

# A LIFE OF ACTIVISM

Interview part of the research project Roma women testimonies and biographies financed by Romaniphen Berlin and written by Maria Dumitru 2022

Interview originally made in Romanian. This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity. This interview originally belongs to the Romaniphen organization.

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This work aims to bring to light stories that are largely unknown by other activists. The goal of these three interview-biographies is to showcase the diverse activism that Romani women engage in. I intentionally selected women from different walks of life to highlight the unique struggles that every Roma woman faces in various spheres. Similarly, the intention was to unveil their contributions to their Roma communities. By documenting the lives and contributions of Roma women, we hope to equip the new generations with knowledge about their role models. Through this work, I have endeavored to amplify the voices of these three women as they envision themselves and give recognition to Roma women for their contributions to what we now call the Roma feminist movement.

## NICOLETA BITU

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*"We can all contribute to something surrounding us, it can start with us, families, friends, and so on. My very first change started in my own family rather than in my community: what about you?"*

Nicoleta Bitu was one of the first female Roma feminists, activists, and intellectuals from Romania. She was born in Constanta, grew up in the last 2 decades of communism and witnessed the transition of Romania from communism to democracy. Nicoleta comes from a low middle class family and learned from a very young age to cultivate love and care for her Roma fellows. Her activism started in her own family when her parents' house was open and hosted all their relatives in

need, as well as she witnessed gender-based violence. These experiences dove Nicoleta to revolt, and she used her anger towards these injustices to build safe spaces for Roma women, where they could feel respected and secure. She publicly condemned racism gender-based violence. Her work was even stronger when she formed a couple with Nicolae Gheorghe who is often remembered as the father of



Ileana Surducan Illustration

Roma Rights movement in Romania and abroad. Nicoleta Bitu coined the concept of inhabiting in between worlds, that of being a woman and that of being Roma, which shows the position of Roma women at the edge of sexism, racism and poverty. During her 30 years of work, she was co-founder of Romani CRISS, founder of Roma

Women Initiative at OSF, served as Director of Romano ButiQ, offered consultancy to the OSCE, Open Society Foundations the Council of Europe, the European Commission, and made a major contribution to the establishment of ERIAC: European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, and served as Chair and academic adviser of the Roma Archive. Nico continues her activism but by working with Roma undocumented migrants in London who sleep rough. "Some people around me call me phoenix, or angel, or that I bring them blessings." We call Bitu a worrier and a role-model.

### **"My family was both a blessing and a curse"**

*I grew up in a family feeling both blessed and cursed. I felt blessed, because my two parents were two Roma individuals with a strong Roma identity, never ashamed of who they were. On the contrary, they were rather proud. They never questioned their identity, nor hid it. They transferred these feelings to me and my brothers. I always showed my identity and never asked why I was a Roma. I did of course ask questions about differences or racism. My mother was from a Roma Lautari family, and my father from a Calderash family. My lautari family were living in urban area while the others were poorer and living in a Roma segregated settlement in Fetesti. Despite this, both my parents' families lived their Roma identity with dignity. On the other side, I felt cursed because as a child I was subjected to racism and witnessed gender-based violence from a very young age.*

### **Studies**

*I loved math. I inherited this skill from my father. First, I tried to study informatics, I applied but I was rejected. Only later I have discovered my passion for human rights and social justice. Before going to study, I had started to work by the age of 16 years old on the beach in Constanta, it was part of my project of becoming independent but also to support my family. After that I have studied Comparative studies on EU social policies, then sociology and made my PhD in Political Sciences on 'Romani women and feminism'. I cannot say I was a brilliant student, but my maternal grandfather taught me to read at the age of 4, and since then I was always a curious child. My love for reading helped me a lot to be critical and always aspire for more. Before I was an intellectual, I was an activist and now at 50's I remain one.*

### **How were you defending yourself? What were your reactions?**

I had an unusual reaction, since I was a good student and put effort into my studies, whenever someone would mess with me regarding my ethnicity it would be throwing lines like: "Go read a book", "learn who to use punctuation marks" etc. It was my way of defending, showing myself that I don't care and trying to put them into their place so I can secure my peace. It doesn't mean that it didn't affect me. Racism, bullying or mocking affects any child or teenager.

### **How did you become a feminist?**

I became a feminist long before I knew what this term or social movement meant. Witnessing violence from a young age and seeing my mother with my own eyes, how she was suffering from being beaten by my father, impacted me severely. It was at that time that my revolt started, then it started when I felt the suffering of my mother and the violent treatment that she suffered under the hands of my father. Later on I have learned that this was not only the story of my mother by the experiences of many women in Romania. Thus, this revolt was amplified when I grew up and witnessed other kinds of violence including racism. I first encountered racism at the age of four. And then in the school.

### **How you describe feminism?**

Feminism is love, respect and care for women and for all persons subjected to oppression. For me feminism is equal to humanism. Humanism is also what I learnt in my family, and I consider it the Bitu's legacy. I learnt to care for other people from a young age. So, my interest for feminism started long before I even knew that there was a term describing equality.

### **Family Legacy**

My father has a very strong story, he ran away from his home to be able to study and he became an police officer. Within the community my father is remembered as a legend and a role model and my mother as sort of a missionary, as she was helping so many Roma families in need. We were indeed more privileged than others, so we benefited from our resources and networks to help cousins, relatives, neighbours,

and so on. I remember how our home was always full, sometimes even too full. My parents never stopping bringing new people home, such as cousins beaten by husbands, children who wanted to join the high school in Constanta, or simply people who became homeless and needed a shelter. Dad, seemed tough and his job as a policeman involved a certain conduct. But when could help someone he was not hesitant. He was in charge of documents, family funerals, anything someone could need. My father was native to the Romani language (romanes). Despite our personal conflicts and the traumatic experiences from my childhood, I am also grateful for everything he taught me and my brothers. The language, the empathy, honesty, dignity and the care of others. My father was born speaking romanes and died speaking romanes. Now, I am able to be bilingual and give it to the next generations. Our legacy is to love and care for other Roma. My family's work continued through my activism, through my brother's activism and through our efforts to be against any kind of oppression.

### **Traumatic experiences**

As a child, I loved reading and questioning everything around me, and as a result I matured much earlier than my siblings. Although I was so young, I was very aware of these different realities. The revolt I had as a child has remained the same till today. I still stand against gender-based violence or any violence against Roma. I am a pacifist, and I am afraid of conflicts. I do not support violence, I do not support injustice, I do not support that any person in this world should be treated unfairly, or less than others. The Roma should not be treated less either. The war in Ukraine affected me emotionally and mentally. I see that at the end of the day, even after 30 years of work, Roma are still treated inhumanely, and considered second-class citizens. Racism and discrimination still persist at an acute level. Hatred is very high, and we have the example of Roma refugees from Ukraine. These experiences are also reenacting my experiences of violence. It reminds me of the violence that I witnessed when I saw the conflicts and crimes that happened. When I started my professional activism between the years of 89 and 97, 62 localities in Romania were affected by a degree of violence during interethnic conflicts. I remember when I was sitting together with colleagues between Romanians and Hungarians armed with knives and tolls ready to kill each other, ready to kill the Roma. That sentiment and violence still persists on my skin, because I could feel the hate, I could feel the anger. When we heard of the killings, my whole family mourned.

## **How was it to be a young Roma feminist woman in Romania at that time(90's)?**

I must mention that, when I started my work, I was not defining myself as a feminist. But I struggled a lot navigating the two worlds: the one of sexism and the one of racism. Often, I had to choose between them or give it up. It was not easy to be among the first ones who claimed rights for Roma women or publicly condemned the gender-based violence, often from the leaders of the Roma movement at that time. I gained many enemies and backlash. But I do not regret it. That time, my own father did not support me either, we had so many arguments. I remember that once, because I wrote an essay for women in America about how I grew up in a communist regime and how I witnessed the violence of my father, he did not talk to me for almost one month, and there were many experiences like that.

It was not just me as a feminist who received a lot of backlashes, but also Nicolae, because he was an atypical Roma male in that time. Too liberal, not a common thinker, too open. Many Roma men judged Nicolae and questioned him, but like in everything, when one does important innovative things, he/she gets attention in the end. We were not a common Roma couple in that time. We were often criticized of being too liberal. However, at the end of his last years of life he did not support my feminism anymore.

Also, I was among the beginners in doing this. I just wanted to gain independence first for me and then work with other women, so I have fought a lot for that during my activism. I understood from an early age that only independence could free me from the oppression that I was subjected as a Roma woman. I was only 21 years old when I started, and it was not easy to be among Roma men who were patriarchal, older than me and held power. It was not easy for me to raise my voice and to be autonomous. It took me 3-4 years till I spoke publicly, till I demanded my seat at the table. Many years, I applied for jobs and roles that were for me, but it was given rather to Roma men. Also, inhibiting 2 oppressive identities that of being Roma and woman, made it difficult till I decided to embrace them both and fight for both. I always believed that the fight against sexism is as important as racism. This is why, as a result of my personal encounter with Kimberlé Crenshaw in 2002 for the preparations of the Durban Conference, I borrowed and introduced the term intersectionality into Romani studies trying to describe the position of Roma women and show both Roma men and the society that Roma women cannot be left behind.

I cannot say that I was not afraid or insecure, in fact I often felt powerless, but still, I had to resist. I knew that I was surrounded by a profound patriarchal system. And even though many times both my work and my efforts have been overshadowed, or not celebrated enough, I had to Raise Up, as my favourite poet, Maya Angelou writes, I had to continue for me and for other women.

### **What were the most difficult experiences for you as a Roma woman?**

It was difficult to be subjected to cultural models, or unwritten laws that were simply made by men for men. Being born a Roma woman in a quite conservative community and country that was both racist and patriarchal, I felt discriminated against and felt a constant pressure on my body. Like any other Roma woman at that time, I experienced gender-based limitations. I had been imposed from a young age to preserve my virginity, limitations to explore my own body and sexuality. These traditions both I and the women in my family somehow challenged. But still today these have a mark on me and on my body. In that time, I learned that my body did not belong to me, and I felt the pressure all the time. Nowadays, I own my body, but I am still working at deconstructing the toxic gender education that all of us women received at that time, especially vulnerable women like Roma. That's why I advocated for the need to have more Roma women and men in this fight because a non-Roma could not understand these things because he/she did not have the experience of the insider.

### **What do you think were your contributions to the feminist Roma movement and Roma in general?**

The Roma feminist movement today is for sure an outcome of lots of struggles and efforts of many amazing women. My contribution can be that I managed to create spaces for Roma women where they could feel safe and respected. I also challenged many gender norms and questioned the sexism in the vulnerable communities. In all my work, activities, network, research, conferences, everywhere I went, I was claiming our space at the table. Coming from a family where my mother experienced violence I believe that I have contributed to this by opening a dialogue regarding gender-based violence. That was so common at that time but absolutely normalized. I think that I was brave to initiate these dialogues and to create safe

spaces for Roma women, where they could receive respect, and where they could be heard. And I started with the women in my family, then in communities, and then speaking for all women around. I am not sure I always did it how I wanted, but nowadays Roma women have a history of activism, and I am grateful to that I initiated part of it and is still part of it.

Also, my activism was not just for women, I did join my efforts to Nicolae's work and this year marks the 30<sup>th</sup> year for me working with Roma women and men. The fight against racism and sexism is still not finished. I am still here, committed to advocate for Roma rights and against patriarchy, but from another dimension and approach. Now, I work with the people on the streets, the Roma who most need our help and support.

### **How did you manage to raise your daughters in a misogynic and racist society?**

First of all, I had a big ally which was their father. We both worked and contributed for the education of our girls. Nicolae did it great and our efforts are paying off now. We both showed them the different realities that many Roma inhabit, so we brought them to see extreme poverty in communities and to participate at fancy dinners. We really tried to equip them with the right tools to take their own decisions, to be autonomous, to know what sexual education is, what consent is, and a critical mind. They do have a sense of justice, but they are not involved in the Roma movement. However, they do are very conscious about their privileges.

### **Tell us something that you feel proud of from your relationship with Nicolae that we don't know of?**

There are many aspects to be shared. We both were manifesting our unconformities, I revolted myself as a Roma woman and he wanted to escape military service. We both had our gender struggles given by the context of that time. This united us, as well as our love for Roma people. He was my model and mentor, and later became the father of my daughters. I will always feel love and admiration for him even though we stopped being a team at the end of our relationship.



Those who knew Nicolae, and his work were absolutely charmed by his passion and his vision. Working with him and seeing him as a model made it impossible not to get influenced. But something that I feel particularly proud about is the fact that I managed to remain myself, I did learn a lot from him, I had a lot of privileges because of him, but my goals and myself remained the same. In fact, as he was my partner, while all the others were following him blindly, I was the only one that challenged him, and made him see other perspectives as well. We were a united team, but it was a mutual learning and I think this is what he admired in me. That I could say the things that I could see, not what he would like to hear. There we are, we spent 17 years together, and worked for 22 years together, a journey that marked my life and brought me 2 amazing human beings, my daughters. Nowadays, I am still celebrating his legacy.

### **What are now your two biggest personal achievements?**

In 30 years of work and commitment I have given everything. Sometimes I felt so powerless in the face of injustices. Now I have matured and learned that change is not happening overnight. It takes time. I accepted that the Roma movement can continue without taking my whole commitment, although I will always be here, for us. So, I made peace with myself not just in this regard but also trying to heal my wounds and my negative experiences that persist on my soul and body. Now, I do not feel that I would like to be elsewhere, I am at peace, I am glad that still a few things are moving, I see Roma women with more space, working with communities, and young people. We are such a young movement, and we have achieved more than we think.

We initiated this in the 90's and did our best considering the context and our expertise. I just hope that this will be taken by the new generations and brought to another level. For me always true feminism means the respect of the women's struggles before us, the consciousness that we are now enjoying our liberties today due to the efforts of our women. I have applied the same philosophy for my Roma fellows, women, and men before me. We need to recognize their struggles and contributions.

Another big personal achievement was that I raise my daughters to be feminists and independent. Now they are 26 years old, and by their own. They are aware of the world we live in, and I am proud to be their mother.

## About the author

Maria Dumitru (Ruiz) Maria Dumitru is a young Roma academic and feminist. Currently, she is a PhD candidate at MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society in Oslo, Norway researching Roma enslavement from a gender perspective. Dumitru holds an MA in Gender Studies from the Central European University, and in the past, she worked in research with Roma who sleep rough in London. Dumitru has also worked for the World Bank in Romania, the Roma feminist theatre Giuvlipen and organisations in Oslo working with undocumented migrants who performed informal work. Area of interest: enslavement, homelessness, intersectional feminism, gender studies, and Romani studies.

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