

Discrimination of Roma Children in Education

The Roma community faces a multitude of discriminatory practices. In this 2014 report, “*On Discrimination of Roma Children in Education*”, the European Commission argues for holistic strategies to achieve the end of Roma discrimination in educational settings. The upshot of the report is that while reforms to policy or law may provide the momentum for social and/ or attitudinal progress, alone, they cannot achieve lasting change. This report focuses on one of the most common and damaging types of discrimination against Roma children in schools: segregation.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) asserts that discrimination against Roma children is an ‘acute’ economic issue whilst the World Bank describes Roma inclusion as ‘a macroeconomic necessity’. Without an education Roma children enter adult life with dramatically reduced employment prospects. Thus, discrimination against Roma children perpetuates the cycle of unequal opportunities and extreme poverty and contributes to the fact that, even in highly developed European Union member states, “71% of Roma households live in deep poverty” of the kind on a par with the poorest areas of the world (p.13).

Consequentially, socio-economic considerations such as these are important. However, the segregation of Roma children must also be acknowledged as a violation of *rights* enshrined in international law. Moreover, failure to uphold a child’s right to education is particularly detrimental because education is itself an indispensable means by which other human rights may be protected and realized. Education gives children the opportunity to embrace multiculturalism, to adopt tolerant values and to learn to live as members of pluralist societies. In segregating Roma (or indeed any minority group) both Roma and non-Roma alike are denied these opportunities.

The European Commission identifies three types of Roma segregation: (1) intra-school segregation; (2) inter-school segregation; (3) segregation into ‘special schools’ for the mentally disabled. In several cases of intra and inter school segregation brought against the European Court of Human Rights or against national level courts, parents of non-Roma children have held demonstrations outside schools in protest against co-education. Such demonstrations confirm the validity of this report’s argument: that while mounting litigation challenges may progress the Roma rights movement, the effectiveness of legal and policy change depends greatly on harmonisation with grass roots projects designed to end stigma and stereotyping.

The segregation of Roma children into special schools for the mentally disabled is accorded particular attention in this report. Such children are doubly discriminated against, and, for them, the prospects of social inclusion are more deeply undermined. There are two points at issue here:

- Roma children are *vastly* overrepresented in such schools (in large part the result of misdiagnosis).
- The automatic and/ or complete segregation of children (Roma or non-Roma) on the basis of mental disability is itself highly morally dubious.

An astonishing example of overrepresentation in special schools is found in Slovakia where Roma children are 28 times more likely than their non-Roma peers to be placed in such schools. Furthermore, estimates indicate that as many as 50% of these children have been misdiagnosed and, in reality, have no mental disability. Regrettably, this is not a localised problem but in fact can be found across Europe. For example, in a case brought against the Czech Republic the court also ruled that misdiagnosis had occurred resulting in three counts of discrimination: (i) misdiagnosis; (ii) isolation; (iii) the following of an inferior curriculum.

Essentially, this report calls for a paradigmatic shift so that EU member states facilitate Roma inclusion more effectively. The implementation of National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) is now required by all member states. For this to happen political will, adequate funding and the overhaul of discriminatory attitudes across all sectors of society must be realized.

Prepared by Katie Javanaud for Child Protection Hub for South East Europe, July 2016

Source: *Report on Discrimination of Roma Children in Education* (2014) European Commission Publication