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ENVISIONING ROMA FEMINISM

Editorial: Envisioning Roma Feminism

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For a very long time, Roma women were treated as an object of research in social studies, anthropology, history or literature with many consequences at different levels. The research produced became the dominant discourse centered on Roma in a unitary way, with the premises that Roma are a social issue that must be overachieved. That framed Roma women in policies at national or international levels, reducing them to their ethnic and/or social issue, hindering their gender identity or pinpointing it through their bodies and biological grounds. When concerning Roma women, especially issues of early marriages or high fertility rates have always been in the spotlight in the detriment of other issues such as reproductive rights or structural violence.

Without arguing the necessity of such studies whom emphasizes Roma women's access or lack of access to health care, education, labor market etc I must add that the research on Roma issue is still dominated by non Roma men and women and Roma whereas they are men or women, they are still marginal or invisible.

Also there is a scarcity of feminist research to reshape Roma women as subjects of research. The under representative Roma women in academia and as researchers is even more painfully clear. So, without a feminist standpoint and the weak voice of Roma women in research and academia, the question that stance is: what do we need to reframe Roma women from a social issue to a political subject?

In the meanwhile Roma women activists in different countries engaged to create their own narrative by becoming a voice in civil society, academic or political sphere, struggling for the recognition of policy inclusion that would make Roma to overcome the social and economic status and to achieve remuneration for abuses during slavery, Holocaust or force sterilization cases (such as Czech Republic, Slovakia). Few of them publicly assumed the identity of Roma feminists, going even further by fighting for the recognition of the multiple discrimination as an experience specific to both ethnic and gender identity, for anti-racist and feminist policies, to end forced marriages and violence against women (Oprea 2004; Kocze 2011) These movements created dichotomies between Roma issues and gender issues, LGBTQI issues and Roma, creating debates and conflicted situation (Kurtic 2013, Mirga 2014). But they also conceptualized the theory of intersectionality, by working with ethnicity, gender, class and sexual orientation.

The call for proposal solicited by the Journal was indeed very challenging from many aspects. First, as far as I know, it is the first time when the Analyze Journal inquired feminist theory and its potential relation with Roma women. Secondly, because it created an opportunity to dismantle the existentialist views on ethnicity and gender. Third because there is always a possibility for readers, scholars, and researchers to change their paradigm and produce knowledge that is so much needed due to the historical invisibility.

Without doubt intersectionality is a theory seen by all authors as crucial analytical tool that has the potential of being conceptualized by Roma women due to their

identities. But it is also an opportunity to gain new allies, find solidarity and understanding towards issues of power relation. As it replicates within the communities and outside of it, it has the capacity of envisioning feminism and women's rights as Raluca Popa states is very well:

„I dare to suggest that gender equality can be a starting place for more inclusive equality struggles. I see a potential for intersectional feminism in Romania that would go a long way beyond merely including gender in a list of inequality categories. The potential of intersectional feminism in Romania and perhaps elsewhere is to offer a vision of equality that starts from the most marginalized positions, usually those of women at the intersection (Romani women, poor women or disabled women) and builds a framework for a more just and a more equal society” (Popa, 2009, 79).

Following the collection of articles presented above, I will briefly reflect on author's contribution from a bottom – top paradigm hoping that readers will also reflect on conceptualizing intersectionality.

In the article “Roma women's marginalities in the recognition struggles of a Hungarian Roma Women's NGO” Ildikó Asztalos Morell propose a cross – cutting analyze of a Roma women NGO who manages to deal with ethnic and gender issues in a contexts of a post socialist state and the influence of a western NGO with feminist liberal agenda. Her study case is based on Roma women activists from the '90 until present who tells her story combined with the stories of women. The author questions different frames that Roma women are related to: high fertility rates, early marriages (with social and health consequences). Due to stigmatization and arise of right wing parties, Roma ngo became reluctant in addressing issues such as: reproductive rights, gender based violence or early marriages as Roma culture. The neo-liberal policies and their influence on Roma inclusion with a focus on Roma women – Western economies and its influence on CEE (Central and Eastern European) made NGO's to fill spaces where the state cut downs its support .

The dilemmas between social condition, integration within the society neglecting other aspects such as gender combined with the dilemmas that Roma women's NGO's in Hungary have due to the support received by international women's organization, donor's dependency and ideation are interlinked in Roma women's NGO, poses an important question: how is Roma women's issues constructed?

Following the same path, Diana Neaga asks a very relevant question: *How can Roma women's empowerment be possible in the context of intersectional representation of inequalities?* Reading her article “Empowering Roma women in Romania – gender or/and ethnicity” one can identify Roma feminists and their struggle to develop offer an intersectional agenda with the mainstream feminism, the ethnic and gender dichotomy that determine the questioning of “real Roma” from gadjicanes.

Marion Colard goes further to understand how Roma women could live in “two worlds” seeing intersectionality as a way of cross-cutting Roma ethnics and gadje in “L'émancipation de la femme dans la société rom traditionnelle de Roumanie”.

Eniko Vincze proposes a move beyond fake dilemmas such as universalism vs difference or ethnic vs gender identity considering that politics of culture does not address the systematic economic causes of social inequalities. Politics of human rights with its universal values generated formal equality but the socio economic rights failed to be addressed. She describes the European policies from 1990 – 2000 as “liberal limited optimism” and shift after 2000 for Roma inclusion policy described as neoliberal due to its focus on Roma as capital who can be more productive if its integrated rather

than exclude. Roma became “object of negotiation for former communist countries in their accession to EU” she states in “The racialization of Roma in the new Europe and the political potential of Romani women”. Identity politics and Roma inclusion politics were both blind to gender and racialised class division. So the challenge is: how to reframe Roma women as political subjects at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and class? One example of the solution that the author proposes is to reshape different concepts from the feminist agenda such as turning violence against women into structural violence (which includes also marginalization, exclusion, racism and patriarchy). To better understand the process of marginalization and oppression from ethnic group and the gadje, Mihai Lukacs in “The Critical Ones: Another Tale of Slavery” goes back in history to the slavery period that brings knowledge and justifies the current situation of Roma women. He also pleads for intersectionality as “(...)the tool of choice when addressing the multiple inequalities experienced by Roma women in Romania today, then the analysis of these inequalities can go back in the past and has to look at the connection between the anti-slavery movement and women’s activism in the nineteenth century”. His critical voice towards the gadje women and men and the oppression during different historical time have shown a Roma resistance where Roma women’s role was crucial.

Talking about the role of “othering” in defining Roma women, Iulia Haşdeu takes a critical stance towards the position of different anthropologist who neglect experiences such as the memories of Holocaust, racists attitudes or discrimination in a context given due to their multiple privileges as white, middle class and gadje (non Roma). She pleads for anthropology to introduce into its work power relations inside, between group and in relation with different parts of society. This could bring new understanding on how gender and ethnicity works within groups, how it effects in larger contexts as domino I would say, reaching the structures of states. In her suggestive article “Words that don’t come easy. Intersectional and post-colonial feminist understandings about Roma in East-European societies” she also questions her own position as gadje discussing about race and racism in an honest way.

This issue contains also a reinterpretation of the story of the Queen of Sheba, a women leader in Quaran reevaluated from an Islamic feminist standpoint.

Last, the issue closes with two book reviews that follow the topic solicited. First is the story of Anina Ciuciu “Proud to be Roma” summarized by Simona Chirciu where a young Roma from Craiova travels with her family in a caravan to France in order to find a better life. Anina is a successful story of a young Roma, challenged and intelligent who studies at Sorbona and had the chance to give voice to many immigrants living in France.

The second book review is “Gypsy Economy: Romani Livelihoods and Notions of Worth in the 21st Century” summarized by Elena Popa. The book tells the story of Roma from Eastern European countries in their struggle to manage income-generating activities in the context of free market, privatization and neo-liberalism policies. The book shows an insight on the economic strategies and values, networking and social relations to maintain a business. It represents a good opportunity to know different traditional occupation of Roma as well as craftsmen’s.

Reaching the end of this issue I want to thank Diana Neaga for her proposal on this topic and support through the entire process. Also many thanks for the teamwork from AnA Society for Feminist Analyses for all the amount of work and for those who sent articles.

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