

**ROMA WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES AT SEBESMANKÓ:  
STRUGGLES FOR SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND RESPECTABILITY  
IN WAGE WORK AND EVERYDAY RELATIONS**

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## ABSTRACT

At the center of this thesis are Roma women's lived experiences in a semi-rural locality: based on ethnographic research and oral histories of Roma women, their mutual struggles for social reproduction and respectability unfold in the domain of labor relations and everyday life worlds. By a multi-scalar historical contextualization of the researched locality shaped by structural transformations from the 1960s, the thesis reveals that both inner and outer narratives have portrayed the respective Roma community as the "striving Roma". This ethnicized social position implies that the local Roma here aspires for jobs in the world of formal wage work, compared to Roma communities who engage in informal "gypsy activities". The historical specificity of this social position stems from their traditional profession of blacksmithing and the greater opportunities in the agglomeration economy. By focusing on Roma women's lived experiences, the thesis reveals that the position of the "striving Roma" for them comprises a joint struggle for social reproduction and respectability: the sort of strategies Roma women deploy in the world of wage work and the sort of assets they can or cannot capitalize upon in intimate and kin relations co-constitutively structures their capacity for realizing economic stability and symbolic recognition within the community. In this complex struggle, Roma women have gendered and ethnicized room of maneuver: their strategies for preserving fundamentally low-valued labor positions mainly in cleaning or catering; their relations to their kin, position, and acts in marriage and motherhood are all fundamental aspects of the route Roma women are navigating through for reproduction and respectability.

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I am thankful for my friends for helping me out when my physical and mental capacities were nearly exhausted. Those cigarette-talks with Gitta are among the joyful memories of this period.

My family patiently waited for me to finish this solitary road I had been tripping on. I hope this patience will pay off, and my sisters will find some thoughts in this thesis that speaks to them.

I could not have undertaken this journey without Danó. He supported me on this road beyond anyone else, on multiple levels. Besides all I have no space to spell out here, I am thankful for him for “weathering my storms”.

I wish I could have passed on just a little of the humor, enormous strength, and resistance of the women whose narratives are the solid ground of this research. I owe my gratitude to them for letting me into their lives.

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## INTRODUCTION

For the second time on my field trip to the outskirts of Sebesmankó<sup>1</sup>, my gatekeeper took me to the house of Vilma, where she lives with her two grown-up daughters, Andi and Kati. Vilma is in her 60s, and when I asked about her early years of work, her remembrance mirrored the local Roma's collective tone about the socialist era in which “there were plenty of jobs” for them and more cohesion in the community.

She started working in the 1970s at the age of fifteen in the nearby factories, as local Roma widely did at the time. Vilma told me that she raised her brother's 3 small children beside her daughters after he and his wife “died too early”. With the close of surrounding factories during the regime transition, she went to work at several public institutions – hospitals and schools – as a cleaner in the neighboring towns and Budapest. She talked proudly about the number of years she served in one institution. When I asked why she could work at one place for 7-9 years, she answered that “there were many children, and they were hungry.” Vilma only stopped working for the period when she was seriously ill, and to this day, she works in a hospital, together with one of her daughters, Kati. Kati was also severely ill for years – at that time, they did not yet have running water. Although Vilma paid her contribution to the municipality for water supply in 2017, until last year she had to wait for the access. After all, Kati made a good recovery and got disability retirement; however, she has been working ever since. She loves working, she said. At her sickness, she prayed to God: “Just let me work. And he gave it to me”.

Kati's words on her strong drive to work illustrate how Roma appears in local narratives in the village of Sebesmankó, 30 km from Budapest: Roma men and women in this village

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<sup>1</sup> Sebesmankó is a fictitious name, the real name of the village is anonymized for the protection of the people. Sebesmankó in English can be translated to “fast crutch”. This is a reference to the “fleeing man who belies the speed of his crutches” in the poem “Careful Remembrance” by the Roma poet Attila Balogh. This represents the Roma's own struggles in their disadvantaged, ethnicized social position. I chose this name to imply that Roma in this village is seen in the image of the 'striving Roma', also that this thesis focuses on women's own struggles.

strive toward “decent work.” During the socialist era, their traditional profession was considered “an integral, useful activity” for local relations, therefore more in line with the regime's ideals about “decent work.” In line with this, the community appeared as the “striving Roma” on the right path of cultural and economic assimilation assigned to Roma in general in the socialist state (Kovai 2017a, 17–18; Ladvenicza 1955, 227–38). From the late 1960s, industrialization processes and politics of assimilation fundamentally rearranged their former sources of livelihood, and local Roma were drawn into surrounding factories in the agglomeration (Bódi 1998). Neoliberal restructuring soon realized brought impeded access for Roma to formal wage work in general and for Roma at Sebesmankó too. However, as the agglomeration economy has always provided more opportunities to find jobs than in more deprived rural regions, the “striving Roma” position lived on in local narratives: the lowest segments of surrounding large public and private actors slowly began to absorb Roma's labor at Sebesmankó. However, structures of institutional marginalization of Roma have been definitive at Sebesmankó too (Kovai 2016). Roma at Sebesmankó only has impeded access to institutions of public provisions – such as to education, health, and bureaucratic systems. Even in formal wage labor, they only access jobs at the underbelly of the labor market, where they are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of times of crisis.

The ideals' of the “striving Roma” is definitive in the lived experiences of Roma at Sebesmankó: their families' positions are organized and hierarchized in relation to the extent they strive towards accessing and preserving formal labor positions. Consequently, respectability (Skeggs 1997) in the community is earned if a family's source for social reproduction is not engaging in informal, „gypsy” ways of living-making. However, since these labor positions are at the margins, with impeded access to maneuver in other social domains, the struggles for appearing “decent” in wage work is markedly co-constitutive with assets and positions in intimate and kin relations. Therefore, from Roma women's lived experiences it is

visible that the position of the “striving Roma” comprises a joint struggle for social reproduction and respectability: the sort of strategies Roma women deploy in the world of wage work and the sort of assets they can or cannot capitalize upon in intimate and kin relations co-constitutively structures their capacity for realizing economic stability and symbolic recognition within the community. In this complex struggle, Roma women have gendered and ethnicized room of maneuver: their strategies for preserving fundamentally low-valued and insecure labor positions mainly in cleaning or catering; their relations to their kin, their position and acts in marriage and motherhood are all fundamental and co-constitutive aspects of the route Roma women are navigating through for reproduction and respectability.

Within the scope of this research, I speak of the lived experiences of Roma women as gendered and racialized subjects who are included to capitalist production through their marginalization and devaluation in their labor relations and social reproduction. I aim to reveal the personal histories and narratives of Roma women at Sebesmankó in a community of which relations and livelihood have been reconfigured by structural forces in several ways from 1960s. In line with this, my research aims to respond to this question: *What are the routes through which Roma women at Sebesmankó struggle for the interconnected goals of social reproduction and respectability in life worlds where wage labor and intimate relations are intertwined?* With follow-up questions as: How do they make sense out of their roles and room of maneuver in labor and intimate relations? What are their ways to achieve respectability? In order to answer these questions, I conducted ethnographic data for 2.5 months in the village where my mother grew up, which I refer to with the fictitious name “Sebesmankó”.

Due to the visibly demolishing social, political and economic effects on Roma women ensuing the regime transition, many have investigated their marginal social position. Sociological studies have mostly focused on the educational, labor market, health care and welfare structures reproducing their disadvantages (Kovai and Vígvári 2017, 124), often in

response to their public perception on their willingness to childbearing, denial of work, or for their cultural and economic integration (Kóczé 2014). Studies like this emphasized that as a result of structural disadvantages, Roma women occupies the least prestigious and unstable positions on the labor market, most often in the public sector (Kertesi 2000; Kóczé 2016; Kóczé, Neményi, and Szalai 2017). Yet the lived experiences and narratives of Roma women in marginal positions is only picked up on by a few, rather ethnographic works (Bakó 2017; Feischmidt 2013; Kóczé 2011). This ethnographic research aims to give an account of the level of lived experiences, yet one that is informed by political, economic and cultural structures of marginalization in the semi-periphery of global capitalism.

In this thesis, from a multi-scalar approach, I talk about Roma women's joint struggle for social reproduction and respectability in the sphere of labor relations and everyday life. I rely on critical theories of social reproduction and labor, and ethnographic methods of oral history and participant observation. The theoretical concepts are from three interconnected fields: social reproduction in capitalism (Bhattacharya 2017; Federici 2017); "otherings", differentiations and alterations in capitalism along space and time, labor sectors and racial and gendered lines (Hall 1996; Rajaram 2018; J. Ferguson and Li 2018); and "affectivity" in terms of respectability and intimate and kinship relations (Skeggs 2014; Skeggs 1997; Roschelle 1997).

My thesis is structured as follows. In the first chapter, I outline the academic discussion on marginalized subjects along gender and/or ethnic lines in Hungary and the positionality of this research within this discussion, and its specific contributions. The second chapter entails my methodological approach and my research position. The third chapter focuses on the contextualization of my research; the description of the Roma community at Sebesmankó as embedded in the interplay of social, economic, and cultural processes on state-level from the 1960s. The fourth chapter is my analysis, focusing on the lived experiences of Roma women as



a joint struggle for social reproduction and respectability. In the fifth chapter, I summarize and draw the main conclusions of my research.

# 1. POSITIONING THE RESEARCH WITHIN THE DISCUSSION ON GENDERED AND/OR ETHNICIZED SOCIAL POSITIONS IN HUNGARY

Due to the visibly demolishing social, political, and economic effects on Roma – and women in particular – ensuing the regime transition<sup>2</sup>, the 2000s was a fertile period for Roma-focused research in Hungary. The first generation of scholars after the Kádár-regime dominantly carried out quantitative sociological works on Roma. Without being exhaustive, the knowledge production of Szalai, Bihari, Kovács, and Kertesi is inevitable for the historical contextualization of my research (Szalai 2000; Bihari and Kovács 2006; Kertesi 2000). Although I situate my thesis as relatively distant from these works in its theoretical and methodological considerations, I recognize their contribution to revealing exploitative and exclusionary structures affecting Roma throughout the last decades.

Their scholarship on critical social policy studies and institutional inequalities is pivotal in discovering the vulnerable socio-economic situation of Roma jointly shaped by political and economic power arising from the regime transition. However, as influential has been their study of exclusionary structures, as little it has been a goal on understanding other social levels in Hungarian Roma-focused sociology (Kovai 2017b). The scope of research on Roma exclusion dominantly remained at the institutional level of state power – that of health care, education, welfare, and structures of employment. Global long-scale processes and the level of lived experiences have been of marginal concern in Hungarian Roma-focused sociology. Multi-scalar ethnographies, such as this research, provide insights into ways in which certain structural processes shape the level of lived experience in certain ways.

Let me turn to works in which the lifeworld of Roma is a central concern. I am particularly in dialogue with Bakó's anthropological study on the Roma community of

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<sup>2</sup> On this, I elaborate more in the Contextualization chapter (III).

Sebesmankó (2017b). Bakó investigates the Roma of Sebesmankó from the perspective that they are a Carpathian Romungro community whose most pertinent group identity is their strong work ethic, as a part of which she also focuses on the labor market strategies of Roma women. She draws on official archival sources, participant observation, and oral history interviews in her analysis. I build on Bakó's historical contextualization and archival data collection and join her in the emphasis on oral narratives. Similarly, Feischmidt's fieldwork (2013) stands out for me in her focus on the scale of narratives of Roma women. She carried out oral histories with Roma women living in peripheral microregions, who performed a degree of mobilization on various routes – that of wage work, marriage and church. Feischmidt's research points out that even those who somehow achieved a degree of symbolic recognition or economic security only had limited space for their aspirations. I join their methods of close reading the everyday life and cognitive structures of Roma women, this is what I partially aim to carry out in this research.

However, from divergences in theirs and my research perspective, I could better understand that epistemological dispositions deeply determine the development and outcomes of an ethnography<sup>3</sup>. In both Feischmidt's and Bakó's research, oral narratives are displayed, but there is scarce attention to the specific history of structures that inform the social positions these women inhabit. Although Bakó shares a critical perception of the ethnicized categorizations of local power in the socialist regime, her rhetoric builds on the “inner world of Roma” and their strategies in the structures of the “outer world of non-Roma” saturated with racial prejudices. Feischmidt gives a brief description of the local context, but she scarcely contemplates on structural processes in which local relations of Roma women's accounts are embedded. In their work, oral histories appear as navigations of a multiply disadvantaged group in the structures of non-Roma society without regard for alterations in space and time. My argument is different than that. I argue that Roma women's oral histories are to be comprehended together with the

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<sup>3</sup> I must acknowledge that the temporal scope of Bakó's research is beyond mine (app. one year altogether), an obvious difference shaping the development of research.

transformations of the complex macro-and micro-scale relations shaping the level of Sebesmankó, which is the primary context of their sense-making and self-worth.

Kovai's (2017a) research adds this piece to the puzzle. Kovai conducted anthropological research for a decade in a Roma community in a rural location. At the foci of her relational approach is the "Gypsy-Hungarian distinction", which, at the intertwining of ethnic and class dimensions, distinguishes social positions and defines local relations in rural areas. Along these lines, being a Roma is associated with a certain social status at the bottom of the social hierarchy, opposite to any formation of the Hungarian status. She shows how structural forces shape this ethnicized social position. Kovai presents the lifepaths of a Roma family's daughters, their struggle with mobilization of kinship and other resources, and forms of vulnerability at different points in the prolonged structural and economic crisis since the regime change (2017a:92–97).

Another work in which my research is in dialogue is Czerván's (2016) multi-scalar ethnography on lower-class rural women's devalued reproductive roles in the labor market and beyond. She outlined that the capitalist restructuring at the regime change has brought extra burdens for socially and spatially disadvantaged rural women through their mediation into paid work. However, this happened with the symbolic and economic devaluation of both of their paid and unpaid feminized labor. By relying on socialist feminism and feminist rural geography, she emphasizes that these structural inequalities are not by-products of the capitalist systems but inherent elements of it. Her argument and its theoretical framework are in line with my research; however, my subjects are differently positioned along the lines of ethnicity.

I join the discussion of others above on Roma and/or women either due to their focus and methods on lived experiences of Roma, or their contribution to understanding the level of structure or both. I contribute to this discussion by focusing on the interplay of structure and the level of Roma women's lived experiences with the help of particular theoretical ideas and

methodological approaches. In terms of theory, I position my analysis of Roma women's life worlds within the Marxist literature on social reproduction. Through this theorization, I aim to reveal Roma women's social position and narratives as embedded in local relations shaped by the interplay of hegemonic social, economic and cultural production. I will explain specific structural dynamics from the 1960s that produce "the female Roma reproductive worker" in Hungary. I will look at historical specificities and transformations of the pivot upon which capital accumulation relies – free labor easily available for exploitation, of which reproduction is as cheap as possible. This cheapening has at least two key means in capitalism: the creation of surplus populations who struggle to sell their body power in a marginalized position; and the cheap appropriation of reproductive work, that of the provision of generational and everyday life cycles (Marx 1867; Federici 2017; Bhattacharya 2017; S. Ferguson 2017; Fraser 2016). I argue that capitalism and forms of marginalization within are to be understood through alterations and differentiations in space and time, across scales, labor sectors, and in line with gender and race. To gain a historically specific conjunctural understanding of Roma women's social position in Hungary and at Sebesmankó I rely on theorizations of the dialogic processes of value regimes and economic production (J. Ferguson and Li 2018; Rajaram 2018; Hall 1996). For the analysis of lived experiences of Roma women I further rely on the literature of "affect" and intimate and kinship relations, explaining contradictory and complex cognitive structures at the level of lifeworlds (Beverley Skeggs 1997; Roschelle 1997). The aim for understanding lived experiences in my ethnographic research is mirrored by my methodological approach of feminist oral history (Abrams 2010), at which foci are the narratives of marginalized groups shaped by particular sociohistorical contexts. In line with that, this research of Roma women accounts for gendered and racialized subjects' joint struggles for social reproduction and respectability by undertaking the reproduction of others in devalued positions.

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND POSITIONALITY: “DAUGHTER OF ILI” IN HER MOTHER’S VILLAGE

My thesis is based on ethnographic data I conducted for 2.5 months in the village where my mother grew up, to which I refer with the fictitious name “Sebesmankó”. My childhood memories from here and my mother’s life trajectory inspired me to do this research. Back then I many times listened to my mother and her female relatives talking about work. Whether one was employed and where so, was one of the key topics on family gatherings. “We're not like those gypsies, Ili, we work”, was usually the response if my mother was not employed at the time. I also witnessed my mother's struggles on the labour market – from full-time motherhood to black employment; from Roma-focused social policy programmes to unemployment; to public work; then care work in public institutions and eventually unemployment again. The complex experiences and narratives of a marginalized social group I witnessed made me chose Sebesmankó as the field of my research. Experiences that are invisible, not part of political and social discourses – yet which discourses largely permeate their lives.

My personal attachment and kinship relations evidently determined my access to the field of my research. I was in good contact with my closest relatives whom we used to visit when I was a child – my mother's siblings and cousins – but I did not gain access to interviews and unstructured talks through these relations directly. It turned out that they mainly have not maintained contact with local Roma outside their closest kinship relations.

My first steps on the field happened with the help of Meli. Meli is the Roma mediator at the local civil organization that focuses on the Roma community of Sebesmankó. This organization, with the involvement of local Roma runs programs for the education and support of Roma children, adults, and a group for mothers. I first contacted the head of the civil organization who then directed me to Meli. Meli is a local Roma and has been employed for 3 years at the organization. Before, she was employed in menial, low-skilled and care positions

in public and private institutions, most often with other Roma women from Sebesmankó. I already had known of her by sight as a child. I later learned that we are relatives, my grandmother and her grandfather were siblings, due to which we built rapport easily. At the first two occasions of my fieldwork, Meli accompanied me to visit families. In return, a few weeks later I helped her with running micro research initiated by the civil organization focusing on school segregation in the village.

My research goal was to not only focus on one unjust moment of labor relations in Roma women's life at Sebesmankó, but on their life trajectories and personal histories to reveal a more complex understanding of gendered and racialized subjects' lived experiences. Therefore, my ethnographic research is divided into two main parts – ethnographic data collected through “unstructured talks” on informal and formal get-togethers and visits (all together with at least 18 women); and oral histories of 12 Roma women. My interviewees are of different age (between 30 and 85), economic status and marital status, however, as I will elaborate in my analysis, all of them are responsible for reproductive work in the household, and all of them have worked or currently employed in paid reproductive roles, with a certain degree of precarity.

The data gathered through “unstructured conversations”(O'Reilly 2014, 125–32) usually happened through the everyday moments I unexpectedly became a part of. As a mutual help, I often accompanied Meli to visit mothers to discuss local school issues where I could be a part of their conversation. These women already knew me – either from earlier or they got to know me through my research. The more formal part of the talk was that Meli asked these mothers about their concerns with the local school – in terms of the quality of teaching, issues between children in class, and the ratio of Roma and non-Roma kids. Here, the topics that were of interest to them and opinions they shared were already important insights to my research. After a while these visits gradually turned into a rather informal, seemingly everyday

conversation between Meli and the women. Here, I did not stay completely passive, I listened actively, reacted with nodding and asked follow-up questions if I wanted to understand a certain topic more. Besides these visits, we usually ran into others on the streets with whom Meli maintained a good contact and had a talk with them. One time a woman asked us to accompany her to the grocery store while she raged about her family to us, telling me also how pretentiously they behaved at the time I visited and interviewed them. Another important “unstructured talk” happened when I reached out to a woman with the intention to conduct an interview, but after a few attempts she seemingly was not comfortable with that. She instead let me visit them in the company of her sisters and mother. They knew my mother well, so they had questions too – mainly about my parents’ well-being; if they work; and about how I got into an elite university. I asked them about work and their everyday life, but more relevant was when they brought up topics – such as high prices; burdens of working in a hospice house; raging over Ukrainian fleeing to Hungary. A few of these “unstructured talks” turned out to be highly valuable in participating in and observing their social life, gaining knowledge about their relations, struggles and conflicts, which might have not come up during interviews.

The oral histories I conducted with women complemented my research with in-depth data. However, my motives for exploring Roma women’s oral history were more than that. As Abrams (2010:18–33) remarks, oral history is a “dialogic process” aimed to detect the layers of interpretations, subjectivity, and emotional responses attached to people's remembrance and narrations shaped by a certain socio-historical context. Oral history in this sense is a dialogic process not only between the interviewer and the narrator, but also between the narrator and certain external discourses having shaped their past lived experiences and thus their current subjective perceptions. However, it is precisely because public and cultural discourses inform the narration of life trajectories and the construction of the self and its placement within personal relations (Summerfield 2004), the aim of oral history should not be searching for the “truest,



authentic voice”. These methodological concerns of oral history were in line with my research focus to reveal the patterns of sensemaking of the lived experiences of a marginalized social group. The interviews focused on the narration of lifepath, with special regard on the labor positions throughout their lives; intimate relations; moments of struggles and happiness. I did not prepare pre-scripted questions for the interviews, as my aim was to have them narrate their complex personal histories in the modes and rhythm that felt right to them at the moment.

Besides, in my research I aimed to gather information about the local relations, economic, political, and cultural processes shaping the lives of women. For this, I conducted interviews with the mayor, the family counselors, and the head of the local Roma-focused civil organization. In addition, here I also relied on data about the village conducted through former research.

My research position was permeated by “in-betweenness”, bringing both advantages and disadvantages of being “caught between structures faced with two different ways of relating” to my research subject (Strathern 1987; Abu-Lughod 1991, 53). I usually went to Sebesmankó at least twice a week, and spent a few hours there, most of the time only with women, mostly in their homes. I felt that to many I was familiar – probably a distant relative, however still a stranger. When someone met me the first time, they would usually give me inquisitive glances trying to figure out whose daughter am I. When I said that “I am the daughter of Ili” most Roma women – especially those over 40 – were delighted and noted that I resemble my mother. This position helped building rapport and find the tone of my interviewees. However, this insider-outsider position also had its drawbacks. In the position of “the daughter of Ili” I was seen as part of my local kinship, a family toward which my interviewees had their own relationality. How some Roma women selected from their life stories they shared with me might have meant what and how they would share with my family or my mother.

On another level, as Borland points out, feminist oral history should avoid relying on a “likeness of mind” rooting in womanhood, where in fact “there is a great deal of difference (Borland 2002, 328–29). This is also in dialogue with Abrams’ (2010) problematization of “empowering”, “giving voice” and overgeneralizing sisterhood, which in fact misinform the feminist goal toward picking up on women’s narratives. Despite my initial familiarity with the stories, lives and subjectivities of Roma women in the village, over the past 10 years the gap widened between my lived experiences and that of the women of Sebesmankó, or of my own mother. This also, might have determined what they shared with me and what they did not. The research has limitations, some of which I outline here. Due to the focus on women, this research can only partially reveal the complex relations of the community, mainly from their perspective and in relation to their position. Moreover, since one of the main aspects from which I focus on Roma women’s lived experiences is wage work, I originally planned to accompany them to work to gain a first-hand insight into their labor processes. However, it turned out to be a way too ambitious undertaking, due to the relatively little time on my hand. Covid-19 has been a hindrance to research to a certain extent. I was unable to go to Sebesmankó for two weeks because either I got the virus or people in the village. Another limitation is that my research only maps the relations of local class positions at Sebesmankó based on my ethnographic data on Roma women and on my secondary understanding from preliminary research, and narratives of local actors. I believe that an extensive understanding on the relative position of the locality and of the local Roma community within require further research.

### 3. CONTEXTUALIZATION: TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE POSITION OF THE “STRIVING ROMA” AT SEBESMANKÓ FROM THE 1960S

#### **Literature on understanding gendered and racialized marginalizations in contemporary processes of capitalism**

In this chapter, I try to understand the social position of Roma at Sebesmankó in line with respective structural transformations affecting Roma in Hungary from the 1960s. For that I am drawing on Marxist and feminist ideas of social reproduction. In line with Luxemburg’s legacy – later picked up by Marxist feminists (Fraser 2014; Federici 2017) and those concerned with the ecology of capitalism (Patel and Moore 2019) – the means of maintaining capital accumulation goes beyond the act of appropriating the value produced by wage labor in economic production. The pivot upon which accumulation relies is also the extension of the logic of capital to the sphere of reproduction: that of the conditions and resources vital for everyday and generational life cycles and as such also for exploitable labor (Bhattacharya 2017). The central concept of my analysis of Roma women’s lived experiences is social reproduction. Meaning the alterations of social reproduction, especially how a certain population’s – Roma women’s – social reproduction has been managed and organized in a specific space and time at state-level and what that means in the level of lived experiences.

A key means of organizing social reproduction in the interest of capital is primitive accumulation. Populations, dispossessed of the means of reproducing themselves outside the logic of capital are forced to sell their body power within. Land grabs, depeasantization, revolutionizing production technologies, and outsourcing work to peripheric regions are all means of increasing exploitations, and thus cheapening and displacing labor. It is all about social reproduction from the aspect of creating constant struggles for certain subjects for reproducing themselves and others, in insecure life situations. Federici (2017) updates Marx’s account and highlights that we need to look at the act of primitive accumulation, that of

producing and maintaining certain subjects' struggle for social reproduction as a continuously constitutive element of capitalism. Disposessions of the means to socially reproduce, meaning the creation of insecure and devalued life situations is not only a means of managing the crisis of capital accumulation, but it is an ongoing experience for some that motivate the cycle of capital accumulation. The devaluation of certain groups' reproduction ensures that they are easily mobile and available for low-wage labor. In Marxist terms, this is the act of creating "reserve army of labour" out of devalued populations, who, in need of selling their labor to a bare minimum of subsistence, would undertake devalued and unstable jobs, which serves to control the active labour activity in stagnation and over-production. This means that the position of devalued populations (in relation to formal and secure positions) heavily depends on the needs and up and downs of capital accumulation in the given historical conjuncture. Capitalism produces precariousness, unemployment and underemployment, marginalizations and devaluations, and this is "the pivot upon which the law of demand and supply of labour works" (Marx 1867, 434,447; Foster, McChesney, and Jonna 2011).

I argue that to grasp the historicity of the multi-scalar and complex relations shaping Roma women's social position at Sebesmankó; we should not stop at a general account of capital accumulation. Hall revises Gramsci's legacy (1996) and argues that his scholarship is adequate to analyze race, ethnicity and gender in capitalism. Hall's starting point is that when looking at a "particular historical conjuncture," we are to understand the dialectic relation of the structure and "spheres of complex superstructure" according to Gramsci: various levels, sites, moments, and meditations of any historically specific society in the development of the respective conjuncture (427–33). This is in line with Federici's argument (2017), that capitalism inherently builds on the differentiation and hierarchization of populations. Therefore, we have various histories of primitive accumulation, which are all necessary to understand the complexity of the capitalist system. Similarly, Hall argues that capitalism "adapts to, harness

and exploit the particularistic qualities of labour power” in any historically specific society. This Hall refers to as the “culturally specific quality of class formations” that capitalism builds into its regimes. Hence ethnicization and racialization is an interaction of structure and superstructure serving the devaluation of certain populations in the cycle of accumulation in a specific moment in space and time.

Although Marx did an economic categorization in the forms of surplus population – latent, stagnant, and floating –, his lack of consideration of changes and differentiations across diverse historical contexts and also key elements configuring life beyond wage work has long been critiqued (J. Ferguson and Li 2018; Floya 1980). As Rajaram (2018) highlights, the concept of a “reserve army of labor” suggest an economic understanding, however, the production of a surplus population is rather an interplay of economic and ideological production that creates ways through which certain groups are surplus to the value regimes in specific historical points in capital accumulation and are “included through their exclusion”(Rajaram 2018, 627–29).

Capitalism not only differentiates between populations, but also between sectors within the mode of production, incorporating “backward sectors” in the social regime (Hall 1996). These “backward sectors” are in which daily and generational reproduction is taken care of. In parallel with how capitalism relies on the cheapening of specific surplus populations’ body power, Hochschild teaches us that the low value associated with reproduction and care is not due to its surplus nature or to the simplicity of the work. Rather it is due to the cultural and ideological production in line with economic relations, that renders it as cheap as possible (Hochschild 2000). The value of social reproduction and labour organized around is hidden in capitalist relations: devalued, gendered, racialized, unpaid, low-paid and free caring labor makes capitalist accumulation possible. The processes that take place in the sectors of reproduction in a given society, meaning who performs reproductive tasks at home and in the

paid labour market, and how the reproduction of certain social groups is organized at the state and local level, and what livelihood strategies this leads to, are important for understanding the history of those populations that capital renders devalued and surplus to its requirements in labor relations at specific historical points (J. Ferguson and Li 2018).

In what follows, I will outline multiple ways specific resources and relations have been combined and transformed on a state- and a local level from the 1960s in Hungary, that has determined the trajectory of Roma women's social position at Sebesmankó. In the capitalist mode of production ethnicity and race are often the base of differentiations between those who has access to stable employment and those who are more likely to be employed at a degree of uncertainty. However, we will see, that the relation of ethnicized social positions to the world of formal labor largely depends on state management of social reproduction – health care, education, social policies – and on attendant value regimes hierarchizing social groups at specific points of capital accumulation. Through a conjunctural analysis of a range of political, economic and cultural dynamics of Hungary from the 1960s I visibilize the struggles of a gendered and ethnicized group for social reproduction, on whom in fact reproductive work is being pushed. My research draws on changes and processes in the semi-periphery of global capitalism along spatial, gendered, racial, and class dimensions that created the breeding ground for Roma women's struggles for social reproduction.

### **The researched locality: Sebesmankó**

Sebesmankó is a small village of approximately 3,000 people located in the agglomeration of Budapest, at the foot of the Pilis Mountains. Although the village could scarcely ever provide jobs – only for a few employed in local public institutions and involved in small-scale agriculture; the livelihood of habitants has been dependent on the opportunities provided by the surrounding towns and Budapest (Bakó 2017, 129–32). It is approximately 30

km away from the capital, which is more or less an hour and a half by public transport: 40 mins with the local train, “HÉV”, and then a 25 mins bus route from the neighboring town where I grew up. My father, a nature-lover, used to say that “we have the Pilis in our mouths”, yet how little we live with the opportunity. Just as in my childhood, on my field trips to Sebesmankó, the familiar bus route was filled with hikers coming from the city to nature on the weekends; and with Roma women going to the city to work on weekdays. However, an altogether two and a half hours-long commute adds a lot to the working hours from a closer look. It is scarcely a burden for those with cars, 30 minutes if there is no heavy traffic. No wonder the village is an attractive destination for formerly urban families for relocation who intend to maintain their work in the city<sup>4</sup>.

According to former research, the village is divided into two distinguishable socio-economic positions: on the one hand, Roma and non-Roma “autochthon” low-income families, among whom a small number of families are of Serbian, German, Slovakian, and Croatian origins. On the other hand, from the 1990s onward, “newly” settled, high-income, educated families mostly moved from the capital who started building houses on former mowing areas sold by the municipality (Bakó 2017, 49–51). It is a fact that low-income Roma and non-Roma families are similarly positioned economically, especially in comparison to the “newly settled populations”. However, my observations suggest that in the light of complex local historical changes, ethnic and class-based differentiations are apparent in local families' social position, both across interethnic relations and within the Roma community.

In capturing state-managed transformations affecting Roma in Hungary in general, I will reconstruct the microhistory of the local context, Sebesmankó. However, as shown, the furthest reaches of the narratives of Roma women are the surrounding towns where they mainly work or go to official bodies, get medical service or other; then interethnic relations of the

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<sup>4</sup>Of course the more families who move here who work in Budapest, the bigger the traffic in the morning and afternoon.

village and moving inwards; the nuanced relations of the Roma community. The complex microhistory of these is the primary context of Roma women's life journeys, the relations in which the narration of the self, the life story, takes place.

### **“Striving Roma” under the socialist regime on the “road of assimilation”**

In line with what seems to be the collective narrative of the village, my interviewees painted a nostalgic picture of the “old times” of the socialist era where “all the five nationalities lived together in peace”. In accordance with the local mayor’s and my interviewee’s narratives, at the foci of this nostalgic remembrance, on the one hand, there is a sense of community and respectability attached to the traditional sources of Roma’s livelihood, of which they gradually have been dispossessed by their involvement into the underbelly of the regional labor market from the late 1960s onwards. On the other hand, from then on local Roma and non-Roma seemed to struggle together for social reproduction in similar positions in wage work.

The state socialist regime, attempting to keep pace with the booming global economy, needed Roma's labor due to the labour shortage in large-scale industrialization and agricultural production. Under the flag of assimilation politics, Roma population was identified as a social problem to be solved by “proletarianization and de-ethnicization” meaning their cultural and economic melting into the proletariat (Szombati 2018, 30–38). However, the Roma community of Sebesmankó was given a better assessment from local authorities, hence their traditional occupation was somewhat in line with the socialist idea of “decent work”. Blacksmithing entailed the making and selling of various types of lath nails and bolts: such as for straps, horseshoes, railway sleepers and gratings (Ladvenicza 1955). According to the mayor, their activity was an “integral part of the microregional economy”, for which Roma at Sebesmankó outstood in comparison to the Roma at the neighboring town. Among other “gipsy activities” pursued by for instance, Roma in the neighboring village, blacksmithing was considered as a



rather decent occupation in official sources of local authorities, worthy of support and formalization. This meant that the Roma at Sebesmankó, in contrast to the Roma in the neighboring town's settlement, was somewhat later involved in industrial production. From the 1960s, blacksmithing became a listed occupation of socialist industry. Roma men condensed into a blacksmith cooperative and made various iron tools and parts for the locals and for iron traders at Budapest (Bakó 2017, 60–61).

Blacksmithing is a prominent part of nostalgia attached to “old times”, evoking a sense of “peaceful living together” across interethnic relations in the village in which Roma had a respected way of living. However, the sense of nostalgic remembrance, from the distance of the present, tends to erode the differences in the positions of local Roma and non-Roma of the time. What I am getting at is that the position of what I call the “striving Roma” appearing in the sources of local authorities of the time and which lives on in local narratives was nevertheless an ethnicized position, unfolding in material and cultural marginalizations.

The “decent work” of Roma at Sebesmankó has not been accompanied by an unravelling of a range of marginalities in local relations. The Roma was located at the margins of the village in two settlements. In the 1960s, at the outskirts of Sebesmankó, a settlement around the Plandics tér was developed for Roma as part of the settlement eradication program. On the site of the former stables, “Reduced Value” or “CS” flats were built without any comfort. The other settlement was on Szabadsághegy. The Roma families living here moved into the houses of poor Swabian families who had been displaced. These were either occupied or bought from the municipality. The buildings in both settlements were in poor condition, usually mud-brick houses with a room and kitchen and without water access (Bakó 2017, 60–61). In the local school, Roma children were often in remedial classes. For the reproduction of Roma families, blacksmithing did not create enough income; thus it was supported by informal activities. These informal activities mark out another pivotal part of nostalgia – animal husbandry, collecting

and selling the surrounding forests' fruits, plants and mushrooms taken care of by women and children meant a pivotal source of livelihood (Bakó 2009; Bódi 1998). Moreover, seasonal agricultural work through the producer cooperative meant income by transporting Roma women and children to nearby lands for work. These informal activities together with blacksmithing knit ties with the local non-Roma population and neighboring village. The basis for peaceful coexistence was rather a “patron-client relationship”(Szombati 2018, 90–92) in which Roma for a cheap price cultivated the fields and gardens of non-Roma families. The cultural and material hierarchy between Roma and non-Roma during the socialist era woven through local relations here as well, with the difference that in the micro-region, the Roma of the neighboring village, not of Sebesmankó, were at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy.

By the late 1970s, full-fledged industrialization reforms put the livelihoods of Roma at Sebesmankó onto the path of proletarianization too(Bakó 2017, 60–60). The modern locksmith profession gradually supplanted the traditional blacksmithing profession. Most Roma men started to work as unskilled industrial workers and in the shipyard factory of Óbuda. The mass employment of Roma women began by the mid-1970s, mostly as unskilled workers in spinning mills and in several factories in the surrounding towns and at the outskirts of Budapest (Bódi 1998). As mentioned above, earlier Roma women worked already from their childhood, together with their mother, who was considered official “householders”: being responsible for all the duties essential to the regeneration and well-being of the family and for informal activities such as fruit picking and animal husbandry to create income. Roma women’s involvement into wage work is embedded in a global reorganization between production and reproduction, as part of which women’s employment began on a systematic level. In this process, there appeared a growing demand for women’s labor in wage work, whereas the providing the reproduction of the family remained their burden (Fraser 2016). Thus, at the time the lowest sectors of the agglomerational labor market were open to Roma’s labor force. They

could easily find and switch between jobs. Their entrance to the world of formal work, most often along with local low-income non-Roma, was presented in a positive light, as the “striving Roma” on the road of assimilation (Bakó 2017).

Beyond wage work, besides the above-mentioned settlement eradication programs, social policies generally targeted the education of Roma to dissolve what were considered their cultural backwardness and economic disadvantages (Kovai 2016). At Sebesmankó too, according to the mayor, in the 1970s, the local headmaster put great emphasis on the schooling of Roma children – “sometimes with rewards, sometimes with coercion”. Although formal employment gave a sense of security to Roma in general in the socialist regime, the goal of assimilation has not progressed as expected. Roma population only accessed the lowest paying jobs as unskilled workers and other forms of marginalization still prevailed in structures of education and housing (Kovai 2016). Similarly, according to the mayor the statistics on the educational attainment of Roma in Sebesmankó were good, with most local Roma in the mid-1970s having 8 years of primary education and being encouraged to learn a trade – boys in construction, women in sales. Although compulsory schooling was intended to promote mobility in the world of wage labour, even the “striving Roma” of Sebesmankó could not overcome the ethnicized structures of the formal labor market. Nostalgic memories of the equal labor relations of Roma and non-Roma under the regime were mostly confined to the lowest segments of the labor market and “peaceful coexistence” was in fact rather hierarchical in education and housing at Sebesmankó too.

### **Neoliberal restructuring: Roma at Sebesmankó as surplus to “decent” work**

However, the crisis of the capital accumulation realizing in the eighties has brought persistent insecurity and impeded access to jobs not only for Roma in Hungary. The industrial factories available in the micro-regions have been downsized through privatization and

mechanization, and the expertise of micro-regional communities lost any perspective (Czerván 2016; Bihari and Kovács 2006; Kóczé, Neményi, and Szalai 2017; Kertesi 2000). Well-illustrated by the local mayor's recollection that in the early 1990s, there was a class in the local school where none of the students' parents had formal jobs at Sebesmankó. Although unemployment affected non-Roma populations in microregions too, due to a shortage in employment possibilities, Roma's already low-valued and low-paid labor became drastically marginalized, surplus to the labor market (Kertesi 2000; Berkovits 2010; Kóczé 2010): the queue for the new jobs that were slowly emerging was so long that the local Roma were squeezed out from the access of formal wage work, at Sebesmankó too. In addition, practices and processes of contemporary forms of primitive accumulation took place: the depreciation of types of collected and cultivated goods Roma pursued and the enclosure of the commons, which at Sebesmankó meant the declaration of the surrounding forests in the Pilis as national parks, which up until then were important sources of livelihood for Roma, especially in lean times (Bódi 1998).

In parallel, in the 1990s, a neoliberal approach has become the breeding ground of social policies and political narratives on poverty, shaping and organizing social reproduction and, as part, Roma people's – and women's social position in particular ways (Vidra 2018; Szalai 2000). A bifurcated system of social provisions was created, differentiating social groups along with two forms of eligibility. Those citizens who economically contribute to production were eligible for support in their reproduction by state provision as contribution-based social security; private pension schemes; health care (Vidra 2018; Oran 2017). Others without a secure income has been granted provisions based on proven need governed by local authorities (Szalai 2000, 538–41). This typically entailed solidarity types of social policies such as unemployment benefits, early retirement, and disability pensions. As Haney puts it, social welfare has become regulated by the “materialization of need”, meaning strict economic measurements of proven

deprivation (Haney 2002). The differentiation in the management of the economically active and inactive has become the breeding ground of ensuing public discourses around the “deserving” and “undeserving” citizens.

According to Vidra, at the structural level, the generous benefits, including disability pensions, were designed to compensate for the loss of jobs among the active population, which could not sell its labor power in the restructured labour market (Vidra 2018). Disability pensions were also widespread in Sebesmankó, with many Roma women and men officially “exempted” from wage labour. However, based on my observations, this resulted from real health problems. Since other social benefits were far from helping Roma find a stable position in the world of wage labor restructured by capitalist processes, nor even providing a daily living for families, Roma populations were forced into insecure, occasional and black activities. In line with the mayor's recollection, Roma at Sebesmankó was also excluded from formal wage employment, and insecure and black activities became widespread at the time. However, based on my interviewees accounts, these positions often were so demanding that they came with direct deteriorations in the health and well-being of Roma at Sebesmankó. This was a huge burden on their reproduction on top of their already impeded access to infrastructures of public provision – due to the black activities many Roma had no officially valid health insurance, some families still had no access to running water, and often faced ignorant and exclusionary treatment in health care.

The dismantling of former systems of state provision put more burdens on families – on women - to take over care work, whereas the flexibilization of labor relations and insecure living conditions demanded women's participation in the labor market (Czerván 2016). For Roma men in general, job opportunities typically meant occasional and temporal jobs in the booming construction industry in the 2000s (Kovai 2017a). However, since these opportunities only provide temporary income that is not enough for the cyclical revenue for the family, Roma

women's paid work is often a pivotal economic source for Roma families. In order to provide the means of subsistence, Roma women, on top of reproductive roles at home typically started undertaking low-paid jobs in the service sectors for instance as cleaning and kitchen workers (Kóczé 2011, 76). As Kóczé highlights, the involvement of Romani women in paid labor has increased, however, it is not necessarily due to any structural development in their socioeconomic status. Rather, it means that their families' livelihood became so fragile that Roma women responded with undertaking temporary and precarious jobs.

According to the mayor, at Sebesmankó, the municipality started selling off its formerly state-owned parceled mowing lands in the early 2000s, which was typically bought by high-income urban families who wanted to relocate to the agglomeration. The ongoing constructions in the village and later also construction projects around Lake Balaton absorbed the labor of local Roma men during the summer season. Most Roma women at Sebesmankó started fulfilling unskilled jobs at foreign-owned companies recently relocated to the surrounding towns (Magnetec Kft, Marathoon Kft,) or as cleaners or caterers in hospitals and schools at Budapest.

From the 2000s social policies gradually shifted toward workfare politics from welfare. The idea was to put an end to “welfare dependency” by incentivizing the long-term unemployed to work (Vidra 2018, 74). Governmental parties aimed this by reducing unemployment-related benefits and tightening its conditions and public employment with an income significantly lower than the minimum wage. Workfare programs further deepened the divide between the formerly constructed “deserving” and “undeserving”, the latter now punished with public employment.

One's place within the hierarchical system of labor in relation to “deserving” or “undeserving” often intersects with ethnic hierarchizations. This means that most likely Roma people are seen as “undeserving”, most affected by long-term unemployment which is

explained by othering rhetoric of their backwardness and cultural subordination (Váradi 2015; Virág 2015, 18–22). These narratives imply that the origin of Roma people's poverty is their own culture, where hard work is not a value, contrasted to lower-class non-Roma “hard-working little men” (Kovai 2017a). The solution for this is Roma people's integration to the norms of “hard work” (Vidra 2018; Czirfusz et al. 2018). In these narratives, Roma women are seen as who only bear children for social aid, producing and reproducing the undeserving poor (Kóczé 2014). As shown above, Roma at Sebesmankó were also excluded from formal wage employment, but the lower segments of the agglomeration labour market typically offered more opportunities beyond public employment – mainly insecure, gray and black activities – than for Roma populations in rural areas. In line with the mayor's narrative at Sebesmankó, Roma women and men's attempts to create an income even at the price of great struggles in local discourses is remembered in a positive light, as a continuation of their striving to work.

### **“Striving Roma” in the system of national cooperation**

After the crisis of 2008, Fidesz reorganized and stabilized a new political-economic consensus in Hungary, a part of which labor coercion became a marked approach to economic politics (Szalai 2000; Vidra 2018). In this regime, as Szombati (2021) argues, within the promotion of the “work-based society” the regime reorganized the boundaries attached to “deservingness” jointly on economic and symbolic grounds. As opposed to its neoliberal predecessor, public employment under the rule of Fidesz became a tool of “taming and harnessing” the formerly displaced surplus population, by tying them into clientistic relations with local mayors. Thus, racialized populations in local relations can have a place within the boundaries of “deservingness” through their marginalization in the formal wage work.

It also means that in this regime, in a hierarchical manner, citizens' value depends on the ways they can contribute to economic production to such an extent that those who do not

undertake the most devalued positions assigned to them are now punished through austerity measures controlling and devaluing their social reproduction. A good example is the new amendment of the health insurance introduced in 2020, which targets insecurely or informally employed or economically inactive who must pay health insurance contribution themselves. Under the new rules, in the event of a contribution debt exceeding six months, the holder of the invalid social insurance number is excluded from public health care. This means that pending they start paying off their debt, they are charged with the costs of any medical care they need (Rudrich 2020). Many Roma from Sebesmankó have impeded access to health care due to long years spent in black employment they accumulated huge debts of insurance contribution.

Opposed to the undeserving populations outside of official economic activities, thus are the “deserving” ideal citizens and families, in the position of the “hard-working little man” who the strive toward stable labor market positions (Geva 2021; Szikra 2018). The system of public employment might be seen as an effective tool for their “integration” and education to “decent” work. Whether who can access, be informed of, and who is rather welcomed in more secure positions heavily depends on the respective historical socioeconomic context, the local authorities' attitude, and on navigations within local relations (Kovai 2016; Szőke 2015). Deprived regions' Roma families in rural localities are dependent on the grey sector, public employment and on the least prestigious and insecure job opportunities available in the surrounding cities (Bihari and Kovács 2006; Messing 2013). However, their value and sense of security in local relations is determined by them strive toward “decent” work. What this entails for Roma depends on the opportunities of the local context, but under the rule of Fidesz, it is most likely public employment, or the most devalued positions of the underbelly of the respective regions' labor market.

Based on my observations at Sebesmankó, the history of the local interethnic relations offers a more nuanced picture of how the complex material and cultural production on



differentiating citizens along ethnic lines realizes on a local level. The local Roma at Sebesmankó have historically been positioned as the “striving Roma” somewhat closer to the world of formal wage work. As we seen it, it is because their traditional economic activity was considered as a decent work, and also because the agglomerational labor market could more or less absorb their labor – in the most devalued and unstable positions. However, throughout the structural transformations from the 1960s, most Roma at Sebesmankó hardly found secure and long-term employment in times of crisis. Most of them, both younger and older women have already fulfilled several short-term and black activities throughout their life, for which Roma women meant cleaning in hospitals, hotels or hypermarkets, and have been unemployed as well (Bakó 2009; Abcúg 2019).

I have not been at Sebesmankó for the last 10 years. One time when I accompanied Meli to recruit mothers to talk about school issues, she took me to a part of the village that I had not known of before, even though it was just one street down from Szabadsághegy, where my mother's family lives. This part was visibly different due to the renewed or new-build houses compared to the often unfinished, houses in poorer condition at other parts that Roma inhabits. My gatekeeper told me that in the last decade some Roma families could gain an economically stable position to an extent to access loans or a few even the Family Housing Support Program (CSOK) of Fidesz introduced in 2015 which fundamentally target better-off families (Szikra 2018). Seeing this part of the settlement and comparing it with Szabadsághegy or Plandics tér, where some families live in formerly reduced comfort housing still without running water gave me the impression that the Roma community at Sebesmankó has become spatially and economically hierarchized in the last decade. According to the mayor, at Sebesmankó public employment has only been prevalent in the ensuing few years of the 2008 crisis, and with the gradual economic restructuring some local Roma mainly have been able to regain positions in the formal wage work. Only 1-2 families are considered as who are not willing to strive to

“decent” work – the thin layer of “lumpens” as referred to by the mayor and family counselors. The factors that determine who can access “decent” positions and what domains and routes this struggle entails is discussed at the level of lived experiences of Roma women.

#### 4. THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ROMA WOMEN AT SEBESMANKÓ

The position of the striving Roma is what permeates and shapes the material relations and symbolic, cognitive structures of the community. This means that the Roma at Sebesmankó appears in local inner and outer narratives as wanting to grasp the “decent”, formal opportunities available to work at any sociohistorical points in the cycle of capital accumulation. The aspirations to appear in this ethnicized position is a mutually constitutive struggle for social reproduction and symbolic recognition for appearing “decent”, the latter I call a struggle for “respectability” (Skeggs 1997). Thus, the position of the “striving Roma” defines this complex struggle and hierarchizes the community’ relations in terms of who has access to more “decent” means to reproduce themselves.

In this chapter, I mainly build on Skeggs’ ideas about respectability among working-class women who perform low-valued care work and other authors’ investigation of the importance of kinship and intimate relations in marginalized communities and its implications on race and gender. Skeggs writes about women for whom class and gender are not only the signifier of their economic opportunities but also of their movements in the systems of value, of respect, which means that their resources to capitalize upon for symbolic recognition and economic security are always limited. Skeggs’ study is informative for this research in the ways „othered” subjects positioned and rendered devalued engage in value struggles. However, the subjects of my study are in a social position even marked by ethnicity, having other implications on their life worlds. As shown in the previous chapter and as Kovai writes, in a broader sense, Roma is generally marginalized spatially, and in the institutional structures of society, such as education, bureaucracy, the health system and the world of work. Even the “striving Roma” at Sebesmankó typically access only the least valued jobs on the formal labor market which are vulnerable to structural changes. It is precisely because of the structural devaluation of Roma that in ethnically marginalized communities, communal, kinship and intimate relations are

valorized (Kovai 2017a; Roschelle 1997). This is the primary arena of material resources and symbolic recognition in which value-making occurs.

However, the routes for enacting resources for respectability and social reproduction within kinship and intimate relations are gendered. Along this line, Roma women have gendered and ethnicized room of maneuver, which I argue, not only plays out in the world of wage work but is co-constitutive and in tension with the world of affectivity: of everyday and long-term processes in intimate and kin relations. What I mean by this is that the sort of strategies Roma women enacted in the world of wage work and the sort of assets they could or could not capitalize upon in intimate and kin relations jointly structures their capacity in the struggle for social reproduction and respectability. Better or worse access to more stable, more recognized jobs from fundamentally marginalized positions in the world of wage work is just one aspect of the struggle for secure livelihoods and symbolic recognition. The position of a Roma woman's kin in local relations and her relation to her own kin, whom she is married to and how she performs as a wife and mother are fundamental aspects of the gendered and ethnicized route Roma women are navigating through for reproduction and respectability.

What are the routes through which Roma women at Sebesmankó struggle for the interconnected goals of social reproduction and respectability in life worlds where wage labor and intimate relations are intertwined? In the following, I will concentrate on three life trajectories to answer this question: of Joli, Andi, and Margit. Through their life trajectories, I do not only want to show the determinative differences in their room of maneuver, but also the convergences: to a certain degree, each woman had struggled to appear "decent" in more or less marginalized positions in the world of wage work and life beyond. Below are personal accounts of women, whose struggle over property and propriety is central to the biological and social reproduction of labor and to reproductive work in the domain of wage work, but also subject to act out the ethnicized and gendered order of things (Skeggs 2019). Through this analysis I show

lived experiences of women through whose bodies projects of capitalism are performed because they want to live a “decent” life.

### **Joli – the struggles of a „decent worker” and a „caring mother”**

Not many I had a chance to talk with over their 60s. Lujza, with her venerable 85 years is way beyond what the expected age to reach in the village. Besides, only a few of the “old-timers” in their 70s are still alive. Joli was one of them. She lives next to Plandics square, on the formerly reduced comfort row of houses. Her narrative displays a life trajectory where reliance on kinship networks did not seem to be at the center of her struggles, but rather her navigation in non-Roma arenas of wage work to be a “decent” worker and a caring mother. Her narrative also gives an account of how affective and intimate relationships are closely intertwined with Roma women’s struggle for a livelihood and long-term social reproduction and how it affects one's path in the world of wage labour.

Through her narrative, the more “traditional” but indeed gendered and ethnicized roles of care in the struggle for respectability and social reproduction become visible as she navigated the tangled intricacies of life from the “old era” to the “new world”. In line with the collective remembrance, Joli shared nostalgic sentiments toward the time women became involved in the labor market in surrounding factories. Based on their account, besides the more equalized labor relations between local Roma and non-Roma, they attach a sense of self-worth and security that entering of formalized labor gave. Joli’s own words mirror it:

*“I started at the flax weaving factory (...) I was there for ten years. 10 years. After that, let's say here, in Sebesmankó, I was the first gypsy who could go on maternity leave. I mean, really. It was such a big thing that even the Hungarian women [in the village] stopped me to congratulate (...) Even if it wasn't big money, it was still money. (...) Because yes, I decided that my children would not go to school in the way I did [in*

*poverty], that I would work for them when I got married, so that they would have everything. And I did.” (Joli, 2022)*

What else this quote mirrors is her strong drive toward caring for her children, which is woven through her narrative about the following stages of her life. “Giving everything to her children” meant not only a strive in her labor trajectory for creating enough income but also a “double burden” in everyday life of performing wage work and reproductive work at home (Lombardozi 2020; Valiavicharska 2020; Fraser 2016). The reconciliation of the two sometimes meant undertaking night shifts so that she could look after her young children in daytime:

*“On the way home after the night shift I went shopping (...) up here, the little grocery store was open, so I could always come home with fresh breakfast, kifli and everything to make them happy.” (Joli, 2022)*

As Skeggs argued, those without access to the “traditional sources” of value in paid work, who are assigned to do the work of reproduction, care provides the main domain for one’s respectability. This is the battleground on which property and propriety come together, she argues: being dispossessed of their autonomous arenas of value-creating while being excluded from valued positions on the labor market they navigate for respectability through the gendered, and here ethnicized venues assigned: *caring for* and *caring about* others is a central concern in undertaking any job available (Beverley Skeggs 2014, 12; 1997). *Caring for* and *caring about* remained central in Joli’s life even now that her children have grown up. Four years ago, she had moved to Switzerland where she had taken care of domestic duties for her daughter, a single mother working in a local meat processing plant. A few months ago, before my visit she had moved home. Soon after my arrival it came out of her with great concern that she came back to be by her son’s side suffering from severe, prolonged symptoms of Covid-19.

Around the regime transition Joli, as many other women, undertook any available cleaner positions in the capital. At the time when she worked at the Mass Communication Research Centre in Húvösvölgy together with her cousin, she ran into a “Hungarian” woman on the bus who asked her to clean after her ill son who lived at Rózsadomb, an upper-class neighborhood in Buda. She seemed proud to have cleaned such a “big, beautiful apartment”. It reminded me that several women I spoke to asked if I know that mother had cleaned in the theatre in those days, among “big people”. With the downsizing of the factories, the only sectors that all the women were formerly recruited to, a room emerged for a symbolic and material hierarchization in how they navigate through the positions available for them. At the underbelly of the job market in times of fundamentally being rendered surplus to production, undertaking a cleaning position that is devalued on the wider labor market in a space of high-class “Hungarians” came with a degree of self-worth and respect in local relations.

At the age of 42, Joli’s husband died, and she was left alone with her 4 children. Joli’s husband was a blacksmith. Due to the bad working conditions, it has been very common for men to die at a relatively young age. In the process of mourning, Joli was herself debilitated, suffering from a spinal hernia for a year and a half, due to ignorance toward her problem in health care. Unable to work, she was put on disability pension, but it did not bring enough income, so she started making and selling funeral wreaths at home. The making of funeral wreaths was a common informal source of supplementary income in the community in the socialist era, and after when it was difficult to access wage work.

This phase of her life illustrates how life-long and daily struggles for social reproduction is jointly formed by both the domain of labor and material and affective processes of everyday life. Deteriorating labor relations and impeded access to provision of social reproduction brought the loss of Joli’s husband. His loss not only came with material hardships of taking care of the family alone, but also brought her grief and emotional distress realizing in prolonged

illness for her. This prevented her striving toward being a “decent” worker so that she can be a “caring mother” as she could not undertake jobs as before. Reduced to disability pension at a certain point is very common in the lives of Roma men and women at Sebesmankó. As I saw, it is most often the result of relational, co-constitutive tensions between deteriorating labor conditions, impeded access to infrastructures of health care and affective and cognitive structures of everyday life at the margins. As social reproduction theorists argue, this is why we need to understand production and reproduction as tightly interconnected, but often also in tension and contradiction (Schling 2017; Skeggs 2019). Joli, after her recovery went back to work part-time at the local hospice house.

### **Andi – the lack of respect through kinship creating other marginalities**

My gatekeeper, Meli took me to the house of Vilma and her daughters, Andi and Kati. Vilma is in her 60s, and her daughters are in their 40s. They live at the road going to Szabadsághegy. Some of the houses here still have no water, nor did Vilma's until last year. Andi and Gizi have no children due to illness, and they have no husbands either. Through Andi's story those Roma women's struggle realizes who could not appear “striving” in navigating for security and respectability, neither through the support of kinship and intimate relations, nor through wage work.

Andi had her fair share of demanding jobs in the black sector. When I first met her, she told me about how much she loved her new job. She worked as a cleaner in a pastry shop in the next town. She was not registered, but that did not bother her as due to the several years she spent in the black sector she was afraid that reregistration would come with having to pay her accumulated debts. When she worked at Pizza Mix, she once cut her finger, and only in the hospital it turned out that she was not eligible for public health care:



*“I thought I was registered, the ambulance took me away, they operated my hand, and the bill came after. You know what they say now? I was nearly blacked out. It's not even red anymore, I am completely eliminated.” (Andi, 2022)*

When I asked women about the conditions of their jobs throughout their lives, they often gave contradictory accounts on the experience of a certain degree of precarity. Many times, the most “well-paying” jobs they fulfilled were the most precarious. As Meli, my gatekeeper told me, that was the case with Marathoon Kft in the 2000s. Many Roma women worked in the black for a daily wage in the frozen food processing company. As she put it, “that was the best due to the very good money”, and “it was the worst” due to the poor labor conditions directly causing health problems for them. We see here that Roma at Sebesmankó, who are although seen – and see themselves – as aspiring toward formal wage work, do not necessarily access formal positions. They often struggle to sell their body power in devalued labor processes; however, the positions they access often mean being rendered “disposable” to the infrastructures of social reproduction (Wright, 2003; Yates, 2011). As I showed in the previous chapter, at a structural level labor position can be understood through the cycle of capital accumulation, in which in times of crisis, they have impeded access to the world of formal work. However, on the level of lived experiences it is a more nuanced and complex process and needs to be understood together with the relations of everyday life.

Although Andi talked about her job at the pastry shop as she “would never leave it” and she “wants to retire form there”, the next time I met her in a distraught state she told me about her having quit, saying she “had had enough”. I immediately thought that the poor working conditions she fed up with, but it soon turned out that the motive of her rage was beyond that. When she started to talk about her life – in a truly upset state – she centered her narrative around the lack of recognition from her family. Andi’s family have gone through several ruptures and losses both in wider kin relations and in the nuclear family. Andi’s mother raised her and her

sister alone, their father left them and started a new family in the community. Later, after Andi's uncle and his wife died her mother took over the care of their three young children. In this process Andi's family became relatively marginalized in the community, among those who have not been able to capitalize on formal or informal resources compared to others in recent decades. Any resources they had, mainly from Andi's, her mother's and Kati's hard work have been rather enough for a day-to-day living.

As she began to narrate her life, it seemed that the household is socioeconomically based on mutual aid (Roschelle 1997) – they have all contributed for the household's reproduction in material terms and in reproductive duties: during my first visit Andi brought in the wood for the stove, her sister was cooking, and they also share household costs. However, Andi feels a lack of affective bond and emotional support from her family. In her narrative, she connected it to the fact that she felt closer to her father's kin, but she became only a tangential part of his kin relations after his leave. The “low point” in Andi's life was 5-6 years ago. Her father died, her sister became seriously ill, and she divorced her then-husband from the neighboring town, whom she married at 17. She became ill, too, suffering from mental and physical problems. Andi did not want to talk about her former marriage, but “she has been looking for the right man” ever since, due to which both her nuclear family and the wider community treat her with contempt. Although she emphasizes her love for her family with whom they rely on each other for financial security, the constant dishonor she gets from her sister and mother, makes her feel isolated after all. Since this low point, “she has not found her place” and “changed a hundred jobs”. She considers only Meli with mutual trust and support, who has a similarly troubled position in her family because of her sexual orientation.

As Skeggs argues, our “social locations” shapes our route and relations to other social positions and “hence our ability to capitalize further on the assets we already have” (Skeggs 1997). In a Roma community without access to “traditional” ways of being valued, the primary

source of respect and economic security is kinship relations. Breaks in a family and in its affective bonds can have a determinative limit on one's capacity for "striving" – even more if that family has little access for economic and symbolic resources within the community. Moreover, Roma women on the route to gain respect not only have to be "decent workers", but also "decent women". This is even harder to fulfill if one appears in a marginalized household which does not consist of a "normal" nuclear family with a husband and children, and also cannot stabilize its economic position in the long-term. Andi's life illustrates that the struggle for social reproduction and respectability is determined by the interplay of kin, intimate relations and involvement in formal wage labour, in which being disadvantaged in one can be determinative also in the other domains. Andi could not secure a place for herself in the world of formal wage work but has been navigating between mostly black employment and unemployment. What her story tells us about the "striving Roma" is that despite its better access to formal wage work, it is a fundamentally insecure position, in which one's success to preserve economic stability can heavily depend on complex affective and material processes in kin and intimate relations.

### **Margit – a striving nurse**

I got to know of Margit through her mother, Lujza. When I spoke to Lujza and she told me about the fate of her children, Margit's story struck me. Margit's is a nurse in her 50s, married to a local Hungarian man, and it turned out that her children went to the same religious high school I did. Margit lives at the part of Sebesmankó where the newly built houses of Roma are located. Margit's life reflects symbolic and material processes in formal wage labour, kin and intimate relations that has brought her the closest to the position of the "striving Roma" in the struggle for reproduction and respectability.

When I asked Lujza how Margit ended up being a nurse, she told me about the conversation she had with the local priest about her route. When Lujza was in her 40-50s, she was the informal “midwife” helping Roma women in the village to give birth. It was a central role in Lujza's respectability, she told me multiple times that even the doctor congratulated on her supportive role in times of childbirths. As the priest interpreted it to Lujza, Margit probably became attracted to pursue a career in health care due to her mother's midwife activity in the village. Part of the truth is that even though I was eager to hear a similarly idyllic narration from Margit about transmitting the act of care through generations, she did not connect her career to her mother's role. In her story, the well-respected position she achieved rather unfolded from a motive of “striving”. She did not want to work in a factory or learn to be a saleswoman which was the maximum of the room of maneuver Roma women had after finishing school, “she wanted more”. Although I can allow myself to assume that it is hardly a coincidence, that her children also work in the health sector.

Although Margit herself had worked in factories in her young years, to these times she gave less importance in her remembrance, and more vividly she narrated her mobility through the ranks of nursing. Her position, although essentially at the bottom of the health hierarchy, elevates her in communal relations, giving her a degree of respectability that few can achieve in the often informally and formally ethnically exclusionary structures of the labour market. Especially when contrasted with the fact that, many Roma women work in the health sector, but as cleaners and, as it turns out, often undeclared. With her own words:

*“I think that I am authentic precisely because I don't deny where I come from, that I am a gypsy. And despite that, I stand my ground wherever I go to work. And I meet the standards that are set out, in working time, in practice, in everything. And that's what makes me credible, that I have earned respect for myself through my work at all times.”* (Margit, 2022)

This reveals that Margit's success in the labour market goes beyond what is meant by a “striving Roma” position, where respect is awarded for one's ability to hold down to formal paid work over the long term: she has earned herself a – gendered – profession that is typically not ethnicised. Hence it is in the Roma community where the valuation of navigating in the world of wage labour is realized it also means that it mainly remains within its boundaries. Her nursing position in structures beyond the Roma community is a symbolically and economically low-valued labor. For Margit, abandoning her community ties would mean that the value of the struggle to access a not ethnicized position would not be realized for her. She stressed that although some says she “got on her high horse”, she aims to stay an integral part of the community, and “give back” if her expertise is needed when someone is ill.

In addition to her position as a nurse in the world of wage labour, Margit's economic and symbolic prosperity is also linked to her marriage to a Hungarian man. Due to the smaller socioeconomic gap between the social status of Roma and non-Roma in Sebesmankó, marriages between local Roma and “Hungarians” became a perspective in the 1980s. Roma at Sebesmankó were constructed in local narratives as lower in status but on the right path of “becoming Hungarian”, and thus as higher in status compared to the Roma in the neighboring town. In line with this, a marriage to a Hungarian man meant both symbolic and material capital and a degree of mobilization, while marrying a Roma from the neighboring village was rather a shame. As I learned it during my fieldwork, many “halfies” were born in my generation whose parents – mainly mothers – were from the Roma community at Sebesmankó. In fact, my mother and all her sisters married to “Hungarian” men. However, as Skeggs emphasizes, when fundamentally marginalized women gain access to capital through “the marriage market”, it comes with more symbolic and material rewards to capitalize upon, however mainly in interpersonal terms and not in the sense of gaining access to power and capital in wider institutional arenas(Skeggs 1997). This is a limited resource and, as such, might mean being

dependent only on assets of this gendered interpersonal arena between men and women. In contrast, other arenas for agency and prosperity remain or even become more severely limited. Although Magdi gained access to a stable position in the arena of wage labor and preserved a stable position within the Roma community, intimate relations between men and women might even come with isolation from other agency assets.

Not rarely did Roma women's marriage at Sebesmankó come with their relocation from the community to surrounding towns with their new families. The women's movement through social space with the physical relocation might mean their entry to social arenas – through the husband's non-Roma family, for instance – that were formerly fundamentally not open to them. However, it also means that in their daily life, they are no longer “protected” by their kinship, which has hitherto provided them with security and symbolic recognition against the ethnically exclusionary structures of society. The “protection” from then on is reduced to the arena of marriage, which is inherently built on uneven access to economic and symbolic capital. Their capacity to navigate in value systems in which they are not recognized might depend hugely on how their intimate relationship develops.

### **Conclusion of chapter**

In this chapter, I drew from three women's life trajectories in the Roma community of Sebesmankó. As outlined in previous chapters, this community has historically been defined as the “striving Roma”, both by local outer and inner communal narratives. What it means is that Roma here is portrayed as willing to live on “decent” jobs in the world of formal wage labour. At the level of lived experiences, I have focused on what domains, scales and patterns of struggle shape out in the oral histories of Roma women toward appearing as the “striving Roma”. Joli could barely capitalize upon kinship and intimate relations throughout her life and her struggle has been centered around being a “decent worker”, having a “decent” marriage and

being a caring mother. By contrast, Andi's life showed a history in which the lack of supportive kin and "successful" marriage seems to be mutually constitutive with her route in wage work in black employment and frequent change between positions and unemployment. Margit's position is the closest one to the ideals of the "striving Roma" due to her success in formal wage work as a nurse, transmitted symbolic capital in kin and successful marriage with a Hungarian man.

Taken together, the most definitive stories of Joli, Andi and Margit draw out that two complex, interlocking aspects of "striving" are the struggle for reproduction and respectability, the outcomes of which are mutually determined by formal wage labour and by the domains of kin and intimate relations of everyday life. What I mean by this is that although "striving Roma" is associated mainly with aspiring toward "decent" work in world of formal wage labour, my study shows that the struggle for this position goes beyond that domain: symbolic and material processes of the domain of everyday life and relations are definitive and co-constitutive with Roma women's value positioning. As summarized below, it means a couple of things.

Everyday life within communal, nuclear and extended kinship ties is through which meanings of the position of the "striving Roma" are experienced: it is the primary arena of cognitive and affective structures, self-worth, respectability, and valuation of one's acts. As can be seen in the example of Joli, the value of paid domestic work done in an upper-class environment at Rózsadomb realizes only in the communal context, in which Roma women access paid jobs primarily in factories and public institutions, and during the respective period had less access even to that sort of wage work. It is along these lines, therefore, that the community defines both the values and the limits of Roma women's room of maneuver. Margit's employment as a nurse, perhaps one of the least financially and symbolically rewarding professions in the health sector, is both a source of great honor and of Margit's fear – and perhaps also of her community's fear – that she had overstepped the boundaries of what was

assigned to “striving Roma” women. This shows that the community and Roma women within do not interpret the acts of striving toward appearing decent as a pressure imposed on them by the structures of non-Roma society, even though it is visible in structural processes and public discourses of assimilation. The value-making attached to roles assigned to “decent” Roma women is realized rather within the boundaries of the community's norms.

Beyond it is the source of respect, the material significance of kinship ties at Sebesmankó typically does not appear as in marginalized Roma communities where kinship is the primary terrain of sources for social reproduction in the lack of access to wage work (Kovai 2017a; Roschelle 1997). However, it is a source of capital that can be enacted for the navigation toward better accessing formal wage work and appearing as a “striving Roma”. Further striking is that some resources become available precisely through how the community appears as the “striving Roma” in local and regional relations. As with many other women in her generation, Margit's marriage to a local Hungarian man was a visible symbolic and material contribution to her mobility within non-Roma structures in her own life. However, gaining capital through intimate relations with men of higher power might have a danger of being dependent – both in a symbolic and material sense – on this interpersonal arena and having no means in others.

At the center of Roma women's lived experiences thus is a mutual struggle for reproduction and respectability defined by the position of the “striving Roma”. The “striving Roma” position fundamentally means better access to formal wage work; however, it is still a fragile position. Quite a few Roma women from the village have found a relatively stable position in the labor market – but in any case, in the world of low-valued work mainly in cleaning and catering for relatively low wages. However, who has better access to more stable, more “Hungarian” labor market positions from a fundamentally marginalized gendered and racialized position seems to be shaped in everyday life beyond wage work, kinship, and intimate relations. However, in a fundamentally marginalized position, it is quite easy to fall distant from



keeping all aspects of struggle under control. Through divorce, late childbearing, sexual orientation, the lack of “proper” care, and domestic work at home in their private lives, Roma women are easily stigmatized and deprived of respectability in the eyes of the village. This might come with a danger of (partial or temporary) marginalization in the village's relations woven through kinship threads. This illuminates how every day and long-term reproduction and respectability in the better or worse position of the “striving Roma” is still a struggle. A struggle determined by the relationship to family, women's roles, informal, hidden, and material resources available to the individual.

As argued by Ferguson and Li, “making oneself living” comprise the whole social life. Decent work of the “striving Roma” is not simply a “quantum of labor”, but instead entails the cultivation of relations of intimacy and sociality (Ferguson and Li 2018). The particularity of Roma women’s routes in this struggle is that they are abandoned to the feminized role of care, as we seen both on the labor market and in their familial life. Their room of maneuver in appearing “decent” on the one hand, is undertaking positions in cleaning, catering, or nursing in public and private institutions. On the other, through *caring for* and *caring about* their loved ones beyond the job market. This means that they are all creating essential value – through taking care of reproduction of others in familial relations and in wider social arenas, from which they are fundamentally excluded.

## CONCLUSION

This ethnographic study spoke about the lived experiences of Roma women at Sebesmankó in their struggle for social reproduction and respectability. Through a multi-scalar analysis, I investigated the local context as embedded into structural transformations from the 1960s impacting the Roma community in the village. Through that journey I revealed the microhistory of Sebesmankó, which fundamentally defines the sense-making and agency of Roma women within. Looking behind the historical specificities of this community revealed that Roma at Sebesmankó has been constructed as the “striving Roma”. In this position, in line with the assimilational route historically assigned to Roma in Hungary, Roma at Sebesmankó appear as who are willing to strive toward “decent” economic activities, at any point of the cycle of capital accumulation. My contextualization revealed that this position in local narratives of Roma and non-Roma is primarily connected to their traditional profession of blacksmithing, which was considered a “decent” activity in the eyes of local authorities. Later, the job opportunities of the agglomeration labour market helped to maintain the “striving” position of the local Roma. However as shown, the valuation of “striving” does not come with “better” positions: mainly the typically ethnicized and gendered, low-valued sectors of the formal labourmarket is open to Roma from Sebesmankó. Besides, other forms of marginalization still prevail in structures of education, housing and health care.

In line with this, the lived experiences of Roma women have highlighted that the struggle for social reproduction and respect within the community goes beyond the world of formal wage labour and is mutually constitutive with the world of “everyday life”, which weaves gendered paths of struggle. It is in the community that the symbolic and material production of value is realized, and in which the struggle for respectability and social reproduction thus becomes meaningful. The way interpersonal relations develop in Roma women's lives, through which they can or cannot mobilize material and symbolic capital,

largely determines the extent to which they are able to represent their position as “striving”. Roma women at Sebesmankó mainly have access only to jobs at the underbelly of the labor market, entailing precarious and poor working conditions, and often further marginalization in state structures of social reproduction – for instance, being cut off from social security or no access to running water. The loss of a husband or the denial of recognition from family can create ruptures in access to these already devalued positions on the labor market, that can further reiterative everyday experience of degradation (Skeggs 2019).

The politics of this thesis is to understand the lived experiences of subjects rendered at the margins: their ways of economic and symbolic value-making. For this aim, it is crucial to expand our focus from the struggles in labor relations to the domain of everyday life relations. I argue that by concentrating on what it is like to be a Roma woman in Hungary today, we engage with the complex social position of those – entailing both labor and everyday life relations – who are at the margins yet at the center of the functioning of capitalism.

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