

**Call me Roma:
Views and Personal encounters with Antigypsyism
by
Maria Dumitru**

“It was 5 am in the morning, I was working, and someone attacked me. A man pushed me to the wall, squeezed my neck, and left me almost out of breath. He hit me. I tried to escape, but I couldn't. Eventually, I managed to escape and desperately called the police with the assistance of my other co-workers. The police arrived after a while and told us: *‘Hey tigancilor (hey gypsies), the police should be called only when a house is on fire, so do not bother us with your shitty stuff.’*” My mother, who is a street cleaner, was shocked and absolutely discouraged. She didn't even report her attacker.

For those who do not know what antigypsyism is, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2011) provides a thorough definition. “Antigypsyism is a specific form of racism, an ideology founded on racial superiority, a form of dehumanization and institutional racism nurtured by historical discrimination, which is expressed, among others, by violence, hate speech, exploitation, stigmatization and the most blatant kind of discrimination.”

For many years, neither I nor my family knew this. We felt what antigypsyism was, but we did not have a name for it. We just knew that society hated us, making us feel inferior, rejecting us from time to time from certain stores, humiliating us and giving us the worst treatment: ‘Condemning’ us to live in misery, near the garbage by the river.

My name is Maria, I am 26 years old, and I am Roma. I was born and raised in a segregated Roma settlement, on the outskirts of a city called Slatina in Romania. My first four years of school were spent at a local segregated Roma school. At that time, there were no non-Roma children in my class, we were just rudari.¹ In that school, I remember that it was quite difficult to get to know the teachers, because they left every other semester. Like many other Roma parents, my parents struggled to provide me with a quality education. I remember that they told me “only education can help you to have a better life.” Thus, they decided to move me to the Rumani school.²

I understood the value of education in the new school, where every child could read. The teachers put a lot of effort into almost every child for everyone to succeed. We were told that we were special and that this school would make us important people. I never heard this in the previous school, where the teachers were barely talking to us, and where then when speaking to us called us stupid, unable to study, lazy, and without any future. We were often punished, and even beaten sometimes with a wood stick. I will never forget the humiliation of being snapped violently in front of all my classmates.

But I also faced some challenges in the new school. I transferred to this school together with a few other Roma girls, and we became a bullying target for the other kids. I was called ‘a gypsy’ and the other darker student was called “crow.”³ I had another Roma classmate, but she was

¹ In Romania there are various Roma subgroups around 14, called caldarari, lautari, ursari etc. My group is rudari and we used to work in carving wood.

² Non segregated school. Rumani comes from Romanians and means the majority people in Romania.

³ Crow in Romanian language ‘cioara’ is equally to the slur in English ‘nig*er’.

white⁴ so she could blend in. However, despite this difficult welcoming, this school was different. I loved the teachers, the classroom was much bigger with nicer furniture, great blackboard, and most importantly: I felt appreciation from the teachers, like they valued us.

Later on, I have learned that school segregation is just another manifestation of antigypsyism, that most teachers who go to ghetto- or segregated schools are the most under-prepared. Some of the teachers have no expectations towards their students, and there are cases of bullying and even aggressions toward the [Roma children](#). In Romania most Roma children are studying in segregated schools. According to a report made by [World Bank Romania](#), Roma children are more likely to drop out of school due to poverty, racism, and discrimination, and/or lack of supportive social networks. Without a good learning environment with competent teachers who are eager to work with any pupil independent of ethnicity and background, the Roma risk being trapped in the so-called [vicious circle](#) that the state is not very willing to break.

According to the [Alliance against antigypsism](#) (2017), antigypsyism is based on prejudices and stereotypes that have been perpetuated throughout history. This type of racism can be found at the institutional level such as in education, politics and in access to protection, among police, on the streets, or even in banks and shops. Antigypsism is found in laws, politics, and ordinances. Today, due to the systemic violence both historical and in the present, Roma are seen and treated as second-class citizens in their countries. In fact, they are not even called Romanian citizens, but foreigners, the "Other", the evil and inferior, or the deviant. For instance, in Romania, Roma are so dehumanized that it is common for non-Roma parents to scare their children with the phrase: "If you do not behave well, I will send you to the gypsies." Generations of gadje⁵ are raised with an inexplicable fear, thinking that Roma are horrible. A fear that later is transformed into prejudice, discrimination and hatred. A new and outrageous example was how Roma were [scapegoated](#) as those spreading the Covid-19 virus, which led to a new wave of hatred. We have to understand that antigypsyism can sometimes be hidden, and other times very visible. But it affects all Roma people, regardless of class, skin colour, gender, and sexuality. It is worst for those inhabiting multiple and oppressive identities which can lead to further discrimination, namely to [intersectional discrimination](#).

There is no wonder that due to marginalization, stigmatization, and antigypsyism, many Roma end up in extreme poverty without access to clean water, electricity, shelter and food. And to survive, some of them see themselves forced to migrate to do any informal work in order to provide for their families. When I wrote my thesis about [Multiple Discrimination and Untold Stories of Resistance](#) (2020), I found that some migrate to Scandinavia to make a living from informal work such as begging, recycling bottles or selling magazines. Unfortunately, they continue living in similar misery to back home: They experience antigypsyism, manifested through negative attitudes, harassment, not being allowed to enter bars, shops or public spaces. Above all they experience homelessness and rough sleeping. Despite all of this, some of them find that this hard work is the last chance to survive.

The experiences I describe above are not just mine, or related to my work. This is not a particular case. The experience of antigypsyism is the experience of millions of Roma families in Romania and abroad who still face the consequences of centuries of persecution, slavery, and [deportations](#). Antigypsyism is so ingrained that neither we Roma nor the non-Roma have access to knowledge about it, its origin or manifestation: It is taken for granted. Students in

⁴ Colourism exists also in Romania, the whiter a Roma is, the easier is for them to blend in.

⁵ Gadje means a person/group of people who are non-Roma

Romania do not learn about [slavery](#) in schools. We do not learn in our history class and books that up to [25,000 Roma](#) Romanians were eradicated during the deportations during the Second World War. We don't learn that the persecution of Roma is historically rooted, and consequently the ground is laid for blaming Roma for their own misery.

Why is it so important to understand how antigypsyism works and manifests? Because it is social, institutional, symbolic, and has led to a history of persecution. It is so rooted into Romanian and European culture and behaviour that people don't even recognize it as a racism. It is so normalized and accepted, that my own mother is tired of telling us how many times she is harassed on the streets just because she is Roma, woman, and a street cleaner. Or my brother who is darker skinned, and anxious every time he must pass an airport check, because he is continuously over checked.

What can we do?

It is my experience that when people learn about antigypsyism, they can challenge this form of racism. I have learned that by raising awareness about antigypsyism - and its consequences - we can better understand the inequalities suffered by Roma. I have also learned that it is possible to fight the anti-Roma rhetoric if we act. Finally, I have learned that I cannot end racism or inequalities alone. But if we have agreed that we cannot achieve gender equality without men, we cannot fight racism against the Roma without the commitment of all. Just because it doesn't affect you or your family doesn't mean it doesn't exist. We always say that racism has its roots in our societies, but aren't we the society? So my question for you would be: What can you do today to challenge the/your prejudices against the Roma?

My very few recommendations:

- We need to facilitate access to equal educational opportunities for Roma
- Educate the Gadjie about us, history, present of Roma, and racism.
- We need History textbooks that teaches us about slavery, deportations, and Roma [Holocaust](#). Ensure Roma participation in building European history, society, literature, folklore etc.
- Create spaces for Roma men and women, youngsters, LGBTQ+ people, to speak on their own behalf
- Listen to - and not - victimize Roma
- We need to be more critical of what we hear, read, and learn.
- Hold actors that uphold antigypsism accountable.

Bio

Maria Dumitru is a young Roma academic, feminist and human rights activist. Maria holds a master's degree in gender studies from the Central European University, and in the past, she worked for the World Bank in Romania, for organizations in Spain and Norway, and collaborated with the Roma feminist theater Giuvlipen. Currently, Maria continues to collaborate with international organizations on Roma rights, homeless Roma, and Roma feminist studies.