

Social and Economic Vulnerability of Roma People

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Stefânia Toma
Editors

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Key Factors for the Success and Continuity
of Schooling Levels

 Springer

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ISBN 978-3-030-52587-3 ISBN 978-3-030-52588-0 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-52588-0>

This book is an open access publication.

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Introduction

According to the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA 2017), the World Bank (2016) and other international agencies, Roma people and families are severely affected by social and economic vulnerability, stemming from a complex set of factors that are interrelated. As a result, there is still a great deal of persistent inequality in the various European countries in terms of access to schooling and success in education by Roma individuals and families. Formal education is important for the social and cultural rights of individuals and is one of the main keys to entering the formal employment market and guaranteeing the basic conditions of survival. Despite the effects of some social and educational policies, the majority of Roma continue to have low levels of education and high rates of school failure, dropout and illiteracy and low rates of higher education graduates compared to non-Roma. Although there has been an increase in the educational attainment of European citizens, there are still persistent inequalities between Roma and non-Roma, exacerbated by gender inequalities as well, which greatly affect Roma women. Several recent researches (see e.g. Abajo and Carrasco 2004; Gamella 2011; D'Arcy 2012; Brüggemann 2012; Pasca 2014; Rostas and Kostka 2014; Bereményi and Carrasco 2015; Brüggemann and Friedman 2017) have shown in particular that continuity of school trajectories depends to a large extent on public policies and programmes, but also on other explanatory factors inherent to the individual, the type of support received from the family group, the presence of reference figures and role models and the importance of peers and institutional factors inherent to the functioning of the public school. In this context of discussion, it is important to understand the factors of success and school continuity, and even of social mobility, but also the reasons that account for the high rates of school dropout and failure.

Since the early years of this century, two institutional initiatives embodied in unprecedented State commitments have contributed to changing this scenario: On the one hand, the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015, the initiative of the Open

Society Institute (OSI), the World Bank (WB), and the European Union (EU).¹ Under this initiative, European governments undertook to eliminate discrimination against the Roma, focusing on the priority areas of education, employment, health and housing. More recently and due to the efforts of the European Parliament, through the European Strategy for the Integration of the Roma (European Parliament 2011), greater attention is given to the issue of the Roma people in various European countries, with each member state being compelled to produce national strategies for the integration of the Roma adapted to the reality of each country. These strategies particularly address four major axes: housing, education, employment and vocational training and health. This publication is inscribed in the midst of the full implementation of the European Strategy and the accompanying national strategies of some of the countries under review herein.

The indicators on illiteracy, early school leaving and low schooling levels shown by the Roma in European countries, in a general manner, continue to be a poignant and very alarming issue, justifying a discerning and in-depth eye on any opportunities that may arise. This implies greater political interest, recognition that we are dealing with a question of structural inequality very often allied to situations of poverty, segregation and social exclusion, and consequently more financial assistance for research as well as support to measures of empowerment of Roma individuals). Nevertheless, these dynamics of growing interest coexist with the reproduction of cycles of poverty, constraints that involve an inability to structurally confront the contributions towards economic and social empowerment without stereotypes or racism of diverse nature (but immensely worrying in the case of structural racism in which the social intervention agents and other social actors believe that those primarily responsible for the situation in which the Roma are found are the Roma themselves).

The difficulty in obtaining statistical data about Roma people in some countries, due to legal and other impediments, greatly limits the work of the researchers. Moreover, the actual academy has extra responsibilities in the “academic narratives” about the Roma, making this an even larger challenge in an international panorama marked by the growth of populism and extreme right-wing parties, by the intensifying governmentality incident on the Roma, and by the persistence of phobia and paranoia in relation to the Roma, primarily in Europe.

But despite the numerous historical attempts of assimilation, in Europe the Roma are not a homogenous and united group, rather portraying a plurality of historical trajectories, national and local policies and distinct modes of coexistence and interaction in relation to the non-Roma. They evince a heterogeneity of lifestyles, trajectories of life and representation in society, very much dependent on gender, position in their life cycle, how they are received and accepted within the majority society and possession of educational, social, economic and symbolic capital, among other aspects. This endeavour to de-homogenise and not essentialise the Roma is

¹The Decade followed the international conference “Roma in an Enlarged Europe: challenges in the future” organised in Budapest in 2003.

very evident in the literature and analysis of extremely divergent national realities, just as those portrayed here, the Finnish, British, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, Hungarian, Slovak and Russian. The different authors employ distinct theoretical and methodological approaches, however, with qualitative methods being dominant. The diversity of approaches should be noted in particular, with some texts being more theoretical, theoretical-empirical or empirical, using various scales and layers of analysis—neighbourhood, camp, region, country, international and transnational spheres.

In this book, the different texts demonstrate, on the one hand, the continuous reproduction of social inequalities in relation to the Roma and, on the other hand, the processes of change underway that reveal the challenges experienced by the Roma in relation to school, facing changes both from within and outside school. According to UNESCO (2009), inclusive school and education involves a process that seeks to respond to the diversity of needs and potentialities of each and every one of the students, through increased participation in learning processes and in the life of the educational community. However, its accomplishment is far from being completely materialised. Despite the existence of anti-discriminatory laws and policies, practices of separating children into specific schools and classes appear to have increased in Europe, by virtue of the intensification of migratory and refugee movements and flows. Segregation at school is a reality in Europe today, affecting not only children with disabilities, children of immigrant origin and institutionalised children but also Roma children (EU Fundamental Rights Agency 2017; Farkas 2014). This is an extremely serious form of discrimination and violation of the Rights of Children and Young People.² Indeed, we are witnessing a manifestation of injustice that perpetuates marginalisation, negatively and indelibly affecting the trajectory of life of these children. In this regard, the findings of the survey conducted in 2016 in nine member states by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) are illustrative. But segregation also happens inside the school premises, where Roma children can be relegated to specific and separate classes, being prevented from using common spaces such as playgrounds or canteens (FRA 2017). Further exacerbating this situation is the high number of Roma and traveller children attending special classes and year groups, where it should be highlighted that in some countries the probability of Roma children being enrolled in special classes is 27 times higher than that of non-Roma children (FRA 2017). This is highlighted in the texts that constitute the first part, Education Policies, Inclusion and Exclusion, and which portray such diverse realities in the UK, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Russia and Hungary. Hence, the social organisation of school is an excellent reflection of that of society in a broader sense, establishing a clear demarcation between educational and residential spaces for the Roma (Powell and Lever 2017), who move between spaces of relegation and almost cloistered circles.

²Article 28 1. States recognise the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunities.

The book is structured into three parts. The first part, subtitled *Education Policies, Inclusion and Exclusion*, includes six chapters on research developed in five countries: Russia, Romania, UK, Slovakia and Portugal. This part returns to the issues of difficulties, problems, barriers and discrimination and many other factors that were identified as influencers of the low educational attainment and success of the Roma in different geographical, social, economic and political contexts. Through the article by Zsuzsa Plainer we gain access to an understanding of the connectedness of school and employment and the thoughts and values that are attached to this by the Roma themselves. Plainer's ethnographic research in a Romanian urban Roma community describes a scenario—maybe too well known—where life priorities formulated by the Roma neglect the importance of schooling, and without proper incentives from the school or outside context, the school and education of children remains merely something of secondary importance to the members of the community. For this reason, a segregated school that is much more familiar to the children persists in being an alternative for Roma families with all its shortcomings: no access to resources, lower quality education and high turnover of teachers, just to name a few.

Likewise, the chapter by Pavel Kubanik highlights the importance of the community, showing how life in the Roma community and school activities are not independent of one another, but are linked through child agency despite the inflexible and hierarchy-dependent character of the school. Kubanik presents ethnographic data on how child-plays are able to act like agents of change in a local school, but also the community by contributing to the socialisation of the Roma children with a school environment that in some cases even contributes to the strengthening of ethnic barriers (i.e. use of Slovak as the language of communication).

Carol Rogers' chapter presents a critical reflection on the educational experience of Roma children in the UK, from the perspective of whether they have inclusive learning opportunities or whether, as in other areas of their lives, they face situations of exclusion and disadvantage. Using country-level statistics, Attila Z. Papp and Eszter Neumann propose a typology of resilient and irresilient schools and then compare the performance indicators of the pupils in the two school types. Based on their findings, the authors formulated three hypotheses that also are worth replicating in other contexts. Firstly, the data show that resilient schools are more likely to be found in smaller settlements where the segregating effect of school choice can be avoided. Moreover, resilient schools are located more in the proximity of the capital and not in areas/regions where the percentage of Roma pupils is high. Secondly, the higher the rate of Roma students, the more likely the school will be irresilient. But an important aspect needs to be highlighted here, because when the school and teachers' characteristics are taken into account, and not only the social background of the Roma students, then the significant effect of the percentage of Roma students loses its explanatory power and the school becomes more resilient. And last but not least, tests were done on whether intervention and development programmes do or do not have an effect, with the result being that Roma-targeted programmes in schools might have had negative effects, meaning that these types of interventions in schools where the percentage of Roma pupils is high do not contribute to improving school skills.

The chapter authored by Manuela Mendes and Olga Magano presents in detail the policy context of the education of Portuguese Roma (Ciganos) combined with the findings of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with representatives of Roma communities. It is shown that regardless of the policies implemented, there is always a need for a closer follow-up of the effects of the implementation and new approaches in policymaking. The impact of schooling and education on the professional life of the Roma is not perceived as being influential; so, that might require a new approach from the interventions. Additionally, it is highlighted that it is important to take into account the specific informal educational strategies applied in Roma communities, which define the socialisation of Roma children.

A distinctive argument is presented in Jekateryna Dunajeva's article, but from a historical point of view, as the reader is taken back to the early Soviet Union period when policies harshly intervened in identity politics in different domains of life, including education. Dunajeva presents a case study based on the example of school textbooks, showing how reconfiguration of Roma identity took place at a discursive level in the Soviet nativisation policy. This chapter emphasises paradoxical situations in the education of Roma throughout, once again underlining that independently of the historical period (these are cases that occurred at a distance of almost a century) the policies and programmes targeted at the Roma aim at "normalising" and "civilising" those marginal and marginalised.

The second part, which focuses essentially on "Obstacles and Key Factors for the Continuity of Education", involves four chapters seeking to discern different factors that could contribute to increase the school paths of Roma children and young people.

The chapter written by Stefánia Toma examines the outside school context in order to detect broader societal factors that in well-defined contexts might contribute to the improvement of the school participation of Roma children. Toma uses survey data comparing the educational data of different student cohorts that had different experiences. First, she finds that a community intervention not related to the immediate school environment and which targeted preschool children living in the segregated Roma community was able to act like a positive model-creating environment. Further, the engagement of Roma families in international migration and the use of remittances (spending directly or indirectly on schooling) also had a positive effect on the school presence of Roma children. While these two factors (NGO intervention and migration) differ considerably in their nature (one is an influence that comes from outside the community, and the second is dependent on family motivations and decisions), opportunities and possibilities were created that were creatively channelled towards improving the children's education, contributing to the empowerment of the local community.

Along similar lines, Marko Stenroos and Jenni Helakorpi present the results of research in which they gave voice to multiple actors involved in the education of Roma children in Finland. They highlight the need to not only focus on the Roma as individuals or as a group in the education system, but to also shift the scrutiny to the structures of the education system. Practices in education both privilege certain pupils and exclude others through systems such as othering and racism. In the

analysis of Roma schooling, it is important to analyse societal forces (mainstream society) and community forces (local Roma communities) affecting the education of Roma children.

Magano and Mendes return with another account of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of Portuguese policies aimed at the integration of Ciganos, taking stock of the factors that define the educational trajectories of Cigano youth. These trajectories are not only intertwined with public policies and intervention, but are also associated with the (re)configuration of identity construction processes. The authors conclude that continuity in the school participation of Roma youth in Portugal is highly dependent on public policies and programmes, but contextual factors inherent to the community and individual must also be taken into consideration.

The last chapter in this part focuses on a specific case study, located in Portugal. Lurdes Nicolau presents the outcome of research developed in the Portuguese northeast region of Trás-os-Montes in which it is found that notwithstanding the Cigano population's progress in terms of schooling, it remains insufficient and far from complying with mandatory schooling, similar to that observed in the rest of the country. The author recognises the positive impact of some policies such as Social Insertion Income, but teachers indicate various underlying difficulties, such as the lack of attendance of pre-primary school, the inadequate support and scant interest shown by the parents concerning school. The evidence also points to the inability to ensure the children's follow-up and the cultural distance in relation to school, reflected in early school leaving especially at puberty.

The last part of the book, *Education Strategies: Success and social mobility vs. Reproduction of Inequalities*, focuses on the identification of innovative educational strategies that could boost school success and social mobility and/or, conversely, could contribute to the continued reproduction of social inequalities.

Andria Timmer and Máté Erős's chapter starts this part bringing new arguments and views from a multidisciplinary angle of alternative ways to empower Roma children and improve educational attainment. Inspirationally combining ethnographic and philosophical approaches, the two authors present a new model of organising education for Roma children that was implemented in Hungary. Choosing one school as a case study, the authors demonstrate that by selecting the right educational strategies and methods, the dualistic and many times paradoxical nature of education (that the academic literature discuss extensively) can be overcome.

The second chapter of this part comes from the context of another country and raises the question of whether available social capital of members of vulnerable groups might have an impact on the educational attainment of youth, examining factors lying outside the immediate school environment. Lazar and Baciu used qualitative methodology in their investigation on the effects of social capital among Roma students. Their results highlighted—in line with the literature on social capital theory—that different forms of social capital might have an impact though in different ways depending on the prevailing social context, but all in all it might contribute to improvements in educational attainment.

The chapter by la Rosa and Andreau argues strongly for the need to fill the gaps in research on the Roma's participation in education. Following a brief overview of the

Spanish literature—both academic and policy—and insights from the international literature on the educational situation of the Roma, these authors underline the need to give more attention to the Roma’s participation in higher education. They identify several issues related to this topic, at the same time stressing the difficulties in doing this type of research. First of all, in many cases there is merely anecdotal evidence of the continuous presence of Roma youth in higher education and academia. Less research has been done, partly due to the “invisibility” of the Roma youth at this level, as they rather prefer to conceal their identity. For the authors—and likewise for some of the other authors of this book—the importance of focusing on the presence of the Roma in higher education and on their achievements would act like a counterforce producing some kind of equilibrium in the widespread approach to Roma education, which mostly focuses on negative aspects, like dropout rates, underachievement, failure and so on, and in this way contributes to undermine the positive aspects.

The last chapter, written by Judit Durst and Ábel Bereményi, comes as an immediate response to the needs formulated in the previous chapter, as they convey strong arguments, this time also empirical, based on the findings of long-term ethnographic fieldwork, of the importance of investigating and trying to understand the upward social and educational mobility of Roma youth. In their inquiry, the authors present in detail what the costs and gains of this upward mobility are for persons coming from a highly stigmatised minority group. Their approach is centred on the concept of “ethnic capital” and the strategies employed to effectively use ethnic capital to mitigate the psychological consequences that would hinder social mobility, as described in the international literature. Later, the authors bring in “resilience capital”, which together with ethnic capital, not only contributes to the successful mobility of the Roma, but is also a constitutive part of a “new ethnicity” that socially mobile Roma deploy and that is characterised by double rootedness.

This book takes the reader on an inversed timeline. It begins with glimpses into the—hopefully positive—future of the Roma in higher education, which merits being discussed no longer in terms of “future”, but as a domain in educational research that has not yet been sufficiently explored but definitely conceals promising insights. Then accounts of factors more or less outside the immediate school environment are considered, all worth being taken into account by policymakers. And finally, several texts follow which critically examine policy measures that either had positive effects to some extent and in certain contexts, or need to be fully reconsidered, as they ignore important aspects related to being a member of a mostly stigmatised and discriminated minority in Europe.

In sum, this book aims to discuss this social reality from a multidisciplinary and transversal point of view, sharing knowledge and practices in different countries. Accordingly, we appealed to the participation of researchers who share analyses with diverse paradigms of analysis and methodologies, but which certainly contribute to broaden our knowledge about the articulations of families, individuals, school and public policies in our societies.

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