

Water and Stigma: School shower programs for Roma children in Eastern and Central Europe

Many Roma communities in Eastern and Central Europe face widespread stigmatization. They are often perceived to be lazy, dishonest, unclean, criminal, and stupid. Roma children experience at least one facet of this stigmatization in schools, where their peers and teachers view them to be dirty and smelly. In some municipalities in Poland¹, Slovenia², Italy³, Hungary⁴, and Romania⁵, schools have implemented shower programs to encourage or even require Roma children to bathe before entering the classroom. These programs, and the stigma that prompts them, are symptoms of glaring deprivations of the Roma community's rights to access to safe water and sanitation, human dignity, and education. Access to safe water should not be an entry condition for access to education, another fundamental right.

Programs such as these, which target children because they are Roma, have the unintended effect of further stigmatization by identifying them as a person who is, in fact, too dirty to enter the classroom without a bath. They communicate that the child is dirty because they chose not to wash, when in reality the child may be deprived of their right to safe water. Discriminatory attitudes are entrenched, not weakened, by stigmatizing policies. Initiatives designed to reduce the stigma that Roma children face in schools should seek to address the negative attitudes and beliefs that contribute to the discrimination they face.

Roma communities often operate beyond the boundaries of the formal economy and experience serious barriers to accessing state amenities such as proof of legal identity, utilities, social services, and education. A 2006 UNDP study estimated that 25% of Roma households in Southeast Europe lived in dilapidated houses or shacks⁶. Roma often live in informal settlements, established on public land that is usually not designated for that purpose. Often the settlements are next to municipal rubbish dumps, railway depots or stray animal pounds. Municipal utilities do not extend to these unregistered camps, and in cold weather other sources of water become impractical. Informal Roma communities in Central and Eastern Europe often lack household water sources^{7 8}, relying on one or two communal water points for all inhabitants. Even in more formal housing situations, Roma families can be subjected to shared facilities and sporadic access to water.

Barriers to accessing water for bathing in these communities include inadequate sources of water (in informal communities, this means too few communal water points for the population they serve) and inadequate housing

¹ Schafft, G. *Roma in Hungary Today*, Anthropology News, 2011. <http://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2011/10/03/roma-in-hungary-today/> Accessed January 21, 2012.

² Department of State. Human Rights Report: Slovenia, US Government, 2010. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/eur/154451.htm> Accessed January 21, 2012.

³ adnkronosinternational.Italy: School eyes 'showers' for Roma Gypsy pupils. <http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/English/CultureAndMedia/?id=3.0.3093861278>. Accessed January 21, 2012.

⁴ Kadet, E. *Creative accounting: State spending on programmes for Roma in Hungary*. European Roma Rights Centre, 2001. <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=1748> Accessed January 21, 2012.

⁵ Jacqueline Bhabha, after conversations with partners on a research trip to Bucharest, Romania in 2011.

⁶ UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth for Independent States. *At Risk: Roma and the Displaced in Southeast Europe*, 2006. <http://europeandcis.undp.org/home/show/1F1720E9-F203-1EE9-BC7AE7B9E8FA04E4>. Accessed January 23, 2012.

⁷ The Open Society Foundations. *Roma Health Mediators*. New York, NY: Open Society Foundations, 2011. http://www.soros.org/initiatives/health/focus/roma/articles_publications/publications/roma-health-mediators-20111026/roma-health-mediators-20111022.pdf Accessed January 21, 2012.

⁸ Fundacion Secretariado Gitano, eds. *Health and the Roma Community*, Madrid, Spain: FSG, 2009. ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=4309&langId=en. Accessed January 21, 2012

that restricts the ability to heat water in cold weather for bathing purposes. Extreme poverty may prevent some families from purchasing personal hygiene products.

If schools are interested in establishing policies to promote personal hygiene, including for Roma children and adolescents, alternative options exist. These include encouraging all children to shower in school facilities following any physical education classes or after school sports activities, making showers available for any child who wishes to use them without making specific requirements for children with particular characteristics.

Access to safe water for children should be ensured at home. Improving access to safe water for Roma communities may be obtained by policies that seek to:

- Promote access to adequate housing, which includes acceptable supplies of water
- Increase the number of water points available in Roma settlements (both formal/informal)
- Facilitate safe storage of water within households that have no running water
- Housing modifications that allow for or promote heating water for bathing purposes (ventilation, fuel sources)
- Make safer options for heating water available (electric stoves or water heaters rather than wood or coal stoves or oil heaters)
- Facilitate access to municipal utilities, which may be difficult to access because of administrative barriers because of citizenship status or lack of proper identification
- Create additional drop-in centers where Roma and other low-income individuals can take choose to showers, wash clothes, and access other social services⁹.

⁹ Valentina Romania. <http://www.valentina-romania.ro/en/hygiene>. Accessed January 21, 2012.