
Roma Women as Knowledge Producers

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Abstract

This article looks at the colonial roots of Roma women's marginalization and highlights the ongoing efforts to reclaim their knowledge production through a decolonial feminist lens. It examines the systemic erasure of Roma women's voices in academic, cultural, and policy spaces and argues for the importance of recognizing Roma women as political subjects and knowledge producers.

Introduction

Throughout history, Roma women have been marginalized not only because of gender but also due to intersecting factors like race, class, sexual orientation, language, skin color, and even clothing. This marginalization is deeply rooted in colonialism, which, over centuries, has built and enforced power structures that decide whose knowledge is valued—and whose is not. The way knowledge is produced, especially in academia dates back to colonial times, when white Europeans not only took control of lands but also imposed their epistemologies. This colonial mindset didn't just seize resources—it erased the histories, knowledge, and cultures of racialized communities, including Roma.

In this article, I look at the colonial roots of Roma women's marginalization and show by a series of examples how they are reclaiming the right to produce and share knowledge. I also argue that a decolonial feminist approach is essential to understanding and supporting Roma women's knowledge production.

The colonial roots of Roma women's knowledge production

The marginalization of Roma women is not accidental; it has roots in the oppressive power structures established through colonialism. Across history, Roma women have been made invisible and silenced because of their intersecting identities in every socio-political and geographical contexts they live in. Colonial powers saw Roma cultures as “uncivilized” and erased Roma women voices from historical narratives, making it almost impossible for our experiences and knowledge to be recognized. In Spain, as early as 1499, Roma women were criminalized, portrayed as “too free” for the Spanish society (Fernandez, 2023). In Romania, where I am from, Roma people endured 500 years of slavery — a legacy that remains hidden from many history books and from Roma communities themselves. Even during the Holocaust, the suffering of Roma people was obscured, and our historical traumas are often erased in public memory and education.

This exclusion extends into academia and policymaking, where Roma women are rarely recognized as knowledge producers. Instead, we are seen as “social issues” to be studied, but not as contributors to knowledge. Carmen Gheorghe, a Roma feminist scholar and activist, asks, *What do we need to reframe Roma women from a social issue to a political subject?* (Gheorghe, 2015). Her question reflects a pressing need to transform how we are seen, to establish a Roma-centered feminist framework that legitimizes our voices as both political and epistemic. We are not only survivors of colonial violence but also creators of knowledge, with perspectives that challenge and expand the dominant narratives about Roma people.

Epistemic Violence and the Silencing of Roma Women

One of the most common forms of oppression Roma women face is epistemic violence, which means the constant silencing of our voices and being left out of the knowledge production spaces. Roma scholars like Isidora Randjelović points out how dominant cultures continue this harm by treating our stories as unimportant or inferior, drawing attention to the idea of “epistemologies of ignorance” (Randjelović, 2015). Maria Lugones’ concept of the “coloniality of gender” also highlights the ways colonial powers constructed race and gender to dehumanize women from marginalized groups. Lugones refers to the unique perspective of those living on society’s margins as “border thinking” — a fitting term for the important insights Roma women bring from our experiences at the crossroads of various forms of oppression (Lugones, 2010).

Within European academic and policy spaces, Roma women's perspectives are often minimized, or even "whitened," reducing our experiences to issues of culture-ethnicity, rather than systemic racism and sexism. Sebjan Fezjula, a Roma scholar from Macedonia critiques this deliberate oversight, emphasizing that it isn't just ignorance, but a political decision to sustain existing power structures. The "whitening" of Roma women's experiences in feminist frameworks perpetuates anti-Roma racism by limiting discussions to "ethnic" differences while ignoring the systemic exclusion and discrimination we face (Fezjula, 2023).

Roma Women as Knowledge Producers

For centuries, our knowledge has been disregarded by hegemonic academic frameworks, but that hasn't stopped Roma women from producing and sharing knowledge. From oral traditions and cultural practices to academic contributions, Roma women have been actively creating and contextualizing knowledge. In fact, our insights often offer new dimensions to discussions on feminism, intersectionality, and social justice within European contexts and frameworks.

Roma women-led initiatives like the *RomaniPhen Feminist Archive*, a groundbreaking platform that documents Roma feminist writings, art, and cultural histories, challenge mainstream narratives that make our voices invisible. *Skola Romani* (2020) is a virtual educational platform that promotes Roma feminism by offering learning resources on the history, activism, and struggles of Romani women created with the contributions of *Association Gitanas Feministas por la Diversidad* (Spain), *E-Romnja – Association for Promoting Roma Women Rights*, *Amare Rromentza* (Romania), *Ribaltambição* (Portugal), *La voix de Roms* (France) and *Fundacion Punjab* (Spain). Similarly, publishers like *Altramuz Editorial* (Spain), led by Roma queer woman Sandra Carmona, and *Omobooks Verlag* (Germany), led by Afro-Sintezza Tayo Awosusi-Onutor focus on promoting books for children and adults promoting Roma and other racialized authors. *E-Romnja the Association for Promoting Roma Women Rights* (Romania) and *Amuge Association* (Spain) are two Roma women led grassroots organisation who fight to bring the lived realities of Roma women and girls into mainstream policies and feminist agendas. The *Feminist Collective of Romani Gender Experts* (2022) a transnational initiative, co-funded by two Roma women gender equality experts, Alba Hernández (Spain) and Marina Csikós (Hungary) aims to provide a safe space for professional growth, challenge the sexist and racist labor market, and reclaim political spaces for Romani women's visibility and recognition. In exhibitions like *Roma Women Weaving Europe* (2019), Roma women's art and lived experiences are celebrated, offering alternative representations

that dismantle the colonial gaze. Initiatives like these and many more reclaim Roma women's histories and allow our stories to be told on our own terms.

In policy and academic spaces, Roma feminist scholars and activists like Ethel Brooks, Alexandra Oprea, Angela Kocze, Carmen Gheorghe, Magda Matache, Sebjan Fezjula, Joanna Talewicz, Jelena Jovanovic and many more advocate fiercely for the recognition of Roma women's experiences. They call attention to forced sterilization, forced marriages, systemic obstetric violence, anti-Roma racism, exclusion from feminist movements, and the oversimplification of Roma issues as "cultural" rather than as matters of systemic injustice. Their work is a strong reminder that Roma women are not just subjects to be studied — we are, gender equality experts, scholars, policy-makers, researchers, thinkers, feminists, activists and political agents of our own lives.

Why decolonization matters for Roma Women

In today's mainstream feminist spaces, Roma women's experiences continue to be ignored or misunderstood. Gender equality policies frequently take a "universal" approach, focusing primarily on the needs of white, middle-class women. This oversight, as discussed by Françoise Vergès (2021) in *A Decolonial Feminism*, is a symptom of what she calls "civilizational feminism" — a framework that reinforces colonial biases by centering the experiences of Western women while marginalizing others. For Roma women, this exclusion is compounded by anti-Roma racism, forced sterilization, economic marginalization, and systemic discrimination and exclusion that mainstream gender equality policies often fails to address.

Vergès' critique resonates with Roma feminist thinkers who understand that "universal" feminist frameworks erase the specific, intersectional struggles we face as women who exist at the intersection of race, class, and gender. In the words of Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) has inspired many racialized women, the layers of oppression Roma women experience can't be fully understood by looking only at gender — race, socio-economic status, and other intersecting identities must also be considered. Drawing on the work of Vergès and Crenshaw, Roma scholars like Sebjan Fezjula emphasize that a decolonial feminist approach is essential for our liberation, allowing us to create strategies grounded in our own realities and histories (Fezjula, 2023).

“Decolonizing gadje¹ narratives” is not just about academic inclusion; it is a profound political act. To recognize Roma women as knowledge producers and political subjects is to challenge the colonial systems that have historically oppressed us. It’s a call for Roma women to reclaim our voices, our agency, and our power to shape the world around us. By centering Roma women’s perspectives in academic and activist spaces, we are not only correcting historical erasures but also enriching global conversations on feminism, intersectionality, and decolonization.

The Romnja Feminist Library, an initiative I co-founded in 2023 with Alba Hernández, is part of this broader movement. It supports Roma women’s efforts to reclaim and share their knowledge, preserving and showcasing our contributions while honoring the past, present, and future of Roma feminism. The library serves as a space for Roma women to come together, share experiences, and create new knowledge, further building solidarity and strengthening movements within our community.

¹ Gadje – refers to non-Roma people in Romani language

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