



Excluded voices: Kosovo Roma children and their right to education

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Abstract: Kosovo Roma children and their right to education during times of emerging crisis represent the black swan of COVID-19 and distance learning. There is a disparity between the theory and the practice of the Kosovar government to provide equal learning opportunities to Roma children.

Roma children and the right to equal and proper education are the two other ends of the spectrum. Exposed from one risk to another, Roma children had already [recorded](#) poor educational inclusion even before online learning. Times of crisis, such as COVID-19, intensified their deprived access to education recalling it as an everlasting challenge.

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Child ([CRC](#)), Article 28, every child has the right to proper and equal education, and any act that prohibits their educational participation is a violation of this right. Because times of crisis aid the exacerbation of human rights violations, we can ask if the times of crisis put on display governments' lack of preparedness for transparent and inclusive reactions or if they disclose the truth behind the government's lack of responsibility for [vulnerable groups](#).

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UNESCO reports that the COVID-19 crisis marked an educational collision for approximately [90 percent](#) of the world's students, affecting mostly children from vulnerable groups, for example, Roma children, being the most affected and the most socially isolated and digitally excluded.

Roma children and access to education during the COVID-19 lockdown in Kosovo

The biggest challenges faced by the Roma community during the lockdown in Kosovo were poor access to healthcare and distance learning due to the worsening economic conditions. As a response to the shutting down of schools due to the pandemic lockdown, the local governments (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation in Kosovo in cooperation with the Municipal Directorate for Education) initiated the start of distance learning lessons which were organised as video lectures released on Kosovo's [Public Radio Television](#).

However, research conducted by [Trupia & Madhi](#) on post-pandemic education in Western Balkans with a focus on Kosovo's national minorities, concluded that there was discrimination towards the Roma community from Kosovo's government as they did not include the Romani language when releasing the recorded classes in national TV programs.

The official website of the Ministry of Education in Kosovo published instructions and documents regarding the access to online platform 'Zoom' and instructions for the official online channel for access to online lectures from 1st to 9th grade, but none of these instructions was provided in Romani language. This furthermore exacerbated the opportunities for children from vulnerable groups – those living in poor or rural areas – to continue [their education](#).

Additionally, the Ministry of Education drafted guidelines to assist educational institutions but it is unknown whether these guidelines reached all teachers and schools or how they were implemented with children from vulnerable groups, as not all marginalised groups, such as the Roma community, were [included](#) in these supporting measures. They also failed to record the data on Roma children's inclusion in online learning during the lockdown, thus, implementing [discriminatory practices](#) for Roma children.

Moreover, the Kosovar government failed to show sufficient effort in providing financial support for Roma children's access to online lectures. The government was supposed to provide 3000-5000 technological pieces of equipment as planned from the governmental budget to children in vulnerable situations, however, 400 minority children were not provided with technological support, and as a result, were deprived of the opportunity to participate in online lectures that became [unachievable](#).

The importance to implement the CRC framework at the national level

The CRC and its Optional Protocols are central to children's rights law and related protection. From this perspective, the realisation of the right to education as enshrined in international treaties must be considered in light of the social, cultural, economic, political, legal and [educational factors](#) that support or impede it.

The UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child proclaims in the [Preamble](#) that 'mankind owes to the child the best it has to give', and states in Principle 7 that education 'shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages', [echoing](#) Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UDHR](#)). The subsequently adopted CRC clarifies children's right to education and is also predetermined to embody the general principles of non-discrimination and equality of children's rights as reflected in various provisions of the treaty.

In countries where the CRC has been incorporated in the Constitution and the national legislative framework, such as in Kosovo, a commitment to the realisation of the rights of children and young people is strongly [expected](#). However, the Kosovar government's *de jure* and *de facto* actions for Roma children's education during the COVID-19 lockdown resulted in differences to a greater extent. The Ministry of Education and the government proclaimed that they included and respected the right to education for all children equally, while the absence of Roma children in online lectures during the pandemic was skyrocketing.

Roma children at the margins: stigmatisation in education

The stigma that Roma children face within education is entirely dependent upon social, economic and political power. The stigmatising process begins with the labelling of the educational differences and associating these differences in academic ability with the established Gypsy stereotype (i.e., a widely spread and essentialist belief about the Roma community labelling them with negative, hence offensive adjectives mainly due to their skin colour). Then, the physical and symbolic separation of the Roma children from the rest confirms the low status of the Roma child in the society, hence serves to justify discrimination.

This causes irreparable harm to the Roma children, being raised with a 'stigma of inferiority' indicating that they are denied equal life opportunities, equal education and the [benefits](#) of studying in a multicultural society.

Children's right to education is threatened during emergencies, and a crisis will always leave an impact on education in one way or another. Specifically, children in low-income countries are [most vulnerable](#) to such situations.

Online learning revealed how the COVID-19 crisis has increased social and economic inequalities within schools. It is [estimated](#) that 80-95 percent of Roma children did not have the technical equipment needed to participate in online learning, they were the most out-of-reach students from teacher contact, and they had lower participation than their non-Roma peers. All of these issues will have long-term negative consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated Roma's exposure to all existing forms of social and structural inequality.

Looking ahead

The unpredicted outburst of the pandemic resulted to reveal the pre-existing learning gaps of Roma children, hence shaping these gaps into stigmatisation. The latter will have longitudinal consequences on Roma children's educational

development and, if no awareness is raised by the government itself, these children's right to education will remain at the end of the spectrum. Therefore, the policy decisions made today will determine whether millions of children will be able to reach their full potential or left to face a future of worsening [inequality and marginalisation](#), hence determining the world we will see tomorrow. On this account, it is of high importance to keep raising awareness of the marginalisation that the Roma children have experienced from the Kosovar government that was predetermined to protect them, because, as [Frederick Douglass](#) rightly stated, 'it is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men'.