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# Low-income Roma Mothers Negotiating Mothering in the Context of Poverty

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on low-income Roma mothers in the Czech Republic. Drawing upon long-term fieldwork and qualitative interviews with these mothers, we show how mothering is formed, negotiated, and reproduced in the context of poverty. In particular, we analyze three characteristics of mothering that we identified in the research: othermothering, the creation of multigenerational households, and teen motherhood. We illuminate how low-income status is reproduced through motherhood and argue that while mothering is a highly individualized and subjective experience, it is also an experience that is substantially shaped by the welfare state and by structural forces and processes.

## KEYWORDS

Ethnic minority mothering; low-income mothers; Roma minority; Czech Republic

## Introduction

There are approximately 10 to 12 million Roma living in Europe (European Commission, 2020). In the Czech Republic, Roma are the largest ethnic minority; estimated at around 240,000, they form 2.2% of the total Czech population (Úřad vlády České republiky, 2019). The Roma minority is among the most at risk of poverty: they often live in socially excluded areas (GAC, 2006; Hurrell et al., 2016; Úřad vlády České republiky, 2007); they attend ethnically segregated schools (Nekorjak et al., 2011; New & Merry, 2010; Schmidt & Jaworsky, 2021; Stejskalová, 2012) and often drop out of school early (Cintulová & Radková, 2019); they experience exclusion and discrimination on the labor market and are often unemployed, working in seasonal jobs (Úřad vlády České republiky, 2007) or in public jobs (European Commission, 2018), and consequently frequently dependent on the state for welfare. Research has focused on the situation of Roma women in Europe (Council of Europe, 2016; European parliament, 2013; Oprea, 2009; Schultz, 2012; Van Baar & Kóczé, 2020); however, less attention is paid to their mothering and to how motherhood is performed and understood by the mothers themselves in the particular socioeconomic context that shapes their opportunities and

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strategies of mothering. Roma mothers face oppression on several levels, including gender, ethnicity, motherhood, low education, unemployment, the paid labor market, housing, residence in a socially excluded locality, class, and the socioeconomic situation as expressed in poverty. All these levels are present in their life experience at the same time and are interrelated.

In 2000, Arendell highlighted the importance of energizing and expanding the study of motherhood and including minority, working-class, and lower-income class definitions, representations, and practices (Arendell, 2000). This has been done with some groups of mothers, such as African-American mothers in the United States (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994; Collins, 2002; Elliott et al., 2015; Taylor, 1986; Verduzco-Baker, 2017), single mothers (Christopher, 2005; Luna, 2009), and teenage mothers (Johnson, 2001; Robson & Berthoud, 2003; Verduzco-Baker, 2017). However, low-income Roma motherhood is missing from the scholarly debate. The aim of this study is to analyze and understand the meanings and aspects of motherhood in the context of low-income Roma families. Drawing upon long-term fieldwork and interviews with Roma mothers, we investigate how low-income Roma mothers reflect, understand, and make sense of their mothering in the wider context of their everyday lives and their socioeconomic position within society and the welfare state. We ask the following questions: *How is motherhood performed and negotiated by low-income mothers?* And *What are the aspects, characteristics, meanings, and strategies of mothering in poverty for the mothers themselves?* In focusing particularly on their mothering and motherhood, it is not our intention to reduce Roma women to their caring and biological function (Rosaldo, 1980). Rather, we see mothering as a key arena in which the effects of poverty on Roma women's lives are clearly visible. While mothering is a highly individualized and subjective experience, it is also an experience that is substantially shaped by the welfare state and by structural forces and processes such as exclusion and marginalization. It has been widely recognized that economic distress and access to economic resources influences the strategies of mothering (Arendell, 2000; Roman, 2016) and that motherhood is significant as a space in which inequalities and poverty are reproduced from mother to child (Collins, 2002).

We follow the current scholarship about Roma people. This body of research has provided significant evidence about the long-term processes of marginalization, stigmatization, and ghettoization (Berescu, 2011; Crețan et al., 2022, 2020; Powell & Lever, 2017), persisting racism (Powell & van Baar, 2019), and even “Romanophobia” (Van Baar, 2011). This article brings a new focus to motherhood as a part of the inquiry on the racialization of welfare, the racial oppression of Roma people, and the politics of (re)production (Kóczé, 2021, 2020). We analyze motherhood as a sphere in which oppressive discourses are solidified in concrete social practices, mechanisms, policies, and structures in Roma women's everyday lives (Kóczé, 2021, 2020). Our text aims to add to the knowledge about this particular segment of Roma

women's lives and social realities to the current debate in critical Roma studies represented by Kóczé (2021, 2020), Imre (2005), Oprea (2012), Matache (2016–2017), Schultz (2012), Vincze (2014), and Themelis (2016). At the same time, our article contributes to current poverty studies by making an explicit link between poverty and motherhood and illuminating how the marginalization, stigmatization, and ghettoization of poor Roma women are reproduced through motherhood.

This paper is structured as follows: first, we present the conceptual and methodological framework of our research. We then focus on identifying and analyzing the characteristics of motherhood among the mothers in our study, which include: teen motherhood, the formation of multigenerational households as a direct response to housing affordability and the role of other-mothers, defined by Collins (2002, p. 119) as “women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities” (typically sisters, aunts, grandmothers, or cousins), the formation of multigenerational households as a direct response to housing affordability, and teen motherhood. We argue that low-income maternal status is reproduced through motherhood. The voices of low-income Roma women are underrepresented in both scholarly and political debates. Recognizing the lack of interest in the perspectives of low-income Roma women, in this article we aim to provide these women a platform for expressing their perspectives, attitudes, and experiences. We believe that only through knowing their perspectives can the effective implementation of social policies and actions occur.

### **Low-income mothering in research**

The conceptual background of this article follows three directions of theoretical and empirical inquiry that inspired our analysis and interpretation of the data. The first is the studies of African-American motherhood that in the 1990s helped move social-science research beyond a discourse centered on majority motherhood (see, Nance, 1996; Perry, 1996; Taylor, 1986) and that even now provide both empirical and theoretical inspiration beyond the particularity and contextuality of African-American mothers (Collins, 1990/Collins, 2002). The research conducted among low-income African-American women (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994; Verduzco-Baker, 2017; Elliott et al., 2015) sought to overcome and undo the stereotyping and negative views directed at them as embodying a deviant or pathological form of motherhood. Collins (1990/Collins, 2002) described how low-income African-Americans emphasized in their mothering practices the need for their daughters to learn to protect themselves against the oppressive conditions in which they lived. Unlike majority mothers, they devoted disproportionately more effort to trying to protect their daughters and equip them with what they needed to survive. Collins noted that as a consequence of this, African-American

mothers were often described as too disciplinary and over-protective (Collins, 1990/Collins, 2002). They might express disappointment if their daughters became pregnant at a young age because it meant that they had chosen to follow the same path as their mothers, making it harder for them to escape a life lived in poverty.

A second body of scholarship includes research on low-income motherhood, manifested particularly in single motherhood (Christopher, 2005; Luna, 2009; Stack & Meredith, 2018) and welfare motherhood. The scholars reported negative stereotyping of women because of their poverty or welfare recipient status (Cassiman, 2007; Ejrnæs et al., 2020; Kelly, 2010; Luna, 2009). Ypeij (2009) focused on motherhood among single mothers in the Netherlands and noted a high risk of poverty among these women, even though the country has a well-developed welfare system. Roman (2016) found that a lack of financial resources resulted in a sense of relative deprivation and significantly limited opportunities for low-income mothers to practice the kind of mothering they wanted to practice. Lewis (1997, p. 50) concluded that, historically, single-mother families in Great Britain have been “characterized as not just a social problem but a social threat, in terms of the amount of public money that is spent on them.” Similarly, Gillies (2006) took a look at the family lives of British working-class mothers and found them to be often misrepresented, disrespected, and scapegoated. She examined the challenges of poverty and low social status and highlighted the values and strengths that are generated in response.

A third source of inspiration was studies dealing with teen motherhood (Johnson, 2001; Kelly, 2010; Lee et al., 2020; Lessa, 2006; Macvarish, 2010; Robson & Berthoud, 2003; Rudoe, 2014; Verduzco-Baker, 2017). Lessa (2006) studied the discursive transformation of the conception of motherhood among women receiving social welfare benefits in Canada, where motherhood has become a privilege linked to high-earning parents. She examined how teen motherhood and single motherhood have become key aspects of the struggle for an inclusive and expanded redistributive welfare system. Being a teenage mother can be seen as both a cause and a consequence of living in poverty and social exclusion (Macvarish, 2010). The teenage mothers cannot work or study due to mothering responsibilities; at the same time, due to living conditions connected to poverty and social exclusion, they become mothers very early. The research results have been contradictory when it comes to deciding whether teen motherhood is associated with negative outcomes or the circumstances that teens are in before they become mothers (e.g., living in poverty, having less resources) are associated with teen pregnancy (Lee et al., 2020).

Teenage mothers often come from poor environments – segregated or marginalized urban spaces without access to appropriate housing and with family incomes well below the poverty level – and they feel stigmatized because of their pregnancy (Lee et al., 2020; Lessa, 2006; Macvarish, 2010). Teen

pregnancy leads to withdrawal from school and peer relations, and teenage mothers frequently face the widespread stereotype of irresponsible, lazy, and poor young mothers (Lessa, 2006). Teenage mothers are often categorized as “socially excluded,” with teen pregnancy unreservedly cast as a mistake, leading to negative economic and health outcomes (Rudoe, 2014). In British politics, teenage mothers have been presented as symbols of social decline, social failure, and social backwardness (Macvarish, 2010). Verduzco-Baker (2017) pointed out that policymakers and the general public do not recognize low-income teens with children as good mothers. Instead, low-income mothers’ race, teenaged childbearing, and/or reliance on public assistance prompt discourse that refers to “welfare queens.” Similarly, African-American teenage mothers are seen, through controlling images of racist stereotypes of women on public assistance, as hyperfertile “welfare queens” (Kelly, 2010).

An opposite perspective of teen motherhood also exists, as Rudoe (2014) pointed out: a large body of work in relation to teen pregnancy has critically interrogated the problematized assumptions of teen motherhood as inherently negative. Rudoe (2014) proposed that rather than focusing on social exclusion, it is better to focus on positive aspects. For example, it is possible to stress the importance of teenage mothers’ feelings of being included in strong and supportive family and social networks (Rudoe, 2014). Lee et al. (2020) concluded that many studies have found that teenage mothers often display significant strength and resilience when they have adequate support. Rudoe (2014) argued that teen pregnancy is not necessarily considered problematic or undesirable in some families and communities.

In sum, as the research described above demonstrated, low-income minority women construct their motherhood in a specific way that differs from majority women and that is a reaction to their life in poverty and to the types of structural long-term processes that disadvantage Roma women. As Chase-Lansdale et al. (1994) argued, noting how poverty affects the quality of mothering through the chronic everyday stressful situations that these women face because they have insufficient material resources. Arendell (2000) found that maternal poverty is seen as setting a negative example, as though they have failed in the role of an ideal mother. Low-income minority women are, according to Veeran (2000), one of the most marginalized groups in society – their voices are not heard, and they are often powerless and unable to exercise their civic rights. Arendell (2000) observed that the social system is always harsher on mothers who are divorced, abandoned, single, or living alone, and that low-income women are usually the first people impacted by social-policy cuts. It is therefore important to hear their voices and understand their conceptions and meanings of motherhood within the particular context of poverty.

## Context: Roma women and poverty

Approximately half of the Roma people in the Czech Republic suffer from or are at risk of social exclusion and poverty, which means they are marginalized and forced to the fringes of society, where they have limited or obstructed access to the resources and opportunities that other members of society access easily (European Commission, 2020; Úřad vlády České republiky, 2019). Many Roma children attend segregated schools; Roma families often live in poor conditions – in lodging houses, public hostels or in low-quality housing; and many Roma adults are either unemployed or work in seasonal or public jobs. Those most at risk of poverty are Roma women. The research by the non-governmental organization Slovo 21 (2014) showed that frequent pregnancy and early motherhood have the effect of excluding Roma women from both the education system and the labor market, and they are thus unable to attain a higher level of education or obtain better-paid skilled work. In this article, we focus on motherhood/mothering among low-income Roma women and look specifically at the different forms the relationship between motherhood and poverty assumes among these women.

The situation of Roma women in Europe cannot be understood without considering the extent of the discrimination, persecution, racial prejudices, and social exclusion they experience (European Commission, 2020, 2018). At the same time, Roma women, as members of Roma communities, are generally bound to a certain social position due to the community gender roles and expectations. The role of women in Roma communities has an impact on their access to the labor market; they tend to experience high rates of unemployment or underemployment. This and the regulation of maternity and motherhood have impacted their access to the political and social sphere in the Czech Republic and in other countries with a Roma population (Berliner Institut für Vergleichende Sozialforschung (BIVS), 2006).

Many Roma mothers receive social benefits from the welfare state. In 2022, they receive child support, which might be considered a “mother’s salary,” but the monthly amount, which is CZK 630 to CZK 1380 [approx. €24 to €53] (MoLSA, The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Ministerstvo práce a sociálních věcí, 2022a) depending on the child’s age and the family financial situation is negligible in proportion to the minimum wage of CZK 16,200 [approx. €623] (MoLSA, The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2022b) earned on the labor market. Second, the caring parent is entitled to a parental allowance until the child reaches 4 years old, in the total amount of CZK 300,000 [approx. €11,532]. At the same time, a caring parent who does not provide proof of previous income, especially students, self-employed, unemployed, etc. can draw a maximum of CZK 10,000 per month [approx. €384] (MoLSA, The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2022c). When drawing

the maximum financial support, the child allowance period is reduced to 2.5 years.

Through the welfare system, low-income Roma women usually obtain housing benefits, though these are currently debated and there are multiple ongoing efforts to reform them (MoLSA, The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2019, Platforma pro sociální bydlení, 2021). This makes these benefits unstable; mothers cannot rely on being eligible to receive them each time they apply for them. To link benefits with living in adequate housing, and thereby excluding those who live in low-quality housing and public hostels, or with the child's school attendance (MoLSA, The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2019; Platforma pro sociální bydlení, 2021) is highly problematic, because it does not consider the reasons behind inadequate housing or why children are not in school; such links punish people already living in poverty for being poor. The environment in which low-income Roma mothers perform their mothering is thus affected by uncertain conditions that are often challenged, as low-income Roma mothers are seen through the “welfare queen” perspective, as those who are the “breadwinners” for their families, despite the fact that they do not earn their salaries through labor within the market system but from funds that are subsidized by taxpayers (Ryšavý, 2018).

## Study design

This study is based on interviews and ethnographic participant observation in a regional capital in the Czech Republic that is home to many socially excluded Roma families. The first author has been working in the field as a researcher since 2017. In addition to long-term observations of the mechanisms of social exclusion and the strategies for dealing with poverty and mothering, ten qualitative interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed. Although the findings presented in this text are mainly from the analysis of these ten interviews, they are interpreted in the context of the wider ethnographic knowledge that the first author gained during four years in the field.

Ten interviews were conducted with women who met the following criteria: a mother, self-identified as Roma, and poor (we considered this last criterion met if the woman was either receiving a supplemental childcare allowance through the welfare system or had received such benefits in the past). Some of the research participants were selected through a gatekeeper, represented by a social worker with whom they were in close contact. The rest of the participants were selected using the snowball method (Table 1).

In the spirit of feminist methodology (Ramazanoğlu, C. & Holland, J, 2002), we tried to give respondents as many opportunities as possible to have a hand in determining what the resulting topics would be. We treated the participants as active partners in order to attain a better understanding of their perspectives and value systems. We wanted to empower our participants through our

**Table 1.** Detailed sample description.

Name (anonymized)	Age	Household	Number of children	First child/ age of mother
Monika	30+	living with her spouse	6	unknown
Zofie	29	living alone, spouse in prison	3	22
Kamila	30+	living with her partner	6	unknown
Alexandra	35+	living with her partner, relatives living in the same shared house (three-generation household)	4	unknown
Klára	20	living with her partner and her father in a three-generation household	3	15
Jolana	28	living with her partner	5	16
Dorota	26	living with her parents in a three-generation household	3	17
Milúše	28	living with her partner	2	16
Ilona	35	living with her mother in a three-generation household	2	20
Viola	29	living with her mother and sister in a three-generation household	2	25

research and to show them that we wanted their missing voices (Nance, 1996) to be heard. Our aim was to create an environment in which we could overcome “top-down” pressures and foster a more creative, individualistic “bottom-up” approach to working with vulnerable groups (Aldridge, 2014).

In every phase of our research process, we were aware that we were working with vulnerable participants, and we adjusted our methodology to their needs (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). We divided the interview into five separate categories; based on the subjective participant responses and feedback during the interviews, we were able to determine which issues were central in their lives and which issues were marginal. The categories were: 1) a woman’s duties and roles in and outside the household – women’s emotional labor; 2) Roma women and mothering – the role of the mother and assistance from the family and all other actors involved in caring for the child; 3) ideas about the correct and incorrect forms of motherhood and mothering; 4) preparations for being in the role of a mother and the course of motherhood, preparations for the future lives of the children; and 5) the feminization of poverty and social disadvantage. A single interview with these proposed categories might seem too extensive, but based on our previous fieldwork, we knew that Roma women often face barriers during interviews (Čanigová, 2022). These barriers are connected to their socioeconomic conditions and to a low level of literacy that originates in their bilingualism, because Czech is not the primary language of the household, or in their early school dropout rates. A basic list of questions was outlined and additional questions were employed in connection with the given context. Our interview scheme had a total of 55 areas of questions. This may seem overly comprehensive, but despite that, our interviews were still quite short – between 30 and 60 minutes. We did not ask all of the questions every time; questions were used depending on the context. We did not go into the field with a clearly formulated hypothesis, but instead proceeded inductively (Charmaz, 2006). The subjective answers of the Roma

women themselves revealed to me which topics were dominant in their lives and which were marginal.

The interviews were conducted in the homes of participants or in the homes of their relatives located in the socially excluded locality or quite nearby. Interviewing in the home environment had a positive effect on the respondents because they were able to remain in their customary setting and did not have to adjust to an unfamiliar environment. On the other hand, there were certain disadvantages to this, such as the limited amount of time in which the interview could be conducted, as the women needed to look after their children during the interview.

The data analysis focused on identifying how poverty manifests itself in how Roma women relate to mothering, what adaptation strategies they adopt in the face of poverty, and what the specific aspects of mothering are among these women. Based on the pre-entry fieldwork, we chose the theme of motherhood as a prominent feature of their lives that connects these women to each other. In processing and coding the interview data (Charmaz, 2006), we defined the dominant theme of financial deprivation and its consequences. Thus, in the spirit of feminist methodology according to Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2010), the women themselves articulated the problem they face: poverty.

We chose a wide range of topics in the interviews. These topics were chosen, as recommended by Charmaz (2006), based on previous experiences. In analyzing the data, we reduced and analyzed them using constructivist grounded theory as articulated by Charmaz (2006). We analyzed the interviews manually, in a classical manner, mainly because we conducted ten interviews; manual coding is not difficult for such a large number. Based on the codes we set out, we looked for similarities in the data and created categories in the form of themes, which we address here. In doing so, we used the comparative method that Charmaz (2006) described as part of any coding in grounded theory. The first step is to compare data with data in order to find similarities and differences. The coding process resulted in the creation of three themes, which are the focus of the subsequent sections of the text.

### **Teen motherhood, multigenerational living, and othermothers: Key aspects of mothering in poverty**

In the data analysis, we focused on how the interviewed women talk about their motherhood and how they explain and interpret their mothering strategies within the context of poverty. Three key issues characterized their mothering experience, all of which are connected with the socioeconomic context in which they live: 1) teen motherhood, 2) the formation of multigenerational households, and 3) the sharing or transmission of care responsibilities to othermothers.

### ***Teen motherhood as a cause and consequence of women's poverty***

Our data analysis suggests that in the particular context we studied, teen motherhood is considered the norm and is reproduced from generation to generation. This is true despite the fact that our participants had not planned to become young mothers and had stated that the ideal age to have a child for the first time was around ten years older than they were when they had theirs. Becoming a teenage mother is narrowly connected to living in poverty (see, Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994; Cone et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2020; Macvarish, 2010; Rudo, 2014). On the one hand, women become teenage mothers because they live in poverty, which has been found to statistically increase their chances of becoming pregnant, having lower academic achievement, and having less access to quality contraceptive services (Lee et al., 2020). On the other hand, teen motherhood can result in “living in poor neighborhoods, growing up in impoverished female-headed families, performing inadequately in school and having limited access to health care and other services” (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994, p. 376).

We were interested in how participants themselves explained why they became teenage mothers. The most common explanation was that having children was not planned: it just happened as it usually happens to others with the same class and ethnic background. This is demonstrated in two statements from the interview with Jolana and Klára:

Jolana: That we're young and we already have so many children, that if I hadn't had one so young, with us you've got one by the time you're 15. White folks don't.

Klára: Yeah, like, not even the first one, that wasn't planned, but that's the way it is with us, once you're pregnant, you shouldn't get rid of it.

These two short excerpts reveal the fact that low-income women are often ambivalent about their pregnancies. All of the respondents who had become mothers before reaching adulthood had not planned their first pregnancy, but they felt positively about becoming a mother; they felt scared when they discovered they were pregnant, but as the time approached for their child to enter the world, they primarily experienced a sense of joy.

Teenage mothers are often exposed to risks connected with psychological development during adolescence, the stress attached to motherhood in general, and the stress of having such a big responsibility at a young age. The psychological difficulties of being a mother before a woman is prepared to be one were only mentioned by Klára, when she was describing her notion of motherhood before she became a mother:

I was looking forward to having a child, but I had no idea at all what it would be like. I thought I'd give birth and everything would be normal again. That I'd feed him, change his diapers, and put him to bed. It wasn't like that. The kid was crying.

Klára has mixed feelings about being a mother that have to do with the psychological strain that stemmed from being a poor 21-year-old mother raising three children in precarious conditions without enough money. Over the course of the interview, she stressed how much she loves her children, but she also said:

Interviewer: And is there something that you could point to as the reason that you were prevented from fulfilling those wishes?

Klára: My children.

I: So that you sometimes maybe regret that you had children?

K: Well yeah, when I was really on edge or when we were really poor, I'd always say to myself, if only I hadn't had them, then at least I wouldn't have to look after them.

It was not just in Klára's interview that we observed a certain ambivalence among the mothers, who love their children, but have been, by becoming pregnant, prevented from fulfilling their plans and escaping from poverty. Early pregnancy has the potential to lock young women into unequal and dependent relationships that reduce their power to navigate their future (Singh & Naicker, 2019). In particular, teen motherhood results in their leaving school prematurely. That is even more true for teenage mothers with multiple children (Cone et al., 2021). The respondents who left school as teenage mothers, while they were still at the basic level of education (i.e., lower secondary) or right after completing that level, never returned to the education process, even though they would have liked to.

Klára: I had a lot of plans, I wanted to be a nurse, go to work. Complete basic school, university, graduate from secondary school.

Interviewer: Do you think that you'll be able to accomplish that one day?

Klára: Yes, I'll fulfill my dream.

None of the participants had attained a level of education beyond lower secondary level. They had either started parental leave immediately or started working as soon as they completed the compulsory basic level, or they had started the next level of study but stopped after they became pregnant, or they went straight to the labor office and registered as unemployed. Like other participants, Jolana stated that her pregnancy interfered with the course of her education, which she abandoned at the age of fifteen. Similarly, Kamila

explained that she had wanted to continue and to study to be a teacher after she completed the basic level of education, but an unplanned pregnancy prevented her from doing so. After the birth of her first child, Klára did continue going to school, but she withdrew after the birth of her second child. We asked, “And after you stopped going to school, did you consider that you might try to go even with a child?” She answered, “Well I wanted to, but then the second one came along. That was too much.”

The successive periods of time that the participants spent on parental leave, given the number of children they had (ranging from two to six children), was presented as the main reason for their low level of education and lack of employment. Cone et al. (2021) saw this as a result of a mixture of social selection and social influence factors. The women knew that education and skills training were important for their economic well-being; however, after becoming pregnant, they sacrificed their education to provide for their children (see also, Elliott et al., 2015). Teen motherhood thus represents a disadvantage on the labor market (Cone et al., 2021; Robson & Berthoud, 2003), and it is the reason these women were not financially independent and came to depend on earnings provided by a man or on financial assistance from the state, and often both. Commenting on the number of children they have, the respondents themselves said that if they were to go back in time, they would have their children later or have fewer of them.

The early adulthood economic outcomes of teenage mothers are important to understand, as economic challenges during this key period of the lifespan for economic advancement can lead to widening inequality in teenage mothers' long-term economic stability and their ability to subsequently provide for their children (Cone et al., 2021). It is important to hear the voices of teenage mothers and know whether their needs are being met. Decreases in societal stigma and more support from families, programs, and policymakers are required to ensure that teen parents and their children can succeed (Lee et al., 2020). According to Lee et al. (2020) the first step to changing deficit-based perspectives is to take a strengths-based, empirical stance against the concept that teen parenthood is inherently negative. For instance, when interventions say they focus on helping “troubled families” or promote “good parenting,” these statements are insensitive and highly stigmatizing of teen parents since they make assumptions about the family (Lee et al., 2020; Rudo, 2014).

### ***Multigenerational living as a reaction to poverty, exclusion, and discrimination***

Meanings and strategies of mothering are crucially shaped by the mother's living arrangements, more precisely by living in multigenerational households. For our participants, a multigenerational household is chosen in response to poor economic conditions and represents a complex kinship network in co-

residential form in which resources and the responsibilities of caring for children are shared (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994). In her interview, Dorota stated that the children in her brother's household, where he is their sole parent, are "raised collectively, by his sisters, mother, and aunt," while in her own multigenerational household she views assistance from her parents as casual babysitting. The extent to which relatives in multigenerational households are involved in caring for children thus varies individually between families. However, regardless of the socioeconomic situation of the household, multigenerational living allows family members to deal with house affordability and provide mutual help and support, not only in childcare or eldercare (Easthope et al., 2015; Souralová & Žáková, 2019). This is particularly important in the context of poverty, where kinship networks can help mothers financially and allow them to survive unpredictable external forces (Luna, 2009).

For our participants, the formation of multigenerational households is a response to the lack of access to housing, which is often the result of discrimination against the Roma minority on the housing market (Hurrle et al., 2016). The Czech welfare system has specific characteristics that do not support cohabitation in multigenerational households, because there can be only one recipient of welfare housing benefits in the household and the income of every person in the household is considered in applications for housing benefits. The conditions are strict, and not everyone obtains the benefits (Rybová & Ondráčková, 2021). When there are more people with incomes in a household, it is less likely that the household will get benefits. The strategy of forming multigenerational households thus does not lead to the cumulation of state financial support. A woman's financial situation is not significantly improved by cohabitation; it only allows the woman to "survive" and to have a temporary place that protects her from less stable forms of housing, like shelters. Under such circumstances, it is easy for multigenerational housing to lead into a spiral from which it is very hard to escape. It usually starts when they are unable to pay the rent or need to leave their housing for some reason and have to move in with their parents. When living in a multigenerational household, women are not eligible for housing benefits, thus it is much harder to save money for new rent, which is usually overpriced because of the lack of housing on the market. Due to prevailing discrimination on the housing market, the impossibility of finding "normal" housing, and the insufficient capacity of public housing combined with a nontransparent system of allocation, they become the targets of "poverty traders" who benefit from vulnerable people and offer overpriced and substandard housing that not everybody can afford because of high initial fees, such as security deposits that are the equivalent of two or even three months' of rent. Klára explained that multigenerational living with her father helped her when she was unable to find housing in the housing market.

Klára: We lived on a sublease and the owner sold the apartment. (. . .) So we all had to move out. (. . .) so we were looking for another sublease, and there was always an owner who told us: “If you had ten dogs, we would take you, but you have three children, so no, and also unfortunately we don’t take Roma.” (. . .) They didn’t care that there was enough work then, so we had enough money, so I didn’t have a crisis to pay for it or anything.

For our participants, multigenerational living was highly ambivalent in terms of their mothering. On the one hand, multigenerational living enabled the distribution of care responsibilities and more effective inclusion of othermothers (see below). On the other hand, it deepened the mother’s dependency on her parents and frequently causes misunderstandings and disagreements. As Viola said: “Now my mother is the head of the family, because my father died, so we’ve been living with her for a month now, but we argue.” She recounted that when her father died, she returned home from abroad and was living temporarily with her mother, but that they often argued because she was not used to living with her mother and she felt her mother’s influence on her children was somewhat negative. Sharing the work of mothering can be stressful for a mother and conflicts may arise between women from different generations over their parenting practices (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994). But there are specific examples in which the two characteristics of othermothering and living in a multigenerational household are combined. The assistance provided by an othermother or older female relative in the same household is welcomed, and an othermother’s involvement can have a very positive effect on a young woman’s mothering. However, if the grandmother is a long-term presence in the household, this can have a negative influence on a young mother’s mothering, because it becomes harder for her to develop her own parenting habits (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994). Klára and Dorota each had disagreements with their parents over what time the children should go to bed.

The effects of living in a multigenerational household are not always positive in the sense of helping mothers to combine the responsibilities of work and being a mother. Responding to a question about how demanding it is to live with her mother, Viola described a negative aspect of this situation: “She has different views, we definitely have arguments, about the children, about how-to parent, about money, she definitely has different views.” For this reason, Viola was actively looking for her own place to live and was doing so even despite the fact that her mother was helping to look after her children, which enabled her to participate in the labor market.

### ***Othermothers and the sharing of care responsibilities***

The third aspect of low-income mothering of Roma women is the inclusion of othermothers in households where grandmothers are often the heads of the

household. As Ilona stated: “My mother and I share the work in the household, but she is the one who has the main say in sharing the childcare responsibilities.” Othermothering is a type of kinship in which the affinity between mother and child is equivalently substituted by a relationship with another relative or with a woman who is not a relative (Collins, 1990/Collins, 2002). In the setting that we studied, there are three possible reasons for this need for substitute care: the mother is too young and needs help from a more experienced woman; the mother has a large number of children; or the mother needs help combining family life with work. In the environments we studied, the role of othermothers was usually performed either by a grandmother or an eldest daughter.

Multigenerational living enables mothers to delegate part of their mothering responsibilities to grandmothers who are therefore frequently performing the role of othermother. It is expected that they will care for their daughters’ children – it emerged from the interviews that the majority of the mothers of the women interviewed were willing to assume this role and were actively doing so. This was most present in cases where a woman became pregnant at a very young age, like Klára, who described the difficulty of the situation she faced in caring for her first-born child after the child’s birth:

So, it wasn’t hard for me when Anežka was born, she was the first one, and he was at work all day, I was here at my mum’s place. She looked after her for me whenever and in the meantime, I continued going to school.

The participation of grandmothers in helping to raise grandchildren in low-income families has a positive influence on mothering among young mothers. According to Chase-Lansdale et al. (1994), their involvement in care allows mothers to achieve a better balance between work, relationships, and entertainment, and to do so in a situation of poor economic circumstances.

The figure of the eldest daughter in the role of an othermother typically emerged in two contexts in our interviews. One was the context of the respondent’s recollection of her own childhood and her own experience of being an othermother. This was the case for Jolana; when asked about her perception of and experiences with parenthood before she had become a mother, she responded as follows:

I had some idea, I am the oldest sister, and we were seven siblings, so I helped out a lot at home.

It was not just in this interview but in others as well that the respondents highlighted having had to help out when there were many other children in the family. This personal experience from childhood then shifts into an expectation in adulthood, when women who were othermothers in the past expect that they as mothers will have an othermother available to them as well. This expectation is however not always met. Consequently, the second context in

which the essential role of othermothers is addressed is when the mothers experience the absence of the assistance from othermother. This issue of expectation was raised by Monika when she described her strategy of “forcing” the role of othermother on her nieces:

When they come here, when I say something, that you’re here so at least look after my little one, take him into the room there to play, they sit themselves down there, like old women, and if they see something, the little one crying, they choose to run away outside. (. . .) I don’t have any girls, a girl who could help me out, and from my brother, they don’t like, that’s even worse than them, the girls, they don’t know anything either. At the age when I was 11, or 12, I already knew how to clean up everything. My mum just cooked, we cleaned, did the laundry, sometimes did the washing up. And these girls they don’t know anything! . . . granny wants them to learn this, but they’re not interested, they don’t want to do it. This is bad, you know, when a little girl doesn’t know these things from a young age, then what’ll she be like as an adult, she’ll have a husband and children, and then she won’t even know anything and she’ll live in a mess? She will, yeah.

Monika’s narrative illustrates several main features of how othermothers function in the context we studied. First, there is the unwillingness of the younger generation to accept the role of othermother and to perform it voluntarily. The role of othermother is thus presented as a forced one, imposed on them by circumstances. Second, there is the emphasis Monika places on the need for her nieces to learn domestic skills, and criticizes her mother, as the grandmother of her nieces, for not practicing the same style of childrearing as had been used on her. She then contrasts it with her own experiences from childhood, when she used to perform housework and act as an othermother alongside her mother. In this she is describing a more general trend that we also encountered in the responses of other respondents – namely, the perception that girls nowadays are less and less well prepared to help their mother or other relatives to care for children or do housework (see also Collins, 1990/ Collins, 2002). The setting in which today’s mothers grew up is changing into an environment in which mothers with multiple offspring have to rely on themselves alone. Monika, like other respondents, finds herself in a situation in which caring for children takes up most of her time and she has very little free time left for herself. Losing the benefit of assistance from an othermother means that mothers are less likely to be able to be financially independent, they have no one to assume their role if the need arises. The absence of othermothers then leads, as in Žofie’s case, to the situation where a single mother has to take her children with her everywhere she goes and sometimes has to choose between going to the physician and taking care of administrative needs because she won’t have the time to do both when her children are with her.

Othermothering can be regarded as one of the strategies Roma women use, one that has multiple interconnected functions for their mothering. The distribution of the mothering role among multiple women is a strategy in the mothering process that helps mothers to cope with caring for children in

a context impacted by structural influences and difficult conditions that are partially determined by the situation of poverty the women are in (see, Cornelius & Webb, 2020). Othermothering can function as a mechanism that protects a mother from poverty: involving othermothers in raising the children means an opportunity for the mother to study or to obtain paid work on the labor market, and thereby opens a path for her to access economic resources and opportunities that can help escape poverty (Hašková et al., 2015). Daughters and grandmothers who perform the role of othermothers thus make it possible for the mothers to engage in economic activity so that they can significantly help to prevent the mother from living in poverty and allow the mother to cope with caring for her children in a context impacted by structural influences and difficult conditions that are partially determined by the situation of poverty the women are in (see, Cornelius & Webb, 2020).

### Concluding remarks

The aim of this article was to analyze and understand the meanings and aspects of motherhood in the context of low-income Roma families. In the paper we identified the three most significant aspects of mothering among low-income Roma women: teen motherhood, living in multigenerational households, and othermothering. All three are closely linked to their low income and life in poverty.

The first aspect observed here is teen motherhood, which is both a consequence and a cause of poverty among Roma women. Teen motherhood is a consequence of life in a Roma community, where being a teenage mother is not seen as something negative. Teenage mothers thus reproduce a pattern of behavior that they observe among other female relatives who also became mothers at a very young age. However, the interviews clearly show that becoming a teenage mother was not planned: it just happened. At the same time, teen motherhood is a cause of poverty among Roma women, who after becoming pregnant and having a child at a young age are unable to return to the education system. They thus enter the labor market in a very disadvantaged position, with a low level of education and no work experience, and their ability to support themselves is reduced (Elliott et al., 2015). Teenage mothers are thus seen as the one of the most marginalized and moralized identities that are perceived as a social problem (Lessa, 2006).

As they became mothers at a very young age, our participants were dependent on the help of other family members, through multigenerational living, through the inclusion of othermothers, or through both. Coresidence in multigenerational households represents a strategy for avoiding a life of poverty by sharing household and housing expenses. The cohabitation of mothers in the same household with the older generation has benefits in terms of being able to share parenting responsibilities (Chase-Lansdale et al.,

1994, Souralová & Žáková, 2019). At the same time, cohabitation in a three-generation household often has the effect of diminishing the agency of low-income mothers, who become dependent on their parents. From the interviews, we discovered that the decision to live together and share a household is not so much a choice as it is a necessity. The financial burden on a Roma mother as the sole adult in a two-generation household is an enormous one with which these women are unable to cope. They therefore decide to live with their parent(s) in a multigenerational household where the costs are shared among multiple adults. Sharing costs protect Roma women from homelessness, but our research did not show that it effectively helps them to escape poverty. We plan to conduct research on this topic in the future.

In our analysis of othermothering, we argued that among low-income mothers the participation of an othermother in raising a child provides the mother with space and time in which to fully devote herself to paid employment. Othermothering can thus serve as a direct means of facilitating access to economic resources and an opportunity to avoid poverty. However, we were able to confirm that as a tool that exists on the micro level, othermothering in women's everyday reality is not effective for engaging in economic activity, because at the time of the interview only one of the respondents had paid employment. The primary issue is that there is a need to focus on the effects of more powerful structural influences, such as the problem of discrimination in the Czech Republic based on ethnicity, gender, and marital status (Úřad vlády České republiky, 2019). A consequence of these influences, the effects of which combined are intersectionally compounded, is a high rate of unemployment among Roma women and therefore the impossibility of their becoming financially independent.

By understanding the specific features of Roma mothering, it is possible to develop a perspective that does not aim to discipline and punish but rather to understand and accept and to contribute to the realization that minority mothering is different from majority mothering (Collins, 1990/Collins, 2002). This perspective can be useful for others who plan to research minority mothering. Knowing the perspectives and specific characteristics of people on the margins of society can improve social policies aimed to help, such as municipal housing policies. The knowledge of the social reality of Roma women can help in following the key document *Strategie rovnosti, začlenění a participace Romů (Strategie romské integrace) 2021–2030* [Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation (Roma Integration Strategy) 2021–2030], which aims to combat the prevailing exclusion of and discrimination against Roma in the Czech Republic (Úřad vlády České republiky, 2021). It can also help to improve the inclusion of Roma women in society (Van Baar & Kóczé, 2020), because they are still alarmingly underrepresented. Our paper provides evidence that is needed for the long-term fight against anti-gypsyism and anticiganism taking place in Central and Eastern European societies; we

present data showing that the prevalent marginality of the Roma population, as shown by the women in our study, is not due to race or ethnicity but to poverty and socioeconomic status. As our data show, it is not an inherent problem of Roma people; the roots are grounded in the neoliberal and capitalist tendencies of the welfare state (Kóczé, 2020, 2021).

Our text describes why there is a very limited Roma feminist movement in the Czech Republic. We hope that the focus from a micro-perspective and on individual mothering strategies can shed light and clarify the socioeconomical situation. We argue that a knowledge of the barriers and the infrastructure of help that the women experience and use can lead to a larger social change. Our policy recommendation is to spread the knowledge and inform young people about teen pregnancy, to focus on education and on motivation for education for the girls and young mothers who lack systemic help. The state is not helping Roma mothers; thus, they develop their own strategies, such as as othermothering and multigenerational households – but at the same time, both of these strategies are affected by the national and local discriminatory tendencies. For example, with othermothering in its institutional form, Roma women are inappropriately denied the carer status that would grant them claim to benefits (Fučík & Sidiropulu Janků, 2019). Multigenerational households are not supported by the state and in fact such cohabitation can lead to the loss of housing benefits as the total amount of household money is higher.

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