
A place for Roma feminism

Author: Dr. Carmen Gheorghe

Issue No. 1 (Iek) 2024: "Decolonising Gadge Narratives"

Romnja Magazine by Romnja Feminist Library

October 18, 2024

Internationally, there are many Roma scholars, researchers (queer and non queer), activists and artists who are shaping Roma feminism and are developing it as a body of theory and practice. My pledge is for placing and contextualising this knowledge production so that roma feminism occupies its rightful place in studies of intersectionality, gender studies, theories of race and romani studies (just to name a few). With this, my argument is that Roma feminism is rather seen as a social and political movement thus, unacknowledged, and in some context is subordinated to other social movements. So, to deconstruct this, my article has two purposes. First, it invites the reader to critically examine the “world¹ in which Roma feminism can have a place. The usage of intersectionality, the exclusion or inclusion within different social movements or the double standards must be addressed considering that any situation where Roma/Romnja are excluded must be critically addressed.

Secondly, because of the implications of the Roma feminism as a framework in European Union (EU) and national policies, in law, access to services, housing or justice, I therefore pledge to introducing Roma feminism as a theory and a method to contribute to a more intersectional feminism in Europe. To support my arguments but also as a form of ethics for the UniRomnja² program where I first presented this article as a lecture, I am

¹ Social movements in that sense

² This article was initially a lecture prepared and presented in November 2023 for the public series organised by UniRomnja collective and Humbolt University in Berlin. For the purpose of publishing, the lecture was readapted, keeping initial ideas/study case

analysing a text of a manifesto written and published in the summer of 2023. I was part of a group of Roma feminists and queers who launched a manifesto called: ***A better place for roma LBGTQ+ in social movements***³. The manifest was a work of collective and individual input from Feminist collective of Romani gender experts, E-Romnja's group, Antonella Lerca and Sandra Selimovic and it was launched in Pride context⁴, which is organised throughout Europe, including in Romania. The manifesto was written as a critique towards different standards and practices we witnessed in the last years where Roma feminist and queer, especially women are being cancelled⁵ or excluded from different spaces / Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and for different reasons. Some of the elements of the manifesto need to be highlighted in this article since it supports the hypothesis I presented at the beginning of this writing. Take for instance the Gadge⁶ standards for getting engaged in various movements and Gadge values/representation towards Roma LBGTQ+ that is criticised in the following quote:

‘In different countries Roma LBGTQ+ still don't feel included in the movement nor in Pride's from planning. When invited by ngo's or collectives, many of us feel scrutinized based on the gadje's criteria and values. Our words are counted, our stories are invalidated or invisible, our behaviour is considered too loud and too aggressive. Some of us can join, if we share the common language, the values of respectability and presentability. For many Roma LBGTQ+ these spaces remain exclusive, elitist, and white’.

As an Romnja activist and feminist during the last two decades I saw many situations where Roma women have been contested, questioned, over scrutinised as part of the Gadge standards. Many of Romnja comrades were expressing fears of not being enough

Here you can follow all lectures presented during the program in 2023

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLkZQai6yn6Yq8VwPhF4NE0XHtfUuJen>

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLkZQai6yn6Yq8VwPhF4NE0XHtfUuJen>

³ Full text can be read here <https://e-romnja.ro/en/manifest/>

⁴ Pride month or LBGTQ+ month is organised worldwide (since the '70s and is dedicated to celebrate the LBGT+ culture but also to commemorate of those from the queer community who died fighting for rights

⁵ Cancel culture is used in this context to explain a phenomenon of public boycott for public figures/groups for their problematic actions, unacceptable views or behaviours. For more reference https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/cancel-culture-background-black-culture-white-grievance/2021/04/01/2e42e4fe-8b24-11eb-aff6-4f720ca2d479_story.html

⁶ Gadge is a term used for non roma people . For more relevance on the topic check the report <https://e-romnja.ro/en/download/2393/?tmstv=1729058632>

of a feminist, activists, or good allies of LGBTQ+ due to the lack of theoretical background. Whereas many of the White/Gadje activists/feminists I work with or in the spaces I am navigating in, had access to a higher level of education and information compared with the number of Romnja activists I know and work with. Having the theoretical background becomes more important comparing with lived experience which is still considered subjective. Knowing an international, dominant language and the usage of correct terminologies defines in our cases the “level of feminism” and therefore engagement. Many Roma feminists from grassroots who have such valuable experience can’t engage in social movements because they never had access to learn an international language. For example, the Roma initiative group from Poradňa from Slovakia⁷ who built the case against forced sterilisation (2011) or the Roma feminists from Spain such as Fakali or Feministas Gitanas⁸ who work with many Romnja. As well as E-Romnja who works with Roma women and girls who would never engage solely because of language barriers. There is still a shy debate in Europe about the languages used, lack of translation available and the lack of spaces for native speakers. Language and the use of different concepts constitutes barriers in creating inclusive spaces.

When it comes to themes, they play an important part in the narrative built about Romnja activists, feminists and queer. In the past 12 years of my work at E-Romnja I addressed issues related to improper streets, lack of access to drinkable water, electricity, lack of access to housing, and lack of public transportation. Yet, I remember many times when I felt uncomfortable in feminist spaces to address these types of issues, as it seemed so distant and disconnected from the Romanian feminist agenda. At that time the spaces were dominated by the universalism of issues, assumed by liberal feminism where gender equality occupied a central place and class, or ethnicity were not even mentioned.

Issues related to daily experiences of Roma women and roma queer such as harassment in public places to lack of access to services or housing, creates different representations and are not seen as feminist issues. Thus feminism is not a homogenous set of ideas and failing to include its varied nature such as the issues raised above at least in

⁷ For more information about their work check the webpage <https://poradna-prava.sk/en/>

⁸ For more info <https://fakali.org> or <https://www.gitanasfeministas.org>

Europe, reinforces the uniformity of a single voice and fails intersectionality. On the other hand, the unitary view of Roma identity and issues present in the Roma movement has silenced many groups including women and LGBTQ+.

Many Roma communities in Romania I worked with but also from South Eastern Europe and the Balkans, still don't have access to infrastructures such as proper streets or sewage drinkable water or public electricity. In addition, there is still a long distance to health care services or local administration which greatly impacts and disenfranchises them severely. Historically we face discrimination, racism and social exclusion, sexism, classism, and lesbo/homo/transphobia. It affects our daily life, opportunities and access to job opportunities. It even influences our way of manifesting, expressing and affirming ourselves as Roma women. Daily experiences or events are a source of powerlessness for Roma women: Control checks at the airports will always 'randomly' choose a group of Roma women dressed in traditional clothes; Police who chase and give fines to beggars; A walk in the city centre with your Romnja friends will catch the eye of Gadje males: A doorman in a shopping centre will follow the dark-skinned Roma women and men everywhere they go; The family doctor who does not touch a Roma child if it is dark-skinned. And lastly, colleagues at work who always have a joke about Roma using the slur word. Roma women learn not to respond to such types of scenarios, due to fear or sense of powerlessness. It is never a singular event which determines the way of expressing and manifesting as Romnja, but a sum of aggression experiences. (Gheorghe, Mocanu 2020) It's the everyday microaggressions, of other Romnja or our own experiences that silence us. It's a history book of being confronted with who 'we are', always narrated by Gadje.

Adhering to a normative notion of respectability is a coping mechanism with a purpose to gain social credibility. Such behaviour is rooted in the resistance and distancing towards images of Roma women's representation as sexualised, exotic or free (Gheorghe and Mocanu, 2020). Politics of respectability⁹ as a value perpetuated by Gadje in social movements, refers to the idea of supposed worthiness of a marginalised group measured by the Gadje group, white and heteronormative (*n.a.in our case*). There is a difference

⁹ The term 'politics of respectability' was coined by Professor Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her 1993 book, [Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920](#).

between respectability and politics of respectability. For instance: if you want to get a job you must dress properly (preferable in neutral colours) to speak with a soft low tone, to not have a ‘migrant accent’, to not show your emotions or your gestures, in other words to act like a Gadge. Now in the politics of respectability while you are constantly confronted with negative stereotypes either as a Roma woman and/or LGBTQ+ you develop strategies of self-representation: good, educated, straight, clean. One distances themselves from the imaginary Roma *queer and becomes the exception from the rule: the PhD student, the writer, the artist... Or how the author Mikaela Pitcan calls it: performing a vanilla self, performing under the standards of others, self-censoring as neutral in order to be accepted. (Pitcan 1993) In some cases as a Roma/women/LBGTQ+ and white passing you can adopt these strategies but colour and class plays important parts altogether, which is a topic insufficiently addressed in social movements throughout Europe. The more vulnerabilities you have, such as: coming from a rural poor family, with low levels of education, poor theoretical formation, from a segregated/isolated/ghetto Roma community and identifying as a Roma LGBTQ+, the less chances you have for accessing labour market, health care or justice. Also the lighter the skin tone is, the better are the chances to have access to services, a good job or be accepted (Kreisman&Rangel 2015). In politics of respectability¹⁰, behaviours are judged by a group who has the power to set the rules of what is acceptable and not, by comparing with colour, class or identity. The respectability norms can be a strategy or a coping mechanism for social acceptance. Either the case, it creates competition between marginalised groups which is the opposite of the much needed solidarity. Also, depending on the case, it can reinforce racism, lesbo/homo/trans/phobia and sexist notions of appropriate behaviour. Therefore, I think it is imperative that we start questioning the white Gadge and heteronormative standards who continue to reproduce themselves in different movements, not just those who have the power to set them. If not, our movements continue to be white, homogenous, heteronormative.

In Europe, throughout the years, many Romnja feminist and queer Roma have criticised the lack of intersectionality in different social movements, either feminists, Roma

¹⁰ The politics of respectability - Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham 1993, book [*Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920.*](#)

or LGBTQ+. Such a context makes me ask: can intersectionality influence activism? A fragment of the manifesto I'm analysing reveals existing tensions within different social movements, from hierarchies created by the level of oppression to the relevance of a majority of people who have been oppressed.

*“We are aware of the vulnerabilities and struggles in our communities and spaces. We all share different oppression systems and fight to dismantle the power dynamics that perpetuate discrimination. **By possessing a discriminated identity or sexual orientation doesn't make communities/collectives less racist or sexist.** At times there have been different allegations of racism and violence towards Roma LGBTQ+ in different spaces. Or stories whitewashed, to be accepted. As if our voices or stories are too disturbing and must be said in such a way as to satisfy the majority's expectation. ”*

It is definitely not easy to criticise the norm and the practices from within the group. I found myself often in this conflicted position especially because of my shared values and common experiences with different social movements that fight for Roma, women, LGBTQ+ rights or against classism. There is a tendency to choose between causes. Subordinate the gender or ethnicity to solidarity, as subordinated groups need to be engaging with other social movement, but not vice versa. As said before, black feminists in the US and Roma feminists in Europe have spoken out about their position in different social movements, their loyalty to the antiracist fight position and also against the lack of intersectionality between movements for decades. bell hooks (2004) in her book *Feminist theory. From margin to center* talks about the struggle of “either” antiracist” or either feminist” that black feminists have had over time. Nicoleta Bitu (2012) a roma feminist from Romania in her article *Personal encounters and parallels towards romani feminism* addresses the same internal tensions about choosing between movements. Vera Kurtic (2013) in her book “Dzuvljarke. Roma Lesbian Existence¹¹, speaks about how little interest the feminist movement has given in times to roma women's rights. Laura Coradi (2019) analyses how little interests the queer and feminist community is given to antifascism, antiracism or anti -Gypsism movements, comparing with subjects related to

¹¹ 2013 European Roma Rights Center Roma participation in policymaking and knowledge production 2015

migration or refugee crises. And Deszo Mate (2019) states that's "Romani LGBTI people are not simply "commentators" or "members of activism". Vanishing our knowledge, representation, and visibility, is epistemic violation"¹².

Alexandra Oprea (2004) and Angela Kocze (2009) both roma scholars have criticised the invisibility of Roma women in the contexts of both Roma and feminist movements. For Oprea, Roma women's marginalisation in both movements is one of the causes of our exclusion from EU policies. In 2015 during a conference in the Czech Republic, topics were addressed such as intersectional identity, the need for diversity and alliances, the invisibility of Roma women and queer people, and discrimination in both Roma and non-Roma environments. Few conservative voices believed that intersectionality leads to the division of the public agenda and dilutes the Roma Rights Movement. In response, Jelena Jovanovic and Anna Csilla Daroczi¹³ argue that on the contrary, not having all these voices on the public agenda denotes a fragmentation as Roma women and men do not experience sexism, Anti-Gypsyism, classism, homophobia, etc., in the same way Roma queer are experiencing it.

Ekaterina Dunajeva, Angela Kocze, and Sarah Cemelyn (2015) in the article titled *LGBTQI, Feminism and Romani Studies*¹⁴, plead for an alliance between Roma feminists and queer Roma people in their common cause for "radical respect for diversity" within the community. Claiming intersectionality within different movements implies conceptualising identities in their relation with the different systems and structures, which become oppressive (Crenshaw 1991). It reveals experiences of Roma women and queer in relation with Gadge power, structures, institutions, racism or lesbo/homo/trans/phobia. It also keeps us at a distance from racial neutrality as pointed out by Crenshaw. The simple fact of ticking the box of identities doesn't make all people vulnerable or oppressed¹⁵. (Collins 2019)

¹² see bibliography

¹³ Jelena Jovanovic and Anna Csilla Daroczi: Still missing intersectionality: the relevance of feminist methodology in the struggle for the rights of Roma Studies" in Roma participation in policymaking and knowledge production 2015

¹⁴ "LGBTQI, Feminism, and Romani Studies" in Roma participation in policymaking and knowledge production, 2015

¹⁵ Patricia Hill Collins (2019) during her lecture at Melbourne Town Hill (Intersectionality, activism and political solidarity)

One of the last fragments of the manifesto formulates the standpoint of existence and difference. It also states the need to contextualise the position of Romnja feminists and queer Roma as they navigate different structures and rules, underpinned by the history of slavery, Holocaust/Porajmos, forced sterilisation in Slovakia or Czech Republic or the racial hate crimes.¹⁶

“Our presence in the social movements should not be contingent upon fitting into white gadje standards or rainbow capitalism, but on the recognition of our diversity, experiences and positions based on racial injustice. The existence of racism within the Feminist and Queer movement endangers our survival not just the representation.”

In the last two decades many Roma activists, feminists and queers have worked to put specific issues on the National and European agendas. Through activist and feminist work, academic knowledge and political art, the normative identities of Romnja and queer have been challenged; boundaries were often broken allowing the production of epistemic knowledge or building political solidarities. Thus sometimes the Romnja presence was praised as ‘revolution is Roma, queer and feminist’¹⁷ and in many other situations was represented through their struggle with basic needs¹⁸ or their antiracist fight. All done with the effort to fill in the blanks of what Romnja’s experience in different fields and with the intention to shape the narrative from our perspective.

For Romnja, feminists and queer in our activist, academic, art or professional work we always remind the national and local governments and politicians that in Europe, from Western to South Eastern countries, many Roma women continue to experience discrimination in access to health care and reproductive rights, education or to attaining justice in cases of gender-based violence. For example, a case from Romania in 2023 became viral on the Internet, when a Roma woman gave birth to a child on the sidewalk in

¹⁶ Around 13 states in UE reported hate crimes against Roma according to OSCE report in 2022. Hungary, Greece, Serbia, Finland, Spain, Romania, Check Republic or Italy are few of the states.

¹⁷ A reference to the theatre play Roma Armee (and idea of Sandra Selimovic and Simonida Selimovic) made by the author Arman Heljic (2019) in his article 'The Revolution is Here, and Now, the Revolution is Roma, Queer, and Feminist'

<https://revistaarta.ro/en/the-revolution-is-here-and-now-the-revolution-is-roma-queer-and-feminist/>

¹⁸ see Gheorghe, C "Roma feminism: ideological and institutional challenges". In Andra Nimu, Cristian Pârvulescu and Arpad Tudor: Civil society, democracy and institutional capacity; Iași 2016, Polirom; p.237-248.

front of a hospital in the city of Urziceni, as she was denied access in the hospital. While segregation operates at all local levels, the lack of infrastructure and utilities, living in poor housing conditions or being forced to live on the streets due to forced evictions, continues to be part of the everyday experience of many Roma women who migrate or live in Eastern countries. The lack of safety is a gender issue, which in the case for Romnja and queer is an invisible topic. Begging or doing sex work places them in situations where they have been bullied, humiliated or verbally abused (Antonella Lerca 2020).

I started my article stating that we must critically examine the “Gadje world” we are navigating in, which is essential to understand our experiences and injustices.

I addressed topics such as: the white Gadje standards, the heteronormativity, respectability, on-going struggles such as lack of proper roads or drinkable water, housing, lack of access to reproductive rights or justice. The case study I analysed shows the necessity to interrogate social movements and their practices of subordination, marginalisation and as producing hierarchies formulating criticism, despite the difficulties. It also proves the need to acknowledge intersectionality not just as theory but as a method to ensure the most marginalised and oppressed voices within our social movements are heard and included.

I also demonstrated how different Romnja activists, feminists and queer addressed intersectionality, criticising the failure of it but also producing epistemic knowledge. Roma women’s experiences provide such insights, and from my position as a Roma developing programs for Roma women and girls, studying, researching, teaching and following the work of other Roma feminists, activists and queer has helped me understand, address and adapt my theoretical and life experience to incorporate their knowledge.

On another note, our contribution to social movements in Romania was broadening agendas with specific issues related to Roma women, such as lack of access to proper roads and utilities (for example drinkable water or electricity) but narrated through our perspective and with our experiences. Therefore, I believe that the elements that I addressed in this article are part of defining Roma feminism as a feminist theory and a method; and should not be reduced and needs to develop further. Though it is not limited to that, I draw some characteristics of Roma feminism theory which come as conclusions from this paper. First, Roma feminism has the basis in positionality. It is developed from the marginalised

voices of women and LGBTQ+ and develops as a theory from the margin which is still not taken into consideration. It draws from historical experiences and events, historical injustice and affirms its commitment towards it.

Second, Roma feminism reclaims knowledge based on collective experiences determined by lack of utilities, infrastructure or services as ‘‘any issue seen through the Roma women’s eyes is a feminist issue’’. Third, the experiences of Roma women unveils the interaction with the gadje world by posing new questions about power, roles, oppression systems, racism or sexism or homophobia. It is crucial to address different types of experiences, such as safety in the context of Roma women who practice begging or sex work. With that, the fourth characteristic is that it challenges the dominant narrative ‘‘we, the Roma’’ simultaneously with developing a form of resistance towards the Gadje standards of respectability, values and heteronormativity. Therefore, it develops as a critique to normalise and practice from inside the groups (Roma, feminists, queer etc) and the use of activism and political art as powerful tools to generate knowledge.

Roma feminism translates and articulates claims based on social inequalities, social realities and hierarchies of Roma women. While using intersectionality as a tool to dismantle power relations, oppressive systems which make identities vulnerable, Roma feminism is always placed in tension between antiracist fights, sexism, classism or queerness. Framing them as social issue created opportunities for those who deny racism, sexism or the historical contexts. Roma feminism is not just a political and social movement but is also built on an epistemic knowledge, as a theory that criticises the relation between the knowledge and the practice of power, the gadje ‘‘world’’ with its standard of inclusion, the research produced and unshadows experiences of women who are particular in the current context. As uncomfortable as it is, without criticism we could not see other’s perspectives that can make a difference. Analysing the gadje standards, the ‘‘respectable roma’’ as well as the dominant narrative ‘‘Roma’’ will bring more nuances on the ways in which roma women and queers were invisible throughout the history, in politics, arts or academia. I believe it can also single out the paternalistic ways in which roma women are addressed (Gheorghe 2010).

The conversation about who produces knowledge about Roma LGBTQ+ in academia is still incipient in a space dominated by white westerns or Roma gay men, where roma lesbians and transgender are missing. We must denounce it as well as the representation of roma women as ‘‘threat’’ and a danger for society, which serves as an excuse for antiroma racism.

We must continue to build solidarities and alliances between groups by starting with understanding our standpoint. Within this context, Roma women and LGBTQ+ becomes important voices that challenge the dominant narrative ‘‘Roma’’ heteronormativity, women’s positions and the Gadge world.

Bibliography:

Antonella, Lerca, D. (2020) Sex work is work. A transgender story. *Fractalia*

Bițu, N. and Vincze, E. (2012) *Personal Encounters and Parallel Paths toward Romani Feminism*, an article published in Vol. 38, No. 1 (September 2012), pp. 44-46, The University of Chicago Press <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/665955>

Crenshaw, K. (1989) *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*, University of Chicago Legal Forum p. 538–54.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

Dezso, M (2015) ‘‘Faced with Multiple ‘Values’ - From the Perspective of the Roma LGBTQ Community p.93 in Nothing about us without us? Roma Participation policy making and knowledge production

Dima, R. (2024) The unspeakable queerness in Romania’s communist period: Lesbian and queer accounts beyond gay’s men experience, SageJournals <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/13634607241228110>

Dunajeva, Ekaterina; Angela Kocze, and Sarah Cemelyn ‘‘LGBTQI, Feminism and Romani Studies’’ in Roma participation in policymaking and knowledge production

Heljic, A. (2019) in the article, ‘The Revolution is Here, and Now, the Revolution is Roma, Queer, and Feminist,’’

Jovanovic, J. and Daroczi, A. C. (2015): *Still missing intersectionality: the relevance of feminist methodology in the struggle for the rights of Roma Studies*’’ in Roma participation in policymaking and knowledge production

Kurtic, V. (2013), ‘‘Dzuvljarke. Roma Lesbian Existence, European Roma Rights Center

Gheorghe, C. (2019) ‘‘*Roma feminism: ideological and institutional challenges*’’. In Andra Nimu, Cristian Pârvolescu and Arpad Tudor: Civil society, democracy and institutional capacity; Iași 2016, Polirom; p.237-248.

Gheorghe, C. (2020) ‘‘The distance between us. Repositioning roma feminist and queer strategies’’ in vol. QUEER. Critical thinking, political consciousness and cultural practices in Romania. Coord.Iancu, V.&Anemtoaicei, O. Hecate

Gheorghe, C. & Mocanu, C. 2021 Challenging intersectionality: Roma women’s voices and experiences <https://e-romnja.ro/en/download/2393/?tmstv=1729058632>

Oprea, A. 2009 *Intersectionality Backlash: A Romani Feminist’s Response* Roma Rights, no. 2. [http://www.errc.org/en-research-and-advocacyroma](http://www.errc.org/en-research-and-advocacyroma/details.php?page=3&article_id=3564)details.php?page=3&article_id=3564

Oprea, A. (2004) ‘‘Re-envisioning Social Justice from the Ground Up: Including the Experiences of Romani Women.’’ Essex Human Rights Review 1 (1): 29–39. 2004

Oprea, A. 2012 *Romani women in reactionary times*, an article published in The University of Chicago Press Vol. 38, No. 1 September <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/665955>

Pitcain, M. 1993 The politics of respectability - Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham [Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/665955).

Vincze, E. & Mark,L. and Gheorghe, C. (2017) ‘‘Towards an Anti-Racist Feminism for Social Justice in Romania’’ in Romani Women’s movement book, ed. Routledge UK