

4 Disadvantages You Would Face as a Roma Child

The Roma community in Europe numbers somewhere between 10-12 million people, though exact figures are difficult to determine since many Roma people don't report their ethnicity for fear of suffering discrimination. This makes them the largest minority on the European continent, and by most accounts, the most discriminated against and marginalized group in European society.

1- Hundreds of years of discrimination stand in your way

The Roma have faced violations to their freedoms and rights over the past thousand years, the repercussions of those crimes still adversely affect the Roma community today. To list everything that the Roma have gone through in Europe would take a lifetime, but a short overview of what was done to them by European states must be briefly addressed.

In the 15th century, the Roma population of Hungary and Romania were enslaved by the nobility with the aim of providing labor for their estates. By the mid 1800's when the emancipation of the Roma was beginning, there were an estimated 200,000 Roma slaves in Romania.

In 1548, the Augsburg diet ruled that the murder of any Roma person by a non-Roma individual would not be considered a crime, and the perpetrator would not suffer any punishment.¹ In France, in 1666, Louis XIV decreed that all Roma men must be put to work on galleys for life, without any legal recourse. In Spain, in 1749, an operation was launched to detain the entire Roma population; this later became known as the "great Gypsy round-up."² Roma people were expelled from many countries and cities, including Spain, England, Venice, Warsaw and Rome, among others. They were also prohibited from buying land, while being barred from joining stable occupations. This in many ways is what made the Roma turn to a nomadic life style.

More recently, between 250,000 and 500,000 Roma were killed by Nazi Germany and its allies, during the Second World War. This amounts to about a quarter of the Roma population in Europe at the time.³ Slovakia even paid the Nazis to send Roma to Auschwitz.⁴ Throughout the 20th century, many countries, such as Sweden, have carried out sterilization programs on its Roma population.

¹ O'Connor, William. "The Story Of The Roma, Europe's Most Discriminated Group." The Daily Beast. January 13, 15. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/01/13/the-story-of-the-roma-europe-s-most-discriminated-group.html>.

² Muižnieks, Nils. "Time to Cure Amnesia about the History of Roma in Europe." Council of Europe. July 30, 2015. Accessed April 6, 2016. <http://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/time-to-cure-amnesia-about-the-history-of-roma-in-europe>.

³ "GENOCIDE OF EUROPEAN ROMA (GYPSIES), 1939–1945." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed April 6, 2016. <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005219>.

⁴ Lee, Laurence. "Racism against Roma: Mainstream Phenomenon?" AlJazeera English. February 24, 2014. Accessed April 6, 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/europe/2014/01/98306.html>.

This long running state sponsored discrimination and violence has negatively impacted the Roma community in many ways. They have grown to be seen as legitimate targets for oppression and discrimination by the majority population. The Roma, in response to this long running oppression, have developed distaste for state authorities, leaving many parents believing that a school environment would not be healthy for their children. Some believe that their children might face discrimination or that the school would attempt to erase Roma culture from them. Additionally, the constant expulsions of the Roma by many European states and the historic inability to purchase land has resulted in the Roma living what has been termed a 'nomadic' lifestyle, which has kept many Roma from settling down and integrating into society. This has further caused an alienation from social structures such as public schools and society as a whole. All of this has limited the education that can be received by Roma children and has adversely impacted their future prospects.

2- Don't expect justice as a victim

The European Roma Rights Centre published a report that examined the response of the police and the state in the cases of dozens of attacks on members of the Roma community. What they found was that attacks against Roma are more likely to go unresolved than if the attack was on a non-Roma. They found that in many cases the identity of the attacker/s was not discovered and the racial motivation behind the attack unconfirmed. In many cases, the attackers are very lightly punished.

Children have also suffered from these targeted attacks on the Roma, which has led to a further deterioration of their quality of life and has negatively impacted their future prospects.

In 2009, in Hungary, attackers threw Molotov cocktails into a Roma family's house and shot dead the father and a son aged 5 as they fled the burning house. Two other children were injured.

Another incident in 2009 in Slovakia saw six police officers detain six Roma boys between the ages of 11 and 17. The boys were forced to get undressed, kiss and hit each other as the officers abused them verbally with anti-Roma slurs, threatened them with police dogs, and loaded guns. The incident was taped by some of the officers and posted online. By the time that the court trial was set, three of the police officers were still employed by their department.

One case that made headlines was of a Molotov cocktail attack in the Czech Republic that nearly burned a two year-old girl to death. The attackers were sentenced to two decades in jail. The former Czech president commented that "The length of the sentences seems... unexpectedly high."⁵

All of these abhorrent attacks on Roma people in the region, and the ensuing lack of attention by state authorities to put a halt to these practices have resulted in some parents

⁵ Albert, Gwendolyn, and Zdeněk Ryšavý. "Czech President Klaus: Arsonists' Sentences "unexpectedly High"" Romea.cz. October 21, 2010. Accessed April 6, 2016. <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/czech-president-klaus-arsonists-sentences-unexpectedly-high>.

fearing to send their children to school. Furthermore, many children traumatized by such attacks feel unsafe in their communities and at school, wasting vital energy on fear and stress rather than focusing on their studies.

3 – You won't receive the education that you need

One of largest impediments in the way of the Roma community in their attempt at improving their social and economic position is the lack of education for children. Roma children have very low school enrolment levels as well as high drop out rates. The causes of this are wide and varied, but one of the most visible reasons has been widespread discrimination and segregation of Roma children from many schools. According to one report, 40% of Roma students in Slovakia go to segregated schools, while 80% of the students who go to special education classes, meant for students with mild mental disabilities, are Roma. Seeing as how the Roma make up about 8% of Slovakia's population, it becomes clear that Roma students are being pushed into such schools to keep them out of mainstream classes.⁶

One way that Roma children are placed in these special education classes, which will prevent its students from ever getting into a university, is through biased testing. According to Judit Szira, a former schoolteacher from Hungary and the Executive Director of the Roma Education Fund, the questions used in the testing are unfair to Roma students. One example that she recalls was how a student was asked, "where does your mother buy bread?" The answer that was given was 'the corner store', which was deemed an incorrect answer, the correct one being 'the bakery'. Szira explained that in most Roma communities, there are no bakeries.⁷ This is an example of the nefarious and discriminatory methods of assessing if a Roma child should be placed in special education classes. Unsurprisingly, when some Roma children who were placed in special education classes by the Czech state were moved to the UK and entered mainstream schools, they did fine academically, despite having to learn a new language.⁸

Amnesty International has also documented several cases of explicit segregation in Slovakia. They found that despite legislation banning segregation, many classes are fully composed of Roma students, with the students locked into separate buildings, hallways and facilities meant to separate Roma from non-Roma students.⁹ The Guardian reported that there were classes in Slovakia explicitly for either "white" students or "black" students; Black being used to describe Roma students. The head teacher openly remarked, "If I open a Roma class, I will lose all the white children. They are not clean enough, nor do I have

⁶ Fontanella-Khan, Amana. "Roma Children Face Segregation In EU Schools." The Daily Beast. Accessed August 03, 2014. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/03/08/european-schools-quietly-segregating-roma-children.html>.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Kushen, Robert. "Unfinished Business: Roma Inclusion in Europe." AlJazeera English. April 8, 2014. Accessed April 6, 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/04/unfinished-business-roma-inclusi-20144895951886264.html>.

⁹ "A Class Apart – Slovakia's Segregation of Romani Students." Amnesty International USA. Accessed August 30, 2012. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/news-item/a-class-apart-slovakia-s-segregation-of-romani-students>.

space for them... I don't think you would let your child go to a Roma class if you lived here as your child would have everything stolen."¹⁰

Through segregation, Roma students in many European countries don't receive the education that they need to pursue higher education and a fulfilling career. Despite legislation banning segregation, as well as both national and EU courts declaring the practice illegal, it is still being widely practiced. The other way that Roma students are segregated is through placing them in special education classes. Students who go to these classes are lucky to learn how to read and write, let alone try to get into a university. Through these kinds of obstacles, many Roma children are not prepared for a placement in rewarding jobs, perpetuating their poverty to the next generation.

4- You are constantly being moved from one place to another

Many Roma around Europe live in 'irregular' housing. These are housing structures that are built without the needed permits by the local authorities or without certifiable ownership of the land on which the structure is built. Many of these Roma end up facing forced evictions. Many times these forced evictions are even carried out against people who reside in their houses legally.

Amnesty International described forced evictions as being evictions that are carried out without sufficient notice or consultation with the people being evicted. Nor are the people who are being evicted provided with suitable alternative housing or compensation. Those who are victims of forced evictions often find themselves homeless, and they might lose their job and have their education disrupted.¹¹

Examples of forced evictions are rife through out Europe. In Greece, in 2007, more than a hundred Roma families living near the center of Athens were evicted from their homes of more than 10 years. Since the families had no alternative housing, the families moved into an abandoned factory where they evicted again by the police a few days later. The families then moved onto a land that is owned by a private company, a few months later they were again evicted. They then moved to an unattended plot of land where they were again ordered to leave. In none of the four evictions that Greek authorities carried out against these Roma families was adequate alternative housing made for them, and in none of these cases where the families consulted or given advance warning or notice.¹²

In the winter of 2010 in Romania, another example of cruel forced evictions took place. Local authorities arrived at Coastei Street and informed the residents there, most of whom were legally renting public housing from the city council, that they had one day to apply for social housing for homeless people. Two days after the authorities arrived, the houses were

¹⁰ Traynor, Ian. "Apartheid in the Heart of Europe: How Roma Children Lose out on Education." The Guardian. November 16, 2007. Accessed April 04, 2016.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/nov/16/schoolsworldwide.eu>.

¹¹ *Stop The Forced Evictions of Roma*. Report. April 8, 2010. Accessed April 5, 2016.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR01/005/2010/en/>.

¹² *Stop The Forced Evictions of Roma*. Report. April 8, 2010. Accessed April 5, 2016.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR01/005/2010/en/>.

demolished without any proper legal authorization in weather that reached negative 10 degrees Celsius. The alternative accommodation that was provided for the families was on the edge of a municipal landfill and dump. An environmental assessment declared that the location was improper for life. Most of the families reported that they did not have proper cooking facilities in their new homes, and did not have running water. A fifth of the children who were evicted were refused to continue studying at the same school as they did before, while others left because they faced increased hostility from the other students after the evictions, with slurs such as “gypsy from the dump” being thrown at them.¹³

According to the Office of the high Commissioner of the United Nations for Human Rights, forced evictions can have severe detrimental effects on a child. Children who face forced evictions frequently develop post-traumatic stress disorders, which include nightmares, apathy, and anxiety. These children also face disruptions to their education and an increased risk of trafficking and other abuses.¹⁴

It is clear that the forced evictions of Roma families across Europe are only adding to their marginalization and displacement. Not only do forced evictions lead to reduced employability and access to health care, they severely affect a child access to education as well. This lack of education will affect these children negatively for the rest of their, and their children’s lives as well. These actions by European states not only harm this generation of Roma children who are having their human rights stripped from them, but it also harms future generations of Roma children yet to be born.

There are many issues standing in the way of Roma inclusion into European society. What was mentioned in this paper was but a short list of what we found to have the most impact on a child’s development. For more information on Roma in Europe, please visit: www.Childhub.org

Written by Kareem Korayem, for Child Protection Hub for South East Europe, 2016.

¹³ "Taken from the City." European Roma Rights Centre. 2012. Accessed April 05, 2016.
<http://www.errc.org/reports-and-advocacy-submissions/taken-from-the-city-romanian-roma-evicted-to-a-rubbish-dump/4079>.

¹⁴ *Forced Evictions*. Fact Sheet No. 25/Rev.1. 2014. Accessed April 5, 2016.
<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FS25.Rev.1.pdf>.