

GYPSY HOUSEWIVES IN ROMANIA: GENDER AND IDENTITY

1. Introduction

This research study focuses on adult gypsy women in order to give us an understanding of the way they perceive their own gender roles, what expectations they are held to by the wider community, and the extent to which these expectations are met in everyday practice.

Ultimately, these communities are pressured by wider political, social and economic factors into adapting their practices accordingly, causing them to change at a different pace from wider western society, but changing nevertheless. As such, the changes in culture should be recorded, monitored and interpreted within a wider anthropological context of the effects of globalisation and modernisation on ethnic minorities.

The results of this research inform us of the effects of discrimination on marginalised communities and how community boundaries are created and maintained - in light of ethnic segregation - and how these impact the livelihoods of women.

2. Rationale

Gypsy communities are marginalised and often closed off to mainstream society¹, and as a result, there is limited anthropological information on life from the female gypsy perspective, although some attempts have been made in Western Europe^{2,3}. This research seeks to address this issue.

The political or social agenda of a social group will often affect women's livelihoods, mostly through direct social control of behaviour, which often restricts the freedoms of women⁴, and thus need to be researched.

Anthropological research in gypsy communities can produce valuable data, which can be used by NGOs and government agencies in order to reduce the level of discrimination faced by Gypsies and to encourage ethnic cohesion.

3. Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were audio recorded to gather the data from 30 respondents, with 10 women interviewed at each of the 3 research sites in Romania. The women vary in age, marital status and religion in order to ensure the results are representative. Recruitment took place through direct contact, approaching them to participate in the study, or by word of mouth.

Four categories were used to ensure questions were appropriate for the respondent's age, marital status and fertility, as shown below.

Newlywed
(2 respondents)

Young mother
(3 respondents)

Mother with
minor children
(9 respondents)

Mother with
adult children
(16 respondents)

4. Findings

1. **Increasingly egalitarian gender roles** – men more involved in childcare and housework, although women still primarily responsible.

2. **Emigration and temporary breakdown of family structure** – youngsters and middle aged men and women often emigrate to other European countries for various periods of time, with children and the elderly being left behind (see Fig 1). Emigration is perceived as a sacrifice for one's family.

3. **Women as bearers of tradition** – the behaviour of women, their modesty, employment status and whom they marry are emphasised as factors which differentiate gypsies from outsiders, thus creating a gypsy group identity.

4. **Increased ethnic segregation** – a communist state ensured equality in job availabilities, education and housing, thus minimising the differences between gypsies and ethnic Romanians. Post-communism, all middle aged or elderly respondents reported increased discrimination and segregation.

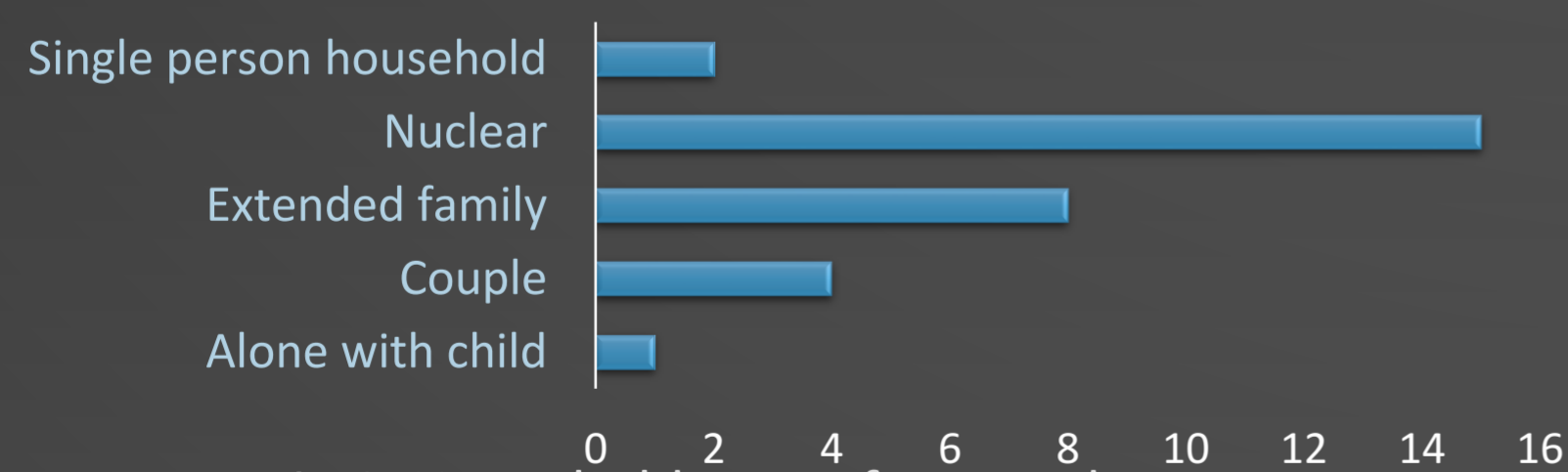


Fig 1. Household type of respondents

5. Implications

Due to external political and socio-economic factors, there are changing patterns within these communities and in order to adapt to a changing society, negotiation and compromise are necessary, leading to the creation of a **flexible tradition**.

The increased discrimination in the workforce means that many in these communities have to rely on welfare, or even resort to petty crime as their means of survival. This further fuels the stereotype of gypsies being work-shy or criminals, making them more likely to be overlooked in jobs applications.

This results in a cycle of poverty, leaving many gypsies unable to gain stable employment and being able to provide for their families (see Fig 2).

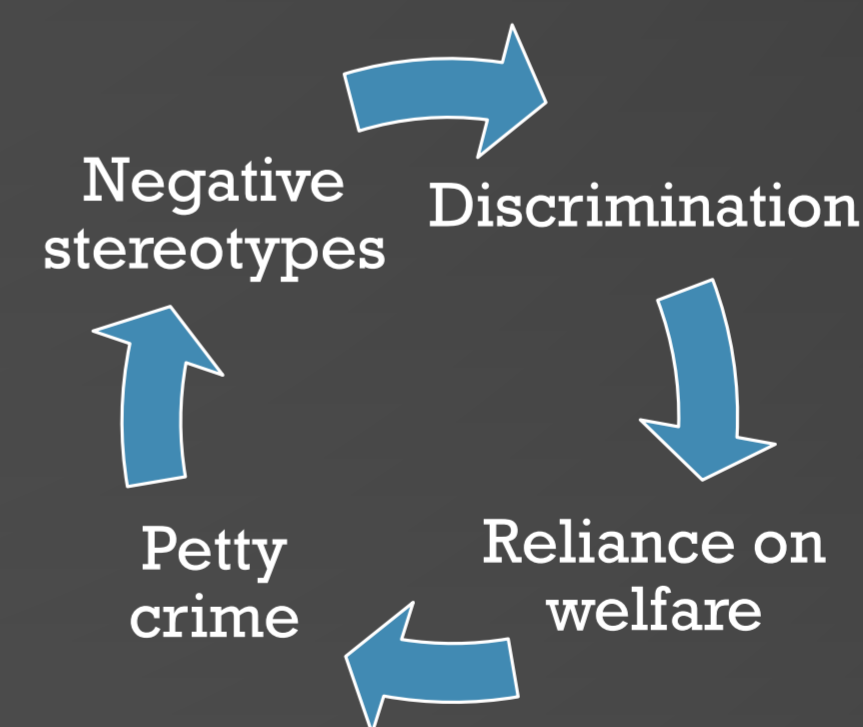


Fig 2. Cycle of poverty

6. Conclusion and future research

This study illustrates the way community boundaries are formed and maintained within marginalised communities, as well as contributing to our understanding of the effects of ethnic segregation on women. It also highlights the notion that communist states have better ethnic integration.

Further study should contrast generational differences in order to gain deeper understanding regarding recent historical changes in gypsy communities and how to encourage positive change in these communities, particularly to address low educational attainment, criminality and ethnic segregation.

References

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