ROMANI GENDER POLITICS IN HUNGARY
AND FEMINIST ALLIANCES IN PRACTICE

Lídia Balogh (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Centre for Social Sciences)
< balogh.lidia@tk.mta.hu >

Paper to be presented at the 5th European Conference on Gender and Politics
by the European Consortium for Political Research
(University of Lausanne, June 8–10, 2017)

Please do not cite without the author’s permission

ROMA IN HUNGARY: SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

The estimated number of Roma in Hungary is 700,000 (Council of Europe estimation), however, the last population census in Hungary, in 2011, showed only 308,957 Roman people, according to self-declaration concerning ethnic affiliation. The Roma population is significantly younger in comparison to the overall Hungarian population, due to lower life expectancy (the average life expectancy of a Roma is approximately 10 years lower than the mainstream average, due to health problems closely related to low socioeconomic status), as well as fertility rates of Roma being higher than those of the general population in Hungary (Kemény 2004). Compared to the current ratio of the Roma population in general, the proportion of Roma children is significantly higher: while in the mid-60s, 6% of newborn babies in Hungary were of Roma origin, this proportion increased to 10% in the 90s, and according to reliable estimates, in 2002, the share of Roma among all newborns in Hungary was 15 %. (Kemény and Janky 2005)

In present-day Hungary, primarily two groups face the risk of – or already live in – poverty: the elderly (those without relatives or significant social network), and the Roma, independently of age. Indeed, ethnicity plays a crucial role in perpetuating poverty in Hungary, as Roma are well over-represented among poor people, and a significant proportion of poor Roma families, especially large families with young children, are living in deep, multidimensional poverty.
HOSTILITY TOWARDS ROMA WOMEN BY THE MAINSTREAM SOCIETY

The relatively high fertility rates of Roma women are usually interpreted by the mainstream society as a “strategy”. In the media, Mártá Gyenei was the first to use the term of "strategic child" (who is presumed to be born in order to contribute to the income of his/her family through child-specific welfare benefits) in the 1990’s, examining the economic survival strategies of poor families, both Roma and non-Roma. (Gyenei 1998) If it comes to Roma (specifically poor Roma, as the fertility rates of well-off Roma are decreasing in Hungary), right wing political rhetoric tends to use the term "offensive" instead of "strategy", as high fertility is interpreted as an ambitious project of Roma to outnumber "Hungarians" in Hungary.

In a number of European countries, involuntary/forced sterilization was used as a (supposedly, systematic) “tool” to control Roma women’s fertility during the second half of the 20th century, and even in the 2000’s. In Hungary, several human rights NGOs got involved into strategic litigation regarding this issue. In 2006, the UN CEDAW Committee found that the Hungarian government had violated the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in a case concerning the sterilisation of a Roma woman, Ms A.S., in the absence of her fully informed consent (UN CEDAW Committee 2004)). Eventually, the Hungarian government paid financial compensation to the victim in 2009. (ERRC 2009). However, according to the assessment of human rights organisations (Hungarian Women’s Lobby and European Roma Rights Centre 2013) Hungary has failed to fully implement the recommendations of CEDAW Committee in the relevant 2006 decision: the legal provisions regulating sterilisation still do not comply with international standards (ERRC 2011).

Again, the fertility of Roma women was in the centre of an infamous case from 2009, when at a local council meeting of Edelény (North-Eastern Hungary, in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County), the town’s mayor, Oszkár Molnár made the following statement: “in the neighbouring settlements, in settlements with a Gypsy majority, for instance in Lak, for instance in Szendrölád, pregnant Roma women take medication so that they would give birth to demented children so that they would be entitled to increased family allowance. Women during their pregnancy – I looked into this and it is true – keep hitting their bellies with rubber hammers so that they would give birth to disabled children.” The Equal Treatment Authority established that the mayor’s statement amounted to harassment under the Equal Treatment Act. The mayor filed for a judicial review against the decision, but the Metropolitan Court upheld the Authority's decision; then the mayor filed for review by the Supreme Court. Eventually, in its decision in 2011, the Supreme Court quashed the decisions by the Equal Treatment Authority and the Metropolitan Court, and terminated the case (Kádár 2011).
In January 2017, the Hungarian Equal Treatment Authority published its decision (No. EBH 349/2016) ruling in favour of a Roma woman who was harassed in the Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County Hospital, in Miskolc, by medical staff while giving birth (Balogh 2017). The complainant, who was alone (unaccompanied by a family member or relative of hers) in the labour room when she gave birth to her second child in February 2016, claimed that she was subjected to verbal harassment and racist remarks, including “you Gypsies give birth only for the money!” The complainant brought the case to the local office of the Equal Treatment Authority on her own; she was only provided with an attorney by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), only later, before the first hearing in her case. The press release of the ERRC refers to recent field research findings of the organization, claiming that “this is not a one-off story. There have been several other cases of similar abuses of the reproductive rights and dignity of Romani women not only in Hungary, but throughout the region”. (ERRC 2017)

GOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVES ON ROMANI WOMEN’S ISSUES

Social inclusion measures for Roma women

As an EU Member State, under the Framework Strategy for National Roma Inclusion Strategies, Hungary is obliged to promote the situation of the Roma with comprehensive social inclusion measures. The situation analysis chapter of the Hungarian Social Inclusion Strategy – both the first version (Ministry of Public Administration and Justice 2011), and the updated version (Ministry of Human Resources 2014) – includes a detailed analysis of the disadvantageous situation of Roma women and girls regarding education, Roma women’s access to labour market, and the health status of Roma women.

Within the framework of this National Strategy, the first high profile measure targeting Roma women was a training and labour market integration program for 1,000 participants. The state funded programme was implemented in cooperation by the National Roma Self-government (the latter is a unique Hungarian feature, provided by the Minority Rights Act) in 2012–2015, with the title „Growing Opportunity! – Training Programme for 1,000 Roma Women in the Fields of Social Services and Health Care”. The direct target group were Roma women who were seeking employment, while facing disadvantages at the labour market because the lack of up-to-date, marketable vocational training. According to the concept of the programme, the participants would serve as 'bridges' between social service providers and thousands of people/families in need, which had not used before – or had used only to a limited extent – social service, child welfare and child protection services. As for the visibility of the programme, numerous local media outlets reported about the recruiting event throughout the country, and news about the programme were frequently published on governmental websites. One of the articles, published on a
governmental agency’s site, cited a senior (male) representatives of the National Roma Self-government, who explicitly welcomed the initiative from its gender equality aspect: "... traditionally, only boys were provided with education in Roma communities. Now women have training opportunities." (TKKI 2013)

While the training element of the programme proved to be successful (the drop-out rate was minimal, and the participants scored high on the vocational exams), the implementation of the labour market element (i.e. finding relevant jobs for the participants) was apparently less efficient; and the actual indicators are not available.

In 2015, 2016 and 2017 the Ministry of Human Resources, responsible for social inclusion and education policies, launched a series of calls with the title ‘Prevention of early school leaving of Roma girls” for NGOs and church organisations. The program applies the principle of “explicit but not exclusive targeting”, promoted by the European Union: the target group of the mentoring projects within this framework, would be girls aged 10-18 of Roma origin and/or from multiply disadvantaged background, who are at the risk of drop-out from for certain reasons. The evaluation of the first and second round of projects is not available yet; there is no information about the proportion of participants/mentees who actually continued their studies, enrolled to secondary school etc.

In 2016, the Hungarian Police launched a joint recruitment campaign with the Fraternal Association of European Roma Law Enforcement Officers (FAERLEO), targeting especially Roma girls and young Roma women, with the aim promoting diversity in law enforcement, and increasing the number of female Roma police officers. However, data about the actual number of Roma officers, whether male or female, are not available, for various reasons, including data protection concerns.

Memory politics and visibility

On April 8, 2016, new posters popped up on the billboards of tram stations across Budapest, related to the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the anti-Communist Uprising in 1956 in Hungary. The non-profit poster series „Roma Heroes of 1956” was launched on the occasion of the International Roma Day, and supported by the Municipality of Budapest. Each of the posters portrays Roma individuals who were killed as freedom fighters in 1956, or were imprisoned later for their involvement in the uprising. The poster campaign is not only remarkable for being a positive endeavour to recognize Roma contributions to Hungarian history, but also to give some visibility to Roma women as well: out of the eight figures portrayed, two are female: Ilona Szabó aka “Kócos” (‘Ruffled’), a 17-year-old commander of a fighter’s group (killed when four months pregnant), and Erzsébet Hrozova, a 18-year-old nurse (sentenced to life in prison).
In early June, an international conference was held in the ‘Palace of Arts’ concert hall in Budapest, organized and funded by the Hungarian government, to celebrate the 5th anniversary of EU’s Framework Strategy for Roma Inclusion (launched under Hungary’s EU presidency in 2011, and promoted by a Hungarian MEP, Lívia Járóka – a Roma woman herself, who was present and served as one of the keynote speakers at the conference). One of the most visible features of this (apparently expensive) event was the presence of two Roma women’s social enterprise: the outfit and accessories of the hostesses and hosts was provided by the Romani Design fashion company (run by two sisters; the style of their products is based on traditional Roma folk costume elements and ornaments); moreover, the catering was partly provided by Romani Gastro (run by two young Roma women; based on the concept of reinterpreting the traditions of Roma cuisine). These arrangements gave the impression that, at least on the surface level, Roma women’s contribution is highly celebrated by the Hungarian government – while the context of this high-profile event was shadowed by ongoing scandals about alleged corruption, fraudulence and misuse of huge amounts of EU money for Roma inclusion in Hungary.

RECENT INITIATIVES BY THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE FIELD OF ROMA WOMEN’S ISSUES

Activities of Roma women’s NGOs

As for the civil society developments in the field of Roma gender politics in Hungary, first of all, the activities of Roma women’s organisations should be presented. The list of Roma women’s NGO in Hungary is not long, especially if it comes to the ones that include gender perspectives into their actions or work on a human-rights-based approach.

of the major actors of the Roma women’s movement is the Association of Roma Women in Public Life in Budapest, with a network of similar local Roma NGO, among them the Association of Roma Women in Public Life in Bódva Walley, operating in a town near to Miskolc, in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County (in the North-Eastern region with a high concentration of Roma population). These association are running projects on various issues, far beyond the field of political participation: they are operating charity projects (cloth and food drives), organising community events and festivities (e.g. Santa Claus parties), running summer camps for disadvantaged children, assisting vulnerable Roma families in housing and welfare issues etc..

In the South-Western part Hungary, the leading actor in the field of Roma women’s issues is the Colourful Pearls Roma Association in Pécs. The organisations’ activities include women’s health care programmes (e.g. breast cancer screening), crime prevention projects in the field of violence against
women and children, labour market inclusion programmes and community building. A high-profile project of theirs is a home restaurant in Pécs, called “Taste It!” (“Kóstolda”), based on a former initiative of the associations (a “mother’s centre” for Roma mothers and children in a segregated neighbourhood of Pécs), operated within the framework of a social enterprise.

Examples of joint initiatives of Roma and pro-Roma civil society actors in the field of gender issues

An example for a joint (one-off) action of Roma and non-Roma feminist activist was a silent vigil in July 2012 for a crime victim, a 25-year-old non-Roma woman (a psychologist, working for the police in Pécs) who went missing for a couple of days, then it turned out that she had been rape-murdered by a young Roma man (Munk 2012). The public event (the vigil), held in the centre of Budapest, was aimed to raise awareness on the risks of misrepresentation of the case by the media (and in the public discourse), which may contribute to the increase of already existing ethnic tensions in Hungary, and may draw the focus away from the overarching issue of gender-based violence.

As for the organisational cooperation between the mainstream women’s movement and Roma women’s movement, the role of the Hungarian Women’s Lobby (the national platform of the Brussels-based European Women’s Lobby), an umbrella organization of approx. 20 mainstream women’s NGOs and Roma women’s organisations, and the) should be highlighted. The first high-profile Roma-related initiative of the HWL was an international conference in 2011 entitled “Roma women in Focus” (Balogh and Kóczé 2011). Gender-based violence is a major topics of the member organisations’ joint actions (e.g. events within the framework of the annual campaign “16 Days of Activism Against Violence Against Women” or awareness raising connected to the “One Billion Rising” flash-mobs). As for lobby activities, the Hungarian Women’s Lobby is involved in the UN CEDAW country reporting mechanism that allows local and international NGOs to submit alternative reports (‘shadow reports’) in addition to the state versions, in which they may include their own data or research findings to illustrate the lack of or inadequacy of governmental measures. Concerning the situation of Romani women in the CEE Region, the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) is the flagship organization in shadow reporting and commenting on the CEDAW state reports throughout Europe. In 2013, the Hungarian Women’s Lobby and the European Roma Rights Centre prepared for the first time a joint submission (Hungarian Women’s Lobby and European Roma Rights Centre 2013) for the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, paying special attention to the situation of Roma women in Hungary.

Alliances and manifestations of solidarity are formed on local levels as well. A mainstream women’s NGO in Miskolc, Regina Foundation has been cooperating with grassroots Roma organisations in the
neighbouring settlements, in the field of community building, and promoting women’s access to reproductive rights and health care. Within the framework of a remarkable project in 2015–2016, in cooperation with the Hungarian Association of Doulas, training was provided for women from disadvantaged Roma communities who were interested in acting as doulas; the training project included sessions on reproductive health and patients’ rights as well. Through the its network of local Roma women activist and community workers, the Regina Foundation has been contributing to the human rights fact finding initiatives of the European Roma Rights Centre in the field of reproductive rights of Roma women; and implemented a fund-raising campaign as well, raising awareness on the vulnerability of Roma and disadvantaged women in maternity care.

Projects carried out by other actors

Notably, in some cases, civil society initiatives in the field of Roma women’s issues were carried out by actors that are usually not considered as part of the Roma women’s movement or the mainstream women’s movement or the (core of the) Roma rights movements.

The “Budapest English Club for Roma Women” was a series of events in English for young Roma women, professionals or students, organised in 2012 by the Toma Lantos Institute; an independent human and minority rights organization based in Budapest. The events included meetings with prominent female public life figures, including U.S. congresswoman Nancy Pelosi. The impact of this initiative, being a ‘soft measure’ with the aim of providing the participants with networking opportunities and inspiration, would be hard to measure.

Another relevant project – “Storytelling Mothers” – was implemented (2010–2012) by a faith-based civil society organization (Unity in Diversity Foundation, associated with the Bahá’í church), within the framework a programme with the title: “Good Start” Programme (co-funded by the EU). According to the available information, the positive outcomes of this initiative are measurable, e.g. in terms of the number of participants – young mothers with low literacy level – who went back to school to finish elementary education, or continued their studies in secondary school. The programme was primarily targeting disadvantaged/Roma children, but this project provided support explicitly for mothers; with the aim of empowering Roma women to break the cycle of illiteracy Yaz (Taherzadeh 2006).

ROMA GENDER POLITICS AND THE CONCEPT INTERSECTIONALITY

Before turning to the analysis of the above presented developments in the field of Roma gender politics in Hungary, a closer look should be taken at a plausible analytical tool, that is, the concept of intersectionality.
This concept (and term) is attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1995), who elaborated it in the context of Black Feminism in the U.S. According to Crenshaw, intersectionality may be manifested as „structural intersectionality“ – some people’s situation is defined by a trap of the interplay of different factors (disadvantages); while the other significant manifestation of intersectionality is “political intersectionality”, when the voice of those who are affected by intersectionality is muted by the conflicting interests of different political movements.

The concept of intersectionality is used with regards to European phenomena, from the early 2000’s (Yuval-Davis 2006); (Verloo 2006); more specifically, it has been applied to Roma equality issues as well (Oprea 2003), both by scholars and human rights activist. It should be noted, however, that Roma ethnicity correlates significantly with social exclusion in many European countries, and while it is by and large agreed that while Crenshaw’s model is able to accommodate issues including the aspects of poverty and socio-economic disadvantages, her framework serves principally the understanding of the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity.

The “classic” example for the phenomenon of structural intersectionality affecting Roma women in the CEE region is forced sterilization (apparently practiced in Hungary as well; see the above mentioned case of Ms. A.S. before the UN CEDAW Committee): it “happens” only with Roma women – but neither with non-Roma women nor Roma men. As for political intersectionality, the tensions between the interests of the mainstream/mono-focal feminist movement’s and the mainstream/mono-focal Roma rights movement’s should be taken into account: “Romani feminists grapple with the dual task of criticising internal patriarchal structures while trying to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes about the community” (Oprea 2009)

According to critics, there would be still space to extend the use of intersectionality as a critical concept. Kóczé’s analysis from 2009, with the title “Missing intersectionality”, reveals that with regards to Roma women’s issues, intersectionality is largely overlooked in research and policy agenda (Kóczé and Popa 2009). Six years later Jovanović and Daróczí – in their paper entitled “Still Missing Intersectionality” – claim that “[If] Romani political actors do not employ a stronger and more inclusive discourse on intersectionality (and not only including gender and ethnicity in the story), Romani political discourse is in danger of continuing to produce misunderstandings among people who in fact have the same goals. (Jovanović and Daróczí 2015). Vincze calls leftist feminists to introduce class among the factors of intersectionality in order to demolish the boundaries between Roma and non-Roma women’s movement and join forces to fight for social justice. (Vincze 2014)
The lack of a strong mainstream feminist movement (because of the historical background, i.e. the forced emancipation of women, and the stigmatization of feminism as a decadent Western ideology during the decades of state socialism; later, the neo-conservative tendencies after the political change in 1989–90) is an important element in the background of Roma gender politics in Hungary. While on the one hand, the fragile situation of the mainstream women’s rights NGOs, especially during the last years, may hinder long-term planning and the creation of alliances; one the other hand, the lack of solid structures of interest and power, the mainstream women’s movement may be more open for cooperation with other actors of the civil society, e.g. with the Roma women’s organisations.

The joint monitoring and lobbying activities of Roma and non-Roma (pro-Roma) women’s rights activists, e.g. in relation with shadow reporting to the UN CEDAW Committee may be seen as “strategic sisterhood” initiatives (Nyhagen Predelli and Halsaa 2012).

Regarding the approaches and claims, there are some perceivable divergences between the mainstream and the Roma women’s movement in Hungary. One of the most distinctive feature of the latter is the tendency to avoid confrontational actions or fundamentally challenge gender roles in the community or in (Asztalos Morell 2015). At the same time, men may play relatively active roles in Roma women’s NGOs or initiatives; for instance, the involvement and support of male members of the community is especially visible in the case of the One Billion Rising flash-mobs, organized by Roma women’s groups.

Representatives of Hungarian Roma women’s NGOs often emphasize that they work directly for the whole community, not just for women and girls – this resonates with the findings of Izsák regarding the European Women’s movement (Izsák 2008). Moreover, Roma women’s organisations typically tend to focus on redistribution issues (e.g. promoting access to health care services or to the labour market); sometimes instead of, or at least at the expense of recognition issues (e.g. combating sexism) or to anti-discrimination issues. Again, this phenomenon, i.e. the marginality of the rights based discourse in Romani women’s activism is perceivable not just in Hungary, but in other contexts as well; as described by Kóczé (2010).

While some initiatives of majority actors that are aimed to empower Roma women are not free from (implicit) essentialism and/or paternalism (Neaga 2013); there is an emerging consensus among Roma women activists that “feminism and alliances with non-Romani feminists have been proven as useful for all Roma”, and feminism “contributed to de-essentializing Roma identity” (Jovanović, Kóczé, and Balogh 2015).
CONCLUSIONS

With regards to Roma women’s issues in Hungary, both socio-economic exclusion of the Roma and deeply rooted anti-Roma Sentiments of the mainstream society should be taken into account. Hostility towards Roma women is strongly connected to demographic issues, first of all the relatively high fertility rates of Roma women with low level of education, and is often manifested in the violation of the reproductive rights of Roma women, or in harassment against women/mothers of Roma origin.

As for the initiatives of the Hungarian government in the field of Roma women’s issues, first of all the principles of international development initiatives or programmes are applied: Roma women are perceived as (hidden) resources for the whole society, while promoting the situation of Roma women is considered as an effective way to help the whole Roma community. Recently, a new tendency is emerging: the celebration of certain prominent Roma women, and “putting in the window” some projects carried out by Roma women, especially some “feminine” ones (e.g. in the fields of fashion design or gastronomy).

When it comes to analysing the relevant developments in the Hungarian civil society, the lack of the tradition of a strong feminist movement should be mentioned. Currently, the situation of women’s rights organisations is characterised with scarcity of resources and a hostile political environment (created by the current Hungarian government).

In the field of political intersectionality; firstly, there is a sensible avoidance on behalf of the Romani women’s movement to apply confrontational approaches towards gender inequalities within Romani communities. Secondly, the overwhelming relevance of class in defining the situation of Romani women is unmistakably reflected in the claims of the Romani women’s movement; i.e. in the prioritization of redistribution issues, sometimes at the cost of abandoning issues related to sexism and patriarchal oppression.

Apparently, the UN CEDAW mechanisms constitute an important major driving force to initiate cooperation between Roma and mainstream women’s rights actors; e.g. the shadow reports and related submissions, prepared by NGO coalitions, are usually more than just expert evaluations of the legislation or the government’s policies; these documents may be seen as manifestos of an inclusive and integrated women’s rights movement.
SOURCES


Hungarian Women’s Lobby, and European Roma Rights Centre. 2013. Alternative report submitted to the UN CEDAW Committee for consideration in relation to the examination of the combined seventh and eighth periodic reports of Hungary January 2013 by the Hungarian Women’s Lobby and the European Roma Rights Centre.

Izsák, Rita. 2008. The European Romani Women’s Movement – International Roma Women’s Network. AWID.


