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Romani Women in the 21st Century and the Role of their Position for Children's Upbringing

ABSTRACT. This paper deals thematically with the emancipation of Romani women in the Slovak Republic, their position in the society, as well as delimitation of their social status and role. Emphasis is put on differences in culture, cultural patterns and behavioral models, differences in the upbringing of children and the position of the Romani woman in the Romani family, compared to the society's majority. Obstacles to the formation of an independent and emancipated Romani woman are described, for whom the concepts of emancipation and equality of rights are unknown and nearly inconceivable. Emancipation and equality of Romani women is particularly relevant in terms of opportunities for education, employment, position in the society and awareness of one's rights. The objective is to present educated, successful, independent, and equal Romani women, enlightenment amongst the Romani population, engagement of Romani women in public and social life, and support them through various projects, etc.

KEYWORDS: Emancipation of women, Education, Culture, Enlightenment, Romani communities, Majority society

Introduction

Although we live in the 21st century, there exist an obvious and incomparable difference between the majority society and the Romani community in Slovakia. This applies not merely to differences in culture (cultural patterns), the style and philosophy of life (values), etc., compared to the majority society, but above all to "differences in the upbringing of children (behavioral patterns and models, style of upbringing, etc.), in socializing (social learning), social status, the role and position of the Romani women in the family and society." As for Romani women, their status can be traced back to India, from where the Roma came to Europe. Contrary to Romani women, the women in the majority

society usually have a higher position in the society, higher level of education, better employment, and general level of emancipation. They are economically independent of men and do not lack legal consciousness, as they are aware of their rights and opportunities of asserting themselves. *Emancipation* of women means liberation, riddance of oppression, subordination, dependence, and their general equality (*Slovník.sk*, 2014). Until the 1900's, women were considered legally incompetent and dependent persons. They did not intervene in social or political life. They were denied the right to higher education or exercising a number of professions. Their unequal, subordinate position to men was emphasized, as they were regarded as less important members of the society. As time went by, however, the women's movement continued to evolve and the emancipation of women began. The first sign of change was improved access of women to education. Prejudices against women's employment receded significantly only during World War I, where women proved their ability to work physically just like men. Yet, the Romani women's position in the society was different from that of non-Romani women. "Emancipation of women has not really reached the environment of Romani communities" (*Redakcia 1*, 2013). "This is accountable primarily to the different, secluded Romani culture, family customs, traditions, and preconceived ideas about the position and role of the woman in the family, which are passed from generation to generation." The life of Romani women and their social position recalls the Middle Ages. Why is it so? There are multiple causes of this status quo. "Equality, mutual tolerance, respect, reverence, love, and understanding are unknown or taboo terms for most of us. The Romani woman is not an equal partner to the man on her side." The woman's verbal communication has little weight. "She may only assert her views in the company of other women." She may confide solely to her own husband who represents his family. These values are still valid even amongst the *integrated Roma*. In the patriarchal Romani family, the dominant position has the man. His woman is like a second-class citizen and has to obey her man under all circumstances. Her role is to bear and bring up children, and to take care of them and the household. In the traditional Romani family, the woman is the guarantor of the clan's survival. In order to achieve respect, she has to start a family as soon as possible, whereupon her value, social status, and her man's recognition are related directly to the number of her healthy (Poláková, 2002, pp. 32-63). While she is re-

quired to be absolutely faithful, fidelity is not expected of her man. Women have been considered as having a lesser cultural level than men and expected to stay mostly home. Man's role was mainly to provide for the family financially.

Social Premises of Relations between Romani Men and Women

Due to their lower level of education, most Romani women are housewives (i.e., unemployed), hence dependent on their men and their competences. At present, men as providers tend to rely preferably on surviving without having to work, thanks to welfare benefits. As Poláková (Poláková et al., 2005, p. 240) points out, they become irresponsible, helpless, and unable to break the vicious circle of social exclusion and poverty. Women who are dependent on men lose the support they need, as their man is not capable of feeding his family, not only due to inadequate education and qualifications, lack of job opportunities, and last but not the least due to discrimination. The woman, from her point of view, perceives this as a hopeless situation with no perspective in sight. The outcome is that her world is based on constant insecurity. Quite often, it is the men themselves who discourage their wives from going to work, as they cannot stand the idea that their women would take on their role. They act that way out of jealousy, too, because they want to be able to keep an eye on their wives so that they would not be "exposed" to strangers' eyes. They cannot stand the idea that other men would regard their wives as sexual objects. Often they do not let their wives go outside, be nicely dressed, or talk to other men. It is taboo for women to show too much of their skin in this sociocultural environment (Hrušková, 2013).

Sexuality and Sexual Life in Romani Families

Generally, sexuality and sexual life are taboo for the Romani community. It would be shameless to talk about these things. Thus, it happens that that preparation for sexual life, marriage, and parenthood is completely omitted (Poláková et al., 2005, p. 204). The problem issues

for the contemporary young Romani female generation requiring solutions were: education, employment, and independence. Namely, the situation where young Romani girls do not even finish basic education and start a family, while still being children themselves, thus become fully dependent of their man/partner, due to behavioral customs and expectations. There is now the “opportunity to build Romani schools, in the vicinity of Romani communities,” so that Romani women would have the “opportunity to gain qualifications, while taking care of their families,” e.g., by attending various courses, training sessions, etc. This also applies to “integrated young Romani women who need support to be able to acquire a certain degree of education to be subsequently able to find a job.” Even today, when a young girl graduates from a university, she still finds it difficult to find employment and become independent.

Finding Necessary Support for the Emancipation of Romani Women

“An ever growing number of educated people from amongst the Roma leave the country to find a job abroad.” Mere minimum of young Romani women complete basic education, enroll in a university, and successfully find a job and gain independence and equality vis-à-vis their partner. Such exemplary cases can be found mainly amongst women who live in a nuclear family, somewhat separately from the Romani community. Their success usually stems from their parents’ decisions and support. Therefore, it is clear that Romani women’s emancipation has to start with support of self-consciousness, education (motivation), job opportunities, independence, and through positive presentation and support of educated, successful, independent, and equal Romani women, as well as enlightenment and engagement of Romani women in public and social life, and improvement of their education and awareness of their rights.

Dealing with Abuse Syndrome of Romani Women

Another negative phenomenon is that Romani women are often abuse by their men, both physically and mentally. On the one hand, they

consider it an expression of his interest in them and a proof of his love; on the other, they fear his threats and himself. Quite often, the woman is isolated from friends and other people. "A woman restricted to taking care of the household and inhibited by her man's commands lacks adequate social interaction, support from social network, contact with the world of the majority, primarily because she lives in a secluded environment." It is impossible for her, for a number of reasons, to leave the man who abuses her. In their naivety, she hopes that her man's ways will change, because deep down he loves her and respects as his children's mother. Sometime, the reason is that she does not know where to seek help and find shelter for her children and herself, and where to get the money she would need. Her closest family would disapprove of her departure, because a woman is supposed to stay with her man under any and all circumstances and be faithful to him in good as well as bad times. Her fear of loneliness is only natural, as they would have to rely on herself without support from the closest family. Since they are exceptionally fixated on their husbands/partners and children, whom they do not want abandon (*Redakcia 1*, 2013). In this respect, it is necessary to ensure enlightenment and education of men, so that they would begin to view women in a different light. Romani women ought to be guided, so that they would not accept violent, humiliating, disrespectful, and constraining conduct of their men, and could stand up to against such conduct openly. They have to learn how to gain independence and demand due respect and consideration from their men as legally and socially equal human beings. It is important to make them fully aware of their rights and make them realize how their men misuse their position and power.

Aggressive behavior, physical and mental tyranny, restrictive orders, and browbeating that men practice against their women have a "negative impact mainly on the children in the family, who eventually adopt the behavioral models and patterns of their fathers. This leads to notorious preconceptions that men apply in their own families in the future." As Lukáč says (2013, pp. 105-109), children are usually left to their own resources to learn the ways of the world, experiment on their own, and *learn by watching* the everyday activities in their family. Their participation in the family's activities and their community's life is the primary source of their social education. They are guided to *independence*. They learn to participate in the economic activities in the family, which enables them to acquiring no-verbal communication patterns of adults.

Bringing up Children in a Romani Family

In social upbringing, upbringing is understood as “regulated, intentional, and purposeful introduction of a child into the lifelong process of socialization in a certain, concrete cultural and social system” (Kraus & Poláčková, 2001). Bringing up children in a Romani family is above all a domain of the mother and older siblings. Thus, socialization of a child takes place primarily within the family. Children’s upbringing is however also influenced by a broader circle of relatives and the whole community as a network of emotional and psychological support (Smith, 1997, p. 243). Ondrejkoivič says that the most common adjectives ethnocentric dimensions associated with the mode of upbringing in Romani families are: *inadequate*, *non-inspiring*, *restrictive*, etc. (Ondrejkoivič, 2004). This is related to expected adjustment of the upbringing in the Romani family to the standards of the majority society. If we isolated the Romani community from the rest of the society, theoretically, the functions related to upbringing and socializing within the Romani family as a closed community would be adequate for the purposes of living. The family passes onto the child the Romani culture, its values, standards, behavioral patterns, which however clash with the cultural patterns of the majority. In the Romani family, the style of raising children is liberal and unrestricted. There are no restrictions, commands, or the like—unlike the style of upbringing in the majority society. “Children are brought up for life in the family and own community” (Lukáč, 2013, s. 107). The upbringing of girls and boys is characterized by ingrained stereotypes. Children learn mainly by imitating their parents and have very strong links to them. Very early in their life, they learn to take part in work around the house: the boy works with the father, the girl helps the mother with housework. The world of the child is not strictly separated from the world of adults. Romani children are intensively involved in the problems of adults. As Dubayová says in the text by M. Lukáč (2013, p. 108), the “typical phase of growing up is missing in the Romani child’s upbringing.” Archaic life cycles prevail, i.e., the time when the child slips from childhood into adulthood and has to deal with all the consequences of this transformation in terms of emotions, family relations, and professional orientation.

Enlightenment as a Means of Changing the Position of Romani Women

“Emancipation and equality of Romani women pertains mainly to issues concerning the level and options of education, employment, position in the society, and awareness of one’s rights.” Especially “intelligent, educated, and independent—emancipated Romani women (as well as men) have to engage in the effort to disseminate enlightenment and change of attitudes amongst Romani women, for whom they should be positive examples and much needed support on their road to independence.” It is important to work intensively on changing the way of thinking of Romani women hailing from Romani settlements, as well as of Romani women who already are integrated in the society. Enlightenment and support of Romani women is achieved by promoting the “principles of Romani men and women’s equality; support of equal rights and equal opportunities for Romani women, gender democracy,” and help with forming the life and support of decent partnership of Romani men and women (Poláková et al., 2005). It is equally imperative constantly to “improve their awareness of their rights and upgrade their qualifications,” e.g., by means of various courses, training, and scholarships that would open their access to the necessary education. This is a very challenging task that requires full engagement of “social workers, community workers, lawyers, consultants, psychologists, sociologists, officers at local administrations, etc.” Significantly positive is also the influence of “Christian organizations and movements” that help the Roma attain meaningful social changes and change of attitudes. Individual institutions therefore ought to cooperate with them more. Support for Romani women may also have the form of creating and intensifying women’s networks, as well as through various “promotional projects, activities of non-governmental organizations, associations, movements, confederations, etc. Independent and educated Romani women and” especially “Romani intelligentsia should develop initiatives to help disseminate enlightenment about all aspects of life amongst the Romani population.”

Romani children often *lack adequate models*. The level of education of their parents is extremely low: up to 53.6% men and 64.3% women did not complete basic education (Ďuričková, 2000). Teachers can play an important role as role models. Role models also are individuals from the environment where children spend their leisure.

The educational and socialization functions of the family in Romani families rest above all on the parents. As part of further development of social andragogics, it is important to exert efforts in research and conceptual endeavor by means of realizing family events with Romani parents as active carriers of the Romani culture, cultural patterns, and behavioral models. In the area of social work in the field focused on Romani women, it is essential to follow the principal aspects of the behavior and survival of women for the educational functionality of the family (e.g., mode of communication with children, verbal expressions, adherence to rules, etc.). The issue of primary importance is the behavioral example of the parents, which depends on their personal maturity. The educational level of parents as part of the cultural capital of the Romani family is not particularly crucial for their educational functionality. Romani parents are the target group in project focused on adult education, where it is important to devise and implement deliberate processes of personality formation (Lukáč, 2013, p. 108).

Conclusion

When defining the characteristics of upbringing and education in Romani families, it is necessary to acknowledge the great differentiation of the Romani communities. "The educational style, mode of communication, role distribution, and other 'contents' of family life vary in terms of time, geographical region, and degree of dependence on social and socio-economic conditions of each family" (Lukáč, 2013, p. 106). As Poláková says (2002, p. 63), every Romani community is different and its specific characteristics and social environment. To be able to apply an adequate approach and achieve relevant results, one has to understand the given environment where the Roma live and be familiar with the conditions they grew up in, and respect the local culture, social structure, inter-human dimensions and cultural patterns.

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