

# Re-envisioning Social Justice from the Ground Up: Including the Experiences of Romani Women

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## Abstract

This paper centres on the exclusion of Romani women from mainstream feminist and antiracist discourses in Europe. This exclusion is explained through the lens of intersectionalism and problematic identity politics. It discusses their invisibility as perpetuated by programmes and reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It explains the absence of Romani women from Romani and feminist discourses, the uncritical view of Romani culture, and the vulnerability of Romanian Romani women to domestic violence. It emphasizes that analyses of social problems must be performed from the bottom up, looking at the experiences of those who are multi-burdened, such as poor Romani women. The paper concludes by discussing the value of recognizing privilege as the foundation for inclusive scholarship and discourse.

## 1. Introduction

In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Esmeralda is a voluptuous Gypsy temptress whose beauty, dance, and charm make her the fantasy of every European man.<sup>1</sup> A far cry from Victor Hugo's exotic Gypsy seductress, for the past decade Romani women have been struggling to regain their dignity in the face of multi-faceted oppression, some of which comes in the form of the aforementioned example of racialized objectification, others in the form of the systematic denial of basic rights. Staging this lonely battle means resisting the interlocking systems of racism, sexism, and poverty as well as the political discourses that perpetuate them.

The marginalization of Romani women is a consequence of the exclusivist feminist and antiracist politics in European political spheres. Centring on Romanian Romnia,<sup>2</sup> the intersectional experiences of these women will be discussed in the context of their systematic exclusion through these limited politics. One example of the marginalization faced by Romani women is seen in the discourse on domestic violence, which neglects to elaborate the racial facets of battering pertinent to Romanian Romani women. Ultimately, in the interest of justice, the experiences of Romani women

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<sup>1</sup> Her complexion was dark ... She danced, whirled, turned around ... Her large, black eyes flashed lightning ... With her smooth bodice of gold, her colorful dress that swelled with the rapidity of her motions, with her bare shoulders, her finely turned legs that her skirt now and then revealed, her black hair, her flaming eyes, she was a supernatural creature...“In truth,” thought Gringoire, “she is a magical creature, a nymph, a goddess, a bacchanae of Mount Menelaus!” At that moment one of the magical creature's tresses came loose, and a piece of yellow brass that had been fastened to it fell to the ground. “But no,” he said, “she is a gypsy!” The illusion was shattered.’ V. Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, trans. Catherine Liu (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 56.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Romnia’ is the plural form for Romani women in Romanes, the Romani language.

should be used as a foundation for constructing inclusive discourses and programmes to benefit white women and Roma.

## 2. Challenging the ‘Anthropological Perspective’

It is important to note that engaging in a critique of internal patriarchal structures in communities of colour is generally controversial. The prevailing approach to discussing Third World<sup>3</sup> communities can be characterized as the ‘anthropological perspective’,<sup>4</sup> whose twin goals are to take an interest in Third World cultures while not critiquing them. Uma Narayan, an Indian feminist, claims that this approach influences the ‘commitment to multicultural education and intellectual inquiry as well as some mainstream Western feminist approaches to “issues affecting Third World women”.’<sup>5</sup> The product of this perspective has been the romanticization of Romani culture and its portrayal as an unchanging monolith. Patriarchy within Romani communities is either ignored or deemed ‘Romani culture’. Internal problems, such as domestic violence, are not acceptable topics of discussion. One of the results of this ‘anthropological perspective’ that so often plagues Romani communities, as they are mostly written and talked about by Gadje, non-Roma, is that it silences dissent to questionable practices. It silences those who are not part of these communities who seek to critique patriarchal structures within the respective Third World community as well as women from these communities who seek to critique patriarchy.

A clear example of the consequences of the ‘anthropological approach’ was illustrated at a round table discussion during the Southern Illinois University Public Policy Institute’s symposium on ‘Addressing the Plight of the Romani People’.<sup>6</sup> The participants involved in this discussion were Romani activists Ronald Lee, Dr Ian Hancock, and John Nickels along with the late president of the University, former Senator Paul Simon; author Dr David Crowe; Matt Salo of the Gypsy Lore Society;<sup>7</sup> and I, the only Romani woman participant. The aim of the panel was to brain-storm recommendations to problems facing Roma, which were later to be published in a pamphlet and distributed to different government agencies. I suggested that we include in the pamphlet a recommendation to the Department of Justice’s Violence Against Women Office to initiate outreach to Romani women in an effort to curb the incidence of domestic violence in Romani communities. Matt Salo interrupted to ask: ‘What does domestic violence have to do with Roma?’ To him, domestic violence was not an issue relevant to Roma — it was a problem attributed only to white families. He claimed that during his visits to Romani homes, he never witnessed incidents of violence, at which point a Romani woman in the audience pointed out that the likelihood of people committing acts of violence against their wives in front of strangers was slim. Mr Salo’s comment, in synch with the aims of the Gypsy Lore Society, demonstrates a steadfastness towards producing

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<sup>3</sup> I use this term to refer to non-white people who at some point have been/are being suppressed. I include Roma in this category.

<sup>4</sup> U. Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 125. Narayan emphasizes that what she refers to as the ‘anthropological perspective’ does not single out the discipline of anthropology as being the only discipline guilty of taking an interest while not critiquing Third World cultures; she claims that it is common to a wide range of disciplines.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>6</sup> This symposium took place from 22-23 Sept. 2002 in Carbondale, Illinois.

<sup>7</sup> The Gypsy Lore Society is an organization established in the late 1800s by non-Roma to study Roma. For more information, visit <http://www.gypsyloresociety.org>. In Romani circles, this organization has been criticized for perpetuating the marginalization and silencing of Roma in literature.

scholarship about Roma while taking precautions not to engage in any criticism. Employing this ‘anthropological’ method neglects the daily realities of Romani women and perpetuates a romanticized notion of Romani existence.

The opinion expressed by Mr Salo is shared by many concerned with espousing a non-racist view, at the expense of ignoring unjust practices within Third World cultures. As Narayan points out, the inclination not to critique ‘Third World’ communities stems from a recognition of the racism these communities have endured at the hands of white supremacy. In an attempt not to replicate these views, many fall into the trap of ‘turning a blind eye’ to patriarchal practices, excusing them as the others’ ‘culture’. However, the lack of a stance against questionable practices demonstrates disregard for the welfare of women harmed by these practices. One clear example is noted in Romania’s systematic lack of attention to the marriages of Romani minors, a practice that most recently came to light through the media frenzy around the arranged marriage of 12-year-old Romani girl Ana Maria Cioaba.<sup>8</sup> When state actors participate in such acts, they implicitly sanction the denial of Romani women’s rights. The motive behind condoning such patriarchal practices, influenced by a feeling of guilt, might be conceptualized as an acceptance of the culture of the ‘Other’, however, in effect, this ‘acceptance’ is tainted by the racist assumption that practices harmful to women unequivocally constitute a homogenous Romani culture.<sup>9</sup>

When women from these cultures criticize internal practices, they are portrayed as traitors to their communities.<sup>10</sup> They are sometimes told that they have become ‘Westernized’,<sup>11</sup> that they sound ‘white’ or in the case of Roma — ‘gadjikanime’.<sup>12</sup> It is important to understand that women’s aspirations to be treated equally are indigenous to every culture.<sup>13</sup> Ideals about equality are not ‘gadjikane’, or foreign, to Romani communities nor is Romani culture something unchanging or isolated from outside influences — it is influenced by host country, class, group, and so forth. Narayan explains that:

We need to move away from a picture of national and cultural contexts as sealed rooms, impervious to change, with a homogenous space “inside” them, inhabited by “authentic insiders” who all share a uniform and consistent account of their institutions and values ... We need to be wary about all ideals of “cultural authenticity” that portray “authenticity” as constituted by lack of criticism and lack of change ... Feminists everywhere confront the joint tasks of selectively appropriating and selectively rejecting various facets of their complex national, cultural, and political legacies....<sup>14</sup>

She points out that it is when one seeks to critique certain practices of a culture that one’s ‘authenticity’ is called into question. This notion of ‘authenticity’ is one that is often employed to discredit the arguments of feminists of colour. I can recall many conversations where activist

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<sup>8</sup> This story was covered internationally. For the article that mentions the systemic lack of enforcement of the Romanian code pertaining to the legal marrying age, see ‘Mireasa de 12 Ani a Fugit de la Nunta’, *Evenimentul Zilei*, available at: <http://www.evenimentulzilei.ro> (last visited 29 Sep. 2003).

<sup>9</sup> I elaborate further in ‘The Arranged Marriage of Ana Maria Cioaba: Positioning Romani-ness against Feminist Ideals and the Obsession with the “Exotic Oppression of Third-World Women”’, to be published in the *European Journal of Women’s Studies*.

<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth discussion of women of colour being forced to choose their race over their gender, see K.W. Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color’ in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 357-383.

<sup>11</sup> Narayan, n. 4 above, 21-39.

<sup>12</sup> Meaning made into a Gadji/Gadjo — exhibiting characteristics of an outsider to the community.

<sup>13</sup> Narayan, n. 4 above, 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Nicoleta Bitu's 'Romaniness' was called into question by Calderash<sup>15</sup> Roma in the course of her work at combating gender oppression in Romani communities. Ms. Bitu is not Calderash but rather part of a Romani group that is considered less 'traditional'. Her husband, Dr Nicolae Gheorghe, is also of the less 'traditional' Romani sect, but accusations of being 'gadjikanime' are less often aimed at him than at his feminist wife because he does not often engage in controversial work critical of internal practices. It is important to keep in mind a critical notion of 'authenticity' for purposes of contextualizing the following argument that seeks to shed light simultaneously on external and internal factors affecting the oppression of Romani women and which touches upon 'sensitive subjects' such as domestic violence in Romani communities.

### 3. The Marginalization of Romani Women Activists and Gender Issues

When one is asked to name renowned Romani activists the list often resembles the following: Dr Ian Hancock, William Duna, Sani Rifati, Ronald Lee, Dr Nicolae Gheorghe, Rudko Kawczynski, and so forth. Romani women are seldom to be found on such lists or on the pertinent panels assembled according to such lists. Romani women activists, such as Violeta Dumitru and Nicoleta Bitu of Romania, Angela Kocze of the European Roma Information Office, and Azbija Memedova and Enisa Eminova of Macedonia, have not gained as much recognition in the context of Romani politics and have not yet reached the ranks of Romani male activists despite the fact that they are involved in ground-breaking work.

The question that begs to be asked is: Why are there almost no prominent Romani female activists, ones who have reached comparable rank to the aforementioned male activists?

One of the more intuitive reasons is that female activists have less access to education and hence are less likely to gain national and international recognition through publishing and are more likely to work on grassroots projects. However, even when male and female activists are of similar educational levels, issues discussed by male activists, neglecting gender components, are held in higher regard. That is, injecting the gender dynamic into Romani politics is seen as giving rise to an entirely new discipline. As opposed to being viewed as adding an essential dynamic to Romani studies, it is seen as separate from and even unrelated to Romani studies.

In situations where activists are invited on panels based on grassroots work as opposed to educational credentials, Romani women activists working on gendered Romani issues are often ignored. Take for example a 'Good Practice Projects' conference in Hamburg in the winter of 2001.<sup>16</sup> Activists were invited from countries such as Poland, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Macedonia to discuss successful grassroots projects, but Romani women activists were nowhere to be found; nor were issues specific to Romani women anywhere on the agenda. This is questionable considering the numerous Romani women's initiatives in the respective regions. However, Romani women were present at the conference — in the kitchen, cooking meals for the participants. This, coupled with the lack of Romani women panellists, sent a clear message about Romani women's 'place'.

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<sup>15</sup> A group of Roma who were traditionally coppersmiths. Many still maintain strict Romani rules of conduct.

<sup>16</sup> This conference was sponsored by the Council of Europe, Rom and Cinti Union and Roma National Congress and took place from 19-21 Nov. 2001. More information is available at: <http://archiver.rootsweb.com/th/read/UK-ROMANI/2001-11/1004607786> (1 June 2004).

#### 4. Romani Women Neglected by Antiracist Politics, Feminist Politics, and Local and International NGOs

Race, class, and gender dynamics place Romani women in a precarious position, the consequences of which are often early marriage, lack of access to decent labour, healthcare, and education, and increased vulnerability to domestic violence.<sup>17</sup> Disaggregated data, a primary tool in challenging such structural subordination, has been difficult to come by in the case of Romani women. Because data is often collected on the basis of race *or* gender, Romani women fall between the cracks.<sup>18</sup> The ubiquitous exclusion produced by racism, sexism and poverty often leave Romani women with little access to the political sphere. Aside from race, class, and gender barriers that Romani women face in *becoming* activists, once they have begun to implement their anti-patriarchal activist ideals, the problematic construction of gender and race politics, in Europe and beyond,<sup>19</sup> serve to relegate their work to the periphery at best. When Romani women manage to overcome barriers and participate in NGOs, they find that their issues are not given the same weight as ‘mainstream’ Romani issues. The work done by Romani women aimed at combating triple marginalization is not considered ‘Romani politics’. Nor is it given due respect as gender politics, since it deals with Romnia who are considered ‘Gypsies’ not women. Feminist discourse in Europe effectively ignores the existence of Romani women and other minority women while preaching a universal doctrine of gender empowerment. The two terms ‘Roma’ and ‘women’ have effectively been constructed as mutually exclusive.<sup>20</sup>

##### 4.1 Exclusion from the Roma Rights Movement

Romani women are tolerated in Romani organizations — though often not as leaders — as long as they leave part of themselves behind: As long as they let their race trump their gender. It is extremely difficult to espouse anti-patriarchal views for many women because it often means rejecting hierarchical relationships one is subjected to within the family and community — it means severing ties with loved ones. Challenging patriarchy is difficult precisely because women often share a life with the oppressor. For women of colour, racism serves as another impediment to challenging sexism within their communities.<sup>21</sup> The ideology of unity in the face of oppression by majority society serves to hinder many women from speaking about internal community issues. Roma being a nation without a territory, the rhetoric of unity seems especially pertinent: In order to preserve identity, ties to community and family must be strong in order to compensate for lack of territorial ties. This being said, due to the pressure to espouse one unified Romani political view, one that excludes gender concerns, when Romani women choose to work in the Romani movement without elaborating the gender dimensions of being Romani in a racist state, they ultimately replicate patriarchy and perpetuate the psychological, physical, and institutional subordination of their Romani sisters.

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<sup>17</sup> The multiple discrimination faced by Romani women is discussed in detail in Refugee Women’s Resource Project, ‘Romani Women from Central and Eastern Europe: A “Fourth World” or Experience of Multiple Discrimination’, March 2002, available at: [http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/New%20RWRP/RWRP\\_RRP\\_Publicationslist.htm](http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/New%20RWRP/RWRP_RRP_Publicationslist.htm) (5 April 2004).

<sup>18</sup> For more on the exclusion of Romani women in statistics, see A. Oprea, ‘The Exclusion of Romani Women in Statistical Data: Limits of the Race-versus-Gender Approach’, 2003, available at: <http://www.eumap.org/journal/features/2003/april/romastats/> (24 May 2004).

<sup>19</sup> For more on the exclusion of Romani women in feminist and antiracist politics, see *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> K.W. Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color’ in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 357-383.

As currently envisioned, Romani anti-racist political discourse constructs a problematic framework where Roma has implicitly come to represent (the interests of) Romani men. Because this discourse deals only with the problems related strictly to racism, it fails to consider the gendered experiences of racism. The result is that the following issues, discussed in a uni-dimensional manner, comprise the bulk of Romani political discourse: Holocaust compensation, lack of access to education, employment, housing and healthcare. The issues tackled by Romani female activists are not considered part of Romani political discourse (for example: domestic violence, family planning, arranged marriages, virginity tests). Domestic violence and birth control are ‘women’s’, namely white women’s, issues. Arranged marriages and virginity tests become untouchable ‘Romani tradition’. Not only is discussion of such issues *not* considered an essential facet to empowering Romani communities, it is considered detrimental to the best interests of ‘the struggle’ for Romani rights. The voices of Romani women fighting for equality within and without their respective communities, elaborating a gendered representation of what it means to be Romani, get misinterpreted and muffled.

One example of this rhetoric, imposing an ultimatum in choosing between being Romani *or* being a woman, is found in the *Roma Rights* journal published by the European Roma Rights Center. In response to a Romani woman’s critique of internal inequalities, Martin Demirovski, a Romani male activist from Kumanovo writes:

I recognize that you have much insight when you go beyond the narrow issue of men and women and discuss the tolerance — or lack of it — of homosexuality among Roma. My advice to you however is not to *divide* Roma into women and men or gay and lesbian. Turn your attention instead to the *global problem* of the Roma and discrimination against us as your priority. Let’s work on resolving the problems burdening *all* Roma. *When* those huge issues have been addressed, we can use our strength to address other issues among us. To be clear and short, for now, in the eyes of the gadje you are not a girl or a woman, first you are a GYPSY.<sup>22</sup>

The rhetoric of division is used to imply that resisting patriarchy is synonymous with dividing a group with supposedly common oppression that can be summed up as racism. In this context, homosexuals and women represent a deviation from the norm — the norm being heterosexual, male Roma. Attempting to draw attention to the problems of the marginalized within the community is characterized as a ploy to divide the community and detract attention from the ‘universal’ problem of racism — as though racism is experienced by all members of the community in similar ways. Obviously racism is magnified when you are a woman or gay or both.

Mr Demirovski concludes with the phrase, ‘first you are a Gypsy.’ When put to the test of logic, this assertion proves to be false. When a Romani woman is raped by a Gadjo,<sup>23</sup> she is *not* ‘first a Gypsy’ because only a certain section of the Romani population is especially vulnerable to rape: Women. When Romani women are beaten by their husbands, they are not ‘first a Gypsy’ because only the female portion of the population is vulnerable to domestic violence. It makes sense to have gender as a specific category of analysis when speaking of Roma rather than collapsing differences. One cannot separate being Romani from being a woman for Romani women who live at this intersection. Therefore the argument of ‘waiting’ to fight for the marginalized within the community, as a tactic to uphold the interests of the community as a whole, becomes obsolete. On the contrary, fighting for the community *as a whole* would necessarily entail espousing the rights of those marginalized within the group. The rhetoric of a ‘global struggle’ against a uni-dimensional form of

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<sup>22</sup> M. Demirovski, ‘Romani women in Romani and majority societies’ (2000) *Roma Rights*, available at: [http://lists.errc.org/tr\\_nr1\\_2000/noteb1.shtml#intro](http://lists.errc.org/tr_nr1_2000/noteb1.shtml#intro) (5 July 2004).

<sup>23</sup> The word for a non-Romani male.

racism would only make sense if one were treating the Romani community as consisting only of heterosexual Romani men.

Romani female activists risk ostracism when they choose to challenge the aforementioned status quo. Like other women of colour, they are often forced to choose their race over their gender in an effort to avoid shedding negative light on their already oppressed communities.<sup>24</sup> The Roma's status as a stateless nation, lacking the protection offered by a home country, also increases pressure to ignore intra group inequalities in favour of a 'unified' Romani liberation struggle. Although appearing politically expedient, this ultimately serves to hinder Romani advancement.

Reports on Roma also replicate the gender exclusivity of antiracist politics.<sup>25</sup> Reflective of the international NGO 'all Roma are men' dogma, is the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) problematic 2003 report 'Avoiding the Dependency Trap'. In the section on 'Employment and Unemployment', they treat Roma as a monolith and fail to perform any type of gendered analysis concerning job opportunities for Roma. They state that 'an important aspect related to employment was ethnic discrimination in the labour market.'<sup>26</sup> Are Romani women only affected by race discrimination? Are they not also women? This type of monolithic analysis only makes sense if all Roma are men.

#### 4.2 Exclusion from the Women's Movement and Gender-based Reports

Equally problematic and worthy of mention is the exclusion of Romnia and other women of colour from European feminist discourse that proclaims to speak on behalf of all women. Without confronting racism, feminist discourse in fact serves only to advance the rights of privileged white women. For example, in one of its projects the Society for Feminist Analyses (AnA) of Bucharest emphasized the need for 'non-sexist education' in schools as well as a forum on 'Gender and European Integration' as ways to promote equality between the sexes.<sup>27</sup> Because Romani women are subordinated by both race and gender, neglecting to address race would render them invisible. Uni-dimensional gender projects such as these serve to improve the situation of middle class white Romanian women while maintaining their privilege as white women in a racist state. Challenging racism would entail recognizing themselves as both oppressed and oppressors — it would mean confronting that anti-Gypsy voice inside themselves. Ann Russo states that:

White supremacy, in the context of the women's movement as in the society generally, is not simply a matter of ideology, ideas, stereotypes, images, and/or misguided perceptions. It is about power and control, be it in terms of money, construction of ideology, or control over organizational agenda.<sup>28</sup>

As evidenced by the lack of inclusion of Romani women in mainstream feminist NGOs, this control has not yet been relinquished.<sup>29</sup>

Replicating the flawed vision of feminism, international NGOs often neglect Romani women by failing to address the intersections of racism and sexism. Some, such as the Open Society Institute's (OSI) Network Women's Program, establish separate programmes aimed at remedying

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<sup>24</sup> Crenshaw, n. 21 above.

<sup>25</sup> For more information on this see Oprea, n. 18 above.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Development Program, 'Avoiding the Dependency Trap: The Roma Human Development Report', available at: [http://hdr.undp.org/reports/detail\\_reports\\_toolkit.cfm?view=708](http://hdr.undp.org/reports/detail_reports_toolkit.cfm?view=708).

<sup>27</sup> AnA Society for Feminist Analyses, 'Past Projects', available at: [http://www.anasaf.ro/English/index\(eng\).html](http://www.anasaf.ro/English/index(eng).html).

<sup>28</sup> A. Russo, "'We Cannot Live Without Our Lives': White Women, Antiracism, and Feminism" in C. Mohanty et al. (eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), 297-313 at 306.

<sup>29</sup> We can deduce from the fact that OSI establishes separate programmes for Romani women that they are not well represented in mainstream feminist NGOs.

the discrimination faced by Romani women. This is valuable but in no way substitutes for the exclusion of Romani women from ‘mainstream’ OSI programs. This is similar to the reports and journal articles that talk about Roma or women in the universal voice, then include a small section on Romani women. It is certainly important that separate programmes be created on behalf of Romani women, but this token representation is insufficient and is not visionary. The answer is not only to implement separate initiatives for Romania but also to include them in existing programmes, in other words, to construct programmes for the Romani community and for women from the bottom-up.<sup>30</sup> Without this approach, only minor gains are possible in a hopelessly hierarchical structure.

Designing programmes for women from the bottom-up would avoid the token mentioning of Romani women in miniscule sections of reports titled ‘Women’s Status within Distinctive Groups’,<sup>31</sup> as in an International Helsinki Federation report. Another example of such exclusive reports is OSI’s ‘Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in Romania’ report, which fails to mention Romani women and, though speaking in the universal voice, fails to mention race as a factor in women’s employment opportunities.<sup>32</sup> Clearly race in Romania serves to privilege some women over others. The only way one could effectively ignore race is by using a white woman as the quintessential woman. If Romani women, who are multi-burdened, were used as the basis for evaluating policies, then the problems related to both race and gender would surface; in other words, the problems plaguing both Romani men and white women would emerge if the experiences of Romani women were used as the nexus.

## 5. Discursive Exclusion Culminating in the Invisibility of Battered Romani Women

Limited feminist and antiracist politics pervade NGO projects and research. A clear example where Romani women’s experiences are ignored is seen in domestic violence — an issue that is neglected in Romani politics and whose racial dimensions are erased in feminist politics. This results in the invisibility of Romani women’s vulnerability to domestic violence.

At the Third World Conference against Racism in 2001, Romani women highlighted three issues they wanted to discuss: involuntary sterilization, unemployment, and violence against women. Andrea Buckova, a Romani participant from Slovakia, remembers how Romani male leaders only ‘allowed’ them to discuss involuntary sterilization.<sup>33</sup> Involuntary sterilization was framed as a racist attack against Roma, stripped of any gendered meaning. Male leaders also commented that ‘violence against women was not a big problem.’<sup>34</sup> Contrary to this statement, Vera Kurtić found that 95 percent of Romani women in settlements in Niš, Serbia, had experienced violence in the family.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For more on bottom-up analysis, see K.W. Crenshaw, ‘Background Paper for the Expert Meeting on the Gender Related Aspects of Race Discrimination’, available at: [www.wicej.addr.com/wcar\\_docs/crenshaw.html](http://www.wicej.addr.com/wcar_docs/crenshaw.html).

<sup>31</sup> International Helsinki Federation Report, ‘Women 2000: An Investigation of the Status of Women’s Rights in Central and Southeastern Europe and the newly Independent States’, Vienna, July 2001, 366.

<sup>32</sup> OSI, ‘Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in the European Union Accession Programme’, available at: <http://www.eonet.ro/pdf/Romania.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> Open Society Institute Network Women’s Program, ‘Bending the Bow: Targeting Women’s Human Rights and Opportunities’, available at: [http://www.soros.org/initiatives/women/articles\\_publications/publications/bendingbow\\_20020801](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/women/articles_publications/publications/bendingbow_20020801).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



Aside from being ignored in Romani politics, violence against Romani women is also rendered non-existent by international structures such as the European Union. Valeriu Nicolae, a Romanian Romani male activist working at the European Roma Information Office, points to the European Union's failure to address 'unabated violence against Romani women, both within and outside the family.'<sup>36</sup> The European Union has yet to recognize the intersection of race and gender oppression in the lives of women of colour, such as Romani women.

Before continuing, it is important to point out that domestic violence is not unique to Romani communities, and in Romanian Romani communities, for example, is influenced heavily by Romanian policies and attitudes to domestic violence in the country as a whole. It is therefore necessary to briefly discuss the atmosphere in Romania with regard to battering. Domestic violence is so prevalent in Romania that in the year 2000, the Romanian edition of *Playboy* magazine published an article that explained 'how to beat one's wife without leaving marks.'<sup>37</sup>

There are numerous barriers to seeking recourse to domestic violence in Romania including the following: The victim has the burden of first filing a preliminary complaint before the batterer can be arrested, a forensic medical certificate is necessary to file a complaint, there is no free legal representation, police are often a factor in deterring prosecution, and there is a lack of shelters. In 2002, there were a total of seven domestic violence shelters in Romania.<sup>38</sup>

These barriers disproportionately affect Romani women due to their position at the intersection of racism, poverty, and sexism. The requirement of a forensic medical certificate imposes a burden on Romani women because they are often refused medical treatment at hospitals due to racism. The burden of filing a complaint while not being guaranteed free legal representation also poses a barrier for impoverished Romani women, many of whom, in addition to lacking financial stability, also lack the social capital necessary to manoeuvre the justice system.<sup>39</sup> Apart from there being few shelters in Romania, the number of shelters likely to be accessible to Romani women is probably zero, due to racist attitudes prevalent in the country. Furthermore, calling the police poses a burden, in light of the police brutality epidemics against Romani communities. When Romani women do call the police, they often refuse to come to Romani neighbourhoods — especially to the ghettos — as is seen in the following example:

Ana lives in a shack in the outskirts of Craiova, one of the major cities in southern Romania, together with her 13-year-old daughter, Maria, and her violent and alcoholic husband, Gogu. Last year Ana ran away with Maria to her stepdaughter, who had previously run away from Gogu, her father, to another town, after Gogu attempted to rape her. But since the 49-year-old Ana was unable to find work she was forced to return to Craiova, to her violent husband, who resumed his beatings. The police have not intervened despite Maria's numerous calls.<sup>40</sup>

Reflective of exclusive non-intersectional feminist politics is a conceptually limited report by the Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights titled 'Lifting the Last Curtain: A Report on Domestic Violence in Romania', where race is not once mentioned as a factor in access to legal recourse

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<sup>36</sup> V. Nicolae, 'Romani Women's Kalisfera', available at: <http://www.erionet.org/mainRomania.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Refugee Women's Resource Project, n. 17 above 165.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>39</sup> For more information regarding domestic violence against Romani women see Refugee Women's Resource Project, n. 17 above, 44-47, 163-174.

<sup>40</sup> Nicolae, n. 36 above.

against domestic violence, in seeking medical attention, or in access to law enforcement officials.<sup>41</sup> Are white Romanian women the only ones subject to domestic violence? What sense is there in only using the gendered experiences of white women, who do not face the added obstacle of racism, as the norm in domestic violence discourse? A bottom-up approach to this problem would force us to look at impoverished Romani women, who often fear calling the police because of police brutality against Romani communities, who are often refused medical treatment at hospitals, and who do not have access to the court system, or jobs that would enable them to leave abusive situations. Using these experiences as the foundation for domestic violence research in Romania would result in a more accurate discourse.

In addition to it being in the interests of a just society to prevent violence against Romani women in the family, it is also specifically in the interests of Romani men. Domestic violence does not only affect Romani women. Domestic violence against Romani women also affects Romani men. These women have children who suffer along with them, as well as fathers and brothers. Refusing to tackle the issue of domestic violence in the name of not shedding negative light on the community<sup>42</sup> only serves to weaken Romani communities, not strengthen them. One fears that discussing domestic violence publicly in the racist society one inhabits will result in reinforcing negative stereotypes of men of colour, but not discussing it allows racism to impede progress by not allowing communities of colour to tackle certain internal problems.

## 6. Conclusion: Recognition of Privilege, Coalitions & Bottom-up Intersectional Interrogation of Inequality

The recognition of privilege is essential to the construction of inclusive politics. Peggy McIntosh claims that, with regard to white privilege, she has ‘come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets, each of which I can count on cashing in, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible, weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.’<sup>43</sup> She goes on to say that: ‘One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms which we can see and embedded forms which as a member of the dominant group one is taught not to see.’<sup>44</sup> One must be proactive in acknowledging one’s privilege in order to be able to challenge systematic racism and sexism. In the context of Roma, a step that could be taken by non-Roma who ‘study’ Roma is to evaluate how their white privilege has allowed them to draw the boundaries of what is known and not known about Roma. With regard to Romani women in particular, both academics and activists must reflect on how the issues they have chosen to write about and/or espouse have excluded the experiences and voices of Romani women — overall, how their empowerment has come at the price of the disempowerment of Romani women.

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<sup>41</sup> Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, Domestic Violence in Eastern Europe Project, ‘Lifting the Last Curtain: A Report on Domestic Violence in Romania’, available at: [http://www.mnadvocates.org/sites/608a3887-dd53-4796-8904-997a0131ca54/uploads/D.V.\\_in\\_Romania\\_1995.pdf](http://www.mnadvocates.org/sites/608a3887-dd53-4796-8904-997a0131ca54/uploads/D.V._in_Romania_1995.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Crenshaw, n. 21 above, 362. Crenshaw explains that what reinforces negative stereotypes is not discussing domestic violence but rather the absence of other, positive, images to counter negative ones.

<sup>43</sup> P. McIntosh, ‘White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack’ in A. Kesselman et al. (eds.), *Women: Images and Realities* (Mountain View, CA, 1999) 358-361.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

It is only through recognizing our privilege, whether it be white privilege, male privilege, class privilege, light skinned privilege, or heterosexual privilege, that we can challenge hierarchical relationships. It is essential that progressive Romani male activists acknowledge their male privilege as a first step to challenging patriarchy and promoting an intersectional, multi-faceted analysis of the problems affecting Romani communities today. White feminists must come to terms with their role in promoting the racial subordination of Roma. The recognition of privilege by white feminists and Romani male activists is a necessary first step to creating a dialogue with Romani women and transcending the 'anthropological approach' that has been plaguing mainstream feminist and anti-racist discourse. In line with rejecting the 'anthropological approach' is the creation of a space where it is safe to critique patriarchy within marginalized groups. Countering the 'anthropological perspective' means implementing a bottom-up approach to achieving social justice, which entails the experiences of those multi-burdened, such as Romani women, forming the foundation of discourse such as that surrounding domestic violence. It is important for professors, students, and activists to perform intersectional analyses of social problems starting with those least privileged. This analysis must be done self-consciously, with the awareness that one is in the dangerous position of speaking for others whose circumstances one does not fully comprehend. In an effort to transcend the 'anthropological perspective' and limited identity politics, this lack of comprehension must be countered using a ground-up approach by consulting with those for whom race, gender, and class result in multiple subordination.