



# EUROPEAN ROMA GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS (ERGO) NETWORK

## **“Roma access to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning in Spain**

### **Introduction**

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The Federation of Roma Associations of Catalonia (FAGiC) is an umbrella organisation created in 1991 that brings together 96 Roma associations across Catalonia. As the most representative Roma organisation in the region, FAGiC was founded to defend and promote the rights of Roma people, fight antigypsyism and racism, and advocate for equity across all areas of life, particularly employment, housing, and youth participation. We aim to channel Roma communities voices and create spaces for meaningful dialogue between Roma and mainstream society, at both national and international levels.

### ***Methodology and the geographical scope***

The methodology of this report combines desk research with field-based qualitative input. It draws on national and European studies (including those of Fundación Secretariado Gitano, the Spanish Ministry of Social Rights, the FRA, and the Council of Europe), complemented by direct insights from Roma families, educators, and local professionals through FAGiC’s field experience. This mixed approach ensures that the findings reflect both statistical data and lived experiences.

### ***Brief overview of the socio-economic situation of the Roma in Spain***

Roma communities in Spain continue to face widespread exclusion and deep inequalities, especially in access to education, employment, and decent housing. Over 80% of Roma live at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and the impact is particularly severe for children and youth. Education remains the key driver of inequality: only 17% of Roma over age 16 have completed compulsory or higher education, compared to 80% in the general population. Early school leaving affects around 86% of Roma youth, six times the national average. Roma women face an even more unequal situation, experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination that limit their access to education and employment. Meanwhile, migrant Roma from Eastern Europe often encounter additional legal and linguistic barriers, exacerbating their socio-economic marginalisation.

### ***Why is quality and inclusive education important for Roma inclusion?***

Access to quality, inclusive education is essential to breaking the cycle of poverty and exclusion experienced by Roma communities. It not only improves academic outcomes and employment prospects but also strengthens social cohesion by promoting intercultural understanding. Inclusive education ensures that Roma children are respected and represented in schools, where they can thrive without stigma or segregation. Investing in equitable education is, therefore, a key pillar for building a more just and inclusive society.

## Roma access to quality and inclusive education in Spain

### ***Early childhood education and care***

Access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Spain remains unequal, with Roma children among the least represented. According to the Spanish Ministry of Education (Datos y cifras 2023–2024), around 62% of children aged 0–3 in the general population attend early education programmes. However, data from Fundación Secretariado Gitano and the Roma Civil Monitor (2023) suggest that less than 20% of Roma children in this age group access formal ECEC. This gap is striking given the proven long-term benefits of early schooling for language acquisition, socialisation, and school readiness.

The main barriers are financial, geographic, and cultural. Despite partial subsidies, fees for nursery schools (*guarderías*) range from €150 to €400 per month, an amount unaffordable for many Roma families where over 80% live at risk of poverty. In several regions, places in public centres are insufficient, especially in peri-urban neighbourhoods and rural areas where many Roma families reside. Private centres are often the only available option, but their cost creates exclusion.

Quality is also uneven. Schools in Roma-concentrated areas tend to be under-resourced, with fewer specialised staff and limited intercultural approaches. Very few centres employ Roma mediators or adapt activities to reflect Roma culture, which weakens trust between families and institutions. Another barrier is administrative: irregular housing situations or lack of documentation (such as proof of residence) often make it impossible for Roma parents to apply for a nursery place.

The lack of early childhood education has a cascading effect. Roma children often enter primary school without the same preparation in language, motor, and social skills as their peers, reinforcing educational inequality from the very beginning. Experts and Roma organisations underline that expanding free and universal ECEC, with targeted outreach to Roma families, is a key step to closing the gap. Pilot experiences led by NGOs, such as family-based early learning groups, have shown promising results in engaging Roma parents and children, but these initiatives lack stable funding and institutional support.

### ***Financial barriers to education***

In Spain, public education is tuition-free across primary, secondary, and university levels. However, hidden costs, such as transportation, meals, school supplies, clothing, digital devices, and extracurricular activities, place a heavy burden on Roma families. These indirect expenses can total €300–600 per child per year, depending on the educational stage and region.

For many Roma households, this is unaffordable. Over 50% of Roma families report no stable income from formal employment, and around 86% live at risk of poverty or social exclusion. In Catalonia, where public transport or books may not be fully subsidised, the financial gap can lead to missed school days or early dropout, particularly in secondary and post-compulsory education.

Tertiary education is even less accessible. Although universities are public, they charge per-credit enrolment fees, ranging from €800 to €1,200 annually for undergraduate programmes, with higher costs for Master's degrees. These fees, combined with administrative costs, transport, and accommodation, place higher education out of reach for many Roma students.

Tertiary education remains especially out of reach: despite improvements, Roma students face financial and administrative obstacles (e.g. deposits, accommodation, or access to scholarships).

We have seen cases, especially among migrant Roma children, where families explained that they could not send their children to school because they did not have appropriate clothing. This example comes from our direct work with families in childhood programmes, where parents narrated these situations as one of the reasons limiting their children's regular school attendance.

Financial strain continues to limit Roma children's equal participation in education, even when the system is nominally free.

### ***Non-financial barriers to education***

In Spain, Roma students face a range of non-financial barriers to accessing quality education. These barriers affect their inclusion and progression at all levels, from primary to tertiary education.

1. **Geographic availability:** In many urban peripheries and rural areas, Roma families live in neighbourhoods with a limited number of nearby schools. This often results in overcrowded or under-resourced schools, and children are sometimes placed in distant institutions that require long or complex commutes. In semi-rural regions of Andalusia and southern Catalonia, limited public transport makes consistent attendance especially difficult for secondary students.
2. **Quality of schools:** Schools located in low-income or segregated areas, often attended predominantly by Roma children, tend to have fewer resources, higher teacher turnover, and lower academic expectations. This reinforces cycles of low performance and early dropout. A 2023 regional analysis in Catalonia noted that some schools in Roma-concentrated neighbourhoods lacked adequate support services, such as tutoring, career counselling, or school psychologists.

3. Institutional rigidity: Education systems often fail to provide flexible or culturally responsive approaches. Curricula rarely reflect Roma history or culture, and few schools employ Roma staff or intercultural mediators. In some cases, school rules around attendance or documentation (e.g., proof of residence) can inadvertently exclude children from irregular housing contexts.

Although there are public initiatives, such as the Pact Against School Segregation promoted by the Government of Catalonia, the reality on the ground is quite different. School segregation remains widespread, often depending on the neighbourhood or area. In some cases, even minor urban boundaries determine school assignment, and Roma or migrant children are subtly channelled into specific schools.

These practices have been reported across Spain, yet they are difficult to prove as intentional. However, they are widely recognised and reproduced. This leads to a “snowball effect”: schools with a high concentration of disadvantaged students, often located in under-resourced areas, tend to offer lower-quality education, have limited support services, and suffer from high teacher turnover. As a result, educational inequality becomes entrenched.

Language barriers mainly affect migrant Roma families, whose children often struggle with Spanish or Catalan in the early years and rarely receive systematic language support. More generally, communication between Roma parents and schools is often weak, as families report feeling unwelcome or not treated as equal partners in their children’s education.

These barriers, while not directly financial, significantly reduce the ability of Roma students to access, stay, and thrive in mainstream education.

### ***School segregation and schools for special needs***

School segregation remains a persistent and widespread issue in Spain, despite legal guarantees of equality and recent efforts to address it. Roma children are disproportionately concentrated in certain public schools, often in low-income neighbourhoods, where a high percentage of students come from disadvantaged or migrant backgrounds. These schools tend to have lower academic outcomes, fewer extracurricular resources, and greater staff turnover. In Catalonia, the Pact Against School Segregation (2019) has helped raise awareness and introduce preventive measures, but implementation remains uneven and segregation persists.

In some cases, segregation happens subtly: minor urban boundaries, administrative zoning, or so-called “parental choice” mechanisms result in de facto ethnic clustering. Roma children are also overrepresented in schools classified as having “compensatory education” needs, which further stigmatises them.

Regarding special education, although the practice of placing Roma children in schools for students with intellectual disabilities (as seen historically in Central Europe) is less visible in Spain today, concerns remain about misdiagnosis or premature assignment to adapted curricula, especially for Roma children with language barriers or irregular schooling histories.

In vocational training, Roma students are often streamed into low-prestige or gender-stereotyped tracks (e.g., beauty, construction), with limited counselling or long-term academic options. This reinforces social reproduction and restricts upward mobility.

While national and regional strategies mention desegregation and inclusive schooling, no formal reparations have been introduced for past or ongoing segregation of Roma students.

### ***Early school leaving and NEETs***

Early school leaving among Roma youth in Spain remains critically high. Around **86%** of Roma students abandon education without completing secondary school, compared to just **13%** in the general population. Completion rates for upper-secondary education are particularly low among Roma girls. According to Fundación Secretariado Gitano, **only 17%** of Roma over age 16 have completed compulsory or higher education.

The NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) rate among young Roma (15–24 years) exceeds **60%**, with **Roma girls disproportionately affected** due to early caregiving roles, gendered expectations, and low institutional support. NEET rates are especially severe in Andalusia, Murcia, and parts of Catalonia.

**Key causes** of early school leaving include:

- **Poverty** and unstable housing
- **Discrimination** and low teacher expectations
- **School segregation** and lack of academic role models
- **Gender norms**, particularly affecting girls, who may leave school for domestic responsibilities or early marriage. This may sound controversial, but in some cases, it still happens. And I'm not referring only to the fact that gender roles tend to be more traditional in Roma communities. The issue is compounded by economic hardship and the urgent need for help at home or an extra source of income. That's often the real reason behind early school leaving for many Roma girls.
- **Absence of flexible pathways**, career orientation, or Roma mediators in schools

**Potential remedies** include targeted scholarships, personalised mentorship programmes for Roma girls, culturally relevant curricula, and stronger support systems during secondary transitions.

### ***Antigypsyism in education, training, and lifelong learning***

Antigypsyism remains a structural barrier for Roma students, families, and adult learners across all levels of the Spanish education system. It manifests in various forms: from institutional neglect and low expectations, to direct discrimination by teachers, school staff, classmates, and even other parents.

**In schools**, Roma students are often perceived as disruptive, unmotivated, or “less capable.” Teachers may unconsciously hold lower expectations and offer less encouragement, which discourages Roma students and reinforces disengagement. According to Fundación Secretariado Gitano, Roma families frequently report that their concerns are dismissed or minimised by school staff, and that they are not treated as equal partners in their children’s education.

**Antigypsyism is not always overt.** Sometimes, Roma children are subtly discouraged from pursuing advanced academic tracks or are disproportionately channelled into basic or vocational routes. In other cases, school staff delay identifying bullying incidents or downplay racist behaviours, contributing to a hostile learning environment.

**Bullying and cyberbullying** are widespread among Roma youth. A 2021 FSG study found that over **40% of Roma students** had experienced insults or mockery in school because of their ethnicity (that’s the reason why many of them hide their ethnicity). Online harassment is also increasing, particularly among adolescents. The psychological impact includes anxiety, school avoidance, depression, and early school leaving.

**Material deprivation** is often penalised rather than addressed. Roma pupils who lack internet access, books, or appropriate school clothing may be marked as “unprepared” or penalised with lower grades. Rather than receiving support, they are sometimes labelled as negligent, even though structural poverty is at the root.

**Roma parents**, especially mothers, report feeling unwelcome at school meetings or treated with suspicion. Some report that their clothing or accents mark them as “different,” leading to subtle but clear distancing by teachers or school administrators.

In terms of policy, **the Spanish government and regional authorities have taken some steps**, such as the National Roma Integration Strategy and desegregation pacts in regions like Catalonia. However, implementation is inconsistent, and enforcement mechanisms are weak. Anti-bullying protocols rarely include ethnic discrimination explicitly, and few schools have Roma cultural inclusion strategies in place.

Antigypsyism in education is still pervasive, both in daily interactions and institutional responses. Without targeted anti-racist training for educators, more Roma staff in schools, and stronger accountability mechanisms, Roma children and families will continue to be excluded from truly equal and inclusive education.

### ***Support for Roma parents***

Roma families in Spain often lack the structural support needed to ensure educational continuity for their children. While public services exist, access is frequently limited due to precarious employment, insecure housing, and bureaucratic barriers. Many Roma parents experience chronic unemployment or work in the informal sector, making it difficult to guarantee stable income, adequate housing, or healthcare, all of which are essential to support children's education.

Some municipalities have implemented local support measures, such as social workers or family accompaniment teams, but coverage is patchy and often depends on regional funding. There are no specific national programmes addressing the situation of Roma parents working abroad, although some schools try to maintain communication when children live temporarily with extended family.

Real support must be holistic, targeting the socio-economic root causes of educational inequality.

This issue is particularly relevant, as in practice families are often penalised for not sending their children to school, without social services considering whether these families had even the most basic conditions to meet their needs. These are incomplete and punitive measures that unfairly target families. The situation is even more serious for migrant Roma families, who often face a persecutory attitude toward school attendance even when they lack access to running water, proper nutrition, and other basic needs.

### ***Educational support measures***

Educational mediators have played a key role in bridging the gap between Roma families and schools in Spain, particularly in regions such as Andalusia, Catalonia, and Madrid. However, their presence remains limited and heavily reliant on external projects or short-term funding. These positions are often precarious and not institutionalized within the public education system.

Educational mediators are generally not employed by the state, and the profession is neither regulated nor codified at national or regional level. Their presence depends almost entirely on NGO projects or temporary local funding.

A relevant example is the Pere Closa Foundation, which works with a school mediation system in various neighbourhoods of Barcelona. However, as mentioned earlier, their work depends on specific projects, which limits the continuity, consistency, and scope of their support.

Language support is also limited. Although Romanes is not officially recognized as a curricular language, many Roma children, especially those from migrant backgrounds (as Romanes was largely lost among Spanish Roma generations ago and is not a current demand among Spanish Roma students), struggle with Spanish or Catalan in early education. Few schools offer systematic language reinforcement or tailored homework support.

Some NGOs and local councils have implemented after-school tutoring programmes, but access to these services remains unequal. Expanding such initiatives and integrating intercultural mediators as permanent staff would significantly enhance the educational inclusion of Roma students.

“The Pere Closa Foundation was born from the will of a group of young Roma men and women, with the support of institutions and allies, to motivate members of our community to become the protagonists of our own future. One of the Foundation’s goals is to strengthen the role of the cultural mediator. Through its main programme, Siklavipen Savorença – Education for All, it supports the regular schooling of Roma children by providing after-school tutoring, working with families, and coordinating with schools and teachers.”  
— Fundación Pere Closa

### ***Promotion of Romani culture, history, and language***

Spain does not offer formal education in the Romani language, largely because Caló, the historic variant once spoken by Spanish Roma, ceased to be actively transmitted several generations ago. As a result, language revitalisation is not currently a widespread demand among Roma communities in Spain. In recent years, however, some autonomous communities have begun including educational materials that highlight Roma culture and history. Despite these efforts, implementation remains patchy and teacher training on these topics is minimal.

Roma remain largely unrepresented within the teaching profession. Many Roma students complete their entire education without encountering Roma educators or role models in academic settings. This invisibility contributes to the persistence of stereotypes and narrows young people's sense of possibility.

Crucial historical episodes such as the Roma Holocaust, the centuries of slavery of Roma people in Spain, and the forced sterilisation of Roma women are virtually absent from school curricula. When Roma are mentioned, portrayals often fall into tokenism or rely on outdated clichés, reinforcing bias instead of challenging it.

Promoting a more accurate, respectful, and comprehensive representation of Roma history and culture is vital, not only to strengthen Roma students’ self-worth, but also to build a more inclusive and informed educational environment for all.

### ***Lifelong learning and the education of adults***

Lifelong learning opportunities for Roma adults in Spain are limited. While second-chance schools exist in most regions, access is uneven and drop-out rates remain high due to competing demands such as work, childcare, or lack of transportation.

Roma adults, especially women, often express a strong desire to continue their education, but face barriers such as digital illiteracy, economic precarity, or bureaucratic hurdles (e.g. unrecognised prior schooling). Non-formal learning opportunities, such as foreign language courses or craft workshops, are often only accessible through NGO-led initiatives.

One Roma woman in Valencia, aged 42, shared: “I never got to finish school. Now I’m trying, little by little, because I want to help my children with their homework. But it’s hard when the classes are far away and I work cleaning in the mornings.” More flexible, community-based adult education is urgently needed.

### ***(Digital) Skills for the labour market and for social mobility***

Roma communities in Spain continue to face significant barriers to acquiring professional and digital skills. Although public training programmes exist, Roma participation remains low due to lack of outreach, inflexible formats, and systemic mistrust. Programmes rarely account for the precarious realities of Roma adults juggling informal work and caregiving responsibilities.

Digital literacy is a major gap. Many Roma households lack internet access, up-to-date devices, or the skills needed to navigate online platforms for education, job seeking, or social services. This digital divide was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many Roma students and adults were unable to access remote learning or administrative procedures.

Current education systems are not effectively designed to promote upward mobility for Roma. Streaming into vocational tracks without proper orientation, the absence of culturally inclusive teaching, and low representation of Roma professionals reinforce structural disadvantage.

More accessible digital training, targeted employment programmes, and inclusive guidance services are key to improving Roma social mobility.

### ***Education in the National Roma Strategic Framework***

The Spanish National Roma Integration Strategy includes education as a key priority, but its impact has been limited by weak implementation and lack of binding obligations. The measures outlined, such as desegregation goals, support for early childhood education, and promotion of mediation, are positive in theory, but progress is uneven across regions.

Monitoring mechanisms are weak, and many objectives lack clear timelines or funding commitments. Moreover, the strategy does not sufficiently address lifelong learning, adult education, or the structural antigypsyism embedded in education systems.

Roma civil society organisations have often had to step in to fill the gaps, but without institutional collaboration or long-term resources, their impact is limited. A stronger legal framework, with guaranteed funding and Roma participation in policy design, is essential for genuine progress.

This would be the same as what I mentioned regarding remedial measures. In the case of education, regardless of the indicators, it is crucial that the other areas, housing, family income, child poverty, are addressed in parallel and in an interconnected way.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study highlights that Roma communities in Spain continue to face structural and multidimensional barriers to accessing quality and inclusive education at all levels. While public education is nominally free, both financial and non-financial obstacles, such as poverty, school segregation, housing instability, digital exclusion, and persistent antigypsyism, undermine equal participation. Roma students, especially girls and migrant children from Eastern Europe, are disproportionately affected by early school leaving and limited academic expectations. Support systems, such as mediation or adult education, remain fragmented and underfunded, while national policies often lack effective enforcement or Roma participation.

Without targeted and structural responses, education will continue to reproduce inequality rather than serve as a tool for social mobility and inclusion for Roma communities.

## Recommendations

- Guarantee free and universal access to quality education by removing hidden costs through school subsidies (transport, meals, equipment, digital access).
- Combat school segregation through robust enforcement of zoning regulations and monitoring systems, ensuring equal distribution of students and resources.
- Institutionalise Roma intercultural mediators and support staff within schools, with stable contracts and long-term public funding.
- Strengthen early intervention and personalised support, especially for Roma girls and migrant students, to prevent early school leaving.
- Include Roma history, language, and culture in national and regional curricula, with teacher training and Roma staff representation.
- Address antigypsyism in schools through mandatory anti-racism training for educators and effective anti-bullying protocols that include ethnic discrimination.
- Expand second-chance education and adult learning opportunities with flexible schedules, proximity, and childcare options.
- Promote digital literacy and access for Roma families through targeted public initiatives and community-led digital inclusion programmes.
- Ensure that the National Roma Strategic Framework includes binding measures, monitoring mechanisms, and Roma-led implementation processes.
- Ensure stable and long-term funding for NGOs and community-led initiatives that complement public education efforts.
- Strengthen data collection disaggregated by ethnicity (with appropriate safeguards) to enable effective monitoring of progress.

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