



## Literacy Program Empowers Women and Children

*Kristina moved to Belgrade as a child after her parents' divorce. When her mother remarried, Kristina and her siblings moved into a two room house with their stepfather and his children. Due to extremely difficult living conditions, the family was unable to pursue education for the children.*

*At age 16, Kristina married Demir and moved in with his family--a home similar to that of her childhood. Kristina and Demir now have a two-year-old-son and a baby on the way, and they live with Demir's parents, his three brothers and two sisters. Living conditions for this family of ten are very hard, in a two room home with no electricity or running water. The family earns what it can by collecting and reselling recyclable materials from dumpsters. Now 19 years old, Kristina-- like many Roma women who marry young-- has little education, and few opportunities to support her family.*

Today, August 26, the United States observes [Women's Equality Day](#). We commemorate the 1920 adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment-- which granted women the right to vote, dramatically changing the role of women in public life.

Recognizing that true universal gender equality requires ongoing work, Week of Compassion's [Women's Empowerment Fund](#) supports programs all over the world that provide economic and educational opportunities for women.

One such program-- the Literacy Program for Adult Roma Women-- focuses on improving literacy among Roma women living in informal settlements and social housing units across Belgrade.

Like Kristina, many Roma girls in Serbia spend their childhood and teenage years caring for younger siblings and doing household chores rather than going to school. Living in extreme poverty, they often reach adulthood with little education and few vocational opportunities. This creates a situation in which many women are at high risk for suffering gender-based violence. Their difficult station is compounded by cultural factors. Widespread discrimination against the Roma people renders them outsiders in much of public life, leaving uneducated Roma women even more isolated and vulnerable.

But through the Literacy Program, our partners through Church World Service in Europe support women in their efforts to read, write, do arithmetic, and become active citizens, not only in their own communities but in the wider culture as well. In addition to learning how to read and write, the women learn skills like woodworking that create potential income sources.

When challenges prevent women from participating in the program, our partners seek solutions that will fit the women's needs. One of the main obstacles for women pursuing education is a lack of childcare, so our implementing partners organized childcare and even a preschool for children whose mothers attended the program.

Not only did providing childcare enable more women to join the program-- it also created an educational opportunity for the children. The preschool program emphasizes learning the Serbian language, expanding vocabulary, improving communication, developing personal hygiene habits, and building self-esteem and independence.

All 34 children who participated in the preparatory program enrolled in the first grade the following school year.

Kristina is one of the young mothers enrolled in the literacy program. Inspired by her desire to learn and grow, Demir and his brother also decided to continue their education and enrolled into higher grades at Branko Pesic, also a CWS partner. Kristina plans to continue her studies from home once the baby is born. Her husband and his brothers have promised to support her, recognizing that her education is a tremendous opportunity for the whole family.

With the support of Week of Compassion, women like Kristina-- and now, their children too--receive basic education and critical new skills.

The transformative potential of these programs cannot be overstated. When women are empowered to learn and work, the overall wellbeing of the whole community improves. In celebration of women's equality around the globe, we lift up the accomplishments of these women, who learn and grow in spite of great obstacles. We pray that every woman might be empowered with the skills and resources that she needs to thrive. With your help, we can witness that reality in our lifetime.

#### ***Mission***

*As the relief, refugee, and development mission fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Week of Compassion works with partners to alleviate suffering throughout the world.*

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