

Intersectionality Backlash: A Romani Feminist's Response

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I would like to begin to respond to some of the backlash aimed at intersectionality² in Romani contexts. Specifically, I would like to respond to the critique that intersectionality privileges Romani women and girls and marginalises Romani men in European policy discourses. I first heard it a couple of years ago at a conference at the University of Toronto, New College, organised by Ronald Lee, a Romani male feminist and a good friend of mine. I gave a talk that centred on the intersectional marginalisation of Romani women and how Romani feminists grapple with the dual task of criticising internal patriarchal structures while trying to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes about the community. A white European woman in the audience said something to the effect of, "I have seen young Romani girls in Europe having more power than the older male leaders; they are put in power by the NGOs and are very disrespectful to the older leaders and to the culture."

I was not sure what she had seen or where she had seen it. I tried to explain to her that what she was describing was an anomaly, that she would not be privy to the conduct that goes on in Romani homes and that if it were the case that she had seen young Romani activist women talking back³ to

male leaders, it was an act of resistance, not of oppression (of those men). In many ways this mirrored stereotypes of the rowdy, overbearing, uneducated, shameless Romani woman – images that circulate throughout Europe. This lens coloured her perspective on strides that had been made toward Romani women's empowerment such that seeing a Romani woman talk back to a male leader in a less than respectful tone became tantamount to oppression of that man. Thus, acts of resistance (no matter how minor) were placed on the same level as virginity tests, domestic violence, disproportionate childrearing, household responsibilities and the like. In other words, anti-subordinative acts (i.e., talking back) were not distinguished from subordinative acts and practices and thus were placed on equal footing. Context disappeared from this inquiry and so did patriarchal structures of subordination.⁴

The latest example of this critique is found in a document produced by Jasminka Dedić⁵ for QUING (Quality in Gender and Equality Policies),⁶ a committee assembled by the European Union (EU) to monitor gender equality in the member and candidate states of the EU. Dedić analysed country reports of the member and candidate states, searching for documents addressing Roma⁷ and gender. What she found

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- 2 See Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color", in *Critical Race Theory*, 357-383 (1995).
- 3 I have borrowed this concept from Bell Hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, 5-10 (1999).
- 4 It is also important to note the patriarchal articulation of culture in her comment. Alexandra Oprea, "The Arranged Marriage of Ana Maria Cioaba, Intra-Community Oppression and Romani Feminist Ideals", *European Journal of Women's Studies* Vol. 12, No. 2, (2005): 133-148. Alexandra Oprea, "Child Marriage a Cultural Problem, Educational Access a Race Issue? Deconstructing Uni-dimensional Understandings of Romani Oppression", *Roma Rights* Number 2 (2005).
- 5 Jasminka Dedić, "Roma in European Gender Equality Policy Debates: Intersectionalized and Feminized", available at: http://www.quing.eu/files/2009/Roma_intersectionality_JDedić_290909.doc (describing policy documents that have included Romani women).
- 6 QUING is "a project funded by the European Union under Framework 6 to investigate gender and citizenship in a multicultural context, 2006-2011. [It] compare[s] the meanings of gender equality in the 27 EU member states, together with 2 candidate countries for EU members. This involves close textual analysis of key policy documents on gender equality in employment, gender-based violence and intimate citizenship, as well as the comparative analysis of the varied institutional and social structural environments under which these meanings develop. Quing will contribute to the development of gender theory, especially in relation to intersectionality and to the theorisation of differences in gender regimes, as well as to more effective gender equality policies." Lancaster University Department of Sociology, *QUING: Gender equality in the European Union*, available at: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/sociology/activities/529/>.
- 7 Other racial minorities were not looked at.

was that this intersection occurs in 16 documents, which were produced by eight of the 29 countries.⁸

One of Dedić's assertions is that the marginalisation of Romani women has been privileged by the QUING countries, in discourses on Roma and gender.⁹ She says that "most (if not all) feminist works addressing gendered issues related to Roma" position Romani women and girls as the normative subject. The simple response to this is, "That is the point: to make central what has been marginal."

Dedić points to "the glaring absence of Romani men in the European gender equality policies." Again, that is the point if taking a bottom-up approach.¹⁰ Making central the experiences of Romani women and girls is not an act of marginalisation.

What is especially concerning to me is the set of background assumptions that inform critiques of this sort. A critique that intersectionality has resulted in policy-makers becoming overly-focused on Romani women and girls, to the detriment of Romani men, supposes two things: 1) that Romani men and women are on equal footing with one another;¹¹ and 2) that it is a zero sum game such that attending to the experiences of Romani women and girls results in a loss for Romani men and boys.

I am not unsympathetic to the claim that there is value in including Romani men in gender discourses. This is true, for example, when addressing domestic violence or child marriages. Romani men would ideally be part of the solution (i.e., would be included in work-shops or counselling and the like). But problematising the inclusion of Romani women and girls in discourses around their subordination constitutes odd framing. This becomes evident if we consider it in the race context. How would it sound to say that unfortunately, most of the European Union's discourse on racism focuses on minorities and excludes White Europeans? It would sound ludicrous because those who are oppressed should be the focus.¹² This does not constitute any sort of special treatment or a privilege, but rather serves to chip away at white supremacy by centering the experiences of racial minorities.¹³

I view Dedić's critique, much like that of the white European woman in Toronto, as backlash against gains made toward intersectional policies, to the extent that such gains have indeed been made.¹⁴ Resistance to intersectionality has also come in the form of gender exceptionalism, or the insistence that gender should be given more attention or special attention as compared to other axes of subordination. This approach is reflected in a paper on European integration.¹⁵

In 2004, Hungary passed the Act on Equal Treatment and Promotion of Equal Opportunities, which addresses gender, race, ethnicity, religious belief, disability, age

8 Dedić, "Roma in European Gender Equality Policy Debates", 9.

9 Dedić admits that Romani women are neglected by feminist scholars: "I would agree with Oprea that Romani women generally do not receive due attention in feminist research. [...] However," she continues, "this is far from being the case on a policy level in the European Union." Thus, she shifts focus away from Romani women's general marginalisation in discourses dealing with gender for instance and focuses the reader's attention on discourses around Roma and gender, where it is expected that Romani women would feature prominently. Dedić, "Roma in European Gender Equality Policy Debates", 6.

10 Alexandra Oprea "Re-envisioning Social Justice from the Ground Up: Including the Experiences of Romani women", *Essex Human Rights Review*, 2004, available at: <http://projects.essex.ac.uk/ehrr/V1N1/Oprea.pdf>.

11 Only if the two groups are on equal footing would increased attention to one group mean favoritism toward that group. If they are not on equal footing, and one is indeed in a subordinate position compared to the other, then increased attention to the subordinate group is not favoritism or a privileging of any sort. It is merely a way to equalize the playing field. See Alexandra Oprea, "The Arranged Marriage of Ana Maria Cioaba". (discussing the rationale behind affirmative action).

12 This is not to say that whites should not engage in analyses around white privilege and the like.

13 I use the term racial minorities to refer to Roma and other racialised groups in Europe such as South Asians, Africans and Muslims.

14 I should note here that I have taken Dedić's assertions as true. Namely, I have assumed that Romani women were indeed the central focus of the reports she found and this may very well be up for debate. Another important thing to note is that even if this were the case, it could be that it is just lip service that is being paid to intersectionality. We must look for implementation and results before we draw conclusions that Romani women have indeed become central to policy making of any sort.

15 Ulrich Sedelmeier, "Post-accession compliance with EU gender equality legislation in post-communist new member states", in Post-accession compliance in the EU's new member states, European Integration online Papers (EIoP), ed. Frank Schimmelfennig and Florian Trauner, Special Issue 2, Vol. 13, Art. 23 (2009), available at: http://eiop.or.at/eiop/index.php/eiop/article/view/2009_023a/140.

and sexual orientation. One criticism levelled at this law is that it “treat[s] all grounds of discrimination equally, rather than treating gender as a special case.”¹⁶ Specifically, the criticism is that race somehow overpowers gender discrimination: “gender discrimination in Hungary is perceived as less salient than racial discrimination – especially of the Roman [sic] minority [...] As a result, sexual harassment is not explicitly prohibited.”¹⁷ What is startling about this critique is the way in which; 1) Romani

women are erased (a male-centered “Romani minority” appears); and 2) the way in which the link is drawn between protecting Roma and neglecting women (not prohibiting sexual harassment).

Further research is needed evaluating the strides European countries have made toward adopting an intersectional framework. Preliminary research indicates that these strides are not significant.¹⁸

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 Duplicating my initial research in Alexandra Oprea, “The Erasure of Romani Women in Statistical Data: Limits of the Race Versus Gender Approach,” *OSI EUMAP*, available at: http://www.soros.org/resources/articles_publications/articles/roma-data-20030403, I note that some countries still fail to disaggregate statistics by race and gender, thereby erasing the experiences of Romani women. See, e.g., Asociația Femeilor Din România, *Proiecte interne și internaționale*, 2003, available at: <http://www.af2010.ro/proiecte.php> (equality between men and women, without mention of race). See also, European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Equality between women and men – 2009* {SEC(2009) 165}, 27 February 2009, available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52009DC0077:EN:NOT> (report on equality between men and women 2009) and Center for Urban and Regional Sociology, *Domestic Violence in Romania*, 2008, available at: <http://webapps01.un.org/vawdatabase/searchDetail.action?measureId=6441&baseHref=country&baseHrefId=1074j>, which disaggregates along gender lines, but not around racial lines, thus hiding frequency or severity of battering of Romani women.