

## **Excluded lives**

### **Female Roma life paths translated in the prison context**

**Sílvia Gomes** CICS-UM/UICCC-ISMAI

**Rafaela Granja** CICS-UM

#### **Abstract**

Roma are a highly stigmatized, segregated and discriminated ethnic minority in Portuguese society. Although the issue of involvement of the Roma ethnic group in deviant and criminal practices is frequently discussed in media and political discourses, scarce research has focused on the experiences of Roma individuals involved with the criminal justice system. In addition, although several studies show an overrepresentation of this group in criminal proceedings and in prison context – the later being even more evident among female prisoners - there has been very little emphasis on the ethnic, gendered and class background of Roma individuals imprisoned in Portugal, especially regarding women.

Drawing on two different projects conducted in Portuguese carceral settings, this paper explores the life paths and imprisonment experiences of a group of female Roma prisoners. Data show that the intersection of ethnicity, gender, class and crime strongly determines and constrains the life conditions of Roma women, both behind and beyond prison walls.

## **Introduction**

Roma are a highly stigmatized, segregated and discriminated ethnic minority in Portuguese society. They tend to be socially excluded in the several realms of public life: education, labor opportunities, contacts with public institutions, and everyday inter-ethnic experiences with non-Roma individuals.

Although the issue of involvement of the Roma ethnic group in deviant and criminal practices is frequently discussed in media and political discourses (Gomes & Machado, 2011), scarce research has focused on the experiences of Roma individuals involved with the criminal justice system. In addition, although several studies show that in Portugal and Spain there is an overrepresentation of this group in prison context (Barberet & García-España, 1997; Moreira, 1999) – which, in Portugal, is even more evident among female prisoners (Moreira, 1999) - there has been very little emphasis on the ethnic, gendered and class background of imprisoned Roma individuals , especially regarding women.

Drawing on two different projects conducted in Portuguese carceral settings, this paper explores the particularities of Roma women involved in the criminal justice system in Portugal.

In the next sections, we briefly address how issues of social exclusion, gender and criminalization relate to Portuguese Roma communities. Then, we discuss the contributions of the intersectional approach to the study of imprisoned Roma women; and, in methodology, we describe how the two researches were combined for the purposes of this article. The analysis is focused on Roma women life trajectories, imprisonment experiences and future prospects. Results show that the intersection of ethnicity, gender, class, crime, and imprisonment strongly determines and constrains the life conditions of Roma women, both behind and beyond prison walls.

## **1. Roma communities in Portugal: social exclusion and gender issues**

Recent research shows that ethnic groups are one of the social categories most vulnerable to poverty (Almeida *et al.*, 1992, p. 77). They tend to be associated with impoverishment mechanisms that, on a recurring basis, reproduce and consolidate social exclusion positions (Mendes, 1998). However, since in Portugal there are also other groups at risk of poverty, the proportion of elements of ethnic minorities among the poor is very small (Machado, 1992, p. 129).

Among ethnic groups, Roma are one of the most vulnerable, segregated and discriminated social categories. Their life conditions tend to cumulatively combine a structural untie from the formal labor market; high illiteracy rates and a general attitude of withdrawal regarding political participation (Mendes, 2005, p. 17-18). Furthermore, Roma communities generally live in segregated urban areas, recurrently associated with poverty, deviance, and marginalization.

Regarding social organization of their own group, the privileging of intra-ethnic relationships, the recurrence to self-employment, the relevance of elderly respect, the strong mobilization of social networks in the face of particular circumstances (mourning, illness, weddings and imprisonment<sup>1</sup>) and the presence of a strong patriarchal system are main components of Roma communities (Casa-Nova, 2007, 2009; Lopes, 2008; Mendes, 1998, 2005).

Roma individuals tend to develop activities characterized by its hybrid boundaries between the formal and informal sector, such as fair hawkers (Mendes, 2005). Maintain an activity that allows them to have some autonomy and flexibility is

---

<sup>1</sup> These support networks provide moral and emotional support, as well as financial aid, goods and, if necessary, physical strength (Mendes, 2000).

considered one way for preserving Roma cultural traditions (Casa-Nova, 2009). However, during the last years, those activities had been undergoing a process of growing instability due to the increasingly competitive market and multiplying of certain industries and large stores. Therefore, the meager profits of itinerant trading and its irregular nature have left these populations in the margins of economic survival and fostered the search for other sources of income. Roma individuals started to also be involved in other activities, some of them in the bottom of formal market - such as security guards in building constructions (Casa-Nova, 2007) - and others in the informal and illegal market, such as drug trafficking (Montenegro, 1999, p. 21), as, indeed, other non-Roma citizens (Silva, 2000, p. 64).

Regarding gender issues, Roma communities are highly structured by a patriarchal system in which women tend to occupy a subordinate position. Gender asymmetries are very evident in the Roma community since childhood. Girls and boys tend to be socialized differently: while girls' education tends to emphasize principles of control and surveillance over their behavior, in boys' socialization freedom is highlighted. These different behavioral patterns are perpetuated throughout the life paths of Roma men and women. As adults, women should maintain a posture characterized by decorum, restraint and family dedication (Lopes, 2008, pp. 70-83). Their labor occupation should be an extension of the domestic sphere, held under the monitoring and control of the community, in particular under male surveillance (Casa-Nova, 2009, p. 140). As opposed, men are generally free to navigate among relationships and circulate between public and private spaces. Male occupation, though generally centered in traditional activities commonly practiced by Roma individuals, is not as restricted to that spectrum. Although only occasionally it happens, men may choose other forms of employment (Lopes, 2008, pp. 70-83).

Notwithstanding, despite the position of male power being presented as “naturalized” within this socio-cultural group, ethnographic research have been showing that there are some particularities on the way the patriarchal domination is exercised in everyday life practices. According to Maria Casa-Nova (2009), although highly conditioned, women are generally able to maneuver, to a limited extent, their subordinate positions within communities, and particularly within the private sphere, in order to find ways to experience some power. However, women do so without confronting male authority. Female strategies may include deliberate poor school performance (in order to continue to attend school), preservation of virginity, taking decisions in the family sphere that influence decisions at a community level, exercising control over family planning, and embellishing of the female body (Casa-Nova, 2009). This implies that, although Roma women live in subordination contexts that tend to be much more acute than most women belonging to the majority society, they deliberately seek to mitigate – in a subtle and invisible way - the reproduction of such gender asymmetries. Therefore, Casa-Nova (2009) concludes that there are different kinds and amounts of power exercised by the men and women: while power in its *expressed* dimension is mainly exercised by man, the power exercised in its *hidden* dimension is mostly performed by women (p. 114).

## **2. Roma: deviance, criminalization and imprisonment**

The attempt to link ethnicity *per se* with crime has been ideologically driven, labeling certain groups as inherently more criminals than others (Carvalho, 2007; FitzGerald, 1997, Howard *et al.*, 2001). According to Fitzgerald (1997), this has adversely impacted the analysis of any ethnic dimension in crime involvement. Researchers who have tried

to correlate different ethnic related patterns with deviance and criminality generally ended up further highlighting and consolidating the stereotyped labeling.

However, according to the same author, it remains crucial to explore how particular ethnic groups relate and adapt to opportunity structures, as well as to analyze their experiences with criminal justice system (FitzGerald, 1997, pp. 57-58). Only by uncovering those singularities, research will be able to discuss and counteract stereotypical approaches. By drawing on this argument, in this paper our aim is to further explore the specific dynamics underlying Roma women involvement with the criminal justice, in particular during custodial sentences.

This issue has been scarcely addressed on Portuguese literature. One of the reasons that may justify this reality is the inexistence of statistical data about ethnic groups living in Portugal. Portuguese official statistics only record nationality: ethnicity or phenotypes are not reported. Direct or indirect records of data permitting such information are prevented by law, in order to not reinforce stereotypes (Cabecinhas, 2007) or society racialization. Thus, the existence of racial / ethnic groups is not formally recognized by the State, which only recognizes citizens (Cunha, 2010, p. 144).

Despite the lack of official statistics, studies carried out in Portugal and Spain addressing Roma communities involvement with criminal justice system have shown an overrepresentation of this group in criminal proceedings and within prison environment (Barberet & García-España, 1997; Gómez & Dopico, 1978 in Barberet & García-España; Moreira, 1999). According to Moreira, that developed a study in the Portuguese prison context, this overrepresentation is even more evident among female prisoners (Moreira, 1999). Regarding crime convictions, most men and women are arrested due to crimes related to drug trafficking (Moreira, 1999). Barberet and García-España (1997, pp. 180-181) found a similar pattern in Spain. Through interviews with criminal justice

professionals and Roma leaders, these researchers concluded that Roma individuals are mainly involved in drug-related crimes - particularly drug trafficking in small and medium-scale -, crimes against property, and violent crimes that usually occur as a result of family disputes.

Taking into consideration the particular characteristics of Roma individuals involved with the criminal justice system, there's a need to further problematize concepts of race, ethnicity, and nationality and, in particular, the ways whereby these categories are translated, shaped and structured in the prison context (Resende, 2006).

Manuela Ivone Cunha (2001, 2005) is one of the Portuguese researchers that have been extensively addressing these issues, focusing in particular on the connections between crime, gender, ethnicity and imprisonment. Her work, based on extensive fieldwork on a Portuguese female prison, has demonstrated that the geography of imprisonment has become very predictable: nowadays, most prisoners, including Roma, are originated from the same deprived and segregated urban neighborhoods. Within these urban peripheries – systematically associated with drug dealing and consumption – poverty, social exclusion, marginalization and retail drug trafficking have ultimately united ethnically diverse populations into a uniform position (Cunha, 2010). The visibility of inter-ethnic cleavages among the poor is therefore rendered as scantily significant. For example, race/ethnicity and gender, doesn't determine or restrict the involvement in the drug retail informal economy. On the contrary, the drug retail economy has increasingly become an illegal structure of opportunities relatively open to all individuals, regardless of their ethnicity or gender.

The centralization of the action of law enforcement agencies in these deprived areas – legitimized by specific policies of penal repression aimed to control retail drug trafficking – has led to a simultaneous and consecutive confinement of individuals from

the same social networks (parents, siblings, neighbors). Therefore, wide networks of kin and neighbors are nowadays present in Portuguese prisons, simultaneously, serving prison sentences. On the one hand, this implies that “sociability on the inside continues to be oriented by criteria which are prior to and external to the social fabric of the prison” (Cunha, 2008, p. 340). On the other hand, it entails that prisoners now share a structured class identity (Cunha, 2010). In this sense, within prison, ethnic categories - as African, Angolan, Cape Verdean or Roma – tend to be merely discursive, not constituting an instrument of struggle between ethnic identities.

### **3. Intersectionality: a contribution to the study of poor and criminalized Roma women**

The intersectionality perspective became a central topic in the feminists’ social sciences in the 1990s. This approach assumes that men and women are characterized by their race, class, sexuality, age, physical ability, and other forms of inequality (Baca & Dill, 1996). These factors simultaneously interact with each other at the micro and macro structural levels (Andersen & Collins, 2004; Weber, 2001; Burgess-Proctor, 2006), creating compounded effects that are more than the sum of separate variables (Brown, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). This implies that the intersectionality approach is less centered on the similarities or differences between race, class and gender and more focused in the connections and combinations between them (Andersen & Collins, 2004, p. 7). In particular, this perspective outlines the ways whereby intersecting inequalities create particular and compounded patterns of oppression and discrimination.

Feminist criminologists also have been examining linkages between gender, race, class and crime, using an intersectional theoretical framework. These approaches



indicate that deviance and crime experiences cannot be understood by isolating each of these factors (Coster & Heimer, 2006; Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Britton, 2000). People involved with the criminal justice system tend to commonly suffer double and triple discrimination experiences, which must therefore be analyzed in combination, as mutually constitutive factors (Brown, 2010). In this article, the intersectionality between gender, class and ethnicity acquires paramount importance since our focus of analysis is Roma women from disadvantaged classes involved in deviant paths. Therefore, taking into consideration the bigger picture of social exclusion, gender inequalities, and overrepresentation of Roma in the prison context, and combining it with an intersectionality approach, our purpose is to analyze how ethnicity, gender, class, crime and imprisonment interact throughout the life trajectories of criminalized Roma women, creating specific patterns of disempowerment.

#### **4. Methodological considerations**

Drawing on data collected by two different projects conducted in Portuguese carceral settings (one carried out in 2010 and another in 2011) we propose a comprehensive and interpretative approach of imprisoned female Roma's experiences behind and beyond prison scenario.

The project carried out in 2010, had as main purpose to analyze the male and female prisoners' narratives of different nationalities and ethnicities in order to reveal the mechanisms which allow us to understand and explain their presence in Portuguese prisons. One of the groups under study was Roma individuals and there were conducted eight interviews with female Roma prisoners in two major female prisons. The other project, conducted in 2011, had as main purpose to explore, from the female and male prisoners' perspective the familial and social impacts of imprisonment. A qualitative

study was undertaken to explore, in depth, how the reconfiguration of social roles and responsibilities upon imprisonment is enacted and how this reframing is shaped by gender, ethnicity and class. Among twenty interviews to female prisoners, five interviewees were Roma women.

Although these two studies were intended for different aims, taken together, these allow for an overall perspective of the following aspects: (i) the pre-prison context, exploring Roma women conditioned objective life conditions throughout the life course, and structural constraints and motivations that led to crime; (ii) the prison experience, particularly analyzing how family relations are reconfigured within prison context and how prisoners maintain connections with the outside world; (iii) and the future prospects, outlining prisoners expectations and concerns.

Focusing exclusively on the qualitative data from both projects, after controlled the similarities and differences between both studies, we proceed to the analysis of eleven interviews<sup>2</sup>. Both studies resorted to theoretical samples, based on representativeness by diversity and exemplariness, according to each study aims. Thus, by crossing data, we obtained a diversified sample regarding socio-demographic characterization (age, professional activities and qualifications) and criminal record (type of crime and duration of the sentence).

**Table 1. Data of Roma female prisoners interviewed**

<b>Prisoner</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>Professional activities</b>	<b>Crime</b>	<b>Sentence</b>
Josefina	59	Illiterate	Itinerant Merchants	Drug trafficking	6 years
Olinda	35	Illiterate	Housewife	Drug trafficking	5 years and 6 months

<sup>2</sup> There are 11 interviews under analysis and not 13 interviews – the sum of the interviews conducted in both studies – because 2 of the female interviewed by the researchers were the same. Once the empirical data was collected in close periods, two prisoners were selected by both researchers.

Nádia	30	9th Grade	Itinerant Merchants	Drug trafficking, coercion and kidnapping	12 years
Vanda	23	Primary education	Housewife	Robbery	3 years
Lídia	42	Illiterate	Itinerant Merchants	Robbery	2 years e 7 months
Fátima	31	Illiterate	Itinerant Merchants	Drug trafficking	5 years
Cristiana	60	Primary education	Itinerant Merchants	Homicide	21 years
Elmira	24	Primary education	Itinerant Merchants	Drug trafficking and driving vehicle without legal authorization	6 years
Joaquina	37	Illiterate	Housewife	Robbery	14 years
Alzira	27	Illiterate	Itinerant Merchants	Drug trafficking	4 years e 6 months
Margarida	30	Illiterate	Itinerant Merchants	False allegations and drug trafficking	3 years e 3 months

**Source:** Individual cases of Roma female prisoners, 2010 and 2011.

The participants ranged in age from 23 to 60 years old, with an average age of 36 years old. Most interviewed women had low levels of education (seven were illiterate) and, prior to imprisonment, most of them were facing socio-economic vulnerability and labor precariousness (eight were itinerant merchants). All the interviewed women were married according to the “Roma law” and were mothers, with an average of four children each<sup>3</sup>. Every imprisoned woman had minor children in the care of outside support.

The crimes that led to these women convictions are diverse and include drug trafficking, robbery, false allegations, driving vehicle without legal authorization, coercion, kidnapping and homicide. The more recurrent crimes were related to drug

<sup>3</sup> This average is higher than the Portuguese Total Fertility Rate. The latest data from 2012 indicates 1.28 children per woman (see Por Data <http://www.pordata.pt/Portugalhttp://www.pordata.pt/en/Home>).

trafficking (six women). Respondents' sentences ranged from two years and seven months to 21 years<sup>4</sup>.

The content analysis of the interviews and the interpretation of results were based on a qualitative approach (Becker & Bryman, 2004). Data were systematically categorised and synthesised into three themes: i) the pre-prison context; ii) the prison experience; and iii) future prospects.

## **5. The pre-prison context: paths to deviance and crime**

Roma girls begin to cooperate in domestic activities (take care of babies, tidying, cleaning, and cooking) since childhood. Generally there are the older daughters that play the most active part in house maintenance, while younger siblings attend school. However, as shown by Olinda, when older girls get married and leave parents' home, younger daughters must also interrupt school career, in order to assume domestic tasks.

*I attended school [but meanwhile] my [older] sister got married, and my father took me out of school because he needed me to help my mother at home.*

Moreover, as shown by Vanda, even if Roma girls do not participate in household activities, according to Roma tradition, their educational path must be interrupted in an early stage, in order to avoid contact with boys:

*I went to school but in my tradition [Roma tradition] we cannot be in school until for example 14, 15 years old. We cannot, because we cannot get along with the boys. And I went to school until I was 11 years old, if I remember correctly. Then I had to leave school. (...) Because my parents didn't let me go to school, there were boys there, and I was committed [there was an arrangement between two Roma families to Vanda marry one Roma boy].*

---

<sup>4</sup> Twenty-five years is the maximum prison sentence in Portugal.

The active participation of girls in household activities and their early withdrawal from school (which explains the high rates of illiteracy among Roma women) mostly occurs due to the need of keep girls under a restricted informal surveillance system, aimed to control their sexual behavior. According to Roma culture, the monitoring of girls activities is only possible when enacted by community and family members - even if it occurs during fairs, in the employment context. In other places, such as school, it is considered that the control over female conduct according to the Roma values is null or reduced (Lopes, 2008).

A short time after leaving school (around age fourteen) Roma girls tend to marry. Among interviewed prisoners, the one who got married earlier had twelve years old, and the one who got married later was nineteen years old.

Roma marriages are mainly characterized for being endogamous (that is, celebrated between two Roma individuals) and by being celebrated in accordance with the “Roma Law”. Josefina explains that “Roma Law” is the only valid law for marriages between Roma individuals, therefore dismissing any other civil or religious records:

*We were married by “Roma Law”. When we marry with our husbands, we are married. It is not necessary to have a record or anything, we just need to be known by our husbands.*

There are, however, two exceptions among women interviewed: Nádia and Olinda had exogamous marriages (that is, marriages celebrated between one Roma individual and another non-Roma). These marriages do not tend to be well accepted by communities, especially when Roma women (rather than men) marry non-Roma individuals (Casa-Nova, 2007). When Olinda decided to get married with one non-Roma individual she had to flee from the community context. Then, as she describes,

they had to wait until Olinda' family was available to receive the couple and welcome them:

*We couldn't date because he wasn't of the same ethnicity as me. Right? So at the age of fourteen I ran away from home, I left my family to go live with him. My parents were against it, my family was against it, as well as everyone else from my community! (...) We run away for several months until my parents accept [our relationship]. When my parents accepted, I came back (...) then, he started to come close to Roma individuals and my family and my parents loved him. Then, they were the ones who didn't want anyone else for me.*

Nádia also had an exogamous marriage: despite not having Roma ancestry in her family, Nádia married twice with Roma men, adopting Roma traditional lifestyle and norms. In order to be fully integrated, when non-Roma individuals marry Roma people they must be available to assimilate and reproduce Roma traditions and culture. These two cases, of Nádia and Olinda, outline the malleability of the concept of ethnicity, that ultimately relates to the sharing of fundamental cultural values (Bader, 2005, pp. 18-19). In this sense, the conceptualization of ethnicity allows to consider as belonging to the ethnic group individuals that, even not having born in Roma communities, classify themselves as Roma, owing of the incorporation of values, standards, codes and language that they routinely adopt as their own.

Since motherhood and progeny are fundamental aspects of Roma culture, pregnancy tends to occur a short time after the wedding. The interviewed woman who had her first child in an earlier age was fourteen years old at that time.

Although Roma women tend to have more children than women from the majority society (Casa-Nova, 2009), data reveal a tendency among respondents to, despite pressures from their husbands to have more children, adhere to contraceptive methods in order to space the time between pregnancies and control their birth rate.

However, as Lídia notices, this family planning is often done without the husband knowledge.

*He would not let me take the pill ... He wanted more children (...) So, I [secretly] went to the pharmacy and bought the pill and I started taking it on the sly. (...) And I said him 'Women no longer have so many children, and most important, you don't give them bath, you don't cook, I am the one who does everything'. I feed them, I worked on fairs, I used to do everything.*

According to the interviews, the main reasons underlining the reduction of the number of children among Roma families when compared with older generations is women overburden. Following broader patterns of sexual division of labor, women tend to be the main responsible for child care and other domestic activities. Men generally play a more peripheral role in the tasks related to the family sphere. Besides assuming most household activities, women also tend to play an active role in the professional realm.

Traditionally, Roma women are involved, together with their husbands, in street trading and other seasonal activities. However, the increasing vulnerability of these professional activities has led to Roma individuals seek other forms to earn income. Yet, alternative occupations, besides being hard to get due to the stigma associated with Roma ethnicity, also entail gender barriers. Most professional activities accessible to unqualified women in the majority society imply that women work away from the community control and distant from their husbands' surveillance. However, among Roma communities, this is not socially acceptable. Thus, in the context of employability in the formal market, due to the intersection of gender and ethnicity, women are doubly excluded: on the one hand by the formal market that rarely tends to hire Roma individuals; on the other hand, by Roma gender norms that generally do not consent women to work in contexts apart from community surveillance. As shown by Olinda,

even if women are able to get a paid job outside Roma community, family pressures are so strong that they generally end up undermining women's possibilities to maintain their job:

*I went to the job center to apply for a job because I would do anything they told me to. But what could I do if I don't know how to read or write? Only if it was for cleaning, or to work in a nursing home (...) They got me a job in a nursing home. (...) In the meantime I started living with my husband (...) His family began to influence him and they used to say that my life wasn't the life of a gypsy<sup>5</sup> woman. According to them, I should be working in the fairs or involved drug trafficking from home... but I didn't listen to them. I kept working. (...) I worked there during awhile, but at a certain point he began to wait for me outside work, began to insult me, began to hit me, and I was ashamed of the people who worked there and I didn't even said goodbye. I didn't show up there anymore. I joined him, we both went work to fairs. But the fairs didn't give us any profit. We started trafficking. And then I was arrested.*

Within this framework of exclusion, retail drug trafficking emerges as an illegal structure of opportunities relatively open to Roma individuals, including women. The character of informality and domesticity that characterizes retail drug trafficking in disadvantaged urban communities (Cunha, 2002, p. 166), allows women to develop the illicit sale of drugs from home, while remaining under community and family control. Moreover, as shown by Alzira, this activity can also be developed in conjunction with other domestic tasks, allowing women to continue to perform the gendered roles they are socially expected to enact:

*Prior to imprisonment I took care of my children, cleaned the house, and sold drugs... Sometimes when I didn't had drugs to sell I went to the fairs with my husband, but we used to win nothing!*

In addition to the permanent position of socio-economic vulnerability that most Roma communities face, they are often confronted with situations that further increase

---

<sup>5</sup> In the women narratives we maintain the ethnonym "Gypsy" (*cigano/a*) because is how these individuals identify themselves.



their instability. Among these factors, the two that stands out most are the imprisonment of family members - reported by 10 interviewed women (in this respect see Cunha, 2002) – and the problematic of drug addiction.

When women face relative's imprisonment, household income is generally reduced. For example, if their husbands are arrested, women who didn't maintain any professional activities, being dependent of their husbands' employment activities to ensure household subsistence, lose their only source of income. Joaquina reports how her husband imprisonment added additional pressure to her vulnerable social and economic condition. After her husband imprisonment, Joaquina unsuccessfully exhausted all other possibilities to ensure family subsistence (apply for formal jobs, selling at fairs). After that, and facing several difficulties to assure household subsistence, Joaquina got involved in thefts, together with other Roma individuals from her community:

*After my husband was imprisoned I was alone with my boys and I had 3 of them still wearing diapers. And they [group of Roma individuals] came to my tent - I was still waiting for social housing - to call me to join them. I went with them, we did stupid thing: thefts (...). Sometimes I would only get €15, €20 from that, it was just for feeding the boys. (...) I couldn't let my children starve, no! I had to do something for my children and I didn't know how to sell drugs.*

Besides being extensively affected by the imprisonment of relatives, in recent years, Roma communities also began to present a relatively wide drug abuse problem among its members (Martins, 1995). Despite being most recurrent among men, some Roma women are also drug addicts. Among interviewed women two faced substance addition prior to imprisonment.

Due to the quick impoverishment that drug addiction causes, it commonly leads individuals to commit crimes against property in order to make quick profit. According

to Lídia, the earnings of such crimes may serve, on the one hand, as means of sustaining the addition and, on the other hand, as supplementary earnings to household income.

*We were in this ugly life, my husband smoked drugs, I also got into bad vices and I was already feeling sick and I didn't had it [money to support addiction] and I ended up in supermarkets, supplied me and then running away. Stealing to eat (...) for me and my grandchildren. I had to cover up the hunger of my grandchildren. That's why I'm here, is not for drug trafficking or anything. It is often said that to steal to eat is not a sin. Look, this was my sin.*

As women's narratives outline, the predominant motivation for criminality among Roma women, regardless of their different shades, is to mitigate economic vulnerability and assure household subsistence. Therefore, violent crimes are relatively scarce among this population. Only one of the interviewees is convicted of a violent crime: Cristiana, who has ordered the murder her husband's mistress, owing to the drainage of household resources that her husband's extramarital relationship involved.

*I worked a lifetime to have our things. He sold my houses to give her [mistress] everything. He took all from me. He picked up the check books, and left me nothing in the bank ... and he used the checks to spoil his mistress. He left me without anything. Not even the gold... I just kept the wedding ring.*

In addition to these women's accounts that clearly explain their crimes, there are some women that claim to be innocent, at least innocent from criminal proceedings for which they were convicted. Elmira talks in a quite emotional manner about her conviction, since she doesn't understand the reason why she is imprisoned. According to her perspective, during the police intervention in her house there was nothing illegal that could be related to a crime, with the exception of 5 Euros of hashish that her husband used for his consumption. Very schematically, she lists everything that was seized at her house on the day of the police raid:

*They found 250 Euros that I had received from the Social Integration Income and Child Benefit allowance [social welfare financial support] of my children. They found my son's laptop and 5 Euros of hashish. My husband, used to sporadically consume hashish. I also had a kitchen knife at home. They got it. And, I suffer a lot of sinusitis; I got many headaches because of sinusitis, and at that time I was with flu (...) and thinking about my kids, I often wore a mask. They catch the mask. (...). And they got me nothing. That's what they got me. And I'm here for a year, with no suspicion, no drugs, nothing.*

The illiteracy rates among Roma women, coupled with a general attitude of detachment and distrust towards institutions of the dominant society, especially law enforcement agencies, imply that some prisoners are unaware of the reasons that led to their arrest, conviction and length of sentence. As Joaquina recalls from the first months of her prison sentence:

*[When I entered prison] I thought it was only for a day, that I would enter today and leave tomorrow. But the days followed and I wouldn't leave prison. I didn't understand "Why I am here? I wasn't caught with anything!"*

Only a few months after Joaquina's arrest, a social worker explained to her that she was imprisoned owing to crimes committed a few years ago, and not for something she was doing at the time she was arrested.

Women's narratives clearly show how being a woman in Roma communities can constitute one conditioning element throughout their life paths and in the several realms of everyday life (childhood, school attendance, marriage, motherhood, employment, involvement with the criminal justice system). However, it is also evident that Roma women do not confine themselves to a passive role. Even with narrow and constrained leeway - highly restricted by class, gender and ethnic inequalities - women tend to mobilize several strategies in order to achieve a better life conditions in the familial, community and economic sphere (Casa-Nova, 2009). Within this framework we argue

that, in the case of women involvement with crime, the recurrence to deviant activities and criminality constitutes one of these *constrained strategies*.

## **6. The prison experience**

Similar to what occurs regarding pre-prison trajectories, Roma women experiences in prison also present specific nuances related to the intersection of gender, class and ethnicity. In accordance to what Cunha (2002) had exposed, fieldwork from both projects also revealed extensive networks of relatives within penal system - in the same and in different prisons. Although these configurations are not exclusive among Roma kinship networks (non-Roma networks also have present several relatives imprisonment) these have a greater expression in this group (Cunha, 2002).

The existence of family networks within the prison context implies a change in the paradigm of adaptation to imprisonment. When entering prison most prisoners are no longer completely dispossessed of their family or social environment. They tend to have a support network within prison that allows them to establish a continuum of relationships between the outside and the inside (Cunha, 2008). When Olinda was imprisoned, she had several family members - men and women – also serving time. Her imprisoned female relatives (her mother and two sisters), were serving sentences in the same prison she would serve her. Therefore, on the night she entered in prison, Olinda was received by her family that warmly welcomed her.

*They were all waiting for me. They [the guards] closed everyone in their cells, but they didn't close them [her relatives] because they were waiting for me. The main officer said "here you are, delivered to your family". My mother came towards me and hugged me, my sisters too, and then we were all together in the same ward. (...) I felt more comfortable because I was with my mother and my two sisters, it was different.*

The entry in an environment that, although hostile, is supported by a pre-prison support network tends to smooth a significant moment in prison experience. However, not all imprisoned women have, in the same prison, other relatives serving time. When Roma women enter prison and there is an absence of other kin within carceral context, their ethnicity tends to overlap the untying to the penal system. As shown by Margarida, in these cases, women tend to specifically request to be placed together with people of their own ethnicity, in order to be more “comfortable”.

*I said to the officers “please, put me in one of the cells with other Roma women, if you don’t mind”. And I wanted to be with them [Roma women] just to have their support, to have their understanding of my experience. That warmth.*

The presence of family members or the existence of intra-ethnic support behind bars can provide prisoners a mechanism that eases the difficulties of experiencing prison. Relatives and other Roma individuals provide emotional and material support (sharing assets provided by families on the outside) that tend to alleviate some difficulties stemming from prison experience.

However, besides implications behind prison walls, networks with several members imprisoned also entail consequences that reverberate in a large extent in the outside environment, particularly regarding child care configurations. As we previously noticed, prior to imprisonment, most Roma women bore extensive responsibilities of childcare. Generally fathers played a peripheral role in education. Thus, when sent to prison, most mothers do not entrust their children to the care of their fathers and children usually cannot stay in the same living arrangements as previously.

Therefore, upon mothers’ arrest, children are usually cared for by kinship networks, in particularly by other women (a situation reported by 9 interviewed women). However, some prisoners do not have outside support networks available to

take care of children: most individuals are imprisoned or overburden with responsibilities and facing vulnerable economic situations. Facing these constraints, Joaquina had chosen to place her four children in three different arrangements, in order to don't overload only one relative,: two children are with her mother, one with her mother in law and another in an institution.

*The youngest is with my mother in law. The oldest is in an institution because he behaves badly and I had to put him there, because my mother-in-law couldn't take care of him. The other two are being care by my mother.*

Accordingly, mothers' absence, coupled with kinship networks unavailability, can lead children into an unpredictable circuit in which they often end up deprived of both parents, and of siblings as well, as children are placed among kin, friends, neighbours or institutions (Cunha, 2002; Palomar, 2007, p. 91).

Although maintaining contact with imprisoned relatives may entail high costs, Roma women tend to report having a strong support system during confinement situations, translated into frequent phone calls and visits. Roma women are usually proud to affirm that their sense of union and commitment to each other largely exceeded the support provided by non-Roma individuals. However, among interviewed women, there was one exception: one of the prisoners had no support from her family. In the period prior to imprisonment, Margarida ended her intra-ethnic marriage and initiated a romantic relationship with a non-Roma individual. Margarida transgression of the Roma tradition caused many family conflicts, implied the deterioration of family relationships, and lead to her escape from community. Her narrative shows how this scenario of strained relationships is perpetuated in prison, since her family doesn't visit her neither provides any kind of support:

*I have no one. I don't have any kind of support. My family doesn't speak to me. [crying] They said me once "You should learn, you have chosen this punishment*

*because you chosen a man which is not worthy". You cannot imagine what it is like for me being here like this.*

When Roma women break social laws and are criminalized by law enforcement agencies, family support tends to remain intense. During imprisonment, family relationships are generally characterized by extensive support networks, both behind and beyond prison, that help prisoners to cope with the hardships of custodial sentences. However, if women break their conventional gendered roles and transgress the norms of Roma communities, family relationships tend to be disrupted and no emotional or material support (such as food, cloth and magazines) is provided during imprisonment. This tends to leave these women in a disadvantaged position when compared with other prisoners who have access to family support.

## **7. The future in prospects**

Prisoners' future expectations are based on two main pillars: family reunion and professional occupation. The most central dimension of Roma female prisoner's plans is family reunion, especially with children. The resuming of mothering roles takes precedence over any other issues, especially in situations where the children are in vulnerable situations that increase mothers' concerns, as is the case of institutionalized children and offspring in the care of people that the mother doesn't trust. This is clear in Alzira's narrative, whose children are placed in an arrangement that she isn't comfortable about:

*When I get out of here, I might go there [house where children are placed] with police (...) I'll get my kids. I'll get them! (...) I do not want to suffer anymore, I just want my children. I will fight for my children. (...) Now I just want my freedom. And then, when I leave here I will get my children. That's all I can think about.*

Regarding the professional sphere, all women showed interest in getting a job in the formal labor market after their release. Women tend to report preference for an employment with scarce but stable income, rather than an occupation as an itinerant merchant, due to the instability that this activity involves. As Fátima reports, employment is considered the main way to avoid the deviant paths that marked their lives before imprisonment:

*I'm waiting to get out, to go to work; there have been some people that told me that when I leave I will get a job, which is to work in a Cafe. They told me that they would provide me a job. When I leave, the first thing I will do is go to work. I don't want this life for me anymore. It will be the first and the last time that I will be here in prison.*

However, aware of the difficulties they might face when trying to enter the formal labor market - that aggregate ethnicity discrimination, gender issues, low levels of education, and criminal records - Roma women continue to perceive itinerant sale as a real structure of opportunities, if the entry into the labor market fails.

*I will ask jobs, any job, even if it is sweeping streets, I'm willing to do everything, in any work (...). But if I do not find any work, I have to go to fairs.*

Although most women exclude of their future plans the continuity of criminal activity, one prisoner mentions the possibility, however remote, to reoffend in drug trafficking as a last resort. Olinda, taking into account the current *state of affairs* of Portuguese economy, considers that it further sharpens the marginalization and ostracism towards Roma communities and consequently complicates job finding for members of this ethnic group:

*I'm afraid of watching TV ...it scares me! The crisis, the unemployment rate, factories closing (...) Can you imagine someone employing a gypsy? (...) I used to sell drugs. And I'm not saying that I won't do it again. I don't know. (...) I'll leave prison, I have three minor children under my care, what will I do? I don't know. Will I return to prison? I do not know. Only God knows. If*



*I go outside and if I get support from someone I'll manage to overcome this, otherwise...*

Female prisoners' future prospects are mainly focused on family and work. Regarding family, women generally don't point future difficulties, considering that even the more complex situations (such as children's institutionalization and family disagreements) will be solved after their release. In this sense, the family is seen as a safe pillar, which is maintained relatively stable, despite the several difficulties and challenges it faces during imprisonment (in this respect see Braman, 2002). However, when women talk about work and about their economic situation after release several fears, concerns and constraints are described. Women are uncertain about their future within the economic and professional realm due to the several inequalities they accumulate in their lives, namely: gender, ethnicity, class and, after imprisonment, criminal labeling.

## **8. Conclusion**

By using the lens of intersectionality, in this article we aimed to analyze the life paths and imprisonment experiences of a group of female Roma prisoners. In particular, we intended to explore the specificities of their trajectories, as these relate to deviance, criminalization and imprisonment.

Prisoner's accounts clearly outline how being a Roma women in a disadvantage social and economic position implies specific outcomes that compound particular experiences of oppression and disempowerment in the several realms of their lives, namely, education, marriage, motherhood, employment and deviant paths.

During imprisonment, gender, class and ethnicity also interplay. Family and social networks, behind and beyond prison walls, provide several kinds of assistance

(emotional, material and economic), thus mitigating – event to a limited extent – the hardships of prison experience. However, women who transgress Roma traditions are generally deprived of those supports. In this sense, in Roma communities, being considered as deviant may not directly relate to transgressing social laws. Being deviant is more intrinsically linked to a severe breaking of gender norms and Roma traditions.

Regarding future prospects, women mainly stress family reunion and professional occupation. However, while family is understood as a stable unit, job placement raises several concerns. The intersection of class, gender and ethnicity that characterized Roma women lives on the outside, creating specific patterns of segregation, discrimination, and exclusion, is further aggravated by their criminal label. Imprisonment therefore emerges as a factor that exacerbates an already vulnerable social and economic position and that might constitute an additional obstacle when trying to accomplish a more comfortable life position.

The development of a more inclusive overview of the challenges Roma women face throughout their life paths, and especially when they are involved with criminal justice, acquires crucial importance for the recognition of the particularities that these particular group of discriminated, under-resourced, and criminalized women comprise. The recognition of these differences is particularly important to delineate social policies that specifically address the various structures of subordination that interact and affect the lives of criminalized Roma women, both behind and beyond prison walls.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank the Foundation for Science and Technology (Portuguese Ministry of Education and Science) the support of PhD fellowships SFRH/BD/47010/2008 and SFRH/BD/73214/2010. We would also like to thank the

Direção Geral da Reinserção e Serviços Prisionais (DGSPRS) [General Board for Rehabilitation and Prison Services] for the permission to conduct both studies and the women interviewed for the generous sharing of their experiences.

## **Bibliography**

Almeida, J. F., Capucha, L., Costa, A. F. da, Machado, F. L., Nicolau, I., & Reis, E. (1992). *Exclusão social: Factores e tipos de pobreza em Portugal*. Oeiras: Celta Editora.

Andersen, M. L., & Collins, P. H. (2004). *Race, class, and gender*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Bader, V. (2005). Etnicidade e classe: um exercício para um mapeamento pro-teórico. *Configurações*, 1, 15-38.

Baca, M., & Dill, B. (1996). Theorizing difference from multiracial feminism. *Feminist Studies*, 22 (2), 321-331.

Barberet, R. & García-España (1997). Minorities, crime, and criminal justice in Spain. In I. H. Marshall (Ed.), *Minorities, migrants, and crime: Diversity and similarity across Europe and the United States* (pp. 175-197). Sage Publications.

Becker, S., & Bryman, A. (Eds.). (2004). *Understanding research for social policy and practice: Themes, methods and approaches*. Policy Press: Bristol.

Braman, D. (2002). Families and incarceration. In M. Mauer & M. Chesney-Lind (Eds.), *Invisible punishment: The collateral consequences of mass imprisonment* (pp. 117–135). New York: The New Press.

Britton, D. M. (2000). Feminism in criminology: Engendering the outlaw. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 571, 57-76.

- Brown, G. (2010). The intersectionality of race, gender, and reentry: Challenges for African-American women, *American Constitution Society for Law and Policy - Issue Brief*, The American Constitution Society.
- Burgess-Proctor, A. (2006). Intersections of race, class, gender, and crime: Future directions for feminist criminology, *Feminist Criminology*, 1(1), 27-47.
- Cabecinhas, R. (2007). *Preto e Branco: A naturalização da discriminação racial*. Porto: Campo das Letras.
- Carvalho, M. D. (2007). *A construção da imagem dos imigrantes e das minorias étnicas pela imprensa portuguesa: Uma análise comparativa de dois jornais diários*. Unpublished Master's degree dissertation, Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa, Lisboa.
- Casa-Nova, M. J. (2007). Gypsies, ethnicity, and the labour market: An introduction. *Romani Studies* 5, 17 (1), 103-123.
- Casa-Nova, M. J. (2009). *Etnografia e produção de conhecimento. Reflexões críticas a partir de uma investigação com ciganos portugueses*. Lisboa: Alto Comissariado para a Imigração e Diálogo Intercultural.
- Coster, S., & Heimer, K. (2006). Crime at the intersections: Race, class, gender, and violent offending. In R. D. Peterson, L. J. Krivo, & J. Hagan (Ed.), *The many colors of crime: Inequalities of race, ethnicity, and crime in America* (pp. 138-156). New York: New York University Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241-1279.
- Cunha, M. I. (2001). Do tráfico retalhista em Portugal: As redes da semi-periferia, *Revista da Faculdade de Direito da Universidade Nova de Lisboa*, 2 (4), 41-60.

- Cunha, M. I. (2002). *Entre o bairro e a prisão: Tráfico e trajetos*. Lisboa: Fim de Século.
- Cunha, M. I. (2005). From neighborhood to prison: Women and the war on drugs in Portugal. In J. Sudbury (Ed.), *Global lockdown* (pp. 155-165). New York: Routledge.
- Cunha, M. I. (2008). Closed circuits: Kinship, neighborhood and incarceration in urban Portugal. *Ethnography*, 9, 3, 325-350.
- Cunha, M. I. (2010). Race, crime and criminal justice in Portugal. In A. Kalunta-Crumpton (Ed.), *Race, crime and criminal justice: International perspectives* (pp. 144-161). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Daly, K., & Chesney-Lind, M. (1988). Feminism and criminology. *Justice Quarterly*, 5(4), 497-538.
- FitzGerald, M. (1997). Minorities, crime, and criminal justice in Britain. In I. H. Marshall (Ed.), *Minorities, migrants, and crime: Diversity and similarity across Europe and the United States* (pp. 36-61). Sage Publications.
- Martins, M. (1995). A Etnia Cigana e a prevenção da toxicodependência. Uma experiência no terreno. In L. Cortesão & F. Pinto (Ed.), *O povo cigano: cidadãos na sombra. Processos explícitos e ocultos de exclusão* (pp. 21-25). Porto: Edições Afrontamento.
- Gomes, S., & Machado, H. (2011). Media's made criminality: The construction of moral panic over gypsies and immigrants. In S. Jovanović Maldoran (Ed.), *Citizenship, Inclusion or Exclusion?*. E-Book: Inter-disciplinary Press.
- Howard, K., Jempson, M., Tombs, S., & Whyte, D. (2001). Is it a crime to seek refuge?. *Criminal Justice Matters*, 43, 18-23.
- Lopes, D. (2008). *Deriva cigana: Um estudo etnográfico sobre os ciganos de Lisboa*. Lisboa: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.

- Machado, F. (1992). Etnicidade em Portugal: Contrastes e politização. *Sociologia – Problemas e Práticas*, 12, 123-136.
- Mendes, M. (1998). Etnicidade cigana, exclusão social e racismos. *Sociologia*, 8, 207-246.
- Mendes, M. (2005). *Nós, os ciganos e os outros: Etnicidade e exclusão social*. Lisboa: Livros Horizonte.
- Montenegro, M. (1999). Projecto Nómada. In M. Montenegro (Ed.), *Ciganos e Educação*. Cadernos ICE. Setúbal: Instituto das Comunidades Educativas.
- Moreira, J. (1999). Ciganos na prisão: Um universo diferente? *Temas Penitenciários*, 2 (2), 5-18.
- Oliveira, J. M. (2010). Os feminismos habitam espaços hifenizados: A localização e interseccionalidade dos saberes feministas. *Ex aequo*, 22, 25-39.
- Palomar Vereza, C. P. (2007). *Maternidad en prisión*. Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara.
- Resende, Cláudia (2006). Raça, racismo e etnicidade: Conceitos pouco visíveis num contexto pouco visível. *Actas do VI Congresso Português de Sociologia*. Lisboa: Associação Portuguesa de Sociologia.
- Silva, M. (2000). Racismo e conflito interétnico: Elementos para uma investigação. *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 56, 61-79.
- Weber, L. (2001). *Understanding race, class, gender, and sexuality: A conceptual framework*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

## **Bios**

**Sílvia Gomes** is researcher at the Research Center for the Social Sciences and at Criminology and Behavioral Sciences Research Unit, both in Portugal. She's a PhD

student at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Minho, and holds the position of trainee assistant professor at the Maia Institute of Higher Education, in the course of Criminology. Her work is mostly related to issues of criminality, social exclusion and inequalities, ethnicity, and media.

**Rafaela Granja** is a PhD Student in Sociology at the Research Center for the Social Sciences, Institute of Social Sciences, University of Minho (CICS/UM, Portugal). Her doctoral thesis explores the familial and social impacts of imprisonment through prisoners and their relatives' point of view. Her research interests focus on prison studies, gender, family relationships and parenting.