

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Roma: Discrimination starts with primary education**

*Children do not come to school because they do not have clothes or a sandwich to bring to school.*

A teacher in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina

*It is too crowded to do any work at home.*

A Romani child attending the Macinec primary school in Croatia

*Romani children are not interested in physics or mathematics; they may learn Spanish, because they watch a lot of telenovelas.*

A teacher in an elementary school in the Dolenjska region, Slovenia

Extreme poverty, discrimination in schools, and the lack of truly inclusive and multicultural curricula prevent Romani children in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia from enjoying their right to education. Amnesty International's latest report focuses on the exclusion of Romani children from primary education in these three countries and on the failure so far of the governments to address their needs.

"The barriers Romani children face in accessing education deprive them of the chance of fulfilling their true potential and perpetuate the marginalization of Romani communities," said Omer Fisher, Amnesty International's researcher on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia.

"Tackling these barriers to education is the responsibility of governments."

The rights to education and to be free from discrimination are enshrined in international human rights law and in the constitutions of the three countries featured in the report. Their governments have adopted special programmes and action plans aimed at the inclusion of the Romani population in education. However, governments and non-governmental organizations alike admit that access to education for Romani children is partial at best.

Free meals, textbooks and transportation are sometimes provided to Romani children. But just getting to school can be impossible when the school is too far to reach on foot and your clothes are not warm enough to cope with a bitter winter. Children are often unable to study or do homework in cold, overcrowded homes. As members of the Romani community in Slovenia told Amnesty International, "Some of us live in huts. How can the children do well at school?"

Romani children are in some cases discriminated against by their own teachers. Sometimes, children are

segregated into "Roma only" groups or classes and are offered a reduced curriculum. Negative stereotypes about the Roma's "way of life" or attitude towards education are often used to explain poor school attendance and grades. Teachers at Macinec primary school in Croatia used the following arguments in a court submission to explain their decision to segregate Romani children: "Romani parents are frequently alcoholics, their children are prone to stealing, cursing and fighting, and as soon as the teachers turn their backs things go missing, usually insignificant and useless objects, but the important thing is to steal".

It is generally acknowledged by teachers, Romani children and parents, that many of the difficulties Romani children encounter in primary schools are due to linguistic barriers. Many Romani children have no or limited command of the language spoken by the majority population. At present, the languages spoken by Roma are virtually absent from schools of the three countries, unlike other minority languages. Other measures that could help overcoming language obstacles, such as improving access to pre-school education for Romani children and the employment of suitably trained Romani teaching assistants, have not been implemented in a systematic and comprehensive way. Romani culture and history in general are not included in a systematic way in curricula in the schools of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia.

"The authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia must adopt an approach to the education of Romani children based on their integration into a school system that adapts to their needs and culture," Omer Fisher said.

Amnesty International is calling for immediate action to confront discrimination against Roma in schools by ensuring that no Romani children are placed in special classes or groups simply because they are Roma, by monitoring the composition of classes and, where needed, the activities of teachers working with Roma, and by providing training to primary school teachers aimed at eliminating negative stereotypes and prejudices.

Tackling obstacles in access to education which are the result of extreme poverty, and including Romani language and culture in schools are parts of a long-term process which should be aimed at the full inclusion of Romani children in primary education.

"Romani children, like all other children, have the right to an education that will empower them to take their place in and contribute to the society of the country they live in," Omer Fisher said.

"It is the responsibility of the governments to break the vicious cycle of illiteracy, poverty and marginalization and to integrate the most vulnerable part of their populations."

**See:**

*False start: The exclusion of Romani children from primary education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia* (AI Index: EUR 05/002/2006) <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur050022006>  
*Bosnia and Herzegovina: Roma and the right to education Factsheet* (AI Index: EUR 63/014/2006) <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur630142006>  
*Croatia: The Roma and the right to education Factsheet* (AI Index: EUR 64/001/2006) <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur640012006>  
*Slovenia: Roma and the right to education Factsheet* (AI Index: EUR 68/002/2006) <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur680022006>

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