

# SOS helpline for children and youth

## Operational Report

December 2018 – November 2019



**“WHEN THE LIVES AND THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN ARE AT STAKE, THERE MUST BE NO SILENT WITNESSES.”**

**Carol Bellamy, former Executive Director of UNICEF**

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“THERE IS NO HOLIER TRUST IN THE ONE THE WORLD INVESTS IN THE CHILDREN. THERE IS NO MORE IMPORTANT OBLIGATION THAN THE ONE MAKING SURE THEIR RIGHTS ARE RESPECTED, THAT THEIR WELL-BEING IS PROTECTED, THAT THEIR LIVES ARE FREE OF FEAR AND MISERY AND THEY CAN GROW UP IN PEACE.”

Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations

## Brief overview of the SOS Helpline operation

The First Children's Embassy in the World MEGJASHI is the oldest civil society organization in the Republic of Macedonia for protection of the rights of the child, founded in April 29, 1992. Megjashi advocates for child rights, positive parenthood and continuously strengthens the civil society movements through all its activities. It broke the silence on child suffering and economic abuse of children, through opening the SOS helpline for children and youth in 1993 and opening these issues in public and directly engaging in establishing more effective child protection mechanisms.

The SOS Helpline for Children and Youth has been operating for 26 years (since October 1993). The operation of the SOS Helpline is firmly based on the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that emphasize the children rights to privacy and protection from harm. The purpose of the SOS Helpline for Children and Youth is to provide a forum for sharing information and to ensure support, advocacy and lobbying assistance, promoting children rights as well as promotion of the SOS Helpline itself as a medium for child support.

SOS Helpline for Children and Youth (the number is +389 (0)2 2465-316) in the course of all these years, had a total of 20,847 cases of reported cases that required and received some type of assistance, counselling or information.

The expert team of the SOS Helpline includes of pedagogues, psychologists, social workers and volunteers with these backgrounds. The volunteers have a special place in the operation of the SOS Helpline. In the talks, none of the expert team will provide ready-made solutions to the problems, but they discuss the possible alternatives to solving the problem for which they have called.

In the course of its operation, the SOS Helpline for Children and Youth has cooperated with a number of stakeholders - relevant institutions, other NGOs working in the area of child rights or in some way are concerned with the child rights, as well as with individual professionals. Depending on the type of the problem the callers have and also depending on the violation of the rights of the child, this service also deals with written referrals to the relevant institutions, monitors the procedures these institutions take in relation to the case and reacts if it finds that they fail to act in the best interests of the children.

Children need to talk about their rights, abuses, neglect, violence, poverty and exploitation. We listen to them, provide support in form of advice, counselling, directing them to relevant institutions or providing additional information. When we think it is necessary, we share the data and stories of children lives with the public by promoting the annual reports on the work of the SOS Helpline. We collect, systematize and analyze the data obtained through the SOS Helpline and report them in a form of annual report. We use these analyzes in the reports to inform and influence the policy and decision makers, and together with our partners we strive to reshape the lives of the children for the better.

## 2.

### **General remarks about the operation of the SOS Helpline for Children and Youth and of the services for direct assistance and support**

#### *Data systematization methodology*

The case recording methodology has remained unchanged, as in previous years, that is, each contact is recorded as a single case. The contact was made in the following ways: by calling on the phone of the First Children's Embassy Megjashi (the number is 2465-316), on the official mobile phone of the SOS Coordinator 070 390 632, via our email address [sos@childrensembassy.org.mk](mailto:sos@childrensembassy.org.mk) and [info@childrensembassy.org.mk](mailto:info@childrensembassy.org.mk), on the Facebook pages of the First Children's Embassy Megjashi, by post and by directly visiting the premises of the First Children's Embassy Megjashi.

We make additional communication for each contact or case, and this is done in order to inform those that reported the case of have contacted us about the measures that were undertaken by us, what are the responses of the competent authorities, including their communication to us regarding any changes in the reported case. This data is shown as additional communication.

When it comes to the number of children in the cases that have been reported to the First Children's Embassy Megjashi (about potential violation of the children's rights), we include the total number of children – victims or potential victims for which specific assistance or information have been requested.

#### *Summary of cases reported in the period December 2018 – end of November 2019*

The SOS Helpline for children and youth registered a total of **113 cases**<sup>1</sup> in the period December 2018 – end of November 2019. These are the cases with which we also had additional communication with (**185 times**), including the initial contact. This additional communication is done in order to feedback to those who reported the cases about the

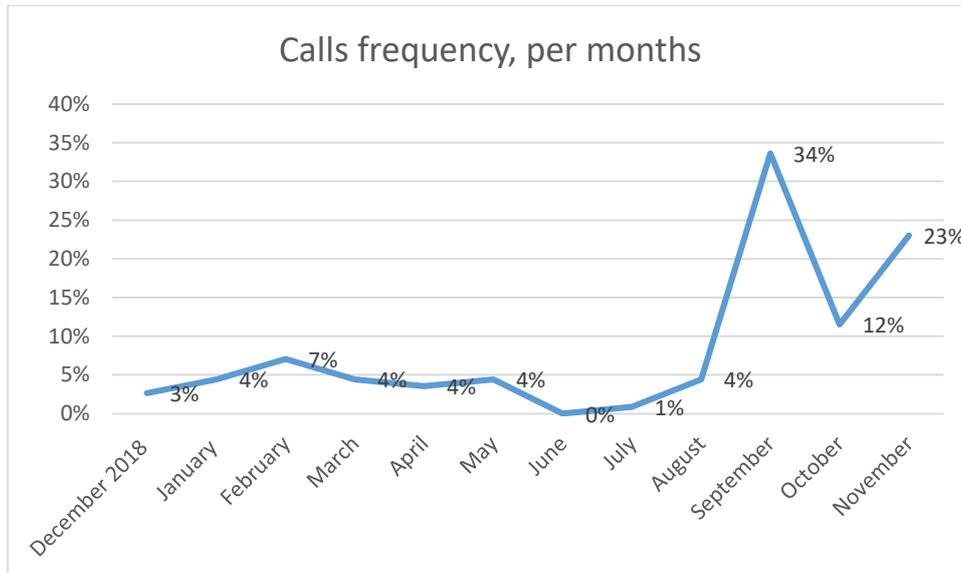
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<sup>1</sup> Reporting of the cases is possible by calling the fixed telephone number of the Children's Embassy Megjashi (02/ 246 5316), via email [sos@childrensembassy.org.mk](mailto:sos@childrensembassy.org.mk), via the social networks or by directly visiting our premises.

measures carried out by us, or what are the responses from the relevant institutions, including their communication to us regarding any changes in the reported case

The Graph 1 below shows the time distribution of the calls for the period December 2018 – end of November 2019, per months.

Graph 1. Frequency of calls per months



As it can be seen from the timeline shown in Graph 1, more than half of the reported cases took place between September and November 2019, and the largest number (34%) was reported in September 2019. This is due to the fact that in September almost all of the reports were about problems with enrolling of children in the first grade due to the lack of certificate for receiving the shot of one of the mandatory vaccines (MRP) when filing the documents for enrolling. More information is provided below.

During the reporting period, most of the communication with the callers was carried out via the fixed telephone number of the Children’s Embassy Megjashi – a total of 48 talks. The data shows that the citizens also report by email or via the social networks (Facebook) – a total of 43 reports/ cases using these channels. The communication also happens through direct visits to the premises of the First Children’s Embassy Megjashi, where these persons received relevant advices. There were 22 such direct visits to the premises of Megjashi.

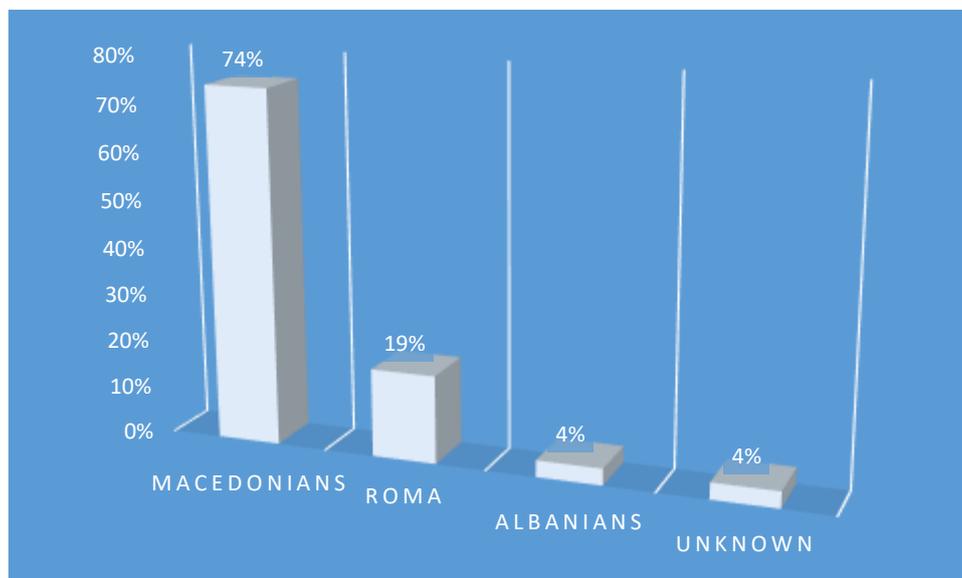
This annual report notes the lack of direct calls by children. In the recent years there is a decline in the trend of children who were contacting us directly. It is therefore necessary to work intensively towards encouraging the children and the youth to call in order to get information or to report violation of their rights. In cooperation with the elementary schools (September – November 2019), First Children’s Embassy Megjashi organized workshops in its premises for more than 400 children – all first and third grade pupils. The children were

getting acquainted with their rights through games and they also visited the premises of the SOS Helpline. They were familiarized with the work of the SOS Helpline Coordinator, why they should call, for what reasons, and what will the children get when they call on the phone.

In the period that follows, Megjashi will also implement additional measures in order to bring this service closer to the citizens, using other communication channels that showed to be more appropriate for the children and the youth. This decision was made on the basis of the expert analysis of the SOS Helpline operation and on the basis the recommendations that are part of the analysis.

### *Ethnic background of the callers*

Graph 2. Ethnic background of the callers

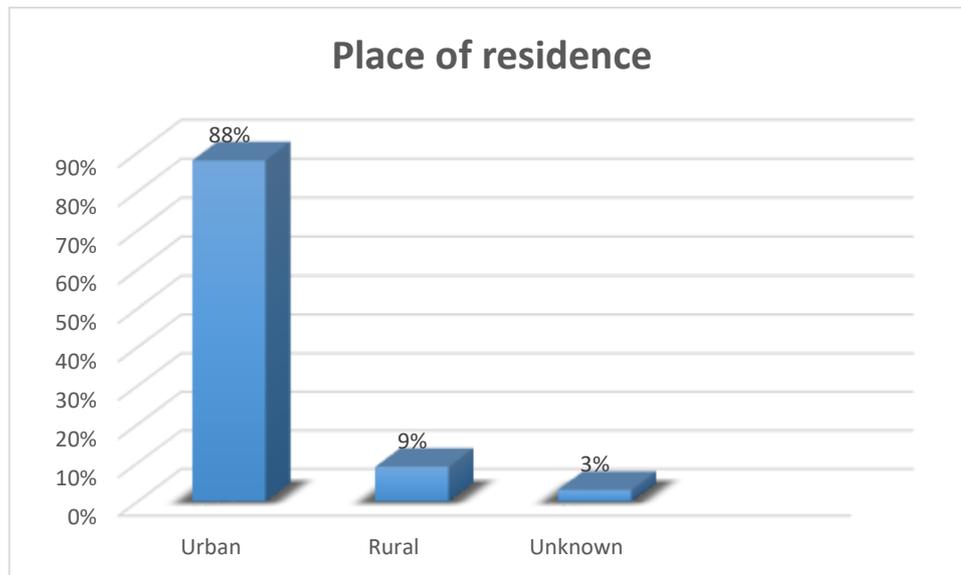


In terms of ethnicity of the callers, 74% of them are Macedonians, 19% are Roma and 4% are Albanians. Only 4% of the callers have unknown ethnic background.

The fact that it is mainly Macedonians who are calling, shows the necessity that Megjashi should find ways in making the SOS Helpline closer to the children from other ethnic groups, for example engage telephone operators who speak Turkish, Roma or Albanian language, and similar.

### *Place of residence of the callers*

Graph 3. Place of residence of the callers – urban and rural



Most of the callers live in urban areas (88%) and less in rural areas (9%), as it can be seen from the Graph above. Three percent have unknown place of residence. This shows that urban callers are much more than the rural callers. We think that this is due to the lack of information by the people living in the rural areas about the rights of the children, the manner and procedure of protection of those rights and the lack of promotion of the SOS Helpline in these areas.

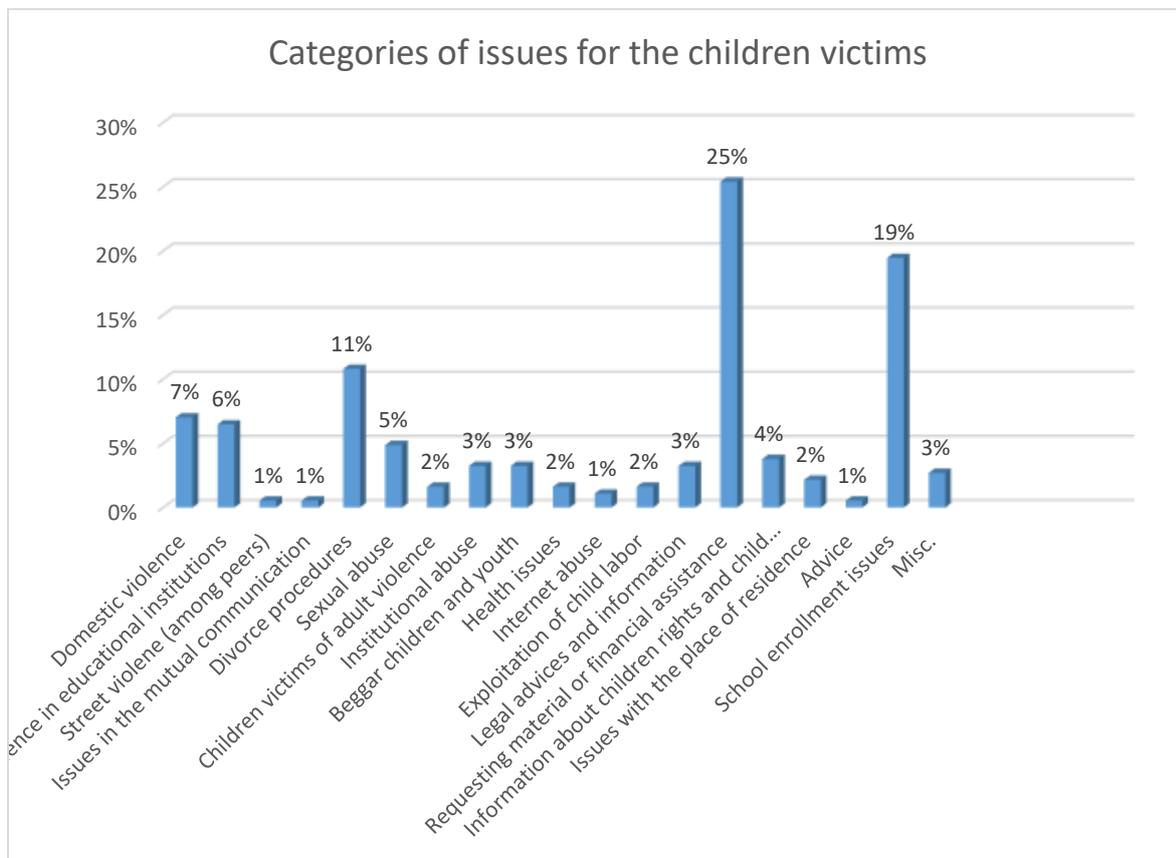
On the basis of the information we have received of potential violation of children's rights, structure per **number of children covered in these cases**, we have a total of **228<sup>2</sup>** children. The information shows that most of the calls are about financial and material assistance, followed by calls for violation of the children's rights in divorces – this is one of the biggest problems the children and their families face. Then we have the issues of enrolling in first grade due to failure to meet the vaccination status (the Government adopted a decision to have mandatory MRP having vaccine shot due to the epidemic of measles), domestic violence, peer violence. One of the more sensitive issues is the experience of the children in a divorce procedure – this remains to be the key issues, same like in the report from the last year. This year, the Children's Embassy Megjashi, supported by the Initiative for Joint Parenthood Following a Divorce was one of the initiators of the public discussion in the Parliamentary Committee for Labor and Social Policy, aimed at

<sup>2</sup> This number excludes the children that have been included in calls by a group of parents, because the number of children covered by the call from a group of parents is unknown – it can be one or several classes, for example.

changing the Law on Family. The intention is to help creating a system that will protect the children – it is necessary to stop using the children as instrument of confrontation between the parents and on the account of that neglecting one of the main obligations the divorced parents have – care for the child.

*Violation of children’s rights per issue category*

Graph 4. Categories of issues pertaining to the children and raised as such in the calls



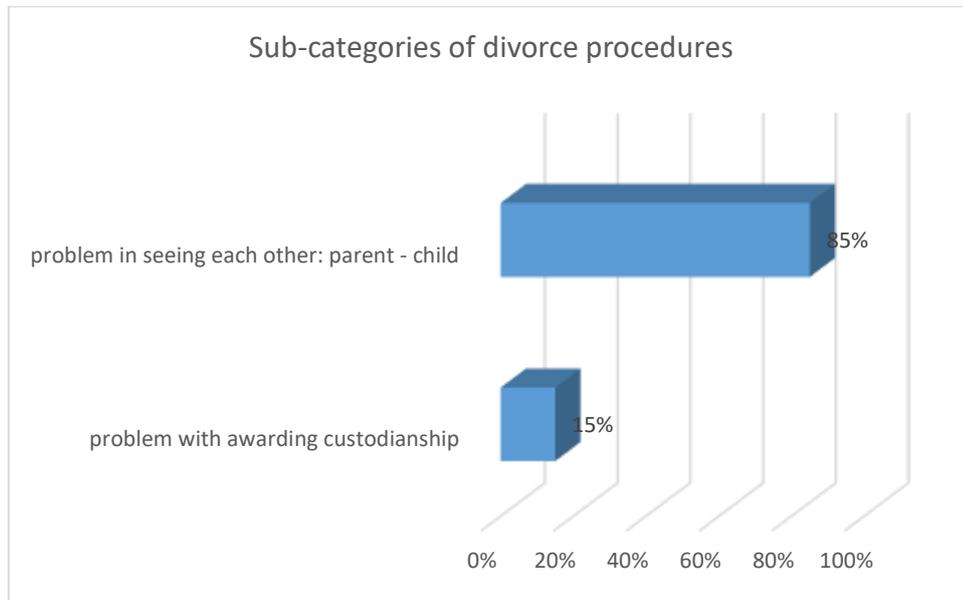
The following are the most common categories of potential violation of children’s rights, as reported in the calls and registered in the Children’s Embassy Megjashi:

- Child poverty – 47 children** or 25% of the reported cases live in substandard living conditions. These are children living in families faced with social risk where there is likelihood of violation of their rights (such as the right to education, health protection, etc.). These children were provided with material assistance such as clothes, food and school means – all within the capacities and possibilities of Megjashi

- **Right to education** – 36 children from the total number of reported cases, which is 19% of the calls during the reporting period were not able to exercise their right to education. These were children that did not have a shot of MRP vaccine and, due to various reasons, were denied enrollment in elementary education. Megjashi submitted an objection to the Ombudsman office about these cases and the feedback we received was that they are also closely monitoring the cases, and that decision was averted for one of the reported cases so this child is not part of the regular teaching process. The attitude of Megjashi is that the system must find ways to enable these children to enjoy their right to education.
- **Divorce procedures** - 20 children, which is 11% of the total reported cases, were potential victims of violation of the right of the child in divorce procedures.
- **Domestic violence - 13 children** (7%) of the total number of children – potential victims were unprotected and exposed to violence in their home.
- **Violence in educational institutions** - 12 children (6%) were victims of violence that happened in the schools. The impression we are getting from the cases reported is that our educational system is still missing organized support and capacities for resolution of this problem. Recognizing this problem, Megjashi continues to work towards capacity building of the teachers and professionals in both elementary and secondary schools, as well as on awareness raising of the wider public, including parents.

If we combine the data pertaining to violence (reported cases of family violence, in the educational institutions and in the streets), we will see that 14% of all reported cases of violence pertain to children – victims. This is a serious issue that deserves attention.

Graph 5. Violated rights of children in divorce procedures



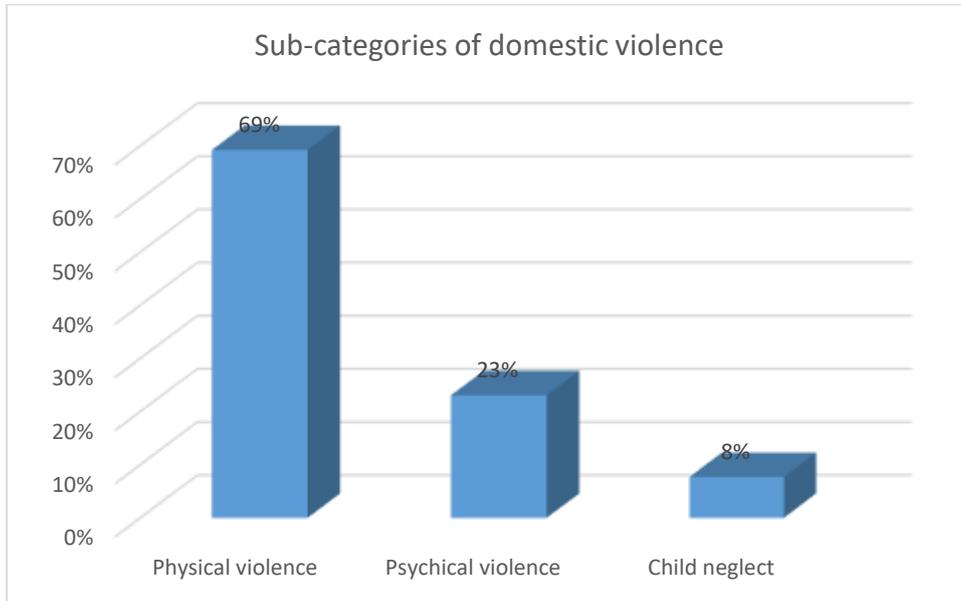
According to this information, most of the children – potential victims (25% of all reported cases) live in poor families that can barely afford food. Eleven percent of the children had their rights violated in divorce procedures. We can also see that the right of the child to be seen by the parent is the one that is mostly violated. There are also issues on who will take further custodianship of the child. We receive reports of cases pertaining to the right to see with one of the parents, but also cases of violation of the right to be seen with the grandfather or the grandmother. We can classify these children as victims because they suffer due to the issues their parents have, and they are mainly about their mutual communication.

### *Violation of the rights of the children in divorce procedures*

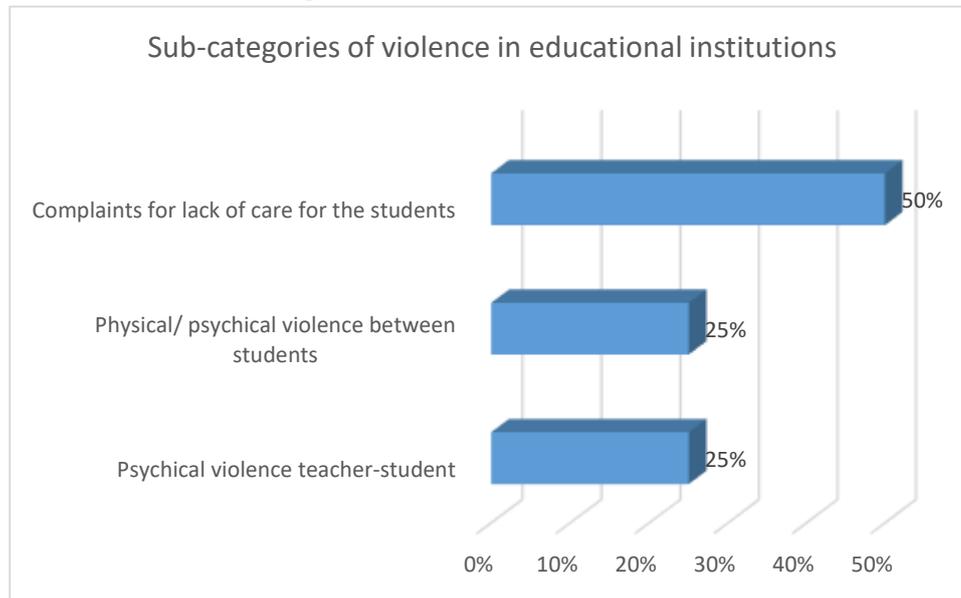
“The best legacy any parent can leave to his or her children, is several minutes of his time during every day.”

Orlando Aloysius Battista, Canadian – American Chemist and Author.

Graph 6. Violation of children rights – domestic violence



Graph 7. Violation of children rights – educational institutions



Graphs 6 and 7 show the cases of violation of the children’s rights – right to family and security, where 13% of all reported cases pertain either to children victims of domestic violence or violence in the educational institutions. In terms of domestic violence, 69% of all reported cases of this type pertain to physical violence against the child in the family, while 50% of the violence in the educational institutions pertain to complaints for the lack of care towards the students.

### *Right to education*

“The children and their parents know that the education is not only their right, but also a passport for a better future – both for the children and the country.”

Harry Belafonte, American singer and activist

Over 30 reports of violation of the children’s right to education were reported during September 2019 at the SOS Helpline, mainly about children to be enrolled in the first grade. Three additional cases were also reported in relation to this right: violation of the right to inform the children and parents about change of the teacher (two cases), and violation of the right to choose studying of a foreign language as a school subject (one case).

### Cooperation with other institutions and organizations

During the reporting period which this publication covers there and in relation to the cases reported on the SOS Helpline, the Embassy cooperated closely with the Centers for Social Work

requesting additional information or submitting the reported information that required intervention from the Centers. We cooperated with the following stakeholders:

- Ombudsman, especially regarding the cases of children not being enrolled in the first grade in the study year of 2019/2020,
- the Project for legal assistance for victims of criminal acts of violence, implemented by the Association of Junior Lawyers and the SOS Children Village, for the cases of domestic violence.
- The European Center for Roma Affairs regarding issues related to the Roma community (when they are unable to exercise the right to social assistance, child allowance or transport to school),
- Initiative for Joint Parenthood Following Divorce on issues related to divorce procedure where the children are the victims, since their right to see and meet with one of their parents is violated.

We also cooperated with five elementary schools in Skopje and one kindergarten for promotion of the right of the children and educating them about their rights. Workshops were organized regarding the rights of the children and getting familiarized how the SOS Helpline works, through direct visits of the children to the premises of the Megjashi.

### ***Expert analysis and operational strategy of the SOS telephone and the services for direct assistance and support***

This analysis was done in order to have an overview of the work and achievements so far, and identify the possible directions for improvement of the SOS Helpline and of other services for direct assistance and support. It was carried out by an expert psychologist and university professor (Prof. Ana Chuchkova Ph.D.) and the baseline for the analysis were the following:

- Past operational reports of the SOS Helpline and other publications issued in relation to the SOS Helpline
- Interviews with sample of volunteers who worked on the SOS Helpline
- Survey on a sample of 50 children, ages between 7 and 16 years
- Interview with Megjashi management.

The ascertainments and recommendations of the analysis can be summarized as follows:

1. There are some issues that have been raised for several years by the founders of the First Children's Embassy in the World – Megjashi and by most of the volunteers who underwent through this process. One of the biggest problems are the insufficient finances for operation of the SOS Helpline which raises the issue of sustainability of this service as well as the need for new volunteers in this service, especially lawyers, that

would contribute towards more effective actions in provision of support to the children and availability of this service 24/7

2. The survey of the children aimed to study the factors that contribute towards accessibility of the SOS Helpline to the children (or impede such accessibility) – informing of the children that there is such helpline, the preferred manner of communication used by the young people and the children, time of the day when it is the best to talk with professional, the issues they would like to talk about and the trust of the children in the professionals on the other side of the SOS Helpline. According to the responses, the informing of the children ages 7 and 8 years old is small (this was to be expected) while the children ages 12, 15 and 16 are much better informed. The 7 and 8 years old children prefer to communicate using mobile phone while the older children (12, 15 and 16 years) prefer to use the Internet or the social networks, as well as other communication channels (Messenger, Viber, etc.). There are differences between the children when it comes to the time of the day – the 7 and 8 year olds prefer morning hours communication (between 8 and 12 hours) while the older children prefer afternoon communication (between 18 and 24 hours) because then they feel the most safe in terms of being discrete and having other obligations. Most of the children ages 12, 15 and 16 years said they would use the Helpline to report issues related to the school (peer violence, issue with teacher, etc.), clearly emphasizing the need to communicate with expert about school environment related issues. Finally, the survey showed that, in terms of trust by children ages 12, 15 and 16 years old, there is high percentage of such trust in the experts, which is an indicator that they feel free to communicate with the experts.
3. The expert in charge of improving the operation of the SOS Helpline for Children and Youth provided some recommendations (show below), while the full analysis is available on the Megjashi website:
  - a) Prefer to use modern communication channels, before telephone communication, in order to establish contact with the children and the youth;
  - b) Training of volunteers that will be capable to communicate with the children using the modern communication channels and introduction of duty work
  - c) Continuous training of the volunteers and team members, with special emphasis on the most commonly reported issues
  - d) Displaying the number of the SOS telephone in every school, at the entrance of the school and in each classroom
  - e) Engaging volunteers for visit to all schools in order to provide verbal presentation or short information about the existence of possibilities to establish communication

with expert, etc.

## Conclusion

The information for the reporting period December 2018 – November 2019 show that for most of the callers, the poverty issue is, unfortunately, one of the key problems the children are facing. They are also deprived of their right to be educated and to have comfortable life like their peers.

Rights that are violated are those pertaining to the right of the child to see one of his/ her parents, or violation of the right to see their grandmother or grandfather. In these cases, the children become victims of the inability of their parents to agree. They become victims of the lack of communication between their parents who are undergoing a process of divorce or have already divorced. The inability to see one of the parents manifests as highly infrequent meetings between the child and the parents which creates a problem in the communication between the two parents and could result in alienation from one of the parents. With this, the child is deprived from his/ her right to grow and to develop healthy and with both parents.

It is important for the children to feel understood, accepted and, most of all, protected. They need to know and to feel that there is some who takes care of them: their parents, custodians, wider family, the system and the state.

The relationship between the parent and the child or the custodian and the child is one of the prevention for all problems and potential violations of the children's rights. The parents/ custodians need to communicate continuously with their children, actively listen to them and trust them. They need to show interest how the children truly feel in order to show them care thus preparing them to protect themselves in the environment, that is, nurture the capacities for self-protection of the children.

In order to reduce and prevent the aggression and the violence, the parents (the adults) and the children need to be sensible about the manner of their mutual communication, acquisition of skills for non-violent transformation of the conflicts, development of skills for mutual understanding, empathy and introduction of peace education in the schools.

**Recommendations based on the operation so far of the SOS  
Helpline for Children and Youth, in order to ensure coordinated  
cooperation between all stakeholders**

Judging by the work so far, we think that closer and coordinated cooperation, as well as common action, is required by all stakeholders that receive reports/ leads from the citizens in relation to violation of the children's rights. The purpose of such cooperation is awareness raising of the citizens about their rights, obligations and responsibility towards protection of the rights of the child, using various channels: media appearances, campaign, information events with parents and custodians of children, etc.

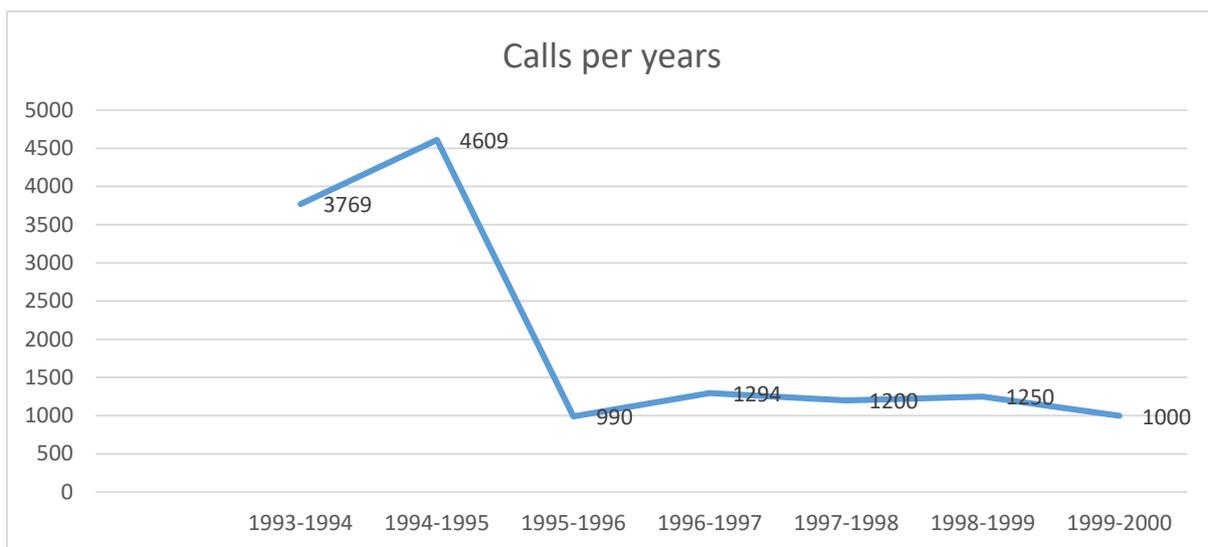
Since the SOS Helpline of Megjashi is part of the global network of Child Helpline International, it would be good to harmonize the number of the SOS helpline of Megjashi with their number – 116111 and to be free to call from all mobile and fixed operators. This would require support from some of the operators in Macedonia.

## Annexes

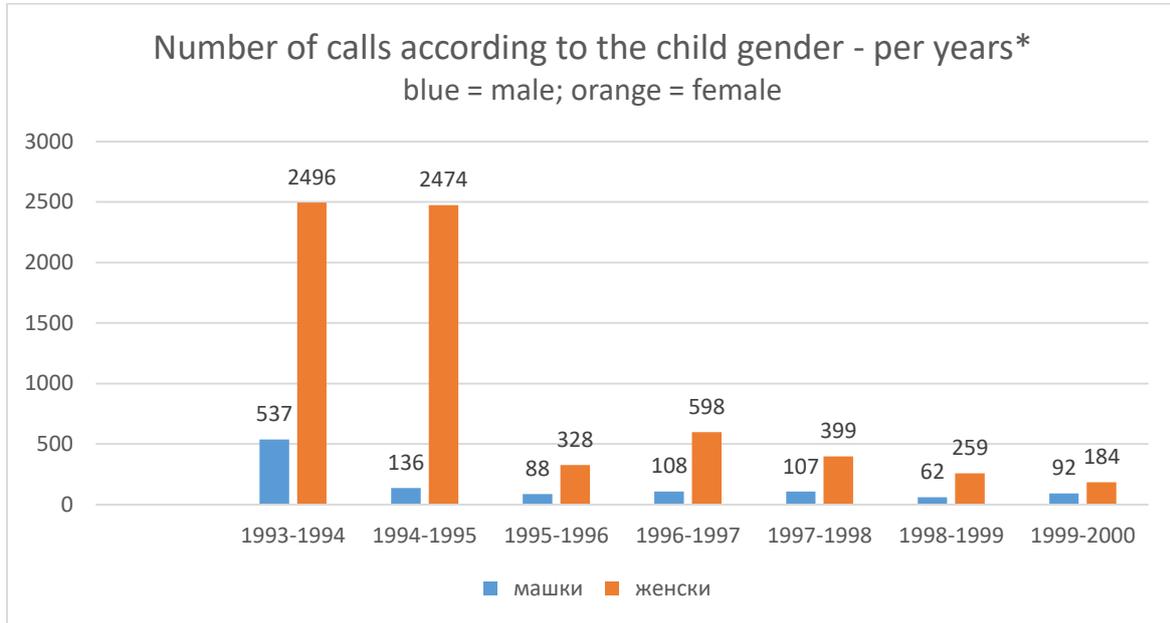
### *Statistics on the SOS Helpline during the 26 years of operation*

The charts and tables below show the calls received on the SOS Helpline for Children and Youth, broken down per year, age and gender of the child. As we can see, there is an obvious declining trend in the number of the calls throughout the years. The first two years of opening of this service saw the greatest number of calls which was an excellent confirmation that this service is useful and it was also an incentive for all 26 years of operation of the SOS Helpline. The additional activities of the SOS Helpline throughout the years were to increase the awareness about the rights of the child, empowering them to identify and recognize those rights and making them more capable for those things, with ultimate objective of respect for the principle of best interest of the children.

Graph 8. Frequency of calls per years – 1993 to 2000

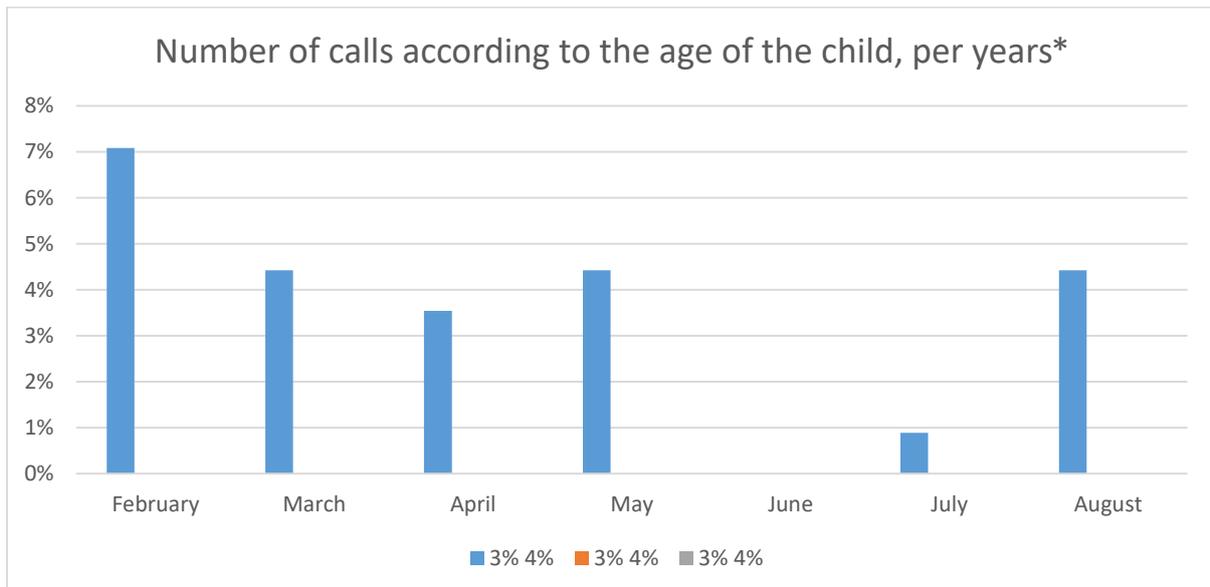


Graph 9. Number of calls according to the gender of the child – 1993 to 2000.



\* The graph excludes the calls where the gender of the child was unknown

Graph 11. Number of calls according to the age of the child – 1993 to 2000.



\* The graph excludes the calls where the age of the child was unknown

**Table 1: SOS Helpline statistics - 2001 – 2019**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total calls</b>
2000-2001	<b>143</b>
2001-2001	<b>77</b>
2002-2003	<b>324</b>
2003-2004	<b>414</b>
2004-2005	<b>912</b>
2005-2006	<b>704</b>
2006-2007	<b>361</b>
2007-2008	<b>360</b>
2008-2009	<b>377</b>
2009-2010	<b>239</b>
2010-2011	<b>235</b>
2011-2012	<b>959<sup>3</sup></b>
2012-2013	<b>969</b>
2013-2014	<b>123</b>
2014-2015	<b>146</b>
2015-2016	<b>82</b>
2016-2017	<b>98</b>
2017-2018	<b>107</b>
2018-2019	<b>113</b>
<b>Total 2001-2019</b>	<b>1638</b>

<sup>3</sup> When considering and analyzing the information we need to have in mind that since 2012 the First Children’s Embassy Megjashi uses new methodology for recording information. A “contact” or “call” refers to a case that has been reported once, while the additional is for the communication related to the cases, which was 959 times. “Children victims” refers to all children or potential victims covered in a specific case

We express gratitude to everyone who supports the work of SOS helpline for children and youth

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