

Babeş-Bolyai University
Faculty of History and Philosophy
University of Iceland
Faculty of History and Philosophy

**The interlinking of gender, state policies and lived experience among
Romanian Roma women during the Communist regime.
An oral history research**

Doctoral Supervisors:

Prof. Doru Radosav, Ph.D.

Prof. Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, Ph.D.

Doctoral Student:

Ionela-Maria Bogdan

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Summary

Roma people represent an important minority in Romania. During the recent years they have often been in the public scrutiny, attitudes towards them being fairly negative. They are portrayed in a manner which sums up different stereotypes people have about them: they are regarded as exotic, unreliable, thievish; live at the outskirts of cities, come from India, and the list can easily go on. But beyond these assumptions, there is little knowledge about their history and background. One of the main reasons for this is their custom of transmitting their history orally, with no written documents. At the present time, Roma people are in the process of finding a “voice” within the main society, mainly through NGOs, which makes them aware of their rights and obligations, helping them to improve their status in the Romanian society. These efforts are not enough though, given the fact that according to statistics, Romanians continue to manifest a vivid reluctance when it comes to Roma, maintaining a dismissive attitude towards them: many Romanians believe that Roma in Romania do not have the right to call themselves Romanians. The Roma do not form a cohesive group, but regardless their particularities, very often come under public scrutiny with negative aspects, all of them being thus included into the same category. From this perspective, one can claim that “issues which capture society’s attention clearly legitimize the image of cultural and social backwardness of Third World peoples,”¹ where Roma are included.

At the present time, there is a vast amount of bibliography dedicated to the Roma people and their history, but most of it, even though it refers to them, was not produced by them. The works regarding Roma people portray a tendency of starting with their immigration towards Europe, but the interest regarding their situation decreases after the Second World War. One work that needs to be mentioned here is “The Gypsies of Eastern Europe”, published in 1995 by David Crowe, which offers general information about the topic, also giving some insight about

¹ Angéla Kóczé, “The Limits of Rights-Based Discourse in Romani Women’s Activism: The Gender Dimension in Romani Politics,” in Nando Sigona, Nidhi Trehan, *Romani Politics in Contemporary Europe: Poverty, Ethnic Mobilization and the Neoliberal Order*, Palgrave Macmillan, (2009), p. 147.

the situation of the Roma people under the Communist regime. István Pogány in his work “The Roma Café Human Rights and the Plight of the Romani People” makes a pertinent analysis of the problems faced by Roma in Central and Eastern Europe.² The theme of the paper is similar to the one written by Isabel Fonseca, “Bury me standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey.”³ Thus, topics such as: racism, stereotypes which the Roma very often face are brought into discussion, as well as the transition from Communism to Post-communism. The book by Ian Hancock, “We are the Romani People” is another general work which offers information about the history and language of the Roma communities.⁴ Will Guy wrote a volume “Between past and future: the Roma of Central and Eastern Europe” in 2001, in which one may find useful information not only about the Roma in general, but also about the Roma living in Romania.

In Romania, Roma communities were brought to the fore through the early ethnographical research belonging to Ion Chelcea, in the book “Țiganiii din România. Monografie etnografică”, arguing that Roma should be studied by placing them into different categories.⁵ In the volume “Țiganiii între ignorare și îngrijorare” coordinated by Elena Zamfir and Cătălin Zamfir, Roma communities are studied from a sociological perspective following the revolution of 1989.⁶ Sociologist Ada Engebriksen also brought into attention the lives of the Roma people, writing a book about the Roma communities from a village in Transylvania and their relations with the locals. Result of a field work of more than a year, when the author lived in a village in Transylvania, interacting with both Roma and Romanians there and the work succeeds to capture the relations of power established between the majority and the minorities, and the way they live together on a daily basis. The author mentions that there is an “asymmetric interdependence relationship” between the two sides, which in turn reflects on the male-female relationship in the Roma community.⁷ Enikő Vincze is another scholar who wrote extensively about the situation of Roma communities in Romania, focusing on aspects such as: discrimination, housing policies, gender issues. More recently, anthropologist Cătălina Tesăr wrote about the so-called traditional Roma communities in Romania: the *Cortorari*. Her work

² István Pogány, *The Roma Café: Human Rights and the Plight of the Romani People*, London: Pluto Press, 2004.

³ Isabel Fonseca, *Bury me standing: the Gypsies and their journey*, London: Vintage Books, 2006.

⁴ Ian Hancock, *We are the Romani people*, London: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002.

⁵ Ion Chelcea, *Țiganiii din România. Monografie etnografică*, București: Editura Institutului Central de Statistică, 1944.

⁶ Elena Zamfir, Cătălin Zamfir, *Țiganiii între ignorare și îngrijorare*, București: Alternative, 1993.

⁷ Ada Engebriksen, *Exploring Gypsiness: Power, Exchange and Interdependence in a Transylvanian Village*, New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007.

“Women married off to Chalice: Gender, Kinship and Wealth among Romanian Cortorari Gypsies” is emphasizing aspects such as the tradition of early marriage and its rituals among others.⁸ Moreover, in her article “Becoming *Rom* (male), becoming *Romni* (female) among Romanian Cortorari Roma: On body and gender” the same author tackles gender issues arguing the reconsideration of the importance of physical bodies for Romani conceptions of gender.⁹

A preeminent Romanian historian who wrote extensively about the Roma people is Viorel Achim, one of his most renowned works being “The Roma in Romanian History”, in which he gives a historical perspective about the situation of the Roma in Romania. According to this work, the Roma had the same status as the rest of the population during the Communist regime. At the same time, it is suggested that some of the measures were favorable to the Roma, who benefited from jobs and housing. The work under discussion manages to make a brief overview of the situation of the Roma in Romania during the Communist regime as well as their status after 1989.

Throughout this thesis I will offer an analysis of the status of Roma women in Romania by referring to them in terms of their differences and commonalities given by their social background and I appeal to one of Iris Marion Young’s theory, which proposes “a way of thinking about women as a social collective without requiring that all women have common attributes or a common situation.”¹⁰ Rather than considering women as a group which is a “collection of persons who recognize themselves and one another as in a unified relation with one another” and its members “mutually acknowledge that together they undertake a common project,”¹¹ I am inclined to view women as series, term that defines women as a “collective whose members are unified passively by the relation their actions have to material objects and practico-inert histories.”¹² Thus women do not necessarily follow a specific pattern which one would think goes in accordance with their social background. Iris Marion Young goes further with her definition of women as social collective and argues that “to be part of the same series it is not necessary to identify a set of common attributes that every member has, because their

⁸ Cătălina-Constantina Tesăr, “*Women Married Off to Chalice*”: *Gender, Kinship and Wealth Among Romanian Cortorari Gypsies*”, University College London, Department of Anthropology, PhD Dissertation, 2012.

⁹ Cătălina-Constantina Tesăr, “Becoming *Rom* (male), becoming *Romni* (female) among Romanian Cortorari Roma: On body and gender”, in *Romani Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2012).

¹⁰ Iris Marion Young, “Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective”, in *Signs*, no. 3, vol.19, (1994), p. 714.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 724.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 728.

membership is defined not by something they are but rather by the fact that in their diverse existences and actions they are oriented around the same objects or practico-inert structures.”¹³

After engaging with Roma women throughout various oral history field campaigns, I argue that it does not exist a universal portrait of Roma women, and I make reference to Chandra Talpade Mohanty who claims that: “the assumption that women are an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic and racial location or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally,”¹⁴ which from my perspective can be applied to Roma women also. In this sense I believe one needs to make a distinction between Roma women as individuals and their so-called identity group(s) that more often than not, the non-Roma ascribe to them.

Nonetheless, the manner in which both Roma and non-Roma women are represented manages to “reinforce a cultural politics that is unfavourable to the aspirations of Roma to achieve the prerogatives of citizenship freely granted to other Romanians.”¹⁵ Nicoleta Bițu, a Romanian Roma activist, tried on a numerous occasions to raise awareness on the fact that Roma women cannot be included into a pattern and that their experiences vary greatly according to the background they come from and the level of integration they have into the main society.¹⁶ Referring to the situation of Roma women, Alexandra Oprea, a Romanian scholar, acknowledges their oppression but at the same time argues that it is vital to “challenge the monofocal conceptualization of <Romani culture> as being the sole factor affecting the experiences of Romani women.”¹⁷ Nicolae Gheorghe, another preeminent Roma activist, raised awareness in regard to the manner in which the Roma are perceived and reinforced the aforementioned statements by claiming that it is extremely dangerous to place all Roma within the same category. According to him, the more we acknowledge the diversity of this population the better we will understand their specificities. After my fieldwork experience and discussing with Roma

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Iris Marion Young, “Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective”, in *Signs*, no. 3, vol.19, (1994), p. 728.

¹⁵ Iulia Hașdeu, “Imagining the Gypsy Woman. Representations of Roma in Romanian Museum,” in *Third Text*, vol. 22, no. 3, (2008), p. 356.

¹⁶ Nicoleta Bițu, “Femeia romă: între două lumi”[available online at <http://www.romanicriss.org/Femeia%20roma%20intre%20doua%20lumi%20%20Bitu%202006.pdf>], last accessed at 18.04.2016.

¹⁷ Alexandra Oprea, “The Arranged Marriage of Ana-Maria Cioabă, Intra-Community Oppression and Romani Feminist Ideals,” in *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, vol. 12 (2), (2005), p. 138.

people from different communities and backgrounds, one can only agree with all of the above. Roma themselves, would very often emphasize that they, the Roma from a specific community are different from the ones who live in the neighbouring village, town or county, claiming that their way of being is better than the way of being of the other ones, whereas the other ones are difficult to deal with, untrustworthy, uncivilised, dangerous and so on. The manner in which Roma represent themselves and their culture often constitutes “simply responses to other people’s expectations of the performance of otherness.”¹⁸ Bearing these facts in mind, I believe it is important to continuously emphasize the fact that the process of stereotyping Roma people is damaging for the Roma people themselves but also for those who do the stereotyping and perceive them as the Other, who need to be civilised by the majority. The literature on the subject claims that “stereotype is often combined with prejudice and becomes a dangerous instrument for conflict outburst.”¹⁹ Concerning these aspects, I believe people are reluctant to abandon their comfort zone and interact with those who are not familiar with.

This research embarks in a complex journey of examining the manner in which the idea of gender and gender designated roles developed in Roma communities in Romania, under the Communist rule, while also claiming that Roma and non-Roma women benefited from the same treatment when discussing the application of state policies. I intend to inquire the process in which gender roles were brought into attention through the policies implemented by the Communist Party, focusing on a national minority, that even though it was not recognized as such during the time under investigation, represented a significant part of the Romanian population: the Roma people. One of the issues I raised in my research concerns the analysis of the reproductive behavior of Roma women during the Communist regime, aiming to examine the manner in which Roma women as well as Roma communities in their entirety have related to the pronatalist policy of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Among the scholars who took upon themselves to investigate the experiences of non-Roma women in Romania, one should pay close attention to the work by Gail Kligman who managed to make an elaborate radiography of the “politics of reproduction” during Ceaușescu’s regime. In regard to Romanian scholars who investigated the

¹⁸ Nicolae Gheorghe, Gergő Pulay, “Choices to be made and prices to be paid: potential roles and consequences in Roma activism and policy-making”, p. 9, available online at [<http://romanobutiq.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Chapter-NG-Final-26-04-11-1.pdf>], last accessed at 22.04.2016.

¹⁹ Gabriela Crețu, “The Image of Roma in Romania after the fall of Communism and its Media Representation: from Myth to Reality,” *Sfera Politicii*, no. 4-5 (2014), p. 114.

period under scrutiny, worth mentioning are the works by Corina Doboş and Luciana Jinga, anthropologist Elena Bărbulescu as well as Adriana Băban.

In Chapter One titled “*People as power: The politics of reproduction in daily life*” the emphasis is being placed upon the pronatalist measures implemented during Ceauşescu’s rule. In this sense, I will make reference to the foundation of these demographic measures which is considered to be Decree 770 from 1966 through which abortion on demand was prohibited and punishable by law with few exceptions. Other punitive measures which followed after this Decree such as additional taxes for those who were childless or complicated divorce procedures will also be analysed. In order to encourage women to have many children the State also introduced a series of measures such as allowances for mothers and children, child support benefits or affordable daycare facilities among others. The (non)impact of these new measures will also be in-depth analysed. The main aim throughout this chapter is to bring to the fore the experiences of Roma women who in one way or another had to deal with these policies of increasing birth rates at all costs. In this sense “the social memory of the pronatalist times” will represent an essential part of this chapter.

As a starting point, I base my argumentation on the fact that Socialist Romania, at least in theory, guaranteed the equality of its citizens, and they all were treated in the same manner. When it comes to gender, the Communist regime did not perceive the emancipation of women in terms of individual liberties but in terms of proletarian emancipation. Thus, I analysed the way in which Roma in Romania relate to the Communist era and to the changes that occurred during that period. As previously stated, the emphasis was placed upon various gender related issues: the pronatalist measures implemented and promoted during the period under scrutiny, their consequences and deeper implications they had among Romanian Roma and the participation in the Socialist labour market of Roma women as part of the modernization process. In this respect, Gail Kligman managed to make a vivid description of what these policies really represented and referred to them as being a case of state violence. When it comes to the pronatalist policies Gail Kligman claimed that “the political demographic policies of the Ceauşescu regime contributed significantly to the processes of social atomization and dehumanization” and “remain a tragic legacy of that regime.”²⁰ This being said, addressing the situation(s) of Roma women during the Communist regime in correlation to policies that were implemented during that time is extremely

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

important. The Decree 770/1966 which prohibited abortions on demand and the consequences that followed represented a main topic of inquiry in my research. In practice, this measure represented an instrument through which society was strictly controlled and aimed at increasing birth rates for the sake of constructing of a greater nation. In this sense, women were “exhorted by the state to fulfil their reproductive duties”²¹ becoming socialist mothers, a role on which women were supposed to take great pride upon. Nonetheless, this policy did not have the desired effect and in the end it backfired: an overwhelming number of women underwent illegal abortions, risking their lives and freedom in order to get rid of unwanted pregnancies. In this sense, “women remembered traditional methods of contraception and created new strategies for terminating unwanted pregnancies, including not only <undesired> pregnancies, but also those impossible for the mother to assume from a socio-economic point of view.”²²

I argue upon the necessity of re-evaluating the situation of Roma women during the Communist regime, challenging at the same time the myth claiming that Roma households benefited from the pronatalist policies, having many children and using it as a main source of income due to the social allowances received for children. A reconsideration of the general belief that “Decree 770” represented a blessing in disguise for Roma women who benefited from the allowances received from the state, is also necessary.

Participation in the labour market was an essential aspect of the Communist doctrine, and therefore the Roma fell, as all other citizens, under the rule which compelled everyone who was able to work, to do so. The involvement of Roma women into the work environment during the Communist regime and the relations established among co-workers is other aspect analysed throughout my thesis. Women did not have only the obligation to bear children for a greater nation, they also had to bring their contribution in the working sector. The Communist regime offered women the possibility of finding stable employment and building a career, “liberating” women from their households and kitchens and offering them a chance to “construct their identity outside of the home and family.”²³ Thus, due to these policies women had a chance at

²¹ Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella goes to Market: citizenship, gender and women's movements in East Central Europe*, Verso, London, 1993, p. 46.

²² Lorena Anton, “On Memory Work In Post Communism Europe,” in *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, vol. 18 (2), (2009), p. 110.

²³ Jill Massino, Shana Penn, *Gender Politics and everyday life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009, p. 13.

demonstrating they were more than the “tender of the domestic hearth.”²⁴ Moreover, many women were drawn into the economic sector under the conviction of the “emancipatory power of paid labour.”²⁵

Many Roma women benefited indeed from stable jobs which empowered them to gain further independence in their households. I made use of Barbara Einhorn’s theory and analysed this new opportunity for women from the point of view of a new “burden” which women undertook: women had to be productive workers but also mothers and they had to find a way to succeed in both roles: “the result was that women in state-socialist countries felt thoroughly overstretched and overstressed. The exigencies of this double and often triple burden meant that many East Central European women perceived their right to work more as an obligation. This view is understandable, given that access to many social benefits was tied to employment.”²⁶ In this sense, one can also suggest the possibility of generating “new structures of dependence,”²⁷ throughout these kinds of policies, with women being obliged to seek and maintain employment in order to preserve other benefits.

While arguing that employment represented a source of independence for Roma women, I also analysed if the so-called equality between workers, much praised by the Communist doctrine did exist in reality. There was a discrepancy in regard to the economy sectors in which women worked and a so-called trend in choosing specific professions, considered more feminine. This came in contradiction with the equality proclaimed by the Communist doctrine; moreover, the same sectors of economy that became feminized started to lose prestige and were remunerated less.²⁸ Thus, educated women usually worked as school teachers, nurses or different type of clerks while women who were not college graduates took employment in textile factories, as housekeepers or in other sectors of light industry. All of the above are analysed in the third chapter of the thesis, titled: “*Back then, everybody used to work: Towards empowering Roma (women) through work environment*”.

In Chapter Three titled “*Changing relationships in changing times: marriage and domestic life*” I analysed the idea of marriage and domestic life among Roma communities both

²⁴ Barbara Einhorn, “Where Have All the Women Gone? Women and the Women’s Movement in East Central Europe,” *Feminist Review*, (1991), p. 18.

²⁵ Irene Dölling, “Between Hope and Helplessness: Women in the GDR after the <Turning Point>,” *Feminist Review*, no. 39, Shifting Territories: Feminism & Europe, (1991), p. 9.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

non-traditional and so-called traditional, aiming at observing the manner in which these aspects have developed over time. When it comes to the so-called traditional Roma communities such as the *Cortorari* and the *Gabori* I emphasized the practice of “early marriages”, a well known and debated custom, more often than not condemned during recent years by the authorities and the public. Moreover, I will also analyse the phenomenon of “bride kidnapping” which is frequently mentioned among the *Cortorari* and the *Gabori* being also linked with their reason for which they decide to practice “early marriages.” One of the main aims is to obtain a coherent understanding of these customs and their specificities by tracing them to the Communist era, and to understand if the idea of “early marriages” was identical to the one in the present and to get a sense of the extend of this tradition. Another issue that I wish to address revolves around the legal aspects of marriage and the importance that they give to it. Marriage and domestic life within the non-traditional Roma communities will occupy the other significant part of this part of the thesis. Throughout this chapter I also wish to analyse the status of Roma women within the household referring to potential gender imbalances.

Throughout the Communist regime the idea of family went through numerous transformations influenced by elements such as growing industrialization, urbanization, access to education and the list can easily go on. Characteristics referring to “the universality and precocity of marriage” nonetheless continued to exist throughout the Communist era.²⁹ The topics of marriage and domestic life during the Communist regime in Romania have been heavily covered by the academia throughout the years, with emphasis being placed upon the majority society. Aspects referring to the manner in which these topics have developed among the Roma people living in Romania and which represent one of the country’s main minorities are incredibly scarce and very often sensationalize the Roma communities. I analysed the manner in which the meanings of marriage and domestic life among Roma communities were refashioned throughout the Communist regime, aiming at offering a nuanced understanding of it.

Most of those living in Romania, even those who did not experience the Communist regime has concluded at least once, when expressing his disapproval towards something that: “it’s like in the Ceaușescu’s time”. The reminiscence of day to day life throughout the Communist period is very present among the Romanian society and very much debated as well.

²⁹ Luminița Dumănescu, “Regimul matrimonial în comunism”, in Alina Hurubean (coord.), *Statutul femeii în România Comunistă: politici publice și viață privată*, Institutul European, Iași, 2015, p. 115.

An analysis of the manner in which Roma women relate to the everyday life under the Communist rule seemed essential in order to understand how they managed to juggle between “constructing socialism”, participating to mandatory public manifestations, being wives, mothers, good workers and fulfilling other daily chores. In theory, tasks such as: cooking, cleaning, doing groceries or washing seem to be mundane tasks that do not raise significant challenges. Throughout the Communist regime, and especially throughout the 1980’s such activities were tedious and time consuming due to the penury that characterized the country.

In Chapter Four titled “*A life story is also a serious business: Roma women and the everyday life under Communism*” I analysed the manner in which Roma women relate to their day to day life, aiming at offering a coherent analyse in regard to the following: the shortages of Communist era and the various strategies used by Roma families in general and Roma women in particular in order to overcome them; I also brought to the fore the manner in which they perceived their free time, the leisure activities practiced, while also emphasizing the recollections regarding public manifestations such as: the National Day of 23rd August, 1st of May, Woman’s Day, Mother’s Day and so on. Last but not least, the post-communist nostalgia encountered throughout the majority of the oral history interviews was emphasized, with the aim of understanding its role in shaping the Roma women recollections in respect to the Communist past.

The voice(s) of Roma women in Romania have more often than not been neglected or it was assumed they do not have anything valuable to say, invoking their submissiveness to paternalistic values and their ties to tradition. By using oral history as the main method of inquiry, I have managed to bring to light coherent narratives which show that Roma and non-Roma women often related in the same manner to the changes brought by the Communist regime. By emphasizing the manner in which interviewees remember specific events I have shown that oral history can represent a mechanism of coping with a traumatic past. When discussing the Communist regime in Romania and the effect it had on its people, one should take into account that Roma in general and Roma women in particular are integral part of those people and should be acknowledged accordingly.

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