

Gender relationships among the Gypsy/ Roma in Bulgaria

Gypsies/ Roma have lived for centuries on end in the Bulgarian lands. During different time periods, they have appeared as a necessary part in the social, economical and spiritual life. On the one hand, they become integrated in the environment where they live, and on the other – still manage to preserve their ethnic and ethno-cultural uniqueness, their traditional norms and values. In the Gypsy/ Roma families, the patriarchal rules and codes of behaviour where customs rule over the individual, are still preserved and are strong. The moral relationships in the family, the group and the community support the patriarchal basis of the man/woman relationship. That is why the most conservative sphere of the Gypsy/ Roma culture is the gender relationships. The role model for social conduct is determined by the “taboo” system and should not be breached. Gender roles and gender relationships in the nuclear as well as the extended Gypsy/ Roma family are determined by strict, specifically set guidelines where the main rule is “to know your right place”. The gender-role behaviour in the traditional model is in the context of the male domination and the patriarchal order, where the role of the woman is mostly submissive and to a large extent without any rights. The gender functions in the family and outside of it are defined also according to age.

The aspects of the social roles in the lives of the man and the woman are taught from a very young age. They are different and based on the understanding of the different assignments the two genders have within the family. In order to be respected and fulfilled, a man has to get married, to create a family and have his woman give birth to several children. Compared to the women, the men have more space for self-expression according to the common rules within the official Gypsy/ Roma culture. Only the men can apply the traditional Gypsy laws.

The female role is strictly separated from, but always complementary to the male. Young girls should preserve their virginity until the day of their marriage. The first and foremost duty of the newly married woman is to give birth. Without children, the Gypsy/ Roma woman cannot be considered socially fulfilled and is threatened to be expelled from her husband's family, from her own family and from the community. When a woman behaves outside of the commonly accepted sexual rules of conduct, she is sanctioned. The most important thing in her life is to be a good mother, to raise her children and to take care of her family. In the Gypsy/ Roma families, there is a hierarchal order. The relationships are strictly determined. The centuries-old tradition that the young should take into consideration and obey the elders' opinion is observed. This is valid not only in everyday matters, but also when choosing a marital partner and in the family customs. The place of the individual and the attitude of others are regulated with various ritualistic activities during the Christmas holidays. In the familial as well as calendar customs of the Gypsy/ Roma, gender dichotomy is clearly visible.