

# Roma women & prostitution



Analysis of the relation between ethnicity and engagement in prostitution in Romania

Master Thesis  
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## Abstract

More Roma women are engaged in prostitution in the area of Tirgu Mures, Romania, than women from other backgrounds. This research is focused on the question whether having a Roma background influences the probability that Roma women become engaged in prostitution. This means that this research will include ethnicity. Ethnicity might play a role in the decision to become engaged in prostitution. However, there is a taboo on connecting ethnicity and prostitution since including ethnicity in research often means that a researcher has to deal with ethical challenges and morality. Despite the barriers that make a research more difficult, this thesis will focus on the question whether or not ethnicity of Roma women and becoming engaged in prostitution in the area of Tirgu Mures are correlated. The starting point will be a discussion on the Roma culture including the historical background of the Roma followed by information about the engagement of women in prostitution in the area of Tirgu Mures. Throughout this thesis, the debate around prostitution will be used to look at prostitution from different angles. Besides the literature review, interviews have been carried out and observations made. The question asked in this thesis appears to be problematic. It seems too simple to state that the ethnicity of these women is the explanation for why they become engaged in prostitution. Besides their Roma background, it appears that history, discrimination, poverty and lack of love and affection influence the probability that these women become engaged in prostitution. All these aspects will be subject of the discussion in this thesis.

All the pictures that are used throughout this thesis are made by the researcher,

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## Acnowledgements

This thesis is the result of graduate research for the master Sustainable Citizenship at the University in Utrecht. It is the culmination of the fieldwork period carried out in Tirgu Mures, Romania. I would like to acknowledge the help, support, and assistance of some key people.

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Marianne Sijtsma,  
Utrecht, the Netherlands.

*To Simona  
I will never forget*

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## 1.0 Introduction

It is Monday morning, 11 o'clock. It is cold outside, somewhere around minus ten. It is one of my first weeks in Tirgu Mures, Romania and it is the second time that I get the opportunity to accompany an organization that reaches out to women that are engaged in prostitution in the area of Tirgu Mures. We are with four people. I am together with the director of the organization, one volunteer, and a male driver. The goal of these outreaches is to make contact with the women and to build a relationship with them. The director of the organization knows where they are working since they appear in the same spots every day. Some women look for clients near factories, others in empty gas stations or a bit outside the city in a parking spot.

We arrive at the first place where they normally work. The gas station is out of function and it is quiet. There is a small wooden hut on the right side where the women can have sex with their clients. Once I see there are no women in the hut I step out of the car. I carry my camera and walk towards it. The smell of urine is intense and condoms are spread all over the floor. I see a small broken mirror and a lipstick that seems barely used. Outside the hut is a small pink scarf waving in the wind and a blanket is hanging in front of the door, probably to create some kind of privacy. When I step out of the hut I see the people from the organization I am accompanying engaged in a conversation with one of the three women. While she is drinking a coffee and smoking a cigarette she talks and laughs. When I walk back to the car I shiver; the wind is cold. I take a seat and look at them. The women are not dressed the way I expected them to be dressed. They are wearing long trousers, t-shirts and some even a coat. One of them turns around and sees me in the back seat of the car. I wave, she waves back and when she smiles I see that she only has a few teeth left in her mouth. The conversations that are held with the women engaged in prostitution are about kids, family life, why they are engaged in prostitution and sometimes they tell stories about their personal history. I look at the three women that are standing here, in this quiet place. I can tell by the colour of their skin that they have a Roma background, just like many other women we spoke to the other day that we did outreach. A question comes to my mind. Is it true that there are more women with a Roma background engaged in prostitution in Tirgu Mures than women with other ethnicities?

During the three months of research, I asked these questions to people, living in Romania. Interviews have been held with people working for different organizations: a teacher from a school that focused on Roma children, a woman who focused on educational material, a journalist that is also a women's activist, a Roma presenter of television programs and two police officers from the Department against Human Trafficking. However, most importantly, I had the privilege to listen to many stories that the women currently engaged in prostitution or that had left the industry willingly shared.

All this information has been collated and provided the material and the basis for my thesis to address the following question:

*“How does a Roma background influence the engagement of Roma women in prostitution in the area of Tirgu Mures, Romania?”*



## 1.1 Ethnicity, research, and prostitution

During the time in Romania it became apparent that there are many Roma women engaged in prostitution. Research done by Brussa (2009) in which the prostitution scene in 25 European countries is mapped, shows that the majority of national sex workers in Romania belong to the Roma or other ethnic minorities. According to Brussa (2009), this makes it exceptionally important to consider the specific situation of ethnic minorities in the sex industry. Brown (1998) and Siegel (2004) agree with the fact that more research should be done that is focused on the link between ethnicity and prostitution. Before elaborating on the link between prostitution and ethnicity the concept of ethnicity will be discussed.

The term ethnicity is focused on the distinction between groups of people based on behaviour and culture as well as biology, physical characteristics including ancestral and geographical origins and languages (Eaton, 1980 & Bhopal, 1997). Eriksen (2002) adds that ethnicity is an aspect of a social relationship between agents who consider themselves as being culturally distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have minimum interaction. Over time, ethnicity appeared to be a fluid concept, which depends on its context (Bhopal, 1997 & Isajiw, 1974 & Vincent, 1974). Some scholars define ethnicity as a social construct (Brooks, 2012) while others use linguistic approaches, cultural or historical explanations, or define Roma along kinship networks (Matras, 2010). Nagy (2016) states that ethnic classification is a frequent topic in social sciences and difficult when it is about the Roma ethnicity since there is no data on who can be considered as a Roma. At the same time, many Roma refuse to be identified due to fear of misinterpretation and stereotyping. Hemelsoet and van Pelt (2015) state that Roma might prefer to be recognized as persons, rather than as Roma.

When focusing on the meaning of ethnicity and the impact it has on peoples' lives, one may assume that much research on women that are engaged in prostitution includes ethnicity since ethnicity can be seen as one of the many possible aspects of the social identity of people besides gender, sexuality, and nationality (Siegel, 2004 & Fearon, 1999). However, the opposite seems to be more the case (Siegel, 2016). Both Siegel (2016) and Okazaki (1995) wrote about the importance and difficulties of including ethnicity in research. Siegel (2016) focused on the moral aspects whilst Okazaki focused more on the methodological issues.

Siegel (2016) states that ethical research is sometimes labelled as racist and results about ethnicity are often unwelcome. These consequences leave researchers with a dilemma. If they decide to publish their research including ethnicity, they might have to face risks such as getting attacked by ethnic interest groups, which can be a threat to their academic position. On the other hand, when withholding information or even refrain from researching possible linkages with ethnicity during research, researchers are seen as unreliable and willing to deliberately change data.

Okazaki (1995) focused more on methodological challenges that might occur when including ethnicity in research. The challenges mentioned are that it is difficult to select the right participants, to decide how to do the sampling, what your measure selection is going to be and how the data will be interpreted. Even though both Siegel (2016) and Okazaki (1995) come up with these difficulties they encourage researchers to include ethnicity. When they do so it is essential to be aware of possible cultural bias when interpreting ethnic



differences in assessment measures and researchers have to be aware of the sensitive issues inherent such work. Siegel (2016) states that ethnographic research on ethnicity, crime, and sex work is not only possible but also necessary in order to challenge the stereotypes and misunderstandings around these topics. Okazaki (1995) states that even when research around ethnicity means that methodological problems will occur, ethnicity should still be included since it can add great value and in particular, predictor value. According to Siegel (2016), it can help unravel the interrelationships and dynamics inside a certain group and helps to create a better understanding about conflicts and competition between sex workers, the struggle for power between groups of different origins, and the defence of collective interest within a shared social context (Siegel, 2016).

### 1.1.1 The abolitionist view

Elaborating on the wider debate around prostitution is necessary in order to place this thesis in a broader range of literature. The debate around prostitution has often been referred to as the 'feminist sex wars' (Kissil et al., 2010) and began in the 1980s after the growing prosperity and liberalization of the sexual morals in the West (Outshoorn, 2005). Overall there are two stands in this debate. On the one hand are the abolitionists for who view prostitution as gender-based violence and when women work in prostitution there is often an asymmetrical power relation. According to abolitionist thinkers, there is no distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution, there is no free choice in prostitution (Jeffreys, 2012). In the abolitionist thinking, prostitution does not involve specific acts of violence but is a form of violence. Scholars like Laurie (2010) Jeffreys (2012), MacKinnon (1989), and Kissil (2010) criticize prostitution and put an emphasis on rape, incest, sexual harassment, pornography, violence, and authority from men over women. Matthew (2008) states that the decision for women to enter the prostitution scene is always driven by economic, social and personal constraints. They are believed to have limited possibilities on the labor market as a result of class, age, gender, location and low educational level. Besides these arguments, abolitionists state that sexual violence and exploitation are intertwined with prostitution. This abolitionist view was echoed in a conversation with a journalist and activist on women's rights: *"In one way or another, the girls are always forced to enter prostitution. How can they be proud of what they are doing? Their body is objectified. Let us spend one day on the street to understand what kind of life they have. I know the debate around prostitution and I know that I should be objective. But I cannot accept this. I cannot accept this because I know what the reality is. I do not want to be objective, fuck objectivity. What kind of objectivity are we talking about here?"*<sup>1</sup> This journalist and activist completely agrees with the abolitionists' argument that women's body is objectified once they are getting into the business of prostitution. This understanding of prostitution from the abolitionist point of view has been criticised for being based on moral ideas. Amongst others, scholars like Segrave et al. (2009) and Weitzer (2007) argue against these arguments based on moral ideas. This critique brings us to the other stand in this debate: the sex work paradigm.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with a journalist/activist, 28th of March 2018

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a young Roma woman, 12th of February 2018

### 1.1.2 The sex work paradigm

In response to the abolitionist understanding of prostitution, a pro-sex-work paradigm emerged. This view holds that it is too simplified to state that prostitution is necessarily oppressive to women. The basis of their arguments is that it is too easy to state that all women are victims of trafficking and exploitation (Andrijasevic, 2006). Contrary to the abolitionist view, the academics who align with the old 'Sex Workers Rights Movement' consider prostitution to be a legitimate profession, a way to earn money and a women's right to choose what she wants to do with her body (Oude Breuil et al., 2011). The name: 'Sex Workers Rights Movement' emphasizes that prostitution is a form of labor and indicates that women can make an active decision to become engaged in prostitution (Outshoorn, 2005). When women decide to become engaged in this profession they do not see themselves as victims (Siegel, 2005 & Agustin, 2007). The 'Sex Workers Rights Movement' aims for the legalization of prostitution and a guarantee of prostitute's rights within legislative frameworks (Outshoorn, 2005 & Weitzer, 2008 & Segrave et al., 2009). When prostitution will be decriminalized, the situation for women can only improve because rights will be obtained and protections given (Weitzer, 2008 & Segrave et al., 2009).

### 1.1.3 Prostitution in Romania

Sex work is not longer illegal since a new Penal Code that started in 2014. This means that clients of the women engaged in prostitution are not prosecuted. However, women engaged in prostitution can get fines for disturbing public order when they contact clients in the street, in parks, clubs and bars. Being a sex worker in Romania is punishable by a fine of 500 to 1500 lei (110 to 330 euros). Romania is one of the few European states in which provision of sexual services is punished (Reinschmidt, 2016). Iovu (2015) explains that when individuals are unable to pay the fines, they have to perform community service. Often they neither pay nor perform these services, which leads to an enormous amount of money to pay off.

## 1.2 Methodology

It was cold outside and cold in the room. The first interview for this research was held in a huge attic in an old building. There was a small heater but it did not give enough warmth to dispel the cold air. There were only a few chairs and a small table in the room. The woman that was willing to share her personal story arrived two minutes ago. She looked at me and asked for my name. She said that she was happy to share her story with me since she had the feeling that I was sincerely interested. This interview was one of the seven interviews with women that had been carried out in the research period in Tirgu Mures. These women were either engaged in prostitution or had been engaged in prostitution for a period of time. Interviews were held in the attic described above, a few interviews were held while sitting in the car, one in a restaurant and one interview was held in a private apartment. The goal of these interviews was to get a better understanding of the lives of women that are or had been engaged in prostitution and to see whether they could tell something about their background and the way their ethnicity influenced their lives. When names are used throughout this thesis, the names are fictitious for safety reasons.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a journalist and an activist for women's rights and a Roma man and presenter. The journalist was a useful source since she has been working with the Roma people for a long time and has a lot of knowledge about the culture in which the Roma people live and work. The Roma actor and presenter shared a lot about the Roma culture and his experiences of a life as a Roma.

Besides these people, two interviews were held with Roma living in a 'Roma street'. The 'Roma street' is an area in which Roma people built a community. A young woman tells about the street: "*There are many people living here. We do not even know how many; nobody ever counts the people here. We call it a street but it is starting to look like a small village instead. In the street are some 'well maintained' houses like ours. However, when you walk further you will see, smell and feel the poverty all around you.*"<sup>2</sup>

In addition, three extensive interviews were carried out with people that are currently working with the Roma community. One of the interviewees is working as a medical assistant for the Roma community, the second is a teacher on a primary 'after schooling' program focused on Roma children and the third interviewee works in a foundation that is involved in developing educational programs for Roma children.

During the period in Tirgu Mures, it appeared that the police are closely involved in the lives of the women that are engaged in prostitution and two police officers were willing to share about their responsibilities and strategies in order to fight trafficking of (young) women and illegal prostitution.

Finally yet importantly, an in-depth interview has been carried out with the founder and worker for an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with a young Roma woman, 12th of February 2018

### 1.2.1 Visual anthropology

During the research period in Tirgu Mures, pictures were taken to complement the information given throughout this thesis. One of the most important reasons to add pictures is because this amply demonstrates the environments that women engaged in prostitution are currently working in. According to Rose (2008) photographs became important for research since the invention of photography in 1830. She argues that photographs can provide a great deal of information about a place that reaches further than words. Adding pictures to a thesis can add a great value to anthropological research because photographs offer the thought process of imaginary in the projective interview (Collier et al., 1986). Anthropology methods are moving on in a present-day environment because the communicative and structural characteristics of photography can be compared to those of verbal language in that photographs hold the same subjective, interpretive potential as words (Moran and Tegano, 2005). Collier et al. (1986) state that the critical eye of the camera can be used as a tool for gathering accurate information because we are often poor observers. Its focus helps us to see more and with greater accuracy than solely watching with the own eye. According to Close (2007), photography has the potential to be a visual language with which we can represent reality. That is exactly why photography is used throughout this thesis.



## 2.0 Roma in Romania



### 2.1 Short history of the Roma

The Roma constitute the largest ethnic minority group within the European Union (EU) (Fagan et al., 2006). The exact number of Roma in the EU is not clear, possibly because many Roma refuse to register their ethnic identity in official consensus for fear of discrimination (Chiriac, 2004). However, estimation shows that about three to five million Roma live in Eastern Europe. These people represent two-thirds of the nine to twelve million Roma worldwide (Fagan et al., 2006). Romania is the country with the largest amount of Roma in Europe. In 2011, there were an estimated total of about 620,000 Roma people in Romania (Reed, 2013). The Roma have no homeland (Barany et al., 2002) and no state to provide for them or protect them (Nagy, 2016). The World Bank report (2002) on poverty in Europe and Central Asia identified Roma as one of the main poverty risk groups in the region.

The Roma people probably came from India and spread all over Europe (Morar et al., 2004). Petrova (2003) states that it is not well established when the Roma migrated out of India. Barany et al. (2002) state that they left India because of war and economic hardship. The vast majority of the Roma were nomadic or, as Warnke (1999) calls them "traveling people". Barany et al. (2002) state that since the Roma people arrived in Europe, the dominant population of the region has politically, socially, culturally, and economically marginalized them. Scholars like Achim (2004) and Oprean (2011) describe that Roma soon became slaves after they arrived in Europe. Warnke (1999) tells that the Roma were bought and sold in the marketplace like livestock. Estate owners, churches, and monasteries owned the slaves. They were tied to their master by certain obligations and belonged to the lowest rung of class in Romania. Enslavement of the Roma lasted almost five centuries and had a devastating effect on the possibilities of social integration (Petrova, 2003). The Roma people were often distinct from the rest of the population and slavery was perceived as an integral part of the countries' social

system. Achim (2004) explains that this 'low' position of the Roma continued until around 1855 when a generation of intellectual Romanians came back to Romania. They undertook their studies in the West and entered back into the public life. According to Greenberg (2010), these intellectuals took the influence of abolitionist movements in the West with them, including the idea that slavery should be abolished. In time, the whole of Romanian society embraced the idea that it was necessary to 'liberate' the Roma people. In 1855, all Roma slaves in the region were freed (Greenberg, 2010). In the nineteenth century, the vast majority of Roma had settled into a sedentary way of life in both rural and urban areas. Achim (2004) describes that they often worked as craftsmen for the agricultural population and Warnke (1999) adds that the Roma contributed rather than detracted from society by supplying labor and services that others have been unable or unwilling to provide. In this period of time, Roma people assimilated. It became easier for some Roma people to blend into the normal society and live amongst Romanians. During the Second World War, the Roma people were again seen as inferior and many of them were brought to work camps. Petrova (2003) states that this war was undoubtedly the greatest catastrophe in the history of the Roma people. More than 500,000 Roma in total were persecuted (Warnke, 1999). Greenberg (2010) and Petrova (2003) even mention numbers between 500,000 and 1.5 million in total. An unknown number of Romanian Roma got deported to Transnistria. A large number of these died of hunger, cold, diseases, and poverty. Many of those who survived returned to Romania after the war (Achim, 2004).

In the after-war period, a communist regime came to power in Romania. In the first years of the communist regime, Roma people got employed, received homes and land and were given the opportunity to join the army (Achim, 2004 & Warnke, 1999). Despite these opportunities, the life of many Roma families was far from easy. Most of them were forced to abandon their historical crafts and had to do unskilled and poorly paid, heavy work (Greenberg, 2010). Because they were kept out of education and training, they were pushed back to the lowest rung of society again (Warnke, 1999). The new generation continued in a cycle of unemployment and polarisation (Warnke, 1999 & Achim, 2004).

Currently, the polarisation between the Roma and the rest of Romanian society is on going. However, it is hard to generalise about Roma since there is an extreme diversity of Roma communities living in Romania (Asylum Aid, 2002). The Roma appear diverse on multidimensional levels involving differences in language, history, culture, religion, social class and education (Fagan et al., 2006 & Barany et al., 2002). Some groups are traditionally settled, some nomadic, and some are still living in a traditional ways and habits. Despite these differences, research done by Nagy (2016) shows that this ethnic group is presented as homogenous, poor and welfare dependent. People tend to ignore the social, economic and cultural diversity of different Roma subgroups. Because of the diversity of the Roma people, it is unclear what the Roma identity is (Barany et al., 2002). Despite this lack of clarity about the identity of the Roma, the following chapter will discuss the different aspects of the lives of Roma families in the 'Roma street' in Tirgu Mures.

## 2.2 Ethnicity of the Roma

Ethnicity is one of the aspects that shapes someone's life, also the lives of the women that are engaged in prostitution in the area of Tirgu Mures. As Siegel (2016) describes: ethnicity is one of the many possible aspects of the social identity of sex workers. Before making any statements about whether there is a link between prostitution and ethnicity it is important to discuss some aspects from the Roma ethnicity in the area of Tirgu Mures. Siegel (2016) states that ethnicity is not just something that may impact a specific event, but is rather the source of events that shapes peoples lives. There are several ways in which ethnicity can be researched. Nagy (2016) explains that anthropology is one of the oldest disciplines adopted for researching the Roma to develop a better understanding of the socio-economic condition and cultural values.

In this chapter, some aspects of the ethnicity of the Roma will be described through an anthropological lens by using literature, observations and interviews. This chapter start off with some general information before moving on towards topics like marriages, pregnancies, and sexuality.

### 2.2.1 Demographics

According to Revenga et al. (2002) Roma in Romania have higher rates of population growth and larger families than non – Roma. Besides, the Roma population is younger. The explanation for this given by Revenga et al. (2002) is that many Roma families tend to have more children and often start having children at an earlier age than the average Romanian. A Roma woman tells during an interview that she comes from a family of nineteen children<sup>3</sup> and the worker in an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution states that most of the Roma families she knows have family sizes of six to twelve children.<sup>4</sup> A young woman that lives in the 'Roma street' tells: "*I only have one brother and that is highly unusual. The average in the street is around eight children within one family but some even have as many as thirteen to fifteen children.*"<sup>5</sup>

### 2.2.2 Discrimination, living conditions & poverty

Barany et al. (2002) explain that the Roma people experience being subordinated and excluded by others since they arrived in Europe. Barany (1994) also remarks that the Roma themselves have cultivated their marginal status by preserving their identity and resisting recurrent attempts at assimilation and integration by dominant groups in the area. Whoever might be to blame, scholars and human rights organizations have found widespread anti-gypsyism in media coverage, political and popular discourse and violent acts against Roma people (Fox, 2010 & Kligman, 2001). The fact that the Roma people have to face discrimination, subordination and assimilation should be kept in mind when discussing other aspects of the Roma culture and the situation in which Roma people are currently living.

Research carried out by Barany (1994) describes that the situation for the Roma people in Romania can be difficult since the majority of the Roma people are living in poverty. Some quotes from interviews carried out in the 'Roma street' in Tirgu Mures confirm this assumption. "*You are still in the good part of the street but*

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with a woman who escaped prostitution, 13th February 2018

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution, 15th of May 2018

<sup>5</sup> Interview with a young Roma woman, 12th of February 2018



*when you would walk further you see poverty everywhere. Many people are drunk, people are constantly shouting and children are dirty. Sometimes it is not easy to breath because of the intense smell of garbage and urine. People do not have clothes, no clean water and not enough to eat. So are the people poor here? Definitely yes.”*<sup>6</sup>

Some Roma groups show higher rates of poverty than Romanian families. The poverty the Roma people face includes persistent inter-generational poverty (Fagan et al., 2006 & Green et al., 2005). When there is intergenerational poverty, parents likely pass on poverty to their children and continue in a cycle of deprivation. This is often the case in situations when people have limited prospects of improving their circumstances and breaking the poverty cycle. The main explanations for this, according to Revenga et al. (2002), are a low educational achievement, the number of children and the employment status of the head of the household. This point will be discussed in the next section, Education and Labor Market Status.

The poverty that many Roma people face becomes evident when looking at housing. A worker in the ‘Roma street’ explains; *“Houses are often made by families themselves with the help of others. Almost no official company has a share in this process.”*<sup>7</sup> Utilities like electricity, heating, and water are not accessible for all. *“The families often live in houses with one or two rooms, mostly with no door in between the two rooms. There is no privacy in the houses. People use the same room to cook, eat, sleep, and to spend time during the day. This is one of the reasons why houses are often not hygienic.”*<sup>8</sup> Besides their housing situation, Roma reported difficulties in getting to health centres, schools, and social assistance because of the distance, roads and poor infrastructure (Revenga et al., 2002 & Asylum Aid, 2002). *“The Roma people often live on the edges of a city.”*<sup>9</sup> *“Roma people do not have the money to build real houses so people are living in poor circumstances illegally.”*<sup>10</sup> This means that the Roma do not have land rights, do not feel the responsibility for the terrain and can be kicked out of these areas without an excuse. All these aspects make the Roma people more vulnerable (to poverty).

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with a Roma woman, 1st of Mai 2018

<sup>7</sup> Interview with a worker in a Roma street, 30th April 2018

<sup>8</sup> Interview with a worker in a Roma street, 30th April 2018

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a worker in a Roma street, 30th April 2018

<sup>10</sup> Interview with a director focused on marginalized groups in society, 8th April 2018



### 2.2.3 Education & labor market status

When discussing the history of the Roma people and the place education used to have in their lives, the director of an organization working with Roma people tells: *“In the past, it was never possible for Roma children to go to school since Roma families were always on the road. While travelling, schooling was not a priority. They did not depend on schooling to survive but survived because of their labor skills. These skills did not have to do so much with education and Roma people did not see that going to school would help them in difficult situations. This line of thinking was common amongst the Roma people until a hundred years ago.”*<sup>11</sup>

Despite of the importance of schooling in order to develop, the education level of many Roma people still tends to be low. Research done by Barany (1994) show that only 51.3% of Roma children attends school regularly, 79.4% of the adults has no professional training, 16.5% has modern professions and unemployment during the time of the research was high at 77,9%. However, interviews showed this has not always been the situation of Roma in Romania. A Roma woman tells: *“When I grew up during the communist period, Roma children were calmer and more educated. School was compulsory. Children went to school and girls got married around their twenties. The quality of the education was good and no distinction was made between Romanians and Roma. When I grew up, I never experienced discrimination. After the revolution the whole situation changed. Attending school was no longer compulsory and discrimination started to appear everywhere in society, including in schools. That situation continued until now.”*<sup>12</sup>

Numbers confirm this decline in school attendance and provide evidence that school attendance for young Roma children is lower than the average school attendance in Romania (Fagan et al., 2006). Research done by Fagan et al. (2006) show that the majority of the Roma people have only reached primary education or below. A teacher in a primary school tells: *“In many cases, children are enrolled in the beginning of the year but will in reality, do not attend school.”*<sup>13</sup> There are some possible explanations for this. Based on research done by McDonald (1999), school absence can be due to a lack of money. The costs for education might be too high for families; the school supplies for a year cost around one monthly salary for an average Romanian citizen. Several women during interviews told that their parents often send a few of their children to school and kept the others at home in order to work. A young woman during an interview: *“My mother would not let me go to school. My sisters went to school so it was my task to look after the youngest children, to clean and to do the laundry. I really wanted to go to school but I could not. There were many other children in my neighbourhood like me.”*<sup>14</sup> This is also a tendency that the teacher at a Roma school sees: *“Some kids never went to school because they had to take care of other siblings. In many families it is not important for the parents to send children to school because in the short-term, they are more useful at home.”*<sup>15</sup>

The World Bank (2000) states that there are more reasons for school absence. Lack of proficiency in the national language, fear of assimilation, and discrimination by non –Roma might also play a role in school

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with a director focused on marginalized groups in society, 8th April 2018

<sup>12</sup> Interview with a Roma woman, 1st of Mai 2018

<sup>13</sup> Interview with a teacher on a school for Roma, 13th March 2018

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a young Roma woman, 12th of February 2018

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a teacher on a school for Roma, 13th March 2018

absences. Another aspect that Fagan et al. (2006) discovered during their research is that schools are often poorly resourced to address the challenges of an inferior educational environment (Fagan et al., 2006).

Some Roma see the importance of education. Interviews showed that there are Roma that have the dream to be enrolled in a school, even though the circumstances in these schools are not always optimal. A Roma woman in an interview about her time in primary school: *"I went to a school in which only Roma children were enrolled. I was able to learn something but not all the time. Sometimes there were no teachers and sometimes teachers were not skilled to teach. However, I tried my best because I wanted to learn."*<sup>16</sup> The teacher at a Roma school told that this child was not the only Roma child that was motivated to learn. There are several children that are eager to learn, to go to school and that would never skip class. *"However, it must be said that there are not many like her."*<sup>17</sup>

Because the Roma tend to show low school attendance and consequently have low education and skill levels, Roma are poorly equipped to compete in the labor market and the unemployment rate amongst Roma is high (Fagan et al., 2006). Even when Roma people get jobs that are available, they might get excluded from other opportunities during their work (McDonald, 1999). Revenga (2002) shows that when Roma people have jobs they are mostly employed in industry and services (Revenga, 2002). According to a report written by the EU Accession Monitoring Program (2002), many Roma families are engaged in a combination of formal and informal employment, in jobs considered undesirable by the rest of inhabitants such as street vending, waste collection or seasonal work (Fagan et al., 2006). Linking back to the assimilation of Roma people and society, the low level of employment of Roma people might be a barrier to social inclusion in Romania (Marin et al., 2012). The director of an organization for marginalized groups further elaborates on this: *"In many 'normal' schools the Roma children are not mixed with children from other backgrounds. In many workplaces, the Roma are not present. This means that adults do not have them as colleagues. Because of this, people do not know anything about Roma people and the prejudice against them remains."*<sup>18</sup> A Roma woman explains: *"A gypsy has to prove himself more in order to get to the same place as someone else. Looking for a job is generally speaking difficult, even if someone has a diploma and is really high skilled."*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with a young Roma woman, 12th of February 2018

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a teacher on a school for Roma, 13th March 2018

<sup>18</sup> Interview with a director focused on marginalized groups in society, 8th April 2018

<sup>19</sup> Interview with a Roma woman, 1st of Mai 2018



#### 2.2.4 Social assistance

Answers given in the interviews showed the importance of social assistance for Roma families in the area of Tirgu Mures. Since they often do not have a stable income, many families appeared to be living partly from social assistance. As said before, the Roma often receive a high amount of child allowances since families are big. *“I know several families that decided to have many children. I know that for some families child benefits are one reason to have a big family. Besides, the fact that children can work for an income is a motivation for many parents as well to get many children.”*<sup>20</sup> Besides the empirical data gathered in Tirgu Mures, a number of scholars have written about the dependency of the Roma on social welfare. The research done by an expert group on gender, social inclusion and employment (Fagan et al., 2006) shows that social protection benefits are important sources of income and comprise about half of the household income for Roma families. According to Fagan et al. (2006), there is a pattern of marginal economic survival strategies in many Roma communities, which encompasses a high dependency on these social welfare systems. As a consequence, many Romanians believe that Roma are living from the social system without putting any effort into finding another job. Nagy (2016) states that the long-standing prejudiced perception of Roma as profiteers involved in illegal activities who are unwilling to integrate is present in Romania. According to the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution, this idea is indeed present amongst Romanians. The Roma people are seen as people who are using the social assistance of Romania and are not willing to work. *“I think this is not the complete truth. In Romania, social benefits are not sufficient to maintain a family and many people do not have an official social insurance since they never had an official job. Many of the families I know have to work besides the social benefits they receive. I would say that they are more dependent on loans than on social assistance. Many families do not even know about possible rights they have on receiving social assistance.”*<sup>21</sup> The presence of the part dependency on social assistance is one aspect of an overall culture, a culture of poverty. This will be further elaborated in chapter 2.3.

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with a worker in a Roma street, 30th April 2018

<sup>21</sup> Interview with the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution, 15th of May 2018

### 2.2.5 Family life

According to Fagan et al. (2006), family ties play an important role in Roma communities and that gender roles are clearly divided in a Roma family. It is the men's task to provide for the family and the women's role is focused on housework. Grigorovici (2014) states that the involvement of women in the life outside the community is absent in almost all places. A young Roma woman explains: *"A woman has to clean, prepare food for the family and take care of the children. Even when women are tired, they have to be there in case their husband needs them. The role of the men is to earn the money. Do 'men' stuff. I can decide to take a job next to my household job but I still have to keep on doing these duties at home."*<sup>22</sup> She further explains about other women in 'the street': *"I only know a few women that are having a job but most of the women in this street spend their days wandering around, shouting at each other and fulfilling their duties as a wife."*<sup>23</sup> Besides the duties that Roma women have in their households, marriage plays an important role in the Roma community. Interviews showed that the lives of Roma women change once they get married. This leads us to the next section where Roma marriage customs in Roma communities will be discussed.

### 2.2.6 Marriage

According to Gheorghe (1991), both marriage and sexuality are important aspects in the lives of Roma women. 52% of the Roma girls in Romania are getting married before they turn eighteen. According to a worker in a 'Roma street': *"People often marry at a young age, and in many cases with someone they know from this street. They are often only between fourteen and seventeen years old."*<sup>24</sup> In literature, some explanations for these early marriages are given. Firstly, girls are supposed to have many children (amongst other reasons because this is a sign of fertility). Secondly, early marriage is considered to protect girls' virginity before marriage (Grigorovici, 2014). Virginity is important because it is seen as the honour of the family to keep your virginity. Despite the fact that people see early marriage as a 'problem' of this time, Oprea (2012) states that it entails ideas that have their origin way back antiquity. In an interview, a Roma actor and presenter explains: *"Gypsies have been slaves in Romania for 200 years. In the past, the landowner could decide about life and death. A landlord used to organize festive activities and could ask a woman to have sex with one of his sons. However, in the traditional Roma culture virginity is sacred for women before they are getting married. Because of this, it would be better for the Roma girls to marry young than that they would become victims of a slave ruler. So, a long time ago the tradition started that Roma girls married at a young age, and this continued until now."*<sup>25</sup>

Literature and confirmed by our own interviews carried out in Tirgu Mures demonstrate that one of the possible consequences of early marriage that might occur is that girls do not finish their education. According to Asylum Aid (2002), this might be the explanation of the high discrepancy in school attendance between boys and girls. The number of Roma women who attended formal education is 60% lower than that of Roma men (Grigorovici, 2014). A consequence of the high school absence and low education level is that women have

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with a young Roma woman, 12th of February 2018

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a young Roma woman, 12th of February 2018

<sup>24</sup> Interview with a worker in a Roma street, 30th April 2018

<sup>25</sup> Interview with a Roma presenter/actor, 24th of Mai 2018

lower employment opportunities, which in turn can cause economic insecurity and greater dependence on their husband's family (Reed, 2013).

Marriages are often not registered legally but are solemnized by the own community. A ceremony is not always needed but traditions are followed. A Roma woman about Roma marriages: *"When a girl falls in love with a boy they run off together. For the Roma tradition, the boys and girls are married when they have sexual intercourse so when they return to the community after eloping, they are seen as husband and wife."*<sup>26</sup> A young Roma woman tells about her own experiences: *"I have many friends who ran off with a boy. Often they did not even know him for long. They leave without telling anybody and from that moment on they are seen as a married couple. A run away couple."*<sup>27</sup> After their marriage, girls often get pregnant within a short period of time (Fagan et al, 2006). 37% of the women deliver a baby before they turn eighteen. *"In the street where the Roma people formed a community it sometimes feels like children are delivering children. I think that these girls are going to have a hard time in raising a child at their age."*<sup>28</sup> From her experience, the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution tells: *"Many of the women that we see during our work got pregnant at a young age. Amongst them, there are girls that had their first child when they were eleven, but the average age is around fifteen. On the other hand, if a girl lives together with a boy without getting pregnant, she will likely get embarrassed by others."*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with a Roma woman, 1st of Mai 2018

<sup>27</sup> Interview with a young Roma woman, 12th of February 2018

<sup>28</sup> Interview with a worker in a Roma street, 30th April 2018

<sup>29</sup> Interview with the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution, 15th of May 2018





### 2.2.7 Sexuality and Roma

Empirical research showed that in this part of Romania, sexuality seems not to be part of the public discourse. This is possibly due to a combination of traditional cultural attitudes, communist ideology, and morality (Baban, 2000). Magyari-Vincze (2006) describes that it seems that Roma people just like Romanian people do not openly talk about sexuality and contraceptives. Reed (2013) states it even stronger: Because of the fact that the concept of purity is at the core of the traditional Roma cultures, taboos are elaborated and lower body functions and sexual health are never discussed. A possible consequence of this is that girls are lacking knowledge about sexuality before they are 'getting married'. A young woman living in a Roma community tells: *"People do not talk about sexuality, there is no openness about it. Some parents have sex while their children sleep in the same room. In the street, it is quite common to hear sexual explicit language, even with the youngest. However, informative conversations by parents to young people about sexuality are not common. Far from that, I am pretty sure that one of the reasons why girls are so naïve is because they do not know anything about sexuality and have sexual intercourse without knowing anything. They get pregnant at an early age and even if they are motivated to go to school they often have to stop their education. This will make them further dependent on men in the community and vulnerable as young inexperienced mothers and women in a Roma community."*<sup>30</sup> The fact that women do not know anything about sexuality before they are getting married sounds unbelievable. However, an ex sex worker tells: *"I did not know how sex and pregnancy worked. I also did not know how to avoid getting pregnant. Nobody ever told me stuff like this. This resulted in a pregnancy and I delivered a child that is currently somewhere in a foster family."*<sup>31</sup> When talking about sexuality in an interview, a worker in the Roma community explains: *"Sexuality is a topic, but often in a negative way. People use bad words that have to do with sex and men tend to approach women with sexually tinted words. Girls learn how to dance in a sensual way when they are around five years old, without being aware of the effect this has on men. Once married, men decide what happens in the sexual life of the women."*<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with a young Roma woman, 12th of February 2018

<sup>31</sup> Interview with a woman previously engaged in prostitution, 10th of February 2018

<sup>32</sup> Interview with a woman working with Roma people, 2nd of Mai 2018

## 2.3 Culture of poverty

An interesting aspect that will be added to previous aspects in the life of Roma people is the culture of poverty. According to Eurostat (2015), 25.4% of Romania's total population is at risk of poverty and if social exclusion is included in the analysis the percentage becomes 37,3%. Poverty can 'get into a culture' and make people behave like they are living in a culture of poverty. A teacher at a school for Roma mentions the culture of poverty in an interview: *"Can we ascribe certain behaviours to people because of their ethnicity? What about the differences among Roma groups? We should rather talk about a culture of poverty instead of the Roma culture. I believe that poverty makes people act in certain ways. It has nothing to do with their blood or ethnicity. In the community where I am working, I believe that one should talk about a culture of poverty. Relationships are seen as important but also breakable. There are many fights within the community, people have a low self-esteem, underestimate the importance of education, addiction is a serious issue for many Roma and it seems difficult for the Roma people in the street to escape the cycle of poverty. To focus on the Roma culture as the cause of the problem I believe leads us on the wrong track. For the Roma and also for us, we need to focus on solving the problems that should be solved. Talking about a culture of poverty helps us to stay away from discrimination and focus on the problem instead of seeing people as the problem."*<sup>33</sup>

Lewis made the first introduction of the idea of a subculture of poverty in July 1958, in San Jose. The idea behind the culture of poverty is that mechanisms are socially constructed and fabricated by the poor from the substance of their everyday lives. According to Reed (1996), this explains how the poor create ways to survive in difficult conditions and it represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair which develop from the realization of their improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society.

According to Lewis (2017), the setting in which a culture of poverty can occur is a cash economy with production for profit and a high rate of unemployment. In these cash economies, the society fails to provide support for the low-income population and treats people that are living in the low economic status as inferior. When people create ways to deal with their situation they often end up living in a culture of poverty. In an article written earlier, Lewis (1998) states that not all people who are poor necessarily live in or develop a culture of poverty. George (2015) states that the most likely candidates for the culture of poverty would be the people who come from the lower strata of a rapidly changing society and who are already partially alienated from it.

The Roma in the 'Roma street' in Tirgu Mures are living in a poor environment. Their history shows that they were always treated as they were lower than the rest of the society. However, their current position might be partly due to the fact that the Roma people in Tirgu Mures refused to adapt to the wider society. A Roma woman states: *"Sometimes I have the impression that the Roma people in this street do not want to develop in a way that they can grow into the society. I have the feeling that some do not care anymore what*

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with a teacher on a school for Roma, 13th Mai 2018

*happens or where they will end up. And honestly, sometimes I do understand this attitude since for Roma people it is extremely difficult to get accepted in the wider Romanian society, even if they want to.”*<sup>34</sup>

Lewis (1998) explains that people who are living in the culture of poverty have a strong feeling of marginality, helplessness, dependency and not belonging. People feel that they are not part of the rest of the country and that institutions do not serve their interest and needs. Lewis (2017) argued that sustained poverty generates a set of cultural attitudes, beliefs, values, and practices. Once the poverty culture has come into existence it tends to perpetuate. And as Lewis (1966) explains: as a culture, this way of dealing with poverty is handed down from generation to generation and children absorb the basic values and attitudes of their subculture. Several people interviewed in Tirgu Mures stated that children already start showing problematic behaviour at a young age. A young Roma woman states: *“Children copy the behaviour of their parents. Believe it or not, there are many children that already start drinking alcohol and using drugs when they are just three to five years old. Children also start smoking at a young age, from as early as three years. When they do so, nobody stops them.”*<sup>35</sup> Lewis (2017) argues that when children grow up in an area like this, they are unready to take full advantage of changing conditions or improving opportunities that may develop in their lifetime. On the other hand, there are families in which parents were involved in their children’s lives and want to fight for a better future for their children.

Newman et al. (2006) identified other examples of behaviour that are related to the culture of poverty. Encounters in the street, relations between genders and friction between youth and the official world of school, employment or police are common. Interviewees recognized these examples. Some police officials explained in an interview: *“The Roma are a closed community. They resolve fights amongst each other and they have their own system to resolve problems. The police are not involved or invited to the ‘Roma street’.”*<sup>36</sup>

We return then to the question whether we can talk about the relation between ethnicity and prostitution or if we should talk about the situation of poverty that makes people act in certain ways. As explained in previous chapters, one of the possible explanations of the poverty of the Roma people is discrimination and that discrimination of the Roma is based on their ethnicity. It is therefore preferable to avoid crossing out either ethnicity or poverty but instead to make a connection between ethnicity, the culture of poverty and becoming engaged in prostitution.

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with a Roma woman, 1st of Mai 2018

<sup>35</sup> Interview with a young Roma woman, 12th of February 2018

<sup>36</sup> Interview with two police officers focused on human trafficking, 17th April 2018

## 2.4 Conclusion

Before moving on to the discussion on how women are becoming engaged in prostitution, a conclusion on the previous chapter about ethnicity and culture in relation to the culture of poverty will be drawn. Since there is such diversity between different Roma groups in different areas and countries it is important to mention that the conclusions in this part are based on the Roma people in the area of Tirgu Mures.

The term ethnicity is based on a distinction between groups of people on culture, characteristics, language, and social relationships. Empirical research and literature review together with interviews has shown that the Roma culture contains traditions, habits, and customs that might have an impact on the development of Roma women.

Sources and interviewees indicated that the Roma people started to face discrimination from the very beginning when they entered into the Romanian territory. From that moment on, they became more or less detached from the rest of society. Currently, the Roma in the 'Roma street' in Tirgu Mures live in poor conditions, with no land and poor housing. Besides this, children often do not follow through with education and drop out at an early age. When they do enjoy schooling they are most likely enrolled in a school where solely Roma children are engaged. These schools often offer a low level of education. There is no push factor for the children to go to school since the parents often do not see the importance of education. During the research period in Tirgu Mures, it appeared that when Roma are educated and looking for a job they still face discrimination and difficulties in getting hired.

Within Roma families, roles are clearly divided. Women have responsibility for the children and the household whilst the men make the money. In many cases, children help their parents in earning money, especially when they do not attend school. Differences in labor opportunities for boys and girls are present since many girls in Tirgu Mures get married at a young age and often fall pregnant after a short period of time. Interviewees stated there is barely any education on sexuality in the street in Tirgu Mures and children are confronted with bad language, sexually explicit behaviour and use of foul words at a young age. In section 2.3 above we demonstrated that this behaviour in the street in Tirgu Mures is not solely connected to the Roma ethnicity. The culture of poverty seems to be present in the 'Roma street' in Tirgu Mures and might have an impact on the lives and opportunities of the Roma people, including the young Roma women. One can state that this culture of poverty is linked to discrimination and unemployment. This unemployment is then linked to a lack of (good) education.

Concluding, the culture of poverty is not abstract but is intertwined with the ethnicity of the Roma. When continuing to discuss the lives of Roma women and their engagement in prostitution, both ethnicity and the culture of poverty will be taken into account in order to see whether being a Roma has an influence on the probability of becoming engaged in prostitution.

## 3.0 Becoming engaged and being engaged in prostitution

### 3.1 The way into sex work

The women that were willing to share their story described a different set of events that led them to becoming engaged in prostitution. Besides the way they become involved in prostitution, the situation in which they are working or had been working differs from woman to woman. The profile of the women engaged in prostitution will be firstly discussed, followed by a description of how women that are engaged in prostitution are currently living and working.

#### 3.1.1 Profile of prostitutes

Literature and empirical research shows that women from different backgrounds and profiles enter prostitution, for their own reasons. In the interviews held in Tirgu Mures, many women talked about a difficult childhood. Returning to the debate around prostitution (section 1.1), these stories are in line with the abolitionist argument that women never choose to be engaged in prostitution out of free will but are always forced by the circumstances in which they are in or grew up in (Matthew, 2008). On the other hand, however, one interviewee told that she enjoyed her childhood and had divergent reasons for becoming engaged in prostitution. This story argues in favour of the arguments of the 'Sex Workers Rights Movement' in which women actively make the decision to enter prostitution.

The first stories that will be told will be from women that had a difficult childhood. A woman speaks about her youth: *"My family is poor. When I was young, we were living in a very small clay house together with 19 children. I worked during the week to earn some money for my family. I did not go to school. My parents used to punish me when I did not listen to what they were saying. I never felt that I was wanted and loved. I actually think that they did not care about me that much."*<sup>37</sup> There were many other similar stories. Another woman tells about her youth: *"I got raised by a lady who was not my biological mother. My own mother could not take care of me. In this period my stepfather used to beat me up. One day he brought me to the forest and touched me. I still remember that it was cold and rainy that day and that I felt extremely scared. Nobody has been through the same shit as I did. However, I am glad that I am still alive. She continues about her life as a child: "I still remember our house. It was made from things we found in nature. I slept on the floor under some coats. When I was little I worked in the house, fetched the wood and cleaned. When I grew up I used to spend my days collecting grapes from the whine yards."*<sup>38</sup> Another woman hesitates before answering the question about her childhood and says then: *"I was born into a poor family. We were with eight children at home and only my dad was working. I went to school for five years, until I turned fourteen. We did not have enough food, clothes to*

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with a woman who escaped prostitution, 13th February 2018

<sup>38</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 2nd of March 2018

wear or shoes to put on. Luckily though, my parents never beat me.”<sup>39</sup> And another woman tells: “I had a difficult childhood. My father was okay but my mother was not. When my father died my mother asked my sister to start working as a prostitute to earn money for the family. Now I have to work for her as well. My mother does not love me, I am sure about that.”<sup>40</sup> These stories seem to resonant with the message that Brown (1998) conveys, namely that is it mainly poor women and children that are vulnerable to becoming engaged in prostitution. The two police officers that were interviewed, also confirm the assumption that many prostitutes in the area of Tirgu Mures come from poor neighbourhoods and difficult circumstances. They tell that many of the women do not have enough money to sustain themselves and most of them did not enjoy education. This has the consequence that they will lack opportunities to enter the labor market. The police officers have the idea that families in the ‘Roma street’ are mostly poorly managed with the consequence that they do not offer the right fundamentals for children to develop. They have observed that the age of the girls working in prostitution has dropped enormously in the last few years: “Now we see girls from sixteen/seventeen and sometimes even younger. We know that many of them start before they turn eighteen. Sometimes we even see girls that started when they were fourteen. Many of these girls are Roma. I cannot give you exact numbers but I estimate that around 75% of the girls are Roma.”<sup>41</sup> During our time on outreaches and throughout the interviews held, it seemed indeed that many of the girls/women working in prostitution were young. One of the interviewees pointed out a situation: “Do you see these two women over there? The women on the left is the mother of the young girl that is standing next to her, she is only thirteen. The mother says that she is not preparing her daughter to do the same job but nobody believes her. It is fucking -10, why would she be here if that would not be the purpose? It makes me so sad, I would rather die than bring my daughter here.”<sup>42</sup>

However, as stated above, there was also a woman that said that she enjoyed her childhood and did experience love when she was growing up. Emma tells: “I was raised by my grandmother and she loved me. She shared all the food she had. I am really thankful that she did not bring us to an orphanage. I went to school for four classes before I dropped out of school. I was okay with this because it allowed me to help help my grandmother. From a young age, I started begging on the streets. But still, I was not unhappy.”<sup>43</sup>

Besides the stories of women that had a difficult childhood, there are women who tell the opposite. In this section, both stories are told to emphasize the importance of avoiding treating these women as a homogenous group. However, it would lead too far to discuss all the aspects in the lives of these women even though these might have an impact on their lives (think of marriage, divorce, and family situation). In following section, a few aspects will be discussed in order to be able to make a better context analysis about the lives of these women: the processes of becoming engaged in prostitution, the lives of the women engaged in prostitution, and the way out of prostitution.

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution 2nd of March 2018 (2)

<sup>40</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 15th of March 2018

<sup>41</sup> Interview with two police officers focused on human trafficking, 17th April 2018

<sup>42</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 30th of February 2018

<sup>43</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 3rd of March 2018

### 3.1.2 Becoming engaged in prostitution

To understand the process that leads women into becoming engaged in prostitution one should look at the interaction between the person and environment (Brussa, 2009). Background and ethnicity have influence on decisions in life, especially for Roma women who have their own traditions, habits, lifestyle, and customs. Besides background and culture, the above-mentioned culture of poverty can be also a driving force for women to enter prostitution.

As elaborated upon in the introduction, there are two rather opposing views on prostitution with the abolitionists on the one hand and 'Sex Workers Rights Movement' on the other hand. In the following part both stories come to the fore.

Women can make the decision to become engaged in prostitution. A woman tells that she made the decision to start working for herself after she escaped from her pimp: *"I did not have any education, I worked on the side of the street for more than twenty years so I did not feel that I had any other option other than to continue to work in this profession. My situation changed a lot. The money I am earning is for me and I do not have to give anything to a pimp anymore. Besides, I can say 'no' to customers if I do not want to have sex. I think I will keep on living my life like this for a few more years since I have two small children to raise and they deserve the chance to go to school. And I need the money to maintain myself. However, I never work more than I need to. When I have enough money, I stop working for that day."*<sup>44</sup> This woman chose to start working for herself because she lacked other labour skills and the money she makes with being a prostitute. Besides her arguments, other stories were told by women that are engaged in prostitution out of free will: *"I choose to start working on the side of the road. The reason why I do this is that we need the money. My husband has brain cancer and if I do not work like this, we will never be able to pay for his medicine."*<sup>45</sup> Another woman tells about her decision to start working as a prostitute: *"It happened from one day to another. I used to beg on the side of the road when somebody asked me whether I would mind having sex with him. He was my first customer. I have to do this work to maintain my family. A few years ago, I lost my first child after a few months since I did not have enough money to buy milk. And to be honest, for me, it is a good way to earn money. How else would I be able to take care of everything?"*<sup>46</sup> After hearing the stories of these three women one can come to the conclusion that they made the decision to work in prostitution without anybody forcing them to do so. However, in the stories heard in Tirgu Mures, this decision was partly influenced by their circumstances and opportunities (or lack thereof) in life. This brings us to the core of the arguments the abolitionists use when talking about becoming engaged in prostitution: that women will never enter prostitution out of free will. In this point of view, women enter prostitution because they are forced by economic necessity (Pateman, 1999). Monroe (2005) explains that financial motives (amongst others to provide children with what they need) are the main reasons for many women to start working in street prostitution. This shows how difficult it can be to prove that a woman is

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 12th March 2018

<sup>45</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 2nd of March (2) 2018

<sup>46</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 2nd of March 2018



either engaged in prostitution because she made the decision as an active agent (Sex Workers Rights Movement) or because she is forced by circumstances (abolitionist arguments).

There is also a group of women that seems to be working in prostitution because they are forced by another person, network or family. The information about these women has been gathered in interviews with women that had already left the industry since it appears to be difficult to get in touch with women that are expected to be working in prostitution for a pimp. A woman tells how she was forced to work in prostitution but succeeded in escaping on the first day that she was put on the side of the street: *“He said that I could better go with him if I wanted to have a better life and I trusted him. However, the first moment that I entered his house I knew that he had lied to me. He locked the door and forced me to stay inside. He beat me and threatened to hurt my family if I would not listen to what he was asking. He told me that he had a plan to bring me to Germany in order to work for him there. Two days after I arrived in his house he brought me to a bridge on the outskirts of the city. I had to prostitute myself there. I was so scared that I did not know what to do. After a few minutes, two ladies came up to me and started talking to me. They offered to help me to leave this place. I decided to go with them. I forgot everything around me. I am convinced that they were my rescuers.”*<sup>47</sup>

Other women told that they were forced by a pimp to work as a prostitute. *“I have been through a difficult youth and I had a bad relationship with my stepfather. When I turned sixteen, a woman offered me to live in with her and her family and I did not hesitate for a second as I wanted to escape the situation at home. After a few days, the family members asked me to bring in some money for the family. Their daughter brought me to the place where I had to work and I did not know what was going on. The girl waited until the first customer arrived and took the money. We drove for about five minutes before he pulled over the car. The customer commanded me to get undressed while I was sitting in the back seat of the car and I did so because I was really scared. I did not know what was going on. I did not know anything about sex. I told him that he was hurting me. After he was done he brought me back to the place where he had picked me up before. Once we arrived there, he demanded his money back because I had not been good enough for him. He paid ten lei (two and a half euros). That was my first experience of being engaged in prostitution.”*<sup>48</sup>

Another woman tells how she ended up in the house of her pimp: *“I saw him while I was walking on the side of the street. He asked me if I wanted to be his girlfriend and made me promises about a bright future. I believed what he was saying and went with him. I did not have anything to live for so I thought; at least I will not be hungry anymore. But after a while, his promises turned out to be lies.”*<sup>49</sup>

The stories of the women that did not enter prostitution by free will are well understood by a Roma woman living in the ‘Roma street’. She tells about her experience when it comes to Roma girls and prostitution: *“I think poverty is the main cause that women end up in prostitution. Maybe they have a pimp for whom they have to work. I suppose that many women are not free to choose and that some of these women are forced by*

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with a woman who escaped prostitution, 13th February 2018

<sup>48</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 12th March 2018

<sup>49</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 15th of March 2018

*their own family or husband.”<sup>50</sup> An activist for women's rights and journalist recognizes the fact that women from the ‘Roma street’ are often forced to work in prostitution by their own relatives: She observed that “The women are often forced by their families. Many of them are minors, I know this because I used to be in touch with them quite often. I think that women in this area often become a victim of pimps and in this way they are forced to become engaged in prostitution. At the age in which they start working in prostitution they barely know what sex and sexuality is.”<sup>51</sup>*

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with a Roma woman, 1st of Mai 2018

<sup>51</sup> Interview with a journalist/activist, 28th of March 2018

### 3.2 Working in prostitution

In this section, the lives of some women engaged in prostitution in the area of Tirgu Mures will be further discussed. Brussa et al. (2009) emphasize the fact that it is important to make a context analysis of the situation in which Roma women live and work. When sex workers work in the less favourable environments, they have less autonomy making their own decisions. So it is not the sexual service as such that determines levels of risk and autonomy, it is the social determinants, working conditions, and other contextual factors. Understanding the situation in which these women are working and living gives a better understanding of the lives of Roma women that are engaged in prostitution. Again, both sides of the debate around prostitution are present in the stories of these women. The first part contains stories from women that have some control over their work and in the second part stories will be told about women that seem to lack control over their work and life.



### Women that have (some) control over their work

In the research period appeared that all the women that have some control over their work and life are not working for a pimp. Some interviewed women stated that they are willing to do this work because it gives them money and freedom in return. Women engaged in prostitution often earn more than the minimum salary that they would earn elsewhere in Romania. Besides, they have more flexibility to choose their working hours. One advantage of these flexible working hours is that they have more time to raise their children.<sup>52</sup> Two women told that when they continue to work in prostitution they earn enough to pay their rent and take care of their children. These women told that they have their regular customers. One of them has regular customers that call her when they want to have sex with her. *"I never know how many customers I will get in one week. Most of the time, men call me when their wife is away from home. I like it to not be working on the side of the road anymore. It was dangerous back then. Now I only go to men that I trust. Life is easier for me in this way."*<sup>53</sup> Another woman tells about her decision to keep on working in prostitution: *"I am not embarrassed about what I do: people know that I am poor. Working as a prostitute here becomes more and more difficult. The number of women working here is growing and they do not ask for enough money for a 'job'. I only have normal sex with clients and I always have sex with a condom. I work every day from around 12.00 till 16.00. I stop working when I have enough money. Most of the days I earn 60 lei (fifteen euros). If costumers have a huge dig I do not have sex with them. I am afraid that I will start bleeding and when this is the case I send them away."*<sup>54</sup> Another woman tells about her motives to be engaged in prostitution: *"I feel bad, I feel bad that I am doing this work. However, I made this decision because I need the money. I do everything with the costumers. I work every day during the week from around 10.00 until 17.00. Because my children are grown up already, they can stay at home together without me being there. I do have many regular costumers and I insist on having safe sex almost every time. I would prefer another job but at the same time, I will never find a job that is so flexible and rewarding (in the sense of the money earned)."*<sup>55</sup>

Like the example of the woman who tells that she does not have sex with some men because the size of their penis and the use of a condom, there are other examples given that show the personal boundaries and limits of the women that have some control over their work. Some examples: *"I do not want to have unsafe sex", "I do not want to have sex with men I do not know", "I do not have sex with men in a truck anymore since I am scared"* and *"I decide the price and when men do not agree, I will not give them anything."*

However, there are also women working under other circumstances. They seem to have less control over their work. Information about these women was mainly gathered in interviews with others or with women that were previously working for a pimp and now working on their own account.

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with a journalist/activist, 28th of March 2018

<sup>53</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 12th March 2018

<sup>54</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 2nd of March 2018

<sup>55</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 2nd of March 2018

### Women that appear to have less control over their work

Despite the fact there is an increase in independent prostitution, research indicates that pimp-controlled prostitution is the reality for some women that are engaged in street prostitution (Barry, 1995 & Williamson, 2000). However, there is limited research done on the relationships between women in prostitution and their pimps (Raphael et al., 2010). Raphael et al. (2010) state that this might be the case because women that are under the control of pimps are often unable to speak in public. This was also confirmed during field research in which it appeared that it was not possible to find women working for a pimp and willing to share their story.

However, there are indications that reveal whether women are working independently or working for a pimp. Money is one of the aspects that provide a lot of information. Brown (1998) states that many women remain poor while in prostitution. As evidenced from reviews of literature and interviews, when women have a pimp they are often not allowed to keep money for themselves. In this way, the women engaged in prostitution might not earn a lot (Brown, 1998). The fact that the money earned in prostitution does not go to the prostitute but to a pimp or a family also revealed throughout the interviews. *"I did not count the money every day but I earned a lot. It was crazy. I estimated that it has to be somewhere around 1000 lei every day (215 euros). I earned more than other women. I was young, pretty, I worked long hours and seven days a week. I did not keep anything for myself and gave all the money I earned to the family the moment I arrived back home. I heard that they bought several houses and a few cars from the money I earned."*<sup>56</sup> Another woman tells: *"I earned a lot of money. I bought a soda every day but had to give the rest of the money to the family of the pimp. They bought clothes for me since they wanted me to look good. They also provided me with cigarettes and makeup. Now I do realize that I was not so smart back then. If I had known their real intentions I would not have been so stupid and would have tried to keep some of the money apart."*<sup>57</sup>

Sanna used to be working for a pimp before she managed to escape from his house. About the time she was working for her pimp she tells: *"I actually do not want to talk about this period of my life. When I talk about it I feel really bad because all the memories come back. I can tell you that he hit me every day. I was living in his house together with another girl and I had to work every day. My working hours were from seven in the evening until four in the night. During the day I had to take care of the baby of my pimp. They barely gave me any food and I was never allowed to sleep more than four hours a night."*<sup>58</sup> Another woman tells about her days as a prostitute: *"I started working around ten in the morning, sometimes even earlier. They made me work until seven in the evening, and sometimes until three in the night. They determined my working hours. I often suffered from pain in my legs. I got pregnant three times from customers and aborted all of them."*<sup>59</sup> One of the women tells: *"A long time ago I already wanted to stop working for him. However, I have children. Every time I said that I wanted to leave, he threatened to kill the kids. He said that if I would dare to leave him, he would hurt them. This was the main reason why I never had the courage to leave him."*<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with a woman that used to be engaged in prostitution, 22nd of March 2018

<sup>57</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution 2nd of March 2018

<sup>58</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 15th of March 2018

<sup>59</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 12th March 2018

<sup>60</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 12th March 2018

As is plainly evident from the above stories, working in prostitution is not generally a safe environment for women. Women that are under control of a pimp might suffer violent treatment (Williamson et al., 2000, & Williamson, 2010). Many women who were interviewed suffered violence on a frequent basis and people working for organizations focused on women engaged in prostitution told stories about the lives of these women. While sitting in the back of the car a woman tells: *"He started to hit me from the first second I entered the house. He forced me to stay with him and threatened to hurt me even more if I tried to escape. He constantly threatened my children and me, beat me and gave me electric shocks. He wrapped electric wires around my wrists and plugged these in the power outlet. It was very painful."*<sup>61</sup> Her eyes did not show any emotion while she told her story but her hands were shaking. Later on that day a worker with women engaged in prostitution tells: *"Women often tell us stories about violence. Sometimes they tell us what happened and sometimes we see the bruises on their necks or around their wrists. It can also happen that we meet women that are pregnant and around their eight/ninth month. Last week I spoke to a woman that was working again after she had delivered a baby just two days before."*<sup>62</sup>

It is not only the pimp that can be violent. Customers can also be a threat for women engaged in prostitution. One of the women shows a huge scar in her neck and tells: *"A customer did not want to pay me and threatened to cut my throat with a knife. He did not kill me but he hurt me a lot. He was not the only aggressive customer. Customers are often aggressive. Another day I agreed upon a price with a consumer but after we had sex he put a gun against my head and did not give me any money. I have to admit that when I am working, I am always scared."*<sup>63</sup> More similar stories were told. Most of these stories were about women that did not get any payment and got scared because incidents like this happen quite often to them or other prostitutes.

One woman told, with tears in her eyes: *"A man took me to a hotel. He promised to give me 100 lei. That is a lot of money. I went with him since I needed the money. When we arrived at the hotel, I found out that there were around fifteen men waiting for me. I had to take a shower in the bathroom and afterwards they asked me to lie down on the bed. When I looked around I got extremely scared because I saw so many men. They came one after another and literally destroyed my body that day. I could not scream for help. I will never forget that moment of extreme fear and so much pain."*<sup>64</sup> She looked me in the eye and finished off with the words: *"You will never be able to imagine what I have been through honey, never."*<sup>65</sup>

Another aspect that Brown (1998) brings up is that some women on the street trade sex for a bed or for food and not for cash. This was also the case for a woman that was interviewed: *"Nowadays I live with my two children in a house with a man. He used to be one of my customers. I do not like him but I want to have a safe place for my children to live. Besides rent, he is asking me to have sex with him. Otherwise he will increase the*

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 15th of March 2018

<sup>62</sup> Interview with the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution, 15th of May 2018

<sup>63</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 2nd of March 2018

<sup>64</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 12th March 2018

<sup>65</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 12th March 2018

*rent. He is so old that he could have been my father or even my grandfather. He has no shame. He wants to have sex with me and I do not have a choice but to do what he wants or I will lose this place for my children.”<sup>66</sup>*

The examples given above are not however proof that every woman engaged in prostitution has to face violence in her work. But the above interviews do poignantly demonstrate that dangers are present and for some women it is part of their everyday lives.



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<sup>66</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 12th March 2018

### 3.3 Conclusion

Reflecting back on the chapter on ethnicity and culture, one can see that many women link the situation in which they become engaged in prostitution to the environment in which they grew up and the poverty from which they wanted to escape. Many women grew up in poverty and might be therefore more vulnerable to ending up in prostitution, whether forced or voluntary.

However, one should be careful with drawing conclusions since the group of women that are engaged in prostitution is extremely diverse. It appears there are also women engaged in prostitution that enjoyed their childhood and actively choose to be engaged in prostitution. In this chapter, we see both the opposing arguments of the 'Sex Workers Rights Movement' and the abolitionists in the life stories told.





## 4.0 Leaving and staying out of prostitution

### 4.1 The way out

Some women choose to stay engaged in prostitution while others want to leave the industry as soon as possible. This chapter will elaborate upon this process of leaving the industry and the possible difficulties that might arise when women want to leave the industry of prostitution. This chapter is integral to this research since the reasons for women to leave or not to leave the industry are often intertwined with their background as a Roma. This chapter will start off with exploring the reasons why women prefer not to leave their current working place. The four phases that Mansson (2002) describes will be used to look at the process of leaving the industry. Answers given in interviews will be used to complement the information gathered in literature.

#### 4.1.1 Not leaving the industry

An important argument for women to stay engaged in prostitution is money. As stated in the previous chapter women earn more than the minimum salary that they would earn elsewhere and they have more flexibility to choose their working hours. One woman explains: *"Maybe it sounds a bit weird but I can make the money I need to survive and send my children to school in a few hours. After that, I am free and have the time to take care of my children and my family. It is not the nicest way to earn money but it works. Yes, it works."*<sup>67</sup>

And then the second reason: belonging. McNaughton et al. (2007) comes up with this feeling of belonging. In a way, women engaged in prostitution are part of a group in which they fulfil a specific role. What should not be forgotten is the fact that women often become engaged in prostitution when they are really young so they actually grow into the industry of prostitution. Being engaged in prostitution also develops into a comfort zone through relationships, routines, status and a place in the sex industry community. Being part of a prostitution network often draws women further away from their own communities. In their community, women are often known as sex workers and returning to this community is often not easy and sometimes not wanted (Tampep, 2007 & Wilson et al., 2008). A journalist and women's activist recognizes the fact that women might face difficulties when returning to their own communities and back into 'society': *"The problem that many women face when they want to leave the industry of prostitution is the fact that both society and community do not want them back. When they come from Roma communities they are a shame to the family and to society. The idea that prostitutes are sinners is so deeply rooted that people will likely not accept them, even when they have the wish to return."*<sup>68</sup> A young Roma woman explains the situation when women return to the community: *"Families are always upset when a girl decides to return to the family. Sometimes they accept the girl; sometimes she gets beaten every day. She always will remain the black sheep of the family. Once I saw that they shaved the hair of a girl when she returned. As far as I know, many women do not dare to return so they stay away."*<sup>69</sup> This information seems to be contradictory to the information given earlier; that Roma families have a high morals

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution 2nd of March 2018 (2)

<sup>68</sup> Interview with a journalist/activist, 28th of March 2018

<sup>69</sup> Interview with a young Roma woman, 12th of February 2018

standard and that prostitution is seen as a shame for the family. However, the poverty that many people are facing every day seems to make these moral standards less important. According to a worker in the Roma street: *“Poverty is one of the reasons why families put their own members on the side of the road to receive an income.”*<sup>70</sup> However, the difficulties mentioned are not the only barriers for women to leave the industry. *“There is really not a support system that helps women to escape when they want to.”*<sup>71</sup> The fact that there are no good institutions that can help women when they want to leave the industry was confirmed by a worker with women engaged in prostitution: *“In Romania, there are few legal institutions to which the women can turn to when they would like to leave the industry. However, even these institutions are mostly located in the same area as where the women worked and they do not feel comfortable with this. Besides, almost all the houses are full and are not designed for women with children. This means that women have to leave their children behind.”*<sup>72</sup>

Besides the reasons of money and a feeling of belonging, women indicated to feel uncertain about their future. Many women that were interviewed throughout the research period stated that it was not easy to leave the industry of prostitution out of fear of what will come next. *“I do not know what else to do”* was a sentence heard in many interviews. These women often did not get an education when they were younger so they do not see which other professions they could do when they would stop their current job. For almost all the jobs that can be found in Romania, people need to have completed ten classes while most of the women from Roma communities that are engaged in prostitution attended school only till year three or less. A woman confirmed this in an interview: *“I really wanted to leave the industry. Many people also told me to stop working. But, I have two children and I do not know what else to do to maintain them. I had never gone to school and a family cannot live from child benefits alone.”*<sup>73</sup> Besides, as mentioned in the introduction, since prostitution is illegal in Romania, many women have a huge debt because of all the fines they got during their working period. If a woman facing fines from prostitution and decides to exit and find a different job, her income will be removed until the fines are paid off. For many of the women this is a huge problem. A woman engaged in prostitution explains: *“Almost all the women that are working here have huge debts because of these fines. We do not have to pay them immediately but they are always following us. When we would start another job, we have to pay these fines first. This has the consequence that during this period, women will not have any income.”*<sup>74</sup>

The reasons given above relate to why women themselves may make the decision to stay engaged in prostitution. However, there are also women that are forced to stay engaged in prostitution by other parties. As said in previous chapter, it is hard to make contact with women that are currently working in prostitution because they are forced. However, some women who had been working in prostitution forced by a pimp were able to share their experiences. Amanda tells: *“The pimp that used to force me to work on the side of the street died. Because of this and the effect this had on the whole family, I felt that it was the right moment to leave. I think that if this would not had happened, I would never have succeeded in escaping. Besides, without the help*

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with a woman working with Roma people, 2nd of Mai 2018

<sup>71</sup> Interview with a journalist/activist, 28th of March 2018

<sup>72</sup> Interview with the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution, 15th of May 2018

<sup>73</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 12th March 2018

<sup>74</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution 2nd of March 2018 (2)

*from a customer to escape my situation, I would have never made it on my own either.”*<sup>75</sup> Another woman spoke about the impossibility to leave prostitution because a pimp had forced her: *“I could not just leave. I could not call anybody and my pimp was checking on me all the time. As I told you before he used a lot of violence and threatened to hurt me or other people if I escaped. So I did not. After seven months I succeeded in leaving him because the police found out that I had just turned sixteen.”*<sup>76</sup>

As can be concluded from the above paragraph, the motives for women in Tirgu Mures to remain engaged in prostitution differ. The first reason mentioned is that these women may experience a feeling of belonging to a group. Leaving such a familiar environment can be daunting for women, particularly for those who have been in this environment for a long time. Secondly, it can be hard for women to return to their own community, as communities appear to no longer accept these women. Women are well aware of the complex social rules that exist within the Roma society and the social barriers that prevent them from returning to their families. Besides these difficulties that women might face when returning to their communities, it can be hard for women to become re-engaged in ‘normal society’. Thirdly, only limited support is available for women working in the area of Tirgu Mures who wish to leave the industry and often does not include much needed support for their children. In addition to this issue, women often do not trust institutions and authorities in the first place, making it even more difficult to help them to leave the industry. A woman explains: *“I can not go anywhere for protection, even the police does not help me. They fine us because prostitution is illegal in Romania.”*<sup>77</sup>

Finally, the financial incentive of prostitution remains a large barrier preventing women from leaving the industry. Several women who are currently still engaged in prostitution in the area of Tirgu Mures, mentioned their need for the money they receive through prostitution. Many of them stated that they come from poor families and are currently responsible for taking care of their families and their children. They mentioned that they would never earn the same amount of money as they do when working in this business. Besides this, they have all the fines they got from the police following them. The last group of women is not able to leave the industry of prostitution since a network, an individual or a family forces them.

#### 4.1.2 When women do want to leave prostitution

Mansson et al. (2002) describe four phases that women will likely experience when they are seeking to leave the industry in which they are engaged. These four phases are: (1) *doubts* which arise when woman begin to question that which they have earlier taken for granted, accompanied by feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction; (2) *seeking alternatives* which is a phase in which women look for other opportunities; (3) *a turning point* often occurs because of an external event and finally the last phase in which (4) *women create an ex-role* in that women that were previously engaged in prostitution succeed in leaving prostitution and building a new life (Mansson et al., 2002). These phases were recognized by an organization focusing on women engaged in prostitution in the area. Generally speaking, women do not abruptly decide that they want to change their

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 12th March 2018

<sup>76</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 15th of March 2018

<sup>77</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 12th March 2018

lives. Many appeared to be afraid since they often do not know where to turn to. This feeling is accompanied by the lack of support from society as these women are often ostracised because they are 'sinners'. For many women, it is difficult to completely turn their backs to their old way of life. While these phases seem to accurately reflect the experience of many of the women, these phases are not exhaustive or absolute. The passage through prostitution and the process of leaving prostitution is by no means a linear process and many precarious situations might arise which could easily result in a spiral back into repeated homelessness or engagement in sex work (McNaughton et al., 2007).

When women are leaving the industry, their situation is often still marked by insecure material situations including a lack of housing security, stable income and employment as well as educational opportunities (McNaughton et al., 2007). Accordingly, Mansson et al. (1999) describe the period after breaking out of prostitution as a very difficult time for women. Women appeared to experience emotional breakdowns, often accompanied by anxiety, traumatic memories, and feelings of shame. The anxiety is not only fear of leaving the known but also about not being admitted or accepted into new social environments (Hedin et al., 2004). The barrier preventing them from moving on is the psychological process that enables women to experience self-worth and recognize that they could have a role or identity within a different lifestyle (McNaughton et al., 2007). Besides, the stigma attached to women in sex work could operate as a barrier to move on and to build new network. A woman engaged in prostitution explains about her decision to go back to prostitution after leaving the industry for some time: *"I returned back to prostitution since I did not know what else I could do. My mother does not want to support me anymore and I do not have an educational background. It feels like the only way to survive. And maybe more important: it is the only way I know how to survive."*<sup>78</sup>

McNaughton et al. (2007) describe that being removed from street networks that were familiar to women from the time that they were engaged in street prostitution is often the key to staying out of prostitution. Staying in or in proximity to this previous environment could lead to a downward spiral. However, according to the director of an organization that focused on women engaged in prostitution, breaking all the relationships of the past is one of the hardest things women have to do when leaving prostitution.<sup>79</sup> *"From my experience, I can tell that when women are safe in a recovery house the chance that they stay out of prostitution is higher than when they arrange their own accommodation. In a shelter they receive help to recover mentally and when they are ready for it, they are helped to find a job. I believe that the psychological aspect of dealing with their past is a crucial part of 'staying out'. 50% of the women that we send to a recovery place returns back to their old environment and profession. Some of them keep on working in prostitution part-time and some of them we lose touch with."*<sup>80</sup> McNaughton et al. (2007) conclude that there are three things necessary to keep women out of prostitution. Firstly, access to a **social welfare system** is critical. In Romania, a solid and functioning social welfare system is not in place yet and especially not for Roma women. As can be found in chapter 2.2.2. Roma people face significant discrimination and the interviews demonstrate that women particularly have a less

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with a woman engaged in prostitution, 15th of March 2018

<sup>79</sup> Interview with the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution, 15th of May 2018

<sup>80</sup> Interview with the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution, 15th of May 2018

favourable position in society. Collectively, workers in the 'Roma street',<sup>81</sup> a worker with women engaged in prostitution,<sup>82</sup> and the police<sup>83</sup> have recognized and acknowledged this. There is no access for Roma women to a social welfare system when they lack money. Besides this, they have little chance to receive assistance for themselves and their children.<sup>84</sup> The second point that McNaughton et al. (2007) mention that is needed to successfully leave the industry is **networks of familiarity**. According to the police, a woman will only succeed in exiting the prostitution when the environment is supportive. Without a supportive environment, the woman has no chance to survive. This is one of the main problems Roma women face when leaving the prostitution industry. The Roma community is often judgemental when it comes to prostitution and in some cases women are not welcome to return to their families. Besides, many Roma families in Tirgu Mures face poverty. When women will return to their families they have to cope and survive with poverty again. This in combination with a lack of education does not offer a bright prospect for the future of these women.<sup>85</sup> The third point that McNaughton et al. (2007) mention as necessary in order to permanently leave the industry of prostitution is **housing**. This aspect is closely linked to access to a social welfare system. Besides the fact that it is hard for women to receive help when they want to leave the industry it is often even more problematic to find housing. Many women do not have experience in arranging their own affairs and they often lack a social network to support them. Most of the women that have the wish to leave the industry also do not have sufficient financial means. Sometimes women that have been engaged in prostitution find a place in a shelter when they leave the industry of prostitution. Within these shelters women are kept away from their previous environment and receive psychological help. They are able to built new contacts and are offered to develop a skill or profession. There are some difficulties with these shelters though. The director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution explains: *"There are not enough shelters for women in case they do not have a place to go to. In the whole area of Mures, there is only one. When women need help, they have to go to another area. In Romania there are no houses that are funded by the government and renting a house is unaffordable for many women when they just left the industry."*<sup>86</sup> A police officer admits that there are not enough shelters for women to turn to when they are in trouble or wanting to leave the industry.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Interview with a worker in a Roma street, 30th April 2018

<sup>82</sup> Interview with the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution, 15th of May 2018

<sup>83</sup> Interview with two police officers focused on human trafficking, 17th April 2018

<sup>84</sup> Interview with the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution, 15th of May 2018

<sup>85</sup> Interview with two police officers focused on human trafficking, 17th April 2018

<sup>86</sup> Interview with the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution, 15th of May 2018

<sup>87</sup> Interview with two police officers focused on human trafficking, 17th April 2018

Despite the fact that the information above shows barriers that women might face when they would like to leave the industry, there are also success stories of women that left the industry of prostitution. Below, the story of Annabel is told.

Annabel has been engaged in prostitution for 8 years. She started working as a prostitute since she had debts to pay and did not know what else to do. After four years, someone came up to her and told Annabel that she would be a perfect wife for her son. She promised to provide them a safe house and security. Annabel believed these promises. After some time it appeared that the mother of the man wanted her to work on the street to bring in some money. Annabel's new husband had the task to check on her. This, together with the fact that her husband threatened to hurt Annabel's family made it impossible for her to escape this situation. Annabel tells about her life as a prostitute: "I had to start cooking for the family around 11 in the morning and was not allowed to eat anything. When I finished cooking the meal for the family, I had to start working on the side of the road. I could only stop working when I got permission from

At one point she got in touch with an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution and after a few conversations she admitted that she would love to have another job. However, she also explained that she was not working for herself like she used to tell people and that it would be difficult for her to leave. However, they succeeded in helping Annabel escape out of her situation. The organization helped her to go to a shelter in the capital city and she currently still lives there. She works at a company that has a one-year program for vulnerable women. At the same time they helped her to find another job. "I never ever want to go back to my old life. I am happy that I came this far and I really want to build my life here. It is a matter of time until I can rent my own place in this city, with a job that provides me enough money to maintain myself and my family."

## 4.2 Conclusion

In order for women to successfully and permanently leave prostitution, several key needs must first be met. Interviewees in Tirgu Mures also recognized the main needs that McNaughton et al. (2007) mentioned. These include access to a social welfare system, familiar and trustworthy networks and safe housing. Roma women in the area of Tirgu Mures appear not to have access to a social welfare system, are having a hard time leaving their old environment and find it difficult to build new networks due to the fear of the unknown and lack of contacts outside the prostitution scene. In addition to this, they lack the skills and money to arrange their own housing, particularly given the scarcity of safe housing. These examples show that it is not an easy decision for women to leave the industry of prostitution and is not always possible even where there is a desire to leave the industry. On the other hand, there are stories like the story of Annabel of women that want to leave the industry and succeed in doing so.

## 5.0 Conclusion

Results from this research carried out in Tirgu Mures sought to provide an answer to the question whether there is a link between becoming engaged in prostitution and ethnicity, specifically focussing on Roma women in the area of Tirgu Mures. Interviews and observations added to knowledge that was available in existing literature. While the main question cannot be answered with complete confidence, some key conclusions can be drawn. Ethnicity is one of the aspects that shape a persons life. The ethnicity of the Roma is coloured by a long history and a rich culture including many traditions and rituals. The Roma people in the area of Tirgu Mures have previously faced discrimination and exclusion throughout their history and today remain a marginalized group in society. Due to their position 'outside' society, they often face poor living conditions, low levels of education and low employment rates. Families in the Roma community in Tirgu Mures often have many children and most of the girls marry at an early age and become pregnant when they are still teenagers. This research showed that the factors that have to do with the Roma ethnicity are intertwined with the effects of living in a culture of poverty. A focus solely on the culture of poverty would be not valid or ruling out ethnicity completely would not be legitimate since the ethnicity of the Roma has put them in a position of marginalization and discrimination in the first place.

Roma children grow up in a culture of poverty and lack opportunities to develop. Among others, parents do not stimulate children to attend school, families often lack sufficient means to raise children in a good and healthy manner, addictions in the Roma street are quite common and there is no sufficient education on morals and sexuality. Besides, the secondary position of the Roma in the broader society likely increases their vulnerability. However, one cannot conclude that these aspects are the full explanation for the fact that women with a Roma background are becoming engaged in prostitution.

In the debate around prostitution there are two ways of looking at prostitution. Both of the arguments from the abolitionist and the 'Sex Workers Rights Movement' were recognized throughout the research period. Money appeared to be the main reason for women to keep on working in prostitution voluntarily. The awareness of the limited opportunities that exist for women who quit prostitution was present in almost all the stories of these women.

Besides the stories of women that are engaged in prostitution out of free will, stories about women that are working in prostitution because they are forced were told. Unstable families, early marriages, poverty and lack of knowledge and schooling were explanations given for the fact that these women did end up in forced prostitution. When women are in a situation of forced prostitution they often suffer hardships. Many stories of violence, rape and abuse were told. Women often expressed feelings of anxiety, desperation and sadness during the interviews. When women want to leave the industry of prostitution they have to face many barriers. These women often lack education, they have no social network that is encouraging them and there is a lack of support at both a local and national level. Due to these reasons it is almost impossible for them to sustain themselves and their children without the money they previously earned while working in prostitution. Besides the issue of



money, the feeling of belonging is one of the most important aspects for women to not leave the industry of prostitution and should not be overlooked.

Returning to the main question of this research: Is there a link between being a Roma woman in Tirgu Mures and the chance of becoming engaged in prostitution? It would not be reasonable or accurate to conclude that it is in the 'blood' of the Roma people to become engaged in prostitution. It would also not be reasonable to state that the complete cause is the fact that many Roma women grow up in a culture of poverty. However, many pull factors to become engaged in prostitution are present in the lives of Roma women and make Roma women more vulnerable to prostitution including marginalization, discrimination, lack of education, low moral standards and this culture of poverty. It can be concluded that these aspects are likely to have an influence on the chance for Roma women to end up in prostitution – whether this is voluntarily or forced.

*Me: "Do you think there is a link between the ethnicity of being a Roma and becoming engaged in prostitution?"*

*Interviewee: "Yes, I think there is a connection between being a Roma and becoming engaged in prostitution. However, I would like to emphasize: I do not think that it is in the blood of the Roma to have a higher chance to become engaged in prostitution. It has to do with discrimination, lack of opportunities on the labour market, lack of education, low moral standards, the cycle of poverty, the eagerness to earn money, a lack of good examples for Roma children, cultural values, rituals and lack of support for Roma people. Summarizing: The Roma ethnicity and prostitution are linked due to social-economic and cultural status and (a lack of) opportunities for Roma women in their own community and the wider society." <sup>88</sup>*

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<sup>88</sup> Interview with the director of an organization focused on women engaged in prostitution, 15th of May 2018



## 5.1 Discussion

As can be seen in the conclusion, one should be careful with making absolute statements about complex situations – especially when analysing the links between ethnicity and prostitution. Besides this moral issue, some other limitations were present during the research period.

First of all, the time in Tirgu Mures was limited. Hence, the amount of respondents that could be interviewed was relatively small. Second: women that are currently forced to work in prostitution are hard to get in touch with. This led to the fact that women that have previously been forced into prostitution in the past and third parties had to provide the information about these women. This makes the information less reliable. Third: the Roma are a closed society. Building relationships with Roma is necessary in order to get the opportunity to do more observations in 'the street' and to carry out more interviews with Roma people. In order to build trusting relationships, more time is needed.

Further research should be carried out in order to gather more information from respondents to make the conclusions valid. For me personally, this research was motivated by a desire to get to know and understand more about the current situation of Roma women in Romania and has been both interesting and eye opening.



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