Xenophobia and Structural Violence: Barriers to Education for Roma Youth

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Abstract
The European Roma, more commonly referred to as Gypsies, are a severely persecuted minority population, even to this day. They have been victims of xenophobia and structural violence for centuries. This has led to segregation in nearly all aspects of their life, from housing to medical care to employment to education; the latter is the focus of this paper. Roma children are often forced into segregated schools, or into special/remedial programs. This paper looks at issues that have led to such an educational dichotomy, and the negative impact they have had on the Roma. The paper also looks at the perpetuating cycle that these educational issues are feeding.

Keywords
Roma, Romani, Gypsy, Gypsi, xenophobia, structural violence, education, primary education, human rights, segregation, Europe

Cover Page Footnote
I would like to thank Dr. William (Doug) Smith for inspiring me to write the original version of this paper for his course on human rights. I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to Dr. Robin Smith for working closely with me on molding this paper for inclusion in this journal. Her insight, encouragement and suggestions are always treasured. Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Misty Weitzel, Dr. Isidore Lobnibe and Mrs. Camila Gabaldón for their support through this process.

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Xenophobia and Structural Violence: Barriers to Education for Roma Youth

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The European Roma, more commonly referred to as Gypsies, are a severely persecuted minority population, even to this day. They have been victims of xenophobia and structural violence for centuries. This has led to segregation in nearly all aspects of their lives, from housing to medical care to employment to education; the latter is the focus of this paper. Roma children are often forced into segregated schools, or into special/remedial programs. This paper looks at issues that have led to such an educational dichotomy, and the negative impact they have had on the Roma. The paper also looks at the perpetuating cycle that these educational issues are feeding.

Keywords: Roma, Romani, Gypsy, Gypsi, xenophobia, structural violence, education, primary education, human rights, segregation, Europe

Just because I come from Roma camp on the hill
They put me in a school for mentally ill
[...]All their lies about Roma
A verse from Break the Spell by Gogol Bordello, a self-identified Gypsy punk band

Introduction

The Roma, more commonly known as Gypsies, remain the most widely disadvantaged minority in Europe. People throughout the world have a stereotypical image in their minds when thinking of Gypsies. For some, that image may be positive and represent freedom, a theatrical flair, an admirable culture and independent way of life. For others, that image is entrenched in racism and discrimination. It may conjure accusations of laziness, thievery, stupidity and ultimately, treatment as second-class citizens. The Roma are not considered members of mainstream European society. There is no single Roma minority, but a multitude of populations that make up the Roma population (Pogány 2004: 10). They are often relegated to the outskirts of cities or confined to dilapidated apartment buildings in urban areas. Why are they treated as the pariahs of Europe? It is impossible to pinpoint a distinct reason or trace it to a specific initiating event. They lack power, which has been attributed to their late arrival in Europe and a strong cultural difference (Petrova 2004). The Roma continually struggle for equality while trying to maintain their own culture.

A comparison can be made between current treatment of Roma and treatment of African Americans in the United States prior to the civil rights movement. Both groups have faced discrimination, poverty, slavery and segregation, but in recent decades the paths of these two groups have been quite different (Greenberg 2010: 919). Jack Greenberg, one of the lawyers who argued Brown v. Board of Education and head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund, has been invited to Eastern Europe to examine the state of Roma segregation. He points out that there is no Roma civil rights movement as there was for African Americans, “but there is ground for hope” (2010: 920).

The Roma are victims of structural violence; the systematic actions, policies and views of non-Roma have prevented them from meeting their basic needs. Roma are trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and suffering in many aspects of life: unemployment, discrimination, poor health, inadequate public and social services. At the core of this is the problem of education. Roma children are not treated the same as non-Roma children. Usually segregated, most Roma children do not make it past primary school, which impedes the opportunities available to them throughout the rest of their lives. This paper argues that the Roma are victims of structural violence and xenophobia, and children are especially affected due to a lack of equal access to education, and that education is the key to social cohesion.

In this paper I will use the term “Roma” to signify the minority group as both a noun and adjective. There is no official consensus on appropriate terminology. Roma, Romani, Rom and Gypsy are most common. Some use Romani because it is the only word accepted by all minority groups (including the Sinti), but most international organizations (both specifically dedicated to Roma issues and those not) have adopted Roma in all uses (Pogány 2004: 20).
Brief History of the Roma

The Roma migrated out of India sometime between the 7th and 13th centuries; scholars still debate whether it was a major migration period or a long, complex migration process (Petrova 2004). They remained in Byzantium for at least two centuries before migrating toward Western Europe (Petrova 2004). Some Roma remained in the Balkans while others moved to Central and Western Europe by the early 15th century. During Ottoman rule of the Balkans, most Roma who remained were enslaved in Wallachia and Moldavia. Approximately 200,000 to 600,000 Roma were enslaved until slavery was finally abolished by 1856 (Petrova 2004).

Dr. Dimitrina Petrova, the founding executive director of the international human rights organization Equal Rights Trust, has specialized her scholarly and activism efforts on human rights and the Roma. She formerly headed the European Roma Rights Centre. Petrova summarized where the negative image of Roma can be traced, “The extensively documented criminal activity of the Roma in Central and Western Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries thus must have been the catalyst of the lasting image of the Roma as parasitic nomads, fraudulent fortune-tellers, incapable of productive work, abusing the hospitality of those who provide them with shelter and food, unreliable, and, of course, and most significantly, remorseless thieves” (Petrova 2004). There are endless examples of how this perception of “parasitic nomads” remained through the centuries. This was most evident within anti-Gypsy laws. Although not all laws passed were enforced regularly at first, they eventually were and repression strengthened throughout Europe (Petrova 2004).

Assimilation laws have left a lasting effect on the Roma, especially those who lived in countries under the Habsburg Austro-Hungarian Empire (Petrova 2004). Maria Theresa, the empress of Austria, established forced assimilation policies in the late 18th century that criminalized the use of the Romani language and Roma names and placed Roma children into non-Roma homes to be assimilated. Because of this, many Hungarian Roma have lost much of their Roma traditions and customs (Petrova 2004).

The Holocaust is a major modern tragedy that has impacted Roma and was a product of the historic

![Figure 1](image.png)  

Figure 1 Roma population map (The World Bank 2007)
treatment of this population. It is estimated that up to 1,500,000 Roma were murdered during World War II (Greenberg 2010: 919). Although Roma were not mentioned in Hitler’s Mein Kampf and were not targeted for extinction, they were viewed as less than human, according to Dr. István Pogány, a professor of law at the University of Warwick in England (2004: 41). His research has focused on minority rights, especially those of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe. He has also studied both anti-Semitism and poverty.

In the Czech Republic, Roma mostly were killed in Auschwitz or camps in Bohemia and Moravia. In Slovakia, most Roma were forced into slave labor (Cahn 2007: 5). Some have argued that the Roma have chosen to remain silent about those human rights abuses because they want to put the past behind them, and they do not have a voice in the public sphere (Pogány 2004: 46). Treatment of the Roma has not improved since World War II. By most accounts, it has worsened since the fall of Communism. Most Roma who were employed under Communist jobs in government-controlled industries that required little or no education. Once those industries closed, the Roma were unable to adapt to the market economies that followed and fell deeper into poverty (Greenberg 2010: 925).

Population counts of Roma in Europe are unreliable because the estimates are from survey-based studies and descriptive reports instead of statistical evidence (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006: 7, 17). When it comes time for a census the majority of Roma who respond do not claim their Roma heritage for fear of discrimination, or in some cases it is a show of national pride or assimilation (Cahn 2007: 4). It is also reported that government representatives conducting a census often avoid Roma settlements (Petrova 2004). After the 2001 census, the official count of Roma in Albania was 1,261, but many NGOs estimate it to be 90,000 to 100,000. Likewise, in Slovakia the official count was 89,920, but the estimates are 480,000 to 520,000 (Petrova 2004). The Roma population grows rapidly and data must be updated frequently. Cahn wrote, “the high numbers of persons clambering to be listed as anything but gypsy are the most powerful litmus test of how society treats Roma and others regarded as Gypsies” (2007: 6). The most commonly accepted estimates claim that there are between seven and nine million Roma in Europe (Greenberg 2010: 926).

**Xenophobia and the Roma Way of Life**

There is often a drastic contrast between what people imagine about Roma and what is truth. Images in popular culture and stories in the media present a Roma stereotype, which is often exaggerated or based in falsities. Especially prevalent are misconceptions about the nomadic myth, Roma language and religion, housing challenges and the health care crisis.

**Nomadism**

One of the first romanticized images many associate with the Roma (whether in imagination or pop culture) is a convoy of caravans or horse carts. Roma have been nomadic through much of their history, but it is a common misconception that they remain that way. Only some Roma in Western Europe are still nomadic; most of them have been settled for decades or centuries (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006: 7). An 1893 census of Hungarian Gypsies showed that only 3.3 percent remained fully nomadic, while 89 percent had become entirely sedentary (Pogány 2004: 31). This demonstrates that even more than a century ago, nomadism was rare among this population, yet this stereotype of fervent nomadism is often connected to assumptions of criminal behavior, unreliability and distrust, and ultimately a perceived threat to the rest of society.

**Language and Religion**

Few still speak any Roma dialects, which are derived from the Indic language of their ancestors; instead they often speak the dominant language of the country in which they live (Pogány 2004: 10). Similarly, most Roma adopt the religion of those among whom they have settled. However, a large number of Roma have joined evangelical Protestant sects, even when that is not the dominant religion of their region (Pogány 2004: 10; Greenberg 2010: 991).

**Housing**

Lack of adequate housing has been one of the most significant barriers to integration for the Roma. Formal definitions of adequate include provisions that shelter should be safe, of good quality, all aspects of it should cater to the cultural particularities of inhabitants, and should be appropriately connected to the urban infrastructure (main roads, garbage collection, public utilities, away from pollution and environmental hazards, and with sufficient access to schools, hospitals and places of work) (FRA 2010: 5). Many Roma in the European Union (EU) do not have adequate housing under this definition. In addition to being segregated from mainstream society they are often forced by poverty into unsafe areas, materials of poor quality are used to make their shelter, homes are often overcrowded, there is inadequate connection to public utilities, they have insufficient access to public services, and they are often vulnerable to eviction (FRA 2010: 19).
Since the fall of Communism, unemployment is as high as 100 percent in some rural areas and Roma there must rely heavily on welfare (Greenberg 2010: 928-929). Roma who have been displaced by the fall of Communism tend to live in clusters at the edges of town, in homes constructed with salvaged materials. They usually have no electricity, running water, sewage system, doors or glass in the windows (Greenberg 2010: 932).

Health issues

Poverty and substandard housing impact the health of Roma and mortality rate is one indicator of this. The overall mortality rate of infants born to Romanian parents is about 27.1 per 1000. For Romanian Roma, the rate is more than triple the country's average at 72.8 per 1,000 live births. Roma often live 10 to 15 years less than non-Roma in the same region, which is generally attributed to diabetes, coronary artery disease, obesity, limited access to medical care, substandard housing conditions and inadequate nutrition. Tuberculosis and other diseases common in developing nations are ten times more prevalent among Roma than non-Roma populations in Europe. The treatment for many of these health issues is out of reach for most Roma as the medication is too expensive and few Roma have health insurance (Greenberg 2010: 931).

The blind hatred of Roma by many throughout the centuries has created dire consequences for this minority group. The xenophobia goes beyond stereotypes of nomadism; it has stunted the integration of many Roma into society at large. Significant barriers, especially insufficient housing, have irrevocably harmed this population through health issues and consequences for their livelihood.

Structural Violence: Barriers to Education for Roma Children

So far in this paper I have explained a variety of ways that Roma are victims of structural violence. Denial of the right to education is one of the most severe violations of all, as it is at the core of a functioning society. For the Roma, only having access to poor quality, if any at all, education has perpetuated their powerlessness and has prevented integration. It is a widely accepted myth that Roma do not consider education and regular schooling necessary for their children. This argument is often used as an excuse for not providing adequate schooling (Petrova 2004). However, some argue that Roma are skeptical about the mainstream educational system (Pogány 2004: 4). Education is viewed as the path to employment in many societies. For some, education must be formal, while for others, education may consist of learning a trade or craft at home. The latter is the case for many Roma (Pogány 2004: 151). Nevertheless, formal education is important and there are still many barriers to education such as a lack of necessary documentation to attend school, not enough money to pay for supplies or lunches, differences in language and culture between Roma and non-Roma, or a fear of assimilation (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006: 9, 63).

It is not known exactly how many Roma children are affected by segregation and special schools. Much like population estimates, data on this topic are incomplete. Even when there are data on Roma education, comparisons between countries are complicated by differing methodologies (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006: 21). It is clear, however, that there is an alarming contrast between the treatment and education of Roma children and non-Roma children in Europe. General estimates claim that 70 to 80 percent of Roma have less than a primary school education and less than one percent continue on to higher education.

In the Czech Republic, it is estimated that only 25 percent of Roma age 12 and above have completed primary education and only 2.5 percent of Roma children enter secondary school, compared to 73 percent of the non-Roma population (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006: 23). This example is mirrored throughout Europe. Roma children are not succeeding and continuing with education at rates similar to their non-Roma counterparts. Segregation is the primary way the right to education is violated for Roma children. It occurs in many forms, most prominently in the form of “special” or remedial education programs and schools (Petrova 2004).

Segregation

The majority of Roma children are forced into Roma only schools, or if they attend schools with non-Roma, they are often taught in separate classrooms. Segregation is no longer the policy in European countries, but that has not prevented it from being the common practice (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006: 8). No European or national judicial or administrative entity has ordered the cessation of segregation in any school (Greenberg 2010: 919). In Slovakia, it is estimated that up to 44 percent of Roma children located in segregated communities failed to complete primary education, compared to 24 percent in mixed settlements.

Not only are Roma children segregated, but Roma school facilities, equipment and educational tools are also substandard when compared to those of non-Roma schools, if supplies are available at all (Petrova 2004). Roma schools are usually held to the same academic standards as non-Roma schools, but they may face
unmotivated and unqualified teachers, crowded classrooms, abysmal spaces, and inadequate materials (Petrova 2004).

“October 11, 2002. We visited Gura Văii, outside of Onești. All of the Roma in Gura Văii live on Morii Street, away from the Romanians in the town. The roads were dirt, and due to morning rain, were very muddy. This settlement was not among the poorest that we saw. ... The school that the Romani children attend was in the middle of the settlement. We entered the school, which had to be opened by one of the teachers after repeated knocking because it was locked from the inside. There were only two rooms in the school. In one room, there was seating for twenty-two children, and in the other, there were twenty-four seats. It was a cold day, and there was no heat in the school, although there was a wood stove in the corner of one of the classrooms. There were no lights in either of the rooms or the entrance, and in fact, no electricity in the school. The Romani children were in class while we were in the school, and there were no books in either of the rooms. There were no textbooks for the children that I saw, no notebooks in front of any of the children, no pencils, no pens or any school supplies of any kind. There was no sign of a learning environment. One of the teachers, who would not give her name, told us that one hundred and sixty children were registered in the school. She also told us that there were four teachers. At around 2:00 PM when we went in the school, it was already dark inside and hard to see. From the outside, there was glass in all the windows, but I could see up under the roof the structure was not solid. This would likely allow much cold air in during the winter months” (Petrova 2004). This is a report excerpt from a European Roma Rights Centre field trip to Romania in October 2002.

The European Roma Rights Centre (2008) conducted research missions in Ukraine beginning in 2006. They compiled what they learned in those missions and sent a letter to Ivan Vakrchiuk, the Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine, urging him to improve the educational situation for Roma children in Ukraine. The identified forms of segregation were: 1) separate classes for Roma in a separate school building, 2) geographically segregated schools in predominately Roma neighborhoods, 3) schools where Roma are the sole or predominate student population, 4) classes for children with developmental disabilities where Roma were the primary population, and 5) schools at risk to become segregated when non-Roma parents decide to transfer their children to other schools due to supposed health problems of Roma children. Teachers often have lower expectations of Roma than they would of non-Roma students and, as a result, many Roma children remain illiterate or leave school significantly early (European Roma Rights Centre 2008). Most Roma schools have no cafeteria or dining hall, no sports facilities, outside toilets without running water, minimal furniture that is in poor condition, and lack facilities to educate students such as computer classrooms and laboratories (European Roma Rights Centre 2008).

Special or Remedial Schools

Many European nations and their local communities force Roma children into special education programs for developmentally disabled youth. There is an extremely disproportionate number of Roma children in these programs as opposed to non-Roma children. The Roma Rights Centre suggests that Roma students are at least 15 times more likely than non-Roma students to be placed in special schools. Other data show that Roma children comprise up to 70 percent of students in these special schools (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006:48). In Slovakia, Roma children are 22 to 26 times more likely to be placed in a special school (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006:59).

Placement in special schools creates concerns about substandard quality of education and the stigma of “mental retardation” (Petrova 2004). In these special schools within the Czech Republic, the standards for students correspond to standards two grades lower in a “normal school.” For example, fifth grade students at these special schools are held to the same standards as third grade students at regular schools (Petrova 2004). In some situations, Roma children end up in special schools based on psychological cognitive tests like the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. One problem with these tests is that they tend to ignore linguistic and cultural differences between Roma and non-Roma children (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006:46). In other situations, Roma parents may prefer to prevent their children from being exposed to racism and abuse; parents are not aware of the negative consequences of segregation and special schools. Also, parents may want their children to be educated in the same place, or at least in a similar fashion, as they were (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006:46-47). But the proportion of parents who want their children in these special schools seems to be the minority.
A Roma mother from Letanovce told the ERRC in October 2002, “My daughter was transferred to special school after the 1st grade - she is there already for 2 years and doesn’t even recognise the letters of the alphabet - if she were in the normal primary school, I am sure she would already have learned that” (Petrova 2004). Another Roma mother, from Hungary, told the ERRC in 2002, “My daughter started primary school in a normal class, but she felt that she received no attention from teachers as compared to her non-Roma classmates. Due to the negligence of the teacher she failed one time. She was taken to the remedial special class immediately. I was not even asked or informed about it in time, only after the transfer. They said that she could not keep up with the others, so they transferred her. I suffered because my child felt very bad. She was labeled stupid, although she might have just needed some more attention” (Petrova 2004).

A non-Roma teacher told the ERRC that many Roma are placed in the special schools immediately, but some are transferred there after a single opinion from a 30-minute examination by a committee. The teacher added that non-Roma children often receive two or three chances and have already failed the second or third year of school several times before they are transferred to a remedial special school (Petrova 2004).

Ultimately segregation and placement in special schools has led to a serious problem of absenteeism among Roma children in Europe. This has been attributed to several possible factors. The low attendance and high absenteeism could indicate that 1) parents are not convinced of education’s importance, 2) schools have a more lax attitude about attendance of Roma children, 3) Roma children have difficulty attending school because they are not geographically accessible, 4) the families do not have enough money for materials and lunches, or 5) the students are needed at home to help the family make a living (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006: 8).

The most forceful form of structural violence that violates Roma freedoms is the denial of the right to education, for this is the crux of a functioning society. By segregating Roma children from non-Roma children and placing Roma youth into remedial programs, communities are systematically keeping the Roma at a disadvantage. When these poorly educated youth become adults, they face even more barriers to achieving integration of their communities into society.

What now? The Future of Education for Roma Children

Equal education for Roma children is a major human rights issue. In recent years, human rights have become the standard by which a nation’s treatment of its citizens is judged (Pogány 2004: 15). This is particularly true for lawyers, journalists, political activists and an increasing number of NGOs (Pogány 2004: 149). The ideology of human rights is well intentioned, but it does not always support the needs of a cultural minority within a state as it is targeted at individuals and it is only as effective as courts and tribunals are willing to enforce human rights laws and doctrine.

Legal enforcement has been a problem for the Roma. There are three major court cases that have tackled the issue of education for Roma youth: D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic, Sampanis and Others v. Greece and Oršuš v. Croatia. Verdicts in each of these cases confirmed that Roma children were being unlawfully discriminated against in their respective education systems. These court cases demonstrate the widespread nature of the structural violence that Roma suffer on a daily basis, as well as confirm that legal entities agree that these human rights violations are taking place. However, it is extremely concerning that these important legal bodies did not demand changes by local governments and education systems to give Roma equal opportunities as non-Roma by putting an end to segregation and discrimination. This needs to change.

Pogány suggests approaches to tackle these issues, including advocacy programs, increased support of NGOs or initiatives such as the Decade of Roma Inclusion, which runs from 2005 to 2015 (Atanasoki 2009: 206). The purpose of the latter initiative is to improve the socio-economic status and social inclusion of Roma within a regional framework in specific European countries with significant Roma populations; it has developed several more direct projects such as the Roma Education Fund. The Decade is funded by financial institutions (e.g. the World Bank and Council of Europe Development Bank) and socially oriented foundations (e.g. the Open Society Institute and European Roma Rights Centre) (Atanasoki 2009: 206). The issue with these types of initiatives is they are non-binding and are criticized for not equipping victims of discrimination with a practical means of righting the wrongs (Greenberg 2010: 938).

The underlying problems causing poverty, unemployment, health issues, marginalization and inadequate education cannot be addressed by merely observing the human rights violations suffered by the Roma. Structural violence can only be combated with action. Just as the fault for this perpetual structural
violence does not rest on the shoulders of the Roma, neither should the entire solution to this education problem. Allies to the Roma (i.e. anthropologists, NGOs, political activists, legal entities) must use their skills and connections to produce solutions alongside the Roma.

I have several recommendations that should be considered for adoption to improve the state of Roma education. The EU, individual countries and local education systems must take better care to train teachers that are more sympathetic to the Roma plight. Properly trained teachers should understand the cultural differences between Roma and non-Roma students. They should also be supportive and have appropriate expectations for Roma children to help them succeed in mainstream education, as opposed to placing them into segregated classes or remedial programs.

Cultural classes or lessons should target non-Roma to help them understand and accept the cultural differences and Roma language classes should be offered to help Roma children feel accepted and comfortable in “coming out” about their Roma heritage. Transportation to integrated schools should be available and those schools must be equipped with supplies conducive to an adequate learning environment.

Roma parents must be supported so they can obtain all necessary paperwork and medical documentation to place their children in integrated schools. Tutoring programs must be offered. Pre-schools should be free and available to all children, especially Roma. And possibly most important, more Roma should be trained as educators to break this continual cycle of education distress. It could be compared to initiatives in the United States to recruit more bilingual teachers to support and accommodate a growing Latino population.

Ultimately and unfortunately, a major solution to embedded actions of structural violence against Roma comes down to money. Money is required to integrate Roma into mainstream society through housing and to improve health care and social services for Roma. Money is required to restructure a system to properly educate Roma children, integrating them into society and supporting them as they break the cycle of structural violence and poverty. It would be ideal for NGOs to team with local governments to pursue solutions tailored to local issues. A problem with NGOs is that they often have minimal funds, limited personnel and lack power (Greenberg 2010: 988). It is also critical to realize that at the core of these challenges is the current dire global economic crisis. It will be difficult to convince organizations with funds to tackle these important issues when they have not been considered important enough to cause significant change during times of economic strength.

Conclusion

The Roma have been victims of perpetual structural violence for centuries. They are marginalized, excluded and trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty. The Roma’s late arrival in Europe and distinct differences in appearance, behavior and culture are used as excuses by many for xenophobic responses toward them. Exclusion from education has been one of the most prominent ways they have suffered. Roma children are segregated and sent to special schools where they are treated as developmentally disabled, whether or not that is the case. When Roma children are not educated, they are often unable to break the cycle of poverty when they grow up. The xenophobia aimed at Roma has caused educational segregation, which has led to abysmal completion rates in primary and secondary school. Europe, as a whole, has failed to take action to improve the station and status of the Roma.

This is a situation that calls for pragmatic solidarity, a term introduced by Dr. Paul Farmer, a medical anthropologist at Harvard, co-founder of Partners in Health, United Nations Deputy Special Envoy to Haiti, and an outspoken advocate for human rights. Pragmatic solidarity is an approach that, in a broad sense, looks at practical solutions to problems and identifies ways to solve problems as a community. It is critical to take action and go beyond mere awareness of issues, such as poor access to education for Roma youth. People across the globe must offer support and take action to stop the discrimination and marginalization, especially those who have special skills and abilities to do so.

NGOs, government agencies and educational institutions alike must work harder to improve statistical data and demographics of Roma and their education situation. Reliable data will help organizations argue for funding and support. Financial support is crucial to improving education levels for Roma, which is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty and segregation. Ultimately, the missing component is a strong Roma-led rights movement.

In the spirit of pragmatic solidarity and as an anthropologist, I argue that we, as professionals trained in cross-cultural understanding, must take an active role in this issue as allies, advocates and activists. There has been much debate over the level of participation that anthropology should take in human rights issues. Some argue that the concept of human rights is a Western idea and that it is impossible to universalize standards and expectations within human rights doctrine. Whether or not this is true, there are clear human rights violations all over the world and we must use our education and skills to help those who are suffering. For so long, we have taken information from communities and societies that we have
studied to advance our careers. Now, we must give back to the communities in which we have worked and accept roles with increased advocacy and activism.

Anthropology training creates professionals with cultural understanding who have the skills to work with a society on its own terms based on various factors unique to each culture. By doing so, we could better appreciate the Roma way of life and the serious segregation and marginalization that this minority suffers through. We could then work with the Roma, NGOs and other organizations to establish action strategies that will destroy the barriers they face, especially inadequate housing and poor quality education.

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