

1. Introduction

The Roma minority seems to live in a parallel society in Romania. On the one hand Romanians, as well as Hungarians in the areas where they are predominant, reject them and make them outsiders, as reports about various attacks on Roma show (Szente& Petrova, 1996). This means that Roma might find it harder to integrate themselves into society and to trust other people and institutions. On the other hand some Roma can be found who do not want to be part of the Romanian society due to their traditions, which they want to maintain (Achim, 2004, p.209).

This exclusion, both voluntarily and involuntarily, also impacts on their education in a number of ways. Firstly 27.3% of the Roma in Romania were found to be illiterate in 1998 (Achim, 2004, p. 205). Secondly, although improvements could be noted, 80% of the children not attending school are of Roma ethnicity (Romanian government, 2005, p. 154), and the number of Roma children seems to shrink the higher the level of education (McDonald, 1999, p.186). The main explanation given for this is poverty, by which Roma households are affected three times more likely than non-Roma ones (Romanian Government, 2005, p. 153) as in around 50% of Roma households not one employed person can be found (Achim, 2004, p. 205).

Women might be even less educated due to Roma traditions, where women are responsible for reproductive and household work, and might, therefore, not be considered to be in need of education. Paivi Gynther highlighted that early marriage and childbearing are common amongst the Roma, who consequently, are unable to comply with the existing education laws which are linked to age (2007, p.230).

The literature suggests that education of women as important to empower them (Medel-Anonuevo& Bochynek, 1995), which in turn can help them to integrate better and to break the poverty circle (Rose& Subrahmanian, 2005, p.5). It is therefore necessary to have a closer look at how Roma women experience(d) education, what role female education plays for them, and

how they think Roma girls' schooling could be improved in order to increase attendance. So far neither literature nor the government's publications seem to pay particular attention to the education of Roma girls and women.

By taking into account Roma women's opinion about how their education could be improved, much needed changes could be initiated. The government and NGOs can only improve the situation together with Roma women.

This dissertation therefore aims to provide new information about the issue of Roma girls' education and to examine the importance education has for Roma women in Romania. To provide the needed context, the literature was reviewed, both about female education as well as about education of Roma in Romania. Additionally, qualitative research in form of semi-structured interviews was carried out to allow a better understanding of Roma women's opinions. The interviews not only looked at how Roma women in Romania view education, how education impacted on their lives, but also how important certain restrictors are, which get mentioned in the literature and government publications, and how the access and quality of female education in Romania can be improved. Although the focus is only on Romania, the paper might also be useful when looking at Roma girls' education, and with it empowerment, in neighbouring countries like Bulgaria or Hungary, where Roma face similar situations.

The dissertation will be structured as such:

The following part discusses the literature on female education and education of Roma in Romania, as well as briefly summarising projects, which the government carried out in order to increase Roma school attendance. Part three highlights the methodology for this dissertation, whilst the findings of the interviews, which were carried out in Romania, are presented in part four. The following fifth part then explores the validity of the literature and mentions the main differences which can be observed between literature and the interviewees' opinions and suggestions on Roma girls' education in Romania. Finally a conclusion about the findings on Roma girls' education in Romania will be drawn based on the previous discussion.

2. Literature Review

Firstly some views on female education as a mean to female empowerment will be mentioned, followed by a critical examination of what is written about the education of Roma in Romania. The last section highlights how the Romanian government aims to improve Roma children's school attendance.

2.1. Female education

Girls' attendance in school is seen by many without a doubt as a way to improve their situation in life. Shinji Tajima, former director of the UNESCO Book Department Division, stated in 1996 that if people cannot read and write they may not get access to knowledge, which is needed for general living, but also to confront issues such as "environmental destruction, AIDS, poverty, discrimination, and human rights" (1996, p.27). However he also mentioned that poverty clearly is a main constraint to literacy (1996, p.27). In terms of girls and women, "direct costs", "demand for their labour", "socio-cultural norms and traditions", "distance", "lack of appropriate facilities", "teachers", "abuse", "curriculum and textbooks", are regarded as the main restrictors to education (Rose& Subrahmanian, 2005, p.1).

In order to overcome these restrictors and to empower girls and women through education, several authors suggest different ways how to proceed. Medel-Anonuevo and Bochynek, for example, favour curriculum changes and awareness-raising amongst teachers towards gender issues, to increase "gender sensitisation in the educational system" (1995, p.10). Herz and Sperling promote increasing numbers of better trained teachers, appropriate curriculum and learning materials. Additionally they demand a reduction of direct and indirect costs of schooling, and the building of local schools which provide privacy and safety (in Rose& Subrahmanian, 2005, p. 9). Other authors have criticized the Millennium Development Goal, which aims at increasing girls' school attendance, for ignoring the importance of secondary and adult education (Rao& Robinson-Pant, 2006, p.137; Lind, 2006, p. 167; Rose& Subrahmanian, 2005, p.7).

On the other hand, there are also authors who question the entire discussion of formal education for girls. Stromquist, for example, argues that formal education of girls, although it might be gender aware, can only be regarded as an antecedent of female empowerment, but not empowerment itself (1995, p.19). Furthermore, Jeffrey and Jeffrey, who are aware of the importance of formal education, similarly warn of an overvaluation of schooling. They highlight that women who did not receive formal education might still be highly educated in the specifics of their social world (1998, p. 248). It seems to be a wrong presumption, so Malhorta and Mather argue, to postulate that in all societies education and paid work improve women's situation like it does in the Western world (1997, p.600).

These discussions about female education would seem to be very important when examining education of Roma women in Romania. Literature suggests that still many Roma lead a traditional life, where girls marry young and work only in the household, rather than earning money (UNICEF, 2002, p.100). Such traditional Roma might support the standpoint that formal education is not necessary, as other values and knowledge are of better use for the women in their society. However financial restraints, facilities or teachers' behaviour and curriculum, as mentioned by Rose and Subrahmanian (2005, p.1), might also play an important role for girls' school attendance. Therefore the different suggestions for improving girls' schooling were taken into account during the primary research in Romania.

2.2. Education of Roma in Romania

Literature about Roma and Roma education in Romania was found to hardly mention female education at all. Instead it focuses more on the reasons for which Roma children's school attendance is lower than of other children, as already mentioned in the introduction. Although the Romanian government provides some information on Roma school enrolment, as for example in its National Development Plan 2007-2013 (2005), some authors on the contrary, like Pinnock & Donati, claim that no data is available for Roma children's school enrolment (2001, p. 320).

The only gender specific data which could be found on Roma girls' school enrolment was provided by UNICEF, and was based on estimations due to the very unclear figures about the Roma population in Romania. In its report "The Participation to Education of the Roma children: Problems, Solutions, Actors", UNICEF mentions that more Roma boys were signed up for school (52%) than Roma girls (46.9%) (2002, p.41).

Several restrictors to education of Roma children's education were identified in the literature.

The most commonly mentioned was found to be financial restrictions of the families which do not allow children to go to school at all or force them to drop out. Ringold et al.(2005, p.101ff.), McDonald (1999, p.188) and Pinnock& Donati (2001, p.318) for example argue that the changes of school administration which occurred with the end of communism, place a further financial burden on the parents. Today they do not only have to pay for clothes and food, but also for previously state-provided school supplies, exam taxes, tuition fees, private lessons and "voluntary contributions", which in many cases outrun the resources of Roma families.

Due to financial problems many authors also expect Roma parents to encourage their children to support their families rather than to attend school (Pinnock& Donati, 2001, 324; Ringold et al., 2005, p. 104). This correlates with a prejudice which can often be heard in general conversations about Roma with Romanians, assuming that Roma have many children simply to make them work or beg, and therefore this point needs to be looked at critically.

The cycle of lack of education is presented in the literature as another factor which determines the school attendance of Roma children (Romanian Government, 2005, p. 154). Zamfir and Zamfir found out that families in which the father is employed, the children are more likely to go to school, in case they live in communities mixed with non-Roma. The same was found to

be true for families where the mother finished at least eight years of education (in Ringold et al., 2005, p.99).

Closely linked to the cycle of lack of education is the argument brought forward by many authors about the mentality of Roma parents being a restrictor to education. However, when reviewing the literature it was observed that many authors were making assumptions about the mentality of Roma without substantial evidence. They assumed that Roma parents do not see education as a mean for success and social mobility, but rather as a way to obtain basic qualifications (UNICEF, 2002, p.81; Ringold et. al, 2005, p.105; Cozma et al., 2000, p.282f.), and therefore do not send their children to school as insistently as non-Roma parents might do.

A further, more practical restrictor which can be found in the literature about Roma education is the fact that about 4% of the Roma do not have an ID card and about 5% of the children do not have a birth certificate (Andreescu, 2004, p.13), and can therefore not sign their children up for school, as these are prerequisites (McDonald, 1999, p.189).

Placing such prerequisites can also be a form of discrimination to which the literature refers to frequently as a reason for the low school attendance of Roma. UNICEF noted that Roma children tend to go to schools located in older buildings, where running water and sanitation facilities do not always exist (2002, p.52ff.). Discrimination can be carried out in various other forms also by teachers, who seat the children separately at the back of the class, for example, or by non-Roma parents, who demand Roma to be sent to special classes, where teaching quality is lower (Cozma et al., 2000, p.283; McDonald, 1999, p. 184). The Romanian government argues that discrimination traps Roma in a vicious cycle, causing them to refuse participation in education and in the labour market which reduces their chances of integration (2005, p. 286). Not being integrated, and focusing on traditions, in turn can increase further discrimination as differences between Roma and non-Roma get more apparent on which discrimination is based.

Surprisingly a lot less than expected has been found to be written about the impact Roma traditions have on school attendance in Romania. Focus was found to either lie on language barriers or on the communities' culture. In relation to the former, Pinnock & Donati claim that bilingualism is not receiving enough attention. According to them, many Roma still speak Romani, which makes it difficult for those children to follow lessons (2001, p. 306). Gynther on the other hand highlights the important role so-called "senior-rights" play in some communities. These "senior rights" place the rights of the older members of the community above those of the children, causing that the children cannot attend school if the different rights enter into conflict (2007, p.230). Furthermore, UNICEF concluded, after carrying out research with parents and students, that "the Roma traditional cultural models, according to which, girls get married at early ages, and their social role is to raise children, to take care of the family, and not to exercise a profession based on a specific school education" have a negative impact on the education of women (2002, p.100).

2.3. Government actions

In order to be able to address the importance these restrictors have for Roma girls' school attendance in Romania, a brief summary of the actions which the government carries out in order to improve the situation will be given here, too. It is important, however, to keep in mind that the publications of the government include only actions which were successful and have already been implemented. Similar to NGO publications, they represent only their point of view and do not indicate the quality of any of the taken actions.

In its publication "Strategic Directions regarding Roma education between 1998 and 2004", the Romanian Ministry of Education highlights the affirmative actions which have been carried out, such as the special places in high schools, vocational schools and universities (undated, p.1). It furthermore stresses the increasing importance of Roma teachers for Romani language, history and literature lessons (undated, p.1), but does not

mention the possibility of Roma teachers teaching other subjects as well. Similarly unclear is the Ministry's encouragement of revised Romani curricula and textbooks (undated, p.2), as it does not refer to its distribution and use. The publication also highlights the that the "corn și lapte" (bread and milk) programme, in which pupils receive a glass milk and biscuits or bread, has been successfully been introduced and that within the EU funded PHARE project, the government carried out trainings for Roma and non-Roma teachers to improve their work with Roma children as well as Roma school inspectors. This project is furthermore responsible for the "A Doua Șansă" ("Second Chance") programme and summer preschools for Roma children (undated, p.2). Whilst furthermore the training of 70 Roma school mediators is mentioned, this measure is only carried out in ten of Romania's 41 counties (undated, p. 2). In order to increase the efficiency of projects, the government promotes cooperation with the non-governmental sector, which is regarded as supplementary in the field of education (2005, p. 295).

In summary it appears that the government does not target all issues which can hinder Roma children, and especially girls, to go to school. The improvement of school facilities, for example, is not mentioned in relation to Roma education, although the lack of toilets and running water, especially in rural schools with a majority of Roma students (UNICEF, 2002, p. 54), can act as a restraint. As Roma traditions include a strict concept about purity and pollution (Shashi, 1990, p.92ff.), lack of facilities for girls' hygiene can therefore confine their attendance. Furthermore, a change of the parents' attitude does not seem to be a priority, although literature suggests that it is highly influential in terms of school attendance of Roma children (UNICEF, 2002, p.81; Ringold et. al, 2005, p.105; Cozma et. al, 2000, p.282f.).

Several authors furthermore criticized the efficiency and stability of Romanian educational laws. Capita and Capita for example highlight that deep political disagreement amongst the parties leads to frequent changes and delays in their implementation (2000). The results are severe for Roma families, who can no longer rely on the state for support to send their

children to school, as conditions are constantly changing (Pinnock& Donati, 2001, p. 318).

Consequently it seems necessary to examine the effect that the taken measures have and how they are perceived by the Roma community. This can then allow the government, together with NGOs, and most importantly Roma themselves, to improve these measures and also to consider new possibilities in order to increase Roma girls' school attendance.

3. Methodology

Studies in social science can either be quantitative or qualitative, both having advantages and disadvantages. Bryman suggests that according to the issues which are going to be raised by the examination of social life, the method should be chosen (1996, p. 110). Due to the complexity and the focus on personal experiences in this research, a qualitative method, which allows to respond to changes occurring during the data collection (Bryman, 1996, p. 98ff.), was needed. Quantitative methods were considered to be unable to capture perceptions, understandings and experiences for this research on the topic of female Roma education in Romania. Furthermore, time and spatial limits argued for an ideographic approach, which is closely linked to qualitative methods, to be applied (Bryman, 1996, p.100).

3.1. Semi-structured interviews

Due to the small amount of literature on Roma girls' education, the interviews were expected to reveal a new set of information. Existing information appears, as mentioned in the literature review, only quantitatively. Discriminatory treatments, opinions about traditions and female education, quality of education and the impact of measures taken by the government cannot be measured by data alone. Further quantitative analysis would also not reveal the personal importance and experiences women have with education. As Miller and Glassner argue, although the interview itself is just a snapshot of their lives, interviews provide the possibility to grasp the interviewees' experience of age, ethnicity and gender (1997, p.102f). Therefore qualitative research was carried out, in the form of interviews with thirteen Roma women from different ages.

Through the form of semi-structured interviews, analysis of the given answers is facilitated. Semi-structural interviews allow the researcher on the one hand to be flexible to the interviewee's answers, understandings or moods, whilst on the other hand they still produce information which can be structurally discussed and compared.

3.2. Participants

The interviewees were Roma women from different ages, ranging from 18 to 64 years old. Nine women from the Western (Agi (23), Ildiko (38), Kata (24), Drina (20), Tania (18), Oana (22), Florica (33), Luminitsa (32) and Dika (64)) and four (Violca (49), Mirela (50), Doina (28), Ioana (20)) from the Eastern part of Romania were interviewed*. All apart from Drina, Tania, Oana and Luminitsa had daughters, whilst Florica had two sons. Kata was the only one who had not been to school at all, whereas all the other interviewed women were either still in education or finished at least four years of formal schooling.

3.3. Carrying out the interviews

Due to the fact that the researcher has lived and studied in different parts of Romania, and therefore obtained knowledge of the language and the context, primary research was made easier.

The interviews contained several blocks of questions (see appendix) of which questions were asked flexibly, according to the previous answers and the situation of the women. The blocks were about the openings education brought about, the experience of education, the importance of education of Roma women and the opinion about government actions. As the interviews were carried out in Romanian, a voice recorder was used in accordance with the women to transcribe the interviews easier. As some women were Hungarian speaking, as it was the case of Luminitsa, Agi, Kata and Ildiko, a translator was also attending the interviews. However it could be observed that the presence of the gatekeeper, who insisted on attending the interview as a translator, even though the women spoke Romanian quite well and hardly needed his help, intimidated Agi, Kata and Ildiko. They seemed not to feel comfortable answering the questions and gave the impression that they answered in a way which they thought would be expected. Once the

* all names have been changed

gatekeeper left the room to make a phone call they all appeared to open up a bit more.

The gatekeepers of the three different communities were contacted before and asked for written consent (see appendix). In the case of one of the gatekeepers from the Western part of the country, all women were chosen to participate beforehand, whilst in the Eastern town the organisation only arranged an interview with one of the women. However the other women happily agreed to be participate, as they were present at the location where the first interview took place. The fact that a member of the gatekeeping organisation was present, whom all women seemed to respect a lot, surely influenced their decision.

Whilst all other interviews were carried out with one woman at the time, the interview with Agi, Kata and Ildiko was slightly different for several reasons. Although the gatekeeper to their community had been contacted on a previous visit to Romania, where he agreed to help with the interviews, he was difficult to get in touch with and seemed to be very busy. The women therefore were not chosen beforehand to participate, but asked right on the spot by the gatekeeper's colleague who found them wandering in the streets at the time. They were also not being informed about the purpose of the interview, as the gatekeeper wanted to prevent confusion. As not enough space was available in the organisation's building, and it was considered to be unsafe to take the women to a bar in the neighbourhood, the interview turned out to be a very short group interview.

It was ensured before each interview that the women participated voluntarily and were informed about the anonymity of the interviews. However written consent of the participants was not obtained due to the fact that some were expected not to be able to read and write.

Ethical considerations, such as the fact that bad memories might be recalled by the women when thinking back to their schooling experience were lessened as contact to the interviewees was made through gatekeepers who could act as contact persons in case the women felt uncomfortable.

However, due to bad experiences, which the women might have had in the past when letting an outsider into their community, it is acknowledged that the given answers might have been influenced by this (see ethics form in the appendix). In order to guarantee the women anonymity of their answers, their names have been changed. Additionally the gatekeepers' names and organisations, as well as the names of the towns where the interviews took place are not mentioned in this dissertation.

4. Findings

It could be observed that the women answered similarly according to their age. In cases where this applies, they will be analysed as the group of the younger women aged 18 to 24, including Tania, Ioana, Drina, Oana, Agi and Kata, the group of the middle-aged women being between 28 and 38 years old, including Doina, Luminitsa, Florica and Ildiko, and the older women aged 49 to 64, including Violca, Mirela and Dika.

4.1. Importance of education

4.1.1. Importance of education for the women themselves

Although literature suggests that Roma are not interested in education as a way to increase success in life (UNICEF, 2002, p.81), the women were found to think only positive about formal education. Throughout the interviews they highlighted learning how to read and write, but also how to behave, as the most important thing they gained. In terms of female empowerment, Oana noted that education of Roma women increases their possibilities to fight for their rights in society and in politics, and Violca saw it as a possibility to see the world through another perspective.

This impression of education to be regarded as very important, was increased by the observation that the women who were still in education had very high ambitions. In regards to their own education, they all mentioned that they want to study further and to go to university, or finish school. It could therefore be argued that this generation of women is very aware of the importance of education for their social mobility.

Amongst the women aged 28 to 38, only Ildiko from the most disadvantaged community was employed, whilst the other women were convinced that their education did not prepare them sufficiently for finding a job. One has to be aware, however, that these women's experiences were slightly different, as when they were about to finish, or just finished, school, communism came to

end, which might have had an impact on the difficulties they encountered on the employment market. Caused by the struggles they face in their present lives, these women were found to be more open towards adult education programmes than the older women.

It was observed that whilst some of the women answered that education is important for life in general and for finding a job, languages also play a major role for them. Doina, who learned Italian in an adult education programme, stressed their importance in particular, as she planned to move with her family to Italy in order to find employment and to offer her children a better life. For Ioana, languages also meant increased opportunities on the employment market as she planned to work in the tourism sector.

When thinking back to the role school played for them, two women, Oana and Florica, considered school as such an important asset that they started to work in order to earn enough money to fund their own education. Although she attended school only for four years, Doina enjoyed it so much that she recalled:

“I ran away from home to go to school, as they [the parents] didn’t let me go”

Interestingly, given that literature suggests parents making a difference amongst the children according to gender, when sending them to school, due to Roma traditions (UNICEF, 2002, p.100), it got apparent in the interviews that none of the women remembered their parents to do so.

4.1.2. Importance of education for their children

In terms of their own children’s education, most of the women interviewed said they could not choose and would rather keep both, sons and daughters, at home instead of sending only one of them. However, as discussion continued, some of the women with a poorer background mentioned that they found it more important for their sons go to school rather than their daughters, if they would have to choose.

Dika said: *“For the boys I fought more so they would go to school. When they go to the army they need to know how to write, so they do not need to ask anyone to write a letter or to read a letter.”*

This contradiction to their earlier statements about the importance of female education and the difference to their parents, who did not choose whose education is more important, might be linked to the women’s understanding of gender roles. As all those, who indicated that they think it is more important to send a son to school than a daughter, were from poor background their opinion might be influenced by the fact that they see men as the principal earners for the family. However it would be wrong to make a connection here with Roma traditions, as similar answers might be given by non-Roma as well, keeping in mind that men in Romania are earning more than women (Romanian Government, 2005, p. 159).

In order to be able to evaluate the importance their daughters’ education has for the women, they were asked what they would do in times of financial difficulties which would not allow their daughters to go to school. Again the answers were found to be divided according to the women’s financial situation. On the one hand the poorer women with less education said they would go and “ask” for financial help. It has to be noted here that the Romanian word for “to ask” (“a cere”) has not only the meaning of “to demand” and “to request”, but also means “to beg”. On the other hand the women with more years of school attendance answered they would take on a job in order to get sufficient money for their daughters’ education. Unlike the poorer women who would depend on the help of others, either authorities or other people, to keep their daughters in school in times of financial difficulties of the family, the women with more education appeared more empowered, as they relied on themselves. It could be noted that none of the women said that there is nothing they could do to keep their daughters in school, and that they all would try to find enough money for their daughter to go to school. This indicates that female education is regarded as important, although some would, as mentioned above, send their sons rather than their daughters if money problems continue to exist.

4.2. Reasons for low attendance and drop out

4.2.1. Poverty

The women whose children could not attend school as long as they wanted them to, claimed this was due to continuous financial problems of the family. They defended their decision to take their children out of school, by saying that the money, which the parents earned through hard work was insufficient. Due to the high costs of education, it was then decided to be for the better if the children would no longer attend school but help with earning the family's income.

In terms of their own education, one of the main reasons for school drop out was also considered to be poverty, and the non-existing "*possibilities*" of the parents, by which the Roma women meant the poverty of the parents. This required them drop out in order to work and help the family. As already mentioned, two women stated that they themselves decided to work in order to earn money for their own education.

4.2.2. Discrimination

Despite the researcher's expectations, based on impressions gained whilst living in Romania, it was apparent in the interviews that not all women had experienced discrimination based on their ethnicity in school. Whilst four women recalled a form of discrimination being used against them when being in school, the others gave the impression of not having been treated differently in any way by neither teachers nor students.

From the group of the younger women, Ioana remembered verbal attacks on Roma from other students. Furthermore, Oana mentioned to be graded down by the teacher for being Roma, as the teacher did not want a Roma to have the best mark.

Amongst the older women, Violca and Mirela experienced discrimination based on their ethnicity in school. In the case of Violca, the feeling of humiliation was so strong that it finally led to her drop out. She mentioned having complexes because of her skin colour, which caused her carrying

some flour with her to school which she would apply to her face in order to look whiter.

As the women, who described discriminatory practices to be occurring when they attended school, were from different age groups, it cannot be concluded that communism treated everyone the same. At the same time it would also be incorrect to draw the conclusion that post-communist democracy led to an increase in discrimination. Puxon argues that socialism did not assist deprived groups in Eastern Europe and that discrimination is based merely on the majority's rejection and the economic situation of Roma (1987, p.9). It seems therefore that discrimination by teachers and pupils alike are independent from the political form of society.

Furthermore, some women even remembered receiving positive discrimination because of being Roma. Dika for example recalled that the impoverished teachers did not demand food from her, knowing her family struggled, and rather took from her Hungarian classmates.

In order to overcome discrimination, the women gave different answers. Mirela decided to argue with the teacher, whilst Florica kept her ethnicity secret from her classmates, and Drina stated that she overcame the prejudices towards Roma students by her motivation and her success in school.

4.2.3. Tradition

As literature suggests Roma traditions to have an impact on their education (Gynther, 2007, p.230), this factor was also addressed in the interviews. Being asked about their opinion on Roma with old traditional lifestyles not sending their daughters to school, most of the women distanced themselves from these "other" Roma. Tania, in particular stressed the difference between her community and traditional Roma. She highlighted that in her community women were able to work and free to wear the clothes they chose to wear. She also explained that due to her community being fully integrated into the Romanian society, their traditions were no different than those of non-Roma, and that the only difference was her ethnicity.

All women acknowledged that some Roma, who hold on to their old traditions and habits, do not send their daughters to school. However they showed little understanding of it. They all agreed to the statement that reading, writing, maths, etc. could not as well be learnt outside school and that formal education therefore is necessary for all Roma. A feeling of sympathy or sorrow for girls, who are hindered to attend school by their traditional parents, seemed to be present, as Doina expressed it:

“We need to fight for them to learn how to read, even and especially if we are Roma, so we can offer them something in life!”.

Increasing these girls’ school attendance depends not only on the government to change its policies, but also on the Roma to change their mentality, so some of the interviewees argued. Oana highlighted that many of the traditional Roma still reject formal education as they themselves felt rejected by society due to their past of slavery, holocaust and during communism, where they were labelled, misunderstood and discriminated. She furthermore explained that her own family however embraced education as an opportunity for her to lead a better life, as they are fully integrated into society, and therefore non-traditional Roma.

4.3. Critique of the government’s actions

As already mentioned, the researcher found out that not all women experienced discrimination by teachers and fellow students. Instead the women blamed the government for applying discriminatory practices. This also got apparent in some of the remarks of the middle-aged and older women, who had experienced the communist schooling system, claiming that during Ceaucescu school was more disciplined and in some ways better than it is today in terms of discrimination.

Generally the government’s actions for Roma and girls’ education were highly critiqued by the interviewees. Especially the “corn și lapte” (bread and milk) programme, which was initiated by the government in order to stimulate Roma children’s school attendance.

Mirela: *“In a way it’s good. On the other hand they give small biscuits which the children do not eat. Sometimes they give shitty ones and many children get belly pain. They give old food, they don’t really give food. Better we give them some food that we have. The biscuits they give are good for nothing. The children don’t eat them, not even dogs eat them. So it doesn’t make sense.”*

On the other hand Drina, who worked as a social worker with Roma communities, highlighted the importance of the programme. Drawing on her own experience she said that for many parents this programme worked as a stimulation to send their children to kindergarten and school.

It was found out that all of the younger women aged 18 to 22 benefited from affirmative actions taken by the government in terms of scholarships or special places for Roma students in high schools and university. However, not all women were satisfied with them. They criticized their allocation, as the money received was insufficient and the scholarships were not only allocated to Roma, but also to other non-Roma students.

Overall it was observed that the women were rather disappointed by what the government does for their, or their children’s, education. Some of them expressed that they had the feeling of being left alone and even ignored as Roma by the government. This got apparent especially amongst the middle-aged and older women, arguing the government denied their requests for support to send their children to school.

Doina expressed her frustration by saying: *“If we do not fight for our rights, no-one fights for us.”*

4.4. Ways to increase Roma girls’ school attendance

4.4.1. Romani lessons

Reviewing government publications, it seems that the use of Romani as a teaching language is considered to increase Roma children’s school

attendance (undated, p.5; 2005, p. 155). When being asked about their opinion on this, the women gave varying answers.

Surprisingly many of the younger women welcomed it, arguing that it should be carried out as a free language course. To them it was furthermore important for the course to be open to all, Roma and non-Roma, and during the normal teaching hours to avoid any form of discrimination. Contradictory to her claims of being a non-traditional Roma, it was important to Drina to learn Romani “*not to give the impression that I [she] lost all traditions*”.

However, amongst those who were mothers and even grandmothers, Romani lessons were considered to be rather useless, as Romanian and Hungarian were the languages spoken in daily life. Whilst some argued that Romani was taught at home and should therefore not be taught at school, others rejected it because they did not like the language, saying that without an own country they did not need an own language.

4.4.2. Suggestions of the interviewees

Unlike the government, the women were found to have various different ideas about how to increase Roma girls' school attendance and decrease their drop out rates. The range of these suggestions was very broad and included financial support for the parents, as well as food allocations, but also ideas such as guaranteed employment for Roma parents, so they can send their daughters to school. Violca demanded changed textbooks which would include Roma children as well as children with other backgrounds living in Romania, and better training for teachers, so they would become more aware of the special needs of some of the Roma pupils. A mediator, who could link school and parents, was suggested by Drina, as he could promote the importance of education amongst sceptical Roma parents and ensures a secure schooling environment for Roma girls. Furthermore separate toilets for girls, better sex education and possibilities to retake an exam in case of pregnancy of a student, were mentioned.

5. Discussion

With most of the literature on Roma education in Romania being written or highly influenced, due to funding, by either the government, NGOs, or other organisations and therefore represent a biased view, the interviews which were carried out, provide a better understanding of the education of Roma girls and women.

5.1. Importance of education of Roma girls in Romania

It is already known from the literature that the education of women is an important tool for their empowerment. Even if some authors regard it as insufficient to merely educate women and expect this education to turn into empowerment, it is still at least a prerequisite (Stromquist, 1995, p.19), which needs to be encouraged. The participants in the interviews shared this opinion, however not all considered the things they learnt in their time in school as useful. The women expressed their awareness of the importance of education, by stating that it helps them to “*deal with life*” or to find employment, but also to get politically empowered.

In terms of adult education, which can empower women as it allows those who did not have the possibilities when being younger to gain better qualification, the Romanian government was found not to pay particular attention to it. The “A Doua Şansă” (“Second Chance”) programme for 15 to 30 year olds represents the only initiative taken in this direction (undated, p. 2). The interviews however showed that especially those women who were currently unemployed were highly interested in it. To them adult education resembled an opportunity to increase their chances on the job market. Not only would this allow them to provide their families with a better living standard, but this could in turn also increase the possibilities of their children to attend higher education. A better communication of the government with the Roma communities, and especially Roma women, should therefore be encouraged, in order to increase the possibilities they have once they finished or dropped out of education.

Education for the participating women represented an opportunity for change, not only for themselves but also for future generations. The women seemed to agree that education of their daughters is important, so they can have a better life than they do. In those cases where the families did not have the possibilities to let their daughters go to school further, the women regretted this deeply. It got apparent that this was the case indifferent of their own educational background. This contradicts with the findings of Zamfir and Zamfir, who argued that a higher level of education and employment of the parents decreases their children's absences and drop outs from school (in Ringold et al., 2005, p.99). The following will look at further restrictors which are mentioned in the literature, apart from the cycle of lack of education, to have an influence on the education of Roma.

5.2. Restrictors of education for Roma girls in Romania

As a lot of the NGO and government publications tend to focus on the various reasons for the low attendance and high drop-out rates amongst Roma, it has to be noted first of all, that the only restraint which played a major role for the interviewed women's education was poverty. However it was discovered that the women were willing to overcome this. In terms of their own education, two women were found to have taken up employment to allow them to go to school. In case their daughters could not go to school because of the family's financial situation, they said they would either go and ask institutions for help or beg, or would try to find work in order to allow their daughters to go to school. This was the case although for many of the women poverty was the cause for their own absence or rare visits to school in the past and although they seemed not to trust in the government a lot.

Whilst poverty was seen as the main restrictor for Roma girls' education, lack of appropriate facilities, curriculum, teachers or lack of identification papers were not mentioned by any of the women to be a hindering factor for school attendance, although the literature suggests so. The interviews also revealed that the women had no understanding for families which do not send their daughters to school because of their strict traditional rules.

Another factor which the literature highlights as being influential for Roma children's school attendance, discrimination, seemed not to be of much importance to the women. Only in one case was discrimination, together with health problems, found to be the reason not to continue schooling.

5.3. Difference in education according to gender

Although the literature suggests that more Roma boys than girls attend school, the interviewed women remarked that their parents did not differentiate according to gender.

The reasons for the figures which UNICEF published in 2002 (p.41) should therefore be considered to lie elsewhere. Birth rates for boys and girls amongst the Roma could be a possible explanation, given that the primary research showed that in most cases it is not a factor of parental attitude amongst most Roma to send sons rather than daughters to school. The majority of women with children said they could not choose, and thought of education to be equally important for sons and daughters. Furthermore none of the women categorically argued that girls would not require education.

As none of the women recalled any form of discrimination due to their gender to be occurring when they were in school, discrimination by teachers or headmasters can be excluded as a hindering factor to the education of Roma women.

5.4. Measures to increase Roma girls' school attendance in Romania

Concerning measures to increase the attendance of Roma children in school, the government appears to pay utmost importance on the introduction of Romani lessons, in order to provide the Roma minority with the same rights in education as they are provided for the Hungarian and German minority (UNICEF, 2002, p. 39; Romanian Government, undated, p. 2). However, the women did not share the view that non existent Romani lessons were a restraint to female education. The younger women would have welcomed it in order to know an additional language or not to loose this

part of their Roma identity. Still none of the women considered it important enough to insist on its introduction and some were quite vehement against it.

Other suggested solutions, such as the “gender sensitisation in the education system” through curriculum changes and teacher training (Medel–Anonuevo& Bochynek, 1995, p.10), are not taken into account by the government. The women on the other hand were very supportive of such measures. Ensuring better safety and privacy for girls, as it gets promoted by Herz and Sperling (in Rose& Subrahmanian, 2005, p.9), was also favoured by the women. This could convince those Roma, who currently do not send their daughters to school due to their worries about their daughters safety and purity according to their traditional rules, to change their mind, so the women argued.

Neither literature nor government or NGO publications mention one of the issues raised in the interviews, which on the one hand would clearly improve the quality of female education in Romanian schools but on the other hand might also repel some of the parents to send their daughters: the improvement of sex education. This would clearly lead to an increase of empowerment for Roma women and would help to decrease the early pregnancies, which according to Gynther (2007, p.230), are common amongst them. However it must be kept in mind that sex education is a delicate issue and therefore change is very difficult to be brought about.

Although some women were aware of the importance of the government’s actions for Roma and welcomed them, such as the introduction of special scholarships at high schools and universities or the “corn și lapte” (bread and milk) programme, they also criticized them highly. Whilst the government seems to laud itself with these initiatives (Romanian government, undated, p.1ff.), the women expressed that a lot of improvement has to be made in terms of the allocation of these scholarships and the quality of the given food. Similarly were the women criticising the allowances which families receive to send their children to school. They therefore demanded job provision for parents with children at school age, so

they would not depend on this insufficient money from the state. The government's intentions should not be criticised but it appeared that they are implemented in an unsatisfying manner and clearly require further improvement.

5.5. Impact of communism

Although it seems important to look at the influence that communism had on Roma education, neither government and NGOs nor other literature takes this really into account.

As the interviews were held with women from different age groups, those from the middle aged group, as well as the older women attended school during Ceaucescu's communism. Two of those women mentioned that they thought of the communist schooling system as being better. They based this argument on two factors, firstly the strictness which was introduced, and secondly school uniforms did not allow pupils and teachers to make any difference amongst the students. The interviews showed that nevertheless discrimination based on ethnicity still occurred during communism. As women from different age groups remembered being discriminated against for being Roma, it seems that discrimination is independent from the political framework of society and only depends on people being prejudiced.

During the interviews it was observed that the women from the middle-aged group were all, apart from one, unemployed. As they were about to finish or just finished school when democracy was introduced, it might be suggested that the end of communism in Romania impacted on the education of Roma women and their opportunities on the employment market. It would be interesting to examine this impact in detail in further research.

6. Conclusion

This dissertation examined the importance of education for Roma women and the ways in which access and quality of it could be improved. Whilst the literature review provided the context of female education and Roma education in Romania, the interviews with thirteen Roma women combined both areas and examined female education of Roma in Romania. Therefore Roma women from three different communities, aged 18 to 64 were asked to voluntarily participate in semi-structured interviews, in which they shared their experiences of education and their opinions about female Roma education in Romania.

This dissertation provides information about an area which has hardly been looked at before, as indicated by the literature review. The presented discussion of female education for the Roma minority in Romania could therefore be considered to be providing new insights. Unlike literature which is often influenced, or even written, by government, NGOs or other organisations, the interviews represent simply the women's own perceptions.

The interviews showed that the Roma women thought only in a positive way about education, and were aware of the possibilities education provides them with in life. Indifferent of their own education, all women viewed their daughters' education as important and would try their best to allow her to go to school. Not only was education seen as a chance for social mobility but it was also identified as a way to increase female Roma empowerment.

Throughout this dissertation it was shown that whilst the literature suggests certain factors to have a large impact on the education of Roma, they did not play such an important role for the interviewed Roma women. On the one hand, poverty and the demand for their labour, in order to help the family financially out, were identified as reasons for Roma girls not to attend school at all, rarely or to drop out. On the other hand, various other factors mentioned in the literature seemed not to affect the women's education.

Although it would be wrong to conclude that discrimination does not represent a cause for the low school attendance of Roma children, nine women, out of the interviewed thirteen, did not mention to have been affected by discrimination in school and claimed to have experienced school like every other non-Roma pupil.

As far as the improvement of Roma girls' school attendance is concerned, the government seems not to be sufficiently involved yet. Not only went the women's suggestions further than the measures which the government has implemented until now, but throughout this dissertation it got apparent that the opinion of Roma women themselves has not been taken into account by neither government nor NGOs. The demand for more opportunities of adult education or better sex education could be used here as representative examples. In order to bring about change and to improve the quality of education of Roma girls and women in Romania, the suggestions of the women should be considered. This could also have a positive impact on those Roma who are not just yet as supportive of female education as the interviewees.

It has to be noted that the interviews represent only the views of women who do not consider themselves to be traditional Roma. In order to understand the opinion of Roma for whom traditions, such as early marriage, purity laws and senior rights still play a very important role, further research would be needed to be carried out. This would then allow to draw better conclusions on the extend to which traditions or rather other factors represent restrictors for female education.

The dissertation also suggests that further research should be carried out in order to examine the impact communism had on the education of women and their opportunities on the employment market.

7. Bibliography

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8. Appendix

8. 1. Interview questions

- Openings of education

What did you learn at school?

What did you learn not attending school?

What do you think were the main benefits for you from education?

How do you/ did you use what you learnt?

How is your education useful for what you do now?

How do you think your education allows you to do certain things compared to other women?

Compared to your mother who might not have been at school, how does your life differ?

Where do you think you could have picked up the skills you learnt at school elsewhere?

Why would you like to attend special adult education programmes now?

What would you hope to learn and why?

- How was education experienced?

Why did you enjoy or not enjoy going to school?

Why would you have liked to go to school?

Do you remember school in a positive/ negative way and why?

What was your best/ worst experience in school?

How were you treated differently than non-Roma pupils?

How do you think your education differed from non-Roma?

How was going to school different for you than for your brothers?

How were you treated differently as a girl when you were in school?

How were Roma girls treated differently than other pupils at school?

- Education of the daughters

Why do you think education for Roma women is useful?

Why do you think it is important for your daughter to attend school?

What do you think is the most important your daughters learn at school?

How do you think your daughters will use what they learn at school?

How do you think education impacts on your daughters life?

There is always stories about Roma not sending their children to school.

Why do you think people do not send their daughters to school?

Have you ever encountered problems similarly and what did you do?

In case education of your children takes up a lot of your income, what would you do to keep your daughter in education?

How do you think education of girls conflicts with more traditional Roma lifestyle?

- Evaluation of government's activities

Do you think the government does enough for Roma education (eg. Romani

language classes, Romani history classes, Roma teachers)?
 Do you think the government provides good education for your daughters?
 How are you affected by the government's programmes for Roma education?
 What do you think should be improved for Roma girls' education?
 What do you think of education in Romani? And have you ever seen a textbook of your children being written in Romani?
 Is the government supporting Roma families enough to keep their daughters in school?
 What problems have you encountered when trying to send your daughters to school? And what support did you get by the government?
 How do you think girls' special needs in education could be addressed better?

8.1. Sample Interview

Researcher: When you went to school, what was the most useful you learnt?

Violca: Useful things from school... now I would say education is very good. I learnt how to express myself, I know how to read...

R: And for what you do now, for your work, what was most beneficial that you learnt?

V: Well it helped me a lot. If I wouldn't know how to write and read, I wouldn't have a job now. I would be a woman without education, only a mother... Now I have a knowledge. When you learn something, you are not forced to learn, but you want to learn more and more. Now I am aware of this. When you do something, you do it for you and you do it better and better. That's my opinion. I learnt little from books, I am more an autodidact. I learnt alone, after school...also how to behave.

R: So you would say that you can learn certain things outside school as well?

V: Well in most cases only bad things. This is my opinion. I cannot change it anymore. Only bad things.... Parents do not give you an education like in school: for example, those with many children, say to their girls "go and get married cause I cannot support you anymore" or to the boys they say "go and work", at the age of 13, 14. They send them to work with tools. In school education is different.

R: Do you think that things such as writing, reading, simple maths could be taught by the parents as well or not?

V: No.

R: Not even if the parents are educated?

V: If they are educated, maybe. But never like at school. I only finished some classes and can never have the experience like a teacher. Never.

R: Let's talk about your experience in school. Why did you enjoy or not enjoy going to school?

V: My childhood dream was to be a doctor, but I never succeeded in it. Not because of financial issues, my parents had money. More because of me being worrying about my skin colour. I went to school, at the age of 7, and had in my bag a small bag with flour which I put on my face, so I could be like the other girls...so I could have another appearance, to be whiter.

R: So would you say you have positive or negative memories of school?

V: More positive ones...I don't know...maybe more negative ones. I have problems with sight. I am nearly blind. I needed to memorize the things directly from the blackboard. I only memorized, as I was blind, I don't know if you can imagine this... I could only read from the blackboard.

R: What was your best experience in school?

V: When I was a pioneer. I was head of the group. Back then, in communism, it was the time of the pioneers.

R: And that was a good thing for you?

V: Well...now I think a bit differently of course. But I still think it is a good thing to have something like that in school. It was another type of strictness. Today school is chaos. I don't know why... Then there was only one uniform, we had to respect certain rules.

R: And what was your worst experience? If you do not want to tell it, you do not have to of course.

V: The worst experience? That was when a female teacher slapped me. The class teacher... I felt so humiliated. I was already in class 8 or so, and she slapped me only because I didn't answer to her question.

R: Do you think you were treated differently than the other pupils, the other girls, at school, and how?

V: Well, yes. Humiliated. In my childhood I was very humiliated. I felt... I had complexes, because of my skin colour. I remember once Santa Clause came. We all received presents, and me, as the highlight of the ceremony, he gave a red tracksuit. That was when I was in class 4. The teacher then said, after I did not like it, that red goes well "them", meaning Roma, because of their skin colour. In class 4 I did not know what discrimination meant, but I felt humiliated. The other children did not have a tracksuit in this colour, they had pink,

white...the only one with a red one was me. I felt the difference then strongly. When I grew up, in class 7 or 8, I searched for ways to answer back, but because of the complexes I had...

Interview was interrupted, due to an interview of a famous Roma woman activist being interviewed on TV.

R: We talked about your experience in school. How were girls treated different when you were at school?

V: Well I don't think there was any differences made.

R: May I ask you why you did not continue to go further, you mentioned you wanted to be a doctor? Did you want to go further?

V: I did want to go further, but I had this interior complex all the time because I am Roma. This was a massive complex as I felt marginalized. I marginalized myself. I was by myself all the time, I didn't hang out with the others, also because I couldn't see well. I couldn't go to the cinema with them because I could not see the movies. I had no clue what to comment about, what I saw! I could remember what actors said, but not what I saw. And my parents discovered only very late that I am nearly blind. It was already very late then...

R: Let's talk about your daughter's education. Do you think education of Roma women is useful?

V: I think it is very important that girls go to school. Not only girls, but also boys. It's important because school... as soon as they go and they know how to read and write they also have a future. They start to see the world with different eyes.

R: What do you think is the most important your daughter learns at school?

V: I would like my daughter to continue to study further, that she doesn't marry. She should obtain things for a possible future career in whatever she likes. I hope she becomes a teacher, a doctor, something that I did not succeed in...or even just a nurse...everything would be nice.

R: There is always news about Roma not sending their daughters to school. What do you think about this? Can you understand it?

V: A bit, but it needs to be changed...the tradition...if not everything, at least a bit...

R: And how?

V: Through consulting the parents. Informing them what education is about. In their future those girls cannot do anything without education, noone

can without education. That's my opinion, maybe others have another opinion... There are more people like me, who think that children, as children, have to go to school. Once you let them go, the rest will follow. Through time the parents will be aware, even if they are not at the moment. But you cannot force it...

R: The next set of questions is about what the government does.

V: Or what it doesn't...

R: Would you say it is enough what the government does for the education of Roma girls?

V: No the government does not even enough for the other girls.

R: What do you think should be improve for Roma girls' education?

V: I wish for a textbook, which from the first grade one, has also Roma children in it. For example in pictures, in the text...about Roma children, not only blond ones, with nice clothes. I don't know if this is possible, but I hope this will happen in the near future. Firstly I hope for a changed textbook, secondly there should be more awareness about the teachers' understanding of Roma children...they need to know better how to deal with Roma children. What else...I don't know...

R: There are also plans to increase the number of Roma teachers being hired. What is your opinion on this?

V: Yes there are plans...it would make sense on the one hand when teachers are Roma... but then Roma teachers are only for Romani language, which is not spoken by most Roma anymore. I don't know Romani anymore for example, and I am not interested in it.

R: So do you think it should be taught in schools?

V: No. I wouldn't like it. It would make sense when you live in a country... well if you as a Roma are citizen of a country which represents you. Isn't that right? I was at many conferences and said: "we are an ethnicity with many members but without a country to represent us". Not like Hungary or whatever... Roma, where they come from noone bloody knows. Well they say they know where they come from but it's not true, it's not a proven fact that Roma came from India or something like that. I don't think that's true. If we have a country to represent us, I'd like to speak the language. But now I was born in Romania. If I was born in another country, I would speak another language, the language of that country.