

Personal Encounters and Parallel Paths toward Romani Feminism

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## Personal Encounters and Parallel Paths toward Romani Feminism

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**T**o address the topic of Romani feminism, we—Nicoleta Bițu and Enikő Vincze—chose to talk about how our parallel paths came together, converging on the belief that Roma communities need feminism as an essential emancipatory force.

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### Nicoleta Bițu

I sometimes lack self-confidence, but in my heart I hope I was among the first to conceptualize the Roma issue from a feminist perspective. Before this point of view became an ideological position, it characterized my life emotionally, first when I was a teenager and then as I became a female activist within the Roma movement. Most importantly, the idea of social justice has shaped my way of thinking—first in universalist terms and later on from a feminist standpoint.

As a Romani feminist I have seen the effects of interethnic conflict firsthand. These conflicts have ranged from small group fights to property destruction. In some cases they have ended with deaths on both sides. I conducted fieldwork immediately after these conflicts in a few localities, and I could observe what my male colleagues did not notice: women's role in such situations and in the Roma community at large.

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### Enikő Vincze

I searched for feminism while conducting research on ethnic/nationalist identity politics in Romania. I was in need of a critical perspective that could enable me to address processes of identity construction in the context of the Romanian-Hungarian relationship. Feminism gave me a useful conceptual framework, but it also gave me self-confidence, as an ethnic Hungarian, to deconstruct the authoritarian ethnicized discourse on the Hungarian minority in Romania.

In my study of how ethnicity intersects with gender while (re)producing power regimes (in the context of Roma women's access to reproductive health), I encountered similar dilemmas. As a *gadjo* (non-Roma) woman, I was questioning the appropriateness of talking about sensitive topics within a Roma community subjected to racism. At that moment, in 2005, I was looking for Nicoleta Bițu's moral and intellectual support as a Roma woman activist. I shared

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## Nicoleta Bițu

The main topics around which Roma feminist discourse has developed include forced sterilization, early marriages, prostitution, human trafficking, and begging (women and children are often the ones begging on the streets)—all of which force me to ask hard questions: May I talk about these issues? Is it time to talk about them now, when anti-Roma racism is so powerful across Europe?<sup>1</sup>

As an activist, I have been fortunate to meet not only some of the great national and international personalities of the Roma movement but also international activists for women's rights, including Roma women from Spain, Serbia, and Macedonia who have played a huge role in shaping a movement for Roma women while constructing bridges between themselves and majority women.

Generally speaking, my aim as a Romani feminist is to contribute to the construction of a modern Roma identity, one that considers diversity and equality within Roma communities and that addresses all the problems Roma women are subjected to at the intersection of gender, eth-

## Enikő Vincze

with her my dilemmas while writing up my study (Magyari-Vincze 2006) and finalizing the related documentary (*Red Poppies* 2006). I realized that feminism—if it is to be capable of transcending ethnic boundaries—must support minority women in their efforts to deconstruct both nationalist/racist regimes and patriarchal gender orders within and outside minority communities. We need to think and act intersectionally to understand that we have been subjected to multiple exclusions and discriminations. Solidarity between women of different ethnicities, ages, and social classes is not simply an emotional game. It is a political option, like feminism itself. Romani feminism empowers me to create networks of Roma and non-Roma women and men working to solve immediate, practical problems but also to broadly conceptualize societal issues like difference, intersectional inequality, the social life of rights, and the relationship between rights and culture.

Without becoming aware of the differences and inequalities among women, or without a feminism conceived from the perspective of women at the intersection of several power

<sup>1</sup> The number of Roma in Europe is between 7 and 9 million. The first documentation of their presence in Europe dates to the fourteenth century. Since their arrival they have been regarded as foreigners, strange. Even the names given by the others, Tsigani, Gypsy, Zigeuner, reflect the deep prejudices against this group. They have been subject to racism throughout their history, and hundreds were exterminated by the Nazis. In Romania the Roma were enslaved for nearly four and a half centuries; Roma slavery was outlawed only in 1856.

## Nicoleta Bițu

nicity, and class. We Roma feminists also need to deal with the complicated problem of the relationship between women's universal rights and ethnic/community rights. Confronting European feminism with what I have learned from the African American women's movement (most importantly from bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw), I was shocked by the lack of sensitivity toward diversity and inequality among women and even more so by the presence of racism among some European feminists. For these reasons, we recently proposed a European Platform of Romani Women that will act independently and avoid being the client of anyone. We want to function differently; we will not wait for funds or requests from anyone before acting.

## Enikő Vincze

regimes, I probably would have thought differently about what was important in an academic career. Romani feminism is a way of assuming the disadvantages and benefits of being in-between, of seeking nonhierarchical partnerships; it is a process of permanently (re)creating solidarities around universal human rights.

Practiced in an academic context, Romani feminism is a way of thinking about the means and meanings of a sociocultural action research that links the descriptive, critical, and deconstructive analysis of power relations with an activist commitment (activism) toward empowering the critical perspectives and practices of people situated in disadvantaged positions.

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*Red Poppies*. 2006. Directed by Enikő Magyari-Vincze. Cluj: Foundation Desire.

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