TEMPTATION TO EXIST: A FEMINIST INQUIRY INTO THE FATE OF ROMANI WOMEN OF THE FORMER CZECHOSLOVAKIA

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FOREWORD

The research essay you are about to read portrays three very distinct regimes—fascism, communism, and democracy—and their very similar ways of handling what has been termed initially by Adolf Hitler as the “Gypsy Problem.” Subsequently the Nazi terminology was overtaken by communists and the modern era democratic politicians with a complete disregard to its original meaning and intent – the Gypsy genocide. The significance of this research lays in the fact that it zeroes its attention on those that have been oppressed the most in this decades-long hunt – the Roma women. These women have been targeted as means to the end of the Gypsy Problem, mistreated, and discriminated against by all levels of the modern society, including those who do share a part of their bereavement – women. As such, the essay serves as a memento and a plea for help sent to modern feminists, with an exclamation finger raised, pointing to the fact that something is wrong when those who fight against oppression oppress others, whether through a blunt ignorance or a hidden enjoyment of power domination.
“We are different, not worse...” A message addressed to modern feminists of Czechoslovakia by the Roma women (Olah, November 3, 2008).

INTRODUCTION

Czechoslovakia, a central European nation that later split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia has gone in its history through a number of contrasting regimes during the last seventy years. Fascism, communism, transitional democracy and finally the western-style “EU” democracy are very dissimilar forms of governance, yet have been noticed to unite in their approach and treatment of the despised Roma people. Through targeting the Roma women as mothers and birth-givers of this despised ethnicum, a history of failed, continuous and regime-resistant genocide has been penned and executed. Throughout the decades of oppression the history of Roma people has become nothing but a narration of the relationship between a minority group and the majority (Slotesova, 2006, p. 69). Where one would assume that a change “from one regime type to another would make a perceptible difference in state policies” (Barany, 2002, p. 41), the case of the Roma people, but especially of the Roma women proves this assumption to be wrong.

Since the fall of communism in 1989 the oppression of Gypsies has been given semi-due attention by various political, social and other non-governmental organizations (NGO) worldwide. Furthermore, the question of gender equality has been “in” and “trendy” at all levels of the modern European society, whether de jure and/or de facto. The victimization of
Romani women, however, has been somehow overlooked, as “the issue of the violations of the rights of Romani women [has] remained unaddressed for a long time” (Mihalache, 2007). The modern feminist groups and feminism in general are the primary villains in this case, acting as yet another “bystander to [this] large-scale atrocity” (Horwitz, 2000, cited in Stoett, 2004, p. 32), with the oppression of Romani women being more denounced than interdicted (Walzer, 1997, p. 107).

Romani women and other women of color need to be included in feminist discussions as without a full intersectional inclusion these wounds will never heal. The Roma women of the former Czechoslovakia are a part of the Czechoslovakian feminist movement, a part that aches. Therefore, feminism must open up and allow for a “more genuine and reflective debate” (Stoett, 2004, p. 32) as the way of healing itself. Applying “a race-class-gender framework to the study of gender” as implemented by intersectional multiracial feminism should thus be regarded “as the next step in the evolution of feminist thought” (Burgess-Proctor, 2006, p. 37).

This document accentuates the importance of transcending the “politics of inclusion” (Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, 2006, p. 3) on the part of modern feminists of the former Czechoslovakia, and the European Union in general, when addressing the concerns of Romani women. The novel feminism needs to move beyond “the element of ideas” as practiced by “academic feminists” (Carty, 1993, p. 13) and needs to celebrate “diversity in community struggles” (Ibid, p. 20). It must uncover the misrepresentation and transform it to what is just. Although I do not intend to minimize the experiences of discrimination aimed at the Roma men, it is the Roma women who are “in this unique position, [experiencing] the deleterious impact of
prejudice directed at them for their multiple identities” (Reid & Comas-Diaz, 1990, p. 400).

These intersecting subordinate identities, being a Rom and a woman, marginalize them within an already marginalized group and thus “relegate them to a position of acute social invisibility” (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, p. 381).

The analytical framework

The essay is a contemporary and archival analysis of the fate of Romani women of the former Czechoslovakia, based on qualitative data collection and an extensive literature review, including academic journals, books, government reports, NGO reports, and real-time monitoring of the local and international print and electronic media. Acquisition of first-hand information from one of the local Roma women’s organizations (Forum Pale Romanja / Forum for Roma Women) through internet discussions has also been accomplished and utilized, highlighting the emancipatory aspect of IT and the Internet in particular.

The epistemological, conceptual foundation of the research is based on postmodern feminism with an intersectional approach as employed by multi-cultural feminists. This approach differs from cultural feminism, which incorporates essentialist explanation of gender division, the view that women and men are biologically determined (Darlington & Mulvaney, 2003, p. 4). Women-of-color feminism, also known as multi-cultural or multi-racial feminism highlights the influence of culture and ethnicity but does not attribute the gendered inequality to a mere biological difference. Rather, it advocates intersectional approach to studying gender, recognizing that “race, class, gender, sexuality, and other locations of inequality are dynamic,
historically grounded, socially constructed power relationships that simultaneously operate both at the micro-structural and macro-structural levels” (Andersen and Collins, 2004, cited in Burgess-Proctor, 2006, p. 37). Hence, by using an intersectional approach multi-racial feminism does not prioritize gender “over other systems of power” (Burgess-Proctor, 2006, p. 37), and as such becomes more holistic in nature and inclusive to the disparities among women themselves.

The intersectionality of feminist inquiry further produces yet another valuable quality of our research—the interdisciplinary integration of fields of sociology, history, ethnopolitics and political science in general, cultural studies, criminology, and information technology. This is a great way of stimulating different ways of thinking, producing different angles of looking at the problem as well as making the many facets of the Roma women’s marginality finally visible and actable upon. It also enables feminists as well as other scholars to discover new connections between various subjects of our study, connections that have been so far either undetectable or indistinguishable. As such, interdisciplinary research is often the most plausible way of solving complex issues, such as the situation of the Roma women of the former Czechoslovakia.

With the same token, however, interdisciplinary integration requires much more resources for the research to be all-inclusive and properly balanced, as different perspectives do bring in both their strengths and weakness. Flexibility, openness and adaptability of one’s views are thus a necessary characteristic of a scholar conducting an interdisciplinary research. Hence, the problem faced by me at the beginning of this study was very complex and required
high tolerance for ambiguity, ensuring that no premature conclusions were made. This was
easier said than done considering the long history of societal prejudice against the Roma.

The interdisciplinary evidence collected during the research was carefully evaluated, and
lead to the production of this document, an account told by a bystander who until now was
ignorant of the problem, whether through an act of not knowing, not needing to know or not
caring at all; a male person who is neither a Gypsy nor a feminist, a person living thousands of
kilometers away from the problem. Yet this person has now been touched by the issue and
calls out to those who hypocritically claim to be the ones de jure representing the de facto
unrepresented, while still trying to understand the collective and individual mentality of the
bystanders who by their ignorance reinforce this unprecedented and unique marginality of the
32).
HISTORY OF THE ROMA OF THE FORMER CZECHOSLOVAKIA: ROMA—THE PROBLEM

“The Gypsy problem is a litmus test not of democracy but of a civil society; the one is unthinkable without the other.” Vaclav Havel

Long before 1918 when Czechoslovakia was created by declaring its independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Roma have been an inseparable part of the Czech and Slovakian history after coming to Europe from India in the 14th century. Throughout these times the Roma have always been “firmly ensconced at the bottom tier” (Barany, 2002, p. 2) of the society, “a pariah group subjected to widespread and intense societal rejection” (Barth, 1970, p. 31, cited in Barany, 2002, p. 2). As such, the Gypsies “have experienced centuries of strategic chaos, of elaborate fragmentation and epic instability” (Crowe, 1995, p. 300). Overall, it has been a bitter tale of mistreatment, misunderstanding, forced assimilation and an attempted physical, biological and cultural genocide.


From the end of WWI until the rise of Hitler, this period was synonymous with “increasing Gypsy impoverishment and socioeconomic marginalization” (Barany, 2002, p. 97). The Roma lived in segregated ghettos and in filthy conditions. Governments usually ignored
them as they did not pose any political risks. Yet in 1936 the anti-Gypsy campaign started to become globalized through Interpol’s establishment of the International Center for the Fight against the Gypsy Menace in Vienna, an organization still active today that has never apologized for its mistreatment of the Romani ethnicum (Hancock, 1987, p. 64). With the rise of Nazism the relative hands-off approach towards the Roma people ended, and in 1939 a forced registration of Gypsies begun under the direction of German authorities and The Office of Racial Hygiene, a registration similar to the recent request of the mayor of Rome and Italian minister of the interior—Gianni Alemano and Roberto Maroni—to fingerprint all Roma in Gypsy settlements within the city boundaries (Colotti, September 2008).

The Office of Racial Hygiene commanded that “all Gypsies should be treated as hereditary sick; the only solution [was] elimination” (Hancock, 2003, p. 42) through the machinery of Endlosung (The Final Solution) (Hancock, 1987, p. 67), or The Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring, imposing compulsory sterilization of Romani women beginning in 1934 (Lewy, 2000, p. 39). No Romani community in Europe “suffered proportionately more than that of the Nazi-occupied Czech lands” (Barany, 2002, p. 105) and of the fascist-satellite’s Slovakia. By the end of the World War II “nearly all Czech Roma were sent to concentration camps and perished there” (Ibid), with the intention to clean up the unwanted race in the name of the fight against racial pollution.

Under fascism, the Gypsies “were deemed so marginal that their murder provoked no intra-agency rivalries and thus required no written authorization” (Friedlander, 1995, p. 285). In keeping with race purifying orders, the Slovak State created a paramilitary organization called
*Hlinkova Garda* (The Hlinka’s Guard) (Slotesova, 2006, p. 80), an organization later revived in the 1990s that continues its registry and an indirect support by the new democratic Slovak government. Although an estimate of “half a million or more Roma were exterminated in the Holocaust” (Gil-Robles, February 15, 2006, p. 4), the persecution of Gypsies by the Nazi regime “represents but a chapter in a long history replete with abuse and cruel oppression” (Lewy, 2000, p. 1). Unlike Jewish people, no war crimes reparations have ever been paid to the Roma people and the Gypsy Holocaust is only lightly mentioned in the history of modern humanity. On January 25, 2009, the United Nations still refused to officially include the Roma minority in the ceremony held on the International Holocaust Remembrance Day (Romano Nevo Lil, January 25, 2009).

*Figure 1: Roma Holocaust (Romano Nevo Lil, February 16, 2009).*

After the WWII Czechoslovakia became a part of the Soviet communist empire. Assimilation and creation of the “Homo Sovieticus (The New Soviet Man)” was the ultimate and official answer to the Gypsy problem as understood by the Communist party (Barany, 2002, p. 36). The ethnic difference was unacceptable and so did the spreading of cultural ideologies. The national minority status granted to the Gypsies in the interwar period was “repealed” (Ibid, p. 115), as it was contradicting the assimilation goals of the Party. Granting them a national minority status was something unheard of. The Gypsies were once again classified as an “element preventing the purity of [the majority] race” (Slotesova, 2006, p. 80). Acknowledgment of membership in the Romani ethnic group “amounted to admission of membership in an antisocial stratum” (Project on Ethnic Relations, 1992). The assumed genetic inferiority of the Roma people could only be overcome by giving up their way of life and getting as close to the norm as possible.

Towards the EU and democracy: PROBLEM: Roma People. SOLUTION: Ignorance.

After the fall of Communism in 1989 the Czechoslovakian Roma were in 1990-91 finally granted a national minority status, despite the fact that neighboring Germany, a developed western democracy still refused to accept the Roma as their national minority in 1992 (Project on Ethnic Relations, 1992). Throughout the years to follow the granting of the minority rights
was perhaps the most notable benefit that the Roma have ever received from the new post-communist era. On the other hand, the Roma marginality continued to be “far more comprehensive than that of the Jews, Kurds, or other traditionally excluded or disadvantaged groups” (Barany, 2002, p. 2). In 1992, the year when Czechoslovakia was about to split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Austrian *Tageszeitung* quoted Rudko Kawczynski of the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), who stated at time that the society was once again “one step before a new holocaust of Roma in Europe” (Hahn, August 29, 1992). The Gypsies continued to be seen by the society as being “*nearer to the animals* (emphasis added) than any race known to us in Europe” (Mayall, 1988, p. 80).

Although after the split of Czechoslovakia on December 31, 1992, both the Czech Republic and Slovakia became independent liberal democracies, usually the most favorable forms of political governance in terms of ethnopolitics, the Roma oppression continued. The newly acquired freedom of speech resulted in the creation of numerous nationalistic parties. Furthermore, facing an increase in the number of new challenges the governments became “relatively indifferent to Roma’s problems” (Salomeea, 2003) and so did the European Union which at this stage did not consider the Roma to be one of its own issues.

The Czech and Slovak governments’ *head-in-the-sand* approach only added fuel to the mistreatment of Gypsies. The prevalent ignorance was often spiked by racial slurs made by high-ranking politicians as a way of excusing the aforementioned lack of acknowledgment. For example, Slovak Premier Vladimir Meciar while speaking about the Roma stated that “it was necessary to curtail the ‘extended reproduction of [this] socially inadaptable and mentally
backward population...” (Fonseca, 1995, p. 66), because “if we do not deal with them now, they will deal with us later...” (Ibid). Several months later the mayor of a small town in Eastern Slovakia said that the only solution to Slovakia’s Gypsy problem was to “shoot them all” (Ibid, p. 62). In 1999 Czech Prime Minister and later President Vaclav Klaus expressed a view that the Gypsies were “an economic drain and an obstacle on the headlong path to prosperity” (Gross, December 19, 1999); his government was known to “do very little to discourage skinhead attacks or to condemn the racist measures of some local authorities” (Barany, 2002, p. 292). Ten years later, on May 25, 2009 the Czech National Television (CTV) still aired a shot of the National Party’s campaign urging people that it’s time to finally deal with the Gypsy question (Szalai, May 21, 2009).

**EU accession: PROBLEM: Roma People. SOLUTION: Dear Copenhagen...Copenhagen, where are you?**

The new EU candidate countries, including the Czech Republic and Slovakia, aiming at becoming full members of the European Union on May 1, 2004, were required as part of their accession process to meet strict criteria set out by the Union in June 1993, later generally referred to as The Copenhagen Criteria. In a nutshell, these criteria were to ensure that, among other things, candidate countries would have “achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and, protection of minorities...” (Copenhagen European Council, June 21-22, 1993). As such, the pre-accession time was the
only time when the governments had to become responsive to the Roma people for the common good of the majority.

Soon after the accession, however, *The Copenhagen Criteria* lost their power and the question of ethnopolitics was back in the hands of national governments; this time, it was the EU itself who now joined the national governments in their sand-boxes, not wanting to deal with its new citizens. As a result, two months after the countries’ accession to the EU a Roma man from the city of Kosice (Slovakia) sent an envelope with his citizenship card, birth certificate and a letter outlining his life story together with an application to renounce his Slovak citizenship as a way of protesting against the mistreatment of the Roma people, his own social status, and the inability of the government to act and help, as the “country [was] not interested in the Roma who wanted to make a difference” (Romano Nevo Lil, June 17, 2004). Ever since 2004, the ignorance and marginality of the Roma people has increased, often directly or indirectly supported by high ranking politicians who have continued to demonstrate “negative attitudes of racial intolerance” (Topidi, 2003, p. 11.)

The ongoing ignorance towards the Roma was recently confirmed by a statement of the lately dismissed Slovak government’s Commissioner for Roma Anina Botosova, who stated that the minister responsible for ethnic minorities, Dusan Caplovic, “lives in the clouds and has no idea about the Roma reality” (Sudor, June 6, 2009). She further added that the ministry responsible for ethnic minorities willingly kept hiring people that “completely [did] not understand the Gypsies’ issues” (Ibid). The Slovak government admitted to having “no tangible plan ready” (Romano Nevo Lil, April 26, 2009) in terms of dealing with the Roma situation,
while the regional politicians’ solutions and statements were often reported as “unpublishable” (Romano Nevo Lil, October 5, 2004). Yet, with no tangible solution at hand, the government had to fire Botosova from her position as her zealouosity to help the Roma people exceeded the government’s willingness to act.

In addition, the Roma continue to be mistreated by the justice system and the violence against them continues to be well spread. The Hlinka’s Guard that was responsible for The Final Solution’s execution in Slovakia during fascism has been revived in 1996 under the name of Slovenska Pospolitost (The Slovak Brotherhood). A far-right extremist group, clothed in the uniforms of the old Hlinka’s Guard, indirectly supported by one of the coalition parties (The Slovak National Party – SNS) received an official registration as a political organization by the Slovak Ministry of Interior. While the party got dissolved in March 2006 in spite of tremendous domestic and international pressure, three years later on July 1, 2009 the Slovak Constitutional Court dismissed the decision to dissolve it and supported the party’s appeal, granting it a full legal status once again (Daily Sme.sk, July 1, 2009).

Furthermore, judges of the Czech Republic and Slovakia continue to ignorantly rule that violent “attacks against the Gypsies cannot possibly be motivated by racism—and thus applying more severe antiracism sentencing guidelines [would be] inappropriate…” (Barany, 2002, p. 165). Unsurprisingly, the first court case ruled under the newly passed Slovak Antidiscrimination Law, where three Roma people were refused to be served in a restaurant was dismissed on August 31, 2006, with the court stating that since the restaurant was well known of its attitude towards the Roma and the three Roma had known of this fact, “they should have presumed the
discriminatory treatment” (Center for Civil and Human Rights, August 31, 2006). Unfortunately, the continuous failure to identify and prosecute the perpetrators of violence and discrimination against the Roma amounts “to a signal from the authorities that they will tolerate such actions” (Project on Ethnic Relations, 1992).

In cases where officials do not deny that a crime has taken place, they attempt to “deny the extent of the crime, or to push the Rom out of the picture as a victim” (European Roma Rights Center, January 1997, p. 12). As such, the Roma are often afraid to call the police for help, as explained by a 25-year-old Roma man: “If I’m attacked again, I won’t call the police. It would be like calling the skinheads” (Ibid). Yet when the current minister responsible for public safety Robert Kalinak was asked about the mistreatment of Romani minority by police officers, he stated that “I do not have any such information” (Romano Nevo Lil, March 13, 2008), a move that goes hand-in-hand with the popular head-in-the-sand ethnopolitics.

Copenhagen, a city of the utmost importance as declared by the EU prior to 2004 has been politically slowly disappearing from the map. The leverage of the EU vis-à-vis the Czech Republic and Slovakia has been lost, or was made to be forgotten, just in case so it does not get used against those who created it in the first place – the EU itself, as the Roma community has suddenly become a shared problem. When in 1998 and 1999 thousands of Czech and Slovak Gypsies immigrated to the old EU countries to claim asylum, the EU countries responded by abolishing their visa-free regimes for Czech and Slovak citizens. These countries included the UK, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany (Germany declared these countries to be “secure third states” (Kawczynski, 2000), and hence no asylum could be claimed by
citizens of these countries), as well as Canada. At the time this was a totally acceptable move on the part of the Union. Paradoxically, ten years later in July 2009 when the influx of the Czech Roma asylum seekers to Canada has lead to the abolishment of the visa-free regime for Czech nationals, the Union responded by calling Canada’s move outrageous, with the Swedish presidency of the EU supporting the retaliatory idea of abolishing visa-free regime for Canadian citizens traveling to any of the EU countries. The EU’s position towards the Roma has clearly changed from that of their protector when they were not its problem, to that of their unwanted step-parent, now that they are EU citizens.

**STORY OF THE ROMA WOMEN: A CIRCLE OF MARGINALITY**

The Roma women remain to be by far the most marginalized, discriminated, oppressed and persecuted group in the former Czechoslovakia. Their marginality is unique and different from any other minority group, including the Roma men. These women face multi-faceted, compound, trans-sectional oppression as they cope with marginalization while being members of the already marginalized group. They fight for their rights as Roma as well as women, with one category often overshadowing the other, making them completely invisible to both the society and feminism.

This unique marginality has been proven to be regime-resistant, exceptional and transnational. The EU reports that Romani women have, in recent years, “been victims of
extreme human rights abuses” (Jaroka, 2006, p. 5), such as forced and coerced sterilizations, refusal of medical care and adequate social assistance, abuses not found anywhere else in the modern western democratic society. The Roma women of the former Czechoslovakia have become one of the “most threatened groups and individuals in the European Union’s member states” (Ibid). This continuous hatred stems from the fact that these are the birth givers and mothers of the despised ethnicum. Their story is a story of a decades-long practice of scapegoatism, where these women have been blamed for the larger society’s inability and/or unwillingness to face the Roma issue. The Roma women’s story thus resembles a circle of multifaceted marginality from which there is no escape, and where it is impossible to talk about one—being a Rom, without referencing the other—being a woman.

Romani gender roles: Abuse as a tradition

One of the clear sources of the Roma women’s oppression is their own culture, a society that still remains highly patriarchal. As a result of these traditions, Romani women do not “enjoy full respect for their freedom of choice in matters concerning the most fundamental decisions of their lives...” (European Roma Rights Centre, 2007). The role of a Roma woman is to take care of the household. Women are expected to obey men and “are ordinarily held in higher esteem the more children they bear” (Barany, 2002, p. 14), which in turn becomes a huge issue for the majority population, as the Roma children are seen as mere money-making tools of their Roma parents through welfare payments. Many Romani women find nothing wrong with being hit by their husbands; when their husbands drink all the money away without...
leaving some for food and other necessities—they do not question it (Olah, November 22, 2007).

When a Roma woman breaks her role she loses the respect of her extended family “and her parents are also less respected by the community” (Bitu, 2003). Girls are often expected to withdraw from schools once they reach puberty and prepare for childbearing of their own children or of the younger siblings. “Very few girls go through a happy and worry-free childhood; most of them jump straight from childhood to being adults” (Conka, May 19, 2006). “They’re still considered to be less valuable and less important than men” (Olah, November 3, 2008). As soon as a Roma woman gets married “her [already limited] rights get revoked” (Conka, January 2, 2008), she can’t go anywhere by herself and neither is she allowed to get more education or a job. An old Gypsy proverb sums it for all: “Such a daughter-in-law is good who eats unsalted food and says it is salted” (Crowe, 1995, p. 40). Hence, “traditions have always been a double-edged sword” (Okin, July 1998, p. 667) for Romani women.

In addition, the ill-applied gender roles and traditions often result not only in psychological abuse and suffering, but also in physical violence including sexual abuse, as well as economic abuse, where a Roma woman is withdrawn any financial resources by her husband. These all are instances of injustice within Roma culture which have become normalized in the eyes of these women to the point where they do not question them. The normality of violence in Roma families is described by Anina Botosova of the Slovak Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family as “common” (Conka, December 8, 2005), yet still a huge object of “tabooization” (Cickova, December 8, 2005). From a Roma woman’s point of view,
physical violence, including sexual abuse from her husband “is normal, as it is coming from a person whom she’s got her children with and that is how it is most likely supposed to be anyway” (Botosova, July 28, 2008). Unfortunately, sexual abuse does not only come from their husbands but from other males in the community and/or family as well, often making these abuses incestuous. As a result, this region claims the “highest incidence of inbreeding in Europe” (Crowe, 1995, p. 101). Very often, these are the older male siblings who lecture their younger sisters on the acts of lovemaking.

**Societal and political abuse**

Romani women have always been seen and misused by the society as either “handy scapegoats or figments of [oppressive] imagination” (Crowe, 1995, p. 1). Through social marginality, the Roma women of the former Czechoslovakia have been shunned, rejected, and ostracized for centuries with societal attitudes forming and deforming political actions and vice versa, to the point where sometimes not even emergency help gets provided to them. This was the case of 1998 where after serious flooding that left thousands of Roma women and their children empty handed, The Red Cross of Slovakia refused to split emergency cash assistance to the Gypsies “as they would only drink it away”(Barany, 2002, p. 312), even though Slovaks and other ethnic minorities from the same area were financially assisted. Overall, a “deepening of socio-pathological factors” affecting the situation of Roma girls and women has been noticed in every part of their lives (Demeova, December 23, 2008). The Roma women who are starting to understand the issue and are willing to help often face barriers erected by their own
government. For example, Slovak vice-premier Dusan Caplovic in charge of ethnic minorities recently stated that the government’s Commissioner for Roma “should be a Roma man” (Romano Nevo Lil, July 1, 2009A) and not a Roma woman.

Settlements where Romani women live and raise their children are assumed to “exist in a state of careless anarchy” (Barany, 2002, p. 13), pointing to the historically and socially constructed inability of the Roma women to provide for their children, acknowledging them as incompetent mothers. A recent outrageous incident from the city of Kosice, Slovakia, illustrates this point further and shows a complete ignorance and cowardness on the part of the state. On March 21, 2009, Slovak State Police officers forced six Roma boys aged six to eleven to undress, slap and kiss each other, while being recorded on the officers’ cell phones. The officers further yelled racial slurs at the boys. Some of the children got bitten by unmuzzled dogs that were let loose by the officers (Daily SME.sk, April 7, 2009). Once questioned, the police officers stated that they wanted to punish and discipline the kids for their unruly behavior on the street and for trying to steal from an elderly woman. A video footage of the incident is shocking and compares to the recent mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners by the US military in Abu-Ghurai, with the exception that instead of suspected terrorists these were young children. While acknowledging the wrongdoing of the officers both the public and the police completely played down the seriousness of the incident, pointing to the inadequate parenting on behalf of the mothers of these children. As such, both examples show how the state and the public were appalled by the incidents yet simultaneously put the judgment onto the Other—Iraqis and the Roma mothers.
In the state’s justification of the abuse through the social construction of inept Roma parenting, President of the Slovak State Police added that “there was certainly no racist flavor to the incident” (Conka, June 1, 2009), even though the officers clearly yelled racial slurs at the boys. Minister of the Interior Robert Kalinak further rejected thoughts about a complete failure on the part of the police, only acknowledging “a failure of the individual officers” (Romano Nevo Lil, June 1, 2009), even though not one officer present at the police station at the time objected to the mistreatment, as the video footage shows the incident to happen in the common areas of the police station, frequented by other officers. Daniel Lipsic, an opposition Member of Parliament for the Christian Democratic Union while acknowledging the mistreatment of the Roma children asked the minister whether there was any “guarantee that the next time such an inhumane treatment won’t be given to respectable citizens?” (Ibid, emphasis added).

In another incident the state got caught once again trying to shift the blame from itself onto the Roma mothers, when it indirectly permitted an additional set of tragedies to happen. Four Roma infants were reported dead in February 2009 in Nizne Kapustniky, an Eastern Slovakian village mostly settled by the Roma. Two girls (twenty-months-old and nine-months-old) burned to death in a shack fire due to improper heating arrangements. Within the next twenty-four hours in the same Roma community another infant (4-months-old) froze to death while the fourth one (5-months-old) was discovered with its face bitten by rats, dying soon after it was handed over to paramedics. Again, it was the Roma mothers who got single blamed for not being able to care for their children, even though numerous calls were made to the appropriate agencies from the community begging the services to take the infants away from
the community at least temporarily during the winter months, as the mothers were unable to
care for them under the present living conditions. The ignorance of the social services to act,
even after the first two deaths was difficult to comprehend, yet was whitewashed by a
statement from the responsible social services agency, asserting that the bad living and
hygienic conditions were not enough grounds to remove children from their parents (Vilcek,
February 16, 2009). Unrelated to the story, in 2004 the EU’s Ambassador to Slovakia Eric van
der Linden himself questioned the ability of Romani mothers to raise their children by stating
that they should be taken away from their parents and placed in residential schools” (Romano
Nevo Lil, May 14, 2004).¹

**Poverty**

If poverty is not a result of nature, then great is our sin.

Charles Darwin

The living conditions of Romani women of the former Czechoslovakia are well below the
European Union’s average, an inexcusable fact. The truth is that there has been no change for
better in the last thirty years. A 1979 description of Roma houses, “which are more like
gutters... [where] the roofs are made of branches daubed with mud...” (Roleine, 1979, p. 112) is
still an accurate portrayal of the Roma housing in the 21st century’s European Union (Figure 2).

¹ The idea of residential and segregated schools for the Roma children closely resembles the residential school
program used for the assimilation of Canada’s Aboriginal population – a form of state genocide in itself.
unbelievable: “I was in Africa, but what I see in Slovakia is something much worse” (Havrlova, June 14, 2004). For example, only 39 percent of Roma settlements have access to water and only 13 percent have a functional sewage (Romano Nevo Lil, November 3, 2006), resulting in numerous and frequent epidemics. A significant portion of these women thus live in housings that “threaten their health” (Jaroka, 2006, p. 5).

The few Romani women that are lucky to find an employment are employed “in auxiliary, unskilled, physically demanding work and in seasonal and occasional labor” (Commission of the European Communities, 2008, p. 32), which provides them with “very low wages and prevent[s] them from accessing social security benefits” (Ibid). Still, the unemployment rate among adult Romani women is “many times higher than that of the majority population” (Jaroka, 2006, p. 5). The “dialectical relationship between poverty and disability” (Erevelles, 2006, p. 25), and hence deviancy, is also recognized as one of the Roma women’s barrier towards gaining an employment. Roma women are therefore left to the mercy of the state to provide them with at least minimum social benefits, and even those usually don’t get to them as they are often abused by their husbands.

The money is scarce and the ways of making them are very limited. It is very common for Romani women to be pushed into the grey areas of the economy to ensure their own and
their children’s survival. Selling their bodies is nothing uncommon and thus on top of everything else the Roma women are subjected to numerous health issues stemming from STDs. As a journalist reports, while working in a local Roma community a woman that mistakenly thought he was a pimp run towards him and yelled the price for which she was willing to work in the sex trade abroad. The price was one thousand Euros (Romano Nevo Lil, July 2, 2009A). When another journalist questioned another Roma woman why her young children were not in school, she stated: “And what am I supposed to put on their feet and on them? I don’t have money for their food, all we get as a family is 5,400 crowns a month (ca. 180 euro) in social assistance payments” (Havrlova, June 14, 2004). Yet even more tragic and distressing is a story of a mother, who’s only way to subsidize her income was begging. For that, she burned her own son’s face with an electric iron as to evoke more pity (Figure 3) (Romano Nevo Lil, July 2, 2009A). In addition, according to Czech and Slovak police authorities, there are hundreds of poor Roma girls working the roads, often pimped by their own parents (Schon, July 2, 2009).
Physical segregation

Segregation of the Roma settlements and communities is another burden the Roma women have to face. These settlements have been moved outside the towns and cities and as such prevent the Roma women from gaining employment, raising their children and living their lives as humans with easy access to social supports. Sadly, the segregation of Roma settlements is not only supported by the society but by politicians and the governments (local, regional, national) as well. One of the biggest Roma settlements in the former Czechoslovakia – Lunik IX, was created by presiding mayor of Kosice (the second largest city in Slovakia) Rudolf Schuster in 1995-1998, a politician who later became President of Slovakia (1999-2004). The city’s Roma were evicted to Lunik IX, a former military housing estate beyond the city’s suburbs, with the intention “to beautify the city’s downtown” (Barany, 2002, p. 289), reflecting the overall and ever-present mood of the Slovak society towards the Roma people. A Czech poll conducted in May, 2009 revealed that relations between the Roma and the rest of the society were believed “to be at their worst in more than a decade” (Bokuvka, June 6, 2009), while eighty-five percent of respondents gave a “poor assessment of coexistence with Roma” (Czech Press Agency cited in Bokuvka, June 6, 2009). A favorite Czech joke is only another said proof if it: “What is the worst you can hear from a Roma? Answer: Good morning, neighbor” (Ibid).

Overall, the governments on all levels still practice the unwritten segregation policy by concentrating all of the new Roma housing projects outside the cities, “in the same segregated areas” (Romano Nevo Lil, July 2, 2009B). Hatred towards the Roma people thus resembles a ping-pong game between the government and the society, passing on the next-step-
oppression-decision ball back and forth. In June 2009, an anonym left an anti-Roma letter and a sample of an unknown substance declared as poisonous in a syringe with a needle placed between bakeries in one of Poprad’s (Slovakian city) shopping malls. The letter stated that some of the bakery products had already been injected with the poison and requested that the new housing project which was supposed to be built for the Roma close to his home-town was to be stopped immediately or there was “going to be no more warnings and people would find randomly poised food items in stores” (Korzar.sk, June 6, 2009). A few days later, the same warning letter was found in a close-by village, this time together with reportedly poisoned chocolate bars left randomly near an elementary school, visible to children. In another example the city council of Jelsava, Slovakia, refused five Romani families permanent residence, even though they owned real estate there, with the following explanation: “We know we are breaking the law [but] we don’t want Jelsava to become a Roma city” (Vasecka, M., 1999, p. 405). In 1999 in Usti nad Labem, Czech Republic, the city council decided to “build a wall segregating Czechs from the Gypsies” (Barany, 2002, p. 296), with the same happening in the city of Presov, Slovakia, in 2005.

By being segregated from the rest of the society, the Roma people and especially the women are unable to find employment, benefit from healthcare and educational services for themselves and their children, and even to obtain basic groceries. The lack of mail delivery is preventing the Roma women from being in touch with authorities, receiving welfare benefits, etc. The unavailability of drinking water, electricity, gas, sewage and other utilities in these segregated settlements prevents them from living valuable and enjoyable lives, and instead provides them with nothing but a daily fight for survival, often resulting in deaths of their
newborns, with the Roma women finding retreat from this misery in alcohol, glue-sniffing or in “better” cases the sex-trade.

**Education**

The same way as the physical segregation of Roma settlements is a result of both societal and political discrimination, segregation of Romani children in schools is yet another example of oppression the Roma women experience both as Roma girls and later as mothers of their children. Whereas in the communist-era and even under fascism the dedicated Roma schools were given lawful name as “seggregated schools” (*Osobitna skola*), the new democratic republics had to change their rhetoric and align it with the EU’s non-discriminatory policy; hence, even though the Roma children are still segregated, now they are told to be attending “special schools,” a “renewed wave of exclusion” (European Roma Rights Center, January 1997, p. 33) in education.

Many of these schools are officially created for mentally challenged children. A 2007 probe conducted by the Amnesty International in one of these special schools revealed that at least ten percent of pupils were Roma, not mentally challenged at all (Romano Nevo Lil, October 9, 2008). A stereotype-driven assumption about most of the Roma children being cognitively delayed thus often leads to the unquestioned segregation of otherwise capable children in these special schools, resulting in them becoming unproductive members of the society later on in their lives. This is due to the fact that “these children follow a curriculum inferior to those of mainstream classes, which diminishes their opportunities for further
education and for finding employment in future” (Gil-Robles, February 15, 2006, p. 20), a depressing and irreversible fact that becomes one of the main reasons of the misfortune of thousands of the Czechoslovakian Romani women. Hence the official report of “the gap in the level of education between non-Romani women and Romani women [being] unacceptably large” (European Roma Rights Centre, 2007). The school abandonment rates of Romani girls in primary education were also found to be “very high” (United Nations Development Program, 2002, cited in Jaroka, 2006, p. 5), and the number of Gypsies completing high-school was reported as being about one percent in the Czech Republic, with the number of Roma in post-secondary education being “infinitesimal, well below one percent” (Barany, 2002, p. 170).

In addition, racial segregation in schools and biased attitudes among teachers and administrators “contribute to the low level of expectations of Romani parents for their daughters” (Jaroka, 2006, p. 5), adding more fuel to the fire that destroys any hope for better future of these girls. Furthermore, bureaucratic obstacles are often created with the intention “to exclude Roma children from schools” (Gil-Robles, February 15, 2006, pp. 24-25). These include the proposed lack of birth certificates or identity documents, an illogical and ironic reason to exclude someone from compulsory, law-compelled requirement of all children to attend primary education. However, in the case of Romani children, a piece of paper required by the bureaucratic machinery is often above the constitutional right and a lawful requirement to obtain primary education.

In many instances “the school principals themselves suggest that the children are to be placed in the segregated, special needs schools with an explanation that this way they will be
protected from racial attacks coming from the white classmates” (Romano Nevo Lil, December 18, 2006). However, the most harmful prejudices are kept alive “among the teachers themselves” (Sudor, June 6, 2009), making the school experience of Romani children and their mothers to be very traumatic. For example, seats by the Roma children are openly “reserved for disciplining purposes of [white] children” (Sudor, June 6, 2009), says a Roma woman. Lastly, non-Roma parents also push on school administrators not to include Gypsy children in regular schools. In one such example, white parents verbally confronted one of the teachers about the fact that “they were not warned in advance about the Roma attending the school” (Havrlova, May 20, 2006). This all is especially tough on young Roma women, who after facing numerous obstacles from within their own communities in trying to obtain education finally do so only to experience more oppression anywhere they go within the educational system.

Segregation, abuse, stare-downs, signs of inferiority as well as “verbal and physical abuse [against Roma students] is more frequent than ever [before]” (Havrlova, November 9, 2004). The situation is so bad that it feels like “some teachers are confused about the difference between being a correctional officer and a teacher” (Ibid), says a Roma mother. The visible and always present abuse is almost constantly picked up by other students as well, who then add to the mistreatment of Roma pupils. For example, in 1997 a 17-year old high-school girl and a finalist of a beauty contest stated in a live TV-show interview that “she wanted to become a prosecutor in order to cleanse her home-town of Gypsies” (Green, April 6, 1993), a statement greeted by a spontaneous applause of the audience. An interview with a Roma woman about her school experience further reveals the atrocity these young girls face in the state-sponsored, life-long oppression: “I never thought that the behavior of my classmates and
the teachers was wrong...I believed that it was my fault. It all changed in puberty, though, when
I attacked my mother numerously and told her that if she and my father were not Gypsies I
would not have these issues. I told her that I wished I wasn’t born in the first place” (Sudor,
June 6, 2009). This is a horrifying statement full of emotional trauma the young Roma girls and
their mothers have to go through while attempting to make their lives better by trying to obtain

Law enforcement: From poverty and starvation to abuse and criminalization

While the Roma women of the former Czechoslovakia are often easy targets of racist
aggression, abuse and violence, the ignorance of this fact by the local law enforcement moves
this horrifying experience to a completely new level. Being unable to rely on those that are
supposed to protect them is a sad fact. Fearing to call for help is an outrageous reality. Law
enforcement is one of the state provided services that instead of helping the Roma women in
their every-day survival plight often create barriers, both psychological and physical to ensure
that help is not received.

Domestic violence and spousal abuse which is so prevalent in the Roma communities is
one of the instances where the Roma women fail to be protected. If they choose to call for help
the officers either do not show up at all, or show up and do not see anything wrong happening,
or turn their action against the victim – the Roma woman, and add to the oppression. For
example, when on June 6, 2009 police received a call from a Roma settlement near the city of
Zilina with the report of a spousal assault in progress, one of the officers responding to the call
got out of the vehicle and instead of surveying the situation and helping the Roma woman he stated: “I’m going to nuke this village” (a Slovak Television news, June 6, 2009). In another case from May 2009, two police officers unlawfully and without any explanation and/or search warrant raided a number of local Roma families near the city of Pezinok, Slovakia, while taking pictures of children and their mothers” (The Slovak Television, May 15, 2009), a clear abuse of power.

Unfortunately, “law enforcement agencies uphold and enforce society’s raced, gendered, and classed structure, conventional notions of ‘morality,’ and social norms established by dominant groups” (Ritchie, 2006, p. 142). The fact that according to a Czech study, “40% of the students at a police academy were not sure if they would assist Romani children in an emergency, [and] 10% were certain that they would not” (Hamberger, 1996, p. 60) is a shocking reality. In addition, “the few incidents of police violence against women of color which have commanded national attention continue to be viewed as isolated, anomalous deviations from the police brutality ‘norm’” (Ritchie, 2006, p. 141).

The misuse of law enforcement power is usually closely tied with criminalization of the Roma women. Due to the fact that in the Czech Republic over fifty percent of adult Gypsies may have a criminal record and in some towns they are responsible for three of every four crimes (Gross, October 24, 1993), the Roma women, mothers and birth givers, are often seen as criminals-producing machines. In addition, the local governments have been tougher than ever on so called “quality of life crimes” (Ritchie, 2006, p. 155), such as loitering, panhandling, public drunkenness, public urination, sleeping in parks, and building settlements without official
permits, all often practiced by the Roma out of desperation and as a result of their socio-economic status, leading to “criminalization of normally non-criminal behavior...often discriminatorily enforced” (Ibid). As a result, eighty percent of the prisoners held at correctional facilities are Roma (Romano Nevo Lil, July 1, 2009C), and this overrepresentation is especially noticeable in women prisons.

Social, political, and economic conditions of Romani women are often described as “disability,” and hence marked by the society as “deviant difference” (Erevelles, 2006, p. 25), assigning them to the category of “criminally inclined” (Barany, 2002, p. 97). Unfortunately, Romani women do connect with almost all known criminogenic factors established by modern criminology. What remains overlooked though is the fact that their marginalization and the overall situation in regards to crime are steadily viewed and judged from a single point of view. Looking at this issue from the perspective of feminist criminology incorporating an intersectional approach, recognizing multiple intersecting inequalities and examining the linkages between inequalities and crime should give us much better solution to the problem than the one offered by Jan Slota, leader of one of the current social conservative coalition parties—SNS, who stated that the solution is a “small courtyard and a long whip” “(The Economist, November 7, 1998).

**Healthcare: The unwanted**

A Roma woman has to “face institutional racism when she becomes a mother and later on as she is the one to keep the contact with the schools, health and social services” (Bitu,
EU Commission’s report highlights the fact that on healthcare matters, “there is ample documentation indicating that Romani women are particularly excluded from healthcare and often only have access to healthcare in the case of an extreme emergency and/or childbirth” (European Roma Rights Centre, 2007). “[I]ndirect provisions directed towards the [Roma] women included in the health programmes” (Bitu, 2003) are also quite common.

These discriminatory attitudes together with numerous instances of refused medical care or treatment are further “a common cause for a willing ‘non-access to health services’” (Gil-Robles, February 15, 2006, p. 29) on the part of Romani women, who are afraid of using healthcare facilities even when their lives or the lives of their children are in danger. As a result, preventative care of the Roma women and their children is also almost non-existent, resulting in their life expectancy in some places being reported as 10 years shorter than that of majority women” (Jaroka, 2006, p. 9). Still, a general view of the medical personnel towards the Roma women is that they are “unreliable mothers” (ETP Slovakia, 2005) for not providing their children with sufficient medical care. An interview with thirty medical employees further found that in general they all considered the Roma as “degenerated, less intelligent, less civilized and [overall] less human” (Zoon et al., 2003, p. 85).

The Roma women are often refused health care by general practitioners on the grounds that they are “someone else’s responsibility” (Jaroka, 2006, p. 9). If hospitalized, the Roma women are segregated from the rest of the population as they are seen as “dirty, thieves and anti-social” (Ibid). A sarcastic comment made toward a well educated and employed Roma woman by her doctor only further proves that even women who are well off still face the wide-
spread discrimination. The doctor’s comment on the reported chest pain was that she was going to “be the first Gypsy woman hospitalized due to being overworked” (Sudor, June 6, 2009). Considering the fact that Romani women have “particular health risks connected to early and repeated pregnancies, compounded by their poor access to healthcare services, which contributes to reducing their life expectancy” (Commission of the European Communities, 2008, pp. 45-46), such attitudes on the part of state-sponsored health agencies should be considered nothing but a hostile discrimination bordering with genocide.

**State’s response: The unwanted must be controlled**

The overall approach and attitude of the state and state-sponsored agencies, such as healthcare facilities towards the Roma can be glued together from the numerous cases of forced and coerced sterilization of Romani women. Sadly, the state has not been scared to express nor has it been ashamed of its proposed solution towards this ethnicum. Understandably, portrayal and directly linking social ills with the fertility of Roma women has been a popular government’s propaganda against those who create “undesirable offspring.” In 2002 during parliamentary campaign, the current Prime Minister promised “to actively effect the irresponsible growth of the Romani population” (CTK, June 15, 2002, cited in Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2003, p. 2). In 1993 at-the-time Prime Minister of Slovakia, later acting President and currently a coalition leader (HZDS) Vladimir Mečiar stated that the Roma constituted “‘a socially inadaptable population’ with high birth rate of ‘children who are poorly adaptable mentally, poorly adaptable socially, children with serious health
disorders, children, simply, who are a great burden on this society” (Barany, 2002, p. 292). In 2001, Slovakia’s Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration, Pavol Hamzik, described Slovak Roma as “a demographic problem” (Keay, April 18, 2001, cited in Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2003, pp. 1-2). In June 2009, Vladimir Meciar made another comment in regards to the Roma birth-rate in a political TV show stating: “Just go to the women’s hospitals and you’ll see Slovakia twenty years from now” (TV JOJ, June 17, 2009), urging the public that something needed to be done.

Whereas white women receive various government grants and cuts with the intention to increase the overall decreasing birth rates of Czechs and Slovaks, the Roma women are bluntly told by the state and the society to stop reproducing. “Why are there obstacles for women who seek abortion while [the] society neglects mothers and children already here?” (Ross, 2006, p. 53) is a question the Roma women have been asking for decades. “[S]ome women are encouraged to have more children while others are discouraged” (Ibid), a clearly discriminatory move bordering with genocide. The Slovak Ministry of Health’s report from October 2000 states that the decreasing birthrate among Slovaks, combined with the increasing birthrate of Gypsies might have negative consequences on the quality of Slovak population. The ministry further reports that “if we are unable to integrate the Romany population and correct its reproduction pattern, the percentage of unqualified and [mentally] disabled persons in our population will increase” (Zoon et al., 2003, p. 46). The EU Commissioner for Human Rights in his report on the situation in Slovakia replies that “[s]uch statements, particularly when pronounced by persons of authority, have the potential of further encouraging negative perceptions of the Roma among the non-Roma population. It cannot be excluded that these
types of statements may have encouraged [the later] improper sterilization practices of Romany women” (October 2003, p. 37). Categorizing the Roma “as a social group or ‘problem’ legitimates intrusive state interventions to deal with the ‘problem’” (Project on Ethnic Relations, 1992).

While it was generally assumed that the practice of coercing Romani women’s sterilization as means to the end of the Gypsy Problem was stopped after the fall of Communism in 1989, the horrific way of dealing with the Roma people started by fascists and continued by communists resurfaced again in 1999 when Finnish nurses reported to The Amnesty International that some of the Roma asylum seekers may have been subjected to forced sterilizations (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2003, p. 4). In the year 2002 shocking information of allegedly hundreds of involuntarily sterilized Romani women appeared in the news, followed by an extensive research report prepared by the Center for Reproductive Rights (CFRR) in Kosice, Slovakia, and New York, USA. Out of 230 Romany women living in eastern Slovakia interviewed by the CFRR researchers, 140, or in other words over sixty percent were found to be, or were reasonably believed to be involuntarily and/or forcefully sterilized during the ten preceding years (Zoon et al., 2003, p. 34). The real number will of course never be known and a suggestion that the sixty percent mark could apply to all Romani women is quite scary.

The state’s involvement in this modern-era atrocity only two years before Slovakia’s accession to the EU was thus indisputable. The Roma women were found to be sterilized without their informed consent in state-owned hospitals: “When I was feeling asleep [from
anesthesia] the nurse would come and take my hand. She signed a paper with my hand. I didn’t know what it was as I can’t read,” says 28 years old Agata (Ibid, p. 53). Others were told that they must undergo the procedure as their lives were supposedly at stake: “They don’t explain nothing...they just do it and then say that they just saved your life,” says a 24 year old Roma woman (Ibid, p. 69). Often, doctors would first wait for a woman to be in excruciating pain and then give her a “paper” to sign (Zoon et al., 2003, p. 56). Other findings confirmed differential treatment of the Roma women in hospitals, complemented by a physical and verbal abuse from medical staff (Ibid, p. 84). Sterilizations performed on underage women without a prior consent of their parents were also quite common (bid, p. 65). The cases of forced, uninformed sterilizations, and other above mentioned types of discrimination of the Roma women in Slovakia were acknowledged by the EU Human Rights Commission in the following: “The Commissioner finds it highly questionable that the consent given in a number of cases can be considered as valid, due to the circumstances under which the consent was apparently given, such as under sever labor pain or already under impact of anesthesia….There have been cases where sterilization was undertaken without any prior consent of the woman (The EU Human Rights Commissioner, October 2003, pp. 42 & 46).

These inhumane actions were further aided by other state apparatuses such as the state police that tried to obstruct the investigations of an alleged act of genocide and other crimes committed on the Roma women. For example, as soon as the CFRR’s report Telo a Dusa was published, the police filed criminal charges against its authors. The authors were told that on one hand, if the investigation does not prove their allegations to be right, they will be charged for indictable offences such as libel and mischief. On the other hand, if the investigation
confirms their allegations they will be charged for not reporting the knowledge of crime to police authorities (under the Slovak law everyone that has knowledge of crime must report it to the authorities) (Amnesty International, July 2003). Furthermore, the police threatened fathers of the underage victims with the prosecution for having sexually abused them (The EU Human Rights Commissioner, October 2003, p. 27). Many Romani women were threatened not to press any charges against hospitals, or they would be charged with perjury and imprisoned for up to three years. Even before the report was completed, in 2001 a Roma activist Alexander Patkolo was threatened with charges of spreading alarming information for highlighting cases of the at-the-time alleged Romani sterilization (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2003, p. 4).

Under the tremendous international pressure from organizations such as the European Union, the United Nations, and the Amnesty International the Slovak government finally decided to commence a formal investigation on the matter, yet it did so only with the intention to prove or disprove the allegations concerning the act of genocide. All other forms of criminal charges, such as grievous bodily harm, discrimination and differential treatment of the Roma were excluded. Human rights activists suspect that in its investigation the Slovak government specifically targeted those Romani women who underwent voluntary sterilization in the past “to offset and discredit reports of involuntary sterilization” (Loder, April 3, 2003). As expected by international human rights watchers, the results of the investigation conducted by the Slovak Ministry of Health showed that “the allegations of an active genocide and segregation were found unconfirmed” (Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic, March 2003). Investigations into the matter conducted by the Slovak authorities have concluded that “all
sterilizations performed at the inspected establishments in Slovakia in the period in question were carried out in compliance with the law in force at the time” (Gil-Robles, February 15, 2006, p. 30), a finding later confirmed by the Slovak Constitutional Court in December 2006 (Romano Nevo Lil, May 31, 2008), even though the European Court of Human Rights stated in April 2009 that by sterilizing the Roma women without their consent Slovakia failed to protect their rights and directed Slovakia to pay each of the eight women that filed the complaint at this court restitution of 3,500 Euros (Romano Nevo Lil, June 2, 2009).

Recapitulation: Genocide: Is it not?

The Roma women of the former Czechoslovakia have been continuously ill-targeted as means to the end in this decades-long, regime-resistant genocide of the Roma people. Physical genocide through “slow death measures” (Davis & Zannis, 1973, pp. 18-20, cited in Churchill, 2004, p. 82) as described in this paper such as subjection to “conditions of life which, owing to lack of proper housing, clothing, food, hygiene and medical care...are likely to result in the debilitation [and] death of individuals” (Ibid) should have no place in the societies that are internationally recognized as developed western nations, members of the European Union, noted for the advanced living conditions of its citizens. Furthermore, traces of biological genocide through involuntary and forced sterilizations of the Roma women, and other policies intended to prevent or otherwise control birth of this ethnicum are shocking to still be found present in these countries despite their EU candidacy/membership. Lastly, cultural genocide and the Roma women’s assimilation requirement by the majority women are still alive twenty
years after the fall of Communism, a period infamous for its assimilation policies towards the Roma people. These brutal solutions bordering and intertwining with characteristics of physical, biological and cultural genocide (Davis and Zannis, 1973, p. 82) on this ethnicum are left for the societies to follow to judge, but will remain a sad and painful part of the Romani history.

Although there are those that have committed their lives to helping the Roma women in overcoming this historical multi-faceted oppression, the results are still nowhere to be seen. But perhaps the solution lays somewhere else, perhaps in finding the common ground with those who share part of their experience – women.

**FEMINISM versus THE ROMA WOMEN’S EXPERIENCE: PROPOSED SOLUTION: NEW FEMINISM**

**Second-class women issue**

Many women of color feel removed from feminism because it is seen as primarily white, middle-class movement (Gabriel & Scott, 1993, p. 25), where concerns of other women are generalized and erased. Feminism thus “isn’t necessarily on the side of the dispossessed---‘real’ feminism can also be a cloak for conservatism, consumerism, and even sexism” (Senna, 1995, p. 18). As such, sadly, “not all White women reject the superiority granted to them by their race and by their association with powerful White men” (Reid, 1984, p. 248). As a result it is white feminism that often gets to wear a capital “F” (Dent, 1995, p. 62).
Until recently, only a very limited number of feminists had “the elimination of racism as [their] first priority” (Reid, 1984, p. 248). Many do not want to face this reality and change the ways of doing things as they fear the loss of their privileges within the marginalized group. Hence, a suggestion that possessing multiple subordinate-group identities, such as being a Roma woman “renders a person ‘invisible’ relative to those with a single subordinate-group identity” (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, April 7, 2008, p. 1) requires due attention on the part of modern feminism. The unity among experiences of oppression and sexism among women is nothing but a self-serving myth practiced by egocentric feminists.

Thus, the dominance approach, a pedestal of feminism, is not enough as it “merely examines women’s experiences vis-à-vis men’s experiences” (Burgess-Proctor, 2006, p. 34), and does not account for multi-level discrimination within feminism in general, based on sub-group identities such as race, culture, class, sexual orientation, etc. Focusing on similarities as practiced by many feminists “ignores the differentiated character and dynamics of inequalities” (Verloo, 2006, p. 211). Unfortunately, this is the view that has influenced many feminist theories that got constructed based on data “constrained by the assumptions of majority dominance and universality” (Reid & Comas-Diaz, 1990, p. 398). Yet to universalize the experiences of white women, “to collectivize them as women’s standpoint, is not just short-sighted; it is also ultimately racist” (Carty, 1993, p. 13).

White feminists in the former Czechoslovakia thus need to recognize how their everyday practices keep reinforcing hierarchies within the movement itself, and how easily can someone fighting the oppression become an oppressor herself, directly or indirectly enjoying the position
of power; power that has become the source of her oppression in the first place. Offering an inclusive community to the Roma women is a start of their liberation, liberation from a decades-long, multi-faceted oppression, in which feminism has played its infamous role as well. The new feminist community thus needs to encompass compassion, companionship, mutual respect and empathy, instead of loving care of an “ideal of assimilation” (Young, 1990, p. 157, cited in Gabriel & Scott, 1993, p. 35).

The new feminist community in the former Czechoslovakia must be built on a collection of experiences from both the Roma and the Czech women’s society to allow for an understanding rather than just a mere accommodation of differences. This will result in the final achievement of “power-sharing as opposed to power-over” (Kohli, 1993, p. 394). Inclusion in feminist circles based on understanding and intersectionality will equip the Roma women with the ability to fight the deep and structural discrimination with more strength and subsequently higher success rate.

**New feminism: Feminism of inclusion**

The disparity between the Roma and White women needs to be addressed and understood if the feminism ever wants to succeed in its fight against patriarchal oppression. Until a full integration, not assimilation, of the disparities among women is achieved the oppression will never be broken and the circle of it will continue to hunt the female gender for generations to follow. Full inclusion of differences can only be achieved by application of an intersectional approach as practiced by multi-racial feminism, as this is the only approach so far
that has “succeeded in examining gender through the lens of difference, while at the same time acknowledging the instrumental role of power in shaping gender relations” (Burgess-Proctor, 2006, p. 35). The inequalities are seen as not equivalent, not independent but rather deeply interconnected and perhaps even interdependent, but mainly dynamic (Verloo, 2006, p. 224). The intersectional approach attempts to fight the temptation to use these inequalities within feminism as static variables, as currently practiced and/or overlooked by many contemporary feminist movements.

Used by feminist criminology is the term “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2000, cited in Burgess-Proctor, 2006, p. 36), a power hierarchy “in which people are socially situated according to their differences from one another” (Burgess-Proctor, 2006, p. 36) and as such, gender is interpreted as being “socially constructed through interlocking systems of race, class, gender, and other sources of inequality (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996, cited in Burgess-Proctor, 2006, p. 36). Social relations based on these inequalities are seen as “multiple and interactive, not additive” (Daly, 1993, p. 56). Race, social class, and gender of the Roma women all create a specific position on the axes within the matrix and position them in relation to others, women and men. As a result these women can experience multiple jeopardy depending on the position and the dynamic interactivity of the other party within the matrix. What feminism needs to achieve is having the belonging to the female gender (a single axis) being constituted as “the first reference [point] for what [every] woman is, wants, thinks” (De Lauretis, 1990, p. 111).
The very few Roma women of the former Czechoslovakia that have succeed in overcoming the barriers of multi-level oppression and have established contact with feminist organizations thus argue that a fundamental change is needed within the movement itself, a change that would broaden its base by including the Roma women in it. As such, the “homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood” (Lorde, 1984, p. 116, cited in Kohli, 1993, p. 419) must be forsaken. Politics of inclusion, not assimilation is thus the way to go, getting rid of the “one right way of being feminist” (Walker, 1995, p. XVII) idea prevalent in 1990s. The new feminism needs to understand that differences among women cannot be mutually exclusive. The final understanding that all women are not equal and that they have never been equal will then be accompanied by a “general feeling of being a bit freer” (De Lauretis, 1990, p. 110), as mentioning and facing the disparity present among women will free them from the burden of being forced to “imagine what did not exist, [which] forbid [them] to take advantage of what did” (Ibid). As such, the difference among women will become enabling. It will require mediation “so as to be able to come out of itself and become in turn the mediator in a circle of unlimited power” (Ibid, p. 149). It is the mediation that the new inclusive feminism needs to provide for this unlimited power to appear.

**New feminism applied: Future of the Roma women of the former Czechoslovakia**

There are a number of small Romani Women organizations in the Czech and Slovak Republics, representing Romani women and seeking their inclusion in the larger feminist movement. After the decades of various proposed solutions which later lead to nowhere,
joining mainstream feminist movement appeals to be the most plausible location of the safety
vest for the local Romani women. These organizations now evaluate what it actually means to
be a part of feminist movement and by becoming its active participants they are changing the
monolithic face of feminism in the former Czechoslovakia, with a hope to fill “the absence of
exchange between these two moments of female humanity, between the woman who wants
and the woman who knows” (De Lauretis, 1990, p. 123).

While the white women are helping the Roma to find themselves, it is the Roma women
who in return give to feminism something most valuable – they provide it with a new theory
and practice, a new purpose, the missing piece in its fight against patriarchal oppression.
Instead of the feared fragmentation, a stronger unity is achieved resulting in much stronger
energy being emitted towards the common purpose. The Roma women will thus enable the
contemporary feminism in the former Czechoslovakia to understand that concerns of racism
within the movement will not spread the interests of women’s rights too thin, “thereby
weakening the total effect of their efforts” (Reid, 1984, p. 248), but rather will provide them
with the before unknown and never-utilized weaponry for their united battle.

Yet with the same token, the Roma women are not looking for easy alliances, where
they would gain protection yet still remain to be second-class members. “[H]ome must be
made within, and the best communities are those built on mutual respect” (Walker, 1995, p.
XXXVIII). This way the complexity of each woman’s live, the instinct not to “shut oneself off
from others, and the enormous contradictions [they] embody (Ibid)” will become food for
creating new theories and new ways of fighting the patriarchal oppression of females. The
Roma women must become real in feminism and not used merely as means, “but must always [be treated] as ends in themselves” (Senna, 1995, p. 3).

The rules of feminism must therefore change, and they will change, as feminism was never meant to be rigid like a fundamental religion. Inclusion of the Roma women in feminist movement will pressure contemporary feminists to “think critically about how to take [this] religion out of feminism” (Dent, 1995, p. 74), to break the old mold so it’s open for a change, a change of inclusion. A development of new grass-roots feminist organizations in the former Czechoslovakia is a good sign of this metamorphosis, and the hopes are that through networking, communication and outreach this new wave of intersectional feminism will reach as many organizations as possible. A notion of entrustment [affidamento], a relationship between a Roma woman and a White woman in which one woman “gives her trust or entrusts herself symbolically to [the other] woman, who thus becomes her guide” (De Lauretis, 1990, p. 8) is the key strategy and a building block of feminism based on inclusion and acceptance of differences among women themselves.

The recognition of mutual value is thus “made possible by [the women’s] inscription in a symbolic community” (Ibid, p. 10) that becomes real. “Women owe women, and the price of female freedom is the symbolic debt each woman has toward other women....which needs to be paid in a visible, public, social manner before the eyes of everyone, women and men” (Ibid, p. 12); only then can the movement fully embark on its trek towards gendered equality. The new feminism has to “attack race and class oppression at the same time as [it] struggles against misogyny. These are not parallel. They are intersecting and inextricable” (Wall, 1993, p. 281).
CONCLUSION

The consciousness of Romani women of the former Czechoslovakia has been slowly rising and it cannot stop for if it did “it would return a number of decades back, which would be very unfortunate” (Olah, November 3, 2008). It is exactly for this reason that a change in feminist movement needs to happen to include the Roma women in it. As such, contemporary feminists as well as Roma feminists must work to “make feminism a faith worthy of proclaiming, and less of a religion that takes its edicts from hierarchy” (Dent, 1995, p. 74). New feminism must learn how to value difference and fight inequality, not limited to gender oppression. There are things which “do not come by historical necessity, but because they have been favored. Among these is female freedom” (De Lauretis, 1990, p. 150), freedom that is supposed to include all women, women of all backgrounds, races, classes and sexual orientations.

The Roma women are not proud when they are complemented by others that they are just like white women. They are happy to be who they are but more than anything else they are women. Their marginality as ethnic women has been there for decades, yet it is not a static condition; “through times and across boundaries the marginal status may change” (Barany, 2002, p. 56), and feminism is believed to be that chance that has been awaited for a long time. It is understood that, whether it will “ultimately succeed or fail, something—quite possibly the future—is riding in the work we do [today]” (Davis, 1995, p. 284). As a bystander to this problem, a white man living in Canada, I can say that I understand that there are those who like the Gypsies and those who do not; freedom of choice is a part of our democratic society.
“What I dislike is when somebody has to suffer for what he is” (Kereszty & Simo, Winter 1995, p. 75).
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