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From Multiple Deprivation to Success – Educational Careers of Ten Roma and Gypsy women

Abstract Roma and Gypsy women in Europe suffer from multiple deprivation: because of their cultural/ethnic traditions, their social situation and their sex/gender. Despite this Roma and Gypsy women are in Hungary (as well as in other countries) more successful in the education system than men. The article analyses the success of ten Roma/Gypsy women, who have come from a background of multiple deprivation but managed to make educational careers in the Hungarian school system. The analysis is focused on the question: “Which factors had an influence on their success?” The empirical analysis is based on biographical narrative interviews which were made by the author in 2012 in Pécs and Budapest. The study shows that all women had a very strong learning motivation and were ready to have conflicts with the traditional female role model. Their parents and teachers played mostly a very positive role in this success, but the most important factor was their own learning motivation.

Keywords: School education, Intercultural research, Roma and Gypsy, Educational sciences, Biographical research, Hungary

Roma and Gypsy women in Europe suffer from multiple deprivation (Council of the European Union, 2011, p. 3). Firstly because of their cultural/ethnic traditions which are different from the culture of the majority societies. These differences often lead to discrimination in school education. Secondly because of their social situation: a lot of Roma and Gypsies live in poverty. Thirdly women have additional disadvantages because the traditional Roma/Gypsy culture defines their place to be in the family. Therefore an educational career is regarded as not necessary (Forray & Hegedűs, 2003). That’s why Roma and Gypsy women are often called the “minority of the minority” (Vincze, 2010, p. 195). In spite of this Roma and Gypsy women are in Hungary (as well as in other countries) more successful in the education system than men, i.e. they have better marks and higher degrees (Forray & Hegedűs, 2003). For ten years now more women than men have got a college/university degree in Hungary.ⁱ This paper analyses the progress of ten Roma/Gypsy women: Adele, Agnes, Barbara, Francis, Marianne, Monika, Nina, Rita and Sonjaⁱⁱ who have come – as the title says – from a background of multiple deprivation but managed to make educational careers and obtained a college/university degree. The author made biographical interviews with the women in 2012 in Pécs and Budapest.

Theoretical framework

Serving as a theoretical framework of this study is the underclass theory of William Julius Wilson adapted by Iván Szelényi and János Ladányi for the Hungarian situation. According to it after the democratic system change in the 1990's the Roma/Gypsy ethnic minority broke apart along the social classes (Ladányi, 2009; Ladányi & Szelényi, 2004). That means for a smaller group (1/5 of the Hungarian Roma/Gypsies) their social position has become significantly better. They have practically become a part of the middle class and this social advancement also means an association process. Their social environment does not define them as Roma/Gypsies anymore (Dupcsik, 2009; Ladányi, 2009). But for most of them this process means that they have become a part of the underclass, have lost their role in society and suffer from permanent unemployment and poverty, live in social and regional segregation. It is very likely that their children will live in the same situation. According to Helmut Fend's school theory school system plays a central role in supporting or impeding social mobility. Through its selection function (Fend, 1980) the school system reinforces deprivation for most of the Roma/Gypsies. However – through its allocation function (Fend 2006) – school can also help them to improve their social position. The interviewed women belong to this small second group.

The interview study

The question of the interview study was: Which factors had an influence according to the opinion of the affected persons on their success in the education system? To answer this we chose the method of biographical narrative interviews. The intention was to collect as many influencing factors as possible and to investigate the opinions of the Roma/Gypsies themselves. This point is particularly important, because the perspective of the affected people is often neglected in research. The initial question (stimulus) was: "I research the school biography of Roma/Gypsy people who have a college/university degree. I would like to know which factors had an influence on your individual success in the education system. May I ask you to tell me about your biography and experiences in the education system (nursery school, primary school, secondary school, college) as detailed as possible?"

For help they had received a guideline at the beginning of the interview: (1) family background (social situation, socialization), parents; (2) childhood, upbringing; (3) pre-school experience; (4) school experience (positive/negative), a) primary school, b) secondary school; (5) college experience (positive/negative); (6) current life situation: work, family status.

The selection of the respondents was done with the snowball method and in accordance with two criteria: the interviewed women had to belong to the Roma/Gypsy minority in Hungary (determined by both: the self-definition and the definition of their environment) and they had to have a college/university degree.

The interviewed women

Most of the interviewed women (6) belong to the *Beás-cigány* group, 3 of them to the *Oláh-cigány* group and 1 person was *Romungro*ⁱⁱⁱ. The proportion of the Beás-group was the biggest because this group lives in the region of Pécs, where most of the interviews were made. Most of the parents (7) belong to the same group, 3 women came from an intermarriage, in which the not-Roma/Gypsy parents were Hungarian, Croatian or German. Half of the interviewed women (5) were at the time of the interview between 20 and 30 years old, the rest of them (5) between 30 and 40 years old. Most of them (8) belong to the first generation with a college/university degree in their family. Only in two families did one parent have (i. e. the mother) a college/university degree. A lot of parents (5) had only attended an primary school or had no school degree at all. In one case they were illiterate. The highest degrees of the interviewed women were as follows: three women had received a Bachelor-degree at a university or a three-year course at a university of applied sciences, six a five-year course at a university^{iv} and one woman had a postdoctoral lecturing qualification (habilitation).

The highest school degree of the parents was positively correlating with the socioeconomic status of the family: Only three of the families can be counted as middle class (the parents of Francis and Nina are businesspeople, Monika's father works in the middle management). All other women described their family as "poor" or "very poor" and three families lived in a Gypsy-settlement, which can be defined as a synonym for poverty and deprivation (see Ladányi, 2009). Both the number of the siblings and the number of the children of the interviewed women were significantly lower than those of the average Roma/Gypsy families, which mostly have five or six children. The largest part of the women had 1 (3) or 2 (3) siblings and only two had four brothers or sisters. Two women have two children, four one child and four women had none (yet). The childless women were between 20 and 30 years old and mostly (3) unmarried (yet). Five women were divorced, one woman was a widow and only one was married. But two women live with a partner^v. These data show that an educational career for a Roma/Gypsy woman is difficult to reconcile with the traditional female role model, which is expected of them.

Educational careers of the interviewed women

Five women – Agnes, Adele, Maria, Nina, Jennifer – had a "classical" educational career. That means they attended a secondary school^{vi} right away after the primary school, and received their GCSE. After that they directly went to university and completed their studies in the regular time. Two of them – Adele and Jennifer – belong to the younger generation, which at the time of the interview was between 20 and 30 years old.

Also five women (5) – Barbara, Francis, Marianna, Rita, Sonja – completed their college/university studies with delays and breaks, mostly in evening courses beside family and work. The most common reason for the delay was to found a family: four women – Marianne, Nina, Rita and Sonja – broke off their educational career because they wanted to dedicate themselves to their family. Conflicts with the traditional female role model also played a part like in Rita's life:

"My mother said that I have no other things to do on this earth, but to have children. I should find a husband and get children. [...] I had to choose between my family and a life that I wanted. [...] I have chosen." (Rita, I9-2).

Another problem was the lack of financial resources. Lots of women worked during their studies (one of them was as a single mother even the main breadwinner of the family) – hence it also caused delays in the educational career:

"These weren't easy times, it was very hard, because the two children were there. I took one to the day-nursery, the other one to the nursery school, then I went to the university and when I was in the second year I had to go to work too. In the morning I was at the university, in the afternoon I worked as a waitress, it was my former profession." (Sonja, I10-3).

Their very strong motivation to learn shows that – despite these difficulties – they have found a way again and again to continue their educational career. For example Marianne, who experienced a great number of conflicts between her educational motivation and the expectation and perceptions of her environment. When she wanted to go to a secondary school and she had a place, the director of her primary school tried to persuade her parents not to send her to this school:

"[...] because I would experience bad things there as the only gypsy child, there are no gypsy children, they don't like gypsies, and I will not be able to prevail, I will feel very badly, I will fail" (Marianne I5-8).

Although her parents still wanted her to go to the secondary school, Marianne preferred – because of her positive experiences in a summer-job in a textile factory and the opinion of the colleagues there – to go to a vocational school. She worked for 5 years as a needlewoman and attended an evening secondary school. She broke off that course just before the GCSE exam, because she became very much in love and got married. Ten years after that she continued her studies as an unemployed, divorced single mother. First she had a retraining, after that she obtained the GCSE and started to study social work with at the age of 35 at

the university. At the age of 40 she received her university degree. Her case shows that the contradiction between her own motivation and the (real or perceived) expectations of her environment caused her big problems. On the one hand she pointed out how important it was for her to study:

“For me it was very natural, to learn, to learn, to learn. I have always known that I have something to do in this world.” (Marianne, I5-10).

On the other hand every time when someone (the head of the primary school, her colleagues in the factory, etc.) showed another option for her, she took the other way. The break-off was every time her own decision: Her parents would have preferred her to go to the secondary grammar school and she never said that her husband would have wanted her to stop her studies. Rather it seems that – despite support and school achievement – she herself did not entirely trust herself to be allowed to have an education career:

“Career decisions are, you know, very interesting things in my life, and I couldn’t say that it is about discrimination. I think it was rather the result of the reality of human frailty.” (Marianne, I5-8).

At the end her learning motivation triumphed and – with breaks and delays – at the age of 40 she obtained her university degree:

“But – it seems – I had to go through every station. I am a late starter and I needed to make a lot of experiences to find my place.” (Marianne, I5-10).

Her case shows very clearly that the decision of a Roma/Gypsy woman to pursue an educational career is associated with high risks and correspondingly with ambivalent feelings. Firstly the possibility (and often the reality) is there to lose their home communities (no Roma/Gypsy-husband, high risk of divorce, conflicts with the family) and secondly it is not sure that their efforts will be rewarded. The integration into the majority society and the improvement of their social position are not in the least secured.

Supporting and impeding factors

In the interview all ten women named their own learning motivation as a very important supporting factor, very often combined with a “disease to please”, to show themselves and others, what they can achieve. The second important factor was the support of the parents (8)^{vii}. Many women (7) named the lack of discrimination, scholarships and support programmes. Although all of the interviewed women told stories about helpful teachers in their school career, only 6 named them explicitly as a supporting factor. There were also other factors like the workplace (3), the university (2) and friends (1).

As impeding factors they named in the first place poverty (4) and conflicts with the family (4). In the second place (3) was the discrimination in school (especially mobbing from the classmates). Two women named teachers who weren’t helpful, some of them tried to stop their educational career. There were also other factors like the unwillingness of the husband (1), the inexperience of the parents with the school system (1), the colleagues (1), the employer (1) and also their own uncertainty (1).

It was very telling, that the interviewed women named more supporting than impeding factors. This may be because they have achieved an educational career and can better remember the positive moments. The initial question stressed indirectly the success-perspective – this could be another reason. The fact that all women have pointed out their own motivation and achievement shows that they know about their special situation as a new elite who had to fight and pay for the success. But at the end they achieved something very important.

Summary

What can we say about the educational career of the interviewed women? We could see that they and their parents made great efforts to enable them to advance. The women had a very strong learning motivation and were ready to have conflicts with the traditional female role model. Nevertheless, we could see that they tried to do both: to be a good mother and housewife *and* to achieve educational success. If they were forced to choose, they decided to continue their studies, even at the price of parting and divorce. But

increasingly they could count on the support of their families. Their parents played a very important and mostly a very positive role in this success, their support was necessary to overcome hard times and not to give up.

Teachers also played a very important role as models to follow and also as individual supporters. Most of the women had positive experiences with teachers, which was very significant for their success. The negative experiences had a great impact on their life too, because not-supporting teachers deepened their self-doubt, made them hesitating and caused breaks and delays in their learning career.

The interviewed women belong to the small minority of the Hungarian Roma/Gypsies, who could – with the help of the educational system – improve their social position. They gave up the traditional female role model and experienced strong identity crises because of the incompatible ideas between the majority and minority culture, and the removal from tight and constricting family relationships (like Rita's parting from the parental family and the divorces of most of the women), which were very distressing. But they also experienced decision freedom, could develop their talents, took their life into their own hands, which altogether strengthened their self-esteem. All of them said that they really liked their work and a good job was as important a life target as to raise their children. They can be defined as an archetype of the modern woman, who tries to have family *and* work. They managed to reconcile her existence for others (family, children) with the claim to have some independence (career, self-fulfilment). They can confidently move between the two worlds of the majority and the minority society. Although they have an "offer" from the majority society to assimilate, they still define themselves as Roma or Gypsy and work for different ethnic organisations. They would like to be Hungarian *and* Roma/Gypsy. Their aim is not assimilation (to be a part of the majority society for the price of losing their cultural traditions) but integration. That means to live together with the majority in the same society and keep the Roma/Gypsy culture. This aim is not fulfilled yet and there is still a long way to go to achieve the integration of the *whole* Roma/Gypsy minority.

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ⁱ Source: Interview with Mr. Gábor Daróczi, director of the foundation Romaversitas and Mr. Gábor Havas, researcher and former director of the foundation Romaversitas.

ⁱⁱ All names have been changed.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hungarian Roma/Gypsy can be divided in three different groups according to their native language, place of residence (region) and to the time of their immigration (Bíró, 2006; Kis, 2007; Szoboszlai, 2006): Romungro, Oláh-cigány, and the Beás-cigány. For more about it see Óhidy & Orsós, 2013.

^{iv} Four of them were preparing for their PhD.

^v One divorced woman and the widow.

^{vi} In a high school or in professional middle school (for more about it see Óhidy, 2007)

^{vii} Two women named also the good financial situation of their family, two women the support of their husband and two named other family members (sibling, grandmother).