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THE STATUS OF THE ROMANY WOMAN IN THE FAMILY AND IN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The aim of this survey study is to highlight the changes in the status of the Romany woman in the family and in society. The status of the Romany woman had always been one of subordination to the Romany man. The woman was responsible for the household and care of the children and family, and even for its livelihood if necessary. The woman's position was determined by her age, fertility, and number of children, and, to a certain extent, did not allow access to education or the official job market. Currently, we are seeing efforts of emancipation of Romany women in the family, where the younger generation is already making their decisions about the number of children they will have and when they will have them, just as they are have "more independence" regarding the question of marriage and independence from men.

The status of the Romany woman in society seems to be changing at a somewhat slower pace than her status in the family, and is influenced by such elements as the lack of opportunities to participate in the job market, which is often resolved by early and frequent motherhood. This reality completes the cycle that prevents a more progressive emancipation of the Romany woman in both of the situations described, which, of course, overlap in real world situations Organisations dedicated to the status of Romany women that have begun to emerge over the past decade have also played a significant role in this area.

Key words: *Romany woman – Romany family – community – gender*

REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Topics of gender of the ethnic groups of our setting are still not being studied to the extent that they should (Kolářová 2008, p. 6), although the differences in gender structures can significantly affect the stereotyping of the members of minority groups, and become apparent, for example in the context of intersectionality (cf. ex. Kendall 1997, Brenner 2000, Newman 2007), where gender, ethnicity (race), and social class work as an interconnected system of oppression (Anderson 1996). Although foreign literature does examine intersecionality, the presented models of the relationships of various groups of women cannot unequivocally be applied to the description of women of various ethnic minorities in various environments (i.e. not just of various countries or regions, but also with respect to social background/stratification) (Kolářová 2008, p. 7). The causes of the decidedly gradual emancipation of the Romany woman must be sought not only in the context of stereotyping by the majority, but also in the status that the Romany

woman holds in the family and community where she represents a lesser partner to the man (Kajanová et al. 2009).

The subject of our survey study is the status of the Romany woman in the family and in society in respect to the changes that she is going through. There are two categories: private and public. This delineation is made more for the clarity of this study, because they are otherwise significantly interconnected.

The Romany minority is the largest ethnic minority across Europe, as it is in the Czech Republic (Kalibová 2003), and, at the same time, is the minority that is the least tolerated, which is related to the stereotyping by the discourses of the majority (Říčan 1998). Additionally, only "traditional" Romany men and women are presented, even though a number of authors point out that certain Romany families/lineages cannot be considered "traditional", because Romany families have been undergoing significant changes in the past decade. These changes relate particularly to the role of the woman, while the roles of the men are changing more gradually (cf. Pulkrábová 2009, Davidová et al. 2010). On the other hand, there are also families in which the "traditional" differences between the roles of its members have endured, for example in the sub-ethnic group of the Vlach Romany (Davidová et al. 2010).

The status of the Romany woman in the family

The traditional role of the woman in the family is predetermined as subordinate, a role that is relatively difficult to subvert and transform into success in society. In the traditional role of the Romany woman in the family, the woman was supposed to love, give birth and raise children, and take care of the nutrition of the family, as well as the household (Durst 2002, Davidová 2004).

A woman could attain a higher status in the family by the number of children birthed (Budilová and Jakoubek 2005, p. 10), in which the birth of male offspring was given more weight. However, according to Kajanová et al. (2009, p. 72), this fact too has been changing over time, as this is no longer as common in cities. In fact, it is not actually beneficial or necessary for a woman to make an effort to acquire an education or succeed in the job market (Davidová 2004, Hübschmannová 2007). The man in the dominant position in the family represents the public image of the family, and provides economic security for the family (Jakoubek 2004). Economic security, however, is not definitive in the family hierarchy; if the man is not contributing financially to the family, and the responsibility falls on the woman, her status in the family does not change (Stewart 2005).

A woman in a Romany family was traditionally in a subordinate position in relation to the dominant status of the man, which is how she was raised from early childhood (Kajanová et al. 2009). From a very young age, girls in Romany families always took part – and still do – in domestic work and care of younger siblings (Davidová 2004), and, conversely, are not encouraged to pursue an education or prepare for a career.

A woman's respect grew with age, in part because of experience she has gained, and, according to Jakoubek (2004), partly as a result of her ritual cleanliness or uncleanliness. In this context, during the postpartum period, and during menstruation, a woman was considered to be unclean. Only older women (Turková 2008) who no longer menstruate can attain the same level as a man (Jakoubek 2004).

The status of Romany women in the family has changed significantly in recent years – the city populations of Romany women in particular have seen an improvement in the past decade in their approach to education, which affects their ability of make decisions in the context of the family, participate more actively in the socialisation of their children, and make decisions about their own rights (choice of husband, choice of the number of children, etc.) (Pulkrábková 2009).

The project GAČR no. 403/07/0336, titled "Quality of life, average and long life expectancy from the aspect of health determinants in the Romany populations of the Czech and Slovak Republics" also partly focused on the subject of the changes in the traditional status of Romany women in Romany families. The findings of this study are presented in the consluding monograph of Davidová et al. (2010). The study describes the perception of the role of women in the family based on analysis of scholarly literature, as well as their own field investigations – from selected testimony of women of the younger,

mid-life, and oldest generations. A breaking of the boundaries in the direction of gender equality in Romany families is beginning to emerge, which is evident primarily in the youngest generations, in mixed families (Czech-Romany), and in families living integrated with the society majority. The question of marriage also plays a role, in that cohabitation with a partner results in greater equality between the partners, as compared to marriage. In the case of marriage, the woman's role is more subordinate – she is seen as his property.

However, Romany women are still subject to many restrictions in their sexuality (Weinbaum 2010, p. 215), choice of partner, as well as life orientation, and, unlike men, are under strict supervision at first by her birth family (Žigová 1996), and then by the family of her partner, where she typically moves (Budilová and Jakoubek 2005, p. 20, Hofman 2008).

The status of the Romany woman usually impacts various areas of her life, including her state of health. For example, Davidová et al. (2010) state that Romany women influenced by their dependence on the private sector (running the household, caring for the family and children, among others) are under an increased level of stress, which is subjectively perceived to be a greater burden than the influences of a disadvantageous social situation. This stress can subsequently lead to psychosomatic issues. Additionally, Kóczé (2011) states that Romany women have less rights and resources than Romany men, and thus, in the context of their state of health, are more vulnerable and helpless. A high percentage of Romany women suffer psychologically, or are sexually abused by their male counterparts. Kóczé (2011) references Durst (2007, pp. 74–103), who, in turn, refers to a study from northern and southern Hungary, where each year, girls under the age of ten become mothers. A greater fertility then is not understood to be a cultural phenomenon, but related to ethnic and social segregation.

Tritt et al. (1992) also mention the discrimination of Romany women in relation to health. They present cases of frequent sterilisation of Romany women, carried out during childbirth by caesarean section, or during abortion, without having been granted any type of consent for the procedure by the patient. Dudová (2012, p. 118) writes that sterilisation was one of the practices carried out against the minority in order to prevent births. These were racially-motivated and discriminatory reasons.

The emancipation of Romany women is evident in a number of areas: on the one hand, it is evident in a greater proclivity to the public sector – a tendency towards the increase in qualifications, efforts in finding jobs, as well as in the private sphere, primarily in the area of motherhood and parenting, in which women speak of the desire for a smaller number of children (Davidová et al. 2010). The Romany woman today can find herself in a completely paradoxical situation, where she is dismissed because of her emancipation from her partner, but at the same time, she still falls short of the demands of society. At the moment when a Romany woman wishes to emancipate herself, her family may cast her out, and society may not accept her (Kajanová et al. 2009). The emancipation of Romany women (primarily of the younger generations) has met with the staunch resistance of the older generations of Romany women, who were raised in a strict division of gender roles, and who teach the younger generations that respect of hegemonic masculinity is a part of the Romany culture (Izsák 2009).

The status of the Romany woman in society

The subject of the conception of the majority population of the Romany minority is weighed down by flawed perceptions of gender. Public discourse speaks of the Romany population solely as a whole, and does not distinguish between the perceptions of Romany women and men. Scholarly works are also conceived in this vein, which is why it was difficult to find more specific information on the subject of the status of the Romany woman in society, as perceived by the majority. This is another reason why we focused on this question in the context of our survey study.

The public sphere had been more or less inaccessible to Romany women until recently. The exception was the required employment of women in countries under the communist regime; however, this involved only activity in the sphere of employment. The representation of women in the public sphere such as it is has

emerged only in the past decade, and is linked primarily with the activities of non-profit organisations or government institutions (in some countries) (Pulkrábková 2009a).

In 2002, the organisation International Roma Women's Network was established, uniting Romany and non-Romany women from 20 European countries, and the organisation The Joint Roma Women Initiative was established in 2006. Both of these organisations collaborate in the fight for the equality of Romany women under the idea that there is no definition of a "real" Romany woman. European Romany women are just as diverse as any other women in the world (Izsák 2009).

In the Czech Republic, there are four Romany organisations that aver their support of Romany women and representation of Romany women in the public sphere. These include the Manushe group (part of citizens association Slovo 21), Inter-ministerial Commission for Roma Community Affairs, and the Athinganoi and Romea associations. However, only the Manushe group defines itself as an organisation dedicated primarily to the support and representation of Romany women. Of non-Romany organisations, the topic of Romany women appears mainly in those working with Romany female clients, such as La Strada, Liga lidských práv (Human Rights League), and the Poradna pro občanská a lidská práva (Counselling Centre for Citizenship, Civil and Human Rights) (Pulkrábková 2009b).

However, despite these efforts, true discrimination of Romany women still persists, on almost every level of her social life in the public and private spheres (Mirković 1996, Hrvatić 2000, Kóczé 2003). The opportunities for access to education and the job market for Romany women is, in reality, more limited than for non-Romany women and than Romany men (Králíková 2006, Koldinská 2010). While even unqualified Romany men can find employment on the grey or seasonal job markets, Romany women do not have this opportunity; in fact, 30% of Romany women of working age have never been employed. One of the consequences of the inability to succeed on the job market is a large percentage of Romany women in prostitution (UNDP/ILO 2002). This situation is particularly poor in socially excluded communities. In these cases, the "traditional" gender roles persist even more markedly. This inability to take part in education or a career is then further neutralised by the fact that women start their families earlier and attempt to find self-fulfillment in that way (Durst 2002).

A significant reflection of the status of Romany women is their depictions in the media. Pulkrábková (2009b) notes that the Romany woman and Romany womanhood are built upon a foundation of motherhood, or through the care of children, as it may be. The requirements of women then too are formulated in the interest of children, and the depiction of the Romany woman in the media is the picture of motherhood (Pulkrábková 2009b). Weinbaum (2010) describes the contrast between how the Romany woman is presented in discourses of the majority, and how she is presented in a culture where she often appears as the definition of sexuality and sensuality (the female character of Carmen, the gypsy Lea, or the portrayal of the gypsy maiden in the Disney movie *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), while reality lies in the patriarchal structure of Romany families, where, conversely, sexuality is suppressed. The eroticisation of the body of the Romany woman in the perception of the majority is related to the romantic depiction of the Romany as nomads (Hasdeu 2008, p. 355), in other words, once again invoking a certain "traditional" image supported by the stereotyping of the Romany minority.

CONCLUSION

Although there are a number of authors focusing on the topic of the Romany minority, and the topic is popular, to a certain extent, the subject of the status of the Romany woman in the family and in society is given only partial attention by academic authors, if any at all, which is also evidenced by the lack of research projects carried out, as well as the absence of scholarly literature.

If we focus on the changes in the status of Romany women in the family and in society, we can conclude that there has been a trend of empowerment of Romany women in contrast to the situation described in scholarly literature (Davidová 2004) in the relationship

to the older generation of Romany women. The Romany woman is more active in society; various Romany women's organisations are being established, though in the context of their everyday life (such as on the job market), Romany women are still disadvantaged (Králíková 2006, Koldinská 2010). In the family, her subordinate position still persists, though even here the woman has tendencies toward emancipation (Pulkrábková 2009).

The invisibility of Romany women in public discourse leads to the neglect of the issues that these women face in all spheres of public life. We deal with these deficiencies in the project, GAJA 098/2013/S, titled "The current status of the Romany woman in the family and in society", which supports this survey study.

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