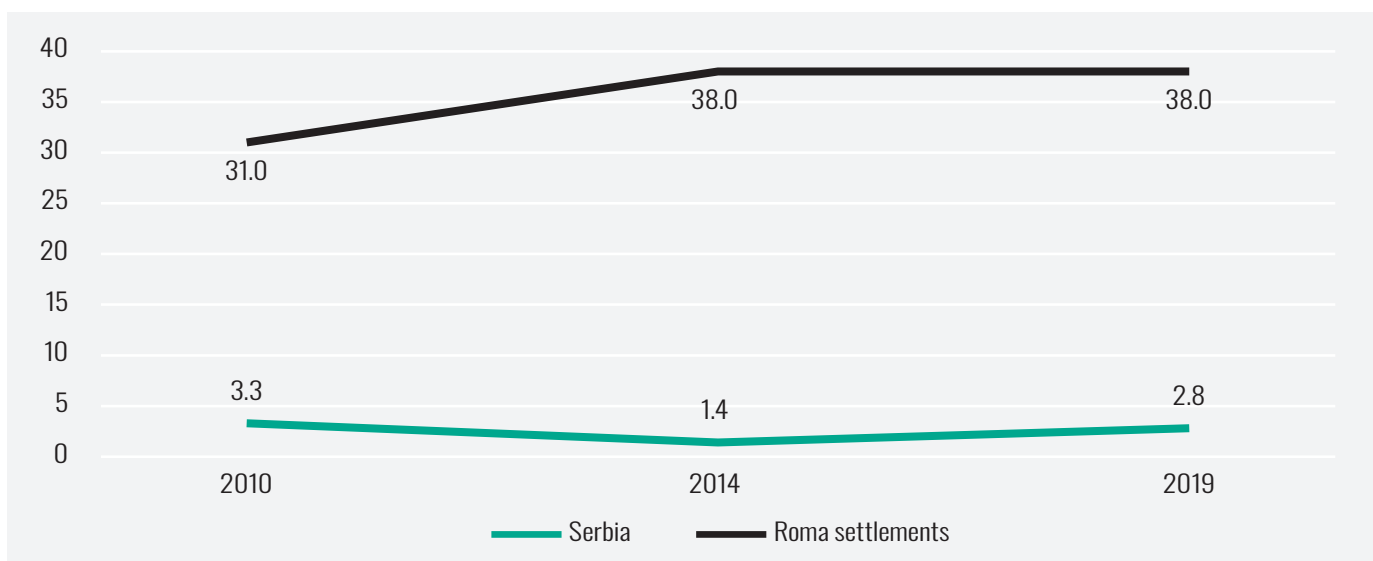
Early childbearing

Early childbearing is another breaking point in the life of women that can negatively affect their chances to achieve an adequate level of education or to integrate in the labour market. Data indicate an **increase in the percentage of women aged 20–24 who had a live birth before age 18**, from 1.4 per cent in 2014 to 2.8 per cent in 2019. Early childbearing is more prevalent among:

- ▲ women living in other areas than among women living in urban areas (5.8 per cent vs. 1.3 per cent);
- ▲ women with no education or who completed only primary school (49 per cent);
- ▲ economically inactive women (5 per cent);
- ▲ women from materially deprived households in three or more items (9 per cent);
- ▲ women from the poorest households (16 per cent).

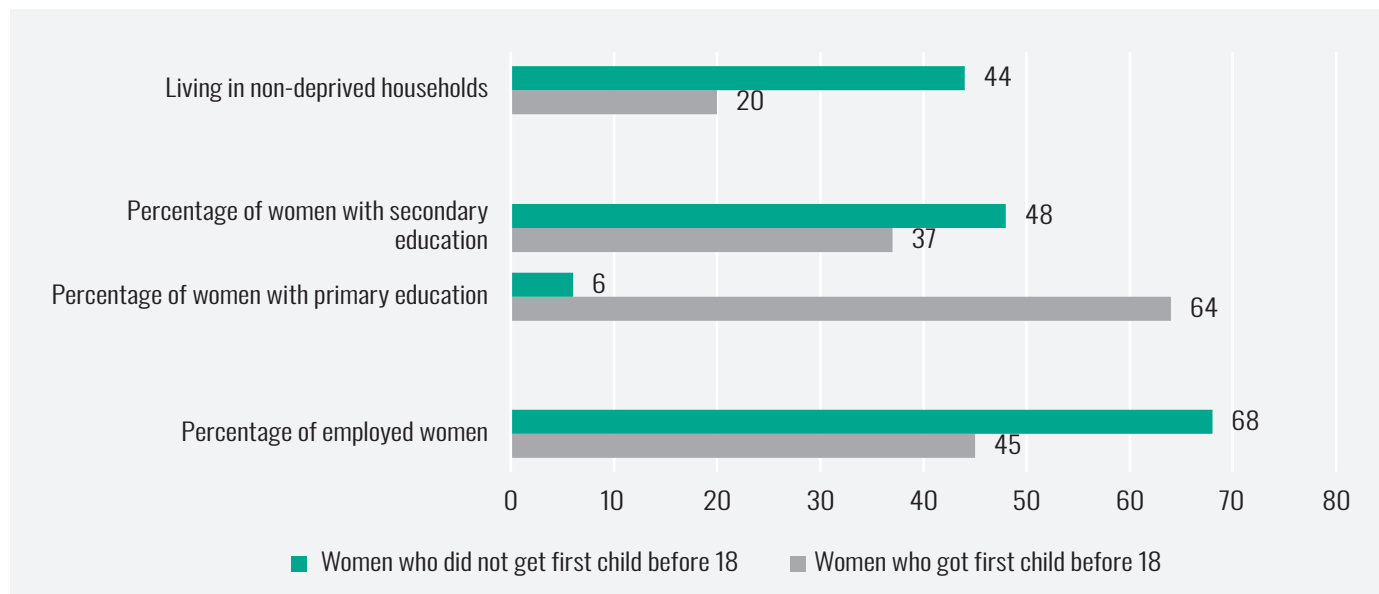
Early childbearing is more prevalent among women living in Roma settlements, where 38 per cent of women aged 20–24 years had a live birth before age 18 (Figure 17). There is a big difference between women with primary and secondary education: 48 per cent of women with only primary education and 10 per cent of women with secondary education had their first child before age 18. The proportion of women with early childbearing is higher among economically inactive than unemployed and employed women (42 per cent vs. 27 per cent and 31 per cent, respectively). The proportion of women with early childbearing is much higher among women from the 60 per cent of poorer households than from the 40 per cent of richer households (46 per cent vs. 26 per cent).

Figure 17. Percentage of women aged 20–24 years who had a live birth before age 18, Serbia and Roma settlements, 2019



Similar to early marriage, **early childbearing decreases women's likelihood of achieving higher levels of education, employment and a living standard that is free of deprivation** (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Percentage of women aged 20–49 with early childbearing, by employment, education level and household deprivation, Serbia, 2019



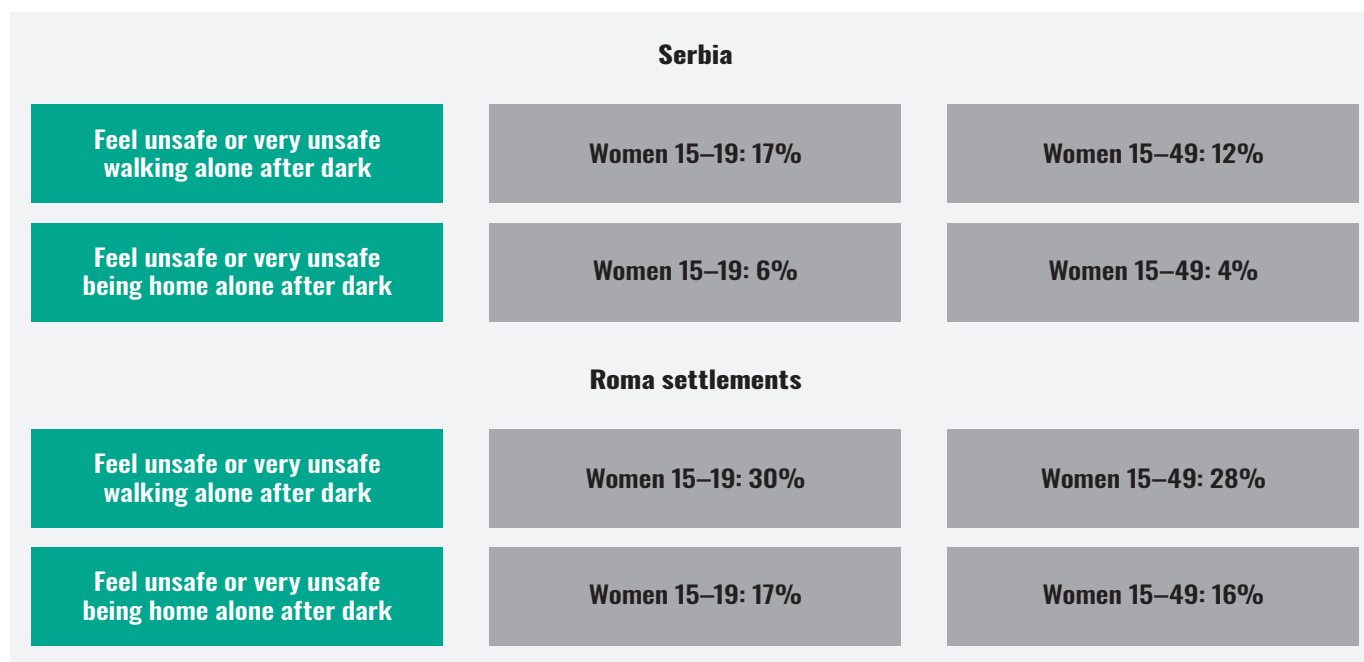
Among women living in Roma settlements, early childbearing has to some extent a different impact: it prevents them from achieving higher levels of education but creates higher pressure to work. While only 4 per cent of women who had a live birth before age 18 completed secondary or higher education, one quarter (24 per cent) of women without early childbearing achieved secondary or higher education. At the same time, 30 per cent of women who had a child before age 18 are employed, 16 per cent are unemployed and 54 per cent are economically inactive; while among women without early childbearing experience, 26 per cent are employed, 17 per cent are unemployed, and 57 per cent are inactive. A somewhat lower proportion (6 per cent) of women with early childbearing experience live in non-deprived households than women without this experience (10 per cent), and their average wealth index quintile score is lower (2.8 vs. 3.3).

Safety, discrimination and violence

Feeling of safety

Feeling of safety in the immediate social environment in everyday life is considered an important aspect of well-being and is included as one of the targets in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDG 16). **A slightly higher proportion of adolescent and post-adolescent women (age 15–19) than women of reproductive age (15–49) feel unsafe or very unsafe in their neighbourhoods, on average. A higher proportion of women living in Roma settlements feel unsafe**, with small differences between adolescent/post-adolescent women and the whole sample (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Feelings of safety among women aged 15–19 years, Serbia and Roma settlements, 2019 (SDG indicator 16.1.4)



Attitudes towards domestic violence

Risks of gender-based violence increase among women who agree with statements that justify violence, as various surveys have shown.²³ Among adolescent girls, 3.2 per cent agree with any statement that justifies a partner's violence against a woman,²⁴ which is higher than the 1.6 per cent of women aged 15–49. A high percentage of adolescent and post-adolescent women know where to report domestic violence, but slightly below the average for the overall sample of women. Specifically, 91 per cent of adolescent girls and 93 per cent of post-adolescent girls know where to report violence, compared with 94 per cent for the overall sample. The majority of women (94 per cent) know where to report domestic violence: most frequently that is to the police (80 per cent), followed by a Center for Social Work (47 per cent), safe house (40 per cent), and SOS helpline (26 per cent), while other institutions are less frequently mentioned (health facility 7 per cent and public prosecutor 3 per cent).²⁵

In Roma settlements, 22 per cent of women justify intimate partner violence. A lower proportion is found among women with secondary or higher education (13 per cent) and among never-married women (14 per cent), while among other groups the percentages are similar, ranging between one fifth and one quarter.

Unlike the national sample, where a higher proportion of adolescent girls than the overall sample justify violence, a lower proportion of adolescent girls living in Roma settlements than the overall sample agree with such a statement (18 per cent). The majority of women (82 per cent) know where to report domestic violence, and most frequently that is to the police (77 per cent), followed by a Center for Social Work (27 per cent) and safe house (11 per cent), while they are less familiar with the SOS helpline (4 per cent), health facility (1.4 per cent) and public prosecutor (0.3 per cent).²⁶

²³ OSCE, *Well-being and Safety of Women*, Vienna, 2019. Available from: <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/413237>

²⁴ This includes women who agree that is justifiable for a husband to beat his wife for any of five reasons: if she goes out without telling him, if she neglects the children, if she argues with him, if she refuses sex with him, or if she burns the food.

²⁵ Girls (age 15–17) are also in highest proportion familiar with the police (79 per cent), followed by safe house (32 per cent), Center for Social Work (31 per cent) and SOS helpline (24 per cent), while they are least familiar with role of healthcare facilities (1 per cent) and public prosecutor (2 per cent).

²⁶ Adolescent girls in Roma settlements show almost the same awareness as the whole sample of women in Roma settlements on support available in cases of domestic violence (80.9 per cent compared with 81.8 per cent). They most often cite the police (80 per cent), followed by Center for Social Work (26 per cent), but a lower proportion are aware of safe house (6 per cent), SOS helpline (4 per cent) and health facility (2 per cent) and none recognized the role of the public prosecutor.

Discrimination and harassment

A relatively small percentage of women reported experiencing discrimination during the 12 months preceding the survey (7 per cent). The most frequent form of discrimination reported by women is gender-based discrimination (3.4 per cent), followed by discrimination based on age (1.8 per cent). Discrimination is more frequently reported by urban women (8 per cent), by women with higher education (9 per cent) and by women living in the richest households (9 per cent). As was emphasized before, the higher percentage of women who report discrimination can be connected to higher awareness of discrimination and not necessarily or solely to higher exposure to discrimination.

Among women living in Roma settlements, a higher proportion reported experience of discrimination during the 12 months preceding the survey (13 per cent), and the most frequent form of discrimination was based on ethnic origin or immigration (12 per cent). A higher proportion of unemployed women (23 per cent) and women in their late 30s (18 per cent) reported experiencing discrimination.

In the national sample, a slightly higher proportion of adolescent girls (age 15–17) than other young women (age 18–19 and 20–24) report experience of discrimination during the 12 months preceding the survey (6 per cent, compared with 3 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively), but in a smaller proportion than older women (for example, 10 per cent of women aged 40–44 years reported experience of discrimination). This might not indicate a lower prevalence of discrimination but lower awareness of what defines discrimination and capacity to recognize and frame their experiences as discrimination based on gender. This is particularly probable when girls and women from Roma settlements are in focus, as only 0.7 per cent of adolescent girls reported experience of discrimination.

Life satisfaction and happiness

Indicators on life satisfaction and happiness have become very important as subjective measures of development. In this approach, happiness is considered part of human well-being.²⁷ MICS 2019 includes indicators on overall life satisfaction, happiness and expectation of a better future.

The majority of women from the national sample feel very or somewhat happy (92 per cent) and the average life-satisfaction score on a scale of 0–10 was 8.0 (Figure 20). **Younger women score higher life satisfaction than older women, and happiness generally declines with age.** Among adolescent girls, 88 per cent are happy or very happy, while the proportion of happy and very happy women is lowest among women aged 45–49 years (71 per cent). Adolescent girls in the national sample are on average more satisfied with their lives than women in the older age categories. On a scale of 0–10, the average life satisfaction score of women aged 15–17 is 8.6, which is higher than that of women aged 45–49 (7.6).²⁸ They are also more optimistic, expecting that their lives will get better after one year. While 81 per cent of girls aged 15–17 and 91 per cent of women aged 18–19 expect that their life will be better after one year, 79 per cent of women (15–49) and 68 per cent of the oldest age group of women (45–49) have such an expectation.

Among women aged 15–49 living in Roma settlements, the percentage of those who are very or somewhat happy is smaller (81 per cent) than among women in the national sample, and the average life satisfaction score is also lower at 7.5 points on the 0–10 scale. Younger women are more satisfied with their lives than older women and are also more optimistic in regard to their future prospects than older women, but much less optimistic than their peers from national sample — 44 per cent think that their lives will improve after one year.

²⁷ Todaro, Smith, 2006: 19.

²⁸ Life satisfaction was not measured among women aged 25 or older.

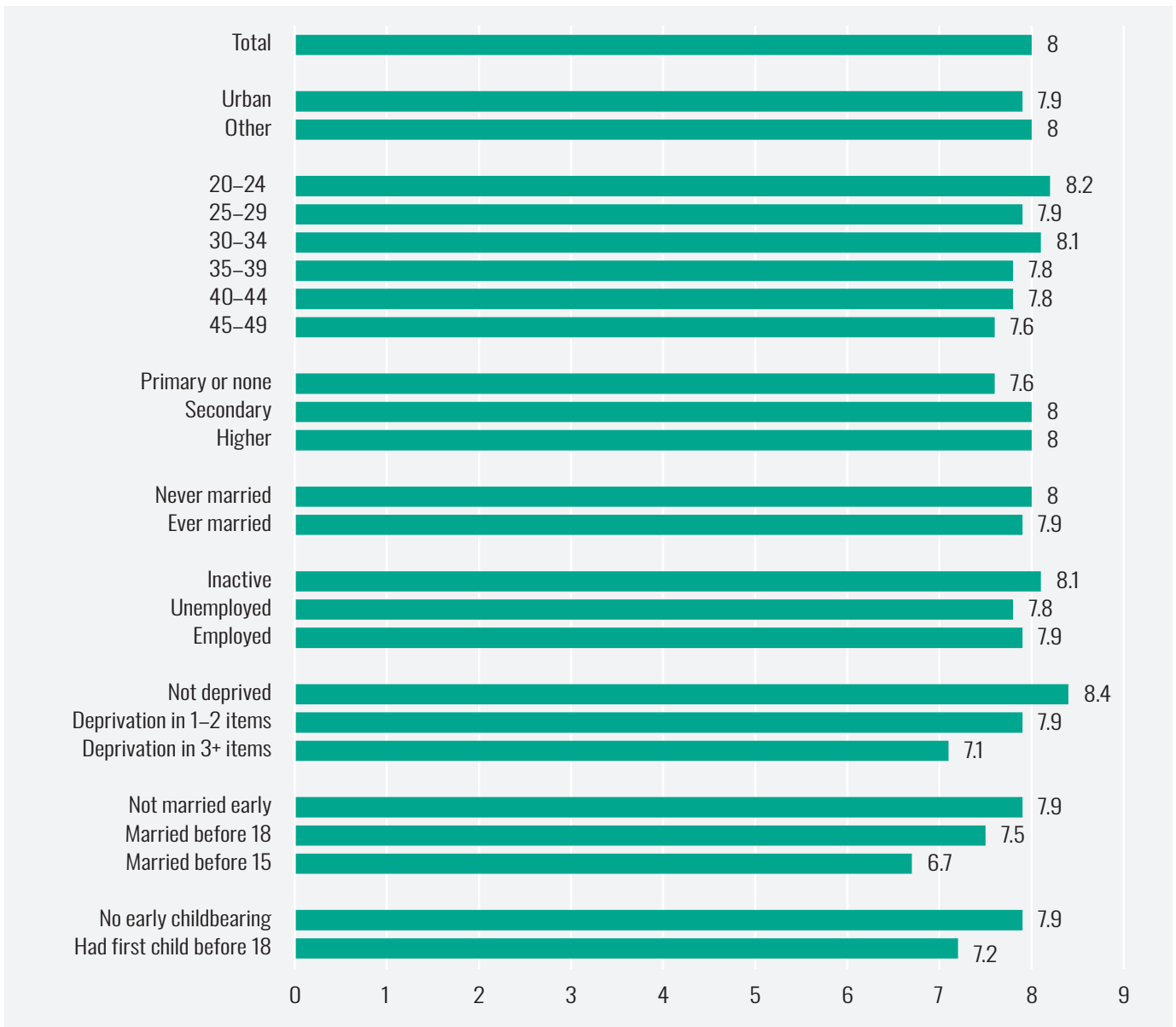
Figure 20. Subjective well-being, Serbia and Roma settlements, 2019

Serbia		
Life satisfaction score	Women 15–17: 8.6	Women 15–49: 8.0
Percentage of happy or very happy women	Women 15–17: 96%	Women 15–49: 92%
Roma settlements		
Life satisfaction score	Women 15–17: 8.4	Women 15–49: 7.5
Percentage of happy or very happy women	Women 15–17: 88%	Women 15–49: 81%

In addition to age, life satisfaction varies across groups of women defined by other characteristics: it is slightly higher among women living in other areas than women living in urban areas; among women who achieved secondary or higher education in comparison with women with no or primary education; among never-married women compared with ever-married women; among economically inactive women compared with unemployed and employed women; and among women living in non-deprived households compared with women living in households that face at least some level of deprivation. **Early marriage and early childbearing also decrease life satisfaction and happiness** (Figure 21).

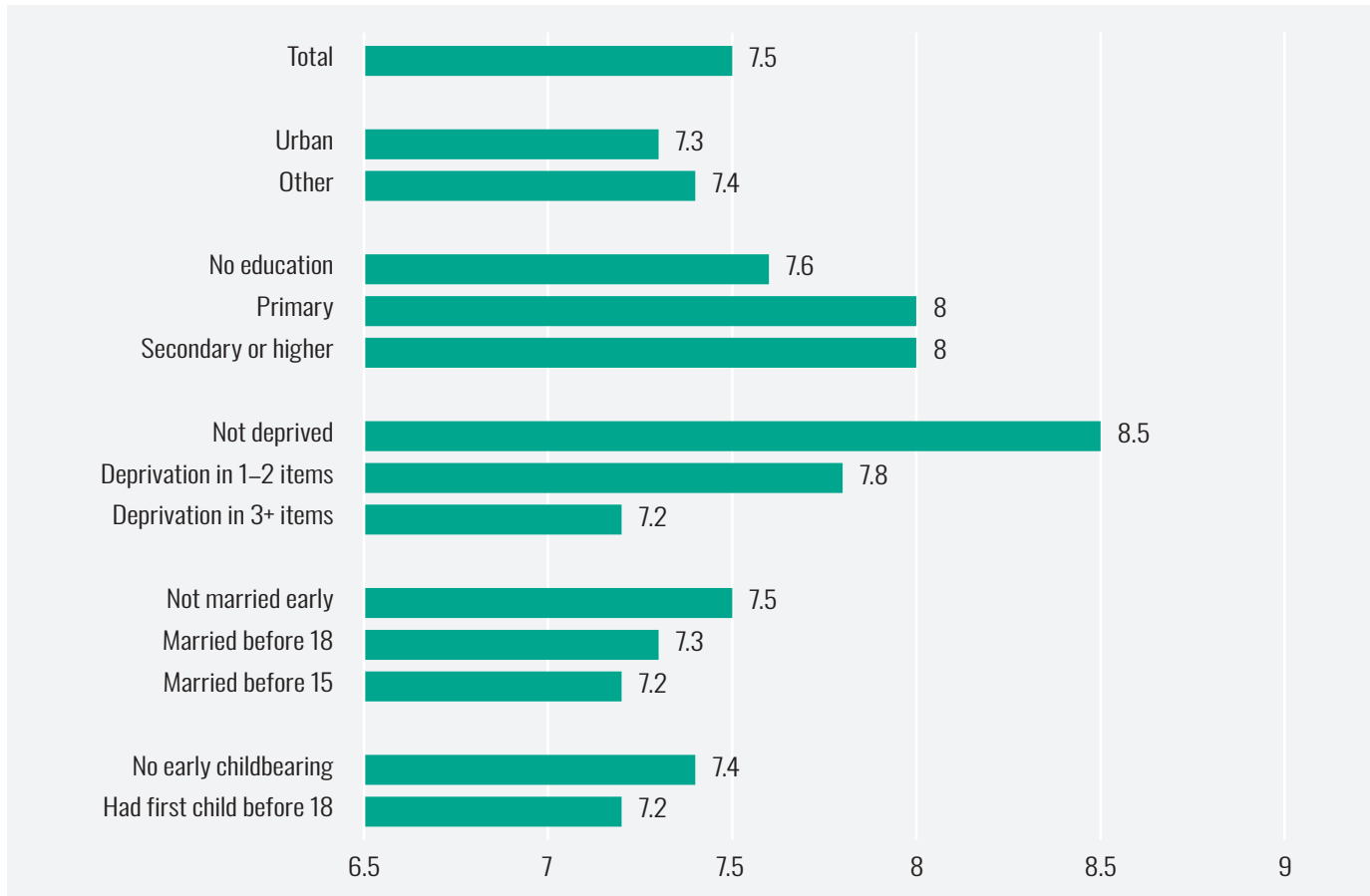
Unlike in the previous MICS 2014 cycle, subjective well-being was not measured by different aspects of life (employment, family, friends, environment, earnings, etc.), so it is not possible to fully unpack the reasons behind differences in evaluating life satisfaction. However, knowing the results from the previous MICS, it can be assumed that the slightly higher score among women living in other settlements can be related to higher satisfaction with clean environment. The lower satisfaction among employed women can be linked to stress related to job insecurity or other aspects of employment. Interestingly, the previous MICS showed higher life satisfaction with family among married women, but data from this cycle indicate that marriage experience slightly decreases life satisfaction in general.

Figure 21. Average life satisfaction score (0–10), women aged 15–49, Serbia, 2019



Similar patterns can be observed among women living in Roma settlements (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Average life satisfaction score (0–10), women aged 15–49, Roma settlements, 2019



CONCLUSIONS

There are aspects of life in which gender differences appear quite early in life and influence reproduction or even increase or lead to more complex gender differences in later stages of the life course. Nevertheless, in other areas gender differences are insignificant, almost eliminated, and remain visible only in some ‘pockets’ of society — mainly in certain underprivileged groups at high risk of social exclusion and poverty.

MICS data reveal that children join our world in already very gendered family settings and are raised by very different engagement of mothers and fathers. This influences their earliest experiences and understanding of gender roles and social relations within the family. Mothers bear the main responsibility — across various social groups they engage much more in daily activities with children — while fathers’ engagement remains low. Nevertheless, there are differences between fathers with different backgrounds, with higher engagement of fathers with higher education, from households with higher wealth status, and when mothers are employed. Certain gendered patterns are visible, as a higher proportion of fathers systematically engage with sons than with daughters, while mothers’ engagement does not show such ‘discriminatory’ patterns. Engagement of fathers in Roma settlements is marginal, regardless of their background characteristics and the sex of the children.

When gender differences are observed from the perspective of children throughout their childhood stages, it is noticeable that they start life with relative gender equality during early childhood (age 0–4) and that gender differences grow in later stages. Also, it is obvious that the area of education is the pathway with the least gender differences in the general population of children: they equally attend early education, they equally attend and complete primary school, and gender disparities are insignificant in secondary school. The situation is very different in Roma settlements, where children are mainly excluded from early education, their attendance in primary education is not complete — despite its being mandatory — and their participation and competition in secondary education is still below the satisfactory. Of particular concern remains the early dropout of girls living in Roma settlements, which is influenced by the still high prevalence of early marriage.

Although gender equality has advanced in the area of education in the general population of children, some gendered practices around education are visible, primarily in the form of somewhat stronger parental supervision and support to boys, but insights into the reasons why are not available (whether the reason is weaker performance of boys or differently valued importance of education for boys than girls, or both).

Gender differences are present in the attitudes towards violent discipline, but not in its practice. Corporal punishment is more frequently justified in raising boys than girls, particularly among mothers with no education or only primary education, or among parents from the poorest households.

The area that introduces remarkable gender differences which will continue throughout the later life stages is the area of economic activity. Participation in economic activity is much lower among girls than boys, while participation in household chores is much higher among girls than boys. It is true that girls are better protected from child labour during childhood, but at the same time they are less exposed to early work socialization. These segregated patterns of labour activities are the cornerstone of later differences marked by the higher and more beneficial participation of men in paid labour and the dominant responsibility of women in unpaid reproductive work.

The well-being of women of reproductive age is influenced by their still insufficient and uneven autonomy in decisions and practices related to their sexual and reproductive life, with a high proportion of women being familiar with modern contraception methods but a low proportion using these. Whether due to ineffective family planning or poor decisions, some women get married or bear children early, before they have the opportunity to achieve at least complete secondary education or employment and economic independence. Early marriage is in stagnation in both the general population of women and those living in Roma settlements. Early marriage and early childbearing remarkably decrease women’s chances of achieving higher levels of education, becoming employed, and living free from deprivation.

The data point to various concerns related to the safety of and discrimination towards women. While in the general population of women attitudes justifying intimate partner violence are present in a very small percentage, these are more frequently found among adolescent girls than older women. Among women living in Roma settlements the percentage of those who justify partner violence is higher, although, in this case, younger women are less prone to concur with statements that justify partner violence.

Every eighth woman feels unsafe after dark in her neighbourhood, and feelings of unsafety are more prevalent among younger women and among women in Roma settlements.

Only a small proportion of women reported experience of discrimination, and the most frequent form of discrimination was gender based. Among women living in Roma settlements, the proportion of women who experienced discrimination in last year was higher, but the most frequent form was based on ethnicity. The low proportion of women reporting experiences of discrimination could also reflect low awareness on discrimination.

Women are, in general, relatively satisfied with their lives, scoring life satisfaction on average at 8 on a scale of 0–10. Life satisfaction decreases with age and increases with education and living standard. Women living in Roma settlements are on average less satisfied with their lives and a lower proportion are happy than women in general population. Early marriage and early childbearing decrease life satisfaction among women in the national sample as well as among those living in Roma settlements.



**GENDER ASPECTS
OF THE LIFE COURSE**

SEEN THROUGH
MICS6 DATA