

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US. FEMINIST AND QUEER ROMA REPOSITIONING STRATEGIES

I consider myself an intersectional feminist. Roma. For quite a while now. I came across the term *intersectionality* in 2006. I think it is important to record this moment for the collective history of a group of activist and feminist Roma women, of which I was part and which initiated the process of introducing multiple discrimination in the law on equal opportunities and treatment between women and men¹. The government announced a consultation process to amend the above-mentioned law, and I was in a happy context to work with Roma activists such as Nicoleta Bițu, Isabela Mihalache, Mihaela Gheorghe, and Magda Matache. For me, it was a novelty to discuss this topic because, in the public administration faculty where I was studying, I had discovered feminist literature and gender studies. So, I read almost everything I could get my hands on, and it sounded like feminism to me, without any guidance, but only based on the principle the more, the better. The context of amending a law opened a new area of study for me. I will always be grateful to Kimberlé Crenshaw for giving feminism a concept for the oppression of Roma women and many others from various social groups or categories. People constantly living at the intersection of race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexual identity, and for whom social, institutional, cultural, and ideological practices cause types of oppression that cannot be ignored. Reading Crenshaw, I understood why I felt a distance between myself as a Roma and the feminist literature I had read so far. Therefore, the concept defined the experiences of Roma women much better, and that is why it was important for the group of Roma activists, among whom I was proud to be, that multiple discrimination was specifically included in the legislation to be properly addressed. I was not surprised that the Government initially refused to introduce the term into the law on the grounds that another mention existed and was thus unwarranted. At that time, in all the environments I frequented, there was only a bit of knowledge about us as Roma women, and it had become customary for me to justify myself. Therefore, I was not expecting an easy battle, and I believe my Roma colleagues did not expect that either. This prompted us to put more pressure, look for allies in different environments, and initiate a dialogue with the institutions that also had to address the multiple discrimination issue. Thus, we initiated an

¹ Law 202/2002 with the amendments from 2006

open letter that was signed by people from different academic, civic, political, and institutional backgrounds. In the invitation to institutional dialogue, we insisted that *“Roma women are most often condemned to social exclusion, limited employment opportunities, restricted access to goods and services, and sometimes abuse and violence. In addition to social marginalization, their marginalization in Roma and equal opportunities policies only accentuates the critical situation of this segment of the population: **neither whole Roma nor whole women.**”* It was our way of saying that “we are between two worlds,” that, in fact, we don’t feel represented in Roma or gender equality policies, and that this creates an intersectional inequality of which the Govern is responsible.

To the best of my knowledge, it was the first time in our post-December Romania when an alliance between Roma and non-Roma people from different backgrounds took place for a cause initiated by a group of Roma women activists. I was proud that a group of Roma women activists managed to make waves on a topic that directly targeted us and received support. I quote one of our main arguments taken from the open letter: *“We believe that the issue of diversity, difference, and inequality must also be addressed from a gender perspective because gender relations and identities, intertwined with other types of socio-cultural relationships and identities, organize social life in all its aspects.”* The term of gender identity itself mentioned in the letter did not have as much public notoriety as it gained now through the “contribution” of the Coalition for Family.

Our 2006 coalition led to the introduction of the *multiple discrimination* term in the legislation and has been a pivotal moment for me that contributed to the development of an intersectional narrative and a Roma feminist discourse in the Romanian space. Unfortunately, this moment remains invisible in the local history of social movements.

I admit I had the feeling then that perhaps the distance between us as Roma activists and different spaces is not that big. What does this distance mean to me in terms of activism? It is not a distance in a temporal sense, although I cannot ignore our history of oppression, which is, in fact, part of the Roma feminist discourse. I am referring to the distance I felt between various activist, feminist, LGBT+, and Roma women spaces, caused by the distressing experience of the Roma cultural, ethnic model intersected with the different experiences of classism, sexism, and racism.

It is a way of saying that although I found out only in my 20s that the Roma people had been slaves and Holocaust victims, and not from school, I naively expected that, in Romania of

2000, we are equal, the Roma rights are respected, the discrimination cases are brought to court and sanctioned, the police and the gendarmerie are not violent with the Roma, there are no employment announcements expressly stating that we are unwanted, Roma women's access to hospitals is not denied, and they are not beaten, humiliated, or harassed on the streets (Romani Criss 2012²).

It is ironic to grow up in a context where, in fact, all the above exposures happened and are just as present in 2020, without having this information as a Roma because white society knows so well how to hide it under the “you do not want to integrate” rhetoric.

Facing a new world through activism, academia, feminism, I was shocked by the level of invisibility of Roma women in all this, while the discourse continued to be dominated by representations dating back to centuries of slavery, exoticizing, sexualizing images, or stereotypes. None reflected the realities and experiences of the women in my family or my Roma colleagues and comrades. Over time, the knowledge gained through gender studies has fueled my resistance to “white knowledge.” And the grassroots work in the community developed my understanding of the systematic oppression of Roma women and the need to create our narrative and to have safe spaces to support and encourage each other to heal the collective trauma caused by racism, sexism, and class. However, in the healing process, society has a major role in our history of oppression. As stated by Ioanida Costache in the article “The Power of Racism, its Trauma and the Road to Healing,”³ the healing process starts by overturning the current narrative about collective memory that would instead produce a radical redefinition of how our collective history is defined.

Returning to my interaction with different Roma, non-Roma, academic, feminist, activist, queer, or leftist spaces determined me to question and negotiate my identities and become aware of the types of oppression from cultural and ethnic to sexual identity.

And, of course, it made me question these spaces. How intersectional are these spaces? Why is there still not enough discussion in some movements about our experiences and identities?

² <http://drepturile-omului.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Factsheet-Politie.pdf>

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Original title, ‘The power of racism, its trauma, and the road to healing,’ published on DOR page in May 2020: <https://www.dor.ro/racism-and-the-road-to-healing/>

Intersectionality refers to the interaction between gender, ethnicity/race, and other characteristics/identities and the results of these interactions in terms of power.

Discussing discrimination in simplistic and uniform terms determines an essentialist way of looking at the identities and experiences of women and men in relation to power relations and access to services, resources, power in political terms, the production of knowledge in science, art, literature, etc.

The concept was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), a feminist of color, but its theorization dates back to the post-slavery period in the United States. Sojourner Truth, a survivor of slavery, speaks for the first time at the 1851 Ohio Convention on the Rights of Women about the cultural differences and the different experiences of black and white women.

Intersectionality not only conceptualizes identities, nuancing them, but investigates how different structures and power relations work while affecting people from various groups and producing social inequalities. Intersectionality clearly addresses the differences between women, warning about “the visibility of multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations” (Phoenix 2006, p. 187). At the same time, it addresses the forms of exclusion that play an important role in activist work. (Vincze 2014)

Intersectionality has also found its place in postcolonial, queer, or postmodernist Roma studies, all based on the analysis of multiple identities.

In Romania, the movements for women's rights and Roma rights gained momentum after the 90s but excluded the intersectional experiences of Roma women, bringing the issues of both women and the Roma to a unitary level (Gheorghe 2010).

Roma feminists such as Alexandra Oprea (2004), Nicoleta Bițu⁴, or Angela Kocze (2008, 2011) have criticized the invisibility of Roma activists in the context of the two movements and the lack of an agenda that includes the identities and experiences of Roma women. The exclusion of Roma women from Roma policies and gender equality policies is the best example (Gheorghe 2011). For Oprea, the feminist and anti-racist exclusion is, in fact, one of the causes of the marginalization of Roma women from inclusion policies at the European level (Oprea 2004, p. 29).

⁴ Undated article published on Romani Criss page and available here:
<http://www.romanicriss.org/Femeia%20roma%20intre%20doua%20lumi%20%20Bitu%202006.pdf>

Consequently, many Roma activists have been asked to choose between ethnic or gender identity as a political or survival strategy (Mocanu and Gheorghe 2009, Mark 2010 in Gheorghe și h.arta 2010, Oprea 2012, Bițu 2012).

Moreover, the neoliberal discourse of Roma civil society people who have established themselves as the spokespeople for Roma at the national and EU level focused on the standards imposed by gajde⁵, economic arguments, individualism, exceptionalism, and meritocracy, and excluded grassroots people, marginalized people such as women and LGBT + (Kockze & co. 2018).

However, more and more data, research, and information with the help of technological means attest that there are collective activities of Roma women and LGBT + people both in Romania and in other countries such as Bulgaria, Serbia, Germany, Austria, and Spain. Increasingly more Roma women in these countries have started to be visible, engaged in the struggle to create their narrative, to become a voice in civil society, academia, or the political sphere, in the production of Roma, feminist and queer art and culture, so that issues related to racism, inclusion, oppression, socio-economic status, social justice, or forced sterilization can take on feminist perspectives⁶. Some of these Roma women have taken on a feminist identity, approaching issues relevant to the ethnic community in gender studies and LGBTQIA +. There are countless examples in this sense. An example is the book *“The Romani women’s movement: struggles and debates in Central and Eastern Europe,”* coordinated by a group of Roma and non-Roma women from academia (Kocze & co. 2018).

However, with the increasing visibility of these voices, dichotomies have occurred between the Roma agenda and the fight against gender inequalities, the inclusion of LGBT + Roma people’s voices creating tensions and debates. But at the same time, they conceptualized intersectional theory by bringing into discussion ethnic, gender, class, and sexual identities (Kurtic 2013).

Such tensions that started from different visions/positions on some topics have existed over time between different Roma groups, Roma women, feminists, LGBT + people, but without intercrossing in discussions. An example of this is the report by Nicoleta Bițu

⁵ Gajde is the term used for non-Roma people. In this text, I propose it as a term to argue how Roma people should question their privileges and standards imposed on Roma people.

⁶ Kocze, A.&co. *Towards an Anti-Racist Feminism for Social Justice in Romania*” in *Romani Women’s movement book*, Kocze & co. ed. Routledge UK, 2017

and Crina Morteau in 2008 on early marriage in Roma communities, which was largely attended by Roma and children's rights organizations. The report drew criticism from its launch, which was recorded in the report and highlighted the different positions of the participants on the subject. On the one hand, the need for state intervention to implement the child's universal rights and the need to dismantle these practices as part of Roma culture, and on the other hand, the justification of this phenomenon in the light of the oppressive measures of the state. The report included the feminist perspectives of Letitia Mark and Eniko Vincze, who advocated for the inclusion of the experiences of intersectional subordination of Roma girls, who are in the most vulnerable position in this context⁷. In fact, the two authors mention in the report the polarization of Roma civil society on this issue and listed several recommendations that unfortunately were not later found in Roma and gender equality public policies.

Another moment of tension this time around in the feminist movement, which I think is worth mentioning here to highlight the lack of intersectionality in the positions of the various movements, was the report of the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM), which voted in January of 2014 a report initiated by the British Member of the European Parliament, Mary Honeyball, recommending the adoption of the "Swedish model" by the European Union. The 'Nordic model' or 'Swedish model' incriminated the clients of the sex workers. The letter of support sent by the Carousel Association in the context of the adoption of this report and initiated by the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE), condemning the recommendations to incriminate clients of sex workers mentioned by FEMM, caused a series of debates for and against sex work, the free choice or sex work arguments being seen through the prism of exploitation. The context created by the FEMM report has led to polarization between feminist groups due to different positions on the subject, with the voices of those directly affected by the adoption of this report being marginalized throughout the national and European debate.

Recalling these moments is relevant for answering the question of how intersectional spaces are developed when approached from a critical perspective to develop

⁷ See p. 66-67 in the report that can be downloaded here:
<http://www.romanicriss.org/Mariajele%20timpurii%20in%20comunitatile%20de%20romi.pdf>

collective actions. And if that happens, who are the people speaking, and in what terms do they speak?

Going back to the intersectionality of the spaces I have been in throughout time, in the collective article published in 2018 with Letitia Mark and Eniko Vincze⁸, I question my belonging to a certain space because I do not find myself entirely in it, with all my identities. Letitia Mark found herself in a similar context in her life experience, the feeling for her being related to alienation, an estrangement of the identities she says you can find in your nation if it is willing to change. This exploration and inquiry of my identities came in a context in which the narrative about Roma women was defined by the perspective of the gadje, while the ethnic one was acknowledged through the experiences of discrimination lived or inherited generationally. The exclusion from both movements comes from the lack of an intersectional perspective.

For a long time, we, Roma women, have been social projects and not subjects that produce knowledge. Different sociological, anthropological, historical, literary, folkloric, or political analysis approaches have changed, interpreted, and reinterpreted our identities and interests without our contribution. There are different interpretations of identity, but my approach is constructivist, considering that ethnic identity is a fluid and multiple identity, as it is based on an internalized, individual, and collective process, but influenced by social, political, and cultural factors, and power relations (Chandra 2001; Chandra and Laitin 2002; Posner 2005). According to Chandra, differentiating between attributes and categories causes changes or fluid identities (Chandra 2002). For example, an attribute is represented by skin color, while a category can be the working class, the liberal profession, or acquired at birth, such as biological sex. The attribute or trait is the sum of inherited attributes (from the beginning), and it is a constraint due to the fact that it changes over time, for example, through mixed marriages (such as skin color). But the category can change depending on the context or an unexpected event such as a political change. Let's take the situation of an imaginary case, Ionela, born of Roma parents - respectively *florari* and *ursari*, she has dark skin, she is from the southern region of the country, and she is a lesbian.

Having multiple identities, Ionela can navigate between identity categories depending on the context she finds herself in, whether at work, shopping, or with friends, but the

⁸ See article published with Eniko, Vincze & Letitia Mark "Towards an Anti-Racist Feminism for Social Justice in Romania" in Romani Women's movement book, Kocze & co. ed. Routledge UK, 2017

fundamental attribute remains unchanged. Assuredly, Ionela does not navigate between different contexts depending on her advantage, but the more visible one of her identities is, the more training and manifestation strategies are created in different spaces. Reflecting on this theory, I wonder how diverse and fluid the Roma identity truly is. The unitary view of the Roma identity makes it all the more difficult to recognize the diversity within. In the context of a racist, homophobic, and sexist society, the homogeneous narrative created about the Roma identity from strategic considerations to acquire social and historical rights has silenced many internal identities, such as LGBT + people and Roma women.

If Roma women have taken important steps in outlining the intersectional discourse in Romania and Southeastern Europe, the queer Roma people continue to live marginalized by both the Roma and the LGBT + community.

Various international institutions have acted as mediators to counter the exclusion of marginalized voices. Angela Kocze's view is that the international and the funders' agenda did not determine the agenda of Roma women and queer Roma people but created a context of visibility (Kocze 2018). In 2014, the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) held a conference in Budapest entitled 'Nothing about us without us,' which had Feminism and LGBTQIA + people in the Roma civic movement as the main theme. The publication published by ERRC in 2015 is the first to bring together both Roma and non-Roma researchers and queer Roma people. In his master's thesis⁹, Daniel Baker talks about his experience as a Roma and homosexual person, forced to choose between one identity and another, or the invisibility of one of the identities in order not to be forced to choose. According to Baker, for queer Roma people, alienation of ethnic identity occurs more quickly once people make their coming out, finding it difficult to navigate between the two. For Vera Kurtik¹⁰, Roma feminist and lesbian, the experiences of lesbian Roma girls and women are even more nuanced, as they do not have the freedom to choose, often being involved in the situation of forced marriage.

In the "LGBTQI, Feminism and Romani Studies"¹¹ article, the authors plead for an alliance between Roma feminists and queer Roma people in their common cause for "radical respect

⁹ Daniel Baker, 'The Queer Gypsy': an examination of the dual invisibility of Gay Travelers, MA Thesis in Gender and Ethnic Studies (undated)

¹⁰ Dzuvljarke. Roma Lesbian Existence, European Roma Rights Center, 2013

¹¹ Ekaterina Dunajeva, Angela Kocze, and Sarah Cemelyn "LGBTQI, Feminism, and Romani Studies" in Roma participation in policymaking and knowledge production, 2015

for diversity" within the community. Debated topics such as intersectional identity, the need for diversity and alliances, the invisibility of Roma queer people, discrimination in both Roma and non-Roma environments remain challenged by conservative voices who believe they lead to the division of the public agenda and dilute the Roma rights movement. In response, Jelena Jovanovic and Anna Csilla Daroczi¹² argue that Roma women and men do not experience sexism, anti-Gypsyism, classism, homophobia, etc., in the same way. On the contrary, not having all these voices on the public agenda denotes a fragmentation of the Roma agenda. Roma queer activism and research is still at an early stage, dominated by Roma homosexual men, borrowed from the Western discourse of the universality of human rights, but liberalist, reflecting the tension over Roma identity and racism.

As one Roma homosexual states in an interview, *"It's easier to be gay than Roma. Because you cannot hide the fact that you are Roma, but you can hide the other side if you want to."*¹³

In a patriarchal society, sexuality is the main form of control over the bodies of Roma women and LGBT + people. But the deconstruction begins by occupying spaces and having voices from these groups talking about their experiences, whether we are talking about activist environments where alliances¹⁴ are created, artistic or academic. In the past few years, Roma cultural production has become increasingly visible, recovering its history and queer experiences. Giuvlipen Roma Feminist Theater with its performances that talk about specific experiences of Roma girls/women, about queer people, or about the Holocaust and Roma Romano Svato Theater in Austria, which denounces capitalism, racism, and sexism, are worth mentioning here. Both are among the few initiatives led by Roma women, having a place in a competitive, racist, and sexist industry. The Roma Armeé play that premiered in 2017 in Berlin, with a distribution of 80% Roma artists, has changed how we are perceived, bringing together people from different countries with different gender identities.

To highlight the importance of this play for Roma, feminist, and queer knowledge, Arman Heljic comments that 'the play deconstructs centuries of oppression, exclusion, violence,

¹² Jelena Jovanovic and Anna Csilla Daroczi: Still missing intersectionality: the relevance of feminist methodology in the struggle for the rights of Roma Studies" in Roma participation in policymaking and knowledge production 2015

¹³ <http://gdm.md/ro/content/petru-sunt-homosexual-sunt-rom-si-sunt-ok>

¹⁴ <https://stories.minorityrights.org/lgbt-roma-spain/chapter/fakali-feminist-gitano-voices/>

slavery, forced sterilization, and homo-lesbo-bi-transphobia under the heteronormative patriarchal system in which live¹⁵.

So, is the distance between us a rationale to reject alliances? I think it is essential to understand the context, the history of oppression, sexism, and racism when analyzing the experiences and struggles of Roma women and queer people. As I have indicated, Roma women are in a marginalized position, but I consider it is necessary to associate with equally marginalized voices to build from these positions a narrative that reflects not only the experiences, identities, and issues they face but to do so in an intersectional manner, aware of social mobilization and the fact that this represents collective power. The agenda of Roma women's groups is highly dependent on society, the community they belong to, other groups, identities, personal histories, and power relations. This positioning reveals different, nuanced perspectives in comparison to gadje people. It is not an opportunity as long as the oppression and marginalization systems take various and insidious forms so that each space becomes a negotiation. That is why the deconstruction of spaces is not a solution when they are not enough for representing and making Roma women and queer Roma people visible. The collective way of working depends on the solidarity and sisterhood of both movements but also on negotiating the relationships.

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Arman Heljic, in the article, 'The Revolution is Here, and Now, the Revolution is Roma, Queer, and Feminist' 2019

<https://revistaarta.ro/en/the-revolution-is-here-and-now-the-revolution-is-roma-queer-and-feminist/>

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