

The Erasure of Romani Women in Statistical Data: Limits of the Race-versus-Gender Approach

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The conceptualisation of race and gender as separate and even unrelated categories has perpetuated the marginalisation of Romani women in the collection of statistical data. Inherent flaws in the exclusive categories in data collection underscore the invisibility of Romani women. Race and gender do not exist in isolation. Minority women often experience multiple forms of discrimination, as a result of race *and* gender. [1] The marginalisation of Romani women must therefore be understood in the context of *both* racism and sexism. [2] Ethnic statistics are necessary, but must be collected in such a way as to reflect the intersection of race and gender. A multi-dimensional approach to the collection of data is an important facet of designing policies and programs to combat institutional discrimination against Romani women.

I develop my paper based on the assumption that disaggregated data on minorities is a necessary tool to successfully combat structural inequality. I echo the opinions of human rights activists who believe that the participation of grassroots activists is an indispensable part of the data collection process, [3] and that the collection of data must be clearly linked to the implementation of programmes for the benefit of the marginalised community. [4] However, I contend that the current data collection approaches are flawed in that they perpetuate the notion that race and gender are mutually exclusive by collecting “gender data” and “ethnic data” separately. This practice, *inter alia*, excludes Romani women and other minority women, and must be transcended in order to remedy the multiple forms of discrimination facing these women.

The limited feminist and antiracist politics in Europe systematically ignore Romani women. Romani non-governmental organisations (NGOs), at the forefront of the antiracist struggle in Europe, address racism but fail to address the role of patriarchy, [5] a key factor in the oppression of Romani women. Feminist organisations in Europe, in turn, focus on gender subordination but neglect racism, [6] a crucial barrier for Romani women. By treating race and gender as mutually exclusive categories, Romani NGOs and feminist organisations alike fail to tackle the multi-faceted discrimination from which Romani women suffer. This limited race-versus-gender discourse also dominates the data collection processes, as illustrated in several reports by international organisations and NGOs. As a result, they fail to grasp the full spectrum of barriers faced by Romani women. For Romani women, multiple discrimination translates into high illiteracy rates, few employment opportunities, poor physical and psychological health, and an increased vulnerability to domestic violence. [7]

Statistics often refer to “women” and to “Roma” as though the two categories were mutually exclusive. One example is encountered in a World Bank report exposing the gender gap in wages in Romania. The report concludes that employment discrimination against Roma can be conceived “in terms of job access rather than wage offers.” [8] By asserting that women suffer from wage discrepancies while Roma do not, the category of women is treated as though only referring to white women, and the category of Roma as only encompassing men. There is no analysis of whether or not Romani women suffer both from wage discrepancies and a lack of access. Instead of showing the intrinsic link between race and gender in labour market practices, race is treated as a separate category. The result is data reflecting the employment situation of white women and Romani men, making no mention as to where Romanian Romani women fit in the complex scheme of employment discrimination.

A report on the status of women in Romania by the International Helsinki Federation (IHF) also focuses primarily on white Romanian women. This 26-page report covers a variety of topics, such as social, economic, and political rights, violence against women, and reproductive rights. However, Romani women are only marginally included in a one-page section under “Women’s Status within Distinctive Groups.” [9] The report speaks in the “universal voice,” [10] appearing to represent the experiences of all women. However, by neglecting to address race throughout the report, it only elaborates the experiences of white women.

A concrete illustration of this is in the report’s exclusion of race in its domestic violence section. In the section of “Police Response to Domestic Violence,” [11] there is no mention of the race-related barriers that prohibit many Romani women from escaping domestic violence. One such barrier is the fear of police brutality directed against Roma, [12] which can deter Romani women from reporting domestic violence to the police. Another topic not dealt with in the one-dimensional analysis is Romani women’s reluctance to report domestic violence for fear of reinforcing dominant stereotypes of the “violent Romani man.” [13] In addition, the report does not mention how

traditional emphasis on “the integrity and good name of the family” [\[14\]](#) can prevent Romani women from disclosing the abuse.

There is very little information regarding Romani women in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, “Avoiding the Dependency Trap.” One of the key flaws of this report is that although it purports to provide information on Roma in different European countries, it does so in an incomplete and one-dimensional manner. The report treats region and gender as separate categories instead of integrating the two and providing information regarding Romani women from each country. It also provides figures for each country, and then for males and females separately, thereby obscuring the experiences of Romani women specific to each country.

The UNDP report further fails to recognise gender discrimination as intertwining with racism to limit the opportunities of Romani women. It claims that “ethnic discrimination” contributes to unemployment among Roma. [\[15\]](#) However, for Romani women, “ethnic discrimination” is only one facet contributing to their lack of access to decent employment. By ignoring gender discrimination, the UNDP report only gives insight into what prevents Romani men from entering the job market.

An Open Society Institute (OSI) report regarding gender opportunities in Romania is another example of rather exclusionary statistics on women’s equality. Race is not mentioned anywhere in the report, thereby ignoring disparities in experiences as conditioned by racial discrimination and differences in culture. The report claims that “women only represent 45.15 percent of the employed population,” [\[16\]](#) which fails to account for the situation of Romani women whose employment rates are in fact significantly lower. The report also claims that in 2000, some 10.3 percent of members of parliament (MPs) were women. [\[17\]](#) Yet there is no mention of the racial breakdown of these figures. It is clear that Romani women do not exist as a category in the evaluation of opportunity disparities between the sexes in Romania. The term “women” creates the illusion that the report is all-inclusive, while in practice “women” only refers to the majority women.

The OSI report contains a recommendation that “gender statistics, which are an important tool in assessing the actual implementation of the law, are to be developed by the National Statistics Institute.” [\[18\]](#) The absence of statistical data makes discrimination difficult to detect. [\[19\]](#) The desperate need for reform in the collection of statistics is seen in the advent of a new unemployment insurance law which establishes “statistical indicators...to monitor the labour market.” [\[20\]](#) The OSI report’s critique of the statistical system to be developed is that it makes no reference to gender. However, an analysis of gender inequalities without mentioning race would still not suffice, as it would rest on the assumption that white is the “norm,” while minority experiences are peripheral and irrelevant. In light of the importance of statistics to monitoring minority policy implementation, it is imperative that statistics be multi-dimensional. It would undoubtedly be more beneficial for this system, as well as other statistical monitoring systems, to collect information according to *both* race and gender simultaneously, and to supplement such data with qualitative studies.

The Fourth World Conference on Women calls on Governments to:

- develop and encourage the development of quantitative and qualitative studies by research organisations, trade unions, employers, the private sector and non-government organisations on the sharing of power and influence in society, including the number of women and men in senior decision-making positions in both the public and private sectors (and to) provide staff training in designing and analysing data from a gender perspective [\[21\]](#)

It also advises that such data be used in the development of policies and in assessing the effectiveness of policies.

One flaw in this recommendation is that it omits race. Governments and international organisations, in conjunction with Romani women activists, should ensure that quantitative and qualitative studies are designed to investigate the representation of women of different groups in a multi-dimensional manner and that the effectiveness of policies is also assessed according to this model. In addition, they should collaborate to develop training programs for staff geared towards increasing their understanding of the intersections between racism and sexism, and to design and analyse data accordingly. [\[22\]](#)

The statistical practices of international organisations and NGOs are part of a larger political paradigm. As previously observed, the World Bank, the Open Society Institute, and the International Helsinki Federation collected data primarily based on the flawed construction of race and gender as separate spheres. The UNDP report failed to provide a comprehensive analysis of institutional problems faced by Romani women, mainly due to its lack of familiarity with multiple patterns of discrimination. These incidents are reflective of the deficiency inherent to anti-

racist and feminist politics both in the United States, [23] where these organisations are headquartered, and Eastern Europe, where the data were collected.

Limited feminist ideology and antiracist politics do not only leave Romani women on the margins of society but also “limit remedial relief to minor adjustments within an established hierarchy.” [24] By focusing on the multiple burdens of minority women, the problems of both majority women and minority men would be addressed through the simultaneous focus on racism and gender discrimination. This process is elaborated by Crenshaw with regard to employment:

- If such ‘bottom-up’ intersectional representation were routinely permitted, employees might accept the possibility that there is more to gain by collectively challenging the hierarchy rather than by each discriminatee individually seeking to protect her source of privilege within the hierarchy. [25]

The practice of treating women and racial/ethnic groups as separate categories in statistical data is connected to the deficiencies of feminist and antiracist politics that render Romani women invisible. The failure of feminists and anti-racists to address racism and gender discrimination respectively undermines the struggle for an equal society. This practice perpetuates the systemic disregard for the marginalisation of Romani women and hinders efficient policy implementation on their behalf. Multidimensional statistics would be one important aspect of remedying structural discrimination against Romani women. However, the collection of data must be connected to the implementation of policies/programmes aimed at promoting the equality of Romani women, and must be part of a broader reconceptualisation of race and gender politics.

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Footnotes

[1] K. W. Crenshaw, *Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989, p. 154.

[2] Class issues are also intertwined with race and gender. Disadvantage can be further aggravated based on nationality, disability, sexual orientation, age, etc.

[3] See M. F. Perez-Solla, “What’s Wrong with Minority Rights in Europe?” Available here: <http://www.eumap.org/articles/content/91/916>.

[4] See comments of R. Kawczynski and N. Gheorghe in “Roma and Statistics,” Round Table Discussion on 22-23 May 2000, Strasbourg, MG-S-ROM (2000) 13; available here: <http://www.coe.int>.

[5] Nicoleta Bitu refers to the Romani NGO’s lack of attention to the problems of Romani women in “The Situation of Roma/Gypsy Women in Europe,” available here: <http://www.romawomen.org/network/reports.php>.

[6] One example of this neglect is found in the Romanian feminist organisation Asociația Femeilor din România, whose programs and ideology lack any reference to race discrimination. See here: <http://www.afr.ro>.

[7] For more information on the situation of Romani women in Europe, consult Refugee Women’s Resource Project, “Romani Women from Central and Eastern Europe: A ‘Fourth World’ or Experience of Multiple Discrimination,” March 2002, available here: <http://www.asylumaid.org.uk>.

[8] S. Paternostro, “Wage Determination and Gender Discrimination in a Transition Economy: The Case of Romania,” *World Bank Papers*, 2001, p. 15; available here: <http://www.worldbank.org>

[9] International Helsinki Federation (IHF) Report, “Women 2000: An Investigation of the Status of Women’s Rights in Central and Southeastern Europe and the Newly Independent States,” Vienna, July 2001, p. 366, available here: <http://www.ihf-hr.org>.

[10] Crenshaw, *Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex*, p. 154.

[11] IHF Report, p. 363.

[12] European Roma Rights Centre, “Letter to the Military Prosecutor of Tirgu-Mures, Romania,” March 2000, available here: http://www.errc.org/publications/letters/2000/Romania_march_17_2000.shtml.

[13] For an explanation on how stereotypes regarding the violence of minority men affect the willingness of minority women to report domestic violence, see Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour,” in Crenshaw (ed.), *Critical Race Theory*, New York: The New Press, 1995.

[14] Refugee Women’s Resource Project, p. 51.



[15] United Nations Development Programme/International Labour Organisation, “Avoiding the Dependency Trap,” 2002, p. 31, available here: <http://www.undp.sk> .

[16] “Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in the EU Accession Process,” Report by the OSI Network Women’s Program and the Open Society Foundation Romania, 2001, p. 440; available here: <http://www.eonet.ro> . Hereafter: “EOWM Report.”

[17] EOWM Report, p. 441.

[18] EOWM Report, p. 445.

[19] EOWM Report, p. 496.

[20] EOWM Report, p. 496.

[21] Fourth World Conference on Women Platform for Action: Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women, see here: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Beijing/platform/institu.htm> .

[22] To gain a full picture of the multi-faceted discrimination facing Romani women in-depth studies should be conducted to root out the diverse forms of discrimination faced by different groups of Romani women. One example would be a study designed to assess the effects of skin colour, culture, citizenship and age.

[23] For an explanation, see Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour,” in Crenshaw (ed.), *Critical Race Theory*.

[24] Crenshaw, *Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex*, p. 145.

[25] Crenshaw, *Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex*, p. 145.