Roma women's voices and silences on unjust power regimes

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Crises and contingency: states of (in)stability

Panel: *Romani activism, challenged democracies, contentious politics*

Major question

How are Roma women constructed as political subject by political and policy discourses in the context of the European Union, with special references to the example of Romania?

"Roma women"

- missing, active, or subordinated policy subject
- political potential of Romani feminism

Paper contents

Introduction: paper overview

1. Gender-neutral or gender-blind Roma politics in Europe

2. The appearance of Romani women around the European policy-making table

3. Forms of gender awareness in current Roma inclusion policies

4. Lack of adequate policy responses to problems of marginalized Roma (women)

5. The ongoing de-politicization of socio-economic (Roma) issues

Conclusions: the political potential of Roma women's activism

Contents of Power point presentation

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Theoretical frames

"Roma women" in four political and policy instances

De-politicization of Roma marginalization (the role of the state, transforming civil society organizations, effects on Roma women)

The political potential of Roma women (Roma and non-Roma feminists, filling the class-gap, structural and political intersectionality)

Empirical foundations

❖ **Own empirical researches**

- Roma marginalization:

  - the social and cultural formation of socially and spatially marginalized "communities" (2011-2014)

  - causes and manifestations of Roma marginalization (2012-2014)

- Roma women's access to reproductive health and rights as :

  - phenomenon of social exclusion (2004-2006)

  - issue shaped by public policies (2006-2008)

  - matter of everyday negotiations between "culture" and "rights" (2009-2010)

❖ **Discourse analysis**

Breaking the barriers (2003, Council of Europe)

Broadening the agenda (2006, OSI)

Romani Women's Rights Movement (2006, ERRC)

Bitu and Morteanu, (2010, Romani Criss and UNICEF)

Breaking the silence (2011, ERRC)

Roma women for equal opportunities (2011, Roma women's association for our children and Desiré Foundation, Timisoara, Romania)

Roma/Sinti women special section, and Preventing violence against women section (2012 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting of OSCE-ODIHR, 2012 Warsaw)

Theoretical frames

Shore and Write (1997):

policies are forms of power that "organize society and structure the ways people perceive themselves and their opportunities" and are having a contribution "to empower some people and silence others"

Van Baar:

"primary political problems tend to be removed from the domain of political discourse and reformulated in the 'objective' and 'neutral' language of expertise, policy-making and science"

Sigona and Trehan (2009), **Rostas (2009)**:

NGOization of Roma movement

Waquant (2008):

advanced marginality is the new form of expulsion in neoliberal context, that does not stem from economic crises or underdevelopment, but it is rather the resultant of economic restructuring and its unequal economic effects on the lowest faction of workers and subordinated ethnic categories

Feminist intersectionality theories:

"social class is the most prominent example of a social category that is strongly connected to inequalities, yet not currently included in the European equality agenda" (**Verloo** 2006)

"intersectionality in the case of Romani women is most often conceptualized in terms of gender and race/ethnicity. … [but] poverty and social exclusion intensify the level of discrimination experienced by Romani women. [That is why] while class may or may not be a ground for discrimination in legal terms, it is important to understand how it interrelates with other facets of social identity and thus, its role in intersectional discrimination" (**Kóczé, 2010**)

"social divisions have organizational, intersubjective, experiential and representational forms"; how is race 'gendered' and how is gender i'racialized', and how both are linked to the continuities and transformations of social class, but all these need to be addressed "in particular locations and contexts" (**Yuval-Davis, 2006**)

distinction between structural or experiential, and political intersectionality (**Crenshaw, 1994**)

"Roma women"
in four political and policy instances

Two main paradigms of Roma politics – gender-blindness

International organizations mediating for Roma women's
   representation – activating women

Current European strategies for Roma inclusion – women's
   subordination within a neoliberal frame

Socio-spatial marginalization and intersected forms of dispossession
   – missing subject

Two main paradigms of Roma politics

The ethno-cultural and the social paradigm

- Divisions ("Culture"/identity politics versus "Society"/ inclusion policies
- Tensions
- Gender-neutrality:
  - In the ethno-cultural paradigm Romni were conceived as naturally bearing the role of reproducing and nurturing the 'nation' (*neam*, *națiune*) both in biological and cultural sense, but were not recognized as political subjects.
  - The socio-economic paradigm was not better either in terms of addressing Roma women's status in the community or in the broader society: their particular needs, interests and experiences were shadowed by the seemingly gender-neutral effects of poverty and social exclusion on Roma communities.

The patriarchal mainstream public discourse, in a false feminist tone, seemingly was deeply concerned about Roma women's subordination to community norms regarding early marriage and childbirth.

Major challenge towards Roma feminists: **protecting women's and children's rights within their own communities while deconstructing the way in which mainstream positions are reproducing convictions according to which Roma are an inferior race performing pre-modern/primitive practices of life**

International organizations
and Roma women's representation

The concept of Roma/Gypsy as a "European" issue was formally acknowledged in 1993, when a Resolution of the Council of Europe declared Gypsies to be "a true European minority"

Council of Europe (1999) requested a consultant to prepare an introductory report on *The Situation of Roma/Gypsy Women in Europe*:

how are Romni experiencing the conflicts between traditional culture and modern society, and between acting for cultural rights on the behalf of their groups and women's rights as universal human rights

OSI, Network Women Program:

Roma women's voice in the public sphere was mediated by international or European organizations supporting the creation of different forms of Roma women's representation

Romania, health mediation (from 1993):

– balancing between mothering as a traditional role highly respected within Romani communities and between taking care of the relationship between Roma groups/families and larger local communities where they belonged to

– how might Romni make use of their reproductive rights without becoming victims of racist fertility control and without being blamed by their own families/communities about not fulfilling the sacred duties they were supposed having in terms of childbirth

Current European strategies
for Roma inclusion

The shift from defining Roma as a "trans-national European minority" to conceiving them as a "European social problem"

European framework for Roma inclusion strategies, 2011:

"Addressing the situation of Roma in terms of employment, poverty and education will contribute to progress towards Europe 2020 employment, social inclusion and education targets"

Romani women are mentioned in the context of the reduced employment and the increased school abandonment rates among Roma, and as well as in that of problematic access to quality health care, but the promotion of gender equality is not conceptualized here in terms of women's rights or social justice and multiple discrimination is not addressed either

Romanian National Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma:

"Romani women have an important role within families and the minority itself. The strategy aims at improving their educational level and employment rate, but as well as their involvement into children's education and other activities that assures the wellbeing of families, family cohesion and the development of next generations"

Women groups' recent proposals for Romanian strategy revision (2013):

- **violence against women: invisible, need for intersectional approach**

- **health:**
  - **life expectancy (age of 60, ten years lower than non-Roma women, and 2 year lower than Roma men)**
  - **maternal mortality rate (0.62% – Roma women, 0.04% – majority women)**

Socio-spatial marginalization and intersected forms of dispossession

Dispossessed classes and patriarchy

Compact Roma communities in spaces affected by:

-    multiple (including housing) deprivations,

- access to precarious informal labor or to underpaid jobs in the formal economy,

- low expectancies and reduced financial possibilities regarding school participation,

- various insecurities (from the lack of identity and property documents, through the lack of health insurance, to the difficulties of survival from one day to another)

- blamed for being poor, or for being socially assisted in an "undeserving" manner

Roma women are pushed to the margins by the whole socio-economic system as members of their dispossessed class and under these conditions of severe poverty are making tremendous efforts to fulfill the household and motherhood-related duties allocated to them by a domestic patriarchal regime. These private and public socio-economic orders eventually exhaust their bodies and endanger their life (as statistics on Roma women's life expectancy shows).

Simultaneously, Roma women's sexuality is expropriated from two directions: on the one side they are viewed as bearing the obligation for the biological reproduction of their own ethnic group, and on the other hand they become targets of racist fertility control and un-dignifying discourses according to which they give birth to children with less value than majority mother's children (as practices of sterilization or discourses on Roma and non-Roma fertility demonstrate).

Internal forms of exploitation

- circles of redistributive dependency between the better-offs of the socio-spatially marginalized communities (who have access to different sources of "welfare") and the most vulnerable of the groups

- form of exploitation : financial (usury); material (selling the scarce goods to those in need on a higher price than they actually cost); sexual (forced prostitution); human (children sent for begging); economic (forced labor)

These are instances when the disempowerment of marginalized Roma women is multiplied and (re)produced by the interaction between several forms of subordination.

Missing intersectional public policies

The **Romanian state** was **not willing and/or capable to elaborate and implement intersectional policies** which could have acted on severe cases of social inequality and **marginalization produced at the juncture of class oppression, patriarchy and racism as intersecting forms of social and cultural domination**

During times when public policies are focusing on cutting welfare budgets, and when the state is preoccupied with justifying why it should support the 'free market' and the privatization of all spheres of life, and why it should stop being a force of development and welfare, **it is more than idealistic to believe that it will act in such a role in what regards Roma inclusion policies**

De-politicization of socio-economic marginalization

The role of the state

Pretends that the huge social problems that a big part of the population is faced with are a kind of accident or are the outcomes of individual failures of adapting to the market economy and might be handled, at the best, with a **project-based approach**

Contributed to the de-politicization of Roma marginalization and anti-Roma racism, and transformed these issues into seemingly politically neutral policy matters

Tries **delegating its inclusion and human rights related accountabilities to the civil society organizations**

Transforming civil society organizations

Roma organizations seemed to be ready to transform themselves into service providers and to compete among each other on the market of euro-funded projects.

Under the risk of being transformed into bureaucratic machineries reporting target group indicators and sustaining themselves financially

But: these organizations could not solve the structural problems faced by marginalized Roma communities, such as socio-spatial segregation, lack of adequate and affordable houses, lack of decent jobs that might assure stepping out of poverty, or eliminating institutional obstacles of participation on the societal life and the underlying anti-Gypsy racism.

The NGOization of the Roma movement and the financialization of these NGOs structurally reduced a lot the potential of institutionalized civil society to sustain solidarity, and through it to put political pressure on the state in terms of respecting human rights (including socio-economic rights) through appropriate development programs or in order to act responsibly in front of (Roma) marginalization becoming a mass phenomenon.

Effects on Roma women

Roma women not only persist suffering the effects of economic marginalization and are not only placed in the category of undeserving citizens alongside with Roma men, but – due to their reproductive and maternal roles – they are perceived and controlled more and more strongly as symbols of ethno-cultural boundaries and embodiments of racialized differences.

While addressing the issue of violence against women, mainstream women's movement define violence while reducing differences between women and men to sexual difference, and are not concerned with the particular effects on Roma women of the violence suffered by them as members of communities stigmatized due to their ethnic background and becoming victims of violent physical attacks or of racist hate speech

Roma women's voices on unjust power regimes with many faces are having reduced chances to be heard and eventually to be transformed into political factors of policy-making and social change. But even if they are not visible/hearable for a large public and they do not address the structural issues of the ethno-culturally or socially oriented politics, this does not mean that they do not act as powerful women solving "small issues" of everyday life (from childcare under precarious conditions, through providing income for the family, to emotionally managing situations of forced evictions).

The political potential of Romani feminism

Roma and non-Roma feminists

While the socio-economic aspects of Roma marginalization are more and more de-politicized (transformed, at the best, into public policy issues without addressing the major systemic causes of mass impoverishment and marginalization), **there are signs in the Romanian public life that Roma women activists** – while building solidarity with non-Roma women and/or with anti-racist actions – **are becoming more and more political**.

The politicization of Roma women activism seems happening exactly around their womanly experiences, but it has the potential to evolve towards reframing 'Roma women' as political subject in an intersectional way.

Radical non-Roma feminist agenda (violence against women, rape, maternity, birth, or women's sexuality) framed by the principle of "the personal is political" are becoming more and more inclusive towards Roma women's experiences.

Filling the class-gap

Roma feminists:

- have the potential to center attention on social inequalities and by this to enrich the radical non-Roma feminist agenda focusing at its turn on 'femininity'

- **might become important participants of re-politicizing poverty, social inequality and marginalization, including the re-politicization of understanding racism as a cultural system justifying and maintaining the social divisions of classes**

- might also fill the class-gap identified in the European anti-discrimination policies

Structural and political intersectionality

Institutionalized forms of Roma women representation (that are more or less assuming intersectional politics or policies) are having the chance to resonate with the experiential or structural forms of intersectionality if, while formulating political and policy demands:

- they are able **assuring the participation of multiple Roma women voices in this process**

- they are capable of **providing Roma (women) with the power to control their means of production, reproduction and representation**

- they **build alliances** across gender, and across different social and ethnic groups that could **generate political action enforcing national and international stakeholders to really act on the behalf of the socially and economically dispossessed classes of nowadays European societies**