“I find it so embarrassing”
Exploring Menstruation in Romani Communities in Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

Romani menstruators have been excluded from menstrual debates both in academia but also in Slovakia, where menstruation is still a taboo topic. To fill this gap, this thesis provides insight into the lived experiences of menstruation among Romani women in Slovakia, focusing on its impact on human rights realisation, namely rights to education, water and sanitation, and freedom from discrimination. The research, conducted through semi-structured interviews with nineteen Romani women, reveals mostly negative perceptions of menstruation by the interviewed Romani women influenced by the insufficient information and menstrual taboos present in their community. Furthermore, the thesis discusses the compounded stigmatisation from racial and menstrual stereotypes, finding that hygiene and access to water are crucial for combating negative perceptions within and outside the Romani community. Additionally, the study notes minimal cultural practices related to menstruation, indicating a need for further research to explore connections with concepts like marime and menstrual slaps. Overall, the findings underscore a commonality in menstrual experiences across different groups, challenging stereotypes and advocating for the inclusion of Romani women in broader menstrual health discussions.

Keywords: menstruation, stereotypes, human rights, lived experience, Roma, Slovakia, stigma

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ABBREVIATIONS

CEDAW - Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CERD - International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

CFR - Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

CRC - Convention on the Rights of the Child

CRPD - Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

EU - European Union

ICCPR - International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

ICESCR - International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

UN - United Nations

UNICEF - United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

UDHR - Universal Declaration of Human Rights

WASH - Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene

WHO - World Health Organization

INTRODUCTION

The Romani people, Europe's largest ethnic minority,[1] continue to grapple with invisibility and underrepresentation in various facets of society. Despite efforts by the European Union, NGOs, civil society organisations, academia, and Romani-led initiatives to address the systematic oppression of the Romani people, their community faces persistent discrimination and marginalisation aggravated by threats of extremism, populism, and securitisation. Throughout history, Romani people were pushed towards the margins of society, falling into a vicious cycle of poverty and systemic racism. Marginalised in multiple dimensions, Romani people encounter exclusion, affecting their quality of life and enjoyment of human rights.

The UDHR grants everyone the right to an adequate standard of living.[2] Yet, the living conditions of most of the Romani population in Slovakia differ from the rest of the Slovak population. Systematically pushed to the margins of society, Roma encounter negative perceptions and discrimination, making them one of the most "undesired" minorities within Slovak society.[3] Living in poor conditions with a society reluctant to help, the Roma are often left on their own, pushed to the outskirts of towns and society. Roma are often perceived as living in substandard housing with oftentimes limited access to essential resources like running water and sanitation facilities. As a result, Roma are stereotyped as dirty and smelly, resulting in social distancing from the ethnic minority. While the stereotypes affect all Roma, a subset of individuals bears a disproportionately higher burden – the people who menstruate, as their need for the basic amenities is even greater during their monthly periods.

[1] European Parliament, 'International Roma Day: Celebrating Europe's Largest Ethnic Minority'.
[2] UN General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 25.
[3] Pew Research Center, 'Minority Groups'.

Poor living conditions exacerbate challenges related to menstruation, as individuals may lack access to clean water, sanitation facilities, and menstrual hygiene products, leading to increased health risks and discomfort during menstruation. Inadequate infrastructure and limited resources further compound the stigma and taboos surrounding menstruation, marked by similar stereotypes of dirty, messy, and smelly. The stigmatised Romani identity intersects with the stigmatised menstrual identity, leaving people who identify with both to struggle for justice.

In Slovakia, menstruation is generally absent from policy debates and school desks. A shadow report submitted to the CEDAW periodic review of Slovakia states that:

> Comprehensive evidence- and rights-based sexuality education is not a mandatory subject in Slovak schools. Sexuality education can be taught during various subjects such as biology, ethics, or religious classes, or schools can decide to offer it as a separate subject. However, teachers providing or coordinating sexuality education classes are not adequately trained in comprehensive sexuality education. […] As a result, the quality and comprehensiveness of sexuality education depends to a high degree on the capacity of individual teachers and the course subject.[4]

In its concluding observations, the CEDAW highlights its concern about "the delays in introducing comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education in the school curricula" and recommends Slovakia to "provide education on sexual and reproductive health and rights to girls and boys, as part of the regular school curricula."[5] Due to inadequate reproductive health education, girls often learn about menstruation from family[6] or remain uninformed, leaving them susceptible to misinformation and unhealthy practices.

Although maintaining its stigmatised status in society at large, menstruation has begun to receive considerable academic attention. Prominent scholars researched the stigma surrounding

[4] Možnosť voľby, InTYMYta, and Centre for Reproductive Rights, 'Joint Submission by the Freedom of Choice (Možnosť Voľby), InTYMYta and Center for Reproductive Rights', 9.
[5] CEDAW Committee, Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of Slovakia, 9.
[6] DeMaria et al., '"My Mama Told Me It Would Happen": Menarche and Menstruation Experiences across Generations', 6, 9.

menstruation,[7] its impact on educational attendance,[8] period poverty,[9] and the accessibility and importance of WASH facilities,[10] framing these issues from a human rights perspective.[11]

Although there is a lack of academic research on menstruation in Slovakia, a few studies do address this topic within the broader context of Eastern Europe. These articles explore issues such as menstrual advertising,[12] menstruation experiences at work,[13] period poverty and stigmatisation of menstruation,[14] and the menstrual cycle's role in Soviet Union politics.[15] In global literature, menstruation is mentioned within the Romani communities in the context of *marime* practice that refers to ritual impurity, which will be later discussed in this thesis.[16]

While the community's menstrual experience did make a small appearance in Catarina de Albuquerque's report to the UN,[17] the object of her mission was not menstruation-related. In

[7] Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 'The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma'; Olson et al., 'The Persistent Power of Stigma: A Critical Review of Policy Initiatives to Break the Menstrual Silence and Advance Menstrual Literacy'; Wilson et al., 'Dismantling Menstrual Taboos to Overcome Gender Inequality'.
[8] Sommer, 'Where the Education System and Women's Bodies Collide: The Social and Health Impact of Girls' Experiences of Menstruation and Schooling in Tanzania'.
[9] Briggs, '"Period Poverty" in Stoke-on-Trent, UK'; Jaafar, Ismail, and Azzeri, 'Period Poverty: A Neglected Public Health Issue'; Rossouw and Ross, 'Understanding Period Poverty: Socio-Economic Inequalities in Menstrual Hygiene Management in Eight Low- and Middle-Income Countries'; Vora, 'Tackling Period Poverty Report 2017'.
[10] Goddard and Sommer, 'Menstrual Health and Hygiene Management and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in Urban Slums: Gaps in the Evidence and Recommendations'; Hennegan, 'Menstrual Hygiene Management and Human Rights: The Case for an Evidence-Based Approach'; Sebert Kuhlmann et al., 'Unmet Menstrual Hygiene Needs Among Low-Income Women'; Sommer et al., 'Menstruation and Homelessness: Challenges Faced Living in Shelters and on the Street in New York City'; Van Eijk et al., 'Menstrual Hygiene Management among Adolescent Girls in India: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis'.
[11] Hennegan, 'Menstrual Hygiene Management and Human Rights: The Case for an Evidence-Based Approach'; Winkler, 'Menstruation and Human Rights: Can We Move Beyond Instrumentalization, Tokenism, and Reductionism?'; Zivi, 'Hiding in Public or Going with the Flow: Human Rights, Human Dignity, and the Movement for Menstrual Equity'.
[12] Poncarová, 'Menstrual stigma in advertising of menstrual products'.
[13] Poncarová, 'Menstruation in the area of paid work'.
[14] Daubnerová, 'Menštruačná chudoba a stigmatizácia menštruácie (nielen) v rozvojových krajinách [Menstrual poverty and the stigma of menstruation (not only) in developing countries]'.
[15] Vasilyev, 'Re/Production Cycles'.
[16] Ceneda, 'Romani Women from Central and Eastern Europe: A "Fourth World", or Experience of Multiple Discrimination'; Carmichael, 'Gypsy Law and Jewish Law'; Larkin, 'The Embodiment of Marime: Living Romany Gypsy Pollution Taboo'.
[17] Albuquerque, 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation', 12.

the literature, menstruation is mentioned in connection with the Romani laws of purity and pollution, referred to as *marime.*[18] However, there is no research focused predominantly on Roma communities and menstruation in Slovakia, which is the gap this thesis aspires to fill, underscoring the originality and urgency of this project.

By shedding light on the impact of menstruation on the lives of Romani women, this research not only aims to fill a critical gap in the existing literature but also seeks to enhance understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by the Roma community in Slovakia. Therefore, the thesis seeks to answer the question of *what the lived experiences of menstruation within Romani communities in Slovakia are and how do these impact the realisation of their human rights.* Subsequently, the thesis aims to provide, based on the interviews, answers to subsidiary questions such as:

1. What role does menstruation play in the lives of Romani women, and how do cultural practices shape it?
2. How does access to information about menstruation shape the menstrual experiences of Romani women?
3. How do Romani women face the stereotypes and stigmatisation of Roma within the majority community, and how does it intersect with menstrual stigma?

The exploratory nature of this thesis lies in the fact that there is no available information (to my knowledge) on menstruation within Romani communities. Therefore, this thesis aims to discover, display, and bring the topic to life.

[18] Vivian and Dundes, 'The Crossroads of Culture and Health Among the Roma (Gypsies)'; Alex and Lehti, 'Experiences of Well-Being Among Sami and Roma Women in a Swedish Context'; Larkin, 'The Embodiment of Marime: Living Romany Gypsy Pollution Taboo'; Leeson, 'Gypsy Law'.

WHO ARE ROMA?

The Romani people,[19] also known as the Roma, have a rich cultural heritage that spans centuries. In 1971, the first World Romani Congress recognised the official emblems, such as the blue-green flag with the red sixteen-armed chakra, the anthem, and the group's official name.[20] This event was crucial in acknowledging and celebrating the often marginalised and misunderstood Romani culture.

The term "Roma" replaced the negative and pejorative term "gypsy" and refers to a diverse racial and ethnic group that encompasses various Romani subgroups such as Roma, Traveller, Sinti, Kale, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom, and others. This work uses the official term "Roma" or "Romani *(adj.)* people" to refer to this group, particularly those residing in the present-day Slovak Republic, where they form the second-largest national minority. To understand the situation of Romani people in Slovakia, this part will shed light on their historical background, social status, perception of Roma, and the practice of *marime*.

Historical background

The Romani people are an ethnic group of Indian origin who have lived in Europe for centuries. In Slovakia, the first records of their presence date back to 1219.[21] Initially welcomed with open arms due to their great metallurgy and horse breeding skills, intolerance towards them grew significantly in the 17th century with the influx of foreign Roma.[22] The newcomers were

[19] I have written this chapter as a final paper at CEU for class RSP5061 - Critical Approaches to Romani Studies 2023/24 Winter**.** Chapter on housing has been partly written as a final paper at CEU for class RSP5066 - Patterns of Exclusion, Dilemmas of Inclusion: Roma Policies and Politics in the 21st Century 2023/24 Fall**.**
[20] Puxon, 'History of the World Roma Congress 1971'.
[21] Jurová, 'From Leaving the Homeland to the First Assimilation Measures', 18.
[22] Jurová, 'From Leaving the Homeland to the First Assimilation Measures'.

depicted as horse thieves and disease spreaders, marking the beginning of a centuries-long discrimination that treats all Roma the same.[23]

In the 18th century, the Habsburgs ordered forced assimilation of the Romani people into mainstream society. The Roma were subjected to civilising practices that prohibited their lifestyle and traditions, largely disrespecting their cultural characteristics.[24] However, these measures largely failed and faced resistance from the Roma, who were neither interested in nor convinced of the need to change their lives.[25] Consequently, mainstream society's scepticism towards the Roma increased, labelling them as unchangeable.[26] By the end of the 19th century, the Roma formed the poorest social class in the region.

Hatred towards the Roma intensified during World War II when 250,000 to 500,000[27] were murdered in concentration camps by the Nazi regime, which deemed them racially inferior.[28] Post-war, the communist regime in Czechoslovakia continued to oppress and marginalise the Roma, labelling them as a social issue and a threat to the socialist order. The regime implemented various policies to control and assimilate the Roma, including forced resettlement, compulsory education, prohibition of self-employment, and sterilisation,[29] often violating their rights and dignity[30] and systematically dismantling their identity.[31]

After the fall of communism and the split of Czechoslovakia in 1989 and 1993, the social

[23] Jurová, 20.
[24] Tkáčová, 'The Roma from the Reign of Empress Mária Terézia until the First Czechoslovak Republic', 24.
[25] Tkáčová, 32.
[26] Tkáčová, 25.
[27] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'Genocide of European Roma (Gypsies), 1939–1945'.
[28] Brearley, 'The Persecution of Gypsies in Europe', 590.
[29] Brearley, 'The Persecution of Gypsies in Europe'.
[30] Jurová, 'The Roma from 1945 until November 1989', 48.
[31] Radičová, 'The Roma on the Verge of Transformation', 63–65.

distance between the majority and minority kept growing, resulting in numerous conflicts.[32] In the 1990s, violent acts, including pogroms and murders by regional white supremacists, escalated significantly.[33] To escape the violence, over half of the Roma population in Slovakia found themselves in segregated settlements, struggling with inadequate education, limited employment opportunities, and entrenched cycles of state dependency and inequality.[34]

The years of failed assimilation processes, constant relocations, and systematic discrimination had an irreversible effect on the Roma in Slovakia. Considered a thorn in the eye of Slovak society, the Roma face racism and prejudice to this day.

Social status and perception of Roma

Despite numerous policies and action plans that have targeted the Romani community over the years, little progress has been made in improving their situation. While they have been recognised as a national minority, the rights accompanying this status have failed to materialise in practice. The Romani people continue to face persistent oppression and institutional discrimination, multi-dimensional exclusion, and disdain from mainstream society.

Exclusion

The issue of marginalisation and social exclusion of the Roma people has been a topic of academic interest for several decades. While marginality marks the boundary between the "normal" and "different" world, marginalisation refers to the procedural exclusion of individuals or groups beyond this acceptance boundary.[35] As a result, the Roma people are

[32] Jurová, 'The Roma from 1945 until November 1989'.
[33] Brearley, 'The Persecution of Gypsies in Europe', 592–93.
[34] Radičová, 'The Roma on the Verge of Transformation'.
[35] Lukáč, 'Sociálna marginalizácia a sociálna exklúzia v živote rómskeho etnika [Social marginalisation and social

unable to enter the labour market, access decent housing or exercise their human rights due to discriminatory practices. Among the Roma community itself, a significant proportion reported discrimination in key areas of life due to their Romani background.[36] The most pressing issue for the community is poverty, with over 80% of Roma living at risk of poverty.[37] Lack of finance is reflected in housing, often the most visible physical manifestation of poverty.

Housing and access to water

Only one-third of the Romani population live integrated into mainstream society in Slovakia.[38] The rest live in larger Romani communities within villages (37 %), on its outskirts (46 %), and outside, fully segregated (18 %).[39] The differences between locations are tangible as integrated Roma often live in modest yet well-built brick houses with sufficient space, sometimes including a small garden for home production.[40] In contrast, those in segregated communities often lack property ownership, residing in small, unstable structures on uncertain land without access to infrastructure.[41]

Monitoring shows that about 66,000 (22%)[42] Roma lack direct access to drinking water in their homes.[43] Instead, they rely on potentially contaminated wells and springs affected by nearby

exclusion in the life of the Roma ethnic group]', 122.
[36] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 'Roma in 10 European Countries. Main Results - ROMA SURVEY 2021', 21.
[37] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 25–26.
[38] Ravasz, *Atlas Rómskych Komunít 2019 [Atlas of Roma Communities 2019]*, 17.
[39] Ravasz, 33.
[40] Rochovská and Rusnáková, 'Poverty, Segregation and Social Exclusion of Roma Communities in Slovakia', 204.
[41] Rochovská and Rusnáková, 204.
[42] In comparison, only 1% of the Slovak majority face this problem.
[43] Ravasz, *Atlas Rómskych Komunít 2019 [Atlas of Roma Communities 2019]*, 50.

industrial activity, animal waste, and agricultural chemicals.[44] Additionally, only 54% of Romani communities have proper sewage systems,[45] with the rest using cesspits (20%) or lacking any wastewater collection (39%).[46] This situation contributes to waterborne diseases, environmental damage, groundwater pollution, and overall poor hygiene in these settlements.[47]

Looking ahead, the topic of menstruation management under these inadequate conditions adds further complexity to the WASH challenges faced by the Romani community. With limited access to WASH, the personal hygiene of the affected people is heavily impacted, reinforcing negative stereotypes of the Roma as unclean and smelly.

Stereotyping, perceptions, and stigma

Stereotypes, according to Maučec, are social constructs created by groups of people to reflect their ideas about others who are different from them.[48] Stereotypes make individuals feel superior to the labelled group and "ignore the uniqueness of individuals by painting all members of a group with the same brush."[49] In the case of Roma, negative stereotypes are still prevalent, as proved by opinion polls that consistently reveal a deep-seated perception of Roma as exploiting the social welfare system,[50] leading to discrimination based on Romani ethnicity being the most widespread form of discrimination in Slovakia.[51]

[44] Filčák, Szilvasi, and Škobla, 'No Water for the Poor', 1399.
[45] Ravasz, *Atlas Rómskych Komunít 2019 [Atlas of Roma Communities 2019]*, 55.
[46] Ravasz, 55.
[47] Filčák, Škobla, and Dokupilová, *Sewage Facilities in Roma Settlements: How Structural Inequalities Manifest Themselves in Slovakia*.
[48] Maučec, 'Identifying and Changing Stereotypes Between Roma and Non-Roma: From Theory to Practice'.
[49] Maučec, 181.
[50] Poslon et al., 'Postoje, politický diskurz a kolektívne správanie majority voči rómom na Slovensku [Attitudes, political discourse and collective behaviour of the majority towards Roma in Slovakia]', 3.
[51] European Commission, 'Discrimination in the European Union', 3.

Some of the common stereotypical views portray Roma as dark-skinned criminals (thieves, beggars), living in wooden barracks in dangerous settlements, avoiding any labour, and not caring about education or hygiene.[52] Consequently, Roma individuals are often stereotyped as "smelly" and "unclean," which further fuels the discrimination and marginalisation they face. Paradoxically, even though the myth of stinky and dirty Roma is still alive, little is known about the importance of purity and cleanliness entrenched into the Romani community and its laws.

Marime

The Romani legal tradition, known as *romaniya*, is an orally transmitted set of regulations and customs that govern(ed) the lives of the Roma. Its *marime*[53] principle is especially relevant for this thesis and is described in more detail.

This moral standard divides the human body into two halves - that which is above the waist is considered *wuzho* (pure), and everything below *marime* (polluted).[54] Thus, under Romani law, the natural bodily process of menstruation is considered *marime*, symbolising impurity and requiring careful management.[55] To prevent pollution of others, menstruators faced restrictions such as being prohibited from preparing food, eating separately from others, and refraining from sexual intercourse.[56]

Although an integral part of the Romani law, the *marime* code began to disappear from Romani culture in the mid-1900s.[57] The abandonment may have resulted from the community adapting

[52] Oravec et al., *Rómovia: mýty a fakty [Roma: myths and facts]*; Maučec, 'Identifying and Changing Stereotypes Between Roma and Non-Roma: From Theory to Practice', 184–85.
[53] Carmichael, 'Gypsy Law and Jewish Law', 122; Ceneda, 'Romani Women from Central and Eastern Europe: A "Fourth World", or Experience of Multiple Discrimination', 40–42.
[54] Vivian and Dundes, 'The Crossroads of Culture and Health Among the Roma (Gypsies)', 89.
[55] Larkin, 'The Embodiment of Marime: Living Romany Gypsy Pollution Taboo'.
[56] Leeson, 'Gypsy Law', 277.
[57] Leeson, 288.

to local practices or, as noted by Larkin, by deliberately abandoning tradition to minimise its negative impact on women who started to claim their agency.[58] However, while the code might not be actively practised, the persistent taboos and stigma surrounding menstruation suggest that historical practices, such as *marime*, may still subtly influence contemporary attitudes. Drawing on the statement of Larkin that: "Only when menstrual blood is 'mismanaged,' able to contaminate physically or symbolically, or when it is 'known of' in public, particularly when it is brought to the attention of males, is menstruation polluting," two lasting contributions come to mind.[59] First, that it possibly restricted the open discussions about menstruation, particularly with men. And second, that it enhanced the pressure put on menstruators who must manage their menstruation. Moreover, it is presumed that due to the notion of impurity associated with menstruation, negative self-perceptions of individuals might be present.

Building on this chapter, my project will investigate the menstrual experiences of Romani women within their society, considering the impact of culture, social status, and ethnicity. It will also explore why menstruation should be viewed as a human rights issue. These inquiries will guide the next chapter.

[58] Larkin, 'The Embodiment of Marime: Living Romany Gypsy Pollution Taboo', 72.
[59] Larkin, 69.

MENSTRUATION IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

In recent years, many academics and activists have advocated for the incorporation of menstruation into the human rights framework, believing that by reframing menstruation as a matter of human rights, there is greater potential in advocating for progress in policies, practices, and societal attitudes towards people who menstruate, eventually achieving menstrual justice.

The rights to water, sanitation, and human dignity were the first to be mentioned concerning menstruation. Although the adverse conditions of menstruating people are linked to these rights, the reduction to only these two is criticised by both Winkler[60] and Zivi,[61] who encourage a more holistic approach. According to them, rather than providing exclusively material help, menstruation should be analysed in terms of structural influences, such as stigmatisation of the topic. Due to the intersectional nature of menstruation, they both point out that its impact can be perceived in other rights, such as the right to education, gender equality or non-discrimination. This chapter will focus on these rights and their relationship to menstruation and menstrual justice.

Rights to water and sanitation

Access to clean water, sanitation facilities and safe waste disposal is vital for practising menstrual hygiene. Being unable to wash reusable pads, change the used ones for fresh ones, or clean oneself, especially during menstruation, can have a detrimental effect on the human

[60] Winkler, 'Menstruation and Human Rights: Can We Move Beyond Instrumentalization, Tokenism, and Reductionism?'
[61] Zivi, 'Hiding in Public or Going with the Flow: Human Rights, Human Dignity, and the Movement for Menstrual Equity'.

rights of women and girls.[62] Concerned over the state of WASH worldwide, the UN Human Rights Council recognised people's rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, ensuring non-discriminatory access and demanding states' compliance for its progressive realisation.[63] Moreover, Article 11(1) of ICESCR encapsulates the right to water within the scope of the right to an adequate standard of living and continuous improvement of living conditions.[64]

To maintain proper menstrual health, access to WASH should be secured in private and public places such as schools and workplaces. Nevertheless, according to WHO, in 2023, half of the world's population lacked adequate access to WASH with insufficient progress over the last decade.[65] The absence of (warm) water,[66] lack of privacy in washrooms,[67] deficiency of soap,[68] and inadequate facilities for disposal of sanitary pads[69] are some of the elements girls worldwide reported as negatively influencing their period management. Difficulties with managing their menstruation, among other things, can force women and girls to exclude themselves from social activities, take a leave from work or skip school.[70]

[62] Human Rights Council, The human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, 3.
[63] Human Rights Council, The human right to safe drinking water and sanitation.
[64] UN General Assembly, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 11(1).
[65] World Health Organisation, 'Improving Access to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Can Save 1.4 Million Lives per Year, Says New WHO Report'.
[66] McMahon et al., '"The Girl with Her Period Is the One to Hang Her Head" Reflections on Menstrual Management among Schoolgirls in Rural Kenya', 5–6.
[67] Goddard and Sommer, 'Menstrual Health and Hygiene Management and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in Urban Slums: Gaps in the Evidence and Recommendations', 4–5; Sommer et al., 'Menstruation and Homelessness: Challenges Faced Living in Shelters and on the Street in New York City'.
[68] Hennegan, 'Menstrual Hygiene Management and Human Rights: The Case for an Evidence-Based Approach', 213.
[69] Winkler and Roaf, 'Taking the Bloody Linen Out of the Closet: Menstrual Hygiene as a Priority for Achieving Gender Equality', 22.
[70] However, several studies argue that there is no straightforward evidence behind the claim that menstruation is a significant factor attributing to school absenteeism and that further research on the link is needed. For more see McMahon et al., '"The Girl with Her Period Is the One to Hang Her Head" Reflections on Menstrual Management among Schoolgirls in Rural Kenya', 2.

Acknowledging these rights is especially important for this thesis, as even in high-income countries, where statistics show almost universal access to WASH, historically marginalised communities are often the exceptions, facing disparities in accessing the services.[71] Facing systematic racism, environmental discrimination, and social exclusion,[72] segregated communities living in inadequate housing suffer the most from inaccessible water, sanitation, and disposal management, impacting their menstrual hygiene management.[73] As provided in the previous section, a large number of segregated Romani communities lack access to these basic amenities. Limited access exacerbates their poor living conditions and reinforces negative social perceptions, such as the stereotype of "stinky and dirty" Roma. This stereotype is further connected to myths about menstruation, which also suffer from similar misunderstandings.

Right to education

The link between menstruation and education has been relatively well-researched due to the significance of education in shaping people's menstrual experience, its potential to combat the stigma, and its role in influencing one's health. Article 10 of CEDAW urges states to eliminate discrimination against women in education, challenge stereotypes, reduce drop-out rates, and provide access to information on family health and planning.[74] The role of education in menstrual health and management is pivotal in two main aspects: one, in providing information about the menstrual cycle while contributing to debunking the misinformation and stigma, and two, in providing a space for managing one's menstruation.

[71] Brown et al., 'The Effects of Racism, Social Exclusion, and Discrimination on Achieving Universal Safe Water and Sanitation in High-Income Countries'.
[72] Brown et al.
[73] Hennegan, 'Menstrual Hygiene Management and Human Rights: The Case for an Evidence-Based Approach', 214.
[74] UN General Assembly, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, art. 10.

Firstly, it has been observed that many children and adolescents lack accurate information about menarche and the menstrual cycle.[75] African American women from low-income households claimed that their primary source of information was their mothers, whose knowledge about menstruation was also limited, contributing to the cycle of misinformation and myths being transferred to the next generations.[76] Studies from Kenya,[77] Tanzania,[78] and India show similar results, highlighting that both children and older generations lack sufficient menstrual information.[79] Considering the general inadequacy and political suppression of sexual and reproductive education in Slovakia, it is likely that Romani communities face similar challenges. Thus, enhancing the quality of this education is essential, as it equips menstruators with accurate information about their menstrual cycles, helping to dismantle stereotypes and promote non-discriminatory practices.

Right to non-discrimination and gender equality

The right to non-discrimination is the core principle of the human rights law, essential for protecting individuals' dignity and equality. The CFR serves as the primary instrument combating discrimination at the EU level through various articles, including Article 20, which

[75] Chandra-Mouli and Patel, 'Mapping the Knowledge and Understanding of Menarche, Menstrual Hygiene and Menstrual Health among Adolescent Girls in Low- and Middle-Income Countries'; Winkler, 'Human Rights Shine a Light on Unmet Menstrual Health Needs and Menstruation at the Margins', 235–36; Cooper and Koch, '"Nobody Told Me Nothin": Communication About Menstruation Among Low-Income African American Women'.
[76] Cooper and Koch, '"Nobody Told Me Nothin": Communication About Menstruation Among Low-Income African American Women'; DeMaria et al., '"My Mama Told Me It Would Happen": Menarche and Menstruation Experiences across Generations'.
[77] McMahon et al., '"The Girl with Her Period Is the One to Hang Her Head" Reflections on Menstrual Management among Schoolgirls in Rural Kenya'.
[78] Sommer, 'Where the Education System and Women's Bodies Collide: The Social and Health Impact of Girls' Experiences of Menstruation and Schooling in Tanzania'.
[79] For an overview see Chandra-Mouli and Patel, 'Mapping the Knowledge and Understanding of Menarche, Menstrual Hygiene and Menstrual Health among Adolescent Girls in Low- and Middle-Income Countries'.

prohibits discrimination based on grounds like sex, race, religion, disability, and sexual orientation.

The right to equal treatment is crucial to ethical systems, but treating all individuals equally is not always practical or desired.[80] To address this, experts recommend focusing on substantive equality and dismantling structural barriers.[81] While substantive equality may seem like a straightforward solution, its implementation is complex. It requires context-specific strategies and a commitment to take apart underlying barriers. These include frameworks requiring special measures such as positive action to compensate for disadvantages menstruators face,[82] which the majority population does not always perceive positively.

In the context of menstruation and this thesis, the concept of intersectionality is particularly relevant for understanding how discrimination on the grounds of menstrual status, gender, and ethnicity can intersect and impact marginalised groups.[83] Intersectionality is exemplified by the experiences of the Romani community in Central and Eastern Europe, who face multiple forms of discrimination, disadvantage and stigma.

Therefore, to understand the full spectrum of the reality Romani menstruators face, the concept of intersectionality is crucial. Using Johnson's words, one must ask the question of menstrual justice to be critical and reflexive on this topic.[84] In other words, one must ask where the racism

[80] For more on the two-sided aspect of freedom from discrimination see Fellmeth, 'Nondiscrimination as a Universal Human Right'.
[81] Winkler and Roaf, 'Taking the Bloody Linen Out of the Closet: Menstrual Hygiene as a Priority for Achieving Gender Equality', 15.
[82] Barnard and Hepple, 'Substantive Equality'.
[83] Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics'.
[84] Johnson, 'Asking the Menstruation Question to Achieve Menstrual Justice'.

within the menstrual experiences of menstruators is and where the menstrual justice is within the discrimination of Romani people.

Menstruation as discrimination

Certain menstrual practices can lead to discrimination against women when they result in unequal treatment, stigmatisation, or restrictions based on menstrual status. Such practices can cause disparities that disproportionately affect women. The effect is even more touchable when poverty and marginalisation enter the debate, as in the case of low-income Romani women.

The financial burden of purchasing menstrual hygiene products can be considered a form of discrimination, particularly for women in low-income communities who may struggle to afford these essentials. Period poverty, stemming from insufficient access to menstrual products and facilities, leads to challenges in purchasing and accessing appropriate menstrual items, often resulting in the use of less suitable alternatives.[85] Period poverty affects menstruators globally,[86] with 10% of UK girls aged 14-21 reporting being unable to afford menstrual products at some point in their lives.[87] The group that has been most affected by menstrual poverty in high developed countries are low-income women who recall not only the lack of menstrual products but also limited access to safe spaces and facilities, clean underwear, or warm water.[88] Menstruation thus becomes a multi-layered problem in which factors such as socio-economic status and gender intersect.

[85] Jaafar, Ismail, and Azzeri, 'Period Poverty: A Neglected Public Health Issue', 184.
[86] Jaafar, Ismail, and Azzeri, 'Period Poverty: A Neglected Public Health Issue'; Vora, 'The Realities of Period Poverty: How Homelessness Shapes Women's Lived Experiences of Menstruation'.
[87] Tingle and Vora, 'Break the Barriers: Girls' Experiences of Menstruation in the UK', 46.
[88] Vora, 'Tackling Period Poverty Report 2017', 13.

Certain cultural practices and beliefs may discriminate against women during menstruation, restricting their participation in religious or social activities. Menstrual practices can discriminate against women by associating menstruation with impurity, sin, and guilt,[89] as present in the Romani *marime* code. This often results in women being ostracised during their periods and viewed as inferior.[90] While some women may choose to follow these practices voluntarily, and certain restrictions could benefit their well-being, menstruation is typically stigmatised and rarely discussed in most cultures.

Menstruation as stigma

Despite being a natural bodily process, menstruation is still subject to stigmatisation all over the world. The stigma manifests through the exclusion of people who menstruate from mainstream society while often depicting menstruators as unclean, consequently justifying discrimination against them.[91] These negative views are shared among mainstream society as well, with the social norms set in a way to keep menstruation a secret which should not be seen and talked about. Consequently, secrecy and misinformation based on misconceptions shape people's experience with menstruation, often affecting their social perception, mental health, intimacy, social distancing, and self-image.[92] While writing about menstruation, the same principle of stigmatisation applies to Romani people in Slovakia. To understand the complexity of the issue, an explanation of stigma and compounded stigma is offered below.

As defined by Link and Phelan, stigma is the co-occurrence of "labelling, stereotyping,

[89] Cohen, 'Menstruation and Religion', 121.
[90] Larkin, 'The Embodiment of Marime: Living Romany Gypsy Pollution Taboo'.
[91] Winkler, 'Menstruation and Human Rights: Can We Move Beyond Instrumentalization, Tokenism, and Reductionism?', 249.
[92] Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 'The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma'.

separation, status loss and discrimination" and exercise of power.[93] Each of these five components plays an essential role in the stigmatisation process. People who do not fit this socially constructed ideal are *labelled* as different, assigned negative attributes based on which they are *stereotyped,* and further *separated* from mainstream society as less fitting. If these three steps occur, the person's social status deteriorates rapidly, resulting in *discrimination* and *status loss*. The concept of sigma-power underlines that stigmatisers are motivated to oppress stigmatised groups to maintain advantages, set societal boundaries of acceptability, and exclude those who diverge from these societal norms.[94] The stigma concept applies not only to menstruators but also to Romani people who, similarly to menstruators, are stigmatised and experience the same pattern of oppression and exclusion, experiencing compounded stigma.

Compounded stigma

Compounded stigma is a complex phenomenon that arises from the intersection of multiple stigmatised identities. It involves a distinct form of discrimination faced by individuals who belong to more than one marginalised group. This situation can lead to unique barriers to accessing resources, opportunities, and social acceptance, further increasing the disadvantages for those affected. Regarding this study, compounded stigma arises from the intersection of Romani ethnicity with menstrual status, both of which identities are heavily stigmatised.

An intriguing parallel of intersection can be observed in the case of Dalits, the lowest strata of the caste system, often referred to as the "untouchables". Dalits are especially relevant as genetic studies suggest that the European Roma are ancestors of the Dom people[95] who came

[93] Link and Phelan, 'Conceptualizing Stigma', 367.
[94] Link and Phelan, 'Stigma Power', 2.
[95] Rai et al., 'The Phylogeography of Y-Chromosome Haplogroup H1a1a-M82 Reveals the Likely Indian Origin

from the Dalit caste. Similarly to Slovakia, where the perception that the Roma are "stinky" and "unclean" is widespread, the whole caste of Dalits is also declared impure and untouchable, resulting in their natural segregation.[96] "Whether menstruating or not, Dalit women are considered impure and polluting," says Sukumar about her experience with menstruation as a Dalit woman.[97] In her account, she describes feelings of shame, lack of discussion, separation from others, and the need to hide her menstrual status strictly. Consequently, the intersection of ethnicity, socio-economic situation, and menstrual status causes the compounded stigma.

of the European Romani Populations'; Jurová, 'From Leaving the Homeland to the First Assimilation Measures'.
[96] Rai, 'Dalit Women in India: An Overview of Their Status'.
[97] Sukumar, 'Personal Narrative', 138.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The core of this thesis lies in a research methodology based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews to offer personal insights into the experiences of menstruation among Romani women. The choice of interviews stems from the method's primary objective, which is to explore diverse perspectives and viewpoints regarding menstruation within the Romani community.

Sampling method

Given that no primary data was available during this thesis's writing, I interviewed Romani women and professionals in the field. To accommodate the project's time constraint, the sample for this study is convenient, purposive, and homogeneous.

Convenience sampling, commonly used in research due to its accessibility and cost-effectiveness,[98] has been chosen as the most effective and efficient data-gathering method. As described by Andrade, convenient sampling involves selecting a sample from a source that is readily accessible to the researcher.[99]

The purposive aspect of the sample is that the primary sample of interviewees consisted of individuals from a specific ethnic group. Therefore, exclusion and inclusion criteria were applied to the sample conditions.[100] Purposive sampling offers advantages such as studying specific populations of interest and making the sample more homogeneous.[101] Here, I chose an

[98] Jager, Putnick, and Bornstein, 'More than Just Convenient: The Scientific Merits of Homogeneous Convenience Samples'.
[99] Andrade, 'The Inconvenient Truth About Convenience and Purposive Samples'.
[100] Emerson, 'Convenience Sampling Revisited: Embracing Its Limitations Through Thoughtful Study Design'.
[101] Andrade, 'The Inconvenient Truth About Convenience and Purposive Samples'.

ethnically homogeneous population of participants claiming Romani origin. Consequently, individuals without a Romani background were excluded from the sample.

Homogeneous convenience samples are those intentionally limited to specific socio-demographic subgroups and, therefore, homogeneous on one or more sociodemographic factors.[102] Homogeneous convenience samples are recommended as, on average, they should produce estimates that are more accurate regarding population effects and subpopulation differences, although they may be narrower in scope.[103]

Given all the above, the advantages and relevance of this sampling method align well with the aim of this thesis, which is based on firsthand experiences of randomly selected individuals whose stories are unique and deeply subjective.

Access to participants

Participants for the study were approached via various channels, including an organisation and a high school. The choice to use these channels was driven by their established connections with women in the Romani community, offering a much higher chance of finding women willing to participate, as opposed to going to the community as an outsider looking for participants. Hence, access to the community was much more manageable, which was crucial given the short period dedicated to data collection.

Zdravé regióny[104] (Healthy Regions) is an organisation that supports marginalised Romani communities in public health. After an initial call, they contacted one of their regional project

[102] Jager, Putnick, and Bornstein, 'More than Just Convenient: The Scientific Merits of Homogeneous Convenience Samples', 2.
[103] Jager, Putnick, and Bornstein, 2.
[104] https://www.zdraveregiony.eu/

leads, who agreed to facilitate interviews and focus groups. The in-person interviews took place in Jurské, a village in Eastern Slovakia with 98% of residents claiming Romani identity,[105] on the premises of the local town hall. Altogether, eight women decided to participate, out of which four participated in a focus group while the rest decided to do one-on-one interviews. Of the eight, two were employees of Zdravé regióny and were interviewed as both Romani women and community workers. All participants were residents of Jurské. Few lived in the local Romani settlement at the beginning of the village, while the rest lived within the village. The youngest participant was 24, and the oldest was 50 years old.

Additionally, I was advised to reach out to the head of the Private Secondary Vocational School of Pedagogy and Social Sciences in Košice, who then asked students about their willingness to participate in interviews. One assistant teacher and ten students eventually decided to participate, six of whom opted for focus group discussion in the high school premises. Five were interviewed one-on-one, and two interviews took place online. Participants, of whom the youngest was 18 and the oldest 25 years old, came from various locations in eastern Slovakia and had different living situations and arrangements.

While it might seem contradictory that Romani students are attending private schools, it is important to note that not all Roma in Slovakia are poor. The remaining 20% of the 80% who live at the risk of poverty belong to other social classes which are impacted by stereotypes rather than poverty. Paying a scholarship as low as 50 euros per academic year is thus manageable. Additionally, to study at the school, students must pass admission tests, eliminating those from the lowest parts of society who often did not have a chance to pursue

[105] Ravasz, *Atlas Rómskych Komunít 2019 [Atlas of Roma Communities 2019]*.

education. Despite all this, 70% of the school's pupils are from marginalised Romani communities and different socioeconomic backgrounds.[106]

Interviews and focus groups

In qualitative feminist research, in-depth interviews are an effective tool for exploring complex issues as they offer rich insights into women's experiences and perspectives.[107] In-depth interviews also provide access to private or intimate information, and their flexibility allows for a deeper understanding of participants' lived stories.[108] The average duration of the one-on-one interviews was 30 minutes, with the shortest one taking 18 minutes and the longest 48 minutes.

Focus groups were chosen as an addendum to in-depth individual interviews mainly to provide an option to interviewees who felt more comfortable speaking in a group. While individual interviews create a private environment for participants to share their personal views and experiences, focus groups offer a dynamic setting where participants can engage with each other, exchange ideas, and expand on the ideas of others in a short amount of time.[109] Time constraint was especially considered in the school setting, where focus groups provided the possibility of receiving more responses since the school allocated only a few classes for the interviews. In both focus groups, participants knew each other as one consisted of classmates and another, in Jurské, of distant family members. The focus group with students took one hour and 22 minutes, and the one in Jurské took 55 minutes.

[106] Interview with Bianka (25), a Romani woman who is one of the respondents, working as assistant teacher at the school and is wife of the school principal. She is also a university student.
[107] Hesse-Biber, *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, 189.
[108] Knott et al., 'Interviews in the Social Sciences'.
[109] Acocella, 'The Focus Groups in Social Research: Advantages and Disadvantages'.

As indicated, this study gathered insights through interviews and focus groups with 19 Romani women aged 18 to 50. The interviews aimed to capture the personal thoughts and beliefs of Romani women about menstruation within their community and their lives. Questions were divided into three thematic groups: 1) menstruation in general, menarche experience, changes in life, and sources of information; 2) menstrual management such as access to water, living conditions, preference of menstrual products and their accessibility, menstrual health struggles; and 3) menstrual stigma and cultural perspectives which contained questions on *marime,* cultural rituals related to menstruation, and views on racism. Ultimately, participants were asked whether discussing menstruation was important and what they would propose to enhance women's menstrual experiences in their communities. The three professionals interviewed were asked specific questions about their experiences in segregated communities and schools. All participants were asked for demographics that entailed their age, sex, housing location, marital status, number of children, employment status, disabilities, health issues, and menstrual status.

Adult women have been selected based on the findings that focus on adolescent girls prevails in studies of menstrual experiences, omitting the experiences of adult women.[110] In addition, adult women have more experience with menstruation and its impact on their lives compared to teenage girls who have menstruated for only a few months or years. It is also assumed that they will be more aware of their position in society and thus better able to reflect on more complex issues. The interviews were complemented by practitioners' views, bringing voices from the professional field into the dialogue. Three professionals were interviewed: a high school assistant teacher and two community workers hired by the Zdravé regióny project.

[110] Alhelou et al., 'Menstruation, Myopia, and Marginalization: Advancing Menstrual Policies to "Keep Girls in School" at the Risk of Exacerbating Inequalities', 16.

These primary data were supplemented by thoroughly examining existing literature, drawing on resources addressing the challenges faced by low-income and marginalised groups in developed countries. Compiling these sources has provided a comprehensive understanding of the social dimensions of menstruation within the studied community as well as the racial stigma Romani people face. The background of the study is defined by a legal framework focused on human rights and relevant international legal documents that provide a human rights lens on the topic of menstruation.

To ensure the highest standards in approaching human subjects in research, I went through ethical clearance, consisting of a five-page checklist on general information, funding, and participants. The Ethical Research Committee approved of the research.

Regarding confidentiality, several participants requested to remain anonymous. Pseudonyms have, therefore, replaced their names, while those who did not request anonymity are marked with their real name. It is, therefore, impossible to determine which name is real and which is a pseudonym.

Analysis method

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), used in this thesis, is a qualitative research method that systematically identifies, analyses, and reports patterns (themes) within textual data, such as interview transcripts. The analytical process involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, identifying overarching themes, reviewing and refining themes iteratively, and writing up the analysis, as suggested by Braun and Clarke.[111]

[111] Braun and Clarke, 'Doing Reflexive TA'.

Limitations

The concern of ethical approach to ethnic minorities was minimised by reviewing relevant literature on interviews with marginalised groups and by consultations with senior researchers with experience conducting research in Romani communities. On top of that, I completed a Course on Research Ethics based on the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2: CORE 2022) prior to conducting the interviews.

A limitation that occurred after conducting the interviews was the fact that only women who felt comfortable talking about menstruation signed up for the interviews. Since all participants knew menstruation was the focus of the interviews, it is clear they were open to discussing it, making it difficult to gauge their comfort levels with the topic. This fact limits the voice of Romani menstruators, who are less willing to discuss menstruation.

Nevertheless, I believe the qualitative method conducted through semi-structured interviews and focus groups is the most beneficial for the study as it provides a detailed analysis of complex and understudied issues such as menstruation in the Romani community. Via interviews, serving as the primary data, I gained access to personal stories and lived experiences that contributed to vocalising the voices of women from Romani communities.

Positionality

I do not intend to speak for the Romani people or the women interviewed for this project. Instead, I aim to let their voices and individual stories of experiencing menstruation in a specific setting resonate throughout the thesis. As a 25-year-old Slovak woman from Bratislava, I grew up near a street mainly occupied by Romani households and had Romani classmates in elementary school, where I first saw how prejudice affects people's attitudes. By having

Romani classmates, friends, and neighbours, I have had the opportunity to listen to their struggles and feel the aspects of the injustice the community faces.

Although there are differences between the interviewees and me, our shared experiences as women who have menstruated provide a connection. I recognise my position as a privileged group member and have developed a deep respect for the interviewees and the Romani community through this study. I am grateful to the participants for sharing their experiences with honesty and respect.

PARTICIPANTS OVERVIEW

The study included nineteen participants, all of whom identified as Romani females. Amongst the participants, the youngest was 18 years old, the oldest was 50, and the average age was 25. In terms of ethnicity, four of the participants identified as Slovaks alongside their Romani identity, which was fully claimed by the rest.

Geographically, eight participants came from Jurské, a village in Slovakia, with 98% of inhabitants claiming Romani ethnicity. The village has been identified by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) as having inadequate access to and quality of drinking water.[112] One participant from Jurské reported not having access to water in her house, while three others said they previously did not have access but have since managed to connect. Besides Jurské, another participant came from Seňa, also a location that appeared on the ERRC's water map. The rest of the respondents came from villages near Košice in Eastern Slovakia.

Regarding motherhood, seven out of eight participants from Jurské were mothers, with one not stating her motherhood status. The number of children ranged from one to four. Seven participants were married, and one had a long-term relationship. Of the eight women, three stated they are on maternity leave, and two are employed: Jana (29) as a health assistant and Anna (50) as her coordinator, both of whom work for Zdravé regióny. One was unemployed, and two participants did not indicate their working status.

Regarding ten students from the high school in Košice, the oldest one, 24-year-old Kristína, was a mother of one son. They were both placed in a foster family. The remaining nine students,

[112] European Roma Rights Centre, 'Thirsting for Justice: A Report by The European Roma Rights Centre', 37.

aged 18-20, were full-time students, unmarried and childless, some in a causal relationship with boys. One of the school's assistant teachers, Bianka, aged 25, was interviewed as part of the interviews with Romani professionals. She was married, childless, and an external university student alongside her work.

Further, all nineteen participants were asked about potential disabilities and health issues, as these may affect menstrual experience, but no relevant issues were reported. In terms of their menstrual status, most of the participants (13) reported having regular menstruation, while four reported experiencing irregular menstruation. Moreover, one participant reported being postmenopausal and one perimenopausal.

To fully grasp the data provided and discussed in the next chapter, it is necessary to acknowledge the differences between the women interviewed and the rest of the Romani population in Slovakia. By reading the information provided in previous chapters, a picture of highly disadvantaged Roma living in segregated communities and generational poverty was built. However, not all Roma live in these conditions.

Atlas of Roma Communities categorises Romani concentrations into three types: those inside of towns, on the town's outskirts, and outside of towns.[113] The distribution of concentrations was 37%, 46%, and 18%, respectively.[114] The authors also clarify that the further from town the concentration is, the lower the infrastructure and quality of living.[115]

Participants of this study fell within the category of inside and on the outskirts of town. Therefore, it is presumed that their living conditions will be on a better level than those of

[113] Ravasz, *Atlas rómskych komunít 2019 [Atlas of Roma Communities 2019]*, 33.
[114] Ravasz, 33.
[115] Ravasz, 17.

segregated Roma. While I would not call the participants privileged, I would claim that most of them fall within the percentage of the Romani community that is not living in extreme poverty and substandard housing. Regarding the high school participants from Košice, Bianka (25), an assistant teacher, notes that when it comes to high school studies, only the "elite" can get in successfully, as many Romani children will not even finish elementary school. However, 70% of the Košice school students are from marginalised communities. And from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Most live in Romani concentrations but enjoy a relatively high standard of living as their parents often work and their children study.

WOMEN'S VOICES IN DATA AND LITERATURE: RESULTS

In this chapter, I introduce the central findings identified during the interview analysis. The chapter is structured into five thematic sections that introduce (I) discussions on menstruation among Roma, (II) in schools, (III) the emotional responses to menstruation, (IV) menstrual hygiene and management, and (V) Romani stereotypes. The women's voices were introduced through their experiences embedded within relevant literature, eventually providing broader insight into menstrual experiences, opinions, and reflections on discrimination and racism.

Discussing menstruation among Roma

The menstrual experience of every person who menstruates begins with the first menstrual period (menarche) and ends with the last menstrual period leading into menopause. Despite it being a natural bodily process, menstruation is a worldwide taboo topic, which results in the stigmatisation of people who menstruate. This was also confirmed by the girls and women who participated in the interviews. Ivana (18) highlights a significant cultural silence surrounding menstruation within the Romani community:

> I know a lot of Romani girls, and when I asked them if they ever talked to their mother about it, they said no, that for them, it's such a taboo for women to talk about it that they wouldn't discuss it with each other at all. When they get it [menstruation], they deal with it themselves. I've never had a girl tell me that; yes, we talked about it.

When asked if they considered menstruation taboo, nine respondents said they were not sure, while the other ten said they definitely did. For those who perceived menstruation as taboo, lack of communication was considered one of the leading causes: *"In the Romani community, menstruation is not discussed at all,"* Jana (29) assessed.

The significant barriers that prevent effective communication about menstruation between parents and their children were also noted by the assistant teacher, Bianka (25):

> I think it's taboo. I don't think the parents talk to them the way my mother talked to me. Because they don't have the time, they don't have enough knowledge to talk about it, maybe it's a bit strange for them, and they are ashamed of it too.

Conversations about menstruation are, therefore, insufficient for several women. Communication limited to the bare essentials adds another barrier to menstrual management and knowledge of individuals. While communication between women is at least at a formal and necessary level, communication with men is noticeably absent: *"In PE class, where there is a teacher and me as an assistant, the girls prefer to tell me when they are menstruating, because they are ashamed to tell a man,"* notes Bianka (25). Anežka (25) confessed that she would never tell her father that she is menstruating because it is a *"terrible shame,"* while Mária (18) admitted that she can only talk about it with women.

Most women shared similar views of strong resistance in discussing the matter with men, but there were a few who discussed menstruation openly with husbands or boyfriends. Often, the husband was the only male aware of the woman's menstruation. Despite this, some women were not comfortable around them: *"I'm withdrawing from my husband during my period. When we go to bed, I automatically keep a distance between us,"* shared her sleeping situation Erika (24). Silvia (32) withdraws, too, stating, *"I'm too scared that I'd leak, and I would get him dirty when he touches me. If he knows that I don't have such a strong menstruation, he is not bothered, but when it is strong, he tells me to keep my distance."* Consequently, sex during menstruation was out of the question for all the women interviewed: *"I asked him about this once, and he said he would feel disgusting"* (Silvia, 32).

From the respondents' accounts, we can see a similar result to the one pointed out by Larkin, namely the influence of *marime* on Romani women's resistance to talk about menstruation in front of men,[116] aligning with Barrington's findings.[117] Since they themselves perceive menstruation as something unpleasant and something to be ashamed of, it is not surprising that menstruation is not discussed much in their circles. The internalisation of these negative connotations with menstruation thus goes to such extremes as voluntarily withdrawing from their husbands, only to not accidentally stain them with blood if their pads leak. Menstruation, despite its biological nature, thus takes on a negative overtone that is passed down to daughters, impacting their menstrual experience.

The first menstruation is memorable for many people, as it is a new experience accompanied by quite a dramatic event - bleeding. For some, fear took over their menarche experience:

> I got so scared. I couldn't take it anymore, and I told one of the caregivers at our children's home that my stomach hurt so bad. She told me to go to the toilet to see what would happen. Then, when I looked at the blood, I thought, what is this? I didn't do anything, I didn't hit myself, what is it? I was so scared. (Kristína, 24)

> I was seriously shocked. I didn't know what it was. There was a lot of blood. I started crying a lot, I was screaming, I was just shocked. My mum explained it all to me only afterwards. She was reassuring me that it was nothing, that all women have it. (Anežka, 25)

Reflecting on the stories Kristína and Anežka shared and their reactions, we can confidently assess that these girls knew nothing about menstruation beforehand. The first encounter with menstruation is many times unexpected, and how much information and what information girls have before menarche can fundamentally influence their reactions.[118] Similarly to Kristína's and Anežka's story, DeMaria states that not informing girls about menstruation often results in

[116] Larkin, 'The Embodiment of Marime: Living Romany Gypsy Pollution Taboo', 68.
[117] Barrington et al., 'Experiences of Menstruation in High Income Countries', 19.
[118] DeMaria et al., '"My Mama Told Me It Would Happen": Menarche and Menstruation Experiences across Generations'; Cooper and Koch, '"Nobody Told Me Nothin": Communication About Menstruation Among Low-Income African American Women'.

"uncertainty and fear during menarche, including concerns of 'bleeding to death,'" as one of her respondents confessed.[119] Children often associate blood with injury, making initial encounters with menstruation potentially alarming.[120] This study found that girls who understood menstruation were surprised but not frightened by it, highlighting the importance of pre-menarche education in shaping their experience. Adequate and timely knowledge can foster a positive perception of menstruation, with mothers playing a crucial role in providing this essential education.

For most interviewees, mothers or other female figures played a pivotal role in their menstrual encounters. Most of them (e.g. Darina, Ivana, Bianka, Anežka) approached their mothers when they started menstruating; Mia (20) and Kristína (24) received information from caregivers, while Vanda (19) approached her close friend first: *"I was ashamed to tell my mother, it was very uncomfortable for me."* Reactions of their mothers varied: some were quite excited, telling girls, *"You are a woman now!"* (Nikola, 18), while also teaching them the responsibility that comes with it as, thanks to menstruation, "*the woman starts to be fertile*" (Bianka, 25). Anežka's mother, who failed to discuss menstruation with her beforehand, did so once she started menstruating: *"She explained everything! How the pads are used, also everything about hygiene"* (Anežka, 25). The most surprising reaction was reported by Kristína (24) and two other girls who got slapped across their faces, a gesture they said serves *"to not get scared of it [menstruation]. Some parents say that thanks to the slap, we will be prettier"* (Vanda, 19).

[119] DeMaria et al., '"My Mama Told Me It Would Happen": Menarche and Menstruation Experiences across Generations', 4.
[120] Gawlicz and Millei, 'Mysterious Cotton Pieces: Childhood Memories of Menstruation'.

Menstrual slaps are recognised in Jewish and Eastern European customs; however, their meaning is unclear.[121] Appel-Slingbaum suggests mothers do it intending to "slap sense" into girls, to awaken them into adulthood or to protect them against a curse.[122] In Lithuanian tradition, the slap is intended to secure beauty and predestine a girl's physiological development.[123] The three Romani girls in this study proposed similar reasons: beauty, fearlessness, and wish for good luck. However, since no other responded indicated such practice, further research on menstrual slaps in Romani communities is advisable.

Generally, studies show that mothers are the first whom menstruators approach.[124] The mothers' reactions also align with Barrington et al.'s systematic review, which states that while mothers who reacted positively were praised, those who reacted negatively or "matter-of-factly" were criticised.[125] However, the menstrual knowledge of mothers is often limited and influenced by common misconceptions which can be passed on to their children. From the interviewees, neither Kristína, Darina, nor Anežka knew anything about menstruation beforehand; they had no information from their family, from people in the childcare institution or school. To help menstruators maintain their menstrual health, they must be informed on both fronts – by someone close to them who can share personal insights and by an official educational institution providing accurate biological and technical information.

[121] Houseman, 'Menstrual Slaps and First Blood Celebrations: Inference, Simulation and the Learning of Ritual', 3.
[122] Appel-Slingbaum, 'The Tradition of Slapping Our Daughters'.
[123] Houseman, 'Menstrual Slaps and First Blood Celebrations: Inference, Simulation and the Learning of Ritual', 3.
[124] Chandra-Mouli and Patel, 'Mapping the Knowledge and Understanding of Menarche, Menstrual Hygiene and Menstrual Health among Adolescent Girls in Low- and Middle-Income Countries'; Barrington et al., 'Experiences of Menstruation in High Income Countries'; Cooper and Koch, '"Nobody Told Me Nothin": Communication About Menstruation Among Low-Income African American Women'; DeMaria et al., '"My Mama Told Me It Would Happen": Menarche and Menstruation Experiences across Generations'.
[125] Barrington et al., 'Experiences of Menstruation in High Income Countries', 27.

Discussing menstruation in schools

Regarding education, Mária, Nikola, Viktória, Eva, and Karmen claimed: *"We had a discussion,"* meaning that some external organisations came to either advertise their products or give a brief workshop. At the same time, Vanda, Erika, Silvia, Izabela, Magdaléna, and Anna said it was their teacher who talked to them, or they had it as part of biology class. Anežka, Ivana, Kristína, and Jana stated they had no school education on this whatsoever. Recalling the shadow report for CEDAW,[126] the quality of the information children receive (if any) depends greatly on the teacher and their willingness to go in depth. If the teacher perceives educating about menstruation as unimportant or as uncomfortable, the children are left on their own.

For those who did receive this information, the quality reported was generally not the highest: *"We had a couple of discussions, but the others [boys] made fun of it, and it was all useless. It wasn't very interesting or at least presented in a way so that we got something out of it"* (Mária, 18). Some claimed the information was not particularly useful, mainly since it came late, as most of them already had their menstrual cycle. On the other hand, a few, such as Viktória (19) and Anna (50), reported that education helped them to prepare at least a bit.

Most of those who received information outside the biology class via seminars and external lectures claimed it was for girls only, which they evaluated positively. When the lecture did not exclude boys, the experience was rather negative:

> We also had a lecture, but I don't know, it was all about menstruation […], and there were boys too, so the boys were all ewww, and the girls were ashamed of it. It was so weird. I don't know, I didn't feel comfortable there. They showed us the pads and the tampons, and they had practical demonstrations of some things, and the boys made fun of it. (Eva, 18)

[126] Možnosť voľby, InTYMYta, and Centre for Reproductive Rights, 'Joint Submission by the Freedom of Choice (Možnosť Voľby), InTYMYta and Center for Reproductive Rights'.

While including boys in the talks was, for many girls and women, including the participants, uncomfortable and embarrassing, having boys educated about menstruation might be beneficial in several ways. Winkler and Roaf state that including boys and men in menstrual education might help destigmatise the topic and assign greater priority to menstrual hygiene.[127] This is true especially when men are heads of households and hold power over the family budget, but also because men run most of the institutions responsible for change. Therefore, educating both girls and boys about menstruation is crucial, but given the negative experiences of respondents, it might be more appropriate to educate them separately. Alternatively, high-schoolers Eva (18) and Nikola (18) note that *"boys can join us in higher grades when they grow up a bit and take it seriously, not as a fun."*

The predominantly negative review of menstrual education in schools suggests that the education participants received did not accommodate their needs. Not only did the information come late, but the substance and presentation were also of inferior quality, a phenomenon DeMaria and others highlight as well.[128] The overall results of the interviews, however, came as no surprise, as they were in line with the hypothesis suggesting that mothers will be girls' primary source of menstrual information due to insufficient menstrual education. The issue emerges when mothers are reluctant to communicate with their daughters due to stigma and discomfort, leaving children uninformed, which impacts their overall relationship with menstruation. To ensure mothers provide accurate information, their knowledge must be strengthened to support their children and the stigma that restrains them from communicating dismantled. When it comes to formal education, according to Sommer, an enhanced curriculum

[127] Winkler and Roaf, 'Taking the Bloody Linen Out of the Closet: Menstrual Hygiene as a Priority for Achieving Gender Equality', 33.
[128] DeMaria et al., '"My Mama Told Me It Would Happen": Menarche and Menstruation Experiences across Generations', 2.

can help overcome specific adverse reactions to menarche,[129] making a correlation between the quality of pre-menarche information and the emotional responses of menstruators.

Emotional responses and financial aspects of menstruation

During a discussion on menstruation, participants shared various emotions and perceptions, with the negative ones greatly prevailing. Vanda (19) immediately associated menstruation with *"pain,"* while Karmen (25) and Viktória (19) voiced their annoyance, exclaiming, *"Again? I don't want it!"* highlighting the repetitive and often unwelcome nature of their menstrual cycles. Common feelings among the group also included embarrassment, disgust, horror, and fear, reflecting the complexity of emotions connected to menstruation.

On a more positive note, Silvia (32) felt that menstruation marked a significant transition in her life, proudly stating, *"The girl becomes a woman."* Kristína (24), despite disliking her menstrual experience, acknowledged its role in her identity as a woman: *"I tell people who don't have periods that I envy them. But then I tell myself I wouldn't be a woman."* Similarly, Karmen (25) recognised menstruation as both a burden and a godly blessing, remarking, *"It is all from God. When there is menstruation, there is also a baby,"* illustrating her ambivalence. Unique among them, Anna (50), a post-menopausal woman, expressed a longing to experience menstruation again, indicating, *"I'm telling you; I'd like to have that period!"*

As offered in Barrington et al.'s systematic review, my respondents' feelings are common responses to menstruation.[130] Their study highlighted that menstruation often evokes negative emotions, including shame, distress, and embarrassment, mainly due to its perceived

[129] Sommer, 'Where the Education System and Women's Bodies Collide: The Social and Health Impact of Girls' Experiences of Menstruation and Schooling in Tanzania', 527.
[130] Barrington et al., 'Experiences of Menstruation in High Income Countries'.

inconvenience and the need for secrecy. Feelings of disgust and uncleanliness were also prevalent, especially at menarche. Conversely, positive emotions were less common but included pride in womanhood and relief when menstruation started each month, as it indicated no underlying health issues or unwanted pregnancy, which was also claimed by the participants.

The beginning of menstruation changes the life of every menstruating person quite significantly. Menstruation brings the responsibility to manage it effectively, ensuring it minimally impacts daily life. Even if successfully concealed, managing it is still a burden: *"We spend more [money]. We need pads, we don't know when it [menstruation] will come. Where I am, there is a pad,"* noted Eva (18) about the financial factor. Bianka (25) also highlighted that she feels responsible for managing menstruation: *"I always have menstrual products in every single purse I own."* For those whose menstruation is irregular, the most common substitute for missing menstrual products was toilet paper: *"When no one was around [to give me a pad], I used toilet paper, obviously",* Nikola (18) and others admitted.

While economic issues in obtaining menstrual products were not recorded in this sample, period poverty is a global issue impacting not only people in resource-poor but also in high-income countries. Within both, people from marginalised and low-income backgrounds are impacted proportionally more than the wealthier households.[131] In Slovakia, statistics show that women are more likely to face poverty and social exclusion than men, especially those aged 25-49 and over 65,[132] a trend also observed by Briggs in the UK.[133]

[131] Briggs, '"Period Poverty" in Stoke-on-Trent, UK', 1; Rossouw and Ross, 'Understanding Period Poverty: Socio-Economic Inequalities in Menstrual Hygiene Management in Eight Low- and Middle-Income Countries', 10.
[132] Vlačuha and Kubala, *EU SILC 2022: Indikátory chudoby a sociálneho vylúčenia [EU SILC 2022: Indicators of poverty and social exclusion]*, 15.
[133] Briggs, '"Period Poverty" in Stoke-on-Trent, UK', 4.

Despite respondents not personally reporting economic struggles, some shared insights into other Romani women's challenges in accessing menstrual products. Eva (18) noted that *"some women need to think about whether to buy bread or pads,"* advocating for free menstrual products. Viviana (18) mentioned that extreme poverty forces some women to steal overly expensive pads, and Anna (50) recalled women from segregated settlements where a lack of water and resources leads to the replacement of pads with various types of fabrics. Although such materials can work as well as reusable pads, meeting hygiene and antibacterial standards is challenging, particularly in households without water access, which restricts the ability to wash these items.

Hygiene and menstrual management

Children naturally learn habits observed in their family, including hygiene practices, which are influenced by their living conditions and home environment. Among the 19 women, only Milena (50) lacked running water in her home. The rest either always had access, primarily those from Košice and nearby areas, or gained access after renovating their homes. Those without water access at some points in their life were, despite the circumstances, always trying to stay clean:

> On the first day, when there are still pains, we don't [wash], but on the second day, when there is more, when it starts to smell a little, we are ashamed... Then we warm up the water from the well and wash in the bath. Then I don't even have pain. (Milena, 50)

> We had a room where we did our hygiene. And during my period I washed really often. We had a basin. I heated water on the stove, poured water into the basin, used soap, washed, and then poured the water out. (Anna, 50)

As Silvia (32) notes, *"Every woman needs to have hygiene. With or without a bathroom, in a wash basin or a bathtub, hygiene just needs to be observed."* Their mothers or caregivers taught them how frequently to wash and what products to use: *"My mum was preparing me,*

we were talking about menstruation, she even prepared pads for me in case I start menstruating" (Bianka, 25). Anna's (50) mum told her that hygiene during menstruation should double, and Jana's (29) mum told her to prepare for pain during menstruation.

Despite the lack of access to water, all girls and women reported that hygiene is particularly important to them, and the need for cleanliness increases during menstruation. While Milena (50) cleans herself *"when it starts to smell a little"* (which usually is every other day), Anežka (25) showers three times a day, sometimes more, comfortably in the shower under warm running water. Women with adequate water access felt cleaner and more comfortable, leading to increased confidence about managing menstrual visibility and odours. Additionally, some noted health improvements, such as reduced menstrual pain following a warm shower.

Most of the respondents, except for two, used menstrual pads. Nikola (18) and Viktória (19) mentioned being too young or worried due to their virginity as reasons for avoiding tampons. Besides these, fear and discomfort played a role: *"I am scared of tampons, so I use night pads all the time"* (Izabela, 28). Karmen exclaimed regarding her experience with trying tampons: *"It was a catastrophe, disgusting, I took it out right away!"* (Karmen, 25). Kristína (24) was concerned about not knowing how to use them and was scared that *"the string would get lost, and it would get stuck inside me,"* leading her to prefer pads. Bianka (25), who preferred tampons, did so because of the comfort they provide during sports. Jana (29), on the other hand, used tampons in combination with pads when travelling or had stronger menstruation to avoid any leaks. None of the respondents explicitly cited financial difficulties as a barrier to purchasing menstrual pads, although a few, like Eva (18), noted that pads are costly and argued they should be free, stating, *"it is not our choice to menstruate."*

Romo & Berenson's research found that women from ethnic minorities in the US expressed similar concerns about tampons being unsafe and inappropriate for virgins, as well as fears of tampons getting lost in the vagina.[134] Individuals from resource-poor backgrounds who use pads tend to prefer highly absorbent types, such as night pads, to manage their menstrual flow efficiently.[135] Moreover, a study from India notes that higher awareness about the variety of menstrual products correlates with higher income and education levels.[136] Given that inserting a tampon without any prior instructions is quite a difficult task by itself, it comes as no surprise that many girls are discouraged by it. In contrast to tampons, menstrual pads are easy to use, change, and dispose of, making it a more comfortable choice. In this study, respondents found tampons useful for athletes and those with heavy menstrual flow, serving as an additional protection layer. This brings us back to the fact that adequate information about menstrual health and menstrual products influences what products girls reach for. If untaught about alternatives in school, girls naturally use what other household menstruators use. The same logic applies to all hygiene habits and misconceptions about menstruation and products.

Hygiene is present in the concept of *marime,* which many authors[137] perceive as core to Romani culture and hence presumed to be relevant to the participants. Dividing women's bodies into pure and impure and restricting and isolating menstruating women, *marime* was, however, not recognised by any of the study participants. Reflecting on Leeson's finding that *marime* is not

[134] Romo and Berenson, 'Tampon Use in Adolescence: Differences among European American, African American and Latina Women in Practices, Concerns, and Barriers', 1.
[135] Sebert Kuhlmann et al., 'Unmet Menstrual Hygiene Needs Among Low-Income Women', 241.
[136] Farid, 'Preferred Menstrual Absorbents, Awareness and Hygiene Practices During Menstruation Amongst Women in Chennai, India'.
[137] Larkin, 'The Embodiment of Marime: Living Romany Gypsy Pollution Taboo'; Leeson, 'Gypsy Law'; Ceneda, 'Romani Women from Central and Eastern Europe: A "Fourth World", or Experience of Multiple Discrimination'; Barnes, 'Gypsy Law: Romani Legal Traditions and Culture - Book Review'.

recognised by all Romani groups, [138] the women's answers suggest that their community is one of the groups that abandoned the practice. This, however, does not entail that they lack awareness of purity and pollution. Quite the contrary; the women did recognise the notion of cleanliness and hygiene, presented as significant appearance characteristics.

For the interviewed women, cleanliness seems to be an essential part of their menstrual management practices, allowing them to conceal their menstrual status. Eliminating sensory recognition of their status is thus secured through staying clean, fresh, and unstained, which seems to be motivated by wanting to hide the messy, smelly embodied reality of menstrual flow. In addition, the women in my study face the stigma of being Roma, who are often stereotyped as being dirty and smelly, which compounds the stigma they face and influences how they respond to it.

Romani stereotypes

As already discussed in this thesis, racism and discrimination against Romani people are still prevalent in Slovak society, and all respondents were aware of it:

> They [the majority/Slovaks/white] look at the Roma in a completely different way, that they don't take them as equals, that it's out of duty that they must tolerate them because they are here. But I don't think they want to have a relationship with them or talk to them. (Ivana, 18)

Jana (29) highlights the position of Roma as scapegoats since *"from the perspective of the white, it is best to blame everything on the Roma."* A common phenomenon is to treat all Roma the same, based on the stereotypical view: *"It just makes me sad that some people are racist, and then they lump even the decent ones together,"* notes Kristína (24), pointing to the fact that

[138] Leeson, 'Gypsy Law', 276.

there are also not decent Roma present in the community and that she is not one of them. As Nikola (18) concludes, *"We are still living in racist times here."*

On the other hand, some respondents saw certain progress in sectors such as education: *"Back in the time, Romani children couldn't study, but now even a Roma can become a lawyer or doctor"* (Eva, 18), or public participation: *"We are going to the Brussels as young leaders, and we are all Roma. The issues are being discussed even if it cannot be seen"* (Mária, 18). While this is true, Nikola (18) highlights that that is not enough because *"the Roma can have all the education they want, but we will still only be Roma for them [Slovaks]."*

In her reflection on the discrimination faced by the Romani community, Silvia (32) poignantly articulated the personal impact of societal prejudice:

> Not everyone is like you [the author]. I can see that you are not withdrawing, that you are normal. But some people say, "Oh, it's that stinking Romani woman," and they start pulling away. And it bothers me so much because I'm a human like you, I'm clean like you. Just because I'm Romani? We're equal. (Silvia, 32)

As already discussed above, one of the features that make distance between the majority and Roma is the hygiene of a person, which is stereotypically seen as greatly neglected by the Roma. Nevertheless, in discussing the internal dynamics within the Romani community regarding stereotypes and self-perception, Milena (50) candidly reveals: *"We also pull away from our Roma when they're dirty and stinky. We are also ashamed of them."*

Being aware of the stereotypes and racism can serve as a coping mechanism for the community, as understanding their biases might help them armour and defend themselves against discriminatory practices. Consequently, once they are aware of the stereotypes, they can emphasise those parts of their identity and behaviour that counteract the stereotypical perception, further empowering them. Therefore, understanding the thinking of discriminators

provides an opportunity to be different and to prove that not all Roma fit the stereotypical box. Milena (50) clearly showed that not only do white people exclude the Roma, but Roma also distinguish between *us,* the clean Roma, and *them,* the unclean Roma. Pantea's research found a similar trend of young Roma re-creating their Romani identity by merging elements from the Romani and mainstream culture.[139] Consequently, the young Roma show to the rest that the stereotypical and negative picture of Roma might not be entirely accurate as these new hybrid identities of different Roma are formed. The women in this study also aspire to form an identity that would debunk the stereotypical perception of the stinky and dirty Roma by staying as clean as possible.

Striving to meet the hygienic standards set by mainstream society, they recognise that there indeed are unclean Roma, but it is not them. However, escaping the stereotypes might be quite difficult. As Creţan and Powell rightly stated, the Roma will face vilification regardless of their status since they are "members of a group which [non-Roma] consider collectively as different from, and as inferior to, their own group."[140] Being perceived negatively, regardless of the efforts to improve and do better, often results in mutual avoidance. In that case, non-Roma try to avoid Roma and vice versa to eliminate possible conflicts. Thus, claiming a 'clean status' might not have the desired effect, bearing in mind that Romani stigmatisation has deep historical roots in Slovak society.

Reflecting on the stigmatisation of Roma and the stigmatisation of menstruators brings us to the last theme, the compounded stigma. As already described previously, compounded stigma

[139] Pantea, 'On Pride, Shame, Passing and Avoidance: An Inquiry into Roma Young People's Relationship with Their Ethnicity', 614.
[140] Creţan and Powell, 'The Power of Group Stigmatization: Wealthy Roma, Urban Space and Strategies of Defence in Post-socialist Romania', 428.

refers to a person holding multiple stigmatised identities, seriously impacting one's quality of life. In this case, several identities meet to form a multilayer stigmatisation – the identity of Romani ethnicity, gender, and menstrual status.

Similarly to menstruators being perceived as bloody, messy, and unclean, one of the classical stereotypes about Roma is their inadequate hygiene standards. As the respondents stated, they differentiate themselves from the dirty Roma, which indirectly reinforces the claim that there are Roma who are unclean. The need to differentiate *oneself* from *others* lies precisely in the direct refutation of this stereotype but also under the pretext of being better than the *other*. Consequently, the means to achieve this new identity can be manifested by increased, even exaggerated, hygiene, ensuring a clear distinction between *them* and *us*. The Romani women in this thesis are thus indirectly trying to classify themselves in the 'clean' majority society so that this stereotype does not apply to them.

CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to research lived experiences of menstruation within Romani communities in Slovakia and investigate how it impacts the realisation of their human rights. As discussed at the beginning, some human rights of menstruators are impacted more, some less. These include the right to education, water and sanitation, and freedom from discriminatory practices.

Based on the qualitative data gained from semi-structured interviews with Romani women, the study highlights significant constraints on the right to education concerning menstrual health. The data from the interviews indicate that the education on menstrual health is often inadequate, resulting in inaccurate information and unpreparedness for the onset of menstruation. In Romani communities, where menstruation is a taboo subject, as the respondents claimed, schools have a critical role in providing essential information that might not be discussed at home. When school-based education is insufficient, girls rely on potentially inaccurate information from family and friends, fostering misconceptions. Consequently, the data proved the hypothesis for the subsequent question that given the restrictive nature and politicisation of the topic of reproductive and menstrual education, the knowledge would be lacking, which would have a somewhat negative impact on girls.

Regarding water and sanitation rights, it is hypothesised that better housing leads to a higher likelihood of well-managed menstrual hygiene. However, participants did not suggest any restriction of their rights as, besides one, they were all connected to the infrastructure. Even those who were not connected previously said that maintaining a high hygienic standard was necessary, and they found a way to stay clean. That, however, is not the case in poorer areas

where water scarcity is more prevalent, leading to the deterioration of individual's menstrual hygiene.

As far as the right to non-discrimination and gender equality is concerned, several factors leading to discrimination can be considered, such as period poverty, prevailing compounded stigma, and cultural aspects. From a financial perspective, while there were complaints about the high cost of menstrual pads, none of the women reported being unable to afford them.

Regarding the intersection of Roma stigmatization with menstrual stigma, participants highlighted an intriguing perspective. They were all aware of the racism and stereotypes faced by their ethnic group, particularly those portraying Roma as unhygienic and smelly – stereotypes that also commonly apply to menstruating individuals, as echoed by the concept of *marime*, which views menstruating women as polluted. To fight the stereotypical perception, women from the study claimed that hygiene has always been paramount in their lives. Staying clean not only maintained their well-being and comfort during menstruation but also helped them distinguish themselves from the *other* Roma who fit the stereotype.

When it comes to menstruation, it has been perceived mostly negatively, often as something disgusting and shameful. Consequently, menstruation must be concealed and taken care of to remain a personal matter. As the menstrual smell and the possible leaks can only exaggerate the stereotypical image of dirty Roma, women used adequate means to stay clean and fresh during menstruation, such as regular showers and menstrual absorbents.

The third subsequent question aimed to find the role of menstruation in women's lives and whether it is shaped by cultural practices. Reflecting on the respondents' answers, I presume there is no significant culture of menstruation in the lives of the girls and women who

participated in this research. Besides the menstrual slap, no unique menstrual rituals or practices were reported, suggesting that their perception of menstruation is similar to those outside their ethnicity. Regarding *marime* as a cultural aspect, its position in women's lives did not seem to play a role. While potential links exist between the concept of marime and restricted discussion, management, and negative self-perception among Romani menstruators, further research in the region is required to verify these correlations.

The results of this thesis showed that Romani women experienced and perceived menstruation similarly to the majority population. This is illustrated by sharing common feelings, sources, and perceptions of menstruation. Despite the world's attempts to orientalise Roma, the data has revealed that when it comes to menstruation, their stories do not indicate any kind of orientalism. Quite the contrary, menstruation blurred the line between the Romani menstruators and the majority, creating a common ground that connects rather than divides.

On a personal level, I found the research extremely rewarding in several ways. Not only has it challenged my presumptions about the Roma, but it also helped the participants to see the majority, whom I represented, in a more positive light. The greatest personal challenge has been the interviewing part, especially interviewing persons from an ethnic minority. I was concerned about their attitudes towards me as an outsider, which I thought would affect their openness and responses. However, all the women I met were incredibly open and personal, letting me glimpse into their lives.

From an academic point of view, this thesis contributes to the field of menstrual and Romani studies as it fills up a gap in the existing research. Thanks to the research, Romani women entered the discussion on menstrual experiences, which are heavily influenced by the already

derogatory stance in Slovak society. A geographical spectrum of menstrual studies has also been broadened by focusing on Slovakia, as limited research has been done within the country.

The study's results are very subjective and personal, given the relatively small scope of participants. While the individual stories are significant, it would be recommended to broaden the scope of the research and focus on different communities in various settings. Further research could also be conducted regarding the menstrual slaps and marime, their presence in the region and their relevance for the Romani ethnic minority.

To leave on a stronger note, I believe the destigmatisation of menstruation and ethnic minorities must be approached through various angles, disciplines, and activities to succeed. Menstruation should be openly discussed among all genders and included in school curriculums with comprehensive sex education, helping everyone learn about their bodies and natural processes. Additionally, racism must be addressed to ensure all individuals, particularly those with intersecting identities, can enjoy their human rights without discrimination based on menstrual or ethnic status. Therefore, menstruation must be normalised in society so that menstruating people, regardless of their ethnic background, feel included rather than excluded, seen rather than unseen, and heard rather than silenced.

Despite its small scope, I believe this thesis succeeded in giving a platform to menstruating Romani women, allowing them to share their struggles and stories, which provided insight into the lives of people who face systematic racism, compounded stigma, and struggle in enjoying their rights.

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