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An Intersectional Feminism of Their Own: Creating European Romani Women’s Activism

“Roma women are going to have to choose between their ethnicity and their gender.”
Young male Romanian Roma leader, September 2005

“No, I cannot and I will not.”
Young female Macedonian Roma leader, September 2005

Context

In Central and South Eastern Europe today, there are probably no more than several hundred women who would self-identify as Romani women activists. Yet, their influence is significant and growing, within and beyond the post-soviet Roma rights movement of the last decade.

This article focuses on an even smaller subset of this small group—those Romani women activists in Central and Southeastern Europe who are struggling to articulate their issues within the framework of women’s human rights and global feminism. Given the racism, extreme poverty, and social exclusion to which Romani people are subjected, coupled with the patriarchal relations embedded in some Romani traditions, theirs is a daunting task. Their stories, insights, conflicts, contradictions, and
I am in the process of conducting oral history interviews for a forthcoming book on Romani women activists. The women whose interviews are excerpted in this article are Nicoleta Bitu (Romania), Enisa Eminova (Macedonia), Angela Kocze (Hungary), and Azbija Memedova (Macedonia). These women are public figures, active at local, national, regional and international levels. Telling their stories may have ramifications—both positive and negative—for them personally and for their activist goals. I thank them for their generosity and trust in sharing their stories with me in hope that their experiences will contribute to the empowerment of Romani women and global feminisms.

The book I am working on is documenting contemporary history in the making—what may be seen retrospectively as the birth of a Romani women’s movement. Yet I am mindful of the email sent by Azbija Memedova of the Roma Center of Skopje to someone who transcribed a recent talk she gave. “I did not speak of a Romani women’s movement,” she scolded, “I talked of Romani women’s activism.”

Feminist theory rightfully gives precedence to the voice of women interpreting their own realities, for they do indeed have epistemic privilege. However, as a feminist...
privilegiran. Međutoa, kako feministička istoričarka so čustvo za „neizbježnog odobruvane koe ja modulira politikata zasnovana vrs simpatija“³ sепак će rizikuvać и će gи postavam moite uveduva paaraleno so tolkuvaњeto на Азбија. Верувам дека активизмот на Ромките signalizira eden značaen istoriski mig – najverojatno на јадро движење и, во секој случај, е облик на женски активизам од кој feministička teorija и feminističkiot aktivizam може да имаат голема полза.⁴

For the last decade, Romani women have been working individually as activists at the local level and within the Roma rights movement. In the mid-1990s, a handful of Romani women, including Nicoleta Bitu, began to raise Romani women’s issues tentatively at the European level. In June 1998, the Soros foundations network convened the first international conference of Romani women in Budapest. The women who attended from many countries had different experiences and opinions about culture and identity depending on where they came from, but all were committed to improving the lives of Romani women and children. Among the Romani women participants were Azbija Memedova and Nicoleta Bitu, who would help found the Roma Women’s Initiative in 1999. The Roma Women’s Initiative (a project of the Network Women’s Program of the Open Society Institute) has worked to develop, link, and catalyze a core group of committed Roma women’s leaders—including many dynamic young women—in an effort to improve the human rights of Roma women in Central and Eastern Europe.

It is of particular importance to present stories of Romani women leaders as counter-narratives. As is the of-
Kako што е често случај со Афро-американките во САД, стереотипите за Ромките функционираат како конструктивски јадра во европската културолошка имагинација. Овие стереотипи вклучуваат сексуално обоени и демонизирани слики на Ромки (питачки, гатачки и крадачки на деца). Животните приказни на Ромките не само што им се спротиставуваат на овие груби стереотипи, туку се значајни и за де-естестви- лизацијата на ромскиот идентитет зашто, всушност, Ромките активистки се навистина една разнородна групација.

Додека животните приказни на родово освештените Ромки активистки можеби изгледаат како еден „кус политички расказ“ сместен во „големата политичка приказна“ за Европа која се проширува, прашањата со кои се занимаваат Ромките активистки се мощни значајни. Поставувањето на Ромките „од marginите кон centarот“, како што сугерира бел хукс, афро-американска феминистичка теоретичарка, ги открива трагите на една долготрајна патолошка сос- тојба што Европа ја игнорира на своја собствена штета. Навистина е неверојатно дека една заедни- ца од приближно 10.000.000 луѓе, сегашни и идни граѓани на Европа, може да биде изложена на такви насилства, исключување, расна омраза, сиромаштија и маргинализација на какви што се изложени Ромите само шесет години по холокаустот.“

Односот кон Ромите го става под знак прашање тврдењето на угледниот историчар Тони Јудт во неговата најнова книга Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945 која доби извонредни критики („По војната: историја на Европа по 1945 година“). Тој вели дека европската свет за сопственото историс- ко наследство ја прави Европа еден од најсилните светски бедеми против тоталитаризмот. Со таква

While the stories of gender-aware Romani women activists would seem a very “small political narrative” embedded in the “grand political narrative” of an enlarging Eu- rope, the issues addressed by Romani women activists are quite significant. Moving Romani women from “margin to center” as suggested by African American feminist theorist bell hooks, reveals vestiges of persistent pathol- ogies which Europe ignores at its peril. That a commu- nity of approximately 10 million current and aspiring EU citizens can be subject to the kind of violence, exclusion, racial hatred, poverty, and marginalization endured by Romani people only sixty years after the holocaust is astound- ing.5

The treatment of Roma challenges the argument of prominent historian Tony Judt, in his highly-acclaimed new book, Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945.6 Judt claims that Europe’s cognizance of 20th century his- torical legacies makes it one of the world’s best bulwarks against totalitarianism. With such blatant disregard for endemic racism and such resistance to changing it, that cannot be the case. Given the current state of the world,
Europe may actually be one of the bastions of progressive possibilities (it looks appealing from the vantage point of the U.S. under our current president), but that should not give much cause for comfort. And I would argue, exactly, that the intersection of racism and sexism is the place to look for barometers of democratic transformation.

As the exchange that opens this article demonstrates, there are some Romani men (and women) activists who believe that focusing on Romani women diverts attention from the primary issue of Roma exclusion in European societies. At the same time, there is also a growing recognition that Romani women’s issues are a legitimate part of the Roma rights agenda. Still the debate continues (classic in minority social movements) about whether framing as human rights violations such “internal” problems as violence against women plays into the hands of racists determined to keep Roma a despised minority.

At a March 2004 workshop on Romani women’s rights co-sponsored by the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) and the Network Women’s Program, Dimitrina Petrova, ERRC’s founding director and one of the leading strategists of Roma rights litigation, posed this dilemma to 15 young Romani women participants. The majority insisted the time had come to deal with such issues openly.
И, така, програмата за правата на Ромите постепено вклучува сè поголем број теми поврзани со сексуалните и репродуктивните права на Ромките. Меѓутоа, дури и на ова поле постојат различни тенденции. На пример, општа поддршка ја дава на кампањата за повикивање на одговорност на владите на Чешка и Словачка за присилна или под притиск извршена стерилизација на Ромките. Бидејќи (не без причина) ова прашање навлегува во силно пристигнатото страв од обидите да се контролира растот на ромската популација (со сеништето на геноцидот и холокаустот покрај нас) не е воопшто тешко да се мобилизира целото движење за ромски права во дискусијата на оваа tema.

Од друга страна, проблемите како што се проверка на девственоста, рано мажење и домашно насилие, опасно се доближуваат до родово обоени односи на моќта во ромските заедници. Додека во различните подгрупи на Роми во целиот регион постои различна пракса, спроведувањето на проверката на девственоста е сè уште мошне раширено. Обичајот налагал младите Ромки во брак да влезат како девции и затоа мора да бидат „прегледани” од лекар или жена родина пред или веднаш по првата брачна ноќ, за да се потврди дека го исполнитувале обичајот.

Под менторство на Азбия Мемедова и Марија Савовска (не-Ромка која работи за Фондацијата „Општни одговорности Македонија“, Ениса Еминова и дванаесет други млади Роми кои истражуваа начините на кои овој обичај ги ограничува нивните животи. Пред неколку години тие ја формираа групата „Млади водачи“ и го започнаа проектот наречен „Проект девственост: слобода да се избира“. Денес во овој истражувачки и акционен проект со кој раководат самите Ромки и кој се фокусира на прашањето

And so increasingly, the Roma rights agenda includes issues related to Romani women’s sexual and reproductive rights. However, even within that arena, there are different tendencies. For example, there is near universal support for campaigns to hold the Czech and Slovak governments accountable for the forced or coerced sterilization of Romani women. Because this issue plays into deep (and not unreasonable) fears about efforts to control Roma population growth (with the spectre of genocide and the holocaust), it is easy to mobilize the entire Roma rights movement to address it.

However, issues like virginity testing, early marriage, and domestic violence come more dangerously close to questioning gendered power relations within Roma communities. While there are different practices among various sub-groups of Roma across the region, the practice of virginity testing is still fairly widespread. The tradition dictates that young Romani women must be virgins before marriage and they are “examined” by a doctor or female relative prior to or immediately after the wedding night to ensure their conformity to this custom.

With mentoring from Azbija Memedova and Marija Savovska (a non-Romani woman working for the Foundation for an Open Society Macedonia), Enisa Eminova and twelve other young Romani women explored how this tradition constricts their lives. Several years ago, they formed the group “Young Leaders” and founded the Virginity Project: Freedom to Choose. This Roma-led research/action project addressing sexual traditions and taboos in Roma communities has now been shared with young people in Bulgaria, Hungary, Montenegro, Serbia,
on traditions in the fields of sexual relations and taboos are included in the youth of Bulgaria, Hungary, Crna Gora, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine. It has opened up the taboo discourse on sexual choice and education in ways that few would have thought possible. And its assertion of young Romani women’s right to question the gender order in Roma communities has ruffled quite a few feathers.

When asked by an interviewer whether gender issues should be dealt with later once basic Roma rights are established and protected, Nicoleta Bitu replied: “It is already later! That’s what I’m saying. Gender issues were put on the table in 1998 and 1999. Now the Decade [of Roma Inclusion—a European effort to integrate Roma] offers a new chance to bring them up and address them systematically. The insistence that we need to keep waiting is one of my worst nightmares.”

Another tactic used to discredit Romani women operating from a global feminist perspective is the accusation that they have uncritically adopted western feminism. The Romani women activists I have worked with do not hesitate to challenge the racism of regional or international women’s movements. At the same time, as English speakers active in a fairly elite world of international human rights activism, they constantly interrogate their own privilege and challenge themselves to be accountable to grassroots communities.

Language is a primary issue—both for the Romani women activists in their working lives and for my feminist
феминистически етнографски проект за и со Ромки­
те. Со Ромките активистки можам да соработувах
на англиски јазик зашто тој е моментално хегемо­
нискиот јазик во меѓународниот активизам во бор­
бата за човекови права. За да добијат средства од
меѓународни агенции, ромски активисти мора да
будат способни да пишуваат квалитетни пред­
lози за проекти на англиски јазик. За да им бидат
dостапни местата каде што се дефинираат начини
на дејствување и каде што се случуваат промените,
ромски активисти, исто така, треба да го зборуваат
 англискиот јазик.

Едно такво место беше и конференцијата „Ромите во
Европа во процесот на проширување“ организирана
од Институтот „Отворено општество“ и Светската
банката во јуни 2003 со која беше воведен проектот
„Декада на вклучување на Ромите“, голема европс­
ска иницијатива за активности и начела на дејству­
вање, осмислена со цел да се обезбеди рамноправен
пристап на Ромите до образованието, домувањето,
вработувањето и здравствената заштита до крајот на
dекадата 2005-2015.9 И покрај фактот што Ромките
активистки одржаа целодневен собир насловен „Фо­
рум за начелата на дејствување во однос на ромското
женско прашање“ непосредно пред оваа конферен­
ција, ја загубиа битката за вклучување на ромското
женско прашање како еден од главните „столбови“ на
Декадата. Прашањето на родот беше прогласено за
„интердисциплинарна“ тема во Декадата на Ромите
и во моментов нивните поддерживајќи водат битка тоа
da добие форма на конкретни дејства кои ќе го подо­
брат нивниот живот.

While sensitivity to grassroots perspectives is not the sole
province of Romani women activists, they are among
the most eloquent proponents of diverse representation

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of Roma people in major policy venues such as the European Parliament and European Commission. On the issue of language, for example, Angela Kocze, then Executive Director of the European Roma Information Office, spoke eloquently to a high-level EU conference in Brussels in April 2004, two weeks before the accession of ten states would add two million new Roma citizens to the European Union:

“The trip here was not an easy one. Obstacles had to be overcome; some of our people had to undergo lengthy and humiliating visa procedures. The requirement that the speakers should be able to make their presentation in English was not easy to fulfill, since discrimination prevents many of us from completing school education and has kept many of our best people out. The place here is a place where most of our people would not dare to put their feet and would probably be immediately chased away if they would happen to do so. But we are here and happy to be so and to share some of our thoughts and experiences with you.”

Such inclusive practice exemplifies what has been introduced into feminist theory in the last decade as “intersectionality.” The term, loved by some, reviled by others for its opacity, denotes the complex interplay of multiple forms of discrimination and oppression, such as those based on race, gender, class, and sexual identity. If the concept itself has been difficult to convey, its translation into policy and practice is extremely daunting.
Most human rights frameworks address only one axis of discrimination at a time. The Roma rights movement, drawing in many ways on the civil rights and international human rights movements, focuses primarily on racial discrimination. Yet, as critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw has noted, intersectional analyses must be developed to fulfill the true spirit of international human rights law:

“Although many current laws and human rights conventions have been interpreted narrowly to only capture a single form of discrimination at one time, these interpretations contravene the explicit intentions of instruments intended to protect against discrimination. Building a truly effective human rights system requires addressing the shortcomings of past frameworks and developing more contextualized interpretations of equality provisions.”

Romani women activists are contributing to building a “truly effective human rights system” by challenging the limitations of current systems and proposing alternatives. They have been on the frontlines simultaneously fighting ethnic hatred, racism, sexism, violence against women, educational segregation, poverty, and extreme social exclusion. They do so with limited resources, ambivalent relations with both the mainstream Roma and women’s movements, and with few role models to call on before them. European Romani women’s activism at this moment in history is extremely significant because it seeks to implement intersectional agendas at the level of public policy (e.g. at the national level, the European Union, and the United Nations) and at the level of social movement activism.
Who are today’s Romani women activists working on gender issues? How did they become leaders? How are they now positioned to affect attitudes and public policy in Europe?

Tall and composed with an aquiline profile, Azbija Memedova delights in challenging people to think beyond their stereotypes. She loves skewering uncritical assumptions! In her purple tie-dye pants, Che Guevara T-shirt and tongue pierced in Prague, Enisa Eminova enjoys provoking dialogues. Yet, she encounters each individual with enormous patience and a generosity of spirit rarely found in people twice her age. Warm and affable, Nicoleta Bitu laughs with her whole body. Then she navigates the shoals of European Roma politics with the clarity and tact necessitated by her role as partner to the senior Roma diplomat in Europe. Angela Kocze speaks in a gentle voice inflected with a lilting Hungarian accent, yet she can deliver an uncompromising and politically sophisticated indictment of racism tailored to each specific context.

Learning They Were Different: Roma Identities

Roma rights advocates agree that the need to challenge popular stereotypes and the stigmatization of Roma identity is an urgent priority. One strategy for doing so is to affirm the multiplicity of Roma identities, defying an essentialist view of a complex people whose religious,
economic, linguistic, cultural, political, and familial patterns vary widely. One of the outstanding things about contemporary Roma activism is the attempt to create a unified politics out of striking diversities among Roma people—within countries and within their own communities.

The question of difference resonates strongly in the stories of Romani women activists. Sometimes they felt different because they were Roma and that had varying degrees of impact on their subsequent activism. But they also felt different among Romani people. And this multiple sense of difference may have led to the kind of critical thinking that enabled them to challenge a variety of orthodoxies in their families, their communities, and in the Roma rights and women’s rights movements.

Born February 23, 1970 in Fehérgyarmat, Angela Kocze grew up in Kispalad, a small village of 500 people in eastern Hungary, seven hours from the capitol Budapest and close to the Ukrainian and Romanian borders. The population was evenly divided between Roma and non-Roma people. At the end of Kispalad’s one street (which housed a church, shop, post office but no school) was the Roma settlement. “We were living in the end of the village... everybody knew that that was the Roma settlement and this was the place where I was raised.”

She was born into an impoverished Romungro family (meaning that her parents and grandparents came from the group of Hungarian Roma who did not speak the Romani language). She was the youngest of three sis-
Identities

Her father, an illiterate unskilled worker, traveled in search of work to Budapest and beyond each week, returning home frustrated and drunk on the weekends. Her mother suffered terribly from asthma. One day in 1987, while her father went to the next village to find a doctor, Angela’s mother died gasping for air in her arms. Angela was only 17.

Despite this difficult childhood or perhaps because of it, Angela grew up with an understanding of the disadvantaged position of Roma which did not seem to damage a strong evolving sense of self. In school, “OK we know that we are Roma but there was no big thing about it.” Her elementary school teachers were supportive and her parents emphasized the importance of education, encouraging her to go beyond their stations in life, and hammering home the point that she would always have to prove that she was twice as good as anybody else.

Though it was evident that “we have our place in the village and we have to accept that,” Angela’s family did not really talk about Roma identity. She first realized that they were different when “I went with my grandmother to the non-Roma and she was… cleaning their houses. My grandmother was behaving like a slave and it was really disturbing for me. I just couldn’t understand why she is behaving in such a way. It’s unbelievable that it made such a deep impression inside me that I still remember those moments.” She realized that “we are somehow beyond them, beyond the non-Roma and somehow we belong to the inferior group and not to them.”

Angela also felt different from the other Roma boys and girls. “I was thinking in a different way and wearing different clothes. I always wanted to distinguish myself. I
не ја сакав вообичаената облека што сите сакаа да ја носат. Секогаш сакав да носам нешто што е шокантно или различно... Сё носев на необичен начин. Се сеќавам дека носев панталони кои ги пикав во чорапите, а тоа беше нешто многу чудно во селото, ама мене навистина ми се дошаа. Носев мащи содолги ракави и преку нив мащи со куси ракави. Знаме дека денес тоа е модерно, но во тоа време не беше. Носев панталони, а врз нив носев фустан... Во тоа време, пред петнаест години, тоа беше навистина невообичаено.“ Ангела со задоволство ги кажува овие приказни, а неа и денес ја карактеризира оригинален чувство за стил.

Иако не почувствуваала нетрпеливост поради тоа што е Ромка, тоа почнало да се чувствува во гимназијата каде што тоа била единствен Ром, а дотогаш не се случило некој припадник на ромската заедница да стигне толку далеку. „Мислам дека тоа беше критичен период во мојот живот. Поминував низ период на криза на идентитетот. Сите знаеја дека сум Ромка, но никој не сакаше да зборува за тоа. Наместо тоа, шепотеа [зад мојот грб] и јас секогаш едносстановно ја чувствувах напнатоста.“ Иако била одлична ученичка, ниту еден професор не ја поттикнувал да продолжи на факултет. „Не мислам дека ме мразеа. Мислам дека мислеа оти не е реално да се очекува дека ќе одам на некој универзитет или факултет... А јас чувствувах дека мислат дека јас сум Ромка и дека е вече дозволно и самото тоа што завршив гимназија.“ Сепак, и покрај огромните пречки, Ангела изнајде начин да го продолжи своето образование. Моментално работи врз својата докторска дисертација по социологија на Средноевропскиот универзитет.

За разлика од Ангела Коце, Николета Биту пораснала во релативно поповолни околности како ќерка didn’t really like these mainstream clothes and what everybody wanted to wear. I always wanted to wear something which is shocking or different.... I was wearing everything in a strange way. I remember I was wearing trousers and I put into my sock the trousers and that was something very weird in the village but I really loved that. I was wearing long sleeve t-shirts and above that I’d wear a short sleeve tee shirt. I know that now it’s trendy but in that time it wasn’t. I was wearing trousers and on top of that, I was wearing a dress.... In that time, fifteen years ago, it was something really strange.” Angela relishes telling these tales and she carries with her today her unique sense of style.

Although she did not experience hostility because of her Roma identity, it did start to make more of a difference in high school where Angela was the only Roma student and no one remembered any other Roma person making it that far. “I think that period was very critical in my life. I went through an identity crisis. Everybody knew that I am Roma but nobody wanted to talk about it. Rather, they were whispering behind [my back] and I just always felt the tension.” And even though she was an excellent student, none of her teachers encouraged her to go to college. “I don’t think that they hated me. I think... that they thought it’s unrealistic for me to go to university or college... And I felt that they thought that I’m Roma and that it’s already a big thing to finish high school.” Nevertheless, Angela would find ways to continue her education despite tremendous obstacles. Currently, she is pursuing a Ph.D. in Sociology at the Central European University.

In contrast to Angela Kocze, Nicoleta Bitu grew up in a relatively advantageous position as the daughter of one
of the few Roma police officers in Ceaucescu’s Romania. Born January 3, 1970, the eldest of three children in a large extended Roma family, Nicoleta recalls: “I was a spoiled child, a very, very spoiled child. You cannot imagine how spoiled I was by both families. I think, first, because I was smart in school. Everybody was, like, oh she’s so smart. Oh, she is our child. I was not only the child of my mom and father. I was the star of the family, the large family... My grandma was very in love with me and I was also a gentle child. I mean I was a very wise child and everybody loved me.” On the other hand, Nicoleta says, “I didn’t have a real childhood. I didn’t go out to play. I was obsessed with homework.”

Nicoleta’s father comes from a traditional Romani-speaking Kalderash family; they had become sedentary agricultural workers long before. Her paternal grandmother told fortunes and her grandfather repaired boots. One of six brothers, two of whom were killed during World War II, Nicoleta’s father ran away to Bucharest to attend school against his father’s wishes. When asked if it was unusual for a Roma person to be trained as a police officer in the 1950s, Nicoleta replied: “Yes, it was very unusual, very, very.” He was well-received at the beginning of his career, famous for his professionalism and honesty, outstanding qualities in a notoriously corrupt police force.

Known as “Bitu Czigano” (the Gypsy Bitu), he was sometimes caught between the Roma and non-Roma worlds. He fought “against Roma thieves as well as Romanians,” recalled Nicoleta and this sometimes caused friction for him and his family. “Sometimes Roma communities... were very afraid of him, which was not very comfortable for me... Also, they were saying that he was a traitor...
My father was a very honest police officer. That’s why we were poor because the police were quite corrupted. I remember that there were people coming to our house asking for help from him and if they would dare to bring something to us he would just put them in the door, saying ‘I don’t want this, I don’t take this’ because being a Roma police officer, being a police officer of Roma identity, I think he was afraid he was more suspect than others, so he wanted to be better than others.”

Nicoleta’s mother’s large family of Lautari Roma musicians also promoted high standards of performance and negotiated between the Roma and non-Roma worlds. “They were a little more aristocratic behaving among Roma because they were the first ones to get contact with the majority. The men were always very well dressed, very proper. Being proper was a very important thing in these families.”

Nicoleta’s family promoted a sense of pride in Roma identity. “When my father’s family came to our town, to our house, I knew that they are different because they are differently dressed first of all and they spoke Romanes between them so at the same time, I wasn’t ashamed being next to them and to walk with them on the street. This is what my mom gave me all the time and I’m very grateful for this. Because the integrated families, they denied their traditions and their connections with more traditional families but my family was a very interesting case... My father was well known as Roma and he was a public figure and also, he didn’t deny his identity. He was not ashamed. My mom, also, she was not ashamed of being Roma.”

Nevertheless, Nicoleta learned from a very early age that “Romanians did not like Roma” and that people
Several Romani women activists grew up feeling different from both Roma and non-Roma communities, positioning them to be boundary-crossers. This role has become typical of Romani women in general, as they are usually the ones who mediate and negotiate with majority communities, especially with educators and social service and health workers. While profoundly aware of racism and more than willing to challenge people by naming it, these women are also open to working with potential non-Roma allies. Nicoleta says she did not experience discrimination in elementary school and was much beloved by a number of teachers who took great interest in her. As she recalls, “I think I am not a nationalist Roma because I had very good teachers, non-Roma teachers, who encouraged me a lot. They were very kind human beings... I am very grateful to them because they gave me the base to start in life.”
дадоа основата за добар почеток во животот“, се потсетува таа.

Азбија Мемедова е родена во Драчево во Македонија во 1971 година во семејство кое, според кажувањето, било од турско потекло. Татко ја потекнува „од група Роми кои се декларираат како Турци“. Родителите на Азбија првпат се сретнале кога и двајцата работеле во една македонска телевизија, што значи дека имале свое занимање. Кога мајка ѝ на Азбија се омајика „таа морала да се откаже од својот [ромски] иден титет бидејќи татко ми беше многу строг околу тоа. Не знам премногу за тоа, затоа што немам дозволено информации поради татко ми. Но, знам дека морала да научи турски и дека со мене морала да зборува турски.“ Турскиот бил единствениот јазик што Азбија го зборувала до возраст од пет и пол години кога починал татко ѝ, а брат ѝ имал само шест месеци. Тогаш мајка ѝ морала да ја научи да го зборува македонскиот јазик за да може да оди на училиште. „Одев во градинка и мислам дека тоа беше мојот прв контакт со она што од сегашнава гледна точка и од оваа позиција би можела да го наречам расизам, зашto се чувствуваа поинаква. Не знаев зошто, но чувствуваа дека односот на учителките и другите деца беше како да сум поинаква“. 

Мајка ѝ на Азбија потекнува од големо и почитувано ромско семејство коe дошло од Гњилане на Косово. Таа била единствената од четирите сестри која завршила средно училиште, и покраj притисокот од нејзиното традиционално семејство да го напушти школувањето. За Азбија, мајка ѝ била многу важен пример во однесувањето и силно влиjaела врз неа - таа инсистирала по смртта на мажот да се пресели во своj стан и сама ги одгледала дветe деца. Живееја во населба со мешан национален состав, во koja за-

Азбија Мемедова was born in Drácevo, Macedonia in 1971 to what she was told was a family of Turkish origin. Her father was “from the group of Roma who are declaring themselves as Turks.” Azbija’s parents originally met when they both worked in a Macedonian TV station, so they were professionals. When Azbija’s mother got married, “she had to deny her [Roma] identity because my father was very strict about it. I don’t know too many things because of lack of information that I had because of my father. But, I know that she had to learn the Turkish language, she had to speak in the Turkish language with me.” Turkish was the only language Azbija spoke until her father died when she was five and a half and her brother was only six months old. At that point her mother had to teach her Macedonian so she could go to school. “I went to kindergarten and I think that was my first contact with something I can call from this point, from this position, racism because I felt that different. I didn’t know why but I felt that the attitude from the teacher, the other kids was that I was different.”

Azbija’s mother comes from a large and respected Roma family originally from Gjilane, Kosovo. She was the only one of four sisters to finish high school, despite pressure from her traditional family to leave school early. A strong role model and influence on Azbija, she insisted on moving to her own apartment when her husband died and she raised her two children on her own. They lived in a mixed settlement of Albanians, Turks, Roma, and Macedonians. “All of my friends, most of my friends, were Macedonians,” recalls Azbija.
едно живеење Албанци, Турци, Роми и Македонци. „Сите мои пријатели, повеќето мои пријатели, беа Македонци“, се секава Азбија.

Во исто време, на возраст од шест до десет години, Азбија, мајка ѝ и брат ѝ го посетувале поширокото семејство на мајка ѝ во населбата Шuto Оризари, ромското гето во Скопје, во Македонија, и најголемата ромска населба во Европа. Тие посети ѝ биле пријатни, но и збунувачки:

„Го слушав јазикот, и не знам како, но сепак го разбирал. Тој беше во мојата глава и се уште е тука. Но никогаш не се обидов да го зборувам и мислам дека тоа претставува еден вид бариера, затоа што растев на еден друг начин, мислам, сосема различен од животот на ромската заедница и имав чувство дека не припаѓам таму и бев, се секавам, самата некако различна. Не знам зошто, но чувствував дека некако сум различна од сите. Знаете, кога сте со Македонци, различни сте, кога сте со Ромите, пак сте различни и долго време имав проблеми да ме признаат, и исто така долго време требаше да се борам со својот идентитет. Не ми беше јасно што се случува. Кога одев кај дедо ми, тие велеа дека сме… Турци. Кога одев надвор, мислам во друштво, на училиште, чувствував дека Турците се признаети, а Ромите не се. Никој, всушност, не ми прашал што сум. Никогаш не велев што сум, но сите знаеја дека сум Ромка.“

Enisa Eminova was born in Skopje, the capitol of Macedonia on August 22, 1981. Her mother’s family comes from Kumanovo, from “the sub group of blacksmiths who are always very rich and a very respected group of Roma.” Her father’s family comes from a different sub-group of Roma. Their name “means villagers and they were poor and working on other people’s fields and they

At the same time, from age six to ten, Azbija, her mother and brother visited her mother’s large extended family in Shuto Orizari, the Roma ghetto in Skopje, Macedonia and the largest Roma settlement in Europe. This was a source of comfort but also confusion:

“I was listening to the language and I don’t know how, but I knew the language. It was in my head and it is still there. But I never tried to speak the language and I think it’s a kind of a barrier because I was growing up one way. I mean, totally different from the life in the Roma community and I had the feeling that I don’t belong in this community and I was, as I remember for myself, I was different. I don’t know how but I felt that I’m different somehow from everybody. You know, when you’re among Macedonians, you’re different, when you’re among Roma, you’re different again and for a long time, I had problems to be accepted and also I had to struggle for a long time with my identity. I didn’t know what was happening. When I was going to my grandfather’s, they were saying that… we are Turks. When I was going outside, I mean in the society life, in the school, I felt the Turks are accepted, the Roma are not accepted. I didn’t know why. In the elementary school, everybody knew that I am Roma. Nobody asked me actually, what am I? I never said what I am but everybody knew that I am Roma.”
било ни платени, туку им давале храна. Мислам дека тоа беше договорен брак... Татко ми беше делумно и со албанско потекло, што беше дури и полошо за овие Роми од Куманово“.

И покрај резервираноста на семејството на мајка ј, тие се венчале. Татко ј на Ениса, кој завршил средно образование, работе во хемиска лабораторија во една железарница, а мајка ј, која завршила петто одделение, е хигиеничарка во едно основно училиште. Како едно од постарите деца во семејството, мајка ј на Ениса морала да го напушти училиштето во шесто одделение за да помогне во грижата за своите шест браќа и сестри.

Во улога невообичаена за Ромките во тоа време, баба ј на Ениса од мајчината страна патувала надалеку за да ги продава производите на својот маж кој бил ковач. Не само што патувала низ цела Македонија, туку и во соседна Србија. Ениса вели дека баба ј не наидувала на неодобрување во ромската заедница затоа што живеја во населба со мешан национален состав. И Ениса пораснала во таква средина, со околу 15.000 жители, претежно Македонци и Албанци, и со дваете ромски семејства кои очигледно биле малцинство.

На прашањето на кој јазик зборуваат дома (каде што живее со родителите, братот, неговата жена и детето), Ениса одговара: “Па, зависи кој со кого разговара. Моите родители знаат да свртаат од ромски на македонски, зашто баба ми и дедо ми живеат во истот двор... Местото е многу големо и ако баба ми и дедо ми се со татко ми, тие можат да зборуваат на ромски, албански или на македонски. Ако баба ми и дедо ми се сами, зборуваат на турски, ромски, босански, бугарски, македонски или албански јазик. Зависи кој

were not even getting paid but they were getting some food. I think it was an arranged marriage... My father had some Albanian origin also, which was even worse for these Roma in Kumanovo”.

Despite her mother’s family’s reservations, they married. Enisa’s father, a high school graduate, works in a chemistry laboratory in a factory that produces iron and her mother, who completed 5th grade, works as a cleaning person in an elementary school. As one of the older children in her family, Enisa’s mother had to drop out of school when she was in the sixth grade to help care for her six siblings.

In an unusual role for Romani women at that time, Enisa’s maternal grandmother traveled widely to sell the products produced by her blacksmith husband. Not only did she travel all around Macedonia, but she sold the products in neighboring Serbia as well. Enisa commented that her grandmother was not subject to disapproval from the Roma community because they lived in a very mixed neighborhood. Enisa also grew up in a mixed neighborhood of about 15,000 people, predominantly Macedonian and Albanian, with 20 Roma families clearly in the minority.

When asked what language her family speaks at home (where she lives with her parents, brother, his wife and child), Enisa replies:“Well, it depends on who is talking to whom. My parents, they could switch from Romani to Macedonian because my grandparents also live in the same yard... It’s a huge place and if it is my grandparents with my father, they could [speak] in Romani, Albanian, Macedonian. If it is my grandparents only, they would speak Turkish, Romani, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Albanian. It depends on who wants to say what. If
што сака да каже. Ако е нешто тајно, ако станува збор за мене, нема да зборуваат на албански зашто разбiram, и ќе зборуваат на турски, но ако станува збор за брат ми, може да зборуваат и на албански, турски или дури ромски, зашто брат ми не зборува ромски, и така во моето семејство се е испомешано. Користиме многу јазици*.

Меѓутоа, нејзиното семејство никогаш не ја научи Ениса ромски; како млада девојка, таа подоцна го научи сама. Нејзините родители инсистираа со деката да зборуваат македонски „затоа што веруваа дека ќе ни биде полесно кога ќе тргнеме на училиште и дека подобро ќе се вклопиме во заедницата. Ние секогаш знаевме дека сме Роми и на тој начин си го чувавме идентитетот“. Ениса секогаш внимавала да им каже на луѓето, „Јас сум многу мала, не зборуваам ромски, но јас сум Ромка и знам по нешто за Ромите“. Во нејзиното училиште таа била единствената Ромка и не почувствувала дискриминација сè додека не тргнала во средно училиште.

Во основното училиште никому не му било важно што Ениса е Ромка. „Едноставно бевме премногу мали. И бевме последната генерации на Титовите пионери и не учеа дека сме сите исти и дека треба да ги почитуваме начелата на братство и единство… Тоа беше навистина многу, многу добро, но јас не можев да разберам зошто сум единствената Ромка во училиштето. Што се случи со другите Роми?“

Во средно училиште, кога Ениса била на возраст од петнаесет години, една од професорките на Ениса кажала расистичка шега за Ромите. Кон неа, како единствената Ромка меѓу 37-те ученици, вели таа, „се свртеа сите и гледаа во мене, а јас ништо не разбирав. Требаше ли да кажам нешто?“ Тогаш Ениса не направила ништо, не беше претставувала дискриминација на братството и единството. Во тоа време не знаела дека ќе се случи нешто во средно училиште, дека ќе биде две години во училиштето и дека ќе биде единствената Ромка во училиштето. Што ќе се случи со другите Роми?“

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it is something secret, if it is me, they won’t use Albanian because I can understand but they will use the Turkish language but if it is my brother, Albanian, Turkish, even Romani is fine, because my brother doesn’t speak Romani so everything is really mixed up in my family. We’re using many languages”.

However, Enisa’s family never taught her Romani; she taught herself later as a young adult. Her parents insisted on speaking to their children in Macedonian “because they believed that it would be easier for us when we go to school and just to integrate better within the community. We always knew we were Roma so we kept identity in that way.” Enisa made sure to tell everybody, “I’m too young, I don’t speak the language, but I’m Roma and I know something about Roma.” Enisa was the only Roma student in her school and she did not really experience discrimination until she was in high school.

In primary school, nobody really cared that Enisa was Roma. “We were just too young. And we were the last generation of Tito’s pioneers and we were taught that you are not different and you have to obey the principles of brotherhood and solidarity... That was very, very good but I could not understand why am I the only Roma in this school. What happened to the other Roma?”

In high school, when she was 15, one of Enisa’s teachers told a racist joke about gypsies. The only Roma among 37 students, “they all turned and looked at me and I just didn’t understand. Am I supposed to say something?” That time Enisa did nothing but the next time the teacher asked Enisa, “How come you’re not dressed like your
ви ништо, но следниот пат, вели Ениса, кога професорката ја прашала, „Како таа да не си облечен како другите Роми?“ „... јас реков, ‘Што ви значи тоа? Како треба да се облекувам?’ А таа ми вика, ‘Па, во долги здолништа, ти не се шминкаш, и не носиш обетки’. Јас ја пращав, ‘Што ја фали на мојата облека, можеби не е нова, но е чиста и убава’. И потоа им реков на моите дека не се случило, а тие само ми рекоа, ‘Добро е, нема проблем, а дали таа ти се извини?’ Не, не ми се извини, но претпоставив дека нема да се повтори. А потоа, од некоја причина, ја станав омилена ученичка.“

Поболно беше нејзиното искуство во спортот, каде што постигнувааше одлични успехи во фрлање диск, ѓуле и копје. Нејзиниот прв тренер ја рекол дека не може да влезе во националната репрезентација за тоа што тоа „треба да биде македонска национална репрезентација што ќе ја претставува земјата, а таа била ‘ебана Циганка’“. Го цитирам, вели таа. „Таа е ебана Циганка“. Ениса добила друг тренер кој подоцна станал нејзин ментор, а таа станала негова штитенчка. Ја советувал да продолжи да тренира и ја ветил дека ќе влезе во репрезентацијата. Ениса била скептична, зашто нејзиниот прв тренер бил во селекторската комисија. Откако комиссијата ја одбра- ла, двајцата тренери „имаа голема караница, а потоа тој реке, честито, доаѓаш со нас ова лето во Турција да ќе претставувааш земјата и ќе бидеш единствената која ќе фрла и копје, и ѓуле и диск зашто обично одат двајца, а во овој случај бев само јас, зашто бев добра во сите три дисциплини... диск, ѓуле и копје.“ Кога слушнала за караницата, заклучила, „значи ако сум Ромка не треба да ја претставуваам земјата...[но] јас сум Македонка, а потоа сум Ромка“.

Roma fellows’ and I was like, ‘what does it mean? How am I supposed to be dressed?’ She was like, ‘The long skirts, you don’t wear any make up and you don’t have any earrings.’ I asked her, ‘what’s wrong with my clothes, maybe they’re not brand new, but they’re clean and they’re fine.’ And then I told my parents what happened and they just told me, ‘okay fine, and did she apologize?’ No, she did not apologize but I assumed it’s not going to happen ever again. And then, I became her favorite student for some reason.”

More troubling was Enisa’s experience in competitive sports, where she excelled in discus, shot-put, and javelin. Her first coach said she could not enter the national team because “It should be a national Macedonian team to represent the country and ‘she is fucking Gypsies.’ I’m quoting. ‘She is fucking Gypsies’” Enisa changed to another coach who would later become her mentor and advocate. He counseled her to keep training and promised she would make the team. Enisa was skeptical because her first coach was on the selection committee. After the committee selected her, the two coaches had a “huge fight, then he said, congratulations, you are coming with us this summer in Turkey to represent the country and you are going to be the only one who’s going to throw the javelin, shot-put and discus because usually it’s two people going and in this case, it was only me because I could do all three of them...discus, shot-put and javelin.” When she heard about the fight she concluded, “so I’m not supposed to represent the country if I’m Roma...[but] I am Macedonian and then I am Roma.”
Enisa also felt alienated from the Roma community. “When I was 17, it was actually my first contact with the Roma neighborhood [Shuto Orizari]... I had my cousins but I would hardly ever go and see them. They would come to my house and visit me but not me going there because I was the freak. Nobody liked me because I didn’t speak the Romani language and I was very young and my cousins and their friends in the Roma neighborhood would say that I was pretending to be gadjie and I just didn’t want to be there and I didn’t want to be offended because of not speaking the language and I chose not to go there.”

**Encountering Sexual Politics**

The life experiences of Romani women leaders shaped their view of Romani women’s issues. They felt very deeply about the sexual politics they witnessed in their families and communities. They were primed to speak out once they encountered intellectual and political frameworks (such as human rights discourse) that helped them make sense of their experiences. They are charting new ground in drawing from a variety of discourses—human rights, Roma rights, women’s rights, and global feminist theory—to chart the course for Roma women’s activism.

Nicoleta witnessed her mother’s suffering as a wife and mother. She believes her father’s public persona gave him a sense of entitlement to do what he wanted: “He was aggressive, he drank, he had extra [marital] relations but he had good and bad points... My grandparents played a very important role in them staying together
merka tie dvača da ostanat zaедно, зашто мајка ми, кога бев мала, сакаше да се разведе, но баба ми рече дека тогаш јас ќе раснам без татко. И така, таа остана и имаа уште две деца.“

Nikoleta веќе дека нејзината свест за односите меѓу половите доаѓа од набљудувањето на врската меѓу нејзините родители, но и од тоа што гледала како нејзините чичковци ги тераат стрините. „Се секавам дека имав десет или дванасет години, а на четиринаесет години бев поагресивна со чичковците, зашто им викав, ‘Зошто го правите тоа?’ ‘Како можете да го правите тоа?’ Не можев да ги гледам жените како страдаат зашто во моето големо семејство имаше многу страдање. Речиси сите мои тетки, стрини и вуйни беа тешни. Не ми е јасно како преживеава.“

За разлика од повеќето ромски девојчиња, родителите очекувале од Nicoleta успех на училиштето и завршување на образованието. Но, врз неа исто така влијаеше и култот на девственоста, зашто „мајка ми очекуваше да влезам во брак невина“.

Иако Ангела не се секава дека во семејството отворено се зборувало за култот на девственоста, во нивната заедница имаше многу срам околу прашањето на сексуалноста. „Сестра ми остана бремена на осумнаесет години и мајка ми ја однесе во болница на абортус, и тоа беше многу срамна работа. Мислам дека не кажа никому во селото. Само не знаевме за тоа и тоа беше таков срам. Навистина беше тешко да носиш во себе толку голема тајна во селото... Не се секавам дека зборуваме конкретно за девственоста, но тоа беше секако важно прашање кое висеше во воздухот,“ се секава Ангела.

Проектот „Девственост“ ја даде шанса на Enisa да патува низ Источна Европа и да ја применува мето-

because my mom, when I was little, she wanted to separate but my grandma said I will grow up without a father. So she stayed in the relationship and they had two other children.”

Nicoleta says her sensitivity to gender relations comes from observing her parent’s relationship but also from seeing her uncles beat her aunts. “I remember I was ten years or twelve years and at fourteen, I was more aggressive with my uncles because I said, “Why [do] you do this?” “How could you do this?” I couldn’t bear seeing women suffering because [there] was a lot of suffering in my big family. Almost all my aunts were beaten. I don’t know how they survived.”

Unlike the majority of Romani girls, Nicoleta experienced high expectations from her parents about achieving in school and becoming a professional. However, she was also affected by the virginity cult, because “my mom wanted me to be a virgin when I got married.”

Though Angela does not remember her family talking explicitly about the virginity cult, there was a lot of shame in the community surrounding sexuality. She recalls: “My sister became pregnant when she was 18 years old and my mother took her to the hospital to have an abortion and it was such a shameful thing. I think they didn’t tell anyone in the village. We were the only ones who knew about it and it was such a big shame. It was really heavy to carry this kind of secret in the village... I don’t remember that we had a talk specifically about virginity, but it was important, certainly, in the air.”

The Virginity Project afforded Enisa the opportunity to travel throughout Eastern Europe, sharing the metho-
dologijata na ovoj projekt so drugi grupi mлади Ромки (а на краj и млади Роми). Таа го наведува своето искуство во Војводина во Србиjа, во август 2002 година, како еден од најзначаjните моменти во нејзината кариера како активистка. При нејзината средба со селскиот старешина во ромската заедница, таа можела целосно да се повика на своjот ромски иден	титет и да го стави во служба на политиката на одно
сите меѓу половите.

„Кога отидов да ги видам девоjките [кои требаа да вршат истражување за проектот „Девственост“] во Воjводина, тие можеa да доjдат дури попладне и jас решаив да одам наоколу и да истражувам. Првата ра
бота што сакав да јa дознаам беше каде се наоѓаат Ромите. Лuѓето me убедуваа да не одам зашто е далеку и Ромите се многу лоши, ќe ми направат нешто, а се разбира, не знаеjќа дека сум Ромка. Од некоjа причина мислеа дека не сум Ромка. Ја се земав такси и отидов таму. Работата беше што таму имаше огромен сид што ги одделува Ромите од главниот пат, а ромската населба беше само едно поле и шума и... импровизирани куќи.

Оtидов таму, а лuѓето викаа, коjа си па ти сега, зборуваш ли ромски ако велиш дека си Ромка? Во тоa време зборуваa ромски... и знаeв дека зборувaa на еден од диjалектите, и така само се претставив. Не ми верувaa, немаa доверба во мене, коjа си па ти, ти си ромска активистка, знаеме не што прават ромските невладини организации за нас. Нашата ситуациjа само се влошува, не се подобрува. Не ти веруваме. Добро, во ред, не морате да ми верувате. Не сум доjдена за тоа.

Потоа me поканиjа на кафе и на селскиот старешина му рекоа дека е доjдена една девоjка коjа патува
dology of the project with other groups of young Roma
women (and eventually young Roma men too). She cites
her experience in Vojvodina in Serbia in August 2002
as one of the highlights of her activist career. In her en-
counter with a male elder of the Roma community, she
was able to fully claim her Roma identity in the service
of her gender politics.

“When I went to see the girls [who would be conducting
research for the Virginity Project] in Vojvodina, they
could not meet me until the afternoon and I decided to
just go and wander and explore. The first thing I asked
was where is the Roma community here? People were
trying to discourage me not to go there because it’s far
away and Roma are very bad, they’re going to hurt me
and of course, they didn’t know I was Roma. For some
reason, they didn’t think I was Roma. And then I got a
cab and went there. And the thing was that there was a
huge wall dividing the Roma community and the main
road but the Roma community was nothing else but field
and forest and... improvised houses.

I went there and people were, like who the hell are you
now and are you speaking any Romani if you are saying
that you are Roma? At the time I did speak Romani...
and I knew that they were speaking one of the dialects,
so I just introduced myself. They wouldn’t believe me,
they wouldn’t trust me, who the hell are you, you’re a
Roma activist, we know what the Roma NGOs are doing
for us. Our situation is getting worse instead of better.
We don’t trust you. Okay, fine, you don’t have to trust
me. That’s not why I came here.

Then they invited me for coffee and then they told the
leader of that community that there was a girl who was
Debra L. Schultz  An Intersectional Feminism of Their Own: Creating European Romani Women’s Activism

sama, koja e dojdena da gi poseti bez nikakva posobna причина и само сака да се напие кафе. Старешината, кој имаше около осумдесет години, дојде да дее поздрави и ми искажа голема почит и одеднаш сите го сменија однесувањето и покажуваа почит кон мене и го сменија односот поради старешината... А јас можев да му искажам почит со тоа што ги знаев сите тие стари роьски зборови и старите начини на искажување почит од младите кон постарите.

Потоа, некако се случи да дојде до тоа со овој ста­рец да зборуваме за сексот затоа што тука имаше една бремена девојка со дете на раце, и нешто се стеснуваше и се плашеше од мене од некоја причина и не сакаше да зборува со мене. А јас пак, му велам, еј, старешино, кажи ми зошто оваа девојка е тука, а не седнува со нас. Дали е тоа затоа што не е поканета или пак не е од твоето семејство? Тој рече: ‘Не, ве­роjатно поради тебе’. Јас прашав: ‘А кажи ми, инаку, колку години има?’ А тој рече: ‘Седумнаесет’. А јас реков: ‘Неjзино дете ли е тоа, или е првпат бремена?’ Тој рече: ‘Не, има две деца, а ова ќе ѝ биде трето’. Потоа јас реков: ‘А знаете ли за некави средства за заштита?’ А тој рече: ‘Како мислиш?’ А тогаш јас не размислува многу и не ми беше ни страв ни срам да кажам, и реков: ‘Па, кондоми и контрацептивни средства’. Тој рече: ‘Дали си ти нормална?’ Јас реков: ‘Зошто?’ ‘Затоа што така жената би му кажала на мажот дека не го почитува и не го сака’. И потоа со овој старец се расправав повеке од четирисест мину­ти дека љубовта нема врска со планирањето на семе­јството, иако јас те почитувам и тебе и твоето мис­лење и ромската заемница и нејзините вредности... Навистина не мислев дека ќе ми солсушаат, но тогаш еден од младите мачки рече, па таа има право, таа е Ромка и ние ќе ѝ веруваме и ќе имаме доверба во неа. И така, бев многу горда што за два часа успеав да се traveling alone coming to visit this community for no rea­son and just wanted to have coffee. The leader, who was in his 80’s, came to greet me and he showed respect very much and then all of a sudden, everybody else changed their behavior and respect and attitude for me because of the leader... I was able to show respect to him by kno­wing all these old Roma words and old ways of showing respect like from young person to old person.

Then, somehow, I ended up discussing sex with this man because there was a girl who was pregnant and she had another child in her arms and she was hesitant and she was scared of me for some reason and she didn’t want to talk to me. And I was like, hey leader, tell me why this girl is staying there and she’s not coming here to sit with us. Is it because she’s not invited or she’s not from your family? He said, ‘No, it’s probably because of you.’ I asked, ‘By the way, how old is she?’ And he said, ‘She is 17.’ I said, ‘Is that her child or she’s pregnant for the first time?’ He said, ‘No she has two children and this is going to be her third.’ Then I said, ‘Do you know of any ways of protection?’ and he said, “What do you mean?” And then I didn’t think and I wasn’t scared and I wasn’t ashamed to say, ‘Well condoms and contraceptives.’ He said, ‘Are you crazy?’ I said, why? ‘Because then the woman would tell the husband that she doesn’t respect him and that she doesn’t love him.’ Then I was arguing with this old guy for more than 40 minutes that love has nothing to do with family planning, although I respect you and your opinion and the Roma community and its values... I didn’t think they would listen to me, honestly, but then one of the young guys was like, she’s right, she’s a Roma and we will believe in her and we trust her. So it made me proud that within two hours I could build a good reputa­tion and I could communicate with the leader in the way he wanted me to for some reasons but also that I could
стекнах со увред во нивните очи и што воспоставив комуникација со нивниот старешина на начин на кој тој тоа го очекуваше од мене, но и поради тоа што се здобив со неговата доверба и почит, така што тој можеше да зборува за секс и жени и за положбата на младите девојки и контрацепцијата и за сексуалните права и репродуктивното здравје со мене. А јас имав дванаесет и една година. Во тоа време имав дванаесет и една година“.

While young Romani women are leading the way provocatively through the Virginity Project, the “older” generation of Romani women activists found their own way to express indignation about sexual double standards. As was true in the social movements of the 1960s in the United States, women in the Roma movement saw some contradictions in their male colleagues’ sexist behavior.¹³

Nikoleta began to speak out more on women’s issues around 1994, because of what she calls the “incoherence” between personal life and political discourse—in other words “the working relations in some Roma organizations pleading anti-discrimination discourse... I think that the women’s rights preoccupation started first from questioning the universality of human rights in the case of Roma, in the case of my Roma colleagues, male colleagues and women also, I have to say. So that’s how I became more and more aware about the contradictions and I said that something has to be changed. I mean, it’s about human dignity and I didn’t like when colleagues of mine were humiliated by men...
I think also I was offended by the language of one of my activist colleagues. He called me a whore because I had a relationship with someone before I got married... It was very rude and I said, ‘What is your problem? You are not my father, you didn’t give me anything to eat and what is your problem?’” The man accused her of “destroying the image of our movement.” Disgusted, she told him never to speak to her again. And they have not spoken since.

Nevertheless, Nicoleta did not discuss these dynamics with her women colleagues at the time. “I think it was more my individual perception of the thing than borning [sic!] a discussion among us.” Such a discussion might have borne fruit in raising women’s awareness of these issues as collective and political, rather than personal.

The younger generation of Romani women sees patriarchal relations as the source of a systemic problem. And they are fighting for freedom of choice and sexual liberation for young Romani women and men, challenging young Romani men to see their stake in these issues as well.

Realizing Romani Women’s Rights

At the July 2003 conference “Roma in An Expanding Europe,” Azbija Memedova presented the conclusions from the Roma Women’s Forum, a historic gathering of over 100 participants, to representatives of the European community, the World Bank, the Open Society Institute, regional governments and Roma civil society. The Roma Women’s Forum panels addressed education, economic empowerment, health and sexuality, grassroots leadership and political participation.
образоването, економската моќ, здравството и сексуалноста, лидерството во пошироката заедница и учеството во политиката.

Притоа, Азбија Мемедова го кажа следново: „Ромското женско прашање е предизвик за дискурсот и на женските и на ромските движења. Програмите на Ромките ја ставаат под знак прашање претпоставената универзалност на дискурсот на човековите права за оние кои ги бранат, а кои важат и за жените и за Ромите. Ромките активистки не сакаат да создадат посебно женско ромско движење, туку имаат за цел да го воведат ромското женско прашање во главните текови на сите нивоа и во сите структури важни и за жените и за Ромите. Положбата на Ромките, како и на ромската заедница како целина, се влошува. Сиромаштијата ги оневозможува Ромките да си ги подобрат условите и можностите, како своите сопствени, така и на нивните семејства и заедници“.

По неколку години работа на регионално ниво како консултантов за Ромската женска иницијатива на „Мрежната женска програма“ при Институтот „Отворено општество“, Азбија го сврте своето внимание кон Македонија. Во соработка со „Мрежната женска програма“, Европскиот центар за правата на Ромите (ЕЦПР) и УНИФЕМ, Азбија раководи со тимот млади Ромки кои го спроведоа истражувањето што послужи како основа за еден извештај во сенка за Ромките што е доставен до телото на Обединетите нации коешто го надгледува спроведувањето на Конвенцијата за елиминирање на сите форми на дискриминација на жените (CEDAW). Комитетот ќе го разгледа извештајот во 2006 година, кога македонската Влада ќе го достави својот извештај до ОН. Како и во Хрватска во 2005 година, постои уверување дека владата ќе мора сериозно да го земе предвид ромс-

She said: “Roma women’s issues represent a challenge for both women’s and Roma movement discourses. Roma women’s agendas call into question the assumed universality of human rights discourse for those involved in defending human rights for both women and Roma. Roma women activists do not want to create a separate movement of Roma women but rather seek to mainstream Roma women’s issues into all levels and structures for both women and Roma. The situation of Roma women, as the situation of Roma community as a whole, is declining. Poverty makes it impossible for Roma women to improve conditions and opportunities for themselves, their families, and communities.”

After several years working on the regional level as a consultant for the Roma Women’s Initiative of OSI’s Network Women’s Program, Azbija has focused her attention in the last year on Macedonia. In collaboration with NWP, the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), and UNIFEM, Azbija has led a team of young Roma women who conducted research that formed the basis for a shadow report on Roma women that has been submitted to the United Nations treaty body monitoring the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Committee will consider the shadow report in 2006, when the Macedonian government reports to the U.N. As in Croatia in 2005, it is hoped that the government will be challenged to take Roma women’s issues seriously, requiring intersectional policy approaches to improving Roma women’s lives.
кото женско прашање и дека ќе побара интерсекциски пристап во својата политика, со цел да се подобри животот на Ромките.

Кога Николета Биту се декларираше како Ромка феминистка на еден собир на Ромки во Европскиот парламент во јуни 2005 год., еден искрено шокиран, но симпатичен мажки член на парламентот паша: „Зарем тоа не ви го компликува животот?“ Со карактеристична искреност, Николета одговори потврдно. Кога ја слушате Николета како исказува контроверзни ставови, ја чувствувате нејзината потреба за потврдување на сопственото интегритет што ја наследила од својот татко полицијац, затоа што знае дека има потреба одреден став да биде и исказан.

Таа вели дека некои од нејзините колеги се чувствуваат непријатно кога таа ја споредува борбата за правата на Ромите со борбата за правата на жените, зашто тоа звуки многу феминистички. „Сакам да кажам дека борбата за правата на Ромите има повеќе сличности со борбата за правата на жените отколку со борбата за правата на малцинствата воопшто, на националните малцинства, зашто правата на жените не се поврзани со територијални прашања. Кога зборуваме за правата на Ромите, станува збор за дискриминација. Ние, всушност, не бараме културна автономија. Не го поставуваме прашањето на границите на ниедна држава... исто е и во борбата за женските права. Жените сакаат исти плати, исти права како и мажите, а не сакаме исти права како и мнозинството. Мисам деке овие движења се многу, многу слични.“

Како и Азбija, Ениса и Ангела, и Николета ги развија своите ставови следејки ги информациите за другите женци во светот. „Информациите за искustvata na ne-Romkite, za жените кои се припаднички

When Nicoleta Bitu declared herself a Romani feminist at an event on Romani women at the European Parliament in June 2005, one sincerely shocked but sympathetic male MEP asked, “Doesn’t that make your life difficult?” With characteristic honesty, Nicoleta agreed that it did. One senses the drive for integrity inherited from her policeman father when listening to Nicoleta put forth controversial positions, because she knows something needs to be said.

Nicoleta reports that some of her colleagues get uncomfortable when she compares the fight for Roma rights to the fight for women’s rights because this sounds very feminist. “I mean the fight for Roma is very similar to the fight for rights for women more than for minorities in general, national minorities, because women’s rights are not territorially-related. When we speak about the rights of Roma, it’s about discrimination. We don’t really want cultural autonomy. We are not questioning the borders of any states... like women’s rights. They want equal payment, they want access to equal rights as men and we want equal rights as majorities. I think it’s very, very similar.”

Like Azbija, Enisa, and Angela, Nicoleta develops her thinking by seeking information about other women globally. “For me it’s very rich when I learn the experience of non-Roma women, like minority women, like
Muslin women, like Dalit women from India. It was very rich for me to learn from them and to realize that we’re not unique in this sense. I think that’s why... I am sensitive to opening the Roma issue to others... I’m not afraid of making comparisons.”

In October 2005 in Bangkok, Thailand, Enisa Eminova became the first Roma woman to speak at a plenary session at the global feminist Forum of the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID). At this 10th AWID Forum (they are held every three years), 1,600 women and men from around the world, grappled with the question of “how does change happen?” In her remarks, Enisa said:

“There are many women who fear to be called feminists but I am not one of them. I stand behind the F-word but I choose my battles. I don’t want to be a full-time “roma” either, as I don’t want any frames... The key is to support self-definition and self-identification—and to resist labels which are imposed, which is just another facet of oppression.”

Romani feminists and women’s rights activists are challenging the Roma rights movement, the global women’s movement, national governments, the European Union, and the United Nations to develop multi-dimensional analyses, practices, and policies that will improve the lives of Roma women, their families, and communities. In the process, they are contributing to the nascent democracies in their countries, as well as to the agendas of all those dedicated to fighting racism, sexism, poverty, and exclusions of all kinds. This is a contribution to Europe writ large and to the global feminist movement.
Notes:

1. While there are many similar issues of discrimination for Western and Eastern European Romani people, especially among women, the differences are significant because of different historical and political trajectories. I focus on Romani women activists in the Central and Southeastern European countries where I have worked: the new EU member states (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary), the accession states of Romania and Bulgaria, and the aspiring states of Southeastern Europe (Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina).

2. My book Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement (New York University Press, 2001) was in many ways a precursor to my current book project on Romani women activists. Going South was many things: the first attempt to document and analyze the role of Jewish women in the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s; a meditation on the politics of memory for American Jews; an exploration of the racial ethics of secular Jews; and a personal/feminist attempt to “think back through my mothers” (with thanks to Virginia Woolf and Alice Walker). Going South appeared mid-way through my time at the Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation) Network Women’s Program, where I began as Assistant Director and currently serve as Director of Programs.

While at NWP, I have been fortunate to contribute to the “open society” mission in ways that resonate with my in-
intellectual and political passions. I have been able to help support gender studies development and the introduction of women’s oral history methodology in the Balkans, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and other parts of the former Soviet Union. Additionally, I have helped develop and support the Romani Women’s Initiative, led by Romani women activists. This has been the heart of my work, for it contributes to the anti-racist feminist agenda of which Going South was both representation and reflection.


4. As an avid reader of the literature on feminist ethnography, I must state that I am not a neutral participant observer. In addition to being a feminist historian and an anti-racist ally, I also play the role of colleague and “funder,” a modest enabler of events and potentially generative connections but also a person with differential access to some types of resources and power. My empathy for Romani women comes from several deep sources: my Jewishness, my anti-racist feminism, and my professional work in the field of international human rights. All of these identities bear critical reflection, but that is a subject for another article.

5. The World Bank estimates that there are 7 to 9 million Roma in Europe but given the challenges of collecting accurate data about Roma because of ethnic data protection laws and the stigma attached to Romani identity, it is likely that the numbers are higher. See Dena Ringold, Mitchell Orenstein and Erika Wilkens, eds., Roma in an Expanding Europe: Breaking the Poverty Cycle (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2003).

7. For further information, see www.romawomensinitiatives.org.


12. Nicoleta Bitu is married to Nicolae Gheorge, one of the leading theorists of the contemporary Roma rights movement who currently serves as the Contact Point for Roma/Sinti Issues for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).


14. See the website of the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) for materials from the conference.
References:


Interview with Nicoleta Bitu, March 6, 2004.


Interview with Angela Kocze, July 4, 2004.

Interview with Azbija Memedova, March 9, 2004.


www.romawomensinitiatives.org.