

MODELS OF MOTHERHOOD AMONG THE ROMA LIVING IN POLAND

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The article presents motherhood practices among Roma from the Polish Roma group. Being a mother is the main role of women in traditional Roma communities however practices associated with it are undergoing changes. In this article patterns of family life, parental rules, customs associated with pregnancy and childbirth as well as the social roles of women and patterns of femininity are investigated.

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Artykuł dotyczy praktyk macierzyńskich u Romów z grupy Polska Roma. Macierzyństwo jest podstawową rolą kobiecą, jego praktyka podlega jednak zmianom. W tekście zaprezentowane zostały wzory romskiego życia rodzinnego, zasady związane z realizacją rodzicielstwa w małżeństwie, zwyczaje związane z ciążą i porodem, a także społeczne role kobiet romskich i wzorce kobiecości.

K e y w o r d s: maternity, Roma, parenthood, femininity

Over the last decade or so there has been relatively little interest among Polish scholars in how Romani models of femininity, masculinity and motherhood, have been created. The majority of publications have touched upon marriage, the roles of men and women, and the Roma's attachment to their families, but more detailed studies on this subject are still lacking. Although there has been some interest in Romani women in Poland (Godlewska 2008, Talewicz-Kwiatkowska 2005, Krzyżowski 2008, Jakimik and Gierliński 2009, Isztok 2006¹), the issue has been mainly taken up by foreign scholars (among others: Okely 1975, Silverman 1981, Hubschmanova 1997, Manna 1997, Sutherland 1987²), with discussions on motherhood in both Polish and foreign literature being limited to claims that the motherhood role is one of the main social roles of Romani women. This subject has also been touched upon in the context of their access to health services or to programmes dealing with the sterilization of Romani women (Neményi 1999). Because it is worth having a closer look at models of motherhood, I would like to concentrate here on an analysis of the practices of one chosen group: the Roma (Gypsies) living in Poland from the Polska Roma group.

¹ Isztok (2006) wrote his article on the basis of interviews with young Romany women.

² Sutherland (1987) presents the life and customs of the Kelderari in the USA, discussing the roles of men and women, as well as the issue of defilement.

This article has been written on the basis of material gathered in the years 2001–2006, when I conducted fieldwork among the Roma from the Polska Roma and Lovari groups. The research projects concerned Romani family customs, femininity among the Lovari and Polska Roma, as well as the presence of the latter in the job market. I conducted a large number of interviews as well as having quite a number of informal conversations with both men and women from this group, all in Polish (the majority of my interviewees spoke the language very well). Motherhood had been the experience of most of the women with whom I spoke and that is why this subject appears quite often in the conducted research. I am referring here to an interview on motherhood that I conducted with a Romani activist from the Polska Roma³, to the opinions of young Roma from an Internet forum devoted to Romany culture, to interviews conducted by Justyna Kopańska with representatives of the Polska Roma group, as well as to research done within the project *Romowie na rynku pracy* [The Roma in the job market].

I would like to start by presenting a description of the Roma (Gypsies) in general in order to differentiate later those living in Poland, especially the group known as Polska Roma, highlighting demographic data, living conditions, and typical occupations. Then I wish to describe models of Romani family life, parenthood principles, marriage customs, practices related to pregnancy and giving birth, as well as to the process of becoming a mother from the social point of view. I wish also to present both the traditional and new roles of women and the influence of motherhood on the shaping of a woman's status.

The article does not attempt to present a full picture of motherhood among the contemporary Roma as this would require separate, more specialized research. It is also necessary to remember that the Roma are not a homogeneous group. Differences exist concerning the interpretation of tradition, principles concerning purity and behaviour on the level of groups as well as of families. Although this work is an attempt to generalize the phenomena which appear in the groups I have studied, it is necessary to be aware of the fact that these phenomena do not appear in all Romani families, and due to decreasing social control, the different practices connected with motherhood in different families may widen in the future.

THE ROMA IN POLAND

There are between six and twelve million Gypsies in the world (Mirga and Gheorghie 1997, 9). This group of people has been characterized in the following way by Lech Mróz (2007, 36):

³ In Polish it has been marked with the symbol [K.PR_1], in English: [F.PR_1]. The coding system of the quoted interviews is as follows: sex, group, and_number of the interview. Accordingly, F.PR_1 is a woman from the Polska Roma group, interviewee No. 1. The groups have been marked as: PR – Polska Roma, LO – Lovari, KE – Kelderari. When quoting Justyna Kopańska's interviewees, I add her initials to the code. The interviewees are quoted verbatim.

“When we speak about Gypsies, we mean European, American or Australian descendants of emigrants from India (...) whose way of speaking shows more similarities than differences (although situations have been known of them losing their language or being greatly influenced by the language of the local population): (...) who show cultural similarities, and who, from the moment they appeared in Europe, were described as Gypsies and who took on this name themselves, using it as a discriminant, next to the proper names of Romani, Sinti, etc”.

The Roma are made up of different groups (cf. Mirga and Mróz 1994, Mariushia-kova and Popov 2001). The most numerous are the Lovari and the Kelderari. It is also possible to differentiate groups whose names come from the region they either live in today or did in the past. Cases in point being the Polska Roma, the Lotfitka Roma and the Ruska Roma. Others can be differentiated by the type of occupations they used to have, or their religion (Muslim Roma).

The Roma in Poland do not make up one homogeneous community. The four largest groups are the Kelderari, Lovari, Polska Roma (groups that a few decades ago still led a nomadic lifestyle) and the Carpathian Gypsies, who have settled in one place. From data gathered by the Ministry of the Interior and Administration in 2003, it appears that there are nearly 21 000 people of Romani origin living in Poland⁴; according to the National Census conducted in 2002, the number is lower, being around 13 000 (*Ludność według* 2002). The leaders of Romani organizations claim that in both cases the numbers have underestimated (Mróz 2001, 262–263).

The Roma's financial situation varies, depending on the given group, its history, their occupations in the past and today, as well as on their resourcefulness. The Carpathian Roma have found themselves in the worst situation. A few decades ago, there was still a large demand for the different types of work they did, such as smithery. After the second world war they worked on state-owned farms, in factories, and some of them were employed in the building of the Nowa Huta Steel Plant. When demand for qualified labourers rose, they lost their jobs and at present many of them are on social security benefits⁵. Their incomes are often on the poverty line and because they do not have any permanent employment (or not very often), they are not eligible for a retirement pension. The Roma who travel undoubtedly cope better, being involved, for example, in trading. However, even in these groups there are those who receive benefits and

⁴ This data concerns the number of Roma and their place of residence in Poland, prepared by voivodship governing bodies on the basis of information provided by different local authorities. This data is only an approximation as it is impossible to establish their true number because of their mobility and the fact that in questionnaires they do not always describe themselves as Roma. Most of them live in the Voivodship of Malopolska (3 500), Silesia (around 2 500), Mazovia, Cuiavia and Pomerania, Lodz and Sub-Carpathia (over 1 000) (*Program na rzecz* 2003, Appendix 1).

⁵ At present, in the Voivodship of Malopolska 75% of the Romani families living there are on social security benefits, whereas in some regions it is as high as 95%. They very often live in crowded conditions that do not meet even the basic standards; oftentimes these dwellings have been built without any official permission.

different allowances (*Program na rzecz* 2003, Appendix 1). To a limited extent, the Roma also benefit from health care (Mirga-Wójtowicz 2008). Helping them to improve their situation has to be a priority and there are also programmes whose aim is to fight unemployment and improve the Roma's general health (*Sprawozdanie z relacji* 2008, 12–14).

The contemporary Roma are most often involved in trade and music groups. We can talk about the emergence of a Romani middle class – they are the owners of bars, restaurants, shops, warehouses, filling stations, and also tradesmen (Mróz 2001, 263). Their level of education is low – in 2003 only 70% of Romani children attended school. Their school attendance is low because their families move from place to place (including abroad) and because parents take up employment opportunities that require mobility. In addition, elderly people are often illiterate. The issue concerning the Romani attitude towards education will be returned to later in this paper. Their religion is often the one prevailing in the territories they inhabit. Thus, in Poland, most are Catholics, although there are followers of different Protestant Churches and Jehovah Witnesses (*Program na rzecz* 2003, Appendix 6; *Sprawozdanie z realizacji* 2010, 7–8)⁶.

Although each Romani group living in Poland speaks its own dialect, has its own system of wielding power, and customs that may sometimes slightly differ, there are links between Polska Roma, Lovari and Kelderari which in the Polish Romani dialect is called *romanipen*⁷, a set of common values or principles associated with how to act in any given circumstance, customs, beliefs, rituals, models of behaviour, as well as conditions which have to be fulfilled if one wants to be treated as a true Rom. *Romanipen* divides the world into what is pure or defiled; it also gives directives for Romani jurisdiction and defines the roles of men and women, as well as expectations towards them (Sutherland 1987, 102 and 124; Mirga and Mróz 1994, 38). It is a norm according to which individuals are assessed and is safeguarded by the elders – a court (*kris*) among the Lovari and Kelderari, and *Szero Rom*, who is the highest authority among the Polska Roma. The *romanipen* principles are uncoded and belong to an oral tradition, which has undergone gradual modification⁸.

MODELS OF FAMILY LIFE

As Agnieszka Kowarska wrote (2005, 44), the Romani family is monogamous, patrilineal and patriarchal, and is based on a clan structure. For Roma from the Polska Roma group, the family, which consists of parents, children and grandparents, is of

⁶ In the academic year 2008–2009, 83% of children attended school; their average grades were between a D and an F (*Sprawozdanie z realizacji* 2010, 7–8).

⁷ *Romanipe* in the Kelderari dialect and *romanimo* in the Lovari dialect, other groups use for example the word *romania* (Sutherland 1975).

⁸ In exceptional situations, such as during wars, it is permitted to suspend these principles if adhering to them may make it difficult for the group to survive.

primary importance. Marriage is an agreement between the two families which takes place in a number of ways and is confirmed publicly in front of the group. The most popular form is through arrangement (Mirga and Mróz 1994, 255 and 259)⁹. On the basis of research conducted by Kowarska and myself concerning contemporary marriages within the Polska Roma group, it appears that girls most often get married between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, while boys between sixteen and nineteen (Kowarska 2005, 103). The younger age of girls is primarily due to the belief that they have already matured and will cope with the responsibility of having their own family. It is also a way to be certain that the girl will have a partner who is accepted by the family and that there will be no risk of her being “kidnapped”.

For a marriage to take place, it is enough to have a Romani ceremony – a blessing given by the elders and the young couple’s parents – or through elopement or what is called snatching. In this case, the presumption is made that the couple have consummated their relationship while away from home. Even the presumption of this means that a marriage has taken place (Godlewska-Goska 2011, 313 and 343; Kowarska 2005, 102). Although the Roma living in Poland are in the main Catholics, they very seldom have a church wedding, or a civil one for that matter, either. One reason for this is that they simply do not feel the need and another is that underage marriages are against the law¹⁰. Sexual intercourse may only take place between spouses where the marriage has been undertaken according to Romani tradition. As Kowarska writes, “every sexual act, even the suspicion that has taken place is equivalent to the two participants having got married” (2005, 45). That is why motherhood may take place solely within a marriage, no matter when it actually occurred. As one of the Polska Roma told us: “Before a woman becomes pregnant she has to get married. Pregnancy outside marriage is improper” [M.PR_2]. This is so because of the youthful age of the girl, the control exerted by both the group and the girl’s family over her behaviour during puberty, as well as the principles governing wedding ceremonies, according to which even a few hours away from home on the part of the young couple is enough to deem them to be legally married. The bride-to-be should be a virgin and if suspected of having gone out with a man whom she has kissed or had any physical contact with, her chances of marrying a member of a respected family become diminished. Her reputation is ruined and hence, pregnancy outside wedlock is an exceptional event affecting the reputation of the girl and her whole future life and results in her losing the respect of the whole community. Even many years later, her community would have every right to hold this event against her (Godlewska-Goska 2011, 353). Only one of my interviewees knew of

⁹ Other ways of getting married are through elopement or through the bride being “kidnapped” by the bridegroom. For more on contemporary Romani marriages in the Polska Roma and Lovari groups see: Kowarska 2005; Godlewska-Goska 2011.

¹⁰ Occasions do arise when after many years of being together and having their own family, couples decide on a church wedding.

a young Romani girl who fell pregnant outside wedlock, resulting in her being quickly married off to the child's father.

Although there is a lack of official statistical data concerning the average number of children Romani women in Poland give birth to, but if consideration is given to when they become pregnant, how many children survive, and this data compared over a period of several decades¹¹, the results of ethnographic research suggest that it is higher than the Polish average, which in 2007, was 1.31 per woman (*Podstawowe informacje* 2012, 13). The Roma say that “the more children – the more happiness” and a child is seen as a gift from God (Kowarska 2005, 60, F.PR_1). In the past, their assumption was that “he who God created, of hunger will not die” [M.PR_2]. They also believed that a woman who had many children was healthier. At the same time, during the last few decades, the number of children being born has dropped dramatically. In the times when the Polska Roma led a nomadic lifestyle, they would often have more than ten children: “In the past women had many children, between four and ten. I’ve even heard of fifteen” [F.PR_1]. The mother of my over-forty-year-old informant had sixteen children and his grandmother nineteen¹².

At present, among 40–50-year-olds the average number of children being born is 4–6, whereas the younger generation usually has 1–3 children (Godlewska-Goska 2011, 393). As Kowarska writes, today many couples plan the number of children they want to have, according to how many they feel they can bring up. This decrease is due, among others, to the growing awareness of birth control (Kowarska 2005, 66)¹³, difficulties in supporting a large family, and marital problems, including some men’s addictions to alcohol and drugs. Only some college student girls put off having children until after graduation. Although in poorer regions of Poland and in some urban districts there are still women who have many children, large families are no longer the rule. In family planning today the financial factor is an important one. Many of Justyna Kopańska’s interviewees pointed to the high cost of bringing up and educating five or six children, a number which used to be the norm. Among her informants there were those who had seven children but also some with only one (even among the 50-year-olds). The former claimed that despite the tendency to limit the number of children, one child was not enough as it is always easier for siblings to help their parents, as well as each other.

Although the Roma recognise the importance of having children and of parenthood, in practice it is often quite different. Firstly, the number of children being born

¹¹ To give some examples from abroad: on average Romani women living in Sweden have 4.2 children, in the Czech Republic this number is 3, whereas in less developed regions it reaches 8 (Ginter *et al.* 2001, 480).

¹² Information concerning such a large number of children among nomadic groups may result from the fact that the children of underage daughters would be registered under the names of their mothers. This also sometimes happened with the children of other family members.

¹³ I have not been able to confirm this information concerning contraception in this group.

is falling. Secondly, large families, which used to be highly respected, are now looked down upon: “If there’re many children, then they’re laughed at” [JK.M.PR_32], said a seventy-year-old Polish Rom.

It is also necessary to draw attention to the increasing atomization of society among the Roma. We can even risk the statement that life on the road was much easier than their lifestyle today as in the past, there was much more support given. Women would help one another, both in looking after the children, in their everyday chores and the poorest families could count on help from the richer Roma, making it much easier to bring up children in a large group. There was a model of mutual motherhood in existence – children were not only looked after by their mothers, but also by their siblings, aunts, grandmothers, and even by unrelated women who would be travelling with them. Moreover, family life revolved around their everyday occupations resulting in children accompanying their parents in their employment activities: boys would go with their fathers to market and help in the making of frying-pans, while the girls learnt fortune-telling from their mothers. In this way children were always under the care of their parents or other Roma. One of the women taking part in the research *Romowie na rynku pracy* [Roma in the job market] said:

“In the past Travellers would set up camp, make a bonfire, one family would do the cooking, another the washing, some others would do something else, yet another look after the children” (Mróz 2006, 47–48, informant AIII.Xe: 2).

Today the Roma often work far from home (as commercial travellers, musicians and other occupations), with school-going children spending part of the day outside the home. The mutual motherhood model, though, is still very much alive as the Roma often live in the same neighbourhood, near their closest relatives and other Roma; extended families may live together in one flat or house. Thanks to this, help with the children is available from grandmothers, aunts, as well as older children (both girls and boys).

There is also a change in when a woman gives birth to her first child. In the past, the aim was for children to arrive on the scene as soon as possible after the marriage – the birth of a child was, and still is, proof of the couple’s maturity and increases both their status and that of their family’s within the group. From the fieldwork I have conducted and the material gathered by Kopańska, it appears that Romani couples today are in no hurry to have children and more and more often decide to delay the birth of their first child to a few years after their marriage. According to a forty-year-old woman from the Polska Roma group:

“The way we see age is changing. In the past a 15–16-year-old mum was seen as being young. Today my daughter-in-law is 21 and I also think she’s young and helpless” [F.PR_1].

Most of our interviewees thought it was better to marry and have children later. One woman, however, claimed that it was better if a woman started a family when she was a teenager. Her argument was that becoming pregnant at a young age meant avoiding complications, which very often arise in older pregnancies, and that she would also become a young grandmother. Another reason was that girls would not have the opportunity to be ‘led astray’, for example by going to school, and they would become decent women [JK.F.PR_7].

The majority, both Romani men and women, declared that the sex of the child was not important and that the birth of both a girl and a boy was a reason for joy. Only one of our interviewees stressed that she would like her granddaughter to have a son:

“May God have mercy on us, may she give birth to a boy, so there’ll be at least one king among us” [E.74.PR_9].

The birth of a son raises the status of both the father and the whole family. A son is a “king”, potentially a man of authority and a leader within the family.

Not being able to have children was and is the cause of conflict and relationship breakup. In the past, it was seen as the fault of the woman, who was often ridiculed and humiliated because she was not able to perform her basic duty (Godlewska-Goska 2011, 417). Kowarska writes that “not having a child may be seen as punishment for one’s sins or because of having a lifestyle that is not fully acceptable from the point of view of the given community” (2005, 59). Today these judgements are not as damning as the Roma are often aware that the problem may lie with the man. There are couples who, despite trying for many years to have a child, remain childless and there are others who look for alternative ways to become parents. To overcome the problem of childlessness three routes are available, although it is difficult to say how often they are put into practice. The first one involves adopting a child from a children’s home – be it Romani or Polish. Romani children are institutionalised only in exceptional cases, such as on the initiative of social services when the family is in a very difficult financial situation, the children are from broken families or sometimes the marriage is mixed. As Mróz suggests, the adoption of a Romani child may simply mean giving it to closer or more distant relatives¹⁴. Another alternative route is taking in a Romani child who has no guardians, one that has been either abandoned by its mother or has lost both parents. It is not only childless couples that can look after such children; it may also be other family members, for example the grandparents, who primarily feel responsible for them. The Roma also talked about the practice of “buying” or “taking” children from Bulgarian or Romanian Roma. My interviewees, as well as those of Kopańska, spoke of this as a purposeful transaction or as becoming guardians of a child abandoned by some Roma. One of Kopańska’s interviewees stated that pregnant

¹⁴ Lech Mróz, a private conversation.

Gypsies from Romania often come to Poland with the purpose of giving birth here and handing the child over (selling it) to local Roma families [JK. F.PR_21]¹⁵.

Just like getting married, divorce takes place only within the group. The Roma call it a separation, it being “a temporary interval in running the home by the couple” (Kowarska 2005, 147) which may last a few days or quite a number of years. Such a separation is consulted within the families and is preceded by negotiations and attempts at maintaining the relationship. It is also decided who is to blame for the breakup of the marriage – that person will then be expected to pay a certain sum of money (usually a refund of the wedding expenses) and is also defiled (removed from the group) for a certain period of time)¹⁶. After a divorce, matters connected with looking after the children and supporting them, as well as the division of the estate are looked into by the Romani leaders (Kowarska 2005, 147). Some Roma claim that if a woman has custody of her children, then she should have most of the estate. The only exception is when it has been proved that she has acted immorally. Then:

“Nobody will give her the children, nobody will let her (...). It’s not enough that she’s such a whore, that she’s brought such shame on herself, she’s to be allowed to bring up children? No man will ever let that happen. Who’ll give her any children? Maybe if she adopts them” [F.PR_3] (Godlewska-Goska 2011, 386).

According to some other informants, when the elders are asked to intervene, they decide on a certain sum of money that the man should pay his wife. One of the *romanipen* principles is that conflicts should be sorted out within their own community and not by the Polish legal system. However, I have also heard that a few years ago *Szero Rom* decided women could apply to a Polish court for alimony if the men were to blame for the break-up of the marriage¹⁷.

¹⁵ I have no information concerning the legal side of the venture. Both Kowarska (2005, 59) and Kopańska (2011, 89) wrote about the adoption of children from children’s homes and of children of Romani people coming to Poland from Bulgaria or Romania and being adopted within the family. It is also worth writing here about a situation that has been observed among the Carpathian Roma during research on *Romowie na rynku pracy* [The Roma in the job market]. Children are often adopted by their own grandmothers, thanks to which the family receives financial aid, which is of special significance when there is large unemployment. “A characteristic way of supporting one’s family is through benefiting from social welfare and making the most of loopholes in the Polish legal system, creating foster families for one’s own siblings and then collecting children’s allowances by both parents” (Mróz 2006, 40).

¹⁶ The idea of defilement (the opposite of the state of purity) and the division into what is pure and what is not are central notions of the whole system of Romani beliefs. Defilement is understood in two ways. It is simultaneously physical and moral soiling, the source of which is the human genitals and the area of the rectum, as well as not keeping to the principle of separating the upper half of the body from the lower part. Defilement is also a punishment, being isolated from the Roma community for acting against *romanipen* (Sutherland 1987, 102, 258, 264).

¹⁷ Mróz suggests that it is necessary to check whether applying for alimony by Roma families happens when the couple are not from the same group (Mróz, private conversation). As weddings often take place within the same group, even within the same family, applying for alimony may lead to the total breakdown of family relations or even to the disintegration of the group.

Although there is official permission to apply for alimony, not many women resort to it. Those who have been left on their own with their children may count on help from their families, the aid being dependent on their financial wherewithal. They also benefit from welfare and in many cases, the father or grandfather contributes to the child's upkeep without having to be asked to do so. It is understood that if the father is attached to his child, he will help the mother financially and will also visit his offspring. Women, however, do not expect this and do not demand any help; it is simply treated as being the man's goodwill. Although there is no official order for him to support his child, if he does so, he shows he is a good and caring father. This help is spoken about in the category of his "right", not his "duty": the man "has the right, because it is his child" [F.PR_1]. Other women have confirmed that a single mother may count on the help of her former husband who "pays out of his own free will".

"If the father's there and feels responsible, he'll take the child by the hand, will go and buy something. There's no need for a court" [JK.F.PR_24].

Many women, however, decide not to seek any help from their children's father, choosing instead independence and sometimes even rejecting any sort of contact whatsoever with their former husbands.

"There are some who won't take anything at all, because they're ashamed. They are too ambitious and honourable to ask for a 100 zlotys or 20. (...) If she's not living with him, then she doesn't want his money. That money has no value" [JK.E.PR_24].

If a woman asks her former husband for money, then it is:

"Bad, very bad. Because she can't manage in life. And is waiting for that money, to get it from him and to survive" [JK.F.PR-24].

One of our interviewees thought it was much better if the woman coped by herself. Another said that applying for alimony is, in a sense, proof of her incompetence and of not being able to bring up her children on her own. This appearance of dependence, turning to her husband for help, or forcing this on him, is a very shameful form of behaviour. Thus, even though the Roma accept women requesting help from their former husbands, the women who enjoy the highest respect are those who not only do not ask for aid, but even reject it. This is the honourable way to act and shows their resourcefulness. One of the women stressed that acting honourably is extremely important, especially if it is the woman who has left her husband. A man leaving the mother of his children is seen as having acted against accepted principles and he may be punished for this (Mróz 2006, 43). Judgement is even more severe if it is the woman who leaves her husband and children for another man: "If she leaves small children and goes off with somebody else, then she better not come back" [M.PR_2] (Godlewska-Goska 2011, 383).

Despite what has been outlined above, divorce and “patchwork” families do exist among the Roma¹⁸. It happens that the offspring of men and women who enter new relationships are brought up by their grandparents. Sometimes remarried women who have embarked on a completely new life, want nothing to do with their children from their previous marriage. This behaviour is assessed very severely by our informants and is viewed as dysfunctional and incomprehensible “to the minds of the Roma community in general” [F.PR_1].

THE TRADITIONAL SOCIAL ROLES OF ROMA WOMEN

As was mentioned above, *romanipen* defines, amongst others, the social roles of men and women. The woman is thus placed within the sphere of biology and the home, while the man is social and public. Traditionally, the roles reserved for men are those of leaders in the group and family and of upholding family and kinship ties, while women’s are centred around the home and looking after the well-being of the family. They give birth to children, bring them up, are responsible for finding the means to keep the family functioning, prepare the meals, and do the housework. A woman’s life was, and still is, mainly subordinated to the needs of her family. She should always act in accordance with the principles of *romanipen* and conscientiously fulfil all her duties. Cleanliness and precision are the most frequently mentioned features that are desired in a Romani woman. It is worth noting that although women are responsible for the home, they are not restricted to it. In the times when the Roma led a nomadic lifestyle, the need to find ways to support the family was associated with frequent contact with the non-Romani world from a very young age. This involved, for example, fortune-telling but special attention was paid to notions of purity and proper behaviour. Women going into the countryside or into town moved about in groups, in this way assuring themselves of safety and also controlling each other’s behaviour. Today the Roma also prefer their women not to appear in public places on their own.

When asked by me what characterises a true Rom, they referred to morality and customs. Most often the opinion was that she or he who shows respect for older people, lives according to Gypsy principles, always tells the truth, and is fair is a good Rom. When talking about true Romani women, they added that they are obedient and faithful towards their husbands, know how to look after the home, and how to bring up their children (Godlewska-Goska 2011, 219). They stressed that a “real Romani woman” is devoted to the home and her children. Being a good housewife is also of great importance. “A real Gypsy woman is then a real wife and mother” [F.PR_1]. When girls are growing up they already know that in the near future they will get married and become

¹⁸ I have not come across any studies on parenting in reconstructed Polish Romani families.

mothers. If a woman is capable of having numerous children and bringing them up well while at the same time showing a lot of patience and satisfying the needs of her family she is then perceived as a good future wife (Godlewska-Goska 2011, 316–317).

In a Roma family, values are passed on from generation to generation with control of each other's behaviour also taking place. This is all extremely important as the opinion you have of one member of the family affects the opinion you have of others. It is possible to differentiate between male and female competence in regards to a child's upbringing. When bringing up her sons and daughters according to the principles of *romanipen*, the woman highlights the proper way to behave. She teaches her children their culture, language, and shows them what the models of femininity and masculinity are. She also teaches both her daughters and other girls what a woman is obliged to do, how to follow the principles of purity, and also – especially in the past – “the Gypsy way of working”, meaning how to earn a living. In this way, the women confirm their own Gypsyhood. Fathers are primarily responsible for bringing up their sons. They teach them how to behave, how to take responsibility for their families, and introduce them into the working world. It is worth noting that decisions taken as a result of consultations between both parents, within the family (or group) are passed on by the father. As presented in literature on the subject and in accounts by the Lovari and Polska Roma, the fathers have always actively participated in their children's upbringing. Today, for example, they help the mothers by taking the children to school, take them out for walks, help in preparing the meals, bathe the babies and change their nappies. They are often the sole carers when the mother is absent. It can be presumed that when they led a travelling lifestyle, the men were not so involved in looking after their children because there was no need for it. As was mentioned above, it was the women who looked after the children and did all the chores, receiving and giving help from and to others. Lifestyle changes associated with how they earn money and of the different concerns that have arisen from being settled in one place have led to a modification of family roles, forcing the men to become more involved in the everyday care of their children. It is characteristic that today the fathers more and more often look after their babies, who traditionally were always perceived as impure. Officially, men are still not allowed to see and touch a new-born child, even a child that is a few months old, but this prohibition no longer holds true. They see their babies and when nobody is looking – apart from the father's closest relatives – they will even look after them. A child is primarily brought up by its parents, although the grandparents may also be involved (Godlewska-Goska 2011, 259; 268–269).

On the basis of observing her own daughters, daughter-in-law and other young mothers, one of the interviewees, a woman in her thirties with grown-up children and grandchildren, said that today “a child takes up its mother's whole day”. She sees how difficult it is for her daughter-in-law to do everything she needs to do in the house and also look after her child. This is surprising as women have it much easier

now than in the past, when they did not have access to running water, washing-machines or disposable nappies. Thanks to these amenities, they have much more time than their mothers or grandmothers had to devote to their children. According to her, young women are weaker and not as well organised as they used to be. However, she might be applying this statement to women giving birth for the first time and gradually, as their children get older and the women become more accustomed to their new way of life, it becomes easier for them to organise their time better. Moreover, some of them start looking for new activities. The same interviewee contradicted herself by also giving examples of young mothers who managed to look after their children and work outside the home. The lifestyle changes involved in earning a living to support the family often requires a lot of effort, limiting the time parents spend with their children. As one of Kopańska's interviewees said, today, parents have much less time for their children:

“Parents are busy and have no time for their children. They're busy earning money to feed them. In the past, it was enough to have money for the basics – clothes, food, a horse” [JK.F.PR _7].

The Roma, as will be presented further in the text, are trying to juggle their family commitments with their occupations outside the home and often choose work that gives them the freedom to organise their own time.

Children, of course, are not separated from the outer world and from their Polish peers. They have the same interests and learn from each other. They are also affected by school, the media, and by books. The profiles of young Roma on community portals show that their idols are the same heroes of TV serials as those of Polish children and they listen to similar music. Due to frequent trips abroad, young Roma become acquainted with new countries, different lifestyles and foreign languages. In the past it was the extended family that brought up and educated Romani children, whereas now, because of compulsory education, this role is also performed by schools. This also has had an effect on mothering as the school – also kindergartens and community halls – look after the child for a few hours every day. Thanks to this, women have more time for their housework, to take up paid employment, or for their own leisure. This of course does not mean that they are no longer obliged to exercise control over their children, which is especially important as far as young girls are concerned. Women want to be with their children for as long as possible, the latter being very close to their mothers. Not many of them go to kindergarten with the explanation being that the mother and child are extremely attached to each other and do not want to spend time apart. Małgorzata Różycka is also of the opinion that the Roma are not at all keen on sending their children to school or kindergarten for other reasons too. It costs money to send a child and it imposes on both parents and children the necessity to adhere to a systematic rigour brought about by the requirement to take the child to kindergarten and collect it at a set time, as well as being obliged to do things they never

had to do before. The children's freedom is also curtailed in ways which contrast with the freedom they enjoy at home. There is, however, another drawback connected to the fact that the woman's main task is to look after her children and bring them up. Sending a child to kindergarten, for example, is not understood as affording the child the opportunity to develop and integrate with his/her peers, a chance to acquire social skills and an education that will influence what will happen when the child goes on to primary school, but as

“proof of not being sufficiently attached to the child, of choosing an easy way out, disqualifying her [the mother] as a carer, and thus questioning her status and position in the traditional community” (Różycka 2009, 21).

Romani women are groomed for marriage, family life, and to assume the role of mothers, from a very young age (Godlewska-Goska 2011, 256–269). Teenagers already have experience in looking after children as they observe their own mothers with their younger siblings and they are also used to helping out; on an everyday basis they come into contact with other women from their family with children. However, because many women start families at a very young age, they still often need support and advice from their parents or in-laws. If a young couple moves in with the young man's parents, it is his mother who takes it upon herself to teach her daughter-in-law what she is expected to do. There is a Romani saying: “The mother gave birth but the mother-in-law brought her up”. Besides teaching young mothers how to run the home, mothers-in-law provide assistance with the children on a daily basis. As one of the women said, learning what to do as a mother is based on practice and heeding the experience of other women. By benefiting from the advice of their mothers, aunts or cousins, women know how to look after babies and children. At the same time:

“You can't learn to be a mother from books or lectures. You have to experience it. It was like that with me. It doesn't matter whether you're a sixteen-year-old mother or thirty years old. What I mean is that when it's your first child, no matter how old you are, you learn to be a mother. I can speak for myself. In the past, older siblings looked after the younger ones, and this does not only concern the Roma. I learnt from my older cousins how to change a baby's nappy, how to feed it, I listened to the advice they got from their mothers, aunts, grandmothers. So later, as a grown-up woman, I knew what to do. It doesn't mean that I didn't read, that I didn't ask doctors and older women for advice” [F.PR_1].

Women look for information on bringing up children from a variety of sources. On the one hand, they refer to the experience of women from their own families, while on the other, they ask their doctor or midwife for advice. Those who read well, also reach out for publications on child rearing. The women are open to suggestions and share what they have learnt with other mothers, and compare their knowledge with that of more experienced women. They have also benefited from technological advances which have taken place making baby-care and the exchange of information easier. Women declare that motherhood provides them with the greatest value and fulfilment.

“Probably for every normal woman children mean fulfilment. It is in this that we differ from men. In my life, my children, my husband, are me, everything I have, my whole life. They take first place, here on earth. They take first place next to my husband. In each of our children I see our virtues and our faults. To the end of my days they’ll be my children” [F.PR_1].

In another conversation on motherhood, the same woman speaks about a woman’s vocation:

“Because this is probably how the mechanism is built as far as the functioning of a woman is concerned. It is her vocation to be a mother, a wife, and that’s how it is. It can’t be any different” [F.PR_1].

Another Romani woman contrasts the aspiration of women towards emancipation that is so promoted in Polish society with the need of the majority of Roma women, which is to start a family. At the same time, it is a retort to accusations that Romani women are restricted and do not have the opportunity to take up professions:

“Is it only education and widely understood freedom that may give a woman happiness? For the majority of Roma women, it is a happy family, children, a husband that are the most important values and they really don’t need an education, for example, to be happy. They don’t even feel they want to be educated” [F.PR_7].

It has to be said that the majority of my interviewees declared that their aim was to have a family. Only a few had decided to go to university, but none of them put their career above getting married and having children.

The Roma consider children as their “most important property in life”. When faced with not being able to have children, material possessions no longer have any significance. One of Kopańska’s interviewees described the reaction of young women to a relative who had been trying to have a child for a long time: “So, she has all sorts of different things but no child” [F.PR_2]. A child is placed at the very top of the family hierarchy, as a Polish Rom says:

“Among the Roma a child is treated as something sacred. It takes first place. (...) Our men don’t treat their wives as well as they do their children” [JK.M.PR_17].

It is required from women that they love their children. An informant previously quoted above said that they should place the good of their children before their own [F.PR_1].

Women who become mothers change their priorities, becoming more serious and responsible, just like the situations which they now have to face.

“When the children are ill, when we lose our temper because the kids are noisy or they don’t listen to us, or there’s not enough money, so what are we to do next? Where do we get money for clothes, food, books? This is serious. Before, you thought about what to buy yourself, where to go, when to go to the cinema, to a family party. Values have changed. It’s necessary to give up on many things because now it’s the children who are most important” [F.PR_1].

In interviews, women stress that they want to be near their children and it is they who are the priority and not paid employment. The same informant emphasised that the women she knew were also to a certain extent afraid of having children. Their concerns related to their loss of freedom, their loss of figure, their loss of attractiveness to their husbands, as well as being afraid they would not be able to support their children and bring them up well. Motherhood is seen as an inevitable part of life and of the experience of women however it may be viewed as a threat to their personal freedom. Maybe this indicates the first cracks surfacing in the Romani ideal of motherhood, evidence which can be provided by the older age of women giving birth to their first child and also the fall in the number of children they are having. Confirmation of this, however, would require further research.

MOTHERHOOD AND A CHANGE IN THE STATUS OF WOMEN

For Romani women motherhood is a positive change leading to an improvement in their status as young wives in their extended families. They start enjoying more respect as they are seen as more experienced as far as life is concerned. A Polish Romani woman said:

“A married woman with children is treated differently. She holds the position of a mature woman, and the older the children, the higher the position” [F.PR_1].

Traditionally, a young wife had the lowest status in a Roma community. It rises after the birth of her first child¹⁹ and this holds true for both parents. (Godlewska-Goska 2011, 417). A Rom who has become a father is seen as a mature and independent man (Bartosz 2004, 192). Moreover, it is only after the birth of a child that the relationship between a man and a woman is strengthened (Yoors 1973, 57).

Motherhood gives the woman an opportunity to have a say in somebody else's existence. From childhood, people have made decisions concerning her future, her education and her marriage. As a mother, roles are reversed and it is she who can decide about the life of her child. In analysing the status of women from the Ashkali group living in the slums of Belgrade, Svetlana Cirkovic (2009) came to the conclusion that they have a double status. The life of a young girl is controlled by the community that decides for her. She is passive with others choosing her as a wife and taking her into the family. The person who makes the choice and decides for the girl is her future mother-in-law. According to the findings of the Institute of Balkan Studies, this phenomenon also arises

¹⁹ Among the patrilocal Kelderari in the USA, it was only after the birth of a child that a woman would be accepted by her mother-in-law (Sutherland 1987, 172–173).

in other Romani groups in the Balkans. It is difficult to establish at which moment the status of a woman changes from passive to active, but it undoubtedly is connected with motherhood. This observation may also apply to Polska Roma with status changing with age. A woman has the highest authority when she is older. Upon reaching puberty the young woman joins the category of people who are potentially impure resulting from the onset of her sexual and reproductive abilities, whereas after the menopausal period, when she acquires the attributes of old-age (numerous grandchildren and external signs such as grey hair), her sources of defilement disappears (sexual activity and monthly periods) and she regains her purity. As a result, her position increases and after many years, she is nearly equal to men. Entering the menopausal period, she loses her femininity understood as the ability to defile. As a *phuri Romni* (old woman) she no longer has to abide by the rules which up to then restricted her in so many ways. The women who have had many children, many grandchildren, an excellent reputation, and have been only with the one man garner the highest status and enjoy the greatest respect. They are called “old mother” – *phuri daj* (Kowarska 2005, 31–32). They gain the right to participate in meetings of the elders, have a say in matters, and give advice to men. They may also take part in the settling of disputes and impose punishment, as well as express their opinion on the fate of their people. Although elderly women are in positions to benefit from privileges they have not enjoyed before, it is best if they refrain from exercising them as in this way they show their respect for men.

The Roma tell one another stories about women who achieved fame through bringing up many children and through their input whose offspring became respected members of the Roma community, often becoming local leaders. However, women who are active in public are appreciated if this activity is a prolongation of their maternal identity.

NEW ROLES OF WOMEN. WORK AND EDUCATION

Today women usually share the responsibility for the upkeep of their family. The work they undertake is not unduly varied predominantly concerning trade, such as selling textiles, commercial travelling, fortune-telling, performing in musical ensembles, working in their own firms or within Romani cooperatives, as well as working in associations or being Romani educational assistants responsible for helping Romani children in their schoolwork²⁰. Informants have also spoken about girls attending colleges studying gastronomy, hotel catering, hairdressing or photography.

²⁰ Women are also occupational and social assistants or assistants of Romani entrepreneurship. Although these occupations are similar to that of a Romani education assistant, they are concerned with the job market or with welfare.

From the research I have conducted among the Polska Roma group, it appears that at the moment the aim is for representatives of both sexes to share the responsibility for the upkeep of the family, with predominance however on the men (Godlewska-Goska 2011, 258; Mirga and Mróz 1994, 76). Both men and women have said that during the times when the Roma led a travelling lifestyle, the women had the most work and sometimes it was just too much for them. Many recalled the fate of their mothers and grandmothers with true sorrow, saying they were “responsible for the children, the washing, the cooking, money, everything” [M.PR_2]. They not only did all the housework, but also went into the towns and villages in search of money from fortune-telling. In addition, they sewed for the whole family, looked after the children, and also helped the male members of the family in their different occupations, preparing the tools, clothes and meals for their working men (Jakimik and Gierliński 2009, 12–13).

Today it is the men who believe they bear responsibility for supporting their families with women in agreement that the men should show initiative and not be so passive and laid back in this regard. Their primary responsibilities are to their women and families, and to be able to provide them with a good life. Facing a new economic reality, in which the traditional way of life has had to be modified, requires both husband and wife to undertake employment in order to support the family. Self-employment has become commonplace as it allows women independence and a great deal of freedom, which would not be the case were they to work for somebody else. This is connected with the fact that the way the parents function and how they organise their work is required to revolve around the needs of their child.

“The child goes to school and they go off on business (...). That’s what it looks like. They come back when the child returns home” [F.PR_1].

There are of course instances of families in which finance for the upkeep of the family is earned by the women due to their partners incapability of earning anything, or due to the fact that they spend the money they earn gambling or on other pleasures (Milewski 2008; F.PR_1). There are also families that receive assistance from social security or receive help from more affluent relatives. Asking for such help is not viewed as stigmatising in any of the groups (often whole villages of Carpathian Roma live in this way). There are also a small percentage of couples where the women are not required to work because their business-minded husbands amply provide for the upkeep of the whole family and in addition they employ home-help. The Roma say that one of the reasons why men take on primary responsibility to be the main family provider is the necessity for the mothers to care for their children (Mróz 2006, 82). “It is the men who run the businesses. The women stay at home to do the cooking, look after the children” [JK.F.PR_33]. Sometimes women devote themselves entirely to looking after the children, until they go to school at the age of six or seven:

“If the woman is not able to cope or at the given moment is busy taking care of the children, then the responsibility falls on the man” [F.PR_1].

When their children go to school, some women continue to stay at home, while others start looking for some means of gainful employment. Undoubtedly, the type of relations that exist in a given family depend not only on the general acceptability of the principles, but also on the family's financial situation and on the relationship between the spouses. However, no matter who is responsible for supporting the family, it is the woman who brings up the children (Mirga and Mróz 1994, 129, 131; Godlewska-Goska 2011, 259). Decisions relating to home and family are taken by both the men and women. However, from my research it appears that although women have their own money, the majority of family funds are in the hands of the men.

Here two models of femininity are observable. One is the “home” woman who is primarily concerned with looking after the children and financially is dependent on her husband, who provides for the family. This is a relatively new model as in the past, women were actively involved in financially supporting their families (from the quoted interviews, it appears that very often they were more active than the men). At the same time, there is a very clearly defined ethos of a resourceful Romani woman who knows how to cope in a crisis. Handing over the responsibility for supporting the family onto the husband has one more dimension, being a way of keeping the woman at home. In the face of all the dangers awaiting women in a non-Romani world, making sure that she is primarily busy at home is a tool that serves to guarantee her purity, while in the long term, also the continuity of Roma culture. It is all the more important because women play a key role both in the physical reproduction of the group as well as in passing on cultural narratives. By their attire and behaviour being in accordance with Romani rules, they represent the culture of a given group while at the same time defending its borders. The honour of the group depends on them (Yuval-Davis 1997, 39, 45–46). Transferring emphasis onto the role of men in supporting the family is perhaps also a response to the changes that have occurred in Romani society particularly in light of more education and the dangers it brings.

The Roma are not in agreement as to the role of education and whether going to school is a good idea. Many of our informants treat school instrumentally – it is important for a child to learn how to read and write, which in the future will make it possible for him/her to function in society. The interviewees stressed that women in particular do not need any additional knowledge because, after their inevitable marriage, their lives will be restricted to looking after the home and bringing up the children, while their husbands will bring home the bacon. At the same time, other informants are in favour of educating girls, stating that naysayers are representatives of old-fashioned Roma. Gaining an education that would facilitate employment is an alternative to the traditional style of life and way of earning money. For many Roma the main drawback is the high cost of education – the price of books, school

accessories, clothes, the obligatory contribution that has to be paid to the school, as well as the cost of extra-curricular classes. However, if a family is able to pay these expenses, it can also often afford to send their children to classes involving sport or music that are organised outside the school. The research I have conducted among the Polska Roma and Lovari has shown that women most often left school at about the age of fifteen, not going to upper secondary school at all. Boys were in positions to continue their education if both they and their parents wanted this. Girls usually terminated their education earlier due to the pressure placed on them by their families. The unquestioned custom is that after reaching a certain age, girls are expected to stop going to school. The Roma argue that it is the girls' own decision. Individual reluctance to continue their education is, however, connected with the pervading conviction that it is superfluous. Girls are discouraged from completing their education, but are actually urged to start "real" Romani family life. Teenagers are also expected to contribute to the housework, which limits the time they have for their studies. Of course, apart from those negatively inclined towards education, there are those who support it. Among them are both those with primary and secondary education, as well as those who dropped out of school after a couple of years.

A special case is the education of married girls. Here the opinions of the Roma are divided. Some of our interviewees believe that there is no reason why a young married girl should not continue her education, stating that it is possible to reconcile family life with school, especially with the help of grandparents. Others adamantly claim that marriage means the end of a girl's education as her school responsibilities make it impossible for a young Romani girl to fulfil her vocation, which is the building of her own family and having children. After getting married, girls are faced with new obligations, which for women are a priority:

"Because she has a husband, has children, and has her responsibilities. (...) A girl wants to go to school? There's nothing stopping her, but if she gets married, then she should lead that type of life"
[JK.FPR_1].

Education is not treated seriously and is viewed as a requirement introduced by an externally imposed majority, which a teenage girl may be released from to finally lead "her own life", devoting it to her new family. This decision may be inspired by her relatives or may come from the young couple themselves. The girls themselves are well aware of the expectations of them and know that if they would like to continue their education after their marriage, that this would not be met with approval. For girls who have already started their own families, the obligation to continue their school education is seen as a punishment: instead of devoting herself to her new life – to her husband and children – she has to go on attending classes.

After getting married, it is the husband who becomes his young wife's guardian. Most often it is he, not the parents, who has the decisive voice in whether she should

continue her education, or not. And in this matter, opinions among the Roma are divided. Some say that after the wedding, men categorically prohibit any further education, while others claim that girls may carry on going to school if their husbands agree. Our interviewees stated that they knew families in which the girls continued going to school for a few years after having got married.

From time to time, however, opinions pointing to a different model of femininity and motherhood are voiced, according to which a woman should get an education before she has a child. This is seen as giving her an opportunity for the future and not an unpleasant obligation. Education and a career, however, are not goals in themselves as the family is still what is most important. One woman said:

“If a girl is wise, she’ll finish secondary school. She’ll still have time to get married, have a baby, and so on. Because a family is a must, there’s no life without a family” [JK.F.PR_11].

An often quoted Romani activist promotes the linkage of education with family life. At the same time, she draws attention to how important it is for girls to acquire the necessary future employment skills even if a higher education turns out to be impossible. This woman does not only claim that you can be both a wife and mother and continue your studies, but also says that “one’s marital obligations do not imply that you can no longer do anything for yourself and develop your own interests” [F.PR_1]. Presenting herself as an example, she shows that young Gypsy girls can also gain satisfaction from their lives outside the family by being able to combine different forms of activity: professional, family and social.

The disinclination to educate girls results from two factors. Many Roma see education as a threat. Very often Romani families have no trust in schools, not believing their children will be safe there (Wiśniewska and Andrys 2007, 272–273). An important issue is the potential threat to the group’s cohesiveness. Girls who go to school have access to all sorts of things that are prohibited and to models of behaviour that are contradictory to those of the Roma. It is at school that they have, for example, their first contact with alcohol and the like. Women have noticed that young Romani girls adopt the models of behaviour of young Polish girls, often replicating their way of dress. The Roma believe that although their girls know the principles of *romanipen*, they may find it difficult to resist the temptations of the non-Roma world. Thus, they may stop living in accordance with Romani tradition. Girls attending school are also beyond the control of their parents and family and what with the schools being coeducational, they have contact with non-Roma boys, with such contacts being prohibited during the age of puberty.

The Roma claim that if a child wishes to gain an education, then he/she should know his/her traditions very well and so be in a strong enough position to resist temptation and uphold his/her “good reputation”. “If a Rom is wise, then he can go to school” [JK.M.PR_13]. One of our interviewees said this about a girl attending school:

“We have such a girl in the family, there’s no reason why she shouldn’t go to school. We’re pleased that she’s getting an education, but she can’t forget that she’s a Romani. She should dress like a Romani – schools have nothing against this – and have her principles, what is allowed and what isn’t. If she wants to go to school, then that’s fine” [JK.F.PR_1].

When the Roma talk about women who have an education, what is important is whether the given woman adheres to the principles of *romanipen*.

The risk has also another dimension. Girls usually stop going to school when they reach the age of puberty. According to Romani principles, this is when a girl is ready to get married. One of the traditional ways of marriage is so called bride kidnapping. If a girl is still at school, there is the risk that she may be abducted when on her way to or from school or drawn out of her class by a Rom who wants to marry her. In order to prevent such situations taking place, parents often let their daughters wear trousers, attire normally perceived as inappropriate, but which assists in the pretence that the girl is still a child. (Mróz 2006, 7; Godlewska-Goska 2011, 270–271). In order to minimise the risk, parents drive their university or secondary-school-student daughters to their classes and also take them back home. Girls are fully aware that with such restrictions and with so much effort required to assure her safety, undertaking any sort of studies may be extremely difficult for her parents. One seldom chosen solution is home-schooling, by which the girl’s safety is secured with her remaining under the constant supervision of her family.

Despite the above, more and more Romani women are attending schools of higher education. The exact number of Roma at university or with a university degree is not known, but on the basis of some very general estimates, done according to the reports of the Scholarship Commission attached to the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, which grants scholarships to university and college students, we can see that women are in the majority. Most of the students appear to come from the Carpathian Roma group, where emphasis is placed on education, treating it as a gateway to a better life. Although only a small percentage of women decide to go to university, we can presume that more will follow in their footsteps and education will become a more common feature of their life.

Because they are responsible for the home, women primarily take an active interest in the increasing education of their children. The fact that it is mainly women who go to university leads to them transmitting to their children the belief in the essential role of education. From the findings of Łukasz Krzyżowski who did research among young female Romani leaders from the Polska Roma and Carpathian Roma groups, young women who have higher education or are at university understand the significance of education and that the strategies that have been adopted to function as a minority group in society so far are no longer sufficient (Krzyżowski 2008, 40, 59). Positive attitudes to Romani parents, cooperating with them, making them aware of the importance of education, teaching them how to prepare appropriate space for

the child so s/he is able to work while at the same time encouraging him/her to do so results in parents becoming involved in their child's educational process.

No research has been undertaken so far among educated Roma which would show the fate of women with a higher education. However, although motherhood is no longer the only available route a woman can take in life, becoming involved in work and education does not mean they give up the idea of having a family. As the results of the studies conducted within the project *Romowie na rynku pracy* [The Roma in the job market] have shown, women who have a secondary education devoting their whole time to their families upon getting married, and not trying to introduce any changes in this sphere.

“Even if before having a child they had declared that their daughters would go to school and then out to work, etc., they prepare them for marriage and parenthood, rather than for getting a job or improving their qualifications” (Mróz 2006, 39).

Presumably, some women after leaving university or secondary school prefer to take on traditional roles whilst others have different aims in mind. This depends on the woman's individual features of character, her aspirations, as well as on the conditions pertaining within the family and the couple's mutual relations. One of the women said:

“I know different women, some who are very emancipated and others who seem to be completely not of this epoch, but their aim is to get married and have children. And the result is that they get married and have children, and function like real mums” [F.PR_1].

This interviewee thinks women who reject the traditional system of values, of which motherhood is an integral part, are “freaks”. Contemporary Romani women are faced with the necessity to combine different types of activities. They are aware of the need to be responsible for their family, but that they also have to teach their children how to be independent, so that they can stay at home on their own during the absence of their parents. That is why the extended family is so important, helping a working mother in so many ways. My interviewee stressed how important it is for a woman to be emotionally strong:

“Among Romani women, those who are strong are able to cope with the children, the home and sometimes are capable of going out to work as well. I admire those young women who manage so much better than was the case in the past. They have much more to do but they manage” [F.PR_1].

As I have pointed out numerous times, contemporary Romani women are, however, more and more active in areas not connected with the home and the upkeep of their family. Some of them are members and activists of Roma associations and work for the good of their own community, such as in the sphere of culture and the education of Romani children. They also benefit from training courses and programmes aimed to help the Roma. Such activities do bring about certain risks: women working outside the home or going to a meeting or conference are beyond the control of the group. In the

Polska Roma group this may lead to them being stigmatized. Among the Carpathian Roma, who have already undergone a certain loss of ethnic qualities, women have long been outside the control of the group and thus this is not perceived negatively²¹.

CONCLUSIONS

Although together with the Roma's changed lifestyle, there has been an increase in the number of roles Romani women may perform, the basic one is still that of mother and wife, whilst also bearing responsibility for finding the means of earning a living. The choice has increased thanks to the opening up of new possibilities. To the traditional roles, such as the already aforementioned ones of mother and wife, daughter, adviser among the elders (a position only available for older women; very seldom do women become traditional leaders), fortune-teller, and singer, can be added those of student, Roma organisation activist, and employee in either Polish or Romani firms. However, irrespective of the financial situation of the family, their education, occupation, and which group the women come from, motherhood is the experience they all share, and which raises their social status. Changes, however, have also been occurring in this sphere, concerning the lower number of children they have, the older age they give birth to their first child at, and the less strict principles in regard to post-natal isolation. According to what they declare, children are still what they put the highest value on but, in practice, fewer Roma are deciding on having large families.

An informant from central Poland also points to the Roma paying more attention to children's health, having better access to doctors and vaccinations²². Women who need support in bringing up their children receive it not only from their family and older women, but also from people working at school, in community centres, as well as from psychologists. Among contemporary women, we can see changes in their attitude to motherhood: they tend to be overprotective – something that did not happen in the past – resulting in their children, especially girls, not learning to be independent and not having the opportunity to interact with their peers. Women are also concerning themselves more with their children's appearance, making sure they are clean and nicely dressed. What has remained unchanged is their love for their children and their desire to have their own. More observable is the increasing role of fathers. Although men were always involved in their children's upbringing, today they devote more time to them than ever before.

²¹ Lech Mróz, a private conversation.

²² This, however, depends on how much the family can afford. From the report on health care for the Roma it appears that in comparison with the population at large, they fall ill much more often. This is due to bad living conditions, lack of means to benefit from the health services, as well as their own customs which have an influence on how they use the services, prenatal health care for example (Mirga-Wójtowicz 2008).

From an analysis of the presented phenomena, there emerges three models of femininity: that of the woman whose duty is to look after the children and the home, the Romani woman who is a mother and wife, but is also busy supporting the family, trying to continue her education and looking for new professional opportunities, and the woman aware of her needs, who goes to university and works for the benefit of her group, while being a mother at the same time.

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