2020

Women in Poverty

Access to Education

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EQUINET
European Network of Equality Bodies
The right to education belongs to the human rights catalogue and is a fundamental tool for achieving goals such as non-discrimination and equal opportunities for women and men. However, research, statistics and complaints received by equality bodies in Europe, show that gender discrimination and bullying based on gender is still largely happening in schools. It is thus essential to put emphasis on the root of the matter and tackle gender inequalities that young girls face, already in their early years of life, in education. Nondiscrimination in education is particularly relevant, as this is a place where girls can learn either...

“...In countries with a high level of school enrolment of girls, those who leave the educational system the earliest, without any qualification, are among the most vulnerable in the labour market.”

Beijing Platform of Action - Women in Poverty
how important equality is or experience discrimination for the first time. Education must start with young girls, so that information is passed on from an early age and girls grow up feeling empowered and equal. Despite the overall higher success rates of girls and women in terms of educational outcomes and higher education, recent statistical figures show that women remain at greater risk of social exclusion, unemployment and low-quality jobs in the EU.

Gender equality has not been reached and traditional gender roles and stereotypes can still be found in textbooks and teaching material. School curricula do not always reflect enough on gender equality. When choosing vocational training, girls and boys still follow different paths based on the stereotypical perception of their gender roles. At the same time, the digital transition and digitisation of the economy and labour market, means that today 90% of jobs require basic digital skills, where women represent only 17% of people in ICT studies and careers in the EU, and only 36% of STEM graduates.

Poverty leads women to even more frequent instances of discrimination, and this is especially visible in schooling. Millions of girls have poor quality education and are not meeting even minimum levels of knowledge, skills or opportunities needed for a productive or fulfilling life.
Depending on various criteria (age, religion, ethnicity etc.), young girls, Roma women, women with disabilities, migrant women etc. are even more likely to struggle in obtaining proper education, skills and opportunities, due to additional obstacles such as literacy, segregation, the level of education or training opportunities.

The segregated education of Roma children remains a crucial, discriminatory practice in several schools and is a perpetual problem of the Croatian, Czech, Hungarian, Slovak or Serbian education systems to name a few. The Fundación Secretariado Gitano as an example, has highlighted that it still considers antigypsyism in the classroom in Spain to be high. The Eurobarometer on Discrimination of the European Commission shows that 55% of the people surveyed in Spain would feel uncomfortable or quite uncomfortable if their sons and daughters went to school with Roma companions.

Roma girls and women also face other trouble in obtaining proper education and having access to equal opportunities in education.
Several Roma pupils and students struggle in accessing books and libraries. Furthermore, many Roma students work to afford their education, and as such have little time left for completing homework and proper studying, aside from already juggling a part-time job.

Migrant girls, Muslim girls or girls with other religions and belief systems may also face the risk of segregation or other forms of discrimination in school, prohibiting them from having equal learning opportunities. Equality bodies have, for example, previously dealt with cases of segregation of men and women at universities for religious reasons.
NEW RISKS IMPLIED BY THE COVID-19 CRISIS FOR WOMEN IN POVERTY

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the role played by socio-economic status in access to proper education. Women and girls with a lower socio-economic status have been disproportionately affected during the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of schools closing, the digitalisation of education and classes moving online.

During the lockdown, women and girls in poverty have been more likely to lag behind in studying at home or participating in online classes, without having proper equipment such as a laptop or the proper resources such as access to internet or a library. UN data shows that women and girls are also at a particular risk of dropping out and not returning to school once the health crisis is over, due to the care work burden that they are now facing, as they are forced to take on more house chores than before during the lockdown.

The lockdown measures imposed in response to the health crisis have also complicated obtaining textbooks and other learning materials, usually available in libraries, as a result of their
temporary closing. The **transition to online classes and online teaching** has led several schools to only send assignments by email and teach through video conferences, refusing to provide alternative materials for girls without the necessary digital equipment or access to internet. In the Czech Republic, a student had contacted their school to request information about the current format of teaching and classes. However, the school only provided online instructions and told the student to buy Internet data and a computer, even though the student did not have enough funds.

The situation has been even more severe for girls with disabilities, who may not only have no access to a computer, or if they do, **may not be able to obtain accessible digital teaching materials** and as such have been left behind.

The COVID-19 crisis has also revealed huge **age/gender inequalities in terms of financial literacy and digital literacy**, which result from the lack of access of women to financial education (usually considered a “man’s” responsibility) and digital upskilling to keep up with the rapid digitization of our working and living environments. With their lower pension, **older women face bigger challenges than men to cover the costs related to IT equipment**, internet connection, and software needed to access services online, putting them in a very difficult situation when, due to lockdown measures, services became only available online, including doctor’s visits or request for social support.

Many Roma students have **lost their jobs and as such can no longer finance their education**. Future students also risk not having the capacity to meet the costs of education due to the predicted, long-term, socio-economic effects of the health crisis.
School closures and home schooling has proven extra difficult for some migrant and Roma parents who themselves have poor literacy skills and as such find it hard to support their children in their schoolwork. As mothers are more likely to care for and support children at home, Roma women have been particularly impacted. Accessing online resources, while lacking digital phones, computers or internet has proven to be another big obstacle for Roma pupils and students.

Many Traveller and Roma families are living in areas with poor or no broadband, and the cost where it is available is prohibitive. As such, many Roma girls have had limited, or in most cases, complete lack of IT equipment necessary to keep in touch with school and college and submit their work.

Such gaps in knowledge may have detrimental effects on Roma children. The inability to attend online lessons for a longer period of time means that Roma children will lag behind their classmates in the level of knowledge possessed. As a consequence, Roma children, especially girls, are more likely to drop out of school. Cultural norms mean that, already now, many Roma girls leave the educational system early, to carry out adolescent marriages, under the age of 16.

Schools play another important role for many girls and women. They can serve as a safe haven for vulnerable girls and women, who otherwise face abuse and poverty at home. As a result of schools shutting down, many girls have had to return home to help their families or have become unpaid domestic workers. Such circumstances, along with the societal norms which form lower expectations for girls in terms of education, have further increased discouragement among girls and young women, to continue their education and reach for success,
with more pressure from their parents to drop out of school, enter the labour market or get married.