

Tajik Gypsy Children Miss Out on Education

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Economic and cultural factors result in poor school attendance.

Ahliddin is 16, but has only spent four years at school.

From a family of Luli, a Central Asian gypsy group, he lives in the village of Tundara, not far from the town of Vahdat, which itself is close to the capital Dushanbe. He attended a village school which serves the 70 Luli families in the area, and offers the first four years of primary education.

Although Ahliddin wanted to continue his studies, he did not last long at secondary school in Vahdat. In a Tajik-majority learning environment, he found it hard to keep up, and struggled with the long journey time and the absence of his friends.

"I wasn't as good as the others. I didn't have good clothes to wear and I stood out because of the language. I felt isolated there, and I left school," said Ahliddin, who now begs on the streets to help support his family.

Ahliddin and his friends are reluctant to mix with Tajiks as they feel so different.

"They bully us," he said, adding that he would have liked to finish school if could have done so among other Luli children.

There are many factors that obstruct access to education for Luli children living in Tajikistan – poverty, discrimination, an absence of parental support, and the fact that many have not identification papers.

According to the 2010 census, there are some 2,300 Luli in Tajikistan, although some community leaders claim the number could be as high as 40,000 due to frequent migration and a lack of official records.

The Luli, who call themselves Mughat, are scattered across Central Asia. In Tajikistan, they live in settlements in several districts of the northern Soghd and southern Hatlon provinces, as well as in the central region where Vahdat is located. Living largely isolated from the rest of society, they tend to follow their own traditional way of life. They speak a dialect of Tajik and share the Sunni Muslim faith practiced by the majority in this country.

Families often send children out to beg on the streets, which obstructs their chances of getting an education.

Zarnigor, an eight-year-old from Ahliddin's village, Tundara, said that although she liked attending school, she was reluctant to give up on earning opportunities. She brings home between seven and ten US dollars a day.

Local teachers say that they are engaged in a constant struggle to convince children to come to classes.

Barno Ahmadova, a teacher at the Tundara village school, has been working there for last ten years, and told IWPR that the working day invariably began with home visits to round pupils up before they went off to beg.

"Every day, we teachers have to literally fight to get the children to school. If we don't, they head off with their mothers and sisters to the streets, from six in the morning," Ahmadova said.

The school has four classrooms, one for each year-group, but there were only eight children present on the day IWPR visited.

Ahmedova said many of the children had no birth certificates.

"Most of the time, the Luli ignore our secular laws. They get married according to the Muslim rite and don't register their marriage with the authorities," she said. "All their women give birth at home, not in hospital, so most of the children don't have birth certificates."

Without identification documents, school administrators can only guess when a child is old enough to attend school.

"All that has negative consequences," Barno said.

As well as the Tundara primary school, there is another school specifically for the Luli community. Located

in the Vose district of Khatlon region, it was built by the government in 2006, with support from by foreign donor organisations.

Here, too, attendance rates are poor. In the first year of its existence, the Vose school attracted more than 100 pupils, but many have dropped out.

Education is mandatory in Tajikistan, and in 2011 the government adopted a law making parents responsible for school attendance. However, there are no known cases of Luli parents being prosecuted when children miss school, and opinion is divided on how best to improve attendance.

Some like Ahliddin would like to see separate schooling for Luli, while Ahmadova says it is more pressing to get children to attend existing facilities.

Education ministry spokesman Ehson Khushvaktov told IWPR that he did not see a need for dedicated schools for the Luli.

“Government, there are no obstacles whatsoever preventing access to education for children from this minority,” he said, adding that as long as they had documents like birth certificates, they could apply for a school place anywhere in the country.

Abdurrahmon Khonov, a member of parliament, wants to see access to education for Luli children improved by special rules specifically targeting their parents.

As things stand, he said, the Luli have a bad name both in Tajikistan and in other countries like Russia where they travel.

“As they’re engaged in begging and there is a high rate of illiteracy among them, they give our country a bad name,” Khonov said.

Muhammad Yusuf, a community leader in Tundara who graduated from a religious school in Vahdat, agrees that education is the key to breaking the Lulis’ dependency on begging and to improving their lives.

“I very much support the idea of our children getting a good education and choosing reliable professions to provide for themselves,” he said, acknowledging that this would be no easy task.

Qayumarsi Ato is an editor with the Ozodagon news agency in Tajikistan.

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