

# WHEN PATCHWORKS DISSOLVE: PERSPECTIVES ON DESTITUTE ROMA FAMILIES' ECONOMIC LIVELIHOODS

In Denmark, as in many other European cities, Roma people are often seen engaging in forms of informal and low-income labour in order to make a livelihood. While many people might not bat an eye at this, Camilla Ida Ravnbøl scratches beneath the surface to uncover just how precarious reliance on this type of income really is for Roma families, showing how the economic situation of Roma people can be viewed as a patchwork pattern about to fall apart at the seams.



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## INTRODUCTION

Standing in front of a grocery store, a Roma woman smiles, as she extends her arm to offer you a homeless magazine. In the city centre, another Roma woman moves swiftly through the crowd, carrying a large plastic bag full of refundable beverage containers collected from garbage bins across town. Closer to the larger waste bins, a Roma man pauses for breath before lifting a pile of heavy old items and scrap materials to carry it away. These are all images that European citizens have become so accustomed to that they hardly question them. When they do, the question raised by many is how such income strategies can be viable for the Roma women and men, who seem to be earning mere pennies from hard manual labour with scrap, recycling materials, and magazine vending. Can it be worth it, considering the many hours of intense work, while living far from their families often in dire conditions and even homelessness? These questions are complex and can hardly be answered in brief. However, this short article will present some insights into the economic livelihood of homeless Roma people in Copenhagen, seeking to broaden our understanding of the complexities they experience in a contemporary European context.

This article builds on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork, initiated in 2014 among a group of 40 Roma from Romania experiencing homelessness in Copenhagen, Denmark. They sleep rough in side streets and green areas around the city. Money earned on the streets of Copenhagen is transferred to their children and older relatives, living in poor dwellings on the outskirts of a large Romanian city. This article explores the contexts of the poverty facing these Roma families and their trajectories to Denmark. It relates these findings to an analysis of the families' household finances. Finally, it discusses the impact of the ongoing covid-19 pandemic on their livelihood.

## HOMELESS ROMA IN COPENHAGEN

The Roma families in this article have not travelled to Denmark as a first choice. Their primary goal was not to live and work on the streets of a cold Nordic city, far away from their children. The majority of those who are now in their 50's (and older) used to work in factories or collective farms during the socialist period in Romania. They lost their jobs when such facilities closed in the years following the political changes of 1989. The transition to a liberal market economy was accompanied by rising levels of poverty and ethnic discrimination for the Roma minority in Romania. Subsequent to the opening of the Romanian borders and diminishing opportunities for work, many began travelling abroad in search of a better livelihood. In fact, the majority of my interlocutors have worked in Italy, Spain and Portugal for up to 12 years, prior to their arrival in Denmark. They had moved to these countries with their children, and mostly took jobs in construction, agriculture, the restaurant business, and in the care sector. Conditions were informal and unstable, and when the economic crisis and EURO zone crisis affected southern Europe, they were one of the first groups to lose their jobs. Following these changes, my interlocutors began travelling north in search of new income opportunities. As one Roma woman uttered in frustration: "Where could I go next, other than the North Pole?" The reasons for this woman's frustration lie primarily in the lack of employment opportunities in Denmark. The Roma women and men whom I work with lack the educational background and language skills to access the highly regulated Danish job market. Most significantly, they are hindered by an administrative barrier, upon which access to a social security number (CPR number) depends on having an employment contract and a residential address. However, many employers and landlords request CPR registration when foreign nationals contact them. Consequently, low-skilled migrants frequently find themselves

in a catch twenty-two situation of mutually excluding barriers. Consequently, the people I spoke with were pushed into homelessness and working in an informal and low-income street economy.

## **‘STITCHING TOGETHER’ AN ECONOMIC LIVELIHOOD**

The Roma families in my research are mainly couples who travel to Denmark together. The wives usually sell homeless magazines and collect refundable beverage containers, while the husbands search for scrap materials that they can bring or send home to Romania to re-sell at flea markets. During the summer, when the city’s inhabitants drink more beverages outdoors, the Roma couples focus their attention on collecting refundable beverage containers. Each item is worth less than one euro but over the course of a warm summer, with many outdoor music festivals, the couples can earn up to two thousand euro. This of course requires intensive work with finding, carrying and sorting refundable containers at all hours of the day and night. During the winter, when income is low in Denmark, many return home to Romania, in the hope of finding day-labour jobs at local farms or in wood cutting. If they can, they go to countries where begging is legal, such as Sweden or France.

I have previously proposed the concept of a ‘patchwork economy’ to frame the various income opportunities through which poorer Roma families generate income.<sup>2</sup> This concept is an analogy of a patchwork pattern. A patchwork is made from separate squares of left-over fabrics that are sewn together and then attached to a larger background material. Whereas this material is clearly defined (such as a square quilt or pillowcase), the patchwork pattern can take numerous forms. I see the ‘patchwork economies’ of the Roma families in a similar way. They ‘stitch together’ different sources of income that are not connected and often scrap-based. None of these minor income streams are reliable in the long run and cannot alone support a family. Hence, it is an unstable household economy, which depends on continuously inventing new income opportunities as old ones fail. It becomes a continuous crafting process of replacing squares of fabric, so to speak. Significantly, the analogy of the patchwork refers to two layers (a pattern and a quilt) that are also at stake in the household economies of the Roma families. If the income sources constitute a patchwork pattern, then the background material of these informal income sources is debt. The debt is the quilt, in other words. The families struggle to purchase basic amenities and have therefore over the years taken out expensive loans with local money lenders and private money lending companies. Due to extortionate interest rates, they are now caught in spirals of debt. Thereby, debt constitutes the background material against which their household

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economy is constantly configured, both as a possibility for credit, when they take up new loans, and as a burden of debt repayment that absorbs most of the families' incomes.

Employing the analogy of the patchwork as a concept when approaching the economic situation of Roma families living and working in the streets of Europe, allows us to understand the instability and fragility of their economic livelihoods. When a Roma woman sells a magazine, this practice cannot, in itself, support her family. Neither can the sale of old items or income from refundable beverage containers. However, the Roma combine all these initiatives, constantly considering how to purchase food and basic amenities for their families and how to repay their debt. A financial crisis appears when too many economic strategies fail, just like a patchwork pattern would dissolve if too many squares of fabric were missing.

## PATCHWORK ECONOMIES FOR HOMELESS ROMA IN THE TIMES OF THE CORONA VIRUS

When Europe was confronted with the global Covid-19 health crisis in early 2020, many states closed down public spaces and put a limit on social activities. In Denmark, the crisis led to the closure of night clubs and cancellation of larger music festivals over the summer. This resulted in an immense drop in income for the homeless Roma families relying on earning large parts of their annual income during the summer in Denmark. A major part of this income is usually earned during music festivals, where they collect refundable beverage containers. For some Roma families, festival cancellations meant a drop in annual income of up to 3000 Euro. Consequently, these Roma families have had to take out new loans with local money lenders and private money lending companies at high interest rates. Furthermore, the closure of national borders, to limit entry to residents

and migrants with working contracts and/or residence permits, have become a large barrier for many of these Roma families. They can no longer travel to Denmark and other countries in Europe which have imposed similar restraints on migration to curb the spread of Covid-19. Again, the consequence is that many families find themselves in a financial crisis, which is not likely to diminish as long as the pandemic continues.

The pandemic is a concern not only for the group of Roma experiencing homelessness in Denmark, but for the vast majority of Roma families living in destitution across Europe. Not only are they experiencing a significant health threat, but they are also confronted with growing discrimination and prejudice during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> On top of this, they are experiencing increased poverty, as their former income strategies are shut down along with the closing of public events and national borders. In other words, and returning to our analogy, the patchwork economies of the destitute Roma families in this study are gradually dissolving as one of the many socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. The many income streams that used to support their annual budgets are missing, and they now have to find new income opportunities to cover the basic needs of their families and repay their ever-increasing debt. The patchwork pattern must be changed once again because in this current moment in time, most of what is left is a background of debt.

### ENDNOTES

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- 2 Ravnbøl, C.I., Patchwork Economies in Europe: Economic strategies among homeless Romanian Roma in Copenhagen. In *Constructing Roma Migrants: European Narratives and Local Governance*. Edited by Magazzini T., & Piemontese S., IMISCOE Research Series Springer, (2019).
- 3 Matache, M., & Bhaba J. (2020). Anti-Roma racism is spiraling during COVID19 Pandemic. *Health and Human Rights Journal*, (7 April 2020).