

MEMO

To: Serbia Office, Roma Education Fund

From: Allison Reefer, European Roma Rights Centre

Date: 2/10/15

Subject: Empowering Roma Girls in Pčinja District, Serbia Through Secondary School Scholarships

Executive Summary

Roma girls in Serbia face many disadvantages in society: Often, they are not able to complete their education, cannot work outside the home, and face issues such as domestic violence and even child marriage. Education for these girls is especially important, giving them economic and social opportunities that would be otherwise unavailable, but only 7% of Roma girls have completed upper secondary education. We propose that Roma Education Fund (REF), with support from the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), establishes a pilot program in Pčinja District for a secondary school scholarship that caters to Roma girls and will fund their education and incentivize their parents to allow their daughters to stay in school.

Background

Roma in Serbia

The estimated 600,000 Roma in Serbia are one of the country's most marginalized groups. Around 78% of Serbian Roma live below the national poverty line.¹ They often lack proper housing, face high amounts of discrimination, and do not have access to social services.² While Roma face many problems in society, a lack of adequate and quality education is the most prevalent.³ Only 12% of Roma children finish secondary school in Serbia and almost none go on to higher education, while around 90% of non-Roma have at least completed some form of secondary education, most finishing high school.⁴ This leads to unemployment or an inability to find jobs in the formal sector. About 70% of employed Roma have jobs in the informal sector.⁵

Education for Roma Girls

Roma girls fare far worse: 30% have had no formal education at all, 35% have only finished primary school, and 27% have only finished lower secondary.⁶ Roma girls face discrimination in education for several reasons. Girls are often pulled out of school in order to help their mothers with household chores and childcare. Roma girls and women also face a disadvantage in employment, due to both societal expectations and a lack of education. About 85% of Roma women, ages 15-64, have had no employment experience.⁷ Generally, the women are expected to take care of the children and the households. Many girls are married as child brides, a practice that hinders both their education and their employment. Around 14% of Roma girls in Serbia were married before age 15, and almost half were married between the ages of 15 and 18.⁸ Girls who marry early are also more likely to face domestic abuse, contract sexually transmitted diseases, and die during childbirth.

Educating Roma girls is important because it can lead to greater job opportunities, more economic growth in the Roma community, and reduced instances of child marriage. While scholarships are already often used to encourage Roma children to stay in school, an emphasis needs to be placed on educating Roma girls, especially through both lower and upper secondary school.

Recommendation

We propose that the Roma Education Fund (REF) provide scholarships specifically for Roma girls to continue and complete their education.⁹ These scholarships would give money to the girls during lower and upper secondary school because that is the period when most girls are

taken out of school. Secondary school scholarships can provide an incentive for Roma families to continue sending their girls to school, as well as provide a supplementary income to make up for the loss in labor. These scholarships should cover any school costs, and additional money should be given so that the families can receive a small stipend for living expenses, in place of keeping their daughters at home to work, do chores, or marry.

The scholarship will cover education costs. While school is free in Serbia, most students must buy textbooks and other school supplies, which can be costly. Roma often need tutoring to help bridge the culture and language gaps that exist in the classroom, so money will be provided for tutoring. Roma girls also tend to lack adequate clothing for school, which can isolate them from their classmates and make the learning environment more difficult. Some of this scholarship money would pay for new clothes, which may help with school absence and ostracizing from classmates. Transportation to and from school is also difficult for Roma, so REF should ensure that transportation costs are covered through the scholarship. Through monitoring by REF, teachers, and school administrators, we should be able to ensure that the money is used properly. The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) will help with the implementation and funding of this project.

This scholarship program will be a pilot program in Pčinja District, which has the largest Roma population in Serbia. The pilot program will be used to evaluate the effectiveness and the impact of the scholarship before it can be expanded to other parts of the country. The REF project implementers will use teacher evaluations and school administration recommendations and nominations as part of the selection process for the scholarship recipients. Recipients must be a girl of Roma ethnicity, be entering or already attending secondary school, and be in a lower income bracket. While grades will be taken into account, other factors such as character, discipline, and ambition will be considered when choosing recipients. The implementers should interview candidates before selecting the final recipients. At least one recipient should be chosen from each secondary school (lower and upper).

If this program proves effective, REF and ERRC can work together to encourage government funding and participation, as well as an expansion of the program. In the long term, providing scholarships for Roma girls to continue and complete their education can lead to better employment opportunities, reduced poverty, less discrimination, and fewer instances of child marriage within Roma communities.

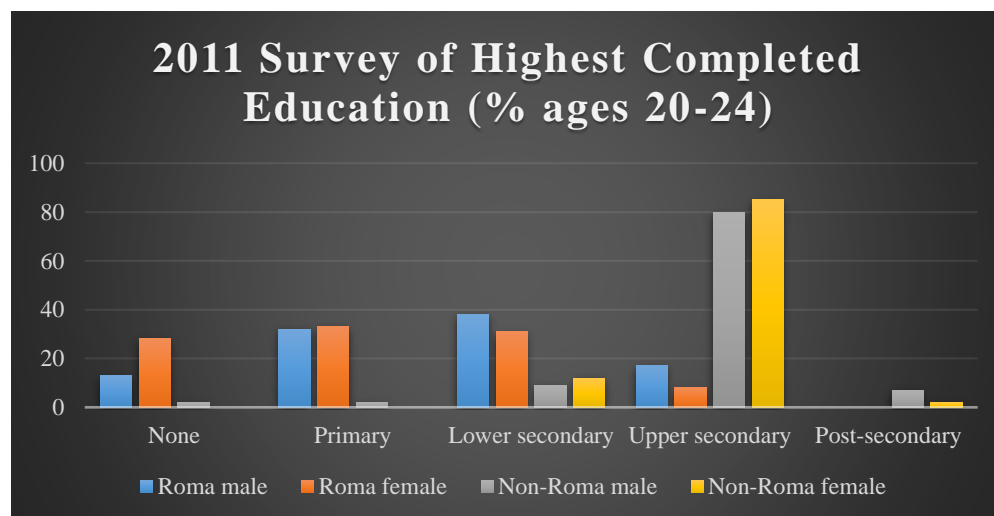
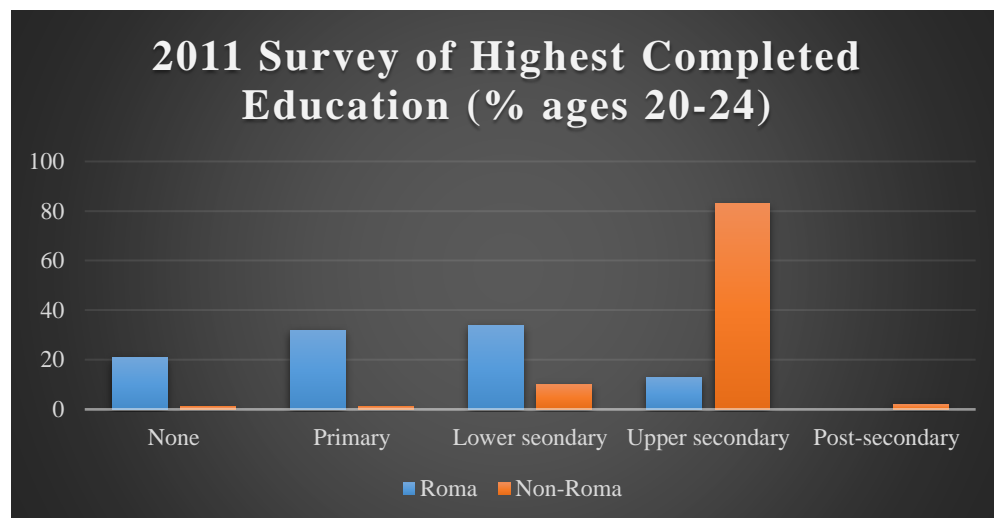
Limitations

While funding for the scholarships will not be hard to obtain for one district, further funding for expansion might be difficult; however, with support from ERRC, the European Union, and other groups with an interest in helping Roma communities, REF should be able to find outside support and work to eventually include the Serbian government.

Another problem might be a lack of trust from Roma communities. For that reason, the REF representatives should be people who have already built trust with the Serbian Roma groups and are familiar with both the culture and the language.

While concerns might exist as far as how the recipients' families use the stipend money, the greater goal is to provide money to incentivize them to keep their daughters in school; for the purposes of this program, there will not be any restrictions or stipulations as to how the stipend is used.

Appendix A: Roma Education Completion Levels¹⁰



¹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2012). "Roma data." *UNDP in Europe and Central Asia*. Retrieved from <http://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/rbec/en/home/ourwork/overview.html>.

² Gruber, A. (2012). "Reclaiming Roma Students in Hungary." *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 21(3), 34-36. Retrieved from

<http://search.ebscohost.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ997000&site=ehost-live>.

³ Greenburg, Jack. (May 2010) "Report on Roma Education Today: From Slavery to Segregation and Beyond." *Columbia Law Review*, 110(4), 919-1001. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27806640>.

⁴ UNDP, 2012.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (2012). "Child marriage." *Republic of Serbia*. Retrieved from <http://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/unfpa%20serbia%20summary.pdf>.

⁹ Alexandre, M. and Bercus, C. (2007). "The Roma Education Fund: A New Tool for Roma Inclusion." *European Education*, 39(1), 64-80. Retrieved from

<http://search.ebscohost.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ769942&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁰ UNDP, 2012.