



**Intersections of Gender, Ethnicity, and Class:
History and Future of the Romani Women's Movement**

Jelena Jovanović, Angéla Kóczé, and Lídia Balogh

Working Paper

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Budapest

December 2015

Table of Contents

Aim of the Paper	3
Context	4
Romani women in Central and Eastern Europe	4
Policy Frame	7
Main Debates	7
Personal is becoming political	7
Gender Politics in the Romani movement	9
Present and Future of the Romani Women's Movement	12
Conclusions, Open Questions and Recommendations	15

Aim of the Paper

The incentive to write about the *Romani women's movement* is a workshop “Intersections of Gender, Ethnicity, and Class: History and Future of the Role of Gender in the Romani Movement”. The Center for Policy Studies (Central European University) and the Friedrich- Ebert-Stiftung organized the workshop on October 30 and 31, 2015, at the Central European University, Budapest, Hungary. During the workshop, Romani and non-Romani women scholars and activists, most of whom have played a significant role in shaping Roma related discourses, policies and projects in Europe in the last twenty years, offered critical reflections on the history of their work in this regard. They also initiated debates about the present and future gender politics in relation to the Romani movement.

The ‘Romani movement’ implies a diversity of politicized contexts in which Romani women and men fought for the rights of Roma. ‘Romani women’s movement’ is also a complex term that implies multiple forms of Romani women’s struggles at the political level and a diversity of contexts and does not imply singularity or exclusively joint steps that they have been taking.

In the last two decades, Romani women from Central and South-Eastern Europe informed, shaped and transformed the agenda of the Romani movement. Discourses on gender equality and equality between Roma and non-Roma have been used and put into practice by women to generate new forms of knowledge and foster changes. They have employed the concept of *intersectionality* introduced by black feminist scholars and activists. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term at the end of the 1980s to “denote the various ways in which race and gender interacted to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s experiences”.¹ Later on, intersectionality developed into an understanding that many categories of difference, such as *sexuality, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, marital status* etc. interact and put people in different power positions. By using intersectionality approach, Romani women respond to the limitations of ‘ethnicity’ but also to the limitations of ‘gender’ as the exclusive categories of interest to them. Intersectionality is the approach that has helped more people become reflective to the hybrid structures of inequalities Romani women face. Intersections of categories of difference still urge a need for Romani women activists to create politicized spaces where they could continue developing arguments emerging from their own experiences and challenge simultaneously the general discourse of the Romani movement and the general feminist discourse.²

This paper offers knowledge based on the discussions of the workshop where Romani and non-Romani activists and scholars shared individual and collective experiences on *formation and developments of the Romani women's movement*. It addresses the ways categories of difference compose complex structures of inequalities. In addition, it reveals what shapes the current lives of the Romani activists and their

¹ Cited in Kóczé, A. (2009), Missing Intersectionality: Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Current Research and Policies on Romani Women in Europe, *Policy Studies Series*, Budapest: Center for Policy Studies, from Crenshaw, K. (1989), Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color, *Stanford Law Review*, Volume 43:6, p. 139

² For more on *political intersectionality*, see: Newey, G. (2014), Politics of Difference and Activism at Intersections: Romani Women in Eastern and Central Europe, in *The Politics of Gender: A Survey*, edited by Yoke-Lian Lee, Routledge, p. 25-45.

organizations, communities, and networks. Finally, the paper draws conclusions from the major debates about the possibilities and limitations of the Romani women's movement through (re)mobilization and (re)politicization of the most important topics/categories of inequality.

Context

Romani women in Central and Eastern Europe

Women's rights and gender issues have become articulated in various ways and by various actors. Firstly, it became part of the human rights regime that have been recognized, accepted, and practiced by various NGOs and donor organizations in the CEE countries. Romani women activism became visible and gained significant impetus through the international gender discourse and the emerging civil society.³

Secondly, in the late 90s there were several Romani women who became active at a transnational level, and they started to articulate the various gender based oppressions and concerns related to the Roma communities, which has been embraced by various international organizations, such as Council of Europe and Open Society Institutes (OSI).⁴ For example, in 1998, OSI organized an International Conference of Romani Women in Budapest, Hungary. Based on various personal accounts, the meeting was unique because it focused on sensitive issues such as the tradition of Roma culture versus women's rights and even some Romani women challenged the existing male dominated power structure within the Roma movement. The conference brought together some of the key players who soon after became part of the *Joint Romani Women's Initiative* (the JRWI) of OSI,⁵ with the aim to develop, link, and catalyze a core group of committed young Romani women leaders whose language has been inspired by the transnational/global feminist movement.⁶

In 2002, a meeting was held in Vienna that brought Romani women from Europe to discuss access to health care in Romani communities, in particular that of Romani women, with the assistance of the Council of Europe. After the meeting, Romani women activists from 18 European countries launched the International Romani Women's Network (IRWN) in 2003, with a membership of more established and 'traditional'⁷ Romani women. Rita Izsák who is a human rights lawyer and minority rights expert, and currently serving as the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues wrote the following: "It is important to note that IRWN did not grow out of the cooperation of already existing networks of national, regional or

³ Kóczé, A. (2011), *Gender, Ethnicity and Class: Romani Women's Political Activism and Social Struggles*, PhD Dissertation, Budapest: CEU, Budapest College

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE, NETWORK WOMEN'S PROGRAM (2002), *Romani Women: Between two Cultures*, Bending the Bow: Targeting Women's Human Rights and Opportunities, available at: https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/bending_the_bow.pdf, p. 44

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ I.e. conservative regarding social/gender roles; promoting the traditional gender roles within their ethnic communities.

local women's groups, with already well-defined visions and goals and the merger being a way of enhancing their efforts on shared goals. It was rather a group of individual Romani women activists who have been working in different capacities, and who knew each other mainly from their participation in international conferences.”⁸

Thirdly, the vast majority of Romani women who remained silent and has never been reached by the Romani women activism, their material reality and gender based concerns became articulated by various international organizations by using a social inclusive language in their policy oriented research papers.

The situation of Romani women in the region according to the Roma Surveys of the FRA

The most relevant and updated data for social inclusive policies were produced by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) based on their Roma Surveys (undertaken in 2008 and 2012).⁹ The research shows that throughout Europe, the Roma communities are at high risk of marginalization. Romani women typically face additional gender forms of discrimination manifested in all areas and levels in their life. The survey was carried out in 11 EU member states and broken down by gender and covering the core areas of employment, education, housing and health, as well as other gender-sensitive policy areas.

On average across the 11 EU Member States surveyed, the situation of Roma women in as the above-mentioned areas like education, employment and health is worse in comparison to that of Romani men. The results show also important differences between Member States that need to be taken into account when developing and implementing Roma inclusion policies and actions.

As the FRA study pointed out, in regard to **education**, more Romani men (85 %) than women (77 %) could read or write and more Romani women (19 %) than men (14 %) had never been to school. The situation is better for young Roma aged 16–24 years: Roma women reach, on average, the literacy levels of Romani men in that age group.

However, across all Member States surveyed, on average fewer Romani women (37 %) than men (50 %) aged 16–24 years were remaining in education after the age of 16.

Concerning **employment**, on average across the Member States surveyed, 21% of Romani women are in paid work compared to 35 % of Romani men. In the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, the proportion of women doing paid work is equal or even higher than that of Roma men. On average,

⁸ Izsák, R. (2009), The European Romani women's movement: The struggle for human rights, *Development*, 52(2), pp. 200-207. See also: Izsak, R. (2009), The European Romani Women's Movement—International Roma Women's Network, *Changing Their World* 1st Edition, Batliwala S. (ed.), Scholar Associate, AWID, available at: http://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/changing_their_world_the_european_romani_womens_movement.pdf

⁹ For more information on FRA's work on Roma inclusion, see: <http://fra.europa.eu/en/theme/roma>.

Romani men are more frequently reported as self-employed (25 %) or in ad hoc jobs (28 %) than Roma women (13 % and 15 %, respectively).

Regarding **health**, there were overall relatively few differences between Romani women and men. On the other hand when comparing Romani women to non-Romani women aged above 16, the report states that more Romani women's health is 'bad' or 'very bad' and the difference is even more pronounced for women older than 50. For example, on medical insurance coverage, on average, 18 % of Roma women are not covered in comparison to 8 % of non-Roma women. Unfortunately, the FRA Roma Survey does not contain questions regarding reproductive health.

In regard to **housing**, the survey results show that 42 % of the Roma surveyed live in conditions of severe housing deprivation, e.g. have no piped water and/or sewage and/or electricity in comparison to 12 % of non-Roma. Roma households with four or more children face a higher proportion of severe housing deprivation.

The **financial situation** of women is reflected in the at-risk-of-poverty household indicator. According to the results of the survey, 87 % of Roma households have an income below the national at-risk-of-poverty level compared to 46 % of non-Roma households surveyed and compared to 17 % for the EU's population in general. Roma families with four or more children have the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate across the surveyed EU Member States – often 90 % or more of these families have an income below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold.

There were relatively small gender differences **concerning perceived discrimination and rights awareness**: overall 22 % of Romani women and 27 % of Romani men felt discriminated due to their ethnicity when looking for work in the last 12 months, but there are important differences between EU Member States. Romani women are also, on average, less aware of anti-discrimination legislation than Roma men.

Concerning **marriage**, across all EU member states surveyed, approx. 2% of Romani girls aged 10-15 were 'traditionally married' or cohabitating with a partner. Also, the same survey showed that approx. 16% of Roma boys and girls aged 16–17 years were also married or living with a partner. In general, 36% of the Roma girls aged 16–17 years were studying (in elementary or secondary school), while only 6 % of those girls who were already married or living together with a partner.

These data of the FRA surveys provide a basis to develop specifically Romani women targeted policies and interventions, and also to apply gender as a horizontal aspect when implementing social inclusion measures.

Policy Frame

Racialized minority women present specific needs and difficulties which call for gender-sensitive policy approaches, and their role in the raising of the new generations makes them an even more important target for social inclusion policies. However, they are usually voiceless and invisible both in data collection and in research and policymaking.

According to the “EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies” (adopted by the European Commission in 2011),¹⁰ gender equality should be one of the priorities, and a directly addressed issue in the national Roma integration/inclusion strategies. The implementation of this strategy by member states should comply with international human rights standards on gender equality, particularly under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), as well as legal obligations to ensure equality between women and men in the EU, as defined in the *acquis communautaire* of the European Union.

The European Commission, Council Directive 2000/43/EC, implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin, states that “the Community should, in accordance with Article 3 (2) of the EC Treaty,¹¹ aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality between men and women, especially since women are often the victims of multiple discrimination”. European policy thinking has started to acknowledge intersectionality even though if it is not in hard laws but in general gender and ethnicity became recognized. However, Romani women’s activism and theoretical work can stimulate European political/policy agenda to apply intersectionality as methodology in their work.

Main Debates

Personal is becoming political

One of the important argumentations around the beginnings of the Romani women’s movement is based on the statement *personal is political* originating in the new left movements in Britain and North America since their emergence in the 1950s, but popularized by second-wave feminist discourses of the 1960s and 1970s:

Carol Hanisch, founding member of the group New York Radical Women and organizer of the demonstration against the 1968 Miss America contest, coined the phrase ‘the personal is political’ in print. In her 1969 article, ‘The Personal Is Political’, Hanisch discusses the nature and purpose of ‘consciousness-raising’ as an organizational strategy within the radical

¹⁰ See: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/policies/discrimination/docs/com_2011_173_en.pdf

¹¹ “In all the activities referred to in this Article, the Community shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality between men and women.”

feminist movement, a process that teaches 'that personal problems are political problems.' [...] But it was in the theory and practice of the 'new left' movements of the late 1950s and early 1960s that the origins of the call to expand the boundaries of the political and to transcend the distinctions between public and private life was most clearly elucidated.¹²

Even though some Romani women learned about the statement as a feminist principle and embraced it as such, not all politically active Romani women are informed through feminist theories. It is important to understand that the stigma put on 'feminism' (for example, visible in the statement: "I am a feminist to support women but not to be against men"¹³) affects internal debates of Romani women too. Romani women's experiences are diverse and there is no one ideological background shaping their political discourses. This is why one has to be careful in looking at the Romani women's movement as a feminist movement. It is also important to point out that Romani women did not gather exclusively around the category of gender, for example only fighting gender inequality within the Romani movement, but their other major concerns were (and are still) poverty and 'anti-Gypsyism', all of these creating the lack of access to education, health, housing, employment and social protection system.

In the context of the Romani women's movement, *personal is political* emphasizes a relationship between Romani women's personal experiences and the structures that shape these experiences by allowing the sustenance of the systems of inequalities that affect women's everyday lives. This was the impeller for Romani women to start defining 'Romani women issues' in order to articulate their concerns. For example, one of the participants started to work in a Romani men led state institution dealing with 'Roma inclusion', she "faced sexism and misogyny within", which then motivated her to politicize her experiences with the support of a non-Romani feminist woman scholar who she felt held more power and was ready to share it.

There are many debates shaping the discourses and practices targeting the intersections of the systems of inequalities affecting Romani women. Intersectional discrimination (i.e. based on 'ethnicity' and 'gender') in educational institutions and workplaces, coming from both Roma and non-Roma, is something expressed by many Romani women as a challenge to both one's performance and identity struggles. Women coming from mixed marriages face anti-Roma attitudes even from their own family members. This is another example of how the simple us/them (i.e. Roma – non-Roma) dichotomy becomes unlinked from the actual experiences of Romani women who then have a need to understand better the complexity they are exposed to.

These experiences are the reasons why making alliances on different levels becomes of great importance for Romani women. There are different figures important for the beginnings but also for the whole process of Romani women's engagements in the political arena. It seems that these are most frequently family members, fathers, mothers and grandparents, sometimes partners or husbands, but also non-

¹² Panton, J. (2004), The Politics of Experience: Second-Wave Feminism and the Unmediated Society, Conference paper, Political Studies Association Conference 5-8 April 2004, University of Lincoln, p. 5

¹³ This and all the other quotations we are using throughout the text come from the above-mentioned workshop. It was agreed that we would not refer to the participants' names.

Romani feminist professors they had met at universities as well as Romani peers with similar experiences. Interestingly, the status of a Romani woman in relation to her family turned out to be very important for her position within the Romani movement. For example, if a woman fulfills all the “criteria”, such as having a husband, children, and speaking Romani language, she has more chances for representing her interest within the Romani movement. A position of a woman within the Romani movement is said to be also depending on her husband’s position within the movement (if he is a Romani activist or not).

Interestingly, regardless of differences between Romani women’s experiences (for example in terms of ‘being born into the Romani movement’ vs. learning about its existence at a later stage in their life) and across generations, non-Romani feminist mentors played an important role in the process of ‘personal is becoming political’ when it comes to many Romani women’s experiences. For example, there was even a member of a national parliament playing the role of a Romani woman’s supporter. The importance of having alliances in multiple arenas is demonstrated by both women who were born into the Romani movement and Romani women who did not find support within the Romani movement because of the lack of “privilege” to grow up in a family where they at least talked about ‘being Roma’. Exclusion within the Romani movement has been pointed out by many women. As demonstrated by a young Romani feminist and human rights activist, a Romani non-governmental organization excluded her, which further pushed her to “choose” to work within other spaces that allowed her to struggle for social justice.

It is very important to look at the effects of the process *personal is becoming political* or the ways it affects life choices of politically active Romani women. Some further interesting examples of these are also conscious decisions of several Romani women to choose a non-Romani husband in order to facilitate their activism. Another example is in the experiences of several other Romani women activists studying economics and then realizing that what they want to choose to do is related to a field that would help them find their way to struggle for social justice.

Gender Politics in the Romani movement

In the previous chapter, we have already touched upon what major challenges have shaped Romani women’s experiences and their political engagements. In this chapter, we will continue this discussion and look in depth at more challenges by focusing on the gender politics. We will see how the gender politics has been articulated and enacted, what kind of debates and tensions it has experienced, what kind of limitations and opportunities it has brought, and what forms of collaboration have been experimented between Romani women activists on the one hand, and the Romani movement and majority women’s organizations, on the other.

Spaces for Romani women's concerns

It is important to start with the spaces that have been created for Romani women to articulate their concerns. Most frequently mentioned are spaces created by private foundations, such as the Open Society Foundation (the OSF, previously: Open Society Institution – see above), but there are other settings stated as very relevant in creating the opportunity for Romani women to voice their interests, such as the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (the OSCE). These have helped women articulating concerns, producing knowledge, creating policies, programs, and similar. However, women were and are still critical towards these and many other settings arguing, for example, that they are those who have been creating the agenda instead of Roma and they have been generally excluding gender equality as a priority area, even though at some point they created substructures specifically focusing on 'Romani women's issues'.

However, as it was already argued, the two prominent spaces that were opened and created for Romani women – JRWI (Joint Romani women's initiative) with the support of OSI and IRWN (International Romani Women's Network) with the support of CoE – embraced ideologically different directions or different values: radicalism (the JRWI) versus conservatism (the IRWN). For example, when it comes to the Romani political activism in general, it has been argued that "sensitive issues", topics such as sexual harassment, early marriages, trafficking, prostitution, intimate and other forms of gender-based violence were not possible to be articulated before the platforms were specifically created for Romani women, and the IRWN as well rejected to deal with all the above-mentioned "sensitive issues". The exception was the issue of sterilization of Romani women. One of the workshop participants argued that sterilization issue was accepted by everyone because the Romani movement is concerned with "reproduction".

On the one hand, this is because the reproductive rights of men (husbands) are affected as well. On the other, this issue is not divisive within the movement because reproduction of the community is important in every nation-building process and the claim to non-territorial nation status may be understood as the most clearly articulated one within the Romani movement.¹⁴

Therefore, it seems that only one of these two women's networks articulated "sensitive issues", understood as radical both by the other women's network and the Romani movement in general. However, the understanding of the relation of the IRWN and the JRWI as conservative vs. radical (feminist, progressive) may not be correct. We should take into consideration that, that even though the IRWN even used "masculine references" (for example: "...any IRWN member may cease *his* membership of *his* own accord by submitting a written application" or "the *chairman* of the IRWN shall be elected for a period of two years...")¹⁵, at one point, at the joint meeting of the IRWN and the JRWI, women drew conclusions related to Romani women's diversity, sexuality, "harmful practices which

¹⁴ Goodwin, M. (2004), The Romani Claim to Non-Territorial Nation Status: Recognition from an International Legal Perspective, available at: <http://www.errc.org/article/the-romani-claim-to-non-territorial-nation-status-recognition-from-an-international-legal-perspective/1849>

¹⁵ Izsak, R. (2009), *The European Romani Women's Movement—International Roma Women's Network*, p. 3

violate human rights of Romani women”, the political intersection between fighting racism and gender based discrimination etc.¹⁶ Rita Izsak understands that it is rather the generational gap when it comes to differences regarding conservative vs. progressive thinking. Older women, in her opinion, articulated different things compared to younger.

Challenging Romani men domination within the Romani movement

The specific platforms were also important because of other effects of Romani men domination within the Romani movement. Within the Romani movement, as reported by the participants of the workshop, Romani women were often considered as “furniture”, used as tokens, manipulated by Romani men leaders, and at best, they worked as secretaries. Even though some women witness that the situation is now better, since they to some extent made a change when it comes to values of previously exclusively masculine movement, there are still Romani organizations “dominated by old macho men”. Romani women who are “in” and those who are trying to get into the movement face different challenges. They still give many stories where they are victimized by harassment, sexism, misogyny, and even violent attacks in the offices, at the meetings.

Turning to non-Romani feminist alliances

These are also the reasons why many Romani women turn to non-Romani women seeking support. Importantly, there are many examples of non-Romani women approaching Romani women not only offering their support, but also seeking the exchange of knowledge and experiences. This relationship is defined as feminist, since “feminism is a political option through which Roma and non-Roma women can fight for social equality”. There are non-Romani feminists who truly share their power and knowledge but also gladly assert that the “knowledge is not just going from non-Roma feminists to Roma women, but also the other way round”. Romani and non-Romani women agree that feminism “contributed to de-essentializing Roma identity”. They also stated that political participation of Romani feminists is of great importance and that it shows that feminism is useful for all Roma and not only for women. Soraya Post who was delegated by Swedish Feminist Party to the European Parliament is a great example. Thanks to her, for instance, the concept of ‘anti-Gypsyism’ was acknowledged and used and awareness of the reality and severity of the evictions of Romani people was raised.

Challenges coming with employing ‘gadze feminism’

Romani feminists face many challenges. Romani men leaders often accuse them for “dividing the Romani movement”. Sometimes Romani feminists are defined as “white *Romni*”. Women keep

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 7, 8

explaining they do not want to create a separate movement for Romani women but rather to “deconstruct the domination of Romani men”, as put by one of the participants. Romani feminists are, however, still requested to choose between being Romani and feminist activists.¹⁷

After challenged by the Romani men of the movement, Romani feminist activists also challenge themselves. They, for example, ask themselves questions about the relationship between “gadze feminist discourses Romani women were recreating at international conferences and reality of people in local communities”. A Romani woman conceptualized this as a “fear of losing her Romani identity”. The same woman explained that she experienced racism within the women's movement. A non-Romani woman supporter also gave an example of non-Romani women exercising racism towards Romani women within the Joint Romani women's initiative.

Intersectional discrimination Romani women within activist circles seem to affect some Romani women to move “back” to understanding of identity dimensions (such as ‘being Roma’ and ‘being woman’) and inequalities based on ‘ethnicity’ and ‘gender’ as *competing* and not as *intersecting*. Intersectional discrimination Romani women activists face may also be the reason why recently some young Romani feminists expressed resistance to “gadze feminism” and a need to produce knowledge as “*Romnja* feminists” (i.e. they discussed the focus of an international women's organization on Romani women's political participation versus the actual need to respond to the needs of Romani women in the Romani communities, where the latter was framed as “*Romnja* feminism”).¹⁸

Present and Future of the Romani Women's Movement

In this chapter, we focus on present and future challenges as seen by Romani women activists. Feminists who manage to stay within the Romani movement, as said, still face difficult negotiations of the agendas. Once a Romani woman becomes a public Romani woman, she is at the same time empowered and victimized. Romani women are agents of change but are also deprived of safe places where they could both conceptualize and search for solutions for many challenges they face. For example, a violent attack a Romani woman survived in a public place by an anti-racist activist was framed at the above-mentioned workshop as an act of violence against women, by a non-Romani feminist activist and scholar, but also as an effect of permanent patriarchy within the Romani movement, by a Romani feminist activist and scholar. This is important because we can see that in these framings there is a difference when it comes to *(de)ethnicization* of the violence against women.¹⁹ Even though there is a

¹⁷ Jovanovic, J. & Daroczi, A. (2015), Still Missing Intersectionality: The relevance of feminist methodologies in the struggle for the rights of Roma, manuscript submitted for publication in *Roma Rights Journal*, will be available in December, 2015 at: <http://www.errc.org/roma-rights-journal>

¹⁸ One of the authors participated in the meeting *Pre Drom: Forwarding the Positions of Roma Women in Politics - Romnja Feminism in the Making*, held in the European Parliament in Brussels on November 18 and 19, 2015, which gathered eleven Romani women feminists supported by the Feminist Initiative and the S&D Group of the European Parliament.

¹⁹ See for example: Asztalos Morell, Ildikó (2015), Gender Equality Struggles - An intersectional analysis with focus on Roma women in Hungarian NGOs, *Baltic Worlds* 8 (3–4):34–46, available at:

fear of ethnicization of the issue of violence, because Romani women do not want to reiterate stereotypes against Romani men as violent, Romani women obviously feel that 'being Romani' is relevant.

Depending on the way the incident was conceptualized, there were different reactions and solutions offered to a Romani woman activist survivor: joining the campaign against violence against woman; creating "peer pressure" among men so they could affect the men perpetrators of violence against women; creating safe spaces for Romani women to raise their concerns and search for solutions. Creation of safe spaces for Romani women was emphasized since, for example, there are Romani women activists who survive different forms of violence but are not empowered to talk about that, since there are no spaces. In this regard, it is important to note that the existing Romani women's networks, such as Phenjalipe, an informal platform of Romani women launched in September 2013 at the 4th International Romani Women's Conference in Helsinki, and the IRWN, seem to generally not be seen as potential safe spaces, since Romani women activists see them as far from concerns of women at the local level and as not being clear in their status and objectives. Romani women are concerned with the question "Who would create the spaces for discussion?" Romani women activists are concerned about "racism of some feminist groups who blame Roma culture and point to the aggressive Roma men".

Alexandra Oprea notes that the dismissal of 'ethnicity' within feminist politics and the dismissal of 'gender' within the Romani politics are equally important to challenge:

The limited feminist and antiracist politics in Europe systematically ignore Romani women. Romani non-governmental organizations (NGOs), at the forefront of the antiracist struggle in Europe, address racism but fail to address the role of patriarchy a key factor in the oppression of Romani women. Feminist organizations in Europe, in turn, focus on gender subordination but neglect racism, a crucial barrier for Romani women. By treating race and gender as mutually exclusive categories, Romani NGOs and feminist organizations alike fail to tackle the multi-faceted discrimination from which Romani women suffer.²⁰

This may be understood as one of the reasons some Romani women point out the need for building a collective/community of Roma (as a possible effect of the above-mentioned 'competing identities approach') and challenging the "power of individual" framing.

Critique of neoliberalism

Some participants connected the dominant "trope of individualism" with the critique of neoliberalism. Building a community is a set of identity/cultural politics versus individual based political lobbying. Some of the participants pointed out, while distinguishing between traditional political liberalism and

<http://balticworlds.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/BW-3-4-2015-Final.pdf>

²⁰ Oprea, A (2009), *The Erasure of Romani Women in Statistical Data: Limits of the Race-versus-Gender Approach*, New York: Open Society Institute, available at: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/roma-data-20030403.pdf>

neoliberalism, that the identity based cultural politics could also be hijacked by neoliberalism that occludes the structural discrimination and violence against Roma. Traditional political liberalism is based on various democratic values, such as freedom, human rights and active citizenship. Conversely, neoliberalism privileges economic freedom at the expense of political freedom, democratic citizenship and human rights.²¹ Some scholars also explain that neoliberalism as governmental rationality place an individual responsibility on social success and blame the poor for their suffering and marginalization.²²

Repoliticizing poverty

Finally, the need for repoliticizing poverty came up as an effect of a dismissal of both poverty and class relations within the discourses of Romani (women's) activism. Social inclusion policies are critically addressed by supporters of identity/cultural politics via the argument that the former associate Roma with poverty and therefore make a huge disfavor to the efforts of recognizing Roma as ethno-cultural or as national minority. Willingly or not, this criticism reproduces the understanding of poverty as an individual failure or as an individual shame. Consequently, both the social inclusion policies and its ethno-cultural critics fail addressing poverty as a class issue. Re-politicization of poverty would exactly mean the identification of systemic causes of the precarization of labor and housing conditions of Roma belonging to the working class. Bringing a contribution to this endeavor, leftist feminism has the potential to introduce class among the factors of intersectionality and to transgress the boundaries between Roma and non-Roma women dedicated to a joint fight for social justice.²³

Focusing on the local level

The statement that there is a huge gap between the international discourses and the reality of Romani women living in the Romani communities was defined as a big problem, which activists and scholars are trying to bridge. Romani women emphasized the importance of focusing at the local level, "at Roma children entering school who do not find any positive image of Roma, at mentoring women and children, at writing our stories and books, at preventing conflicts in school" etc. Romani women activists who were suggesting focusing more at the local level are those who operate mostly at the local level but have experiences at the national and international level Romani politics as well. Their voices, since they spend most of their time at the local level, are not heard. This is framed as one of the greatest challenges within the Romani (women's) movement.

²¹ Brown, Wendy. 2006. "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization." *Political Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 6 (Dec., 2006), pp. 690-714

²² Passas, Nikos. 2000. "Global Anomie, Dysnomie, and Economic Crime: Hidden Consequences of Neoliberalism and Globalization in Russia and Around the World." *Social Justice* 27(2):16-44.

²³ The racialization of Roma in the 'new' Europe and the political potential of Romani women, *European Journal of Women's Studies* 2014, Vol. 21(4) pp. 443-449.

The generational gap

The next challenge, and something that has not been conceptualized by this moment, is related to the relationships across generation. Young generations of Roma are criticized by older generations of Romani men and women for “wanting well paid jobs in *gadze* society but not to work for their own community”, or for their “ideological options”. This cannot be generalized as a criticism by older generations of Romani activists towards younger generations, because, for example, a woman who works with young people at the local level said that she is “privileged to work with Roma university students”. However, this criticism, since argumentation has not been developed yet, seems to be increasing. This may be related to the conservative/progressive dichotomy related previously in the paper connected with the relation between the IRWN and the JRWI, because more and more young people are rebelling the conservative discourses and talk openly about the “sensitive issues” described above as well as sexuality.²⁴

Conclusions, Open Questions and Recommendations

Romani feminists face many challenges. While they do not want to create a separate movement but to “deconstruct the domination of Romani men”, they are being constantly accused. On the other hand, Romani women are concerned about simply recreating mainstream feminist discourses. Maybe the most important conclusion is that Romani women need to create new safe spaces. Constant pressure that Romani women activists face in different environments, at workplaces, non-Romani feminist/women organizations as well as the Romani movement, coming from both Roma and non-Roma, both men and women, is something expressed by many Romani women, as a challenge to their performance and to the strength of their identity. Experiences of intersectional discrimination bring some major challenges which shape Romani women's political engagements. Importantly, even though Romani women still feel the need for having safe spaces where they could at least meet and discuss their issues, the platforms specifically created for Romani women have disappeared. Few remaining are seen as not functional and not answering to the concerns of Romani women. Nevertheless, there is a need to explore more the existing Romani women's networks in terms of their functionality and objectives.

Some Romani women argue for motivating non-violent Romani men to create pressure among men and stop violence against Romani women. Racism of some non-Romani feminists and violence that Romani women face by men may lead to the idea that Romani women should create safe spaces by themselves and carefully choose their alliances. However, alliances on different levels are very important for

²⁴ Read the life stories of young LGBT Roma in Fremlova, L. (2014), *Barabaripen. Young Roma speak about multiple discrimination*, Council of Europe.

Romani women²⁵ as it was noted in the paper, non-Romani feminist mentors often played an important role in supporting Romani women.

Romani and non-Romani women agree that feminism “contributed to de-essentializing Roma identity”. They also stated that political participation of Romani feminists is of great importance and that that feminism and alliances with non-Romani feminists have been proven as useful for all Roma in this regard.

An important conclusion is that it is very important to focus at the local level. Related to this, there is the question if young Romani activists are disconnecting themselves from Romani communities. As an alternative to the accusations or criticism towards young Roma, it was proposed that it is important to first listen to young people and then open a debate on why the Romani movement is not attractive for them, which is an important step to be made in the future Romani politics.

Impressum

© 2015

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Publisher: Büro Budapest

H-1056 Budapest, Fővám tér 2-3 Ungarn

Tel.: +36-1-461-60-11

Fax: +36-1-461-60-18

E-Mail: fesbp@fesbp.hu

www.fesbp.hu

The views expressed in this paper are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

²⁵ For the relevance of alliances between majority and minority women's movements in contemporary Europe, and for the concept of “strategic sisterhood” (i.e. joining forces for specific causes, or projects), see: Nyhagen Predelli, Line – Beatrice Halsaa (2012) *Majority-Minority Relations in Contemporary Women's Movements. Strategic Sisterhood*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.