HOW CAN PREJUDICES AND STEREOTYPES AFFECT EVERYDAY LIFE OF ROMA WOMEN?

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Abstract

This article deals with problems of prejudices and stereotypes; namely their impact on Roma women's lives. The goal of the publication was to study and analyze how a Roma woman experiences her feminity in a societal context and within her family.

In the first part, the theoretical knowledge concerning just stereotypes and prejudices is described. We explain these concepts, causes and the impact on social perception. Another part is devoted to the life of a Roma woman. We describe her social role and the overall position in the family and society. We also describe the impact of stereotypes and prejudices on the life of a Roma woman.

After description of the methodology the results of our own field investigation are presented. The main knowledge which comes out of the research is the finding that stereotypes and prejudices are derived from primary identification, which in this case is skin colour. Next, we describe the differences in the perception of prejudices and stereotypes by Roma women and by experts working with the Roma community. Some experts described the differences between the perception of Roma men and Roma women by the majority society.

Key words: prejudices; stereotypes; a Roma woman; experts; discrimination

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

INTRODUCTION

The starting point of this article is to describe how Roma women perceive prejudices and stereotypes based on their ethnicity. We were interested in which spheres of life the racial prejudices and stereotypes appear.

The Roma population is the largest minority in the Czech Republic (Davidová et al. 2010). Coexistence with the Roma population is often described as problematic and prejudices and stereotypes are mainly in the background of these phenomena.

Theoretical starting points

Prejudices and stereotypes

Prejudices and stereotypes are part of everyday life. They affect human judgements and subsequent behaviour towards others and they become part of the daily language. Although, people do not often even realize it (Nelson 2009). While talking about stereotypes in a broad sense, we find this definition in a dictionary: "Automated hard sequence of actions which do not require detailed consideration, monitoring the quality of performed activity and evaluation

of the successfulness from the person who performs them" (Průcha et al. 2003, p. 230). However, for the needs of this article, we must define stereotypes appearing in interpersonal perceptions. In this case, we shall talk about a uniform perception of people with the expected characteristics, without the acceptance of individual characteristics of each individual (Stangor 2000).

In most cases, stereotyping refers to a group of people who have similar characteristics. These can be common characteristics, behaviour, and appearance. In general, how the group seems to be specific. Stereotyping, therefore, creates an image which is not created on the basis of own experience, but an individual perceives this image as completed (Schneider 2005).

Some authors do not differ regarding the relationship and difference between stereotypes and prejudices. Others describe prejudice as a negative stereotype. Generally, stereotype can be used even in neutral to positive level. Creating prejudices is a common and natural process, which is described as the creation of simplified ideas. In general, this is a mistaken generalization of phenomena or characteristics (Allport 2004). Prejudices are often unconscious and created on the basis of past experience. It is basically a set of preconceived ideas, opinions and evaluations which subsequently often affect and distort judgements and evaluation of other people and phenomena in negative and unwanted way (Pelinka et al. 2009).

One of the determinants which predisposes the formation of early and often mistaken judgements are, for example, the personal values of an individual, or the fact that people prefer associating with people of the same species, thus they separate themselves from the various groups with different features. This automatic consistency in monogenic clusters basically results from human laziness and the sense of uselessness to learn a new language, a new culture or adapt to people with different level of education. Generally, consistency with people of the same kind eases to overcome most of vital tasks. By "same kind" we are referring to the same ethnicity as well. That ethnicity may be one of the most common sources of prejudices and stereotyping process (Allport 2004). An individual, who is affected by prejudices, evaluates other people (or objects) regardless of their individuality and real characteristics (Brown 2010). Allport (2004, p. 41) further defines prejudices based on an ethnic origin as "antipathy, which can result from a rigid generalization. This antipathy may be directed to the whole group or to an individual because he or she belongs to this group".

A Roma woman and prejudices

A Roma woman faces many prejudices in her life, especially because of her ethnic origin and gender regarding the majority society. Linking of these two (or more) factors is generally called crossing of inequalities or intersectionality (Kolářová 2007).

The theory of intersectionality (combination of inequalities) was developed in feminist theory and since the 90s it has been gradually accepted even in the theory of stratification. However, it is necessary to distinguish between the accumulation of inequalities and their crossing. Normally, the combination is primarily understood in a cumulative sense as double or triple oppression when the discrimination based on class increases by racial/ethnic and gender or other forms of oppression, for example health. Through the combination of various factors the group of poor women of ethnic minority or migrants with low education and qualification results in the most marginalized group (Kolářová 2007).

However, in social work practice intersectionality is often neglected and inequality is reduced to one dominating factor. Also the fact that factors of inequality are manifested differently at different levels of social functioning is ignored. But at the micro level – in the family system – these factors can be an advantage, at the macro level – in the society – they may become the subject of discrimination (Chancer and Watkins 2006).

Roma people are generally perceived by the majority as people who steal, beg and do not work, and as violent group of people. Racial stereotypes, prejudices are differently shown in gender roles. Roma men are described as primitive brutes and thieves. Roma women, for example, are described as kidnappers of babies, thieves, who often use vulgar expression in their speech. It is also known that Roma women are perceived more negatively than Roma men by the

majority of the population. Roma women are more prevalent in public institutions with requests for social benefits, while Roma men work in public places (although often illegally) (Woodcock 2010). It should be mentioned that the media largely participate in formation of prejudices and stereotypes. They impose information which highly influences the awareness of the Roma groups. The media often put Roma men and women into position of culturally diverse people who are lazy to go to work and rely only on social support (Tomovská 2010). Then, the majority society perceives Roma people negatively. One of the main reasons is the opinion of the prevailing social favouritism and the high rate of criminal offences (Kobrová 2010). With the wave of economic immigrants the opinions concerning taking jobs away from the local population (Kelly 2014).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research was conducted with the use of qualitative research strategy, through the technique of narrative interviews. Narrative interview does not confront the subject with standardized questions but encourages people to completely free narration (Mayring 2002). Narrative interview assumes that there are subjective meaning structures which result from free narration, and not from direct questioning. As for the narrative interview, a verbatim story is necessary. All interviews are recorded with the consent of informants, and then transcribed verbatim and analyzed by the programme Atlas TI.

The main studied group was represented by women identifying themselves as Roma women living in České Budějovice, Plzeň and Brno, in different locations and with various socio-economic statuses. The locations were designated as socially excluded and locations where Roma communities live in unconcentrated numbers.

We focused on women of different generations (mothers – daughters – grand-daughters) and on differences in their perception of feminity. We received interviews from ten informants in each location. A total of thirty interviews were processed.

A supplementary research group consisted of experts who were devoted to the topic of Roma minority on the theoretical and practical level. These are social workers who come into contact with Roma minority (especially with Roma women), academics, ethnographers, or other experts. The content of their discussion was the status of a Roma woman in a family and society and its changes over time.

In total, we created three focus groups (České Budějovice, Plzeň and Brno).

RESULTS

According to the testimony, the informants were divided into two groups. The first group included Roma women who have not faced prejudices or stereotypes in their lives. But there were only two informants. The other group of informants (significantly larger, i.e. 28 women) have experienced prejudices and stereotypes mainly in their jobs, in housing issues and in majority public institutions (school, labour office, medical facilities). We researched the specifics why those two informants have not met prejudices or stereotypes, but none were found.

The informants who have not met prejudices and stereotypes may even have the opposite experience where no generalization within the Roma ethnic group has appeared:

"There are lots of people who distinguish Roma people and Roma people, they do not put them in one bag, and there are lots of such people..." (Plzeň)

Informants, who have met prejudices and stereotypes, marked the field of employment as their main source. Some employees have openly admitted that their application for a job had been rejected because of their ethnicity:

"...well, maybe they directly say to eyes, this is a Roma, and no one is wanted..." (Plzeň)

"You are a Roma, you will not work for us..." (Brno)

In other cases the informants described situations when the job was promised in advance but after personal contact they were rejected for their ethnic origin:

"Well, when we girls wanted some temporary job, as selling ice-cream, they said no. They did not look at what we are but just the fact we are Roma girls. And other

girls were admitted right away…" (České Budějovice)

"When I go and ask about the job, they do not want to employ me. Perhaps it is because I am a Roma. Once I got written message that I was admitted. But when they saw me, they said no. They said there was no job. But another person who came after me got the job. It is difficult to find some job because I am a Roma…" (České Budějovice)

"… and the lady who had no interest in talking about it. They told me there was a job, so I went there. Well, and they said: 'We have problems with people.' It was clear there were problems with Roma people…" (České Budějovice)

Informants further spoke about moments when they felt that for the employers an important factor of their failure in getting the job was ethnicity on the basis of visible characteristics (especially skin colour). They did not mention other reasons for their not getting to the job such as lack of qualification or competence…).

"When a Roma woman asks for a job, they just put you in one bag, and then that is the problem. There are Roma people who really want to work and it is bigger problem for them because if they want to work and they cannot because of the skin colour, so, then it is difficult…" (České Budějovice)

Similar situations, as was described in prejudices and stereotypes in job, happen also in issues related to housing. Informants talked about cases when the failure was explained by their Roma ethnicity straight in the eyes.

"Well, just after we got out of the car, he said that he did not want Roma tenants…" (České Budějovice)

Also in this case the informants met behaviour when the possibility of living was promised by the owner but in personal contact after identifying Roma man or woman they refused their interest:

"… wherever you go to live, when you order something, at first they want the bail. At second, they promise, yeah, definitely, for a hundred per cent, housing will be. And we go there, they say: sorry, you are Gypsy, so nothing…" (Plzeň)

Other areas where Roma women face prejudices and stereotypes, are major public institutions. Specifically, at first it concerns school. Here an informant described confronting between her daughter and the schoolmates who negatively perceived her because of her skin colour:

"My daughter had a problem but it was probably in her third grade. Children were swearing, you are black…" (Plzeň)

Furthermore, informants described the reluctant behaviour of an officer at the labour office because of their ethnic origin:

"Well, she told me that she did not have time for me. I felt it was because I was a Roma…" (Plzeň)

In addition, in health care facilities, Roma women face prejudices from the staff. The staff is influenced by stereotypes concerning early escapes of Roma women from obstetric departments without their children. Generalization of this prejudice then affects women who in fact exceed this idea.

"… and then in hospital when I gave birth, they discharged me the next day because Roma women after the delivery escape and leave their children in hospital…" (České Budějovice)

Experts who participated in the discussions carried out within focus groups discussed some facts concerning the topic of stereotypes and prejudices. The first area was generally negative perception of the Roma minority by the majority of the society. This is primarily due to abuse of welfare benefits:

"I think that majority does not perceive them as tiny and defenceless but rather as big dirt, big mob and vermin…" (Plzeň)

"A Roma woman in my opinion is the parasite with a million babies…" (České Budějovice)

In the interviews, we met two different views on this issue. Some experts perceived the Roma men and women uniformly. Others described different perceptions of Roma men and Roma women by the majority society. In the interviews, experts mentioned that majority society perceived Roma men more positively than Roma women. As a fact they stated that Roma men may be seen in the

public during work (excavations and building work). On the other hand, Roma women more often appeared in offices and that evoked a sense of parasitism in the majority society:

"The majority may see a man and a woman differently because these men sometimes go to work while the women with children run around the labour office. Quite often you drive through the city and you can see Roma men working in trenches. So, you may see. They work..." (Brno)

"I think, there is some first association in that man, that he is different, he does not work. And the woman, she is the parasite who has children. I might add something more, he is an aggressor, she is a cutpurse. Yeah, those are stickers, sort of labels, well..." (České Budějovice)

In the discussions with experts we have also experienced the views of a uniform perception of Roma men and Roma women by the majority society:

"I think that women and men are understood the same. Well, the label Gypsy prevails..." (Plzeň)

"...but otherwise I think that the society does not deal much with the Roma people, the difference a man and a woman. Now, it is set generally, simply Roma people. Roma people, community, family..." (České Budějovice)

DISCUSSION

Our results support the finding that the majority society is still burdened with stereotypes and prejudices about the Roma population. Available literature also speaks about the negative perception of the Roma population by the majority society. Specifically, we discovered opinions that Roma people are rapists, thieves or other defamatory names (Woodcock 2010). Participating experts dealing with Roma population reported the same experience. They talked about viewing Roma population by the majority society as inferior and useless.

In the interviews, the informants frequently described three areas in which they meet prejudices and stereotypes throughout their lives. Namely, employment, housing and public majority institutions, such as school, labour office or hospitals. Regarding employment, Roma women described situations when they were rejected just because of their ethnicity. This fact is described, for example, by Tomovská (2010) and Kobrová (2010) who speak about great influence of the media which show Roma people as non working, relying on the state supporting the form of welfare. Further, we can encounter the opinion that Roma people are irresponsible and they often commit crimes. Roma women encounter the same situation in the area of housing when pre-promised housing is rejected because of their ethnicity. It is interesting that during the interviews was not mentioned another reason for their rejection, as insufficient qualification or any failure of other conditions.

In the interviews obtained from the informants and in the discussions with the experts working with Roma population we can find some differences. Some experts describe that the majority society perceives differently Roma men and Roma women. This fact is also described by Woodcock (2010) who, among other things, talks about the fact that Roma women leave obstetrics departments early. This fact is also mentioned by Roma women who describe the situation that their escape was expected and therefore they were discharged early.

Roma informants do not mention different gender perceptions of the Roma people by the majority society. They more often speak about the so-called "putting in one bag". And especially in terms of stereotyping of Roma community as a whole (cf. Weinerová 2014).

CONCLUSION

The main finding resulting from the conducted research is the fact that most prejudices and stereotypes (and subsequent behaviour) towards the Roma minority are based on primary identification. In the interviews with Roma women the negative behaviour of the majority society after identifying a Roma man or Roma woman, was described several times, specifically because of the skin colour. Furthermore, we have discovered that a Roma woman during her lifetime has encountered stereotypes and prejudices especially in employment, housing issues and also in some majority institutions. In addition, in these three most areas prejudices and stereotypes are based often on the skin colour of Roma men or women.

In addition, our research has found that the majority society may perceive Roma man and woman differently, depending on places or situations where majority society encounters a Roma man or woman. It is interesting that Roma women did not reflect these differences in their interviews. They spoke more often about Roma people in the context of a community.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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