

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF
EDUCATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION
OF ROMA GIRLS IN SERBIA



CIRCUMSTANCES

There are 450 000 Roma living in Serbia or about 6% of the population, according to the estimates of civil society organizations and the country itself. Only 2% of Roma children are included in the system of preschool education, less than 40% are included in primary education, and up to 70 to 90% of Roma children who enrol in primary schools, drop out at some point.

There are numerous problems and obstacles that make education inaccessible and difficult to Roma children at all levels:

- Preschool capacities are not sufficient, which particularly affects the Roma children who make a large percentage of this age group;
- Administrative and legal barriers, as well as the hidden costs of education, still present major obstacles;
- Low training quality, inadequate studying and discrimination in schools and the wider environment, are the main reasons for Roma children to leave school early, most of them even in primary school;
- Discrimination and lower quality education for Roma children;
- Segregation, usually in form of separating Roma children in special classes in regular schools, segregation in special schools for mentally challenged children (often as a consequence of inappropriate categorization procedures); involvement in schools for adults with shortened curriculum;
- Cooperation between schools and Roma parents, if it exists, is superficial and unsatisfactory.

Power Within (PW) - CARE USA program aims to empower 10 million girls worldwide to complete primary education and develop leadership skills. By providing vulnerable and marginalized girls the opportunity to achieve their full potential through various activities, PW intends to remove barriers and improve the quality of education, to provide the opportunity for extracurricular activities which develop leadership skills, social networks and civic activities, to build coalitions, to improve the legal framework and influence public policies, to improve the capacity of governments and civil society to provide quality education, to protect the rights of all children, and to improve practices in the communities in relation to gender norms and attitudes.

In addition to the above mentioned difficulties and obstacles, it has been noticed that there are specific problems when it comes to education of Roma girls, which make their access to education more difficult. These problems are associated with the traditional gender patterns that do not encourage women's education, but their early marriage and commitment to housework and family. Double discrimination against girls increases the risk of peer violence against them, but also violence by school personnel. Abuse or the risk of abuse of girls in schools is another reason for leaving school early, at primary school level.

Roma women are the least educated group of women in Serbia; most of them are illiterate or without any qualification. Low level of education and professional training reduces the chances for successful integration of Roma women into society and lead to their economic dependence, vulnerability, greater exposure to discrimination, violence and health damage.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

Situation analysis of education and social inclusion of Roma girls in Serbia has been conducted by CARE Serbia in partnership with Novi Sad Humanitarian Center, from October 2010 until January 2011. The study is based on the experience in working on empowerment of Roma girls in the educational process, through the project “Chances and Choices for Roma Girls” (2008-2010).

The aim was to gain a comprehensive insight into the current state of primary education of Roma girls in Serbia, so that these data are used for planning and implementation of the programs on the empowerment of girls from marginalized groups (program “Power Within”). In doing so, we have been trying to get answers to questions regarding the accessibility and quality of education for Roma girls, in relation to preschool and primary school education, moving on to higher grades and enrolment in secondary schools, possibilities for education of girls who are older, but did not attend primary school, as well as gender-sensitive policies and programs in education, and their influence on education of Roma girls. We were also interested in learning more about the social inclusion of Roma girls, their social networks and the role models they have, but also the way Roma community sees the impact of tradition on the opportunities for education of the girls. A special part of the research is dedicated to a detailed analysis of legislation, strategies, policies, research and studies on education of Roma in Serbia.

The study was carried out in Novi Sad (Voivodina), Kraljevo (central Serbia) and Nis (south Serbia). In all three target cities, there is a significant number of local Roma people, as well as those who are internally displaced from Kosovo. The study included nine elementary schools, three in each target city, attended by a large number of pupils from the Roma population. Focus groups have been held in Roma communities in each city.

The survey was organized into four interrelated parts:

- A) Analysis of the legal framework for education of Roma children in Serbia, access to education and inclusion of students from vulnerable groups;
- B) Survey of attitudes, knowledge and practice of the teaching and professional staff in target schools on education of Roma children, gender issues and their impact on education;
- C) A review of school attendance and achievement of pupils of Roma nationality through the insight into school registers;
- D) Focus groups with girls and boys of primary school age and their parents from both Roma and non-Roma population, in order to learn about their opinion on the accessibility of education, inclusion in community life, social networks, barriers in education and ways to overcome them.

THE RESULTS OF THE SITUATION ANALYSIS OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION OF ROMA GIRLS IN SERBIA

A) ROMA GIRLS IN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN SERBIA

Within the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, with Serbia as a member, a series of regulations and strategic documents related to improving the situation of Roma in education, gender equality, child rights and the fight against discrimination have been adopted: Strategy for Reduction of Poverty, Draft Strategy to Improve Roma Education in Serbia and Unique Action Plan for Improvement of Roma Education in the Republic of Serbia, National Strategy for Improving the Position of Roma and the accompanying action plans, Strategy for Development of Adult Education ... Since the Government adopted the Action Plan for Improvement of Education of Roma at the beginning of 2005, the Ministry of Education has started with its implementation, which requires greater participation of Roma in the educational system and ensuring the continuity and quality of their education. The Action Plan is a constituent part of the National Strategy for Improving the Position of Roma, adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in April 2009. This strategic document is dealing with the issue of Roma women in particular, and within it, there is an action plan for women that provides a variety of affirmative measures and actions for improving the status of Roma women. Those include education, health, housing, employment, combating discrimination against Roma women, participation in public and political life, fight against violence against women, arranged marriages, bride selling and trafficking, and systemic dealing with the problems of children living on the street.

The action plan for implementation of the Strategy contains thirteen action plans, including the Action Plan for Education which describes the measures within the four aims:

1. Inclusion of Roma in the educational system and providing continuity of education;
2. Providing quality education;
3. Developing tolerance and respect for diversity;
4. Fostering cultural identity

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia from 2006 in Article 71 states: "Everyone has the right to education. Primary education is compulsory and free, and secondary education is free. Serbian citizens are equal in exercising their right to education, regardless of gender, race, nationality, religion or language, age, physical and mental constitution, social and cultural background, financial status, political affiliation or other personal characteristics."

However, until 2009 and the adoption of the Law on Basic Education System, the gap between the determined goals and their implementation in practice was evident and indisputable, and no systematic methodology for monitoring the results achieved in the areas of the Decade, including education, has yet been established. In addition, the particularity of education of Roma women has been in the background, i.e. almost nonexistent. There is a lack of reliable data about Roma in the educational system and the main reasons for this are the still present reluctance of Roma to declare themselves as Roma, and the misinterpretation that every collection of data on ethnicity of students is prohibited.

The adoption of the Law on Basic Education has created the conditions for the implementation of educational policies that provide equal access to quality education for all. When it comes to education of Roma, it especially relates to regulations concerning the inclusive policy of enrolment in the first grade, the introduction of educational assistants, measures of affirmative action, sanctioning discrimination and funding the education per student. The financing of inclusive education, especially education of Roma through DILS project of the World Bank and the IPA funds (EU pre-accession funds) should also be added to these novelties.

However, programs that recognize the specific difficulties that Roma girls are faced with and include activities to support this doubly marginalized and discriminated population, are still weak and insufficient.

Preschool education

Roma children attend pre-school eight times less than the rest of the population. Only 3.9% of children from Roma settlements are included in preschool programs from the age of 3 to 5, as opposed to 33.4% of children from other communities. There are no data that a single Roma child, under the age of 3 is involved in preschool. Compulsory pre-school program one year before the first grade is attended by only 62% of Roma children. Roma parents are not highly motivated to send children to preschool, the status of Roma assistants in schools who contribute to better and easier work with Roma children has not been regulated, and the basics of preschool programs are not designed or adapted to work with Roma children.

Primary education

Since 2010-2011 school year, by applying the provisions of the Law on Basic Education, the access to education for children from vulnerable groups has been significantly simplified: the enrolment of Roma children in primary school has increased by 10%.

66% of Roma children enrol in the first grade of primary school at the right age (94% of the total population), 74% of Roma children aged 7-14 attend primary school (98% of the total population), only 50% of Roma children who enrol in the first grade, come to the fifth grade, 28% of Roma children reach the eighth grade (98% of the total population).

Unlike the general population, there is inequality in school attendance between boys and girls: 76% of boys compared to 71% of girls attend primary school. Inequality between girls and boys is expressed in Roma settlements, where the GPI index for primary and secondary school is 0.94, i.e. 0.42 (Gender Parity Index is an indicator of differences in values obtained in men and women: GPI between 1 and 0 means a disparity in favour of boys, a GPI greater than 1 indicates a disparity in favour of girls).

Secondary and tertiary education

It is estimated that only 10% of students from Roma settlements attend secondary school (as opposed to 84% of the general population), and the percentage of boys who go to secondary school is twice the percentage of girls (14% and 6%). Roma are generally enrolled in secondary vocational schools (traffic, mechanical, technology, school for designing and processing fabrics, leather, schools for hairdressers, administrative) where they are not required take the qualifying exam, and a very small number enrolls grammar schools and secondary schools (of medical, chemical and pharmaceutical professions, or agricultural) that are more valued and provide better opportunities for further education and employment.

Measures of Affirmative Action for Roma in Serbia facilitate enrolment in secondary schools, but the way they have been implemented so far prevents young Roma to enrol in the prestigious high schools, because due to the low achievement in primary school, even after they have been added 30 points, they can not achieve the number that is required for entry. The number of Roma secondary school students who enrolled in secondary schools through affirmative measures has a growing trend in the last eight years: in 2003 the number of enrolled Roma students was only 30, while in 2010 this number amounted to 250.

In addition to affirmative action, scholarships and mentoring have also had an important role in support for Roma nationality students in Voivodina, thanks to which the number of students enrolled was quadrupled in four years (2006-2007 the number of Roma secondary school students was 158, and in 2009 – 2010 that number was 633). Also, the attrition of students with values of more than 7% has been reduced to about 3% and academic achievement of student who receive scholarship significantly increased. Only 0.9% of Roma are included in tertiary education, less than 200 Roma students are enrolled in state universities.

Education of adult Roma

Roma are significantly present in schools for adult education. These schools are for people who did not attend or complete compulsory primary education, and are older than 15, which is the legal limit for attending regular primary schools. Adult education has for many years been totally neglected in Serbia, almost nonexistent in formal education, and with a poor offer in the informal educational system. The idea of lifelong learning and the need for additional training and changing qualifications have conditioned the adoption of the Adult Education Strategy in the Republic of Serbia in 2006.

Affirmative Action

The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with governmental, international and nongovernmental organizations, implemented a number of activities, programs and initiatives aimed at increasing the number of Roma children in regular education, improving the quality of education, and providing support to students for successful and continued education: affirmative action for entry into secondary schools and universities, the program Functional Basic Education of Roma, the project Protection of Roma Children from Discrimination in Education, training and appointment of advisors who are responsible for the improvement of Roma education, implementation of local action plans for improvement of Roma education, increased enrolment of Roma children in preschool institutions, a designed model of introduction of Roma assistants in schools, and other systemic measures to improve educational opportunities for the Roma population.

However, Roma girls in education, as a specific vulnerable group have been the main focus only in the project Chances and Choices Roma girls, conducted by CARE Serbia in Belgrade and Novi Sad Humanitarian Center in 2009-2010. The aim of the project was to contribute to the accessibility and quality of education for Roma girls, by improving the support of institutions involved in education and their accessibility, and by increasing awareness and knowledge of the importance of education of Roma girls in the Roma community. This is a unique example of activities aimed at Roma girls as a particularly sensitive part of the Roma population.

B) ATTITUDES, KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN RELATION TO GENDER ISSUES AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE EDUCATION OF ROMA GIRLS

Teachers and expert associates (mainly psychologists and educators) from target schools that were chosen due to the high percentage of pupils of Roma ethnic origin, participated in this phase of the survey.

Nearly two-thirds of the professional associates, teachers, and class teachers do not fully understand the difference between gender and sex, and it is obvious that this topic is not very present in our schools, nor the impact of gender affiliation is associated with the results of education. The school staff are not sure what the programs that deal with gender issues look like, except in cases when it is obvious from the organization of the program. Regardless of this, at least one of the programs that are focused on gender-sensitive issues has been organized in all schools in the past, often showing educational films, and training on tolerance and changes in puberty, and in one case special work with girls from Roma population who leave school early. The professional staff are not even sure what the programs concerning gender sensitivity and gender politics in general look like. A very small number of professional associates and teachers believe that the education and its outcomes differ by gender of students. Nevertheless, more than a half of the associates is partially or completely satisfied with how much attention is being paid to the subject of gender sensitive issues by the teachers in their school.

When asked whether the teachers at school, in the opinion of professional services, pay additional attention to Roma students, almost all respondents believe that they need extra attention and that teachers in their schools provide the extra attention in an appropriate manner. Some of the teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with the program of inclusion, arguing that the children “do not learn anything at home” and that the books they get, they just “tear up and stain.” Insufficient interest of parents for their education is considered to be the biggest problem in education of boys and girls of Roma nationality, while the least important are problems related to the attitude of the environment (school and other children) towards them. Early marriage of girls was noted as a big problem (right after the indifference of parents). When asked what could be done for better results in education of Roma children, the associates generally cited financial assistance as the possibility of the country, either through employment, or through direct financial assistance or by providing housing and free education. Roma assistants agree with this and they see the socio-economic status of Roma families as the biggest problem which should be dealt with to make the education of Roma children a bit more successful. Most ideas the respondents gave when asked what the Roma population itself could do about this problem - most commonly cited were school attendance, better cooperation with schools, better language skills and development of work culture. It is interesting that none of the associates put themselves in the first place of importance in solving problems in the education of Roma children. Teachers believe that they are doing everything in their power, and, as an improvement in work, they mention additional classes, better contact with parents, greater seriousness in working with these children, etc. The ideas that teachers

gave for Roma population itself and their further engagement in the issue of education were mainly related to school attendance, better cooperation between parents and schools, development of work culture, but there was a number of respondents who expressed open hostility towards Roma: “Great attention is paid to the Roma, and they are still dissatisfied. Because of Roma children, we, the teachers, do not have enough time for good children. “

Prejudice of the associates is relatively low towards the Roma in general, but towards Roma girls as well. Teachers have a somewhat more pronounced prejudice against Roma than the associates from the same school. Those who have direct contact with Roma children have expressed weaker prejudice. The importance of daily contact to reduce prejudice is visible, but only when the contact is saturated with common interaction, and not only with the mutual presence in the same school or classroom.

C) REVIEW OF ATTENDANCE OF ROMA STUDENTS IN NOVI SAD, NIS AND KRALJEVO

The insight into the attendance of pupils of Roma nationality, as well as the review of their school achievement has been made on the basis of the school registers. The trend of coverage of Roma children has been positive in the last 8-9 school years in primary schools where the research was conducted. Since 2000 there has been an increased tendency of involvement of Roma students in compulsory education, although non-linear. In nine schools in the three cities, 1735 Roma pupils have been recorded, with an equal number of boys and girls.

Drop-out rate among Roma children is 32%. The age at which most Roma pupils drop out of school is after the fourth grade when 10.5% of students leave school. However, a great number of students leave school at the very beginning; during and after the first grade 7.7% students leave school. Girls are more likely than boys to end their education after the first and fourth grade, while boys are more likely than girls to give up school after the second and fifth grade.

More than a half of Roma children have lower educational achievement. The most common achievement of Roma students in all three cities is sufficient and good. Almost a third are good, and 18.2% are sufficient. About 25% of Roma students repeated a class at least once, and among them, nearly 4% repeated a grade more than once. Repetition is most frequent in the first and fifth grade, and boys and girls equally repeat the first grade.

There is about 15% of very good and excellent students altogether, which is a significantly lower percentage compared to the number of very good and excellent students in the general population. It can be noticed that in all three cities, boys are more often found in a group of students with low achievement, whereas girls are more frequently in a group with higher achievement. This could perhaps be explained by the girls' learned obedience stemming from their roles in a patriarchal society, i.e. family. Thanks to socially acceptable behaviour, girl students are able to adapt better and use the forms of support that exist in school.

By reviewing the registers in nine target schools in three cities, it has been concluded that for most students who left school there are no data at the specified place in the register, or the note says “advised to repeat,” “moved away”, “stopped attending school”, etc. Such a way of keeping the registers in case of leaving school with no data related to other registers and / or issued transfer papers, prevents further monitoring of students' education. In this sense, there is considerable scope for improving the management of school records, which would help better implementation of legal provisions and the inclusion of Roma nationality students.

D) THE ACCESSIBILITY OF EDUCATION AND INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY LIFE

From early childhood, Roma children are crucially influenced by their parents' low education and poverty and the unsupportive environment in which they are growing up. Even though, most Roma parents believe that education is important, they do not fundamentally believe that graduating from school would provide better life for their children. Institutions that could help in raising Roma children, especially pre-schools, are not adapted to the specific needs of Roma population, so the number of Roma children in public preschool institutions is very low. In communities with informal schools for Roma children, positive changes in children's readiness for school and attendance have been observed.

Roma mothers and fathers have children at a very young age, so they lack experience, knowledge or support to learn about parenting skills. Their ambitions are poor, the view of the world often pessimistic, and so the messages they send to their children are discouraging. Growing up in poverty, without the support and encouragement, with these ideas about the world around them, Roma children have inevitably low self-esteem and self-respect, motivation and faith in the future. In addition to poverty, they recognize their parents as barriers to education.

Roma children have no adequate role models to look up to, and in their environment there are almost no successful and educated Roma. They shape the picture of their future by their personal environment, where men are engaged in collecting recyclable materials, and the women are housewives and mothers. Gender inequality has a strong influence on all decisions that parents make for female children. Traditional patterns such as early marriage, although recognized as harmful by children and parents, are still being repeated. Early marriage is a way to control adolescent sexuality and the community supports this practice, although it leads to the obvious bad social outcomes, deepens the poverty and creates new, poor and socially deprived generations. Gender divisions are the base of the limitations imposed on girls from early childhood. In such environment, Roma girls become frightened, uncertain, unambitious, obedient, ashamed to express their views, have no clear idea about their future and their role in it. As such, they rarely rebel against their position in the community, even when exposed to violence.

Discrimination in education and society in general is a very discouraging factor that makes Roma boys and girls even more isolated and closed in the Roma community. Young people in these communities have no ways to resist the harmful traditional practices. There are no support mechanisms that young people would turn to in such cases. Forced marriages are often introduction to violence against women and the support to the victims of violence is also less available for Roma woman than for the general population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The country should provide quality education for all children, particularly for socially vulnerable and marginalized children, and to ensure broader public support to education of Roma girls, including gender sensitization of the Roma community, teaching and professional staff of schools, students, local government, etc.
- It is necessary to provide reliable data on the Roma in the educational system. In this sense, schools would have to constantly update their systems, by keeping the registers and monitoring all the children in their territory, with particular emphasis on children from vulnerable groups.
- It is necessary to ensure optimal coverage of Roma children in preschool and primary school level, to prevent dispersal of children from school and allow them to go back into the regular school system. It is necessary to expand pre-schools capacities and provide free all-day programs for Roma children at the earliest age, and not just during the compulsory preschool curriculum.
- Affirmative action that would, with appropriate assistance, increase the involvement of Roma girls in primary and secondary education, should be developed, whether it comes to those who left school due to early marriage or pregnancy, or to women literacy classes.
- Schools should adequately respond to any form of discrimination and promote the development of tolerance among all students through various activities. It is necessary to inform, educate and sensitize the teaching staff to the specific problems that Roma children, especially girls, face during their schooling and growing up, to discrimination and gender equality, with an aim to reduce prejudice against the Roma community and to respond to educational and psychological needs of Roma girls.

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- Failure to comply with legal regulations must entail clearly defined sanctions which will be consistently applied. By-laws must precisely clarify the new terms and thus prevent the avoidance of their use.
 - The voice of Roma children should be heard and accepted when the initiatives to improve education are being launched at the local and national levels, and educational systems must be inclusive, and they have to recognize the reality and the conditions in which each child lives. Schools should adequately establish a dialogue and cooperation with Roma parents, and find the best way to include them in the work of the Parents' Council, and also to provide them support to express their opinions, ask questions, and to acknowledge their role in education of Roma children. Schools need to work on developing the inclusive culture, policies and practices that will make education more open and accessible for all children and their needs, with particular attention to providing continued support for girls in education.
 - Roma children, especially girls, need support in developing self-confidence and self-esteem, self-awareness and social skills. The importance of education should constantly be emphasized and Roma children should be allowed to form positive attitudes towards themselves, their future and their potentials.
 - It is necessary to work on raising the awareness of the harmful effects of gender divisions in the whole Roma community, especially with the young people. It is also necessary to initiate discussions about these issues in the Roma communities, and to work on increasing the knowledge and empowerment of girls and women from the Roma population. For young Roma parents, especially mothers, specific support programs in raising and educating children are necessary, as well as the support in continuing their education, with the support of existing and new programs for adult education.

Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre

Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre (NSHC) is a non-profit, charitable organization founded in 1998 in Novi Sad. NSHC's mission is to contribute to the creation of humane society through provision of assistance to vulnerable and marginalized groups, development of civil society, research and education. In cooperation with governmental and non-governmental sector NSHC contributes to poverty reduction, health promotion, the development of informal education, improvement of social policy and employment policy in Serbia. Since its foundation NSHC implemented various projects to support the Roma population in Serbia, with the aim of improving their education, living standards and social integration. Activities which NSHC is most involved in are literacy improvement, inclusion of Roma children in regular school system, support in education, psychosocial assistance and support in the economic empowerment of Roma families, and health education. In previous years NSHC has been active in the field of advocacy for the education of Roma children in Vojvodina. Through various projects, NSHC facilitated the development of local action plans for improvement of Roma education in 11 municipalities in Vojvodina. NSHC also engages volunteers who help the group of children from Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian population in education and social integration.

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CARE

CARE is an international organization with more than a decade of experience in implementing community-based programs throughout the North West Balkans region. CARE works to enhance citizen empowerment through income generation programs, civil society strengthening, and peace building. In designing and implementing its programs, CARE focuses on advocacy, rights-based approach (RBA), commitment to civil society strengthening, and gender and diversity. CARE's program approaches are based on principles of partnership, empowerment and participation in addressing poverty and social injustice. CARE's projects in Serbia started in 1996 related to emergency response and reconstruction assistance. Since 2000, CARE has implemented various developmental projects such as projects which contribute to empowerment and integration of the Roma in the area of education, employment and development of Roma communities, anti-trafficking projects, projects for improvement of reproductive health, youth projects aimed to develop tolerance and activism, and reduce xenophobia, and projects which promote gender equality, healthy life styles and prevention of violence.

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