

Romnja<sup>1</sup>: Long live the (in)visible activists!

By Serena D'Agostino\*

When [Ethel Brooks](#) was nominated as Board Chair for the [European Roma Rights Center](#) (ERRC) in 2016 I was excited for two different reasons. First of all, it was the first time ever that the ERRC Board was presided by a member of the Romani community. Secondly, for the very first time it was presided by a woman. Suddenly, Ethel Brooks became the personification of the *intersectional paradigm* on which Romani Feminism was trying to develop its program. According to this paradigm, identity categories – such as gender and ethnicity – are inseparable and interact in both a dynamic and creative way. Thanks to the presence of an American scholar with Romani background at the head of the ERRC, the “intersectional idea” suddenly became visible and manifest.

A few weeks ago, [Nicoleta Bitu](#), another Roma intellectual and activist, has been appointed as Board Deputy Chair at the [European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture](#), recently launched in Berlin. Nicoleta Bitu is considered one of the most important personalities of Romani Feminism in Romania and in Europe in general. Well known for her progressive ideas, she has become an important and influential political actor (albeit often contested) in the field of Roma inclusion in her country and abroad.

The election of two Romani women in the directorial board of two organizations well known at the EU and international levels has a strong symbolic value and reopens the debate on the rights of Romnja in general and the role of gender in Roma integration policies in Europe in particular.

On a European political level, gender has always taken a rather marginal place in the wider discourse on the socio-economic integration of the Romani minority. In the last two decades, the importance attributed to this subject has gone through distinct phases. The unique condition of marginalization and discrimination faced by Roma women was defined for the first time at the European level in Seville in 1994, on the occasion of the *First Gypsy Congress of the European*

*Union*. Despite its limitations, the Congress of Seville was a significant step forward in the history of Romani women's activism, as it produced the *Romea/Gypsy Women's Manifesto*, marking the beginning of the transition from *gender-blind* Roma policies and politics to a more *gender-conscious* interpretation of racial discrimination<sup>2</sup>.

Since the 1990s, the battle for the recognition of the rights of Roma women has never stopped, although its visibility has fluctuated greatly according to the interests and political priorities of the moment. Thanks to the efforts of a relatively small group of Romnja activists, fundamental concepts such as *multiple discrimination* and *intersectional discrimination* have begun to formally enter the political language used when discussing the rights of Roma women. The presence of Romnja politicians in the European Parliament, such as Lívía Járóka, Viktória Mohácsi and Soraya Post, helped to institutionalize this approach and to consolidate the "Roma women's issue" beyond national borders.

Despite the important accomplishments achieved by these activists, the struggle for the affirmation of Roma women's rights is still far from having reached its goal. In most European countries, the stereotyped image of the thieving, illiterate or even prostitute Romani woman remains predominant. Notwithstanding the fact that any violation of the rights of the Romnja has been openly condemned either at the political or legislative level<sup>3</sup>, cases of discrimination remain relevant in the European Union - where, for example, forced sterilization is still perpetrated in some member states.

The stigmatization of the Romnja by the majority society remains a daily challenge. Among the many factors that fuel prejudice, the lack of representation of Romani women and their rights plays an essential role. The work of Romani women activists then becomes a tool of representation, information and proclamation essential to reduce this gap, and a necessary voice for the affirmation and recognition of this intersectional minority group.

The activism of Roma women has a double potential. On the one hand, it contributes to making the condition of subordination and marginalization of Romnja visible. On the other hand the accomplishments achieved by these activists (often with a doctorate in hand, leading NGOs and important social inclusion projects, or contributing to important academic studies - such as

Angela Kóczé or Alexandra Oprea) at national and international level contribute to overcome the *clichés* and become a *role model* for the new generations.

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<sup>1</sup> Romnja is the term used to signify 'female Roma' (pl.) in the Romani language. This article uses the term Roma as a substantive and adjective, whereas the word Romani is used exclusively as an adjective.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vincze Enikő, "The Racialization of Roma in the 'New' Europe and the Political Potential of Romani Women". *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 21(4) (2014): 435-442.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., for example, the European Court for Human Rights [Case V.C. vs. Slovakia](#) (2011).