

## THE CONFRONTATION OF EDUCATION AND CUSTOMARY LAW AT SCHOOL: THE CASE OF ROMA GIRLS

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The main goal of this article is to generalise and describe the aspects which were revealed during the ethnographic research conducted in 2018 and which are related to the gender of Roma girls as representatives of an ethnic group. The findings have influence on the process of education in the context of school community.

**Concept.** During the ethnographic research conducted in one of the schools in Lithuania in 2018, the fragments of Romani customary law were revealed, which are directly related to the female gender and show how belonging to a certain gender can have impact on the process of education at school. The present research used anthropological methodology and was mainly focused on one case-study.

**Results and conclusion.** The Roma girls are accompanied by the pressure of community to start a family early, and thus, to emphasise and confirm their own belonging to this ethnic group and continuation of traditions. The situation is exacerbated by the stereotypes in the society and the Roma community, which – in most cases – are ruthless towards Roma girls and women.

**Cognitive value.** The patriarchy as the basis of Romani culture, and the unwritten customary law accompanying it, frequently become a source of ambiguity. Being a non-Roma researcher, i.e. *gadje* (non-Roma individual), one faces a difficult challenge – not to make mistakes interpreting various aspects of Romani culture, especially such sensitive ones as gender. However, Roma children (girls in particular) still abandon the system of education too early (from our, *gadje*, perspective). The academic discourse, feminist anthropology, allows for particularly critical evaluation of these processes.

**Key words:** Roma girls, ethnic group, Roma, education, emancipation, ethnography

### INTRODUCTION

It is commonly regarded that during the collision of different cultures, more considerable changes occur in the so-called “weaker” culture. The more technologically or economically advanced culture starts dominating over the



“weaker” one (Okely, 2002). Similar statements are possible about the Roma ethnic group, whose members constitute the marginalised minority in Lithuania. When referring to them (as in the case of other groups of minorities), it is possible to employ the concept *bricoleurs* suggested by Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) and to approach them as people who choose or reject random things and who can afford to use any elements of the culture that surrounds them. However, it would not be entirely true. The Roma people are highly selective and act more as an independent group capable of making autonomous decisions. They include certain symbols, rituals, myths, and this is their deliberate choice and/or rejection (Okely, 2002). The foreword of Walter Otto Weiraucht’s book (2001) Angela P. Harris provides for the following generalisation: “Roma have been able to maintain an impressive degree of cultural integrity not only by absolutely excluding *gadje* from their private lives and their values, but by excluding them even from knowledge about Romani language and social institutions” (Weiraucht, 2001, pp. 9-10).

The customary law plays a crucial role in Roma communities and this is their main unwritten law (therefore hardly accessible to us, *gadje*). It is the axis regulating all spheres of life and undoubtedly influencing children’s upbringing as well. At the same time, it is a possible obstacle to pursuing successful education of Roma children (and girls in particular). The results of the sociological research (DSTI, 2001) revealed that 27% of children from Roma families did not attend school at all. The approach that education of Roma people is the main means for fighting against social exclusion, exploitation and crime, and that education of Roma children has to be the main objective solving problems of their socialisation, is followed (Štuopytė, 2008). According to the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania (2015, pp. 2-3) The situation of education of Roma children in Lithuania underwent significant changes in the period of 2001–2015: compared to the data collected in 2001, illiteracy and non-completed primary education in this age group decreased by 39% (47% in 2001, 11% in 2011 and 8% in 2015) and the percentage of individuals with basic education rose from 7% to 27%. The most significant difference in education between the Roma children (10–19 years old) and their peers all over Lithuania was observed at the level of secondary education, whereas the indicators of illiteracy for primary and basic education differed only by 1–5% (the differences identified in 2001 equalled 11-36%). Although the situation is completely different at present, there are still opinions that to get to the fifth grade for a Roma girl is still a big achievement (Aržuolaitienė, 2018). The customary law provides for the rule that the life of a girl is in the hands of her parents and after the marriage – in the hands of her husband. Gender and racial discrimination often act in conjunction. Tatjana Peric (2003) states that the pressure of the family will force young Roma girls and women to leave school in order to get married. In fact, there may be exceptions, but such a scenario of life is followed by the majority of Roma girls.

The duality can be considered as one of the features of the Romani customary law. Everything is as if divided into allowed and prohibited, pure and

dirty, female and male. These symbolic concepts mark the boundaries between what is appropriate or not for a Roma girl, what she can talk about and what is considered to be an indecent topic to her. There is a large number of the so-called taboo topics and this is seen as a potential problem that Roma children can encounter during lessons of sexual education (Fraser, 2001). The status of a woman in the Roma culture is obviously lower compared with that of a man and consequently, in this patriarchal model the approach to girls is also distorted.

The woman is believed to be sinful and "dirty". A woman or a girl (especially during their menstruation) is not supposed to wash their clothes and the clothes of other family members. It is even thought that she has to eat separately. Elwood B. Trigg (1973) says that a woman must never walk by a seated man because her genitals would be at the same height as his face. Women cover their legs when they sit down. The Roma girls who took part in the current research confirmed the aforesaid statements. They also claimed that women cannot go upstairs to the second floor, if a man is on the first floor. They are not even allowed to comb their hair and let it fall in the presence of men. They agree that they have to listen to what their father says. Women are struggling with family responsibilities and lower earnings. Also, women are more likely to experience physical bullying and domestic or even sexual violence (European Commission, 2008; World Health Organisation, 2005).

One of the problems encountered while observing and describing the behaviour of Roma girls is undoubtedly a possibly inaccurate interpretation. The anthropologists who conduct research on Roma culture (Spreizer, 2009, pp. 67-68) acknowledge that seeking to reveal the Romani laws and customary law, which is passed by word of mouth, over a long period of time has to be spent within this ethnic group. And still not all the aspects of Romani customary law can be understandable to us, *gadje*. The researchers (Weyrauch, 2001) emphasise that talking about certain issues is both taboo within the community and discouraged as a way to keep outsiders out. Hence, the outsiders may receive false impression concerning many aspects of the culture.

## METHODOLOGY

The empirical ethnographic research was carried out in one of the schools in Lithuania, which has the largest number of Roma students in the country. The students were observed in learning and communication space, i.e. at school. The participant observation was conducted following a predefined plan. Seeking to specify, explain and expand the data of observation, an in-depth interview was also employed. During the research, attempts were made to identify what practices are applied and what social norms are followed by Roma schoolchildren who remain within the system of education. The total sample of the research included 15 Roma children learning in a basic school: 6 boys and 9 girls. The targeted sampling in the present research did not aim to

represent the whole population.

Particular attention was allocated to research ethics and limitations. All the research participants were familiarised with the goal and procedure of the research as well as with significant details. The permission from the participants was also received. They exercised the right to withdraw from the research at any time. The school where the research was conducted signed a written permission that allowed the interviewing members of organisation to use archival material and to view and watch video records. Written consents for participation in the research were received from the minors' parents. The names of all the school students in the sample were changed. The new names were chosen from a sample of existing Roma names, which were found in the lists of school students and are used to emphasize the unique cultural heritage.

The observed behaviour of school students and their expressed opinion was evaluated considering different cultural contexts. In this case, the context of Roma school children embraces the confrontation of school and Roma ethnic group as opposing communities and a bilingual/trilingual environment that constantly surrounds the school learners and where they freely choose the ways of communicating with this environment. Three different behavioural models of Roma people were identified during the research:

- The first behavioural model includes school learners, who most frequently ignore the rules and behaviour norms that exist in their school, although they are perfectly aware of them. Such children choose to communicate exclusively with Roma school learners;
- The Roma school students, who fully adopt their school culture and seek not to stand out of the whole school community, are attributed to the second behavioural model;
- The third behavioural model unites the school students, who equilibrate between the school culture and that of Roma people and choose one or the other depending on the situation. (Stonkuvienė, Žemaitėlytė-Ivanavičė, 2019, pp. 8256)

The conducted research distinguished the Roma girls. The abundance of data related to the Roma girls allowed defining new problem fields, where the object of the research is the perception of self-identity of Roma girls in the context of two "different worlds", i.e. the primary school and their Roma community.

### FAMILY LIFE AND SCHOOL: (IM)POSSIBLE TO COMBINE

Roma girls stop schooling much earlier due to early marriage and pregnancy. EU documents (FRA, 2014) indicate that more Roma girls than boys indicate the fact of marriage or pregnancy to be the reason for the early abandoning of school. In Lithuania almost 25% of Roma girls give birth to their first child still being under the age of 18 (Petrušauskaitė, 2014). In the Romani culture, there comes a time when the boys and the girls are separated (Enguita,

2004). According to the Romani customs, the very start of menstrual cycle is the sign that a girl has to get married. Therefore, the girls' "drop-out" from school is most frequently preconditioned by this biological phenomenon mixed with the Romani traditions.

Although an early marriage is one of the most common reasons for abandoning school, this tradition in the Roma group has not always been consistent. The research revealed that Roma women of elder generations (born 1971 and earlier) got married and gave birth to their first children later (i.e. being 18 years old and older) compared to women of younger generations (born 1972-1986). The Roma women of the oldest generation were also better-educated compared to those of the middle generation. The growth in educational background is observed among women of the youngest generation (born in 1987 and later) (Petrušauskaitė, 2016). Therefore, can we refer to well-established customs being aware of these facts? Or are family enlargement issues related to political, social, economic practices and educational background? The anthropologists explain that in multicultural contexts it is a common phenomenon to consider women of different race or ethnic group to be hyperbolically reproductive as well as to create various fertility models which are frequently opposite to the situation of the majority (Durst, 2010, pp. 15-16). The ones who claim that in Lithuania Roma women give birth to a higher number of children compared to the representatives of any dominating group should consider who those Roma women are compared to and how the comparison is performed. If they did as anthropologists recommend (*ibidem*, p. 19), i.e. they would compare Roma women with the non-Roma people of the same social status and educational background, the same or very similar scheme of family planning would be observed.

The participants in the research were asked why girls cannot learn further after marriage. In fact, the Romani customary law does not prohibit learning but it is obvious that education is not a value or a life goal in itself. All the informants provided the socially expected response about the importance of education, but the further dialogue always returned to the focus on the family. A married minor girl is able to get back to school, but she has to get permission from her husband or mother. Most frequently, this issue is not even raised because married women are supposed to give birth to children. Pregnancy prevents girls from attending school and they start lagging behind their classmates. According to the girls, after giving birth and having received the permission, it would be possible to return to school, but such cases are not known in the history of the school. For example, 17-year-old Vanesa was forced to get married in the 9th form and was sent to the Moscow tabor, where she gave birth to a baby. Her baby was immediately taken away and the girl was forced to leave the tabor. When she returned to school at the end of the 10th form, she told awful things about how she did not know how to get her child back and that she did not know what to do in life. When she was asked if she wanted to return to school to learn, the young woman said that she would like to, but she did not know how because all the thoughts were about how to get her child back. She also said that she would be punished if she disobeyed the family and

started attending school. The girls have to obey their elders and their family and do not dare to go back to school, even if they want to. Married men have more freedom to choose but they do not even consider the return to school. They are afraid to earn disrespect because when you get a family, you have to take care of it instead of engaging in less important activities.

Not only pregnancy or early marriages force the girls to stop attending school. It is frequently household chores and the necessity to help at home that prevent them from learning at school. Cleanliness and the understanding of cleanliness at home is an important issue in the Romani customary law, which differentiates the Roma people from *gadje* (who stereotypically believe the Roma people to be not clean; Okely, 2002, p. 78). Even diseases of adult family members in separate cases may result in greater responsibilities for children in daily chores (looking after smaller children, cleaning, bringing water/wood, etc.). This makes attending school even more difficult and reduces possibilities for independent learning at home (Petrušauskaitė, 2016, p. 14). Taking into account the cultural traditions of Roma people, these duties have to be performed by girls, and thus, housework is usually the reason for their absenteeism.

Several factors can contribute to preventing the Roma adolescents from early abandoning of school: strong relations between the parents and school and successful learning experience in lower forms. Even if the reason for leaving school is marriage or pregnancy, the strong learning motivation (the Roma children, who started attending school on time, did not have to repeat the programme and did not face any major learning difficulties, usually successfully continue their school studies in senior forms, i.e. in the 8th form and in the junior high school), which was formed before abandoning the school, usually enables a school student to continue learning either independently or attending a youth/adult school (Petrušauskaitė, 2016).

A research participant, Anfisa, a 16-year-old 6th former, is not particularly fond of speaking about her housework, although it is a difficult duty. She is the only girl in the family with four brothers and the father. Her mother is in prison. Anfisa says that she gets up early because she has to wash the floor in the whole house, then to prepare food for everybody and even to bring water. The same routine occupies her in the evening. The girl says that she feels tired but, at the same time, she acknowledges that she likes the housework. When asked why after the morning housework she does not go to school, Anfisa says that then she has to cook dinner and in such a way, the circle of daily chores does not stop. She has so much housework that coming to school is a luxury for her and she does not have time for it. And despite all that complicated routine housework, all the topics that she is eager to speak about are related only to her wedding. Anfisa thinks that after her marriage, she will have less housework. Her husband's family may be smaller, which means less trouble. She is looking forward to an invitation to marry or at least to a visit "to look at her" and is very worried that no one has come so far, unlike in the case of her friends. Can such housework routine disturb the learning process? Of course, yes. No more energy and time are left, especially when learning motivation is weak anyway.

Regardless of the behaviour model chosen at school (full acceptance of school rules or their disregard), the Roma girls in the research unanimously agreed with the statement that life of Roma boys and men is easier when compared to that of girls and women. Moreover, this is confirmed by the previously conducted research: the majority of Roma women do not feel equal to men (Serban-Temisan, 2011, p. 22). There are not so many requirements for men. Sometimes there is an impression that requirements for men do not exist at all. For example, Pilat, a 9th former, states: "A Roma man has to be handsome. He has to be able to spin around". When asked about what will happen to the family, if the man is only handsome and does not work, the boy answered firmly: "the wife has to take care of everything". The only concern of the boy is to find that wife. The same problem burdens other peers as well. For example, Roland, a school student, who is in the same form for the second year, seems thoughtful in the middle of a lesson in one of the school corridors. To the question why he is not in the classroom and what is he doing here, he immediately answers: "I am very busy, I cannot go to the lesson now. I've been searching for a wife the whole day" and points to his telephone screen with a list of girls' pictures, similar to that on the Tinder match application. In fact, the task is complicated – to find a wife and the future mother of his children. In such a way, Roland only confirms the exceptional situation of Roma men compared to Roma women. According to Judith Okely (2002), men choose and in this way they demonstrate their power even more. What is more, after the choice of a wife according to the Romani traditions and marriage, the 8th former Roland will have to take his wife to his parents' home, where two more brothers (one with a wife already) and two sisters are living. At first sight Roland's mother is going to have more trouble with such a big family but the heaviest burden will be on the shoulders of the youngest wife, who will cross the threshold of their house. In this case, this burden bearer is most probably going to be a 15-year-old girl, who will be chosen by Roland. Consequently, adolescent girls from the basic school segment are the main houseworkers. The female participants in the research agree with such a hierarchical pyramid, which exalts men. Although they admit that the life of women and girls is more difficult, they take it as something inherent or a norm, and they acknowledge the standards universally accepted in the community.

Such an attitude, which is adopted by the majority of Roma, has become a challenge to the system of education: it is not necessary for girls to learn and the boys are "the navels of the world" anyway. The Roma people want the girl to marry successfully and her husband and children to become the centre of her life. At home, boys are authorities over their sisters or even mothers. Therefore, encountering a female teacher is a complicated challenge for them. The majority of them tend to follow *romanipen*, which means that they may encounter difficulties obeying female teachers, particularly on issues related to daily chores (cleaning of the school territory or the blackboard). Roma men never perform such duties at home and, naturally, the boys avoid such tasks

at school in order not to be disrespected. As the boys grow up and become adolescents, it becomes difficult to manoeuvre between double standards, so they choose to abandon school (TMDE, 2008, p. 86). Abandoning the school in adolescence may be linked to the requirements imposed by the community to leave school as early as possible and to take on activities that their fathers are engaged in (Bhopal & Myers, 2008, p. 123).

Generally speaking, it has to be noted that the confrontation between the rules, norms, values adopted by the school community and the customary law as well as values emphasised by the Roma community is obviously getting more serious as the girls grow and get mature. For example, Marija and Anna, two Roma sisters, who are smart students and care about their academic achievements, say that they are frequently laughed at in the tabor: "what is so good about education, what are you going to be in future? You'll be the whores of the tabor anyway." Such controversy is typical of other countries as well. It is obvious that the more emancipated Roma women with higher educational background are likely to help their children to learn and to encourage them to attend school or even to hire additional teachers for their children (TMDE, 2008, p. 19), but the Roma people frequently underestimate the benefit of education, they fail to see the practical value of it. Knowing that even after you invest a lot of effort (that is, you learn), you may not necessarily succeed and they give this example as a reason for not making any effort at all (Durst, 2010, p. 23). Also, many young Roma women can have feelings of cultural dislocation and anxiety (Levinson & Sparkes, 2003). In adolescence, girls find themselves at the crossroads of choice, when the first path is not to stand out from the Roma community and to show respect for their elders and parents, to agree to the wedding and or any other duties, whereas the second one means learning and meeting the requirements set by the school. The second choice asks for both a lot of courage and support from outside. To be rejected by your community is an option, which deprives you of safety. For this reason, a large number of girls do not even consider the possibility of objecting to the parents' wishes. Moreover, to many of the girls, the family life looks more simple and understandable compared to the future of learning, which "promises nothing."

The outcome of the confrontation between the two ruthless systems: the legal basis and school rules as opposed to the unwritten but very strong and well-established *romanipen* norms and the pressure from the elder Roma community people, is a young individual who is disappointed with education and the traditions of their own family. The ones who refuse to adopt the Romani laws or accept them only partially feel unsafe, are not self-confident and are afraid to be "condemned" by members of their community, i.e. by the Romani people. Unfortunately, they are marginalised by non-Roma people as well: their skin is too dark, their command of language is less advanced; stigmas and stereotypes related to the Roma people prevent them from getting employed or gaining accommodation. Failing to adapt to the tabor or to "the society" they choose to emigrate (Žemaitėlytė-Ivanavičė, 2018).



### BETWEEN THE STEREOTYPES AND THE REALITY

Generalising how Roma women are characterised and perceived among *gaje*, the same duality and ambivalence can also be easily observed. Brooks (2012, pp. 2-3), states that Roma women are portrayed either as sexual objects or, on the opposite, as old witches. They are also frequently represented as passive victims of a patriarchy, who need to be saved or as thieves and beggars. The duality reveals itself between the stereotype and the reality. The anthropologist Okely (2002) states that there exists a huge gap between what stereotype which accompanies the Roma girls and women and who they really are, how they are characterised by the Roma people themselves. Despite the fact that in the majority of European countries Roma women are seen as loose fornicators or dark-haired temptresses dancers or are often associated with prostitution, in the Roma community the situation is quite the opposite – moral norms are very high there.

The girls are religious and their fidelity, devotion to the family and husband are the main values, which has been pointed out by the majority of girls in the research. The girls, who communicate mainly with other Roma, emphasise the importance of their own virginity. For example, Anfisa states that: "On the wedding night the bed linen is checked and if no blood is found, the girl can even incite disrespect and it is even possible to reject her as a wife". If a girl makes friends with a boy (or it is sometimes enough just to talk to one in the evening), she may get a public reprimand or may even be forced to prove her virginity. The girls are even taken to gynaecologists. Such self-perception, when you are perceived of value only if you are virgin, also forms the understanding of "the good" and "the bad." It is obvious that the values that are opposite to the stereotypes formed about them by non-Roma people are conveyed to the Roma girls. It is observed that in other countries adolescent Roma girls also start feeling strong pressure from their community, their virtuousness and morality are constantly doubted. For these reasons they even choose to leave school earlier (Bhopal, 2008, p. 123).

Exaltation of the same values forces Roma boys to see other (non-Roma) girls as immoral. For example, Danila, a 9th former, states: "Did you see how girls from the 10th form chased me? They wouldn't let me pass calmly – tarts". In general, it can be stated that Roma boys have formed a negative stereotyped attitude towards non-Roma girls and *vice versa*, a stereotyped attitude towards Roma women has spread in the non-Roma society. In this case, the image of Roma and non-Roma women is radically different and it is well represented in the scheme of J. Okely (see Figure 1):

Regardless of the behaviour model applied at school – absolute isolation and communication exclusively with the Roma people or complete identification with the non-Roma, the girls at school talk about the same daily household activities: about cleaning and understanding that a woman has to obey the rules and obligations. They are all very enthusiastic explaining about the clothes the girls are or are not allowed to wear. All the girls in the research told

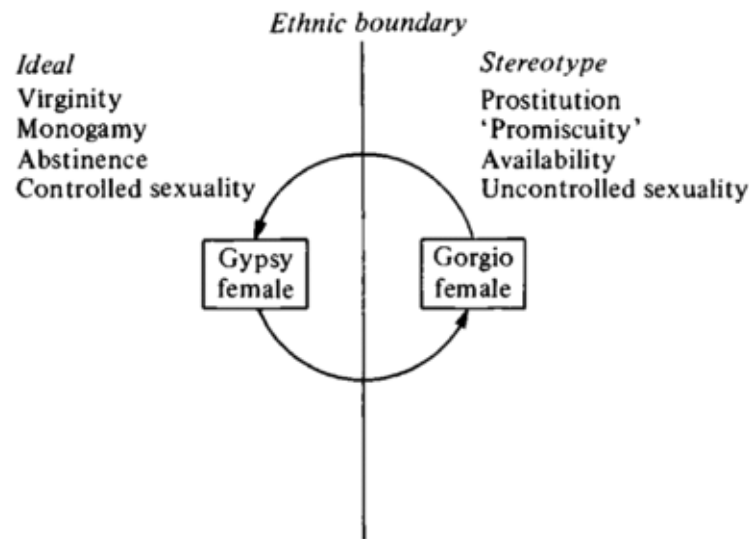


Fig. 1. The Roma girl: between the stereotype and the ideal.

Source: Okely, 2002, p. 214.

about the tradition that they are going to follow when married. They said they were also going to wear the skirts below their knees to keep the tradition. In fact, not all of them called it the preservation of the tradition. Some of them said that they just have to do this, others were sure that they would do this to preserve the tradition. Even the girls, who were going to go abroad, assured that they would only wear skirts. Ana, a 6th former (14 years old), was the only one, who started debating this obligation: "I do not know why we have to wear these skirts. If I am in jeans, I will still be a Roma girl. I want to talk to my mom about it but she won't understand". This is the very beginning of emancipation.

Referring to clothes, it has to be acknowledged that the girls are slightly braver regarding their clothes worn to school. However, this aspect is influenced by the principles of the Roma society. For example, you can put on shorts at school, but to wear mini shorts or shoulder revealing blouses somewhere else (where they can be seen by other Roma people) is not possible for sure. The Roma people do not wear clothes that uncover the chest or reveal legs above the knees. All the girls agree with these rules. Having been asked about the consequences of wearing shorts in the Roma tabor, they explained that they would be called bad names and accused of seeking to marry sooner. The worst thing would be to earn a status of *magerdo*. Fraser (2001, pp. 236-239), states that a person with *magerdo* is not respected, s/he is eliminated from the community life. Such pressure within the community directly influences the choices of clothes among girls and, at the same time, builds up their attitude towards themselves, their own bodies and towards the absence of the right

to self-expression. The Roma boys as well as the Roma girls are strict about clothing but there is the Romani customary law behind it. They are perfectly aware of the boundaries of decency and understand that they should not be trespassed. The knees and everything above them is the taboo. The analysis of these statements clearly shows that they are in line with the traditions of Roma people from other countries, which have existed for a long period of time (Okely, 2002, p. 207).

Despite early marriages, the Roma children feel embarrassed to talk about the body, sexuality and physiology. Discussions about the opposite sex fall under the category of taboo as well. The research shows that Roma girls and Roma boys tend to remain separate from each other at school. The girls communicate in their "circles" and the boys remain within their groups. Actually, this unwritten rule does not apply for communication among relatives (brothers-sisters-cousins). Despite such an obvious distinction between the genders, the interview revealed that interpersonal relations are of high interest to them. The schoolchildren in the research are not shy to speak about their wish to get married and to have children, but such talk is regarded as infantile. For the Roma girls it is a part of fairy tale, where the main culmination and value is the very fact of marriage. What this marriage will be like and how personal needs will be satisfied – these questions are discussed particularly reluctantly. The questions: "What will happen if you dislike your husband? What will happen if you do not want or cannot have children? Who will take care of the family budget?" suddenly become "inconvenient," they are accompanied with a smile and the Roma school students are unwilling to answer them. The real answer points to early marriages and early pregnancies which, on the basis of the research on all the adolescents in Europe, are tending to decrease, but considerable inequality taking into account social contexts are still observed (Part et al., 2013). As it can be seen from the experience of other countries (Smith, 2017), such processes can evidence not only difficulties encountered in sexual education but also the absence of sexual education at all, which leads to complex problems of sexual and reproductive health as well as psychological state.

A large number of topics are unpleasant and shameful for Roma adolescents. Homosexual relations are considered to be disgraceful and are completely eliminated from the conversation of adolescents. The reaction to the question about a pair of lesbians living in the Vilnius tabor is similar: without any hesitation the Roma boys started cursing and spitting and the Roma girls started putting them to shame and expressed their consternation stating that this is an obvious example of *magerdo* because nobody communicates with "those" (referring to "them" as strangers) women in the tabor. The evaluation of these statements leads to undeniable conclusions – these Roma girls and boys need gender studies. The representatives of the feminist movement and Roma women activists started organising schools of gender studies in Belgrade, Brno and Kosovo (Schultz, 2012), where the issues related to language, gender and human rights were presented to the groups of participants. The studies of this kind would be particularly necessary in Lithuania as well.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research revealed that pregnancy or early marriages, frequently household chores and the necessity to help at home are the main reasons preventing the Roma girls from learning at school. The girls have to follow the family priorities and they are not supposed to confront them. According to the participants in the research, it is acceptable to abandon school because their family needs support in housework. The girls have to be concerned about cleanliness and order at home. They are taught impeccable order, to prepare food for family members and to take care of the younger family members. When a senior daughter in a Roma family stops attending school, the mother can breathe a sigh of relief – now the obligation to take care of everything is not on her but on her daughter's shoulders.

The attendance of Roma schoolchildren (girls in particular) decreases or they abandon school, when they reach the age at which they can help their parents or at the beginning of puberty (11-12 years). Under relatively favourable conditions, the Roma girls reach 6th-8th forms. Continuing studies becomes complicated. The traditional approach to gender results in the confrontation in their relations with the school. From the perspective of Romani customary law, allowing the girls to attend school, their parents are fearful for their honour and future, their family life. There also appears fear that their adolescent daughter may make friends with boys as school students of different ages and gender attend schools. Several factors can contribute to preventing the Roma adolescents from the early abandoning of school: strong relations between the parents and school and successful learning experience in lower forms.

This article presents only some aspects of the confrontation between education and Romani customary law, which are further specified by the factor of gender. The researcher is faced with a complicated assignment to observe the smallest reflections of this customary law, which, in most cases, are even hidden. It is obvious that under such circumstances some misleadingly interpreted details may occur. This may be the reason why the central axis of Romani culture, which is manifested through the patriarchy together with the customary law and all its reflections, have been the source of ambiguity for thousands of years. Could we intervene with feminist debates here? It is hardly possible. Being a feminist, one should support the wish of Roma women to be Roma women in the patriarchy, whereas the Roma women, taking into account their choices, should be perceived as anti-feminists. None of the recommendations suggested different education practices for Roma girls compared to Roma boys. However, it is obvious that Roma girls require a different type of attention. Important aspect includes the academic discourse, feminist anthropology, which allows for a particularly critical evaluation of processes.

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