

Emancipation Life Paths of Portuguese Cigano/Roma Women

Subjects: Social Issues

Contributor: Olga Magano

In Portuguese society, some Cigano/Roma women, during their life paths, distance themselves from the Cigano cultural tradition, particularly in regard to marriage, schooling, employment and social life. On the one hand, there is a feeling of attachment to traditional values as family pressure to marry or in relation to gender differentiation; on the other hand, these women express a desire for empowerment autonomy and emancipation in order to draw up their own trajectories and life projects.

Keywords: Cigano/Roma women ; education ; Emantipation

1. Background

Cigano/Roma culture is essentially based on blood relations and customs ([Gamella 2013](#)) and characterized by a strong division of age and gender ([Arias 2002](#)). The gender issue is particularly relevant to the differentiation of roles between men and women and is an important topic to understand the way of life and the constraints experienced by Cigano women. As in other geographical contexts, Portuguese Cigano/Roma women are often victims of various inequalities, in disregard of the legal assumptions of equity (need to promote balanced representation in society) and equality (access to equal opportunities in the various areas of education and access to training and employment). Often, some women are not treated equally within the family (without equity) and prevented from accessing certain basic rights such as compulsory schooling and access to vocational training and employment (without equality).

2. Theoretical Context: Cigano Culture and Gender Role Differentiation

The distinction and specificity of Cigano culture in the Iberian Peninsula rests on key central values. These include the idea of a common history, the common origin of all Cigano traditions, customs and language, the value given to age and experience as structuring principles of status, the role of women, respect and worship of the dead, as well as the cohesion and differentiation of non-Ciganos ([Coelho \[1892\] 1995](#); [Garrido 1999](#); [Mendes 2007](#); [Nunes 1996](#); [Román 1994](#)).

For [Gamella \(2013, p. 19\)](#), Gitano identity rests especially on the combination of two elements: blood and customs. It is these two sources of identity that serve to distinguish Cigano people from one other and from non-Ciganos. According to this author, customs change rapidly, but blood is transmitted from one generation to the next and is fundamental to identity and in-group inclusion or out-group exclusion. Equally, reference to having Cigano blood is often pointed out by Portuguese Ciganos as one of the intrinsic characteristics for the identification of being a Cigano ([Magano 2010](#)).

As all Portuguese citizens, the Cigano are expected to actively partake in social life and to take full advantage of their rights as equal citizens in a modern democratic society. This is seldom the case, however, given that marginalisation and social exclusion are very prevalent, which leads to a collective characteristic, that of a people shrouded in poverty and who possess great difficulties in accessing a decent life ([FRA 2012, 2017](#)).

The affirmation of Cigano culture is mainly due to the importance given to marriage, through the valorisation of endogamic marriages carried out at a very young age, through a complex network of family alliances that frequently determine the lives of young people, especially girls upon reaching the age of puberty ([Magano 2017](#); [Mendes and Magano 2016](#)). As a result, breaching everyday life for a non-Cigano with values reminiscent of a traditional patrilocal society is a task that is difficult to achieve given the presence of family pressure and socio-spatial confinement.

Cigano men have more freedom of social movement and interaction with non-Ciganos, especially with non-Cigano women, in the areas of work and daily social relations that are farther away from family members and other Cigano people. As [Lopes \(2008, p. 79\)](#) points out: "Masculinity has the freedom to expand, to show itself, without compromising

the identity of origin". Men's freedom of movement contrasts with the conditions and limitations of women and is indicative of asymmetries at the level of sexual and gender roles. For this author, the separation between men and women is thus ritualised with each passing day and becomes noticeable in the behaviours assumed in public, in which gender division is a constant.

To a large extent, what is meant by the "Cigano identity" involves the daily reaffirmation of the differences between men and women, through the way of dressing, body postures and gestures, behaviour assumed in public spaces and tasks performed and their times ([Lopes 2008, p. 85](#)). The characteristics that often define "Cigano", however, whether they be delineated by researchers or emphasised by Cigano themselves, are almost always essentialist and tend to homogenise around certain cultural traits, often "imagined" ([Anderson 2005](#)), or revealing an idealised conception of Cigano femininity ([López Rodríguez and Sanz Hernández 2017](#)). Seldom do they take into account the diverse and cultural plurality of Cigano women and men in which negative and stereotypical representations do not facilitate the uncovering of complex, social realities in various forms of cultural expression.

[Surdu and Surdu \(2006\)](#) point out that, almost always, Roma women are victims of double inequality: on the one hand, because they are women; on the other, as a result of being Roma, a gender gap particularly in accessing education comes to the forefront, placing Roma women and girls in an asymmetrical position.

The situation of gender inequality and the role of imposed submission often tends to be assumed by Cigano women: it is argued that men are physically stronger, and in possessing more strength, they are in a position where their say has greater weight, which is seen as facilitating the exercise of power within the family and permits access to more opportunities within society at large. According to [Lopes \(2008\)](#), who carried out an ethnographic study on Cigano people in the city of Lisbon, Cigano women rarely call into question their position as subordinates or the values of male authority and female obedience; these are internalised from an early age and seen as necessary, given that they are factors of cohesion, group harmony and expected gender behaviours as attributed to different life stages. This does not mean, however, that all Cigano women accept rules and cultural impositions in the same way. Questioning or not accepting the traditional role reserved for women may lead to family conflicts, often to the point of cutting family relations ([Magano 2010](#); [Magano and Mendes 2014](#); [Missaoui 2004](#)).

The issue of the existence of gender inequality among Cigano women is not specific to Portugal. In Romania, for example, a number of studies reveal this equal reality of inequality in which situations of poverty are closely related to women's lack of schooling ([Bitu and Morteau 2010](#); [Jovanovic 2014](#); [Kóczé 2009](#); [Surdu and Surdu 2006](#); [Vincze 2006](#)). Similar results have come to light in relation to Bulgaria ([World Bank 2014](#)). Portuguese girls and young women, similar to other Cigano women, have greater difficulty accessing schooling and undertaking processes of learning and often end up in disqualified and segregated environments; they experience situations of discrimination and unfriendly educational environments, which are frequently fostered by teachers and also by the educational system. Generally speaking, there is often a lack of a stimulating learning environment in terms of educational offerings, as well as positive reference models within the family or cultural group. The lack of qualifications of Cigano women at the level of basic schooling and absence of adequate vocational training means that they do not have a real option to compete in the labour market for jobs and thus are "disempowered" ([Bitu and Morteau 2010](#); [Pereira and Magano 2016](#)) by not having acquired basic school and professional skills that allow access to the labour market.

One of the main indicators of gender differentiation and inequality between Cigano women and men currently is that of education levels (although compliance with compulsory schooling is very seldom met, regardless of gender). The family plays an important role in maintaining this inequality with the evocation of tradition and customs regarding what is expected of Cigano girls in terms of marital commitments. The will to preserve the tradition of a Cigano marriage prevails, even if this comes into conflict with a basic right to schooling. The impediment that keeps Cigano children from carrying out their education, however, may very well constitute a violation of human rights ([Mendes et al. 2014](#)).

In general terms, the majority of Portuguese Ciganos have high rates of illiteracy, as well as a failure to complete any level of schooling, let alone completion of compulsory schooling (12 years of schooling). Research has shown that in several residentially fixed Cigano families around Portugal, the majority of members are illiterate and do not have any degree of education ([Medinas 2018](#); [Pereira 2016](#); [Pinto 2017](#)). Despite increased enrolment of Cigano children in school systems around the country, failure and dropout rates continue to be widespread even before the completion of the second cycle of the Portuguese school system (grade 6) ([Mendes et al. 2014, p. 81](#)). Data from a survey of the Ministry of Education ([DGEEC 2020](#)) show that the number of Cigano students enrolled in public schools decreases as the level of education advances, and this is more pronounced for girls. This survey was applied to principals of public elementary and secondary schools, within the scope of the National Strategy for the Integration of Roma Communities (2013–2020) and reinforced in

2018, by the Council of Ministers, with Resolution 154/2018, in relation to the need to complement the design and implementation of strategic measures in the field of schooling, among others. Among the data from a national study carried out in 2014, it can be observed that males stay longer in school than females (although in either case, very few continue beyond the sixth grade). The justification presented by Cigano families concerning young girls is based on classes being mixed. Conviviality between the sexes at adolescence, especially with non-Cigano males without the supervision of the family, is seen as a danger to maintaining the tradition of female purity and is thus restricted ([Mendes et al. 2014](#)).

The decision concerning what women can and cannot do is under the control of men (e.g., husband, father) ([Casa-Nova 2009](#); [Lopes 2008](#); [Magano 2010](#)). It is also the male figure that oversees conversations they may have and declarations they may make. The same applies to work or the possibility of having a job outside the family home. Within the Cigano household, the idea of women reconciling outside employment with their domestic and maternal duties is perceived as impossible. In order to do so, they thus need the authorisation of their husbands and/or family ([Mendes et al. 2014](#)).

3. The Importance of Marriage to Cigano/Roma Portuguese Families

Given the differences that can be seen in terms of territory, the education of a Cigano girl is generally carried out keeping in mind their marriage to someone (Cigano) who must be approved by the family. Family alliances formed through marriage are still the heart of Cigano culture. They seek to ensure parental dominance within a group, through forms of commitment that involve planned marriages, sometimes promised or agreed upon even before the child is born ([Magano 2010](#); [Nunes 1996](#)). Such promises or agreements establish alliances and end up having real consequences in the lives of the children and their parents. Research has made reference to such promises and agreements ([Lopes 2008](#); [Magano 2010](#); [Mendes 2007](#); [Silva 2014](#)), as often pointed out by social workers working on local projects with Cigano families, as well as by Cigano people themselves. These planned marriages are also frequently pointed out as key factors in justifying school drop-out ([Magano 2014](#); [Mendes et al. 2014](#); [Silva 2014](#)).

Despite the strength of Cigano traditions, however, some freedom of choice is often referred to as being permitted to women when it comes to who they will marry (Gay y Blasco and Arias Lagunas state the same for Spanish Roma). At the time of concretising the conjugal alliance, the bride is given the possibility of breaking the commitment assumed by her parents, an act called “giving gourds” ([Nunes 1996](#); [Silva 2014](#)) or “a withdrawal” ([Magano 2010](#), [2014](#)). These rituals of acceptance or rejection of the commitment of marriage are an elaborate way of preserving the girl’s family honour (along with the fact that this is the only way a Cigano girl is able to choose her own Cigano boyfriend) ([Casa-Nova 2009](#)).

The preservation of female virginity is seen by both men and women as part of the Cigano culture as a sign of honour and respect for tradition. Failure to comply with this ritual is seen as an “embarrassment” to the family, a daughter’s dishonour before her parents and the group ([Casa-Nova 2009](#); [Lopes 2008](#); [Magano 2010](#); [Nunes 1996](#)). Cigano women function as the strength and weakness of the family, given that in them lies the pride and honour (or dishonour) of men (father, brother, fiancé, husband). However, the goal of preserving virginity until marriage makes her a hostage to the family, preventing her from prolonged schooling or professional undertakings outside of the domestic sphere. She is under the control of the family and under the watchful eye of men ([Casa-Nova 2009](#), p. 140), who condition her social relationships.

Marriages between Ciganos, and especially within the group itself, are the most valued and desired. However, there are also exogamous marriages, both with non-Ciganos and with Ciganos from other groups who may possess different values when it comes to marriage traditions, and there are also instances of marital separations. Sometimes, the marriage of a Cigano woman to a non-Cigano man is less accepted than if it were the other way around, due to the fact that Cigano women are understood as being easier to assimilate ([Magano 2014](#)). Furthermore, the marriage of a Cigano man to a non-Cigano woman is more highly accepted, given that there is a greater tendency to stay within the culture. If Cigano women—who are thought to owe obedience to their husbands—are to marry a non-Cigano, it is believed (even expected) that they will follow their husband, and thus, the tendency to stop following the Cigano culture is more likely. When exogamous marriages take place, according to the interviewees, the family is thought to be “less valuable” to the Ciganos (it is thus a situation in which one’s individual act has consequences for the whole family) (*idem*). The preference that many hold for inbred marriages, to the detriment of exogamous marriages, is owed to the fact that marrying a non-Cigano is understood as a form of contamination of the “Cigano race”. Frowning on the idea of crossing blood, marriages with people who share consanguinity or possess relations of affinity are thus preferred ([Bastos et al. 2007](#), p. 213). Data from a national study on Ciganos ([Mendes et al. 2014](#)) reveal that the average age of marriage for this population is much lower than the national average.

References

1. Gamella, Juan. 2013. Sangre Y Costumbres. . In *Ciganos Portugueses. Olhares plurais numa sociedade em transição*. . Edited by Mendes Maria Manuela and Magano Olga. Lisbon: Edições Mundos Sociais, pp. 17–35.
2. Arias, David Lagunas. 2002. Modern Gypsies: Gender and kinship between the Calós from Catalonia. *Romani Studies* 12: 35–55.
3. Coelho, Adolfo. 1995. Os ciganos de Portugal: Com um estudo sobre o calão. . Lisbon: Publicações D. Quixote. First published 1892.
4. Garrido, Albert. 1999. Entre Gitanos e Payos: Relación de Prejuicios y Desacuerdos. . Barcelona: Flor Del Viento.
5. Mendes, Maria Manuela. 2007. Representações face à discriminação: Ciganos e imigrantes russos e ucranianos na área metropolitana de Lisboa. . Ph.D. dissertation, Institute of Social Sciences, Lisbon, Portugal.
6. Nunes, Olímpio. 1996. O Povo Cigano . Porto: Livraria Apostolado da Imprensa.
7. Román, Teresa Sán. 1994. La diferència inquietant: Velles i noves estratègies culturals dels gitanos. . Barcelona: Alta Fulla—Fundació Serveis de Cultura Popular.
8. Magano, Olga. 2010. «Tracejar vidas normais». Estudo qualitativo sobre a integração social de indivíduos de origem cigana na sociedade portuguesa.
9. FRA. 2012. The Situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States Survey Results at a Glance. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
10. FRA. 2017. Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey. Technical Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
11. Magano, Olga. 2017. Tracing normal lives: Between stigma and the will to be Cigano. *Social Identities* 23: 44–55.
12. Mendes, Maria Manuela, and Olga Magano. 2016. School pathways and economic practices of Portuguese Ciganos: Some continuities and changes. *Social Identities* 22: 561–76.
13. Lopes, Daniel Seabra. 2008. Deriva cigana: Um estudo etnográfico sobre os ciganos de Lisboa. . Lisbon: ICS.
14. Anderson, Benedict. 2005. Comunidades Imaginadas. Reflexões sobre a origem e a expansão do nacionalismo. . Lisbon: Edições 70.
15. López Rodríguez, M. Esther, and Alexia Sanz Hernández. 2017. Reflexión, acción, decisión: Trayectorias en la construcción de la identidad de género en el patriarcado gitano. *Empiria. Revista De metodología De Ciencias Sociales* 38: 41–62.
16. Surdu, Laura, and Mihai Surdu. 2006. Broadening the Agenda: The Status of Romani Women in Romania. New York: Open Society Institute.
17. Magano, Olga, and Maria Manuela Mendes. 2014. Mulheres ciganas na sociedade portuguesa: Tracejando percursos de vida singulares e plurais. . *Journal Sures, Digital Magazine of the Latin American Institute of Art, Culture and History—Federal University of Latin American Integration-UNILA, Diversity, Plurilingualism and Interculturality*, n. 3. Available online: <https://repositorioaberto.uab.pt/handle/10400.2/4038> (accessed on 16 May 2022).
18. Missaoui, Lamia. 2004. Drogue, VIH et individuation des femmes gitanes. In *Faire Figure D'étranger. Regards Croisés sur la Production des Altérités*. Edited by Cossée Claire, Lada Emmanuelle and Rigoni Isabelle. Paris: Armand Colin, pp. 119–37.
19. Bitu, Nicoleta, and Crina Morteau. 2010. Are the Rights of the Child Negotiable? The Case of Early Marriages within Roma Communities in Romania. Bucureste: UNICEF Romania.
20. Jovanovic, Jelena. 2014. Romani Women's Identities Real and Imagined. Media Discours Analysis of "I'm a European Roma Woman" Campaign. Budapest: Central European University.
21. Kóczé, Ángela. 2009. Missing Intersectionality. Race/Ethnicity, Gender and Class in Current Research and Policies an Roman Women in Europe. Budapest: Central European University.
22. Vincze, Eniko M. 2006. Social Exclusion at the Crossroads of Gender, Ethnicity and Class. A View of Romani Women's Reproductive Health. Budapest: Central European University.
23. World Bank. 2014. Gender Dimension of Roma Inclusion. Perspectives from Four Roma Communities in Bulgaria. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.
24. Pereira, Isabel, and Olga Magano. 2016. "Nobody gives employment to Gypsies": (Dis)integration of Gypsies in formal labour market. Paper presented at the Congreso Espanol de Sociología, Gijón, Spain, June 30–July 2; Available online: www.fes-sociologia.com/files/congress/12/papers/4476.pdf (accessed on 5 October 2017).

25. Mendes, Manuela, Magano Olga, and Pedro Candeias. 2014. Estudo Nacional sobre as Comunidades Ciganas. . Lisbon: High Commissioner for Migration.
26. Medinas, Carlos. 2018. Ciganos e Literacia digital: Estudo de caso em Reguengos de Monsaraz. . Master's dissertation, Open University, Lisbon, Portugal.
27. Pereira, Isabel. 2016. "Ninguém dá trabalho aos ciganos!". Estudo qualitativo sobre a (des)integração dos ciganos no mercado formal de emprego. . Master's thesis, Open University, Lisbon, Portugal.
28. Pinto, Paula C. S. 2017. O Terceiro Bairro. Estudo qualitativo sobre o impacte do rendimento social de inserção nos modos de vida de pessoas ciganas. . Master's dissertation, Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences and Faculty of Economics, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal.
29. Direção Geral de Estatísticas de Educação e Ciência (DGEEC). 2020. Perfil Escolar das Comunidades Ciganas 2018/2019. . Lisbon: DGEEC, Ministry of Education.
30. Casa-Nova, Maria José. 2009. Etnografia e produção de conhecimento. Reflexões críticas a partir de uma investigação com ciganos portugueses. . Lisbon: ACIDI.
31. Silva, Manuel Carlos. 2014. Sina social cigana: História, comunidades, representações e instituições. . Lisbon: Edições Colibri.
32. Magano, Olga. 2014. Tracejar «vidas normais». Estudo qualitativo sobre a integração dos ciganos em Portugal. . Lisbon: Editora Mundos Sociais.
33. Bastos, José, André Correia, and Elisa Rodrigues. 2007. Sintrenses Ciganos. Uma abordagem estrutural—Dinâmica. . Lisbon: City Hall of Sintra and ACIDI.

Retrieved from <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/history/show/57977>