

'I was told the position has already been filled':
Barriers to mobility and coping strategies
of highly qualified Roma youth on their way
to the business sector in Hungary

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Abstract

The article investigates educational and career paths of educated Roma youth in Hungary as striving to enter quality employment in the business sector. While the employment rate of well-educated Roma youth is high compared to the general Roma population, their sectoral distribution is skewed towards self-employment, and towards the public sector vis-à-vis private sector. Our article investigates the reasons for the low presence of educated Roma in the business sphere, a sector which holds the greatest potential of occupational and social mobility. We use a survey dataset of educated young Roma (N=381), and also rely on in-depth interviews with youth from the same group, which provided us with a better understanding of the individual experiences of social mobility. We identify some of the main barriers linked to business sector employment of the Roma youth. By utilising the Bourdieusian theoretical lens, we focus on the importance of cultural habitus and its misrecognition in professional settings. The paper analyses successful capital mobilizations of those striving towards/ experiencing social mobility, while discussing experiences of failures too. These findings are unique in their nature as they pinpoint individual mobility strategies, the role of different forms of capitals in strive for jobs and later in early professional career.

Keywords: social mobility; Roma in CEE; racialized minority; forms of Bourdieusian capital; barriers to mobility; corporate sector

1 Introduction

The Roma are the most stigmatized and vulnerable ethnic minority in Hungary and the wider Central East European region. Their disadvantages concern all spheres of life, such as education, employment, housing, health. Although the term Roma (or as many call themselves in Hungary, 'cigány' (Gypsy)) embraces a highly heterogeneous, culturally, socially and economically diverse subgroups of people (Tremlett, 2014; McGarry, 2014) and despite the methodological difficulties of obtaining reliable data about their situation (Messing, 2014a; Rughinis, 2010), all available data sources and studies suggest that they possess an exceptionally vulnerable position on the labour market and hit a 'glass ceiling' concerning educational, pro-

fessional and social mobility. The gap between Roma and non-Roma does not seem to be closing despite considerable efforts, policy interventions and funds dedicated to what is referred to by mainstream institutions as 'Roma inclusion'. Labour market exclusion is one of the most important reasons as well as consequences of Roma's social exclusion and derive from a complex web of factors including racial discrimination, inadequate education, geographical disparities, family and gender patterns, lack of political voice and representation to mention the most important ones (Kertesi & Kézdi, 2011; O'Higgins & Ivanov, 2006; Ciaian & Kancs, 2018; Kahanec, 2014; Messing, 2014b; Vermeersch, 2017). A rich pool of studies explain labour market exclusion through the prism of policy interventions and labour market programmes operated by the state or civil actors (Ciaiana & Kancs, 2019; Messing, 2015), however there are very few studies, which would pose the question about the role of the business sphere in the labour market and wider social integration of the Roma. Our study aims to fill in this gap from a particular angle: examining employment opportunities of well-educated Roma youth in the business sector. It is evident that as long as many Roma remain out of the private, for-profit (business) sector, their labour market position will be characterized by vulnerability and exposure to state operated labour market interventions and limited employment opportunities in the public sector.

Our study changes lenses from the 'vulnerable Roma' and investigates those cases, where young Roma are on their way of becoming successful in terms of career and social mobility: after completing upper secondary or tertiary education, as they become formally competitive in the labour market. The paper takes account of the major barriers they encounter and negotiate as approaching quality employment in the private sector. For this end we will use the unique data set that was obtained during Bridge to Business project's impact study¹ including a survey of 381 young (18–35-year-old) Roma with at least upper secondary qualification in Hungary and two dozen of interviews with the same group. Our investigation begins from understanding challenges of accessing and completing quality education. We include spatial inequalities, the presence of helpers or hinderers (including family members, relatives and teachers) while analysing this stage of individual paths. After the section on experiences in education, we shift our focus to examine factors enabling access to a highly prestigious segment of the job market, the corporate sector. We selected this segment of the job market for two reasons: it is heavily understudied although it is the sector potentially enabling the largest 'jump' in social mobility due to its high prestige, well-paid positions, and secondly, there are no studies available on the professional mobility to and within this sector for the Roma. Our analysis closes with a few cases of career progress of young Roma within this sector. These cases enable us to discuss some of the challenges of professional mobility as experienced by the actors themselves.

¹ 'Bridging Young Roma and Business – Intervention for inclusion of Roma youth through employment in the private sector in Bulgaria and Hungary' project has been supported by the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) 2014–2020. The project took place between 2016 and 2019, and was led by the Open Society Foundation, Sofia. Partner institutions were Autonomía Foundation in Budapest responsible for implementing the programme in Hungary and the Center for Policy Studies, CEU in Budapest responsible for the impact evaluation and research.

2 Theoretical background

The paper approaches educational and early career paths of Roma youth as a social inclusion and mobility question. It applies Bourdieu's theoretical approach involving different forms of capital and their role in *social mobility*. As Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) argued knowledge transferred between generations secures status in society and thus reproduces social hierarchy. Yet, Bourdieu speaks not only about reproduction of social position via birth (which would suggest only immobility) but also about social advancement and mobility through knowledge gained through formal schooling. However, findings of research on education's role in mobility paths of racialized minorities indicate that formal education rarely fulfils this potential efficiently. Racialized minority students in formal education are typically falling behind in school and teachers routinely identify them as 'lacking' certain skills or capitals to (be able to) become socially mobile. (Yosso, 2005, p. 70) Invoking the Critical Race Theory lens (CRT), Yosso offers a critical interpretation of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and introduces the concept of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). The author identifies at least six alternative forms of cultural capital that students from racialized minority communities may bring with them into formal school environment: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance. She argues that many of these alternative forms of capitals go unacknowledged in formal school settings. When discussing Roma's access to business sector jobs, the following types of alternative cultural capitals appear to be the most relevant. (1) *Aspirational capital* refers to the ability to maintain hope in the face of hardship, while (2) *familial capital* refers to strong interpersonal supportive networks coming from extended families in the community. (3) *Navigational capital* is yet another important alternative resource, which refers to skills and abilities to navigate institutions, including educational spaces. The lack of such capital may become a major barrier in educational career and later during entry to competitive jobs. In this study, we analyse capital mobilization and uses of alternative Community Cultural Wealth, which contribute to educational achievements and a successful transition from education to employment. In less successful cases, when barriers occur these alternative forms of cultural capital are being mis/unrecognized by majority institutional actors.

Our approach has important antecedents in Hungary in the research tradition on social mobility of highly educated Roma people. Authors like Nyírő and Durst (2018; 2021), Durst and Bereményi (2021) focus on the upward mobility of the Roma youth and examine the different mobility strategies, the effects of (hidden) costs of upward mobility of Roma professionals. The interviewees Nyírő and Durst (2018) spoke to took up mostly public, or non-profit sector positions connected to the 'Roma issue', thus reconnecting with their communities of origin and the poorer Roma. This however meant fewer career opportunities and limited access to the private sector, where the most financially lucrative positions are located. As they conclude, more opportunities are needed for the high achieving Roma in the corporate sector (Nyirő & Durst, 2018, p. 102). Our study takes up the thread from this point.

Another theoretical inspiration for our article, also emerging from the Bourdeausian tradition, looks at mechanisms of reproduction of privileges through the lens of social class. Friedman and Laurison in their recent book (2020) pay special attention to barriers of social mobility of individuals with working-class origins. They offer a critical take on classical social mobility studies by emphasizing the role of class in getting 'in' to and getting 'on' in

prestigious corporate jobs. The authors argue that in contrast to meritocratic ideas, which emphasize the central role of merit in career achievements (see corporate ethos), *class origin casts a long shadow* on people's lives.

Friedman and Laurison argue that class background is defined by one's parents' stock of three primary forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social). These not only structure one's childhood, but they tend to be inherited. While the passing on of economic (monetary assets) and social capital (networks) seems to be more straightforward, the inheritance of cultural capital is a more complex process. Bourdieu introduces the concept of *habitus* for this end, describing a set of *dispositions* which organize and define how we relate to and understand the world around us.

The real significance of such dispositions and various aspects of symbolic mastery associated with the privileged classes is their direct relevance to social mobility. Such dispositions tend to be (mis)recognized, especially in highly elit(ist) environments such as leading corporate firms. (Friedman & Laurison, 2020) They are assigned with high value and are read as signs of cultural competence and distinctions. This is in short how class privilege becomes reproduced. What is especially problematic about this practice from the point of justice and equality is that while passing on economic assets and social contacts is (relatively) easy to spot, cultural capital is transferred in less obvious ways. Such capacities tend to be (mis)read as signs of talent, 'natural sophistication', innate intelligence, while the lack of such dispositions is misinterpreted as lack of 'merit' and 'talent' (Friedman & Laurison, 2020).

Our analysis takes into account different forms of social and cultural capital, which may contribute to the understanding of the barriers in accessing jobs in the corporate world, and in a broader sense, during social mobilities of young Roma people. The 'capital-focused approach' is important, as it is applied in a sector particularly proud of its meritocratic ethos, often (mis)understood as a 'pure competition of talent'.

We believe that our research can inform the international scholarship of social mobility on two important points. Our research material describes the limited pathways of social mobility for an ethno-racial minority in Hungary through taking account of the various barriers individuals negotiate as trying to access a prestigious segment of the job-market (the private business sector). As we show later, these barriers can be linked to the so-called 'meritocratic' principles and to difficulties in converting non-dominant forms of capital into professional recognition in corporate settings based on cultural capital of the privileged (upper-middle) classes. Despite all odds, we also identify successful cases of minority community capital mobilization.

3 Data and methods

The analysis applies a mixed method approach including qualitative and quantitative research data that mutually supplement each other. A survey of 18–35-year old Roma youth with at least secondary school matriculation forms the basis of the quantitative analysis. The survey includes 381 individuals aged 18–35 with at least matura exam,² making the

² Matura exam (*érettségi*) is a secondary school leaving exam that is universal (not school specific) and marks graduation from upper secondary education. It is a prerequisite to enter tertiary education.

sample as high as 5 per cent of the relevant population, which is a strong sample in statistical terms.³ The sample comprises of two subsamples: one includes participants of the Bridge to Business program addressed to Roma youth (N=93), and was collected for each of the ten cohorts when they entered the program (between March 2017 and May 2019),⁴ and the other involves Roma youth with matriculation recruited with a snowball sampling method that served as the control group for the impact study of the same program (N=288) (this survey was conducted in 2017).⁵ The sample is geographically not focused, but covered the entire country, as programme participants were recruited through NGOs located in the four regional centres with significant Roma population, while the control group was recruited through a snowball sample started from 6 different regional centres.⁶ The gender distribution of the combined sample is slightly leaning towards women (41 per cent male vs 59 per cent female). Geographic location is a similarly important aspect when evaluating the sample: 15 per cent of Bridge to Business program participants lived in Budapest (which also served as the main training site), half came from rural towns, and one-third lived in villages. The control group is somewhat different, with a larger share of those living in the capital city and a smaller share of those residing in villages. Although there are no baseline data against which the representativity of the sample of this very small and specific group could be established, looking at the distribution of the respondents across geographical regions, settlement type and gender it can be considered as a sample describing educated Roma youth in Hungary fairly well. The survey inquired about their education background, employment history, family/household settings, their personal network, skills, future plans concerning career and personal life.

Our research is unique due to the specific sample of a subgroup of the Roma: the young elite in terms of educational qualification and potentials of successful labour market career. Half of the respondents were in employment and a fifth were still in education at the time of the survey. However, if we look at where these youth work, we see that it is skewed to self-employment and employment in the public sector, especially when compared to non-Roma. There is a much higher rate of those who are self-employed or work in a family business (30 per cent), or in the public sector (39 per cent), while employment in the business sphere is quite marginal: only a fifth worked in the private sector (excluding family business). These data call for an explanation of the highly slanted distributions of sectors when it comes to employment of qualified Roma.

Last but not least, we also conducted over two dozen qualitative interviews with young Roma from the same group involved in the survey. Interviews were conducted throughout the entire time-span of the Bridge to Business programme (between March 2017 and May

³ Based on the census data (KSH, 2011) 5684 individuals aged 20–29, and 3274 individuals aged 30–39 having at least upper secondary certificate identified themselves as Roma (self-identification, and dual identification is allowed). We may presume that the number of those in the age group of 18–35 is approximately 7000–7500 and thus our sample covers over 5 per cent of the population.

⁴ And also a follow-up to their programme participation a survey has been filled at a later stage in order to measure impact, but this is not used in this analysis.

⁵ As in fn. 4.

⁶ The geographical distribution of the sample (who provided with their zip code) is as follows: 38 per cent Budapest, 14 per cent Central Hungary, 11 per cent North East HU, 16 per cent Alföld regions, 11 per cent South West HU, 11 per cent Western HU.

2019), with participants from each cohort when they entered the programme (2–4 persons/cohort). With a dozen of our respondents the interviews were repeated within a year, in some cases, we have followed up on our interviewees' career developments and life events beyond the first year of the research. Interviews discussed family background, childhood history, school experiences, educational paths, motivations as well as employment experiences, failures and successes, career plans, and job preferences.

In the following sections we examine mechanisms of the social production of inequalities. Stages of an individual life course laced together with defining institutional encounters (such as schooling) and further social factors (spatial inequalities) provide the context for interpreting the intricacies of social mobilities of individuals belonging to a racialized minority. These contexts and factors explain the most important barriers preventing young Roma to access prestigious employment in the business sector or making their way to it extremely challenging. The analysis of barriers is complemented with coping techniques, shedding light on the importance of individual agencies and the role of individual predispositions. The latter directs us to the Bourdeusian lens, to the role of capitals (mostly cultural and social), including non-dominant capitals (such as community capital) from the critical stream of this scholarly tradition.

4 On the road to the corporate workplace

4.1 Troubled experience during compulsory schooling and its long shadow

Formal schooling is a place of knowledge-making, or in a Bourdeusian wording, a space of capital formation. It is also a place for pre-existing norms, behaviors, cultural codes to get reconfirmed and built upon, while alternative codes, behaviours and norms are pushed aside, denied, or they are straight away penalized. Scholarship about racialized minority children's school trajectories point out that the mis/unrecognition of alternative forms of cultural capital, including minority community capital takes place in the early, formative years of schooling, which has a long-lasting effect on these children's school performance, on transition from education to work, and on their job search and employment.

Confirming findings of earlier research (Ercse, 2019; Kertesi & Kézdi, 2014; Zolnay, 2018), we can read from our survey that the *greatest barrier for young Roma is to enter and complete upper secondary school offering matriculation*.⁷ Data show that once successfully graduated from upper secondary education and gained Matura, the educational trajectories of Roma youth are comparable to non-Roma. 24 per cent have tertiary degree (MA 3 per cent and BA 21 per cent, and a further 4 per cent other types of post-secondary degrees), in addition 25 per cent of them pursued tertiary studies during the research.⁸ These data suggest that a similar share of Roma and non-Roma youth who achieved upper secondary diploma

⁷ Based on census data only 12 per cent of the 20–24 cohort, 10 per cent of the 25–29 cohort, 7 per cent of the 30–39 cohort and 5 per cent of the 40–70 cohort reached the level of matricula, while these shares are significantly more favourable for non-Roma (62 per cent of the 20–24 cohort, 42 per cent for the 25–29 cohort, 34 per cent for the 30–39 cohort).

⁸ These data are in accord with the data of the 2011 census: 24 per cent of 25–40 years' old Roma with matricula (N=5739) have graduated from university (N=1387).

(matriculation) are likely to continue education towards tertiary or other post-secondary education.⁹ Nevertheless, as presented later, educational careers of the few who successfully completed upper secondary school are linked to several positive conditions – we identify these as different (often alternative) forms of capital. These may result in successfully negotiating barriers.

So, what are the barriers linked to minority experiences that mainstream middle class institutions tend to misread? One is certainly the *scattered school trajectory* that characterizes most Roma students who reach the level of upper secondary education. While non-Roma typically pursue their secondary school studies in the same school unless the family moves to another geographical location most of our Roma respondents (72 per cent) reported changing schools at least once during the 4 years of upper secondary education. Scattered school trajectory is likely to be misread by middle class institutional actors (school principals or corporate HR professionals) as a lack of persistence and focus. However, interviews point out that in addition to personal life-events, changing schools has two typical motives directly linked to being a member of a racialized minority: either it is a response to the quality of the school or to discriminatory behaviour of teachers. Many Roma young people are systematically ushered into schools of the lowest quality, which do not prepare them for matriculation (érettségi). This later becomes a formal barrier to continuing education beyond compulsory schooling. Several of our interviewees gave account that changing school was motivated by its low quality and inability to prepare for matriculation, which is a prerequisite to continuing education beyond compulsory schooling. Leaving school was frequently motivated also to escape from discriminatory school practices. Several of our interviewees reported enduring verbal harassment during secondary school studies from some of their teachers or peers.

Such experiences have built into their behaviour, self-esteem, ambitions and emerged in the form of cultural ‘incompatibilities’, ‘incompetence’, ‘inadequacies’ during the schooling career and transition from school to work. The example of L tells how such insults may have a long-lasting effect on self-esteem and function as a barrier to perform well in competitive situations such as a job interview or exam:

I had a teacher, who taught literature and grammar. She picked on me. Would she sit in front of me now, and tell ‘you smelly Gypsy’ I wouldn’t care. Unless she hit me, just verbally abuse, I wouldn’t care, anymore. It is her problem, not mine [...] But it was different back then. Our class was preparing a recital and she would not allow me to join. She either bullied me or would not notice me at all. My literature grades started to drop, and while I still had excellent grades in other subjects a mental block built up with which I struggle up to date. If I am tossed out of my comfort zone – for example in an examination or interview situation – my mind blocks and I can’t find words, can’t continue speaking, I become speechless. I think, the source of this psychological block dates back to this teacher.

Beyond the clear evidence of racially motivated abuse taking place in the school, the long-term consequences and their impact on one’s personal life and professional career decades later needs to be emphasized here. This latter takes place through the bodily incorporation of the experience of being shamed, which returns in situations of social selection and classification, e.g. school or job admissions.

⁹ According to the 2016 microcensus 46 per cent of those who have matriculated continued to tertiary education in the total population.

Another important factor affecting life and career chances for Roma youth is the presence or the lack of strong and diverse familial and community support that is decisive in escaping segregated schooling. According to a comprehensive scholarship on this issue, segregated schooling is a major barrier to successful educational career for Roma. (for example (Hajdú et al., 2019; Fejes & Szűcs, 2019; Messing, 2017) Our data support these finding and indicate the devastating role of segregated schooling in primary school. While over half of Roma children in Hungarian compulsory education (6–15 years) attend either segregated schools or segregated classes of mixed schools (EU FRA, 2018),¹⁰ only 10 per cent of the respondents of our survey – all of whom passed Matura exam – have signalled the segregated environment in primary school. Our research indicates that using alternative community capitals they were able to prevent segregated schooling. Many explained how the choice of a non-segregated primary school in contrast to going along the ‘obvious way’, that is into the local segregated school environment, has been a conscious parental choice or effort. Strong parental agency and awareness of the significance of quality schooling for our interviewees proved to be crucial in secondary school level too. Interviews indicate how much the parental motivation – often paired up with some sort of social capital and information regarding which school to choose or whom to ask – to set the child on the right track defines later educational outcomes and professional consequences.

This choice/effort is similarly important when transitioning from general primary school to secondary school. The most typical trajectory for young Roma people is vocational training (Kende & Szalai, 2018; Messing, 2017). Enrolling to a gymnasium (upper secondary school with academic track) is atypical even though the final exam (matriculation) decides which segments of the job market one can access later. When talking to young Roma, most mentioned the family as the most important source of inspiration to continue education on an academic track. In some cases that family (parents) made this decision against the advice of the head teacher, who suggested the child not to aspire too high. In other cases, another significant adult played a great influence on educational career choices. This may be a teacher or other adult in the direct environment of the child. For example, an interviewee who hailed from a dysfunctional family, was not only convinced by friend’s parents to continue education in an upper secondary school, but they also supported him financially. Interestingly, there were very few mentions of NGOs or extracurricular programs, such as the after school club (*Tanoda*) network (Messing, 2014; Fejes, 2014) formed to support young Roma in their education and career choices, while almost all of the survey respondents gave account of benefiting from some kind of scholarship program at certain stage of their educational careers. These cases all stand for the importance of community resources or capitals, as forms of non-dominant capitals. Their potential to put someone on a mobility track, or to keep one there should not be underestimated.

¹⁰ The FRA EU MIDIS survey overrepresents Roma living in marginalization, therefore the data on school segregation is likely to overestimate the reality, but school segregation is significant according to Hungarian national data sources too.

4.2 Post-secondary education and graduation: Gaining employment relevant skills and qualifications

The relevance of various forms of capitals, including minority cultural wealth is extremely relevant during transition from compulsory to post-secondary education; when choosing a profession and applying to an institution of tertiary education. When firms argue about the lack of Roma in the corporate sector they point out the mismatch of qualification and skills between what the companies are looking for and what young Roma can deliver. (Árendás, Messing & Zentai, 2018) This is a complex issue since it involves several factors mutually reinforcing each other. It includes the general discontent of employers with the educational outcomes of the school system in general, that it does not prepare young people for the current needs of the job market irrespective of ethnic minority background. Secondly, it is about misrecognition of skills and cultural dispositions of most of the minority candidates by employers who belong to the upper-middle class. They often read them as 'unfit' and 'not matching' the positions they want to fill up.

There is a widely shared belief among HR professionals in the corporate sphere about a sectoral 'mismatch' between young Roma candidates and employers: according to this belief educated Roma typically gain qualifications, which are not functional in the private sector, such as social care, teacher training and nursing rather than professions sought after in the business sector (Árendás, Messing & Zentai, 2018). The analysis of the professional tracks in our sample does not support this 'shared knowledge'. The majority of post-secondary, non-tertiary trainings (ISCED 4) are highly compatible with the business sphere's demands (administration, project coordination, service sphere professions).¹¹ What we have observed during our fieldwork is that the multiple qualifications are common among highly educated young Roma, as an answer to better 'fit' the employers' expectations and a clear sign of the presence and use of navigational capital. We recognize this as part of young Roma people's successful coping strategies. Whenever a window of opportunity 'closes', they look for another path. This results in a diverse portfolio, which is often read by the HR professionals as lack of focus of career ambitions rather than what it is: a sign of young people's ability to change, to react swiftly, a non-dominant type of capital enabling young people to 'moving ahead'. People brought up in marginalized situations often acquire this type of capital early on, while for an HR person with an upper-middle class background it is uninterpretable, or worse, misread as a disadvantage.

As part of formal qualification, most business sector employers look for specific skills; user-level IT and foreign language communication skills are required for most business sector jobs. Our survey data suggest that Roma youth with secondary school diploma have major disadvantages in these areas. This is a result of the public education system being unfit to

¹¹ A third of the survey respondents had qualifications in administration, project coordination, approximately a quarter gained qualification in service sphere professions, and only a fifth in the social sector professions (mediator, social worker, community coordinator). It is conspicuous that many respondents reported pursuing multiple, unrelated professional trainings (such as for example agricultural machine technician – community developer – masseur; or salesperson – tourism manager – nursery assistant).

provide for these skills. In addition, Roma families lack financial capital to counter-balance low-quality schooling with private tuitions (only 20 per cent have English skills that qualify them for jobs in the business sphere).

Regarding the sectoral 'mismatch' concerning tertiary education (ISCED 5 and 6), survey data suggest that Roma youth's choices in tertiary education are diverse: 27 per cent indicated studying (or graduating from) economics and law, a similar share studied to become a teacher, and 9 per cent indicated each of the following five categories: engineering, social sciences, healthcare, culture and religious studies, social worker. Certainly, professions sought for in the public sphere, such as education, social and health care are more frequent among Roma university students and graduates than among the non-Roma, still, presuming that these professions dominate over the competitive ones is far from reality. What makes Roma less competitive in the job market of the business sector is the fact that many graduate from low-ranked institutions of upper secondary and tertiary education: from rural non-prestigious secondary schools and small colleges, where the quality of education is meagre and infrastructure significantly poorer than in large urban institutions. On the one hand, this is a direct consequence of the lack of economic and social capital and follows from the fact that most Roma live in marginalized regions, where only lower quality tertiary education is accessible. The lack of financial capital and social network outside their home-region makes it very difficult for young aspiring Roma to move to the capital or to an urban centre with higher education opportunities. On the other hand, this situation is a result of the community inspired aspirational capital and expectations to learn a profession that the community considers meaningful, such as teaching, child-care, social service related profession, while more distant professions, such as economist, lawyer or professions in humanities do not make much sense in these communities. And finally, a significant factor in these decisions points to gender inequalities in some Roma communities, which we will discuss in the next section.

4.3 Intersecting racial and gender inequalities impacting schooling trajectories and school-to-work transition

Since we only interviewed high achieving young Roma, we were able to collect only partial information on the gender related barriers in schooling. Yet, some of the data suggest that gender inequalities are present, and these create a clear division between opportunities for young Roma men and women.

A noteworthy dimension of gender disparities relates to the type of qualifications young Roma obtain: young women are more likely to choose supporting professions (social worker, health care, teacher and other pedagogical tracks) that are not or rarely sought for in the business sector. But gender inequalities start much earlier. Several interviewees mentioned that parents wouldn't let girls to study in secondary schools if that meant moving away from the family (to a dormitory). As explained below, most Roma people in Hungary live in small settlements situated further away from regional centres, where quality schools of secondary education are to be found. A similar phenomenon was mentioned with reference to tertiary education by interviewees who come from 'traditional', patriarchal Roma families: parents were reluctant to let their daughters to study further away from home and to stay in a dormitory, which in these patriarchal settings means 'slipping out' from the family (male) control. B's story describes these dilemmas in a traditional Vlah Roma family:

It was very difficult for my parents to let me go. It took two years until they accepted it. First, they wanted me to commute daily, but when they saw that this was extremely difficult for me, time consuming and also, I could not participate in any program that started after 5 pm. They finally agreed that I should move to the dorm.

The possibility to move to a Christian Roma Advanced College Dorm¹² was decisive in her case. Parents were more relaxed about their daughter moving to a dorm, where most of the students were Roma and some were acquaintance of the family. Her cousins were less lucky, they had to stay home and get married.

I have two cousins, girls. Not that they would be dull, they have matricula, but they had to get married because of the traditions (they are Vlah Roma). Traditions are so much more compelling for us (Vlah) than for the Romungros. [...] There are girls in the family, who would have preferred to go to university, but they were not allowed to. They had to get married, end of story.

Since Roma in Hungary form an extremely diverse community (or communities), generalized statements about parental behaviours and the impacts of family settings on women mobilities would be over-generalizing. We encountered and heard about different patterns, oppressive patriarchal and emancipatory ones too, where girls had equal chances for education as their male peers. However, if we need to sum up the chances of Roma girls for better education and quality employment, the intersectionality is evident in these cases. Most girls and women need to negotiate multiple barriers due to their gender and belonging to a racialized minority group.

4.4 Geographical distance as a major contributing factor to inequalities in schooling trajectories and school-to-work transition

Geographical barriers are among the most important structural factors affecting employment chances of young Roma people on the labour market, especially in the corporate sector. (Árendás, Messing & Zentai, 2018; Berescu et al., 2013). This barrier emerges as early as entering education as quality of schools may be highly different in villages and urban areas. The highly selective and inequitable educational system in Hungary (see for example Radó et al., 2021) results in low quality schooling for most Roma, who live predominantly in remote (far from the capital or other major urban centre), small villages. Geographical distance is often a barrier to highly educated Roma too: only 36 per cent of our survey respondents lived either in Budapest or in the county seats or settlements where jobs in the private sector concentrate. Based on distance data and travel time data, we calculated the average time to reach the centre of the micro region, the county seat and the capital city¹³ by public transportation for our respondents.¹⁴ These three types of urban centres and the corresponding

¹² Christian Roma Advanced Colleges are a network of Advanced Colleges run by Christian churches offering accommodation, scholarship and special classes to Roma students.

¹³ This was determined on the basis of the postal code of their residence and the closest regional center and public data on public transport schedules

¹⁴ As most of the participants are young and come from socially disadvantaged families, owning a personal vehicle would be unlikely for them.

distances are significant in terms of access to public services, education and jobs as most private-sector jobs (except agricultural ones) and institutions of tertiary education are situated in regional/ county seats, or in the wider capital area.

The survey data highlight the relative labour market disadvantage of those Roma youth who live in rural Hungary: living in a village means – on the average – a daily commute of 90 minutes by public transportation to the micro-region centre, where most public services and institutions of secondary education are located, while it takes on average over three hours to commute to the nearest county seat, where most of post-secondary educational institutions and business-sector jobs are located. The interviews revealed three types of situations that characterize labour-related mobility decisions.

The broadest category of Roma youth is geographically mobile. This is an extremely important type of capital when it comes of employability, ability to access certain job types (particularly corporate ones). Interviews revealed that many – especially those living in the east and northeast of Hungary – were not only ready to move from the place of residence but they preferred to do so. For an individual belonging to a racialized minority group, moving to a bigger settlement can be a game-changer, requiring ‘survival’ skills and an aptitude for mobility, non-dominant capitals often emerging in vulnerable minority settings. As a thin, but very relevant literature from the Hungarian mobility research points out (Árendás et al., 2022) mobility is not a kind of knowledge supported or recognized in Hungarian schools, to the contrary, it is looked down, silenced, or considered as a disadvantage.

The greatest challenge in a cross-regional geographic mobility is to set foot, to find accommodation in large cities with high rental prices. The public housing sector is tiny, sub-standard and essentially unavailable (Hegedűs, 2017), while job-related housing arrangements do not exist with a few exceptions of temp workers. The following example represents these difficulties, as a significant barrier to most young Roma.

R has post-secondary degree and found a job opportunity at a multinational retail chain headquarter near the capital city. She lived in a town 200 km away from Budapest thus had to move for the job. The salary she was offered as a junior manager did not cover the initial costs of relocation such as deposits, advance payments. These costs emerge as an important obstacle to employment related mobility of socially disadvantaged individuals, as neither they, nor their families have financial reserves which would cover such expenses.

Most of our interviewees, who managed to move for a quality job in the business sector were able to do so with the support of friends and/or family members, who shared their homes for the initial few months. The above stands as a clear example of efficient alternative capital mobilization: in situations of need, when lacking economic capital, other forms such as community capital, are being utilized. Yet, not everyone is fortunate enough to have friends or relatives in a position to help. This can be especially true for the most vulnerable, marginalized members of a minority community.

The second category among Roma youth represents those willing to relocate for work, but not too far, to stay connected to their families and closer community. The case of V, a university graduate with work experience in the public sector shows this dilemma. He was ready to move for a business sector job but wanted to stay in the same macro-region. For him, his existing network of friends and acquaintances in the region he lived and worked in, his ‘rootedness’ represented the most important form of capital, which he was not willing to exchange for other possible prospects. Nevertheless, this turned out to be a significant limitation regarding his employment opportunities: he turned down a job he was offered by

a MNC retail company in Budapest. Even though he was intensively applying for jobs in his region, he could not find employment. Finally had to accept a job in a meat factory and to work in three shifts.

The third category of people includes those who cannot move from their communities and/or family for objective reasons like care responsibilities or simply, who are not willing to do so. Many of them do not find employment locally or are confined to poorly paid public sector jobs or public work programs. In these cases, immobility (often in highly gendered forms, as discussed earlier too) translate into serious disadvantages regarding job prospects, further exacerbating their socio-economic position.

The opportunities that arise with more geographic mobility are highly gendered. It is the women who are more restricted in their geographic mobility as they are the ones, who are automatically assigned the care-giver's role (taking care of children and elderly/disabled). They are not only restricted in moving away from their homes, but daily commute is also extremely challenging, if not impossible for many. Given the strong gender disparities in the division of labour at home and in care responsibilities, and the fact that most of the corporate sector jobs require regular overtime. Mothers with young children, irrespective of ethnicity have significant disadvantage in joining corporate sector employment in a full-time capacity. Geographical barriers and other socio-economic disadvantages are built on each other, when it comes to women's access to corporate sector jobs.

5 Getting employed and 'getting ahead' in the company

In the following part of the paper, we scrutinize barriers and coping strategies (capital mobilizations) of young Roma, who reached the doorsteps of the corporate sector. While conducting empirical research on their perceptions about obstacles and ways of coping, we tried to understand the underlying social mechanisms of capital mobilization.

The primary level of perceived barriers to getting employed is racial discrimination that has long-lasting effects on young Roma's aspirations. Negative, and often humiliating experiences from the past (not necessarily from the corporate sector, but from any job-related situation) often restrain young Roma people even from trying for quality jobs at prestigious companies. Our survey pointed out that racial discrimination is widespread in Hungary. 21 per cent of all respondents experienced discrimination personally related to one or more traits linked to being Roma ('race' and/or 'ethnicity' and/or 'nationality' and or 'appearance'). Considering that only half of the respondents were in employment (including those who studied in addition to work), the unsettling picture is that half of young Roma in employment experienced racial discrimination in spite of their short employment career. Research interviews highlight typical situations in which these experiences occur. The most frequent account explains discrimination when entering a job selection process:

I submitted my CV to a number of job announcements. I was invited to the workplace [her family name does not refer to her Roma origin] but as soon as I walked through the door, I was told the position had already been filled. I had work experience relevant to the job, in the financial sector and in retail. For example, I applied for a shop assistant position in one of Budapest's large shopping centres: I went for a trial day, but after the first hour, when they recognised that I was a Roma girl, [...] you know, people in Pest have an expression on their face: 'Who is this Gypsy girl?' – they thanked me and said the position had been filled.

Even though she graduated from upper secondary school, speaks English, and has work experience in sales and administration, she could only get a cleaners' job.

Experience of discrimination do not end with unsuccessful job applications. Explicit and implicit forms of discrimination may work in the workplace too. These often feed into feelings of inadequacy and self-blame on one side and contribute to those perceived capital 'deficits' which racialized minority employees (or applicants) are associated with by ethnic majority employers.

In our research, we came across a handful of companies with diversity measures at place that were supportive of hiring and including Roma. Yet, their diversity-oriented measures (more on these in Árendás et al., 2022) are often unable to tackle the different cultural dispositions of minority applicants, and they usually misread these as 'deficits'. 'Soft elements' such as self-presentation, way of speaking, or self-confidence play an important role in corporate decisions on who gets hired. It is evident that minority candidates underperform in these areas due to their minority position related experiences. Their weaker performance is (mis) interpreted by employers as 'lack of merit' or 'talent' for that matter. Our findings resonate directly with the work of Friedman and Laurison (2020) discussing the long shadow of working-class background on career development and social mobility. They argue that cultural capital is inherited and passed on in less obvious ways than economic assets or social contacts, yet those belonging to privileged strata of society benefitting from these directly. In all the cases we followed closely in our research, we could detect disadvantages stemming from such 'inadequacies'.

Friedman and Laurison (2020) suggest that the corporate sector is set on upper-middle class values and cultural capitals, though this environment is considered as purely 'meritocratic' and thus egalitarian. To the contrary, the competition is uneven, since it is rooted in privileged class settings and upbringing. As a result, it reproduces the class privileges of those being highly educated and coming from a privileged family settings and elite school environment (Friedman & Laurison, 2020).

Language use and vocabulary are good examples of a finely coded cultural capital in action, incorporated in each individual by upbringing and schooling. It is promptly and mistakenly translated by employers and colleagues into professional competence, 'skills' or 'merit'. Certain regional dialects or the way some Roma people speak accompanied with certain body language (another example of carefully nurtured cultural capital), is also often translated by co-workers and supervisors as a sign of professional incompetence. During our interviews we hear references to employers (or superiors) reminding young Roma people about (in)appropriate dressing and appearance.

We are not suggesting that a non-dominant cultural capital embodied in various bodily appearances, behaviours and aesthetic forms is the main and only reason for the lack of presence of young Roma in the business sector jobs, but it certainly contributes to the intricate mechanisms of self-presentation and perception during the entire hiring process, often referred to as 'chemistry' by HR people. And we have no doubts that this 'chemistry' among employees, and between employees and superiors continues during the entire trajectory of employment, feeding into decisions on promotions and entire career developments.

6 Concluding thoughts

Our aim was to analyse the barriers Roma youth encounter when striving for jobs in the business sector, whereas we also tried to interpret their cases in the broader theoretical framework of social mobility. As we presented a detailed account of the major barriers, based on our survey data and personal narratives of young, educated Roma, we wanted to arrive at more than just a diagnosis of a problem. We aimed to understand what the main drivers behind the phenomenon are, why are educated individuals formally fitting job requirements not making it, or only a very few of them. In other words, we aimed to know how upward mobility of individuals belonging to a racialized mobility works, especially through the lens of a sector which emphasizes 'merit' more than any other part of our society. As we presented in the analysis of our findings, the answer is in the idea of 'merit' itself and in 'matching' capitals. While conventional measures of 'merit' such as professional expertise, qualification, skills do play a decisive role in hiring practices and in career progress, 'merit' has further dimensions too. As Friedman and Laurison (2020) point out, individuals belonging to different segments of society (e.g. to different class in their study, or a different racialized group) have the capacity to 'cash in' their 'merit' and realize their 'talent' differently. 'Merit' does not hang in a social vacuum, instead it heavily dependent on the socio-economic circumstance it emerges from. Merit needs to be given its opportunity, it has to be demonstrated or performed. And this is where privileged have a head start, and a racialized minority job-seeker may experience a real disadvantage.

When focussing on highly educated Roma youth on their road of applying for jobs in the corporate sector, we could single out and analyse barriers, which potentially prevent them from 'cashing in' or converting their 'merit' and 'talent' into actual jobs. The evaluation of this context took us way back in time, travelling back to their childhoods peppered with negative educational experiences, with experiences of early discrimination, to spatial inequalities and barriers related to gender, horizontal selection within the system (diverting many of ambitious young Roma to less lucrative, thus less competitive professional fields) and to experiences of not 'fitting in' when trying for corporate jobs.

Our analysis was organized around two key elements, that of barriers (of social mobility), and coping strategies as an individual response to barriers. We relied on the Bourdieusian concept of capital, critically re-examined in works of Yosso (2005), Durst and Nyiró (2018), Durst and Bereményi (2021), and Friedman and Laurison (2020). We have focussed on the role of different capital forms in case of minority youth making their way towards quality employment. Often, despite having the necessary technical capital (formal education, diplomas, employment experience), companies perceived these young Roma as 'unfit', 'not matching' their needs related to an ideal candidate. We interpreted these situations via alternative forms of cultural capitals. Assessing by the fact that in contrast to the vast majority of Roma youth our interviewees were able to reach and successfully pass matriculation they were able to 'cope' and to overcome the most significant barriers their cohort typically encounters. Coping involved mobilization of alternative forms of (cultural) capital, however these capitals stayed often unrecognized and unacknowledged by the employers in situations of job-search or career progress.

Though a large number of studies related to labour market opportunities of the Roma are being published about the Hungarian context and the CEE region, most of them focus on the less educated, lower strata of job-seekers, for instance on the public work scheme. Highly

educated Roma, and especially their link to the business world has not been established in any of the existing studies so far. We consider it important to fill in this gap for a number of reasons: due to the fact that the number of highly educated Roma is increasing in Hungary and in other CEE countries, and their access to prestigious and competitive jobs in the business sphere is crucial in terms of social mobility, recognition and justice. Moreover, it is clear that educated Roma in lucrative jobs may bring along a multiplier effect, inspiring other Roma to step on the path of mobility, projecting an image of a successful Roma person, suggesting that mobility, despite all odds, is a feasible social project. The latter one is especially important in case of a racialized minority in CEE, in a social context where mobility is not clearly part of the social imaginary.

Finally, the cases we analysed in our study inform not only the Hungarian scholarship on Roma and/or social mobility research but point beyond the national context. They shed light on processes – such as mobility patterns and pathways of racialized minorities, such as the Roma – beyond Hungary, with a broader relevance to the CEE region.

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