

Still Missing Intersectionality: The relevance of feminist methodologies in the struggle for the rights of Roma

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The relationship between feminist ideologies and the political discourse of Romani people was recognised as important at the Budapest conference we participated in in October 2014. *Nothing about us without us? Roma participation in knowledge production and policymaking* was a “unique three-day gathering of Roma activists and thinkers”, as defined by the organisers. We agree. It was a unique gathering. We cannot think of another space created for Romani feminist and LGBTQIA¹ scholars and activists to come together and share their knowledge and ideas. Yet the conference also turned out to be rather predictable: there was a lack of understanding that the complexity of Romani people’s identities needs to be recognised within Romani political discourses.

In this paper, we argue that the Romani movement must incorporate intersectional approaches to a greater extent in order to avoid a narrow Romani identity politics that assumes national identity as having exclusive relevance to the experiences of Romani people at any given time. At the above-mentioned conference we were strongly affected by those voices we strive to challenge, those who recreated misconceptions that “feminism produces separatism within the Romani movement” and that “we [Romani political actors] are concerned only with national or ethnic identity”. We believe that these misconceptions are based on the lack of understanding and/or the lack of acknowledgment of our feminism and intersectionality as the main approach originating in the feminist scholarship we strive to incorporate into the movement. Angéla Kóczé has already argued for intersectionality as a tool to bring more inclusive discourses into the Romani movement and she rightly noted “[t]he meeting of feminism and Romani politics has already transformed internal discourses within the Roma movements”.² However, our experiences show that intersectionality should be incorporated to a greater extent in order to make the discourses within the Romani movement more inclusive.

We will argue for including intersectional approaches to a higher extent into the Romani movement’s discourse by:

1. Explaining the concept of intersectionality and why it is relevant in the context of the movement;
2. Emphasising the relevance of intersectionality in the discourse so as to push for the recognition of intersectionality as a methodology that helps to identify and expose disadvantages faced by Romani boys and men as well as women;
3. Pointing out the ways intersectionality goes against the elitism of the movement’s discourses by denying both isolation and hierarchy of social categories;
4. Explaining the need for the creation of a safer place for suppressed people, for example, Romani lesbians and;
5. Touching upon the idea of intersectional methodology (making alliances) as a strategy which can strengthen the movement itself.

Intersectionality is one of the feminist theories and methodologies that might help more people become reflective to the hybrid structures of inequalities that Roma face. The main idea is based on experiences of “women of colour”. Advocates of intersectionality argue that categories of difference (such as gender, ethnicity, class, age and sexuality) work together to create specific experiences for people in the complexity of power relations. It has been a long time since Kimberlé Crenshaw noted that feminist efforts to place women’s experiences on the political agenda and anti-racist efforts to place experiences of people of colour on the political agenda have frequently appeared as these experiences occur in isolation from each other. She notes “[a]lthough racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and anti-racist practices”.³ One of her conclusions is that “when the practices expound identity as ‘woman’ or ‘person of color’ as an *either/or* proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location

1 ‘LGBT’ is a well-known umbrella term used to refer to *lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender*. We use ‘LGBTQIA’ to intentionally include and visualize *queer, intersex and asexual*.

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

3 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color”, *Stanford Law Review*, Volume 43:6, (1991): 1241-1299.

that resists telling.”⁴ We also emphasise the importance of the mentioned conclusion because of the introduction of one of us as someone who “shifted from the Romani to the feminist movement”. This expounded our identities as an either/or proposition, which further implied that one can fight *either* for Romani *or* for women’s rights. We could even argue that this resulted in a discursive creation of us as outsiders in relation to the Romani movement.

Angéla Kóczé, following influential black feminist critiques, has written extensively on the situations of Romani women and argued for the need for specific measures to address intersectional discrimination faced by Romani women all over Europe. “The development of intersectional approaches and methods”, she stated, “might bring a new transformational politics in Europe, which will recognize and address Romani women’s issue and social position [because] [d]ominant anti-discrimination policies are not sufficient to address various forms of intersecting inequalities in social policies.”⁵ We would not disagree with Kóczé, but would like to add the relevance of intersectional approaches in also identifying and revealing disadvantages that Romani boys and men face in different contexts.

Feminists are most frequently understood as those fighting only for women’s rights. This may be true for many, but not for all. Feminism helps us understand that Romani men’s experiences are also intersectional. Many Romani men are positioned in “a location that resists telling”. Applying the relationship between intersectionality and relevance of the context may lead to a better understanding of the unprivileged positions of Romani boys and men in certain situations. For example, the dominance of understanding Romani women as facing “double” (based on their gender and ethnic origin) or “multiple” discrimination (sometimes *class* and rarely *sexuality* are added to the picture) ignores contexts in which Romani boys are almost exclusively vulnerable to specific forms of trafficking in human beings, such as in the case of street children in Belgrade. The ignorance of the political and policy discourse towards Romani boys (the failure to examine *gender relations* rather than *gender identity*, their socioeconomic position, ethnic belonging, age, sexuality) and

towards the context results in a lack of prevention, assistance and protection measures for Romani boys.⁶

Importantly, Romani men and women do not have an equal share of experiences of sexism, anti-Gypsyism, classism, heterosexism, islamophobia, ageism and many other scourges of our culture. Family background, socioeconomic status, place of residence and many other factors help build power structures within the group. Statements implying that “we are concerned with national or ethnic identity” in the struggle for the rights of Roma assume that all Roma are in the same power-position in each context and disregard all other dimensions of our identities as those of high political relevance. What we would like to emphasise is that this statement is elitist and that the leaders of the Romani movement often seem not to consider elitism when conceptualising their ideas. Being an activist within the Romani movement seems to require considerable privilege, which is not available to individuals who understand their own identities as more complex and fluid. We believe that the voices which promote feminism as a tool for separatism must better understand and reflect on their own power-positions within.

The elitism of the political movement is reflected in the unrealistic expectations of the members of the group, and not only of activists. In order to start practicing intersectionality we need to become curious about alternatives and silences. This is another important lesson we have learned from feminists. We found that alternative and missing narratives are exactly the narratives which point to the specific power-positions of Roma, both within Romani communities and in relation to ‘others’. For example, even though many Romani activists strongly promote the free expression of ‘Romani identity’, a woman activist from Macedonia challenges this elitist discourse by saying that she would not expect this from a woman who would rather hide her Romani origin in order to get a job and feed her children.⁷ In sum, statements implying that “we are concerned only with national or ethnic identity” suggest that national or ethnic dimensions of our identities somehow exist isolated from other dimensions, as referred to

4 Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins”.

5 Kóczé, *Missing Intersectionality*.

6 Jelena Jovanovic, “‘Vulnerability of Roma’ in Policy Discourse on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings in Serbia: Perspectives of the National Policy Actors, Center for Policy Studies Working Papers, (Budapest: CEU Center for Policy Studies, 2015).

7 Enisa Eminovska’s video message, part of the *I’m a Roma Woman* campaign, is available at: <http://www.romawoman.org/?page=article&id=256>.

by Crenshaw. Secondly, they imply that nationality or ethnicity is of higher relevance compared to other dimensions. This isolation and hierarchy exist, but exclusively on a discursive level, not in people's everyday realities. Intersectionality clearly denies both isolation and hierarchy of social categories. Intersectionality is therefore very much still of relevance in rethinking Romani politics.

Putting intersectionality into practice can make our Romani movement less fragmented, by accepting those who are rejected. Romani women, for example, often make alliances with non-Romani women, on the ground of common dimensions of identity, such as suppressed gender identity and sexuality. The main value embodied in these processes is *solidarity*. Some Romani lesbians in Serbia, like Tamara, find their safe place in lesbian activist groups where they do not feel rejected because of their sexual identity.⁸ However, some other Romani lesbians in Serbia experience the lack of a friendly environment among mainstream LGBTQIA movements while at the same time facing rejection from Roma. If Romani political actors employed a stronger and more inclusive discourse on intersectionality (not only including *gender* and *ethnicity* in the story), this could perhaps create a safer space for people within Romani political arenas.

Alliances within and between social movements attract the attention of many scholars. This growing interest has been reflected in many works of leading experts on equality activism in the areas of gender, LGBTQIA, race and ethnicity, education, and anti-poverty. The interests of these scholars lead them to reveal different conditions for mobilisation in different parts of the world and the role of institutions in relation to intersectional activism, which is a rich source that argues for the necessity of building stronger coalitions. For example, one of the strong arguments for making alliances is related to the fact that the European Union strives to move towards policies that address multiple inequalities. Including intersectionality as a methodological tool for the Romani movement could

help us understand the ways policies are set up and developed on a supranational level.⁹ Secondly, creating alliances with other social justice movements encourages solidarity around wider social justice interests.¹⁰ Studying alliances within and between social movements is outside the scope of this paper, but it is important to be grappled with in the future so that we could also argue for the concrete strategic opportunities of joint political actions. However, we are aware of the challenges of these processes as well, as it has been clearly stated that “[i]n these fragmented times [...] it is both very difficult to build these alliances and never more important to do so”.¹¹

In this paper, we intended to confront statements such as “feminism produces separatism within the Romani movement” or “we are concerned only with ‘national’ or ‘ethnic’ identity”. Because of our understanding of these statements as misconceptions related to the lack of understanding of our feminism and intersectionality, we partly explained what we mean by feminism in relation to the Romani movement and why we think that the movement still misses and still needs intersectionality. We argued that ‘national’ or ‘ethnic’ identities do not have exclusive relevance to the experiences of Romani people at any given time and that this is why the Romani movement must strive to make its discourse intersectional. The complexity of Romani people's identities needs to be firstly recognised and secondly acknowledged as politically relevant in order to make discourses within the Romani movement more inclusive.

We repeated what some Romani feminists and LGBTQIA and women's activists argued for two decades, but we also hope to add some important points. One of these points is very practically oriented - that an intersectional approach is also relevant in identifying and revealing disadvantages that Romani boys and men face in different contexts. Secondly, we want people to pay more attention to alternative and missing narratives because these are the narratives which point to the specific power relations within. We wanted to

8 Tamara Mitić's video message, part of the campaign *Month of Romani Women's Activism* is available in Serbian and Romani at: <https://vimeo.com/123207307>.

9 For a critical analysis of the EU multiple inequalities agenda see: Mieke Verloo, “Multiple Inequalities, Intersectionality and the European Union”, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Volume 13 (3), (2006): 211-228.

10 Jane Parker, “The TUC and Civil Alliance Building: Towards social movement unionism?”, (Paper presented at the AIRAANZ (Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand) conference, Melbourne, February 2008), available at: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wbs/research/irru/publications/recentconf/jp__airaanz_paper.doc.pdf.

11 Cited in Lyndi Hewitt, “Framing across Differences, Building Solidarities: Lessons from women's rights activism in transnational spaces”, in *A Journal for and about Social Movements*, Volume 3 (2), (2011), 65-99.

point out that intersectionality denies isolation and hierarchy of social categories, such as gender, ethnicity, class, age and sexuality. Thirdly, and maybe one of the most important points, fighting for more inclusive discourses could help intersectional methodologies enter into practice in terms of involving now suppressed and excluded Romani identities in the mass we are striving to make critical. Finally, a better understanding of the concept of intersectionality might make the movement itself more inclusive to Romani feminist and LGBTQAI people/activists, which is a mobilisation strategy that has already proven efficient within women's movements, for example, but which seems to have its ups and downs when it comes to the Romani movement.

The Romani movement needs a higher level of solidarity among Roma themselves to be able to fight its own

limits. If we fight for equality but suppress voices within, we praise nothing but hypocrisy and leave so many voices unheard. Therefore, the struggle for Romani rights must be a struggle for and with all Roma. We still need intersectionality to shape political discourses and conduct. If the Romani movement does not do this, it will further expose power relations and help preserve or even increase its own vulnerabilities. Romani feminist and LGBTQIA scholars and activist are often understood as those who fight for some "other rights" if they do not make the national or ethnic dimension of their identities central to their politics. If Romani political actors do not employ a stronger and more inclusive discourse on intersectionality (and not only including *gender* and *ethnicity* in the story), Romani political discourse is in danger of continuing to produce misunderstandings among people who in fact have the same goals.