Hegemony in the Roma family

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Abstract

This article is intended to describe the current hegemonic masculinity within the Roma family structure in the Czech Republic, with regard to changes related to developments in the majority society and the current socioeconomic situation of the Roma. The theoretical context of this article is based on the paradigm of masculine hegemony as it exists and has existed in the Roma families. Data for the study came from semi-structured interviews with 30 Roma females and 30 Roma males living as couples, in three Czech cities. The main finding reveals a dichotomy between the traditional roles of Roma women, i.e. care for the family and the household, and the present functions, i.e. contributing to the family income through social benefits. We observed a decline in the traditional role of Roma men, who were often unemployed. We related the change in the roles of men to the "non-functionality of the men", contributing to the emerging potential for emancipation of Roma women. However, the traditional patriarchal Roma family is structured such that men are given the main decision making powers, which has slowed changes in marginalized Roma families. Additionally, social pressures against women as well as socially conditioned pressures that act to preserve hegemonic masculinity, have largely prevented the realization of the potential for emancipation of Roma women, or if a woman tries to leave her non-functioning husband.

INTRODUCTION

The role of Roma women in the Roma family and in society is problematic both from the perspective of direct discrimination by the Czech society based on ethnicity and from the perspective of oppression related to the unequal status of the woman within the cultural tradition of the Roma (Pǎșcuțǎ 2012). The contradictions in social status of men and women and the historical dominance of men are rooted in social processes related to the social system in which the actors live (Pulkrábková 2009). Ethnographic literature discusses many reports of differing roles and duties of women; but this article provides further information regarding the context of change in recent years and examples of hegemonic practices of Roma men, which are rooted in cultural traditions. The dissimilarity of the normative traditions of social functioning of the Roma is based on preservation of a patriarchal tradition that has been losing its historical significance in the majority society (Saller 1997). The transformations in social and family functioning, taking place in connection with transitions of social conditions and changes in contemporary cultural standards, have initiated a trend toward

female emancipation (Paletschek 2005). The modern interest in gender studies points to the importance of gender membership in social life and accentuates the reproduced inequalities linked to various traditions and practices of social interactions and institutional customs. The media paradigm of the western sociocultural circle and its legislative emphasis on equal opportunities has created a modern trend producing political and socio-economic opportunities regardless of gender (Inglehart and Norris 2003). In view of the different cultural practice and distinctive segregation from the majority, the anthropological literature and practice of social workers deals with the topic of unequal status of Roma women, viewed through a modern lens. This article describes the significant consequences of gender differences in the Roma family, which are rooted in sociocultural traditions. It uses actual quotes from Roma couples to illustrate some of the hegemonic traditions affecting the lives of Roma women, which helps to further perpetuate the present situation (Hudson 2009).

The Roma family is characterized as having a patriarchal family structure (Saller 1997; Weyrauch 2001). The principle still prevails in Roma families today and probably dates back to the original Indian tribes, from which the present day Roma males and females descend. The patriarchal structures in which the man enjoys considerably deeper respect than other family members are much stronger in Roma families than in the families of the majority society (Liégeois 1994; Jakoubek 2004; Sedláček 2004). The men in Roma families are traditionally perceived as a patriarchal authority, who controls the life of the family (Kozubík 2015). Additionally, after marriage, traditional customs lead to Roma women going to live with her partner's family. This puts women at the lowest status level within the family. In this position she is expected to obey her husband's family members and be deferential to them. The status of Roma women in this system only rises after the birth of her first child. The Roma man expects his wife to be obedient, humble and to show respect (Callan *et al.* 2013). At present, overt displays of respect are observed mainly by older generations in Roma settlements in Slovakia and in the sub-ethnic group of Wallachian Roma, where humble/respectful traditions manifest in the women never walking beside their husbands, but instead walking several steps behind and, when in public, not sitting at the same table with men (Žlnayová 1996; Davidová 2004; Poláková 2014). At present, some communities, particularly the Wallachian Roma and the Roma from Southern and Eastern Slovakia still emphasize the dominant status of men in the family by restricting the role of women to caring for children and the household.

High unemployment prevails in Roma communities; therefore everybody who can find a job, already works. On the other hand, both women and men may work in the household, and household chores are less likely to be distinguished as "male or female" work (Kozubík 2015). Thus one the social traditions that supports the man's authority, i.e., that of bread winner, within the family unit is disappearing from younger Roma families (Budilová and Jakoubek, 2007; Davidová *et al.*, 2008; Kajanová and Dvořáčková 2013); nonetheless, it was not hard to find displays of male hegemony as well as associated standards and customs in Roma families living in the Czech Republic that continue to impact Roma women and their families.

In this article, we view Roma traditions from a somewhat untraditional point of view, i.e., that of the hegemony of masculinity (Robinson *et al.* 2003). There are multiple ways of viewing the hegemony of masculinity; but in general, it is rooted in social systems and influences family roles, and passes the main authority in the family to the men. The theory of masculine hegemony is based on the hegemony concept by Antonio Gramsci, a well-known author of sociological theory, who dealt with ways of shaping social formations and changes based on efforts to maintain social continuity of dominance and authority. In his concept, hegemony includes the process of persuasion and shaping of communities based on re-interpretation of reality, usually done through control of the dominant communication channels and social institutions, and with the help of its acceptance as "normal" and "natural" (Donaldson 1993). Therefore, the dominant group strengthens its persuasion to others and mentally and emotionally supports its own system of values and attitudes. The concept of hegemonic masculinity deals with the topic of male dominance, both within broad customs and through violence-enforced authority. The status of women and men is based on the ideological traditions of patriarchal religions and evolution of the community, in which the social system was shaped relative to displays of masculine hegemony. The concept of hegemonic masculinity represents traditional gender roles in the overall society, which created space to oppress women, as initiated by the idea of inequality reproduced by the patriarchal authority (Connel 1995). Masculine hegemony is opposed by the concept of emphasized femininity, complemented with a mental representation of division of roles in a society between male and female (Connel and Messerschmidt 2005). Gramsci (1971) disregards the aspect of violence in hegemony, and focuses on displays of the actual power and influence. Individual power can be based on the concept of hegemony, i.e. constitutes a coordination of assuming and maintaining specific roles related to power at a symbolic level, which works as an invisible mechanism. However, the view of gender status in the concept of the hegemony of masculinity suggests not only the effort to emphasize the role of men but also the tendencies to oppress women (Robinson *et al.* 2003). *"The dominant gender, in pushing through persuasion, uses any means to express the repressive forces reacting to the disrupted continuum of the dominant group. Unlike the traditional theory of hegemony, it lacks an emphasis on the political*

and socioeconomic dimension, too divorced from histori-
cal processes and material changes, and tries to clarify
the hegemony of male dominance particularly through
patterns of violent tendencies" (Connel 1995, pp. 83–84).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study focused on gender role structures and
changes in the current Roma family with regard to
patriarchal hegemony.

The study was implemented in form of field research,
using a semi-structured interview, from 2013–2014,
with 30 Roma males and 30 Roma females, living as
couples in various cities around the Czech Republic.
The participants were selected from South Bohemia,
West Bohemia and South Moravia; 20 interviews with
ten couples in total were completed in each region
(*N* = 60). Some of the conclusions were run through
three focus groups with experts working in respective
research fields (field social workers, workers from non-
profit organizations focused on Roma, etc.).

The verbatim transcribed interviews, presented
in the form of quotations in the results section, are
intended to highlight past and current roles and life
conditions of Roma women.

RESULTS

Our results are presented along with direct quotes from
those that were interviewed. The quotes are not edited
to sterilize the language. We felt it important that those
interviewed were allowed to express themselves in their
own words.

Traditional role of Roma woman

The man is the dominant member and considered to
be the head of the Roma family. "*Well, the guy wears the
trousers and decides about everything*" (FG, Plzeň). The
actual subordination of Roma women is maintained
through deference toward the father, and that pattern is
further reflected as unequal approaches toward gender
roles: "*For example when I wanted to go somewhere,
my daddy did not want to let me, so I thought that if I
were a boy, he would perhaps let me go*" (34 years, České
Budějovice). Equal status of men and women as part-
ners traditionally has not and currently does not apply
in Roma families. The concept of hegemonic mascu-
linity considers gender status to be relative to social
formation (Donaldson 1993). Traditionally, men were
more respectable and had a higher status than women
within the family relationship hierarchy. The decision
of men always held sway over other opinions, and other
family members were expected to obey without too
much opposition. Men decided all family issues, were
responsible for providing "the roof" over the heads of
the family and the income needed for living (Callan
et al. 2013). Our study confirmed these views and
roles for Roma men: "*...the Gypsy women must largely

conform to the guy in everything, it is always like, when
the guy decides where they are going to move or some-
thing like that, they just have to go with him*" (FG, Plzeň).
"*The husband is the head of the family, he orders and we
obey*" (40 let, Plzeň). A young Roma girl cannot go out
alone; while she lives with her parents, she is usually
accompanied by a male relative; in adult partnerships,
these standards still persist: "*When you go with boys (to
a disco or just out), you just go. But girls can't go alone*"
(20 years, České Budějovice). Roma girls and women
are expected to respect these traditional limitations on
personal liberty: "*It is just a tradition. Like in our home.
The guy can; well the woman can, but with her partner,
or with her husband; she must get permission. But alone
without permission, absolutely not*" (35 years, České
Budějovice).

In the traditions of the Roma community, the man
was responsible for the behaviour and actions of the
family in society; the man was both the carrier and the
protector of the family's prestige. The man was also
responsible for building or enhancing his family's honor
and reputation within the Roma society. Specifically, the
man was responsible for making sure that the behavior
of family members (particularly women) did not dis-
honor the family (Dixon 1992; Štěpařová 2005). Such
displays of masculine hegemony show the responsibility
of the men to preserve and meet the external standards
of the reference social group. It is very important to
Roma men that they be respected by their wives. Partic-
ularly in public, it must be obvious who wears the trou-
sers: "*...the woman just can't dare it, for example when
the guy is in the pub, she can't come and pull him home,
no way. The guy is just the guy, and how would the others
view it*" (28 years, České Budějovice). At present, many
societies are moving away from hegemonic masculinity
and the associated dominance of men in interpersonal
relationships. Many of the societies that surround the
Roma are pressing aggressively towards female eman-
cipation. However, since these transitions have yet to
happen in Roma societies, female emancipation that
takes place in the majority society acts as an external
pressure on Roma women and strains traditional roles
in Roma societies: "*The man puts greater demands on
the woman when they are married; he forbids her every-
thing, discourages her from seeing her family, is jealous, as
he thinks she belongs him*" (50 years, Plzeň).

The modern Roma woman[1]

The role of the Roma woman is linked primarily to
caring for household issues and caring for children.
Particularly in very patriarchal Roma communities,
it is often unacceptable and practically impossible for
women to study, since most of their duties and time
revolve around the care of frequently large or extended
families (Sedláček 2004). However, despite traditions,

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[1] This concept is not a technical term; it is the authors' designation
of the Roma woman in the current society.

the results of our study show that, today, Roma parents want both their male and female children to have the same education; nevertheless, girls often drop out of school and start a family at relatively early ages. *"She was born without me wanting it. My partner wanted it, but me not. We met at a disco, and we started dating, then I got pregnant. They let me finish the apprentice school with a belly. And I had to do the exams 3 months before birth and I didn't give a shit about it"* (31 years, České Budějovice). Additionally, men control the use of contraception, so the reproductive policy of their family, is for the most part, determined by them. *"They sometimes don't want to have children so much, but it's impossible to force the girl to use contraception; and a guy using a rubber, well that doesn't exist. The guy is just dominant in this"* (FG, České Budějovice). Long-term unemployed Roma families are often reliant on income from children-related benefits and allowances. This means the decision to start or extend the family may be partly based on the man's decision or on pressures put on young girls to contribute to the family income: *"Usually the family or* (her) *mother decides whether she can have an abortion or not"* (FG, České Budějovice). The research interviews identified that the Roma women most frequently want to have two children: *"I don't want to have more children. Now I am expecting my fourth baby, and that is really enough. This baby I am expecting is unplanned"* (34 years, České Budějovice). *"No, no, I don't want any more* (the woman)… *Well, I would want to have another little boy* (the man says)" (23 years, České Budějovice).

At present, Roma women, contrary to their original roles, now bring money into the household. *"(The* men) *usually speak about seeking a job and about seeking this or that, but it often happens that the woman comes up with a solution"* (FG, České Budějovice). The men in marginalized areas are often "non-functional" and make negligible contributions to the family income; in fact, they often show pathologies like addictions, gambling, infidelity, or domestic violence. Groes-Green (2009) reported direct connections between justification of violence committed against women, social marginalization of men, and prevailing socio-historical oppression in relevant social systems: *"He was good for nothing, he slept with my sister and had a baby with her and with me too"* (43 years, České Budějovice).

However, in many Roma communities, separating from a partner is often unacceptable; and when it happens, the price of emancipation is full separation of the woman from their own family, relatives, and social environment. Additionally, when a Roma woman goes against tradition in a cultural context, even though based on the patriarchal model, she may lose social support from her family (Sedláček 2004).

Domestic violence

The most distinctive display of uncompromising masculine dominance takes the form of domestic violence against women, a feature that is often mentioned by Roma women. Žlnayová (1996) mentions that Roma women are used to the man beating them from time to time: *"They beat their women normally. They just slap them in the face. They are just hot-headed. They don't speak much together, the slap arrives straight away"* (38 years, České Budějovice). We came across displays of domestic violence in the statements of both female and male interviewees. There were statements asserting that domestic violence was common in Roma families and was not perceived as pathological behaviour. The statements were confirmed by the interviewees as well as by focus group members: *"I had several clients who, well, when speaking about some physical and mental violence, they considered it a normal thing"* (FG, Brno). The abusive behaviour of Roma males towards their own wives is explained and, to some degree, even justified based on the traditional arrangement and structure of relationships within Roma families. Hearn (2012) writes that violence committed against women is not a stable behaviour but, to the contrary, a constructive and adaptable behaviour related to displays of gender power, social structure, and hegemony linked to the ideological concept of a partnership. Their physical attack often results from jealousy, which is perceived as a display of love: *"It must be shown, well, that he longs for her, and, well, yes."* Therefore, Roma women often rationalize domestic violence: *"…some situations seemed almost provocative to me, like they couldn't end in other way"* (FG, Brno). Women are expected to exercise restraint in their behavior to avoid conflicts: *"As soon as she has a husband and kids, there it ends, well, she must not wear short skirts, she can't show anything, just like the Muslims"* (50 years, Plzeň). A failure to exercise restraint may lead to domestic violence related to the hegemony of masculinity; in such social situations, the men show their superiority to women by their behaviour (Conell and Messerschmidt 2005). *"When we lived in the quarters, I even lost my teeth. He always beat me"* (59 years, České Budějovice). However, Roma women traditionally don't approach the appropriate and available institutions in the majority society to report domestic violence: *"I don't want to downplay it, but the range of the opportunities and situations and attitudes is so large that it cannot be generalized. But the truth is that hardly anybody will solve such a situation by criminal complaint, including testifying in court. It must be a very strong personality, even to us who are used to communicating with those institutions, that's it"* (FG, Brno).

Infidelity

The essence of hegemonic masculinity consists in male control and dominance over women. The dominance can be best seen in sexual behaviors that reveal the natural expectations relative to gender. It is obvious, for instance, with regard to the acceptance of promiscuous behaviour in men and the double standard relative to promiscuity in women. Hegemonic masculinity in gender issues can also be distinctively seen in sexual

behaviour; men often describe their sexual performance as imaginative control of the woman. Bourdieu (2001) states that sexual intercourse is understood as a display of male dominance and control of women in many cultures, including the control that extends to reproduction behaviour: *"They just don't have contraception and the boys refuse to use condoms, because it is unworthy of them, they just won't do it with condoms. They don't have them and the girls don't force them to use them because they would lose the status, they just conform in this regard"* (FG, Plzeň). Sexuality is also related with control of women; sexual relationships also constitute a way to correct and symbolically express power relationships between partners. Male infidelity is frequently tolerated; many Roma women even boast of their unfaithful husbands, since it validated their virility and manliness. However, if a woman is unfaithful, it is a very serious offence and the man is considered to have the right to punish his partner (Žlnayová 1996; Štěpařová 2005; Vives-Cases C *et al.* 2014). *"If I cheated on him, he would kill me"* (28 years, Plzeň). Public approval of male infidelity and the harsh double standard applied to female infidelity points out the subordinate and degrading status of Roma women, something that is almost inconceivable from the perspective of the non-Roma majority population (Rác and Šusterová 2014). *"Well, the girls have no choice. She either tolerates it, or can go home* (to live with her parents)*"* (FG, Brno). Roma women cannot prevent male infidelity, and the Roma community, particularly the older generation, respects and accepts jealousy-related violence: *"He must trust his wife, and if he doesn't trust, then it's his problem; if she cheats on him, they don't live together; when the man cheats, the woman must live with it... in my daughter's family, the situation is different; it has changed; if he cheats, she also does; today the situation is different; when I was young, it wasn't so; I am faithful only to him, and he isn't faithful to me"* (50 years, Plzeň). Nonetheless, those working with the Roma often report mild displays of disapproval with regard to male infidelity too; the women may provoke quarrels or hit their husbands; but more often than not, Roma women have no means to prevent infidelity: *"The man cheats, but still lives with the wife,"* while female infidelity usually results in a breakup of the partnership: *"… the woman leaves when the man is a bastard; she takes the children and marries another, to have a better life, that's it"* (28 years, České Budějovice).

Statistical analysis used Atlas.ti 7 software.

DISCUSSION

The concept of hegemonic masculinity states that individual groups within a community legitimize their own status and reproduce the social bonds in which they are a dominant authority (Connell, 1995). However, the current generation of Roma men has, to a certain degree, lost its traditional role within the family, due to

unemployment and the hopelessness associated with their socioeconomic situation. The traditional male role as head of the family is now partially preserved with the help of dominant behaviour. The issue effects how the Roma population appears to the majority society, especially with regard to domestic violence, which unfortunately has received relatively little researcher attention. It is a very intimate, almost taboo topic to the Roma community (Păşcuţă 2012). Radka Janebová (2012) describes several explanations why domestic violence in Roma families is ignored. For example, the majority society may not feel a pressing need to address the problem, since it does not directly endanger the majority society. Even though the majority society supports emancipation opportunities for Roma women and greater control over their own reproductive rights and condemns domestic violence, it doesn't mean that there will be any significant intervention. While the majority society may support a woman's right to leave her partner, in reality, the concept of hegemonic masculinity removes this option, which makes emancipation of Roma women almost impossible within the traditional hegemony of men and social pressures that enforce such traditions. Therefore, a Roma woman can leave her family and community, but not without significant social and personal consequences (Koutská and Kajanová 2011). On the contrary, in the context of emphasized femininity (Connel and Messerschmidt 2005), the Roma woman contributes to preserve the traditional role of men and rationalizes and justifies domestic violence (Álvaro *et al.* 2015). Therefore Janebová (2012) identifies another explanation for failure to address the domestic violence issue among the Roma, which is cultural stereotypes; even social and health care workers may believe that domestic violence is a normal and traditional part of typical Roma family coexistence (Djurovic *et al.* 2014). Another possible explanation may be related to the extreme marginalization of the Roma population (Sedláková 2014). For the Roma, it means seriously reduced opportunities for social promotion and full involvement in the majority society. Another feature that may explain why Roma women don't leave violent and abusive husbands is that they are poorly educated with little or incorrect information regarding ways to improve their current family situation (Clark 2009) within the context of the majority society. This particular issue was confirmed by the experts in the focus groups.

CONCLUSION

Recently, Roma women have been experiencing great role shifts, as male roles within the family, especially with regard to being the main provider, have gradually eroded. As male roles become non-functional within the Roma family, we can often see conditions suitable for emancipation of Roma women, although actual emancipation is relatively rare. The standards in the Roma communities are based on traditions of hege-

monic masculinity and the failure of male as the "main providers" is not considered so significant as to allow Roma women to leave finically unsupportive husbands. In fact traditional family and community values still have considerable power. These powers are easily visible in the Roma community with regard to the role of women. Infidelity and domestic violence are generally tolerated, while transgressions of females are dealt with harshly. Such benevolence towards men is often fully supported within the local community. Roma women who decide to take steps the change their situation are often subjected to symbolic or actual exclusion from the community, which constitutes an additional level of marginalization for a member of an otherwise already marginalize minority. The men have traditional authority in Roma families, which are manifested as full control over family decision making. While the man's contribution, particularly among the younger generation, to the family income has become increasingly problematic due to widespread unemployment, their control over the family income remains inviolate. Beyond that, men also still decide about the use of contraception, and therefore have the main say with regard to the number of children in the family. Abortions, while possible, are not under the control of the woman, instead it becomes an issue decided by the whole family. Collectively all these family, social and community traditions, server to disempower the Roma woman and significantly impairs her ability to be an actor in her own future.

Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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