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UPWARD SOCIAL MOBILITY OF INDIVIDUALS FROM MINORITY GROUPS: A CASE STUDY OF ROMA WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I investigate the phenomena of social mobility of women from patriarchal communities and the low rates of social upward mobility of women having an ethnic minority background. The aim is to identify the factors that influence access to higher education for Roma women living in Romania. I examine the interaction between social, economic, cultural and institutional factors. This paper offers a clearer understanding of the interconnections between different factors in the decision making of women from minority communities who seek a higher socio-economic status. The results of this research are based on empirical evidence through qualitative research. The paper has an interdisciplinary perspective, though the main approach derives from sociology and political science (policy analysis). An important input in this research comes from a gender studies perspective, especially related to the analysis of the intersection between gender, class and ethnicity.

KEYWORDS

- Roma women
- intersectionality
- gender
- ethnicity
- social mobility
- higher education

1. Introduction

Roma women represent, according to Surdu and Surdu, ‘the most deprived category of the Romanian population’¹. They experience multiple discrimination living at the crossroads of gender and racial discrimination. According to an UN report describing the various forms of discrimination faced by Roma women, ‘as a member of the Romani population, she [the Roma woman] has few advocates and is the target of constant hostility. She is marginalized within her community because of her minority status and within her family because of her gender’.²

¹ L. Surdu, & M Surdu, *Broadening the Agenda: The Status of Romani Women in Romania*, Open Society Institute, Budapest, 2006, p. 5.

² UNDPI (United Nations Department of Public Information), *At the Crossroads of Gender and Racial Discrimination. World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance*. Durban, South

The multiple discriminations expose them to a higher risk of social exclusion. Moreover, previous research has shown that Roma women represent one of the most vulnerable groups in Romania with respect to poverty.³ Scholars on social exclusion identify a chain relation between social exclusion, income, access to the labour market and educational attainment. Education represents, in this perspective, a key instrument to fight against and counteract risk of poverty and social exclusion.

‘Socially excluded are first of all those who do not have an income that would buy them and their families a standard of living in line with their national benchmark. The principal reason for insufficient income is that they do not find a sufficiently well-paying job on the labour market. This leads straightforward to the first policy conclusion: all young people must receive an education that qualifies them for decently paying jobs’.⁴

For the case of Roma women, an increase of the educational attainment would decrease the risk of extreme poverty that Roma women are facing: the cycle of poverty may be interrupted by providing an adequate level of education, and the process of transmitting the poverty from one generation to another could be stopped.⁵ In this context, education can contribute for establishing social equality: ‘good education, including university level degrees’, is considered one of the most important points that define the central tasks of any policy of social inclusion – ‘This is a very demanding task, and yet it is a feasible one’.⁶ Education, including higher education, is approached, from this perspective, as an instrument for upward social mobility that would give Roma women the chance to enter labour market, have better health, be political involved and become financially independent.

In what concerns education, the Roma encounter major problems, being one of the social groups that are most exposed to the risk of dropping out of school. The situation is much more severe in the case of Roma women because of the harsh living conditions and because of patriarchal attitudes within the communities. In Romania, 80% of the school-age children who are not enrolled in the educational system, at any level, are of Roma ethnicity, and 23% of the Roma women over the age of 16 have not benefited from any kind of formal education, while only 3.7% of these women go to high school or college.⁷ Low educational enrolment therefore has a profoundly negative impact on a wide variety of aspects of an individual’s life, including family relations, access to the labour market⁸ and health care, and the

Africa, August 31–September 7, 2001 <http://www.un.org/WCAR/e-kit/gender.htm>

³ A Iancu, ‘Dimensiunea de gen a excluziunii sociale’ [Gender Dimension of Social Exclusion] in O. Băluță (ed), *Parteneri egali. Competitori egali* [Equal Partners. Equal Competitors], Maiko, Bucharest, 2007, pp. 134-183.

⁴ D Arpinte, A Pfaller, & MS Stănculescu, ‘Policy Priorities for Social Inclusion in Romania’ in A. Pfaller & M. Meinardus (eds.), *Social Inclusion in South East Europe*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Sofia, 2010, p. 49.

⁵ Iancu, op.cit., p. 143.

⁶ Arpinte et al., op.cit., p. 49.

⁷ A Dragolea, ‘Dimensiunea de gen a pieței muncii’ [The Gender Dimension of Labour Market], in O. Băluță (ed), *Parteneri egali. Competitori egali* [Equal Partners. Equal Competitors], Maiko, Bucharest, 2007, p. 56.

⁸ Arpinte et al., op.cit., p. 49.

exercise of citizenship rights.⁹ Therefore, levels of educational attainment have to be proportionally distributed within communities. Implicitly also the rate of students who enter higher education has to be equally distributed between social groups.

Participation to higher education is approached, from this perspective, as an instrument for upward social mobility that would give Roma the chance to enter labour market, have better health, be political involved and become financially independent. Given the importance of education for social upward mobility, the provision of non-discriminatory quality education for the Roma minority is expected to have a substantial impact, in terms of living conditions.¹⁰

Therefore, it is important to analyse how access of Roma women to higher education is affected by the interplay between gender, ethnicity and class. In order to increase the understanding of Roma women's status, there is the need to understand how their identity is constructed from both gender and ethnic perspectives: how ethnic identity manifests itself through gender identity and vice versa.¹¹

2. Research aims and hypotheses

The main purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms of social mobility of women from ethnic minority communities. The analysis focuses on access of Roma women to higher education in Romania. But the ultimate goal is to identify similar patterns of social mobility in cases of women from ethnical minorities.

Furthermore, in this study my aim is to explore of the factors that influence the structural social upward mobility of women from minority groups. More specific for the present research case, the aim is to identify the factors that impact Roma women's access to higher education and to determine how these factors interact. Is the low access of Roma women to education a question of class (access to resources), a question of ethnicity (different values ethnical values or the relation between majority and minority), or a question of gender (social roles of Roma women inside and outside their community)? The present paper contributes to understanding the underlying mechanism of participation of Roma women in HE. The factors that interact and influence the decision-making about entering HE are derived from the intersection between gender and ethnicity.

⁹ N Fraser, 'After the Family Wage: Gender Equity and the Welfare State', *Political Theory*, vol. 22, 1994, p. 603.

¹⁰ C Bruggemann, 'Roma Education in Comparative Perspective. Analysis of the UNDP/World Bank/EC Regional Roma Survey 2011', *Roma Inclusion Working Papers*, United Nations Development Programme, Bratislava, 2012, p. 10.

¹¹ E Vincze, 'Forward to the Volume' in N. Bițu & C. Morteau (Autors of the Volume), *Are the Rights of the Child Negotiable? The Case of Early Marriages within Roma Communities in Romania*, Report, UNICEF & Romani CRISS, Bucharest, 2010, p. 7.

Central for a good understanding of how these factors interact is the concept of intersectionality, a framework essential in the analysis of multiple and complex inequalities. Intersectionality offers an explanatory model for grasping the background of the ‘inequalities and discrimination that members of certain communities face’.¹² For the scope of the present paper, the concept of intersectionality broadens the possibilities of considering the specificities of and the diversity among Roma women: on the intersection between gender and ethnicity, Roma women are shown as ‘a category with a major risk of discrimination in the majority of the spheres of life’.¹³

To summarise, the paper examines the participation of Roma in higher education in Romania, focusing on the factors that affect Roma women’s entrance in higher education. The main research question is: What are the factors that impact the entrance to higher education of Roma young women and how do these factors interact?

The research started from the following hypothesis:

1. The lower the economic resources of Roma women and their families the lower the chances to enter higher education.
2. The higher the number of experiences of perceived discrimination, the lower the probability to aspire to enter higher education.
3. The wider the cultural distance between a certain Roma community and the majority population, the lower the chances of a Roma woman (from that certain community) to access higher education.
4. Family and community support for education have a positive impact on higher educational attainment.
5. The lower the compatibility between following a higher educational program with the gender roles of Roma women specific to a community, the lower the chances for these Roma women to enter higher education.

3. Methodological considerations

For this research I undertook twenty interviews with Roma women living in Romania, aged 18 to 30, who attend or have attended higher education programs. For recruiting respondents I used the snowball technique.

The respondents were at different moments in their career paths. Either they were just starting their undergraduate education or they were already pursuing graduate studies or they were already on the labour market. Their backgrounds were also very diverse. Most of them (seventeen out of twenty), at the time of the

¹² A Kocze, & RM Popa, *Missing Intersectionality. Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Current Research and Policies on Romani Women in Europe*, Center for Policy Studies Central European University, Budapest, 2009, p. 13.

¹³ M Ungureanu, ‘Principalele rezultate ale cercetării’ [Main Results of the Research] in C. Mocanu (ed), *Discriminarea multiplă în România* [Multiple Discrimination in Romania]. Societatea de Analize Feministe ANA & Institutul Național de statistică, Bucharest, 2008, p. 20.

interview, were involved in their daily lives in activities related to Roma communities and acting as mediators between these communities and the larger society. Twelve of them speak the Romani language and during their childhood or adolescence they spent some time in traditional Roma communities. None of the respondents is from a closed or segregated community or from a family that rejects having contact with the majority population. Eight of the respondents were from mixed families, with a non-Roma parent. The names of the respondents were changed, in order to protect their identity and to ensure confidentiality.

In order to understand how different factors interact to influence educational access and how these factors are perceived at a personal level, the use of qualitative research methods was more appropriate than quantitative research. I chose to use as research instrument a combination between narrative interview and semi-structured deep interview. The reason for selecting this method was to offer the respondent the opportunity to provide the story of her life and education, through her own lenses.

4. Results of the empirical research

The lives and the educational paths of the interviewees were to a large extent different from one another. I identified common patterns even though the women faced different problems, came from different socio-economic backgrounds, and had different educational experiences. During the interviews I could discern several intertwined factors. The most apparent factors included economic situations, family support, and attitudes of the out-groups. There was not one single factor that decisively influenced the access of women to university-level education. Having an appropriate economic status was generally the determinative factor, but this was rarely enough. Coming from a family where at least one of the parents had some level of education could have made the educational path easier. Nevertheless, this was not a necessary and sufficient factor, since in other cases access to education was enabled by the support of teachers and academic faculty or by being in a network where education was encouraged. However, the moral support or, at least, the acceptance of the family was in all cases necessary in order to be able to go further with the studies. Another important factor was the attitudes of the out-groups. None of the respondents considered that they were subjects of severe cases of discrimination, though sometimes they felt prejudice and stigmatization and argued that this discouraged them in going further with their studies. However, several interviewees mentioned that the family and/or the community were sceptical with regard to pursuing further education. The factor that motivated them to achieve university-level education was the belief that through education they can have a better life, earn qualifications and get good jobs.

A higher level of income was in most cases the defining factor that made access to education easier. Conversely, lack of money determined the withdrawal from studies and increased the chances of school dropout: 'I had to work because of financial problems that I had, the death of my father' (Tania). Lack of financial

resources created the impossibility of achieving good results: 'I had problems at home. We barely had any bread. [...] I liked to study, but I didn't have the power to concentrate because I was always hungry. [...] At the Bacalaureate [high-school graduation exam], at the physical education exam, I could not resist because I hadn't eaten' (Aura).

The respondents who did not have financial troubles declared that this helped them to achieve good results and to get admitted to university: 'I've had a lot of support from my parents. I haven't had financial difficulties because my parents tried as much as they could to give me everything I needed. I also had tutoring [a private and paid practice, common in Romania in order to ensure successful admission at BA studies]. I took extra lessons in chemistry' (Valentina), said one of the respondents, who was happy to be one of the very few Roma and the only Roma girl who entered the best high school in her community at that time. In her case the educational path was smoother. Furthermore, her studies were not hindered by any interruption.

The financial and moral support of the family was also vital for increasing the access to education. In some of the cases even the scarce resources of the family were invested in education: 'Let's just say that there were some days when we had to eat just potatoes, but father still sent us to school' (Ana), whereas, in certain cases, the other family members did not consider education as a priority: 'I did not have money for the tax of an exam. I would have had it if my father hadn't decided to gamble the money' (Aura). Comparatively, the two types of attitudes of the family made a considerable difference in the possibilities of respondents' educational achievement. In the instances where the family does not offer support, educational attainment is more difficult. In these instances, moreover, there are many gaps between the periods when the respondent went to school and periods when education had to be interrupted.

Education is negotiated mainly in terms of social reproduction. If the group of belonging, namely the family, had little access to education, then there are small chances for the individual, namely the Roma girl, to pursue higher education. Related to the idea of belonging to a social class, social networks played an important role in the educational achievements of the respondents who were from a lower class. The respondents from the middle class declared that the process of deciding to go to university was a joint one that including the parents. For the respondents who were from families with lower income and lower or no educational achievements, the help provided by a person who was either from the larger family group or a person involved in the educational system was particularly important.

This support can be in different ways, either on an administrative level or at the emotional and psychological levels. Some of the interviewees confessed that a barrier in the process of application to higher education was the fact that they were not familiar with the application procedures, and that their families were not able to guide them. Hence, receiving information about the possibilities to

continue the studies and about the application procedure is very important: ‘My godfather told me to go to a certain school’ (Tania), ‘someone from an NGO helped me to prepare the file with the papers’. Therefore, receiving administrative and informational support is a deciding factor. On the other hand, emotional and moral support and encouragement proved to be equally important in facilitating access to education: ‘without the advice of that professor I could not have made it. He made me trust myself and [convinced me] that I am intelligent and can study further’ (Mirela). The most important aspect of this type of support is to make the individuals perceive that admission to and successful performance in higher education is something achievable, that they can make it, and that there are already positive examples in this respect: ‘when I moved to the new school I met a school counsellor that had a past similar to mine and gave me good advice’ (Aura).

Receiving administrative, informational and moral support is highly correlated with the variable of educational expectation. All but two respondents declared that their decision to study and subsequently their admission to an institution of higher education surprised their family. Therefore, the role of counselling was much more important for them, for they could not receive this type of counselling from their family, friends or social network. In addition, higher education studies were perceived as something unachievable in their social network and reference group: ‘I was the first girl in my community that went to university’ (Mirela). ‘My mother was a cleaning lady in a [prestigious school in Bucharest], and ever since I was little she took me with her and I made friends with children there. Going to university was for them something natural, something that was expected to happen. For me it was not like that, it was something that no one would have thought it possible’ (Maria). Receiving counselling and encouragement has a high impact, especially in the conditions faced by lower-class families, to a higher degree, risk avoidance and they fear that higher education studies cannot be pursued by someone like them: ‘Before going to university all were laughing at me because I was trying it’ (Maria), or ‘All my family was so surprised when I graduated from the university. They did not take me seriously and they did not expect it’ (Carmen).

Another central factor that influences access to education is the attitude of the family and of the community towards education. The results of the research show that the respondents who stated that they had the full support of the family (financial, moral and informational) had much greater chances to enter higher education than others. For none of the respondents was education against the social norms of the community. But the interpretation of this fact should not necessarily generate enthusiasm, and the idea that education is compatible with the social norms of all Roma communities should not be extrapolated or taken for granted. This last consideration is due to the fact that the sample of the present research is limited and not representative of all Roma communities. The segregated communities or the very traditional ones are not represented in the sample of this research. Moreover, there are few examples of members of such communities attending higher education, and such examples are rather exceptional. Therefore it can be concluded that the type of community they belong to is highly relevant in

enabling/disabling the access of Roma women to university. When they were asked if it matters the type of community in which they were raised, all of the respondents said that this was definitely important for them: 'If I would had been born in a family of Căldărari [in English And Romani language Kalderash, one type of Roma ethnic sub-group believed to be more traditional compared to others] I wouldn't have been to school' (Aura). 'For example, in the Gabori [another Roma ethnic sub-group, living mostly in west part of Romania in closed communities] families, the girls are not allowed to go to school. It is something about tradition. They get married and have children. There the tradition is kept very strictly' (Carmen). One of the respondents explained why traditional families are not willing to let the girls to continue the studies, arguing that staying a virgin or else remaining faithful to the husband is a strict demand in the communities, and that going to school means being in contact with the ones who do not have the same social norms: '[The family members] are afraid that other girls will teach her that they can love someone other than her husband, how it is to love another man' (Aura). 'In my family, too, there were questions about why I needed so much school'.

The social norms of a community should not be interpreted as something unmovable or entirely fixed: 'The Căldărari started to send their children to school' (Valentina). This shows that some types of communities are more resistant than others, but all these communities are in permanent change. For instance, even if the Căldărari are rather isolated communities, they are still in a system of cultural exchange with other Roma or with Romanians.

Not living in a segregated traditional community is also seen as an advantage that facilitated access to education: 'As my parents were living in town and not in the community, I had the occasion to go to a good primary school and afterwards to a good high school. This helped me very much'. Living in a closed community means in most cases not learning the Romanian language, which would hinder an individual from further education or otherwise create difficulties in achieving similar results as native Romanian speakers.

Through the research I also aimed to identify the type of relationship between respondents and their non-Roma colleagues and teachers. The respondents affirmed that they did not often go through episodes of discrimination or marginalization. Having a welcoming environment is one factor that has a positive impact on educational attainment. This shows that there is a common pattern according to which all those who succeed in higher education are those who had integrated in the broader society and had developed good relations with the members of the majority ethnic group. Moreover, as none of the respondents stated they felt discrimination or stigma for a sustained period of time during their primary or secondary education, it can be argued that one necessary factor of entering higher education is the absence of perceived discrimination or stigma.

When asked to identify what motivated them to enter higher education, the answers were in large proportion connected with the idea of acquiring a good

professional qualification that could enable them to have a better life. For the respondents who came from families in the lower class, the main reason for going to school was to live a better life, which can be understood as the aspiration for social upward mobility. In the case of the respondents whose parents were well educated and belonged to the middle class, higher education is viewed as a natural way of maintaining their social status.

The special educational programs for Roma and the public policies in this field had also a positive impact on both educational attainment and access to higher education for Roma women. Twelve out of ten respondents were beneficiaries of special educational programs or policies. In some cases these policies gave them the chance to study in better schools, while in other cases it increased their trust in their own powers. In this way, such programs and policies gave them the possibility to be in contact with professors who later guided them in their career. Affirmative action measures – in particular the allotted places in university for Roma students, which functions as a kind of quota system implemented in Romania – represents the most common program used by the respondents for entry into higher education.

5. Conclusion of the research.

Exploitation of the results in terms of public policies

The main purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the social mobility of women from minority patriarchal communities. While the analysis focused on the case of Roma women in Romania, the ultimate aim is to identify similar patterns for other minority women who belong to patriarchal communities. A better understanding of the way factors interconnect in the upward mobility of women from ethnic minority groups can provide a wealth of support in the process of policy making. The outcomes of this research will enrich the documentation used for public policies and measures that can facilitate Roma women's access to higher education in particular, and access to education for all ethnic minorities in general.

The results of this empirical research show that access to higher education is dependent on a series of factors that are clearly highly interconnected. The common pattern in all the interviews was that the respondents came from families and communities in which education did not violate social norms. For an individual who belongs to a minority community, this shows that access to education is facilitated when education is positively valued inside his or her community. The incompatibility between the educational system and the norms of the social group might be the main reason preventing women from attaining education. We should bear in mind, however, that values are transformable; there are no fixed, unmovable entities. For this reason, educational institutions should create a space for dialogue between educators and communities. In this way, the perception of education inside Roma communities can be improved. Additionally, educators and educational institutions learn to be more sensitive to the needs of Roma communities. Finally,

the educational system can adapt so as to include Roma values, too, for example by introducing into its curricula Roma language classes and Roma history.

This paper further shows that access to education for Roma women is in a large part dependent on the type of community they belong to. Social networks, affirmative public policies and good relations with teachers and other fellows can positively influence the access of Roma women to (higher) education. Moreover, the level of trust in the relation between educators and Roma communities remains low, and thus needs to be improved significantly. If this relation is to be improved, then educators will be better trained in terms of intercultural skills and discrimination in schools will diminish.

Further, belonging to the lower class – which typically correlates to having few economic possibilities, to having parents who cannot offer a proper educational counseling, and to having few if any role models to emulate – decreases one's chances for educational attainment. For this reason, the role of educational institutions has to be raised in order to create equal opportunities for those who for those who do not have inbuilt socio-economic advantages within their families. Tutoring inside schools, combined with career counselling and emotional support, would help pupils from minority communities catch up with their middle- or upper-class peers. This measure would be highly beneficial, since it would mitigate many social disparities. The economic disparities can be overcome by offering educational stipends and creating spaces inside schools for after-school classes, in order to give pupils the chance to prepare for their studies.

According to the results of the study, educational expectation plays an important role in educational attainment. Therefore, teachers, communities and pupils themselves should perceive Roma women's access to higher education as a reachable goal, rather than an exception. Role models and school counselling should undertake this task in order to overcome internalized discrimination and to convince and encourage Roma pupils that they can benefit from higher education in the same way as the majority population.

To conclude, Roma women's access to higher education in particular, and the social mobility of individuals in general, can be facilitated by creating a positive attitude within state institutions towards members of this group, by taking affirmative action measures and by minimizing economic disparities.

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