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The Limits of Rights-Based Discourse in Romani Women's Activism: The Gender Dimension in Romani Politics

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Until recently, most political scientists and historians writing about the Romani 'movement' eschewed a consideration of the conjunction of ethnic and gender identity in their analyses, partly as a result of the traditional emphasis on forms of political struggle in which men have taken a leading role. Moreover, recent scholarship on Romani politics or political mobilization tends to be celebratory, and excludes critical consideration of gender as it operates to produce political identity, to ground ideology or to inform leadership structures, goals or dynamics. The lack of gender awareness deprives us of a crucial perspective which could serve to rework key concepts such as power, resistance and identity within this area of engaged scholarship. It also hinders our understanding of how gender systems have been shaped by – and have profoundly shaped – other forms of power in social relations.

One of the most striking features of the contemporary Romani movement is that it aspires to share an important aspect with other anti-racist social movements: the centrality of gender-based activism as a progressive force and gender equality discourse, both of which have become elements of political leverage. In this chapter, I analyse various manifestations of 'Romani women's issues' in European public discourse. In so doing, I interrogate the issue of forced sterilization which has primarily affected Romani women in Europe. Specifically,

I examine how this issue connects with the global women's movement, the impact of the coerced sterilization issue at the transnational level, and how it has gendered the Romani political discourse.

Furthermore, I identify various political discourses and institutions where this issue has manifested itself, and the social and political effects of the coerced sterilization of Romani women. The political recognition of the sterilization of Romani women offers multiple opportunities for activists, and I further interrogate them in this chapter. Coerced sterilization is a question connected intimately with the violation of reproductive rights and effective measures to control birth rates of 'undesirable' communities. I analyse how the issue of sterilization can support the construction of a pan-European Romani political identity, wherein Romani leaders (mostly men) portray Romani women as the symbolic repository of collective identity. I argue that the forced sterilization of Romani women is the most accepted and recognized gender issue by male Romani leaders because it contributes to the construction of their own political identity.

In the second part of this chapter, I examine the intervention of Western liberal feminist discourse on those issues identified as 'Romani women issues', in particular, early marriages. I base these on discussions with Romani women who are involved in international Romani political activism, and who perceive mainstream Western liberal feminist discourse as an imperial 'white' gaze which sees Romani culture as patriarchal and backward/primitive (cf. Oprea 2005b). Thus, white feminists are compelled to intervene and 'save Romani women' (much as their attempts to save other women in the Third World). This mainstream Western liberal discourse within feminism will then be contrasted to the scholarship of critical feminists who demonstrate the intersectionality of ethnicity, gender, class and other vectors of inequality such as age, disability, etc.¹ The real question and challenge for Romani activists is how to avoid the trap of condemning their own 'culture'. One way would be to explain how centuries of oppression by majority societies against Roma have resulted in certain internalized forms of oppression which work against women, such as early marriage. At the same time, it is definitely a struggle for Romani women's voices to be heard in the public sphere, but the fundamental question is: what are the structural forces and realities which have generated this?