

LGBTQIA, Feminism and Romani Studies

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During the *Nothing about us without us?* conference there was a special section dedicated to the discussion of the Roma LGBTQIA¹ community – a segment of the population that rarely receives adequate attention – and theories of feminism that might strengthen the already underway Roma empowerment movement. The workshop provided crucial space to express frustrations, goals, concerns, and individual struggles.

Alliance building was one contentious issue: while some saw a clear opportunity in LGBTQIA, feminist and Roma communities joining forces in their struggle for equality, others were wary that the very idea of premature alliance would dilute the Roma cause. The standpoint of some attendees was that defining the Roma cause, carving out political space for Roma and strengthening the Roma identity should be the precondition of any alliance building, and thus we need to lay the foundation first. Another recurring concern that emerged was the dividing force of the various movements: do Roma women, for instance, have to choose between their gendered and ethnic identities, thus distancing themselves from both (feminist and Roma Movements) or either of the movements. This statement was contested immediately: Romani identity should be reconsidered to include the feminist perspective, rather than replace it. Learning from or joining with other movements remained an issue without consensus, but it was critical for these arguments to emerge, and at times clash and settle.

“Radical respect for difference” was a key statement during the discussion – respecting and celebrating gender, ethnic, and all other differences should be the overarching goal, which

could lead to more open, accepting societies. The truly enriching comments came from audience members who affiliate with several groups: “LGBTQIA often share the same emotions as we [Roma] do” and thus they could be natural allies.

These themes and others are present in the previous academic and activist literature on Romani feminist activism and LGBTQIA activism within Roma communities, but undoubtedly received a heightened impetus during the conference. In order to contextualise and understand these issues more fully, it is worth reflecting briefly on this background.

The lack of intersectional analysis has been a pervasive issue for Romani feminists. They have highlighted the intense marginalisation of Romani women and the oppression they experience both from the dominant society and within communities, including domestic violence, alongside their absence within mainstream feminist and anti-racist discourse and the programmes of non-governmental organisations.² They have faced assertions that being a feminist and a Romani are contradictory or incompatible,^{3,4,5} as Nicoleta Bitu also found when she declared herself a Romani feminist in an event at the European Parliament in 2005.⁶ The work of Romani women activists is obscured and often rendered invisible, as are the lives of Romani women generally, compared to the recognition accorded to male leaders of the Roma Movement.

Invisibility is also an issue for Roma who identify as LGBTQIA. Daniel Baker’s MA study⁷ highlighted the conflict experienced between being Gay and a Romani, with the

1 LGBTQIA stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual – we use this all-inclusive umbrella term in the introduction to refer to and include the community as a whole. We would like to note that not all authors describe all members of the community, and in their articles each author uses the acronym that reflects the scope of their paper.

2 Alexandra Oprea, “Re-envisioning Social Justice from the Ground Up: Including the Experiences of Romani Women”, *Essex Human Rights Review*, Vol. 1 Number 1 (2005): 29-39.

3 Ethel Brooks, “The Possibilities of Romani Feminism”, *Signs*, Vol. 38, Number 1 (2012): 1-11.

4 Petra Gelbert, “Either Sing or Go Get the Beer: Contradictions of (Romani) Female Power in Central Europe”, *Signs*, Vol. 38, Number 1, (2012): 22-29.

5 Angéla Kóczé, *Missing Intersectionality. Race/ Ethnicity, Gender and Class in Current Research and Policies on Romani Women in Europe* (Budapest: CEU Center for Policy Studies, 2009).

6 Debra Schultz, “Translating Intersectionality Theory into Practice: A Tale of Romani-Gadze Feminist Alliance”, *Signs*, Vol. 38, Number 1, (2012): 37-43.

7 Daniel Baker, *The Queer Gypsy: an examination of the dual invisibility of Gay Travellers*, MA Thesis in Gender and Ethnic Studies (undated).

resulting loss of connection through having to choose between one or other aspect of identity, or else ‘passing’ and submerging one aspect. Vera Kurtić documented the multiple oppressions of Romani lesbians both by majority Serbian society and the minority Romani community.⁸

As a result of restricted views of what being a Romani involves, these and other commentators point not only to the failure to address the rights of Romani women and sexual minorities, but also to the losses to the wider Roma rights movement since many voices may be silenced and lives rendered invisible.

Lack of recognition of intersectionality within the Roma Movement is at odds with the activity of Romani women all over Europe, fighting against gender oppression and racism (though not all activists will describe themselves as feminists). The involvement of Roma in Gay Pride marches and conferences proclaiming and publicly celebrating LGBTQIA identity represent a highly significant political act in itself given the invisibility surrounding them.

One factor that has been seen as an influence on the silencing of Romani feminism is the urgency of defending the communities against the rampant media, public and political racism facing all Romani communities across Europe⁹ and resulting arguments that multiple perspectives within Roma politics might be seen to dilute its focus on challenging injustice. This latter view prompted energetic debate within the conference and in this volume, generating optimism that a critical moment might be reached enabling broader recognition that the focus of Roma rights would be strengthened by a more inclusive movement.

While discussion of intersectionality in the Romani feminist and LGBTQIA literature has referred to a range of dimensions of oppression, the most prominent are ethnicity, gender and sexuality. There are other dimensions reflecting other Romani lives that will hopefully be further explored through both activism and theory, including disability, age and transgender. Disability receives rare mention, although

the health disadvantages experienced by Roma communities indicate that it may be an important issue. Age is discussed sometimes in terms of generations, for example the greater level of involvement of young Romani women and the challenge they have generated toward the ‘virginity cult’¹⁰ in Macedonia and other countries. A contrasting example from the UK, where young women are also active, is that some leading women activists, who do not necessarily describe themselves as feminists, have noted that being older can provide an easier platform for women’s activism within the community in the face of cultural gender expectations.¹¹ The extent to which feminism is an organic as well as academic perspective within the range of women’s grassroots activism is one of several theoretical and practical questions that have arisen in this field. More research about how Romani women without a high level of formal education conceptualise their daily struggles against oppression and the mutually enriching connections that can be made with Romani feminist theorising could be valuable. This requires more collaborative work from feminist scholars to work together with local Romani women, who do not necessarily identify themselves as feminists, and to theorise together their gendered social and political struggles.

Research in relation to LGBTQIA issues for Roma and the achievements of LGBTQIA activists remains thin. The groundbreaking studies by Baker and Kurtić will hopefully inspire much more work in this field. These two studies focus respectively on Gay men and Lesbians; intersectionality could extend to exploring further the parallels and divergences within and between the experiences of different sexual minorities and the development of support systems and campaigns.

The building of alliances was a strong theme in theory and practice at the conference. The literature demonstrates how policy advocacy and the building of networks within national and pan-European organisations has led to a greater focus on Romani women in policy and some programmes, though without leading to fundamental change. Building on these networks, feminists have argued for affirmative action¹²

8 Vera Kurtić, *Džunijarke – Roma Lesbian Existence* (Niš: Ženski Prostor, 2014).

9 Alexandra Oprea, “The Arranged Marriage of Ana Maria Cioaba, Intra-Community Oppression and Feminist Ideals, Transcending the ‘Primitive Culture’ Argument”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, Vol. 12 Number 2, (2005): 133-148.

10 Schultz, “Translating Intersectionality Theory into Practice”.

11 Sarah Cemlyn, Maggie Smith-Bendell, Siobhan Spencer and Sally Woodbury, “Gender and Community Activism” in *Hearing the Voices of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities: inclusive community development*, ed. Andrew Ryder, Sarah Cemlyn, and Thomas Acton (Bristol: Policy Press, 2014), 155-176.

12 Oprea, “The Arranged Marriage of Ana Maria Cioaba”.

or specific policies for Romani women¹³ that incorporate the intersectional disadvantages of gender, poverty and ethnicity. Alliances between Romani women and *Gadje* have been explored in the literature, emphasising the centrality for *Gadje* of reflection on privilege and of engagement in learning from Romani perspectives,^{14,15} and this holds true across all Roma/non-Roma alliances. Some argue that alliances within and between social movements are also central to the promotion of social justice. The work of black feminist scholars has been a crucial inspiration for Romani feminists, yet anti-racist campaigns have often excluded Roma. We may be at a point where a fully inclusive European Roma Movement could take the lead in developing a cross-cutting social justice movement.

Theorising intersectionality within Romani Studies is undoubtedly a challenging, yet much-needed direction to explore further for academics. In this section, a group of excellent scholars is unpacking this very question.

Jelena Jovanovic and Anna Daróczy underline the critical relevance of feminist ideologies in the struggle for Roma rights. Reflecting on the conference, the authors powerfully claim that “the Romani movement must incorporate intersectional approach to a higher extent in order to avoid a narrow Romani identity politics that assume national

identity as having exclusive relevance to experiences of Romani people at any given.” Daniel Baker, in his insightful and engaging piece based on his MA thesis, notes the critical absence of published literature on the topic of LG-BTQIA Roma, and thus Baker’s article provides a unique insight into the lives of Gay Gypsies in the UK. In a similarly distinctive, blunt and thought-provoking article by Dezső Máté, based on fifteen personal narrative interviews with LG-BTQIA Roma, the author cogently presents Gay Roma identities and the surrounding sets of discourses. Finally Angéla Kóczé’s invaluable article draws our attention to the role of power in the construction of truth and knowledge within Roma-related academic discourse, and the role feminist theory plays in that process. She applies feminist theory to expose the racist and masculine nature of the dominant knowledge-making process.

The conference *Nothing about us without us?* and also this section in the Roma Rights Journal encourage development of and support for feminist research and theorisation. Our vision is to produce a more inclusive knowledge on Roma without being trapped in the reproduction of patriarchal dominant knowledge-making processes. We hope that this section is read as a call for more reflection on various privileges and for the production of more feminist knowledge.

13 Kóczé, *Missing Intersectionality*.

14 Oprea, “Re-envisioning Social Justice from the Ground Up”.

15 Schultz, “Translating Intersectionality Theory into Practice”.