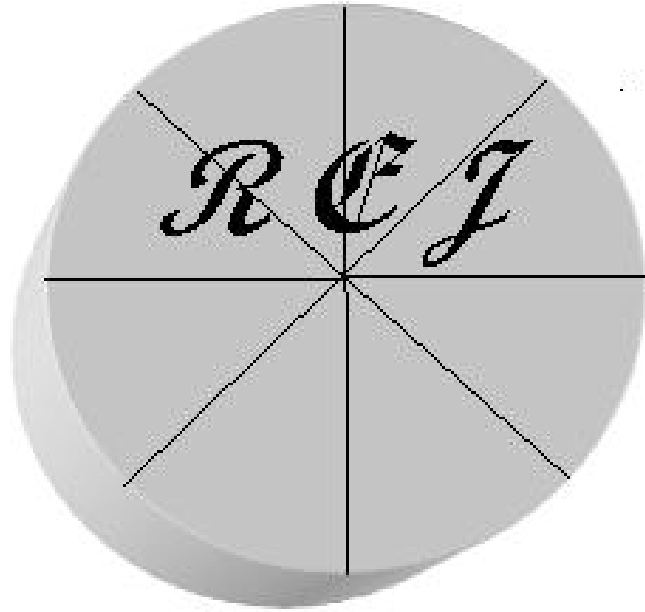


# *Romani E Journal*

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Ansvarige utgivare: Gregor Kwiek  
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## Romani Gender Balance

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## **Editorial & Summary of Contributions**

Welcome to the second issue of Romani E Journal! Since the launch of the website in December 2009, Romani E Journal has received a lot of positive responses and interest from people and organisations from a number of countries. We are particularly pleased for proposals on themes worth to cover in relation to various expressions of antiziganism.

Readers already engaged in Romani related matters are most likely aware of the pervasive significance that the Internet has had on the transnational Romani movement. There exists numerous virtual communities, homepages, webcasts from church services, mailing lists, and chat forums, and so forth. RomNews for example, has facilitated the exchange of information on Roma rights across the globe since its beginning in 1993. So, why do we need a new digital resource such as the Romani E Journal? The answer to that question is that an academic e-journal dedicated to disseminating antiziganistic traditions, tendencies and trends does fill a hole in the sense that it strives to encourage all readers – Romani and non-Romani alike – to a critical approach when being confronted with representations of Roma and Romani culture. The articulated aim of Romani E Journal is to create a synthesis, a bridge between academia and activism. It is our belief that although it may be hard to combine both perspectives, cross-fertilization of experiences from the two ”camps” is necessary in order to fight antiziganism in all its forms.

Needless to say, Romani E Journal is still in its early stage. We are continuously identifying and working with areas of improvement and are grateful for your ideas and input. One topic that is occupying us at present is for example the feasibility of catering a trilingual website. Our ambition to do so is firmly based on our conviction of the importance of inclusion and accessibility.

The theme of the current issue of Romani E Journal is Romani gender balance. This year marked the 100th anniversary of the International Women’s Day (March 8th, 2010). A conference organised by Romano Paso’s Research Centre celebrating this event was held on this particular day in collaboration with - and at the premises of - the Romani Cultural Centre in Stockholm. A major part of this issue therefore contains both contributions as well as a summary from the conference.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is defined as a common standard for all peoples and nations. The concept of universal rights have been challenged, and one objection

has been that they essentially are a Western construct that stresses the individual rather than the collective which often is of more importance in non-Western societies. It is beyond the scope of this journal to delve more deeply into this philosophical debate. However, it is interesting to note that there seemed to have been a broad consensus at the conference that conventional notions of gender equality are not to be imputed to the Romani community. Another outcome from the conference was a shared view that Romani women's rights deserves its own forum in Sweden.

On an international level there is an advocacy network of Romani women called IRWN (International Roma Women's Network). IRWN was launched in 2003 and consists of Romani women from approximately twenty countries. At the international Council of Europe conference on Romani women's rights that took place in Stockholm 2007 (*Amare Glasura Ashunde – Our Voices Heard*), similar views were stressed by the participants. However, an emphasis was also put on the necessity for Romani women to be engaged in both the women's rights movement as well as the movement for Romani rights (conference report in both Romani and English is available in our documentation archive which can be found on our webpage [www.romaniejournal.com](http://www.romaniejournal.com)). Issues of women's rights cut across many areas – social, cultural, political and economical. We will definitively have every reason to revisit the topic of gender balance and women's rights in future issues of Romani E Journal, hopefully including comparative experiences from other parts of the world.

The first article, *Time, Space, Condition & its Impact on Romani Sexuality*, is written by Gregor Kwiek. Kwiek is half *Kelderash* and half *Lovari* Romani and holds an MA in ethnology. The article challenges notions of Romani culture and values as something inherently stable and unchanging. Kwiek supplies us with many examples from his own family history to demonstrate the impact that external factors, e.g. socio-economical mechanisms, have on attitudes to gender roles in the Romani communities that Kwiek's family belongs to.

Kwiek's article is followed by a contribution from MC Rom; *Unemployed Mothers = Children without Hope*. MC Rom is a musical artist and *Lovari* Romani, who is also working as an instructor with Romani pupils. MC Rom's article is a form of case study describing how children growing up with a single parent (most commonly the mother) display less ambition for a future career than children who are being raised by both parents.

Robert Brisenstam is a Resande Romani man studying law at the University of Uppsala. In the article *An Exoticized Question Mark – Reflections Over the Romani Woman and the Lack of Knowledge About Her Everyday Life* he reflects over how ignorance, stereotypes and the absence of the Romani people in the history books contradict the reality of the Romani people and how this leads to antiziganism, which he sees as in itself always having been and still being a great obstacle in the everyday lives of many Romani women and a source a severe persecution.

A report by Gregor Dufunia Kwiek from the aforementioned women's rights conference provides a summary and analysis of the contributions presented at the meeting. The summary report is followed by manuscripts from two of the speeches held at the conference.

One of these speeches was held by Robert Brisenstam who lifted up the need of historical research and education in Romani related issues in order to combat antiziganism and ignorance thus enabling Romani women, often persecuted and subjected to harsh discrimination through history and today, to live and participate in society on the same conditions as non-Romani women.

The final contribution of this volume is an extract from a speech held by Emilia Domurat. Domurat, a student of Political Science at Gothenburg University and a Polish Romani feminist, bases her argument upon a notion that there exists a common assumption among Swedish feminists in general that issues of women's rights cut across ethnic boundaries. Domurat objects to this by pointing out differences in collective experiences between non-Romani and Romani women, such as racism.

# **Time, Space, Condition & its Impact on Romani Sexuality**

By

Gregor Dufunia Kwiek

## **Ethnocentricity**

Numerous articles and studies have been written on sexuality. Many such articles and studies often depict Romani women's sexuality as being under the control of a patriarchal social order. As an example, ethnologist Lena Gerholm (1998) has identified the traditional Romani dress as a means to discipline and control the sexuality of Romani women. In a study I had carried out for my MA dissertation on Romani women's clothing, Romani female informants saw the traditional clothing from a different perspective and did not share the same views as Gerholm had (Kwiek 2009). The conclusion that Gerholm drew above, could be a projection of her own culture onto another in her analysis of the Romani women's dress. After all, in a culture where women may believe that gender equality is reached when both sexes can participate in social spheres commonly associated to a single sex (such as knitting for women and boxing for men), can be perceived by another culture as demeaning to women for replicating men and trying to be as they. In other words, the projection of a researcher's culture onto another that is studied, makes it difficult for the researcher to understand how sexuality is understood and practiced in that culture.

## **Misconceptions and Their Canonization**

Without a doubt, the projection of non-Romani culture onto Romani culture is not the only culprit when it comes to contributing with generalizations and misconceptions about the Roma. Numerous studies on Romani law and traditions, such as those of Weyrauch (2001), Sutherland (1986), and Gropper (1975), suggest that Romani women were not permitted to take on roles of authority in the Romani institution known as the *kris* (Romani court system). This however is not true, because many Romani groups have Romani women play a role of authority in the *kris* as judges, and have had it even more so in the past. And yet, the idea that the *kris* is a male dominated institution can still be found in present day studies and articles. The fact of the matter is that the fore mentioned studies on Romani law were not based on research that was carried out with various Romani groups, but was based on results from

studies carried out on *Kelderash* and *Mechvaja* groups in North America during the 1970's. These two groups practice the *kris* differently to the way it is practiced in Europe. Article after article, and study after study did not carry out new field research into this area, but rather canonized earlier references such as these via generalizing the practices of Romani society.

There are numerous issues to consider when it comes to the claim that Romani women have no authority in the *kris*. Informants could have exaggerated about Romani customs, some could have lied about them, and some simply provided information on what they knew, that could be wrong, because of what they do not know.

### **Experience: A False Representation for the Truth**

In a recent study, *Romsktnet, its Rise, its Fall & its Resurrection*, Romani women interviewed under the age of 40 believed that women have no place with roles of authority in the *kris*, while women that were above 40 did (Kwiek 2010). The women that were above 40 experienced the participation of Romani women with strong positions of authority in the *kris* when they were younger. This group of women explained that they experienced a decline in this as Romani women became less and less able to produce a source of income.

Romani women in the past told fortunes, and often were the dominant source of income in a Romani family. The practice declined over the years as Romani identity led to discrimination, and because fortune telling was associated with Romani identity, Romani women practiced it less and became far more economically dependent on men.

The Romani women that were under the age of 40, only heard about Romani women judges, and believed this to be something that was rare. They had not experienced what the women have that were above 40, and so their lack of being accustomed to seeing Romani women take on such roles, had them seeing the *kris* as male social sphere.

Time and space changes the way in which words give meaning to things we know about the world. As an example, Europe had a different meaning in a different era because it encompassed lands different to what it encompasses today (Neumann 2003:43). Romani society has social spheres that divide the sexes and ages. As an example, women and men of all ages attend a wedding, but the seating positions can separate the ages and sexes from one another. These spheres can divide teenagers from the middle aged, the elder and so on.

Because the social sphere of the *kris* was not sexually segregated for Romani women above 40, and is for the women under 40, that participated in the interview, as mentioned above, this paper shall examine how conditions may have affected the way in which sexuality is understood in different spaces and time.

Space is another factor that is relevant here as fortunetelling declined more in some countries while less in others. The women interviewed above have ancestors that originated from Russia prior to the Second World War, had parents and/or grandparents that ended up in Poland during and after the war, and they themselves were either born in Sweden or came to it as children.

In Sweden there are virtually no Romani women who use fortune telling as a source of income, while in Poland, one can find a few, and in Russia one can find even more but not as much as in the past.

One cannot pinpoint exactly when the decline took place except that it has declined in all countries although it has not died out. The decline can be estimated to have taken place sometime during the Second World War for groups occupying European countries where Roma were targeted by the Nazis for annihilation. So it may very well be that because fortune telling was associated with Roma that Romani women tended to practice it less and less to conceal identity and avoid Nazi persecution.

Since the origins of these women come from a family that was in Russia prior to the Second World War, in Poland during and after it, and they themselves were born in Sweden or came to it as children, they then elaborate on this issue from a standpoint that is in respect to this. Time and space distinguishes the way in which these women in the interview see the position of Romani women in Romani roles such as in the *kris*.

### **The Aim and its Path**

Often, Romani culture and its practices have been presented as something that is static and non-changing. To demonstrate how Romani culture and its practices change over time, in relation to sexuality, I shall use examples from my grandparents, parents and myself, to present the way in which marriage, divorce and virginity was looked at by these generations. Prior to presenting these examples, I do wish to clarify that these examples are not a representation of Romani culture, but demonstrate how views on sexuality change over time and under certain conditions.

### **Virginity & Marriage**

As a child, I remember asking my mother about abstinence from sex and marriage. My mother responded with saying that a boy need not be a virgin because there is no way to tell if he is or not. Some Romani women activists have discussed this matter on numerous occasions in interviews and at various meetings. Romani women activists have pointed out that it is



oppressive that Romani boys can engage in sexual relations outside of marriage but that Romani girls cannot. As an opposing view on this matter, other Romani women activists believe that these women influenced by western feminism and are being assimilated because they do not see the honor and prestige they have as Romani women who discipline their sexuality.

What distinguishes these Romani women activists is not that one group condones abstinence from sexual relations prior to marriage, and that another promotes it, but that one group of women sees it as an instrument of honor, regardless of what Romani men do, while the other group sees this view as a patriarchal social order that oppresses women. In order to address this issue, I shall examine how the Romani word for “whore” and “slut” has had different meanings over time.

The word for whore has a male form (*kurvari*) and a female form (*kurva*)<sup>1</sup>. Commonly, the word whore and slut, is not associated to the male gender in English. The words on their own do not characterize any particular gender, nevertheless, rarely is the word “whore” or “slut” used to describe a man who shows promiscuous behavior. This of course has changed to an extent over time, and the usage can be applied to men today, but still, in most circumstances, these words are still associated to women.

*Kurvari* has often been used in cases where Romani men have not been loyal to their wives, or, had numerous sexual encounters outside of marriage. The difference between *kurva* and *kurvari* were the consequences that came with being labeled with these terms. In the generation of my mother, if a woman was labeled a *kurva*, she would have been demoralized, dishonored, and her reputation could have been destroyed, bringing repercussions that would have turned her into a second-class citizen in Romani society. The term *kurvari* on the other hand gave bragging rights to the man that was called this. So then the English equivalent for *kurvari* would then be Casanova? The answer is yes, from the 1960’s into the 1990’s, but not after that or prior to it.

My grandparents were born prior to the Second World War. They had limited contact with people from non-Romani society, and at the time, the average marriage in their community was between the ages of 12 to 15. Being that men and women married at such an early age, it is more than likely that both were virgins.

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<sup>1</sup> Various groups have loaned in words from different languages for whore, and prostitute. As an example the word *Lubnji* is of Russian origin but either means whore or prostitute. The words *kurva* and *kurvari* are used in a different sense, which is that one engages in sexual acts outside of marriage.

Looking back at the word *kurvari*, and the way it was used then, I remember my grandfather applying the term to a man who he defined as being irresponsible, careless and self centered. During this era, sexual diseases in particular were treated with ostracization. Sexual diseases were not easily cured or understood.

Contact with non-Roma became more common after the Second World War for my family. As the contact grew, so did relations. Social changes increased the average age of marriage at the time. Both my parents as an example were above the age of 16 when they married. The increase in the average marriage age can be a benefactor for Roma to be more curious about sex and even seek it outside of marriage. For male Roma, contact with non-Romani society could have given opportunity to engage in sexual relations outside of marriage with women that came from a culture that had fewer restrictions to sexuality than the Romani one did. The mere idea of even discussing sexuality in Romani society is considered taboo. However, this does not mean that sexual contact between Romani men and non-Romani women was acceptable, nor was it a trend that was practiced by all Romani men, it's just that it was tolerated more so at the time. In fact, up until today, there are and were Romani women who engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage, as had Romani men. The distinction is that women had more to lose in Romani social circles than did the men, but this changed.

By the late 1990's the tolerance level had dropped. Marriages ended in divorce because of male Romani adultery. The term *kurvari* began to have social consequences associated to it, placing Romani men in the position of disciplining their sexuality. The word no longer carries any bragging rights; on the contrary, the term bestows shame and dishonor upon the man that is labeled with it.

Virginity is still an expectation that should be a condition until marriage. However, the difference is that it is not demanded or discussed. The average marriage age for Roma in Sweden is well into the mid 20's and above today. Economy and education have been prioritized over virtue. More and more, young Roma prefer to complete their education first and be economically independent before they settle down.

### **Divorce & Marriage**

Legal divorce was introduced in Poland, in 1946. My mother was born and raised in Poland during the 1950's and 1960's. My mother divorced my father when I was a child and did not remarry until some fourteen years later. I remember how my grandmother spoke about my mother's divorce situation. She referred to what had happened to her as something that had damaged her for the rest of her life. Indeed, the case was such that Romani women who were

divorced were considered to be damaged goods. Romani men were not keen on marrying divorced Romani women. When a woman left her husband because he abused drugs as an example, the woman was pitied. Divorce had affected their status.

My mother did not remarry for years so that she could build the honor that she had lost in divorce. Rarely were these women told that the man that they had left was no good for them and that now they could move onto a better life.

Over the years this has changed. My mother has spoken with words of encouragement to her own daughter in moving on. In today's society, Romani women that have gone through several marriages and divorces are not perceived in the same way. Men on the contrary, in the same circumstance, are seen as unreliable. Women are cautious when it comes to such men, because it is assumed that their track record presents them to lack of commitment. Interestingly, my grandmother entered into marriage with my grandfather after a second marriage. In some cases, women from the same generation as my grandmother were married numerous times. At times, these women were married more than once, marrying men who were marrying for the first time. Similarly, my first marriage was to a woman who was married to someone else once before. So why was not my grandmother, and other divorced women from her generation, not to forget my own, considered damaged goods and why were men keen on marrying them?

As already stated before, the generation of my grandparents had little contact with non-Romani society. This had changed after the Second World War and contact grew with non-Romani society. Both my parents lived at a time in Poland when divorce was first legalized in the country. Television shows like *Happy Days* presented the divorcee as the "experienced woman". Popular culture in a European and North American context depicted the divorced woman as someone that has tasted the "forbidden fruit" and now was deprived of it. It is of course conjecture on my part to say that this aspect of non-Romani society affected Romani society due to contact. However, it still remains as such that divorced Romani women were not seen as second grade women when it came to marriage, when there was little contact with Romani society. The generations following my mother and preceding do not and did not perceive the divorce woman in the same light as had the generation of my mother in Poland during the 1950's and 1960's.

To make a final point on this issue, my children and many of their relatives and friends are roughly around the same age my parents and grandparents married at, and they are unable to relate to how marriage or divorce can change social status. They see it as a partnership that is

the concern of two people and no more, and cannot understand how quantity can affect quality.

### **Honor is in the Eye of the Beholder**

To conclude this section, I return to the discussion that Romani women activists present at meetings and in interviews. Self discipline comes in many shapes and forms. In Europe for example, at football games, supporters of a team have racially mocked players on that team for making a mistake in the game. In the United States, such an incident would more than likely not occur at a similar sporting event. Self-discipline is dependent on social order and what is acceptable in a culture to what is not. In western European society, we are aware that in the past men visited prostitutes to serve their sexual needs, while such a thing was not tolerated of women. Attitudes have changed and will change again.

The Romani women who believe that no sex before marriage for women is oppressive to women when it does not apply the same condition to men, is seen by other Romani women to be a condition that reflects honor and prestige. However, the condition has become less relevant when compared to the significance that education and economy for many today. I do believe that social changes will cause Romani women to find prestige and honor in something else, and also believe that the oppression of women will also be funneled through something else. The discipline of the body in itself is not a form of oppression when it used to gain honor, but it is when it used to dishonor. Dishonor and honor exists because they are relative to one another. Hence, both groups of the Romani women are correct in the arguments for their positions and yet both are wrong. Gender equality is not about both sexes doing the same thing but having the right to do the same thing. The Romani women that see this form of discipline to produce honor, choose to practice it, they are not passive practitioners. The projection of culture is by no means with which to measure gender equality, because it is relative and not a truth.

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# **Unemployed Mothers = Children without Hope**

By

MC Rom

For the past two years I have worked as an instructor with Romani children between the ages of seven to fourteen years of age. During this period I was reading a book by R. W. Connell (2002) on gender construction. The second chapter of the book concentrated on how children were socialized into gender roles. Several examples were provided on how social order divided boys and girls into different roles. Amongst them, it is pointed out how boys tend to push other boys into the girls' playing territory when they wanted to shun them (Connell 2002: 14). Symbolically, the girls are treated as a disease and with lower status, thereby when a boy is pushed into their play territory, or even being called a girl, the status then of that boy lowers and by associating him to girls he is demeaned (Connell 2002: 15). Connell goes on to point out that girls do not do the same to boys and by this point Connell seems to suggest that boys are more aggressive than girls are. Indeed, such situations and circumstances can be found in various western societies, but this is not something that I could find to take place amongst my students. Although, I did see the significance that social engineering has on gender roles and it was something that I found to play an important part in Romani society.

As already mentioned, my Romani students did not present any suggestions that would have me to believe that the boys saw the girls as subordinates. This is not to say that they did not have distinct gender roles dividing boys from girls socially, but that the roles were not submissive in relation to one another. In fact, the children knew the traditional Romani boundaries between the sexes, but did not see the other sex having less worth. Issues around gender roles came up often in classes.

In one discussion with students I had posed the question to students of what they want to be when they grow up. A total of twelve students were in the class, seven of which were girls. Three of the younger girls answered that they wanted to be teachers; one of the older girls said she hoped to become a hairstylist while another was not sure. Among the boys one boy

answered that he wanted to become a rock star, and another answered “doctor” but answered right after that “this is an impossibility”, while the last three were not certain. The questions were then changed to “what does your father and mother do?”, and the response was one that led me to further investigation.

One of the young girls who was uncertain about what she would do in the future told the class that her father sold carpets, but is divorced from their mother and has remarried and has other children. Astoundingly, the majority of the children who were not certain what they would do in the future, were being raised by a single parent, namely the mother. The one girl that answered that she hoped to be a hairstylist has a mother who works in a salon as an assistant to a stylist and is raising her on her own. One of the two girls who said that they wanted to become teachers, is being raised by mother and father, while the other girl is being raised by a single mother and works as a caretaker for an elderly woman. The boy who wanted to become a doctor, is being raised by a couple. The father works as a taxi chauffeur and his mother works as a cleaning woman. The majority of the children who were being raised by single mothers explained that their mothers were unemployed and were dependent on welfare.

The conclusion that I can draw from the scenario presented above, is that because the gender role of Romani women designates them as the major caregivers of children, as a result single mothers without employment tend to be the models with which the children grow up and have little motivation in the household towards a specific career. Of course this analysis can be entirely wrong. After all, television, media, and schooling can have other social effects on a child giving him/her an idea of what they hope to become in their future. However, I would like to make the point that in the past, Romani women did contribute to the family’s economy and their daughters carried on likewise. Today, this no longer exists, a mother is not passing a trade to her daughter, and the answer is simple to why this is occurring and is because a mother no longer knows such trades. But the bigger question to answer here is why the trades were not passed on and why do most Romani women not sell cars or carpets today? It is not this article’s intention to answer this question but to point a problem that is progressing, which is that unemployed mothers can lead to future unemployed children.

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# **An Exoticized Question Mark – Reflections Over the Romani Woman and the Lack of Knowledge About Her Everyday Life**

By

Robert Brisenstam

*At the low croft of the rider, at high Hönneberg hill  
There sat a lone woman, colored like the snow  
And with tears falling from her cheek...<sup>2</sup>*

## **Introduction**

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<sup>2</sup> From the song *Vid låga rittartorpet* (At the Riders Low Croft). Some people however call it *Uti det polska kriget* (Out In the Polish War) The Swedish text goes "Vid låga rittartorpet, vid höga Hönneberg/Där satt en ensam kvinna, likt snön var hennes färg/Och tårar föll från kinden..." I have made the translation.



These are the first words of an old Resande Romani song from Scandinavia.<sup>3</sup> The song is about a woman who has been left alone in her home after her husband has gone away with the army in one of the many wars of Sweden, and then fallen on a distant battlefield somewhere in Poland. Their son has left their home and never returned. It is winter and the name of the woman is Elin. Whether this Elin is a Romani woman or not is not revealed by the song, but if one studies the lyrics one will soon notice that it draws a certain description of a person. We are told the name of the woman, how she looks, that she wears an apron, how, when and where she lived and what has happened to the people she loves most and who stands closest to her. The song even reveals something about the firewood that is burning in her stove.

This song is one of many expressions of the oral singing and telling tradition of the Resande Roma. Among the Resande Roma this tradition is considered to be a rich source of knowledge about their ancestors and their history.<sup>4</sup> It is seen as being a part of the Resande Romani identity and cultural heritage. The tradition also functions as a sometimes well needed complement to a larger and more general history writing, in which Roma are reduced

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<sup>3</sup> Resande is the name of a certain Romani group in Scandinavia. The number of individuals belonging to this group is estimated to be around 30 000 in both countries together. The ancestors of the Resande immigrated to Scandinavia between the beginning of the sixteenth century and the middle or the end of the nineteenth century. Several of them came from Russia and Germany during the period of the Carolean kings (roughly speaking between the 1650's and the 1720's) and served as mercenaries. The primary source of this knowledge is our own oral tradition, which during the latest decades has been confirmed by genealogical research. Although most Resande today speak Scandinavian languages as their native tongues, they also have a Romani vocabulary of between some 50 and up to several thousand words – which they use in different contexts – and this specific dialect of the Romani language, in large parts following the Swedish/Norwegian grammar and showing similarities with the dialect spoken by the Romanichal and Sinti, is for the Resande an identity marker alongside with family ties, social codes of conduct and behaviour, taboos etc. Similar to the Sinti in Germany the Resande generally do not use the word Rom as an ethnonym. Instead they call themselves Resande, Tavring, Dinglare, Skojare etc. The word Tattare is also used by some although it in most contexts has a strongly negative tone. There is yet another word used by the Resande about themselves, Romanifolket (the Romani people), which has become more of an official name for Resande in Norway. This name marks and emphasizes the Romani identity of the Resande in the same time as it marks that the Resande is a Romani group of its own and not a branch of for example the Kale or any of the Vlax or Balkan Romani groups (Kelderash, Lovari, Romungri, Arli, Gurbeti and others). The word Resande literally translated into English becomes Traveller. However, I do not translate it because it is very rare that names of Romani groups are translated, unless one is perhaps speaking about the name itself and not of the group. The Kelderash are for instance never called Coppersmiths when written or spoken about in English, nor are the Kale ever called Blacks, nor are the Manush ever called Man/Human being. In order to make it easier for the readers I use the word Roma for all Romani groups. To all this it is important to add that there also might be non-Romani Travellers in Scandinavia using the word Resande as an ethnonym. However, the two groups are not the same people and ought not to be mixed up with each other. As this article is concentrating on Romani people, everything mentioned in it about Resande concerns the Romani group with that name unless something else is explicitly written. For more information about Resande and their dialect of the Romani language see for example *Resandefolket – från tattare till traveller* by Bo Hazell and *Ordbok över svensk romani – resandefolkets språk och sånger* by Lenny Lindell and Kent Thorbjörnsson-Djerf with contributions of Gerd Carling.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on this see for example Hazell, *Resandefolket – från tattare till traveller*.

to a group of anonymous people where everyone looks the same, acts and dresses in the same manner.<sup>5</sup>

### **Romani women are and have always been exposed to antiziganism**

The history of the Romani people is filled with suffering and persecution. The Holocaust and the slavery in the Romanian principalities are but some examples of this.<sup>6</sup> Another example of this is the so called "Tattarplakatet" from 1637.<sup>7</sup> According to this act all Roma had to leave the Swedish realm before the 8<sup>th</sup> of November the same year. If a Romani family was encountered within the borders of Sweden by a person of authority after that date, the authority was supposed to hang all the men of the family in the nearest tree or post without any trial and confiscate all the belongings of the family. After this the women and children were to be driven from one place to another until they finally had left the country.<sup>8</sup> Another example is the custom in the Romanian principalities, during the time of the slavery, of offering guests a "Gypsy girl", thus forcing Romani women and girls held in slavery to prostitute themselves.<sup>9</sup> In Sweden there are examples from the latest decades of Romani women wearing traditional clothes being denied access to shops if they refuse to take off their skirts.<sup>10</sup> Forced sterilization has been practised by Sweden and Norway as a means to get rid of the Romani population and during the latest decade there were disturbing reports of Romani women being sterilized in the Czech Republic against their will and without really

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<sup>5</sup> From my time in school I cannot remember that Roma even were mentioned in the history books; this although I myself loved history and always read those books in particular. In texts where Roma are mentioned, little space is given for example to the history or cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of Roma, despite this being fundamental in order to understand the culture and the language.

<sup>6</sup> For more detailed information about these specific events of Romani history, see for example *The Pariah Syndrome – an account of Gypsy slavery and persecution* by Ian F Hancock (<http://reocities.com/Paris/5121/pariah-contents.htm> 2010-03-28).

<sup>7</sup> The word Tattare is strongly negative and has ever since the first Roma arrived to Sweden in 1512 been used as a name for Roma, in particular Resande Roma, and non-Romani Travellers. The word came to be used in Sweden as a name for Roma because the non-Roma mixed the first Roma in the country up with the Tartars. Over the centuries it both became a synonym for the word Zigenare but also had and still have a wider meaning as it is used for people connected with features that the majority population perceive as negative. Who was and is seen as a Tattare by his/her surrounding thus often depends on how the surrounding defines the word. See for example SOU 2000:20, Hazell and Montesino-Parra, *Zigenarfrågan – intervention och romantik*.

<sup>8</sup> "Placat om tartarnes fördrifwande af landet", Hazell.

<sup>9</sup> Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome – III. Conditions Under Slavery* (<http://reocities.com/Paris/5121/pariah-ch3.htm> 2010-03-28), Fonseca, *Begrav mig stående – zigenarna och deras resa*, Brisenstam, *En kortfattad redogörelse för slaveriet i Rumänien* p 5 and Elmgren, *Zigenare som slavar* ([http://papers.kommiekomiks.com/zigenare\\_som\\_slavar.htm](http://papers.kommiekomiks.com/zigenare_som_slavar.htm) 2010-03-28).

<sup>10</sup> Gergely, *Good Practices: Compilation of Court Cases of Discrimination Against Roma in Access to Public Places*.

understanding the meaning of what they were subjected to.<sup>11</sup> At a large extent Romani individuals have been deprived the custody of their children by the authorities who placed the children in institutions or in non-Romani families in order to transform the children into non-Roma.<sup>12</sup> One excuse for taking a Romani child and placing it in an institution or a foster family could be that the mother was from a "Tattare" family.<sup>13</sup> During the autumn of 2009, while working at the Embassy of Sweden in Bucharest, I was informed of a "contract" in the village Sanmartin in Harghita county in the middle of Romania. According to the "contract", Romani women in Sanmartin were prohibited to live in the village if they married Romani men from other villages or cities.<sup>14</sup>

These are but some examples of how Romani women have been and are subjected to various forms of antiziganistic policies and acts.<sup>15</sup> The reasons of these policies and acts are all connected to antiziganism. One of the excuses for sterilizing Romani women has at various occasions through history been that they have been perceived to be bad mothers with dangerous genes – a threat to the non-Romani society and its self acclaimed superiority.<sup>16</sup> Roma as a group have been and still are associated to a nomadic lifestyle, thieving, being promiscuous, dirty and uncivilized.<sup>17</sup> In our present day society it seems to be irrelevant what level of education one has achieved or how prosperous and successful one is. He or she who is, or is thought to be, of Romani origin in fact runs a risk of being discriminated against in one way or the other. As mentioned above, Romani women following traditional codes of dressing are especially exposed when it comes to this, as they are easily recognized, often being the only ones in a country wearing a certain kind of clothing and many times (but far from always) having a different physical appearance.

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<sup>11</sup> Hazell, European Roma Rights Centre, *UN Presses Czech Republic on Coercive Sterilisation of Romani Women* (<http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=2626> 2010-04-17) and Spritzer, *Sterilized Roma Say They Did Not Consent* (<http://www.womensenews.org/story/the-world/050724/sterilized-roma-say-they-did-not-consent> 2010-03-30).

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Hazell.

<sup>13</sup> Öhman, *Barnen från Källbäck* (<http://www.acasord.se/> 2010-04-17). In the chapter named *Stora Källbäck i siffror* the reader can find a list of 86 reasons why children were placed at the orphanage Stora Källbäck in Gävle in Sweden. Reason nr 76 reads "Moder tattarsläkt" – Mother [of] Tattare origin/stock. Reason nr 45 reads "Moder steriliserad, ska steriliseras" – Mother sterilized, to be sterilized. If a Romani woman had been or was to be sterilized, her child thus risked being placed in the orphanage Stora Källbäck.

<sup>14</sup> UD-EU Dnr 88 *Beträffande främlingsfientliga partier i Rumäniens parlament samt förföljelse av romer och HBT-personer*. I obtained this information from a Romani activist in Bucharest, while preparing the just mentioned report.

<sup>15</sup> For more examples see for instance Pira, *Tattarna i Sverige*.

<sup>16</sup> Hancock, *Romanies* ([http://radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art\\_b\\_history\\_1789-2004&lang=en&articles=true](http://radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art_b_history_1789-2004&lang=en&articles=true) 2010-03-28), Hazell and Montesino-Parra.

<sup>17</sup> Hancock, *Romanies* ([http://www.radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art\\_b\\_history\\_1789-2004&lang=en&articles=true](http://www.radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art_b_history_1789-2004&lang=en&articles=true) 2010-03-28), *The 'Gypsy Stereotype and the Sexualization of Romani Women* ([http://radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art\\_d\\_identity\\_sexualization&lang=en&articles=true](http://radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art_d_identity_sexualization&lang=en&articles=true) 2010-03-28) Hazell and Montesino-Parra.

## The image of the Romani woman through history and today

The various ideas and images of Roma and "Romaniness" (Romanipe) are further examples of how Romani women have been depicted in an erroneous way in history writing, literature, film, art and in the media during the latest century.<sup>18</sup> The image of the "Gypsy woman", an exotic, craving, passionate creature with seducing eyes, big skirts full of stolen goods, a body decorated with a lot of gold and silver and with long, thieving fingers on a big crystal ball is an image that is commonly used to depict Romani women in general, although few, if anyone, recognize themselves in such a description. Despite this many Romani women are talked about and treated according to these stereotypes.<sup>19</sup> In fact the exoticism around Romani women is so strong that some human rights activists have pointed this out as one of the causes for a demand for Romani women in trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation.<sup>20</sup>

The list of works including one or more Romani characters is rather long and a significant number of the authors and composers creating these works are highly esteemed for their achievements in literature and music.<sup>21</sup> When coming in contact with these works, one can wonder to what extent they are connected to reality. In several works the Romani woman is depicted as exotic, wild and promiscuous, while the Romani man often is depicted as violent and criminal. The Roma of reality, especially Romani women, and their everyday life, however, has seldom been shown by the history books or the media.<sup>22</sup>

Once I heard a non-Romani person claim that the many representations of Roma in literature, art and music are to be regarded as a recognition of the *Gypsy* and of all that is Gypsy (note that the person does not say *recognition of the Roma and of all that is Romani*, although the person usually uses the words Roma and Romani when speaking about the

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<sup>18</sup> Hancock, *The Concoctors: Creating Fake Romani Culture* ([http://radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art\\_d\\_identity\\_the\\_concoctors&lang=en&articles=true](http://radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art_d_identity_the_concoctors&lang=en&articles=true) 2010-03-28), *The Struggle for the Control of Identity* ([http://www.radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art\\_d\\_identity&lang=en&articles=true](http://www.radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art_d_identity&lang=en&articles=true) 2010-03-28), Nilsson, *Mediemytiska romer – mediekonstruktionen av romer i nyhetstidningar 1962-2002* and Hazell.

<sup>19</sup> A considerable number of Romani individuals have experience of being treated according to the mentioned stereotypes.

Before the elections in Sweden in 2002, my school was visited by politicians representing the political parties of the parliament. When asking them what they would do in order to spread light upon the history of Roma in Sweden, one of them answered that Roma have a funny culture, wear a lot of gold and silver and that Roma are overrepresented in crime statistics. The later she based on her visits to certain trials in the courts of Eksjö and Jönköping in Sweden. It would be interesting how she found out who is Romani and who is not.

<sup>20</sup> La Strada CR, o.p.s., *Trafficking in Women in Roma Communities* ([http://diskriminace.info/dp-bydleni/tiw\\_in\\_roma\\_community\\_final\\_report.doc](http://diskriminace.info/dp-bydleni/tiw_in_roma_community_final_report.doc) 2005-05-17).

<sup>21</sup> Wikipedia, *Fictional representations of Romani people* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fictional\\_representations\\_of\\_Romani\\_people](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fictional_representations_of_Romani_people) 2010-03-30). Also see Hazell.

<sup>22</sup> Hancock, *Romance vs. Reality: Popular Notions of the Gypsy* ([http://www.radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art\\_d\\_identity\\_romancevsreality&lang=en&articles=true](http://www.radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art_d_identity_romancevsreality&lang=en&articles=true) 2010-03-28)

people, the culture and the language), especially because the creators of the works many times have been significant personalities in their own field. However, without investigating further into the purposes of each author, artist and composer, I do not agree. If for example the Romani characters of the book *Singoalla* by Victor Rydberg – foreign Gypsy pagans stealing from a monastery – are to be regarded as a recognition of anything that has to do with the Romani people, it is the recognition and enforcement of the antiziganistic Gypsy stereotype and not of the Roma of reality. The same can be said about several other works of literature, music and art and of several films as well.<sup>23</sup>

Although the Romani woman has been living her daily life alongside all other European women for around eight centuries, it is seldom that one can read about the ordinary, daily routines of the Romani woman through history. The Romani people is neither a people lacking role models of their own, nor a people whose individuals have not contributed to the development of Europe. On the contrary, many Romani individuals have according to their best ability contributed to the flourishing development of Europe and a number of Romani individuals have reached high posts and become respected in different societies at different occasions through history.<sup>24</sup> But in the dust of history most of these people, as well as the rest of the Romani people of real life, remain anonymous. The importance of the horse dealer, the coppersmith and the slave for the economy of a country is not the first that is mentioned when the topic of economic history is discussed. My impression is that a majority of researchers, journalists, people working for authorities, authors of educational material and others through time seem to have taken for granted that Romani people are in a certain way and that the millions of Romani individuals never change.<sup>25</sup> In the same manner the fate of many Romani individuals remain unknown to the world and history does not reveal what happened with the Romani women who lost their husbands in one of the many battlefields of Europe or as a consequence of endless persecutions.

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<sup>23</sup> Hancock, *The 'Gypsy' Stereotype and the Sexualization of Romani Women* ([http://www.radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art\\_d\\_identity\\_sexualization&lang=en&articles=true](http://www.radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art_d_identity_sexualization&lang=en&articles=true) 2010-04-19), *Romance vs. Reality: Popular Notions of the Gypsy* ([http://www.radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art\\_d\\_identity\\_romancevsreality&lang=en&articles=true](http://www.radoc.net/radoc.php?doc=art_d_identity_romancevsreality&lang=en&articles=true) 2010-04-19) and Hazell.

<sup>24</sup> For instance the blessed Ceferino Jiménez Malla, the patron of the Romani people. Although he was illiterate he became the advisor of the bishop and a member of a local decision making body. Rodrigo, *Gypsy Saint – Ceferino Jiménez Malla (1861-1936)*, ([http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/migrants/pdf-documents/rc\\_pc\\_migrants\\_nom\\_zeffirino\\_en.pdf](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/pdf-documents/rc_pc_migrants_nom_zeffirino_en.pdf) 2010-03-28). Another example is Ștefan Răzvan who ruled Moldova for a period in 1595. Wikipedia, *Ștefan Răzvan* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%9Etefan\\_R%C4%83zvan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%9Etefan_R%C4%83zvan) 2010-04-17). There are many more examples, both of people not hiding their Romani identity and of people hiding it.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Montesino-Parra and Nilsson.

## Who are the Romani people?

It is beyond the framework of this article to examine all possible ways of changing the stereotype image of the Romani woman. But one way of breaking the anonymity surrounding the Romani people in for instance media coverage and thus making the Romani individuals less different and exotic might be to ask how the everyday life of Mr. or Ms. X is. Does he or she have a professional or academic title? What visions and dreams and values does Mr. or Ms. X have? What happens to Ms. X and other Romani women when they are persecuted and discriminated against because of their identity and their refusal of giving up the Romani traditions and culture? What happens to Ms. X if she refuses to give up the role as Romani woman?<sup>26</sup> What happens to Romani women when their loved ones are killed or imprisoned for months without a trial because of their Romani identity (things that happen in the European Union of today!)?<sup>27</sup> In most, if not all peoples, there are individuals with social problems – drug addicts, alcoholics, criminals etc. The Roma are not an exception to this. There are also a number of Romani individuals in various countries that have fallen victim to trafficking in persons. How many of these individuals have ended up in their present day situation and had their lives to an extent or entirely ruined because of antiziganism, for instance in the shape of sterilization without necessary consent, deprivation of custody of their own children or being placed in an orphanage or a foster family?<sup>28</sup>

The ignorance surrounding the Romani people, the Romani culture etc. is a cause for antiziganism and the various obstacles for Romani individuals that antiziganism itself causes.<sup>29</sup> Improving education in Romani related issues is one way of combating antiziganism. Trying to understand the Romani people and the Romani culture, into what context various Romani individuals are born and live every day is another. Showing, in an

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<sup>26</sup> Whatever it may contain, thinking of for example the heterogeneity of the Romani people and the fact that all individuals are unique and thus might have different definitions of what the role of the Romani woman means.

<sup>27</sup> During my time at the Embassy of Sweden in Bucharest I met a Romani woman in northeast Romania whose husband was kept in custody without a trial for at least four months. The case also involved antiziganistic police brutality/torture and Romani human rights activists were working with the case. I mentioned it in a report that I wrote for the Embassy about the situation of the Roma in Romania and the Republic of Moldova; *Romerna i Rumänien och Republiken Moldova – inblick i några människors vardag*.

In 2009 several Roma in Hungary were murdered, as it seems, simply because they were Roma. Roma Rights Network, *Roma woman murdered in Kisléta, Hungary*

(<http://www.romarights.net/content/roma-woman-murdered-kisl%C3%A9ta-hungary> 2010-03-30).

<sup>28</sup> Thinking of the human rights in general and the human rights of women, children and Roma in particular, it is noteworthy to keep in mind the words of a Romani woman at the conference *Från ord till handling* at the Romani Cultural Centre in Stockholm the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 2010. She said that there is no point in speaking about the rights of the Romani women if their children do not have rights and a real possibility to access them. This because the children in Romani society are always considered more important than their parents.

<sup>29</sup> Brisenstam, *On Antiziganism and the importance of Education* ([http://romaniejournal.com/donatello.binero.se/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=j-6QRx9m\\_X0%3d&tabid=81&mid=475](http://romaniejournal.com/donatello.binero.se/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=j-6QRx9m_X0%3d&tabid=81&mid=475) 2010-03-30).

objective way, the contribution of various Romani individuals through time (for instance the importance of Romani tradesmen for the economical development for Swedish rural society),<sup>30</sup> is yet another way of combating antiziganism. And by combating antiziganism one increases the possibilities of Romani women in overall society.

## Epilogue

*'Cause I am a child of the forgotten tribe  
From land into shore like a sheep gone lost  
I was hated and whipped and beaten along the road  
For I was a poor Romani child<sup>31</sup>*

*Romani boy, Romani girl  
Say to all the people  
A new day is coming<sup>32</sup>*

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<sup>30</sup> Montesino-Parra.

<sup>31</sup> From the song *För vad sorg och smärta* (For What Sorrow and Pain). The Swedish text goes "Jag är ju ett barn av den bortglömda stammen/Från land intill strand likt ett vildfåret får/Jag blev hatad och piskad, fick stryk ut på färden/För jag var ett fattigt dinglarebarn." I have made the translation.

<sup>32</sup> From the song *Hårda minnen lever kvar* (Hard Memories Live On) by Malik Faltin Fredriksson. The Romani text goes "Rommano tjavo, Rommani tje/Penna to sas manusch/Neuvo divus avas kej." I have made the translation. The phrase *neuvo divus avas kej* can also be written and pronounced *nevo dives avar kaj* depending on who says or writes it. Literally translated the text says "Romani boy, Romani girl/Say to all people/[A] New day comes here". For the whole lyrics of the song, see Hazell.

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## **Summary Report from Romani Women’s Rights Conference – *Från ord till handling* – (From words to action) –**

By

Gregor Dufunia Kwiek

On March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010, the Romani Cultural Centre and Romano Paso’s Research Centre celebrated International Women’s Day by organizing and carrying out a Romani women’s rights conference. The conference took place at the Romani Cultural Centre in Stockholm.

Conference speakers consisted of men and women, Romani and non-Romani, with various backgrounds including academics, journalists, teachers, as well as housewives. The intention with the conference was to acquire various opinions on Romani women’s rights issues from

different perspectives. Among the speakers there were those that focused on education as being most relevant to Romani women's rights, while some saw economics playing a bigger role. Some speakers believe the more important battle was in challenging the misconceptions that Swedish feminists have on the roles of Romani women within Romani society.

Discussions have been recorded via video camera, and highlights from that conference are presented in this report. The highlights that are presented in this report from each speaker are not necessarily presented in the words of the speaker nor are they presented in their entirety. Points, arguments and concerns have been summarized in the words of the author of this report. Each speaker is named, followed with brief background information, a summary of the points and issues raised by that speaker, and brief analysis from the author of this report. Speakers and their talks are presented in the order that they were presented at the conference. The report ends with an analytical conclusion and recommendation to deal with concerns that were brought up at the conference.

## **Gregor Dufunia Kwiek**

### **Academic and Romani Activist**

Kwiek opened the conference and was its chair. Kwiek elaborated on the pride that he feels for being in the same room with a person he admired for taking on the challenge of studying to be a sociologist. He continued and pointed out that it was Agnes Lakatos to whom he was referring to, and how she inspired him to enter the university world. Kwiek raised the point of how wonderful it was to be in a room with Romani teachers, Romani university graduates, Romani social workers, and Romani journalist, challenging stereotypes that Roma are uneducated.

### **Analysis**

The majority of the speakers that participated in the conference were women. Kwiek was well aware that a majority of the teachers, university graduates, social workers and journalists, were women. By illuminating how Romani women contribute to Romani activism without

stating that he feels pride not because of what they achieved as Roma but as women, the discourse would have marginalized the women. The emphasis was on what they achieved as women so that Romani activism could be understood as something that requires the effort of both genders.

## **Hans Caldaras**

### **Romani Artist and Activist**

Caladaras opened his speech by pointing out what significance International Women's Day represents. He discussed the various roles women play and how women had been historically oppressed in the name of religion, tradition and culture. He reminded us that the oppression of women is oppression against our own mothers, sisters, daughters and wives. The speech was concluded with pointing out that International Women's Day is a day of recognizing achievements.

### **Analysis**

When he brought up how religion and tradition oppressed women, he was signaling that end must come to this so that humanity can progress further without hindrance. The recognition of achievement is a means of pointing out that humanity would not have progressed without the contributions of women.

## **Emilia Domurat**

### **Student in Political Science**

Domurat discussed different forms of feminism. She made a distinction between what is "white feminism" or "western feminism" to "Romani feminism". Definitions of gender equality often are misinterpretations of what gender equality, as Domurat pointed out: "Gender equality is about having the right to choose doing what a man can do, not doing what a man does." Often, western feminism projects its own understanding of how to measure gender equality from its own culture onto the Romani women, Domurat clarified. She went on to say that western feminists miss what problems Romani women face because they are concentrated on problem areas they presume to be problem areas for Romani women. She defined this perception as being colonial. She stressed that western feminism may understand some Romani practices to be a form of sexual oppression, and that is what sets Romani feminism apart from western feminism. She elaborated that the same practices in different

cultures will have different meaning, and it is the meaning which is important not the interpretation.

### **Analysis**

The talk itself was an analysis on how external perceptions can misinterpret the position that Romani women have in Romani society. Domurat's point and emphasis is that Romani feminists must address this issue, and make known obstacles that are faced more often by Romani in the struggle towards gender equality.

### **Larissa Lacatos**

#### **Romani Social Worker**

Lacatos concentrated her talk on the many social problems faced by Roma in general. She brought up numerous examples of social problems faced by Roma in Romania. She felt that Romani women's rights are a part of the general problems Roma face, namely education, housing, employment and discrimination. She believed that the process of dealing with these issues requires a joint effort of educated Romani women and men from Romani society: "Role models are needed who have accessed high level education, to go into the community, pass on the knowledge that they gained and inspire others to do the same."

### **Analysis**

On various occasions, Romani women's rights activists have pointed out that Romani women face dual discrimination. First they face discrimination as Roma, and then they face it again as women. Statistics show that even a state like Sweden, where gender equality is priority that the state actively takes on, women still face discrimination in the employment sector. Lacatos's point on addressing Romani social problems by both genders has a valid point. Since Romani women face dual discrimination, the dual discrimination becomes a Romani concern that should be addressed by both genders belonging to the group rather than isolating the problem and marginalizing it to Romani women alone.

### **Christina Rodell Olgac**

#### **University Lecturer**

Olgac placed emphasis on the need for parents to be involved in their children's education. She continued and pointed out that it this was the hundredth anniversary of International Women's Day, and that it was some forty-five years ago that Katarina Taikon campaigned for Romani access to education in Sweden. Olgac stressed that according to an international study carried out by the WHO (World Health Organization), has shown that when women become educated, she reaches a larger public than when a man does; "Education of a woman is not only of value to her, but to her children as well".

### **Analysis**

Olgac referred to an international study to demonstrate how much Romani women can do for the community via education. By naming what Katarina Taikon achieved, in the same passage as she names the significance of this being the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of International Romani Day, Olgac was marking Taikon's campaign as one that is of historical significance. The emphasis on the need for parents to be involved in their children's education is not only to encourage them, but also to ensure their success, and becomes a habit that will work like a pyramid effect.

### **Kati Demitri-Taikon**

#### **Chief Editor for Romani Youth Periodical & Teacher in Romani Class**

Taikon elaborated that as chief editor for a periodical, she has experienced that her status would have had greater recognition had she been a man. She pointed out that three very important events can contribute to changing this; referring to an International Romani Women's Rights Conference entitled *Our Voices Heard*, a seminar that focused on Romani women's rights, that was organized by the Delegation for Romani issues, and the conference she was speaking at that day. Taikon informed the audience at the conference of the many emails she has received from various organizations that are celebrating this day, and that it is being celebrated by Roma around the world.

### **Analysis**

Taikon stressed that the mere fact that these conferences are talking place and that more and more people recognize this day and celebrate it, is a form of change in itself. Every day is a day that should recognize women as equals to men. However, what Taikon is making relevant here is that a specific day, or women's rights conferences, is a symbolic instrument that focuses attention on women's rights, changing the lower status women have to men for the

same success to equal status, because opportunity is given to women to raise such issues and confront them.

## **Nadja Bilicka**

### **Business Owner**

Bilicka's talk presented findings from a study that had over 800 Romani participants. Among the findings, data had shown that Romani women had complete responsibility for the children from a divorce or had relatively little help from the children's father. According to the study, the majority of the women who had little education were unemployed, or had an income that was at the poverty level. Bilicka then pointed out that in the past Romani women contributed more so to the household economy than they do today. She explained that women told fortunes in the past, but that discrimination has caused this source of income to decline as an income among Roma. Bilicka provided numerous examples of discrimination cases in employment and education and made it known that Romani women are more likely to face it than Romani men because they are identified because of dress style as Romani sooner than are men. Bilicka concluded with returning to the study and presenting data that showed that the majority of the women did not know how to start a company, file for discrimination, apply for a job, or how to gain entrance into university and vocational studies. With this she emphasized that a method needs to be developed so that Romani women can learn how to access their rights and then, and only then, can they truly combat discrimination.<sup>33</sup>

### **Analysis**

The data from the study are used to point out that the majority of major caretakers for children from a divorce are women who have a low level education and live at poverty level. Discrimination is one of the elements that bring this cause, but a lack of knowledge also contributes to the problem. Bilicka was saying that a domino effect can be stopped from spreading from mother to child if this problem can be tackled head on. She was suggesting that the problem be first addressed by bringing knowledge to Romani women on how they can better their social situation and claim their rights. Without first having an education, the lack of it can be used as an excuse by employers to exorcize discrimination, and it is that Bilicka believes can better fight discrimination when the excuse is removed.

## **Agnes Lakatos**

### **Radio Journalist & Academic**

Lakatos spoke about the difficulty she has working with Romani women's rights issues when her son, daughter, and their children, still must fight for their rights as Roma. "The right to an education, the right to food, the right to a roof over their head and the right to live....Roma are killed left and right in today's Europe". Lakatos made this point, but at the same time acknowledged that Romani women's right issues must have its own forum. The problem with such a forum, Lakatos pointed out, is that it overburdens Romani women with all the things they need to do.

### **Analysis**

Lakatos's final comment summarized the entire point of her speech. She did not deny that Romani women's issues require their own discussion, but that Romani discrimination fills up most of the discussion. Lakatos demonstrated with this point that that general discrimination against Roma is so pervasive that issues that may be more relevant for Roma women than Roma in general are difficult to prioritize when greater threats exists that all Roma need to face.

### **Robert Brisenstam**

#### **Law Student & Editor for Romani E Journal**

Brisenstam provided an historical account to elaborate on the situation of Romani women today. Among the examples he had used to present this account, he pointed out that Romani women were victims of forced sterilization in Germany and Scandinavia up into the 1900's and that the Czech Republic still engages in it in more recent times. He explained that the forced sterilization was a means to stop the spreading of the "defected" Romani genetic make-up. This was done because it was believed that Roma were inherently criminal or were mentally challenged. Brisenstam stated that although evidence showed this to be untrue as there were educated Roma who could have challenged this negative perception of Roma, forced sterilization had taken place and had continued to take place when it came to the Roma. Brisenstam pointed out that Romani women were oppressed parallel to other women historically, but with the distinction that Romani women were oppressed for being Romani as women.

### **Analysis**

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<sup>33</sup> Bilicka was not present at the conference but her paper was read by Gregor Dufunia Kwiek



Brisenstam awakened an issue the likes of which have not been covered in scholarly approaches to Romani society. Brisenstam used sterilization as an example to point out that Romani women were not only oppressed for being Romani or being women but faced specific oppression as Romani women. The example provided by Brisenstam can be one of many of interest to historical research.

### **Angelina Demetri-Taikon**

#### **Romani Class Teacher & Activist**

Taikon explained that the Romani situation is different to that of the majority society. “We are told that our organizations need to be made up of 50% women and 50% men. But you know what? We have only been activists for the past thirty years. At the start of the movement, it was men that represented Roma, the women did not want to be activists. The majority society says to us that we must have a 50/50 gender ratio. OK, we will try, but it will be hard, not everyone wants to be an activist. In the past there were those who took care of the household and those were out there making money. Gender equality is not about who does the dishes on what day of the week. The person who can work does so and the person, who can do the dishes, does them, and this can be a man or a woman”. Taikon continued and explained that the labour market is dominated by men who are in higher positions than women, and that gender equality is an issue concerning the whole of society. She continued and stated: “you probably do not hear much of what Romani women say, and have your assumptions, but you should hear what they have to say! One needs to consider who sets the demands on gender equality. I want gender equality to be based on my culture and my own ways, not another’s”.

#### **Analysis**

Taikon elaborated that men commonly acted as spokesmen on behalf of the Romani community in Sweden, and because of this, it may be the case that non-Romani society may assume that Romani women are not given opportunity to speak. She perpetuated such an assumption to be a myth when she made it known that Romani women do express their concerns although non-Romani society may have not heard them. As Taikon made this point, some members in the audience murmured *Katarina*, this being a protest to the notion that Romani culture holds down Romani women. By explaining that household chores and employment do not have segregated borders in Romani society, Taikon was stating that the gender equality issue for the majority society should not be the same for Romani society, and any demand for it be as such would be a means of assimilation.

## **Recommendations:**

All participant discussions at the conference shared certain patterns that were in strong agreement to one another, among which were:

1. That gender equality in Romani society should not be governed by the same demands for gender equality from another society.
2. That Romani women need to be assisted in accessing their rights, as the effects from that can reach their children, causing a domino effect.
3. That Romani social problems need to be addressed simultaneously as Romani women's rights issues as there is a relation between the two.
4. That Romani women's issues deserves its own forum so that those issues can be validated and given recognition.
5. That historical research is needed on Romani women's history.
6. That Romani women and men should work side-by-side not to marginalize Romani women's issues.

Concerns presented at the conference are in relation to one another. Points 2, 3, 4, and 6, all address social concerns, demands focus on Romani women's concerns, and that marginalization of those concerns should be avoided. Points 1 & 2 are of relation to one another because research can help to understand what problems are specific to gender equality for Romani women. Based on these conclusions, the first step that would need to be taken is to mobilize both Romani women and men, with an educational program to gather data and find ways of presenting to Romani women so that the information can be accessed and used. The suggestion does not exclude uneducated Roma but rather includes all Roma in the process of developing these materials. The educated Roma merely fill the purpose of selecting information and designing an instrument to satisfy the need. However, the information needs to be gathered from Romani populations to know what information to spread and in what way to present it.

**Speech held at Romani Women's Rights Conference**  
**– Från ord till handling – (From words to action)**  
**Stockholm 8 March 2010**

By

Robert Brisenstam

*Vid låga ryttartorpet, vid höga Hönneberg*  
*Där satt en ensam kvinna, likt snön var hennes färg*  
*Och tårar föll från kinden...*

Detta är inledningsorden i en gammal resanderomsk visa härifrån Skandinavien. Visan handlar om hur en kvinna har blivit ensam i sitt hem efter att hennes man har dragit ut i ett av Sveriges många krig och gått förlorad på ett avlägset slagfält någonstans i Polen. Deras gemensamme son har lämnat hemmet utan att återvända. Det är vinter och kvinnans namn är Elin. Om denna Elin är en romsk kvinna eller inte framgår inte av visan, men om vi studerar texten lägger vi snart märke till att den tecknar ett personporträtt. Vi får veta vad kvinnan heter, hur hon ser ut, att hon har ett förkläde på sig, hur, när och var hon lever samt vad som hänt med de människor som hon älskar mest och som har stått henne närmast. Visan avslöjar till och med något om veden hon eldar i spisen med.

Denna visa är ett av många uttryck för den resanderomska sång- och berättartraditionen. En tradition som utgör en mycket rik källa till kunskap om våra förfäder och vår historia. En tradition som utgör en del av vår identitet och vårt kulturarv. En tradition som fungerar som ett välbehövligt komplement till den större och allmänna historieskrivningen, i vilken romer reduceras till en grupp anonyma människor där alla ser likadana ut och alla klär sig likadant.

Romer har en historia fylld av lidande och förföljelser. Romska kvinnor har varit och är särskilt utsatta för förföljelser och diskriminering. Några exempel som vittnar om detta är tvångssteriliseringar riktade särskilt mot romer i Sverige och Tyskland – en form av förföljelse som främst drabbat kvinnor. Under det senaste decenniet kom oroväckande rapporter från Tjeckien att romska kvinnor steriliserades utan att vilja det och utan att veta vad ingreppet egentligen innebar. Anledningarna till att romska kvinnor har tvångssteriliserats är bl. a. att de har ansetts vara dåliga mödrar med farliga gener – ett hot mot det ickeromska samhället och dess påstådda överlägsenhet. I våra dagar verkar det kvitta hur framgångsrik och välutbildad man är. Är man av romsk härkomst löper man en betydande risk för att falla offer för antizigansimen i en eller annan form. Kvinnor som klär sig enligt romska klädkoder är särskilt utsatta på denna punkt.

Föreställningar om romer och romskhet är ytterligare exempel på hur romska kvinnor har återgivits felaktigt i historieskrivningen, i litteraturen, i konsten och i det senaste seklets mediebevakning. Bilden av ”zigenerskan”, en exotisk, liderlig och passionerad skapelse med förföriska ögon, stora kjolar fulla av stöldgods, en kropp smyckad av mycket guld och silver och med långa tjuvaktiga fingrar på en stor kristallkula, är en bild som tillskrivs romska kvinnor i gemen, trots att få, om någon känner igen sig i en sådan beskrivning. Ändå blir romska kvinnor omtalade och behandlade därefter. Ändå är exotiseringen av romska kvinnor

så stark att vissa människorätsaktivister har kunnat ange detta som en anledning till att det på sina håll i människohandeln råder efterfrågan på just romska kvinnor.

Verklighetens romer och vår vardag har det dock sällan skrivits om, än mindre om de romska kvinnorna. Det är sällan man kan läsa om den romska kvinnans vardag genom historien, en vardag som under minst åttahundra år har utspelat sig parallellt med andra europeiska kvinnors vardag. Romer är varken ett folk som saknar egna förebilder eller ett folk vars individer inte har bidragit till Europas utveckling. Tvärtom har romer efter bästa förmåga bidragit till Europas blomstring och ett antal romer har nått höga poster och aktning i olika samhällen vid olika tidpunkter. Men i historiens damm förblir vi ändå anonyma. Hästhandlarens, vallackarens, kopparslagarens och slavens betydelse för ett lands ekonomi är inte det första man nämner när man talar om historia. Forskare, journalister, myndighetspersoner, läroboksförfattare m.fl. verkar ha tagit för givet att romer skall vara på ett visst sätt, att romer är på ett visst sätt och att vi är oföränderliga.

Likaså förblir så många romska människoröden anonyma och vi får sällan eller aldrig veta vad som hände med de romska kvinnor vars män gick förlorade på Europas många slagfält eller till följd av otaliga förföljelser. Vad hände till exempel med de romska kvinnor som med viss sannolikhet fanns med i trossen vid det svenska nederlaget vid Poltava för trehundra år sedan och vars män kanske stupade på slagfältet eller blev krigsfångar?

Men vi måste även ställa samma frågor utifrån vår egen tid – hurdan är vardagen och verkligheten för dagens romer, för dagens romska kvinnor? Vilka värderingar har romer, vilka värderingar har romska kvinnor? Vilka visioner har romer, vilka visioner har romska kvinnor? Vad händer med romska kvinnor när de blir diskriminerade eller utsatta för förföljelser på grund av sin identitet, på grund av sin vägran att ge upp de egna traditionerna, den egna kulturen, den egna traditionella klädseln och rollen som just romsk kvinna? Vad händer med romska kvinnor när deras män blir mördade eller fängslade i flera månader utan rättegång på grund av att de är romer (vilket sker i EU idag)?

Okunskapen om romer, romsk kultur m.m. är en starkt bidragande orsak till antiziganismen, som i sina olika former hindrar romer från att kunna delta fullt ut i samhället. Genom att råda bot på denna okunskap, genom att försöka förstå sig på romerna och den romska kulturen, det sammanhang som vi romer är födda in i, det sammanhang som vi lever i och som vi gemensamt bygger upp och förvaltar, genom att på ett ärligt och objektivt sätt återge romers insats (i Sverige särskilt romers betydelse för bondesamhällets ekonomiska utveckling) kan

man slå ett slag mot antiziganismen. Och genom att bekämpa antiziganismen slår man ett slag för den romska kvinnans möjligheter i samhället i stort.

*Robert Brisenstams tal på konferensen "Från ord till handling" på Romskt kulturcentrum på Internationella kvinnodagen 2010. Det talade ordet gäller.*

**Den romska kvinnan (Extract from speech held at Romani  
Women's Rights Conference – Från ord till handling – (From  
words to action)  
Stockholm 8 March 2010**

By

Emilia Domurat

Alla kvinnor i världen, hälften av världens befolkning, har olika erfarenheter i livet; alla har sina egna så kallade glasögon att titta ut genom. Skillnaderna kan vara stora beroende på faktorer såsom klass, religion, och etnicitet. Det är naturligt att en ”vi och dem”-känsla kan uppstå när, som i många fall, det enda kvinnor har gemensamt är att de är just kvinnor.

I de fall när vår könstillhörighet är det enda som förenar oss är det verkligen inte svårt att förstå att det kan uppstå konflikter mellan kvinnor, något som i sin tur leder till ett kulturellt avstånd. En del svenska feminister har en tendens att tala för alla kvinnor, och utgå från att alla kvinnor kämpar för samma mål. Att utgå från att alla kvinnor har samma behov och önskningar som de själva avspeglar ett arrogant synsätt.

Nu ska jag beskriva några problem som denna syn kan ge upphov till. Alla andra kulturer som är annorlunda som inte har samma synsätt är dåliga därför ska de bekämpas. Det finns en viss typ av feminister som verkar anse att de var först med att vara feminister, med att kämpa för kvinnors rättigheter, att de har rätt i sin kamp och att andra ska efterlikna dem. Att de är ensamma om en ideologi som står för jämställdhets- och frihetsvärderingar.

Istället för att försöka lösa existerande kulturella konflikter mellan olika grupper av kvinnor skapas ännu fler. Man ska komma ihåg att de flesta människor anser att just deras kultur är den bästa eller den vackraste. Det ligger i ens synsätt. Vi kan anse att andras kulturer är dåliga, men andra kommer säga samma sak om vår. Vem har rätt? Det ligger i betraktarens ögon.

Det är just kampen mellan kulturer som förstärker ”vi och dem”-attityder. Istället för att acceptera varandra, samtala och försöka hitta en balans gör man det lätt för sig och pekar fingret mot de andra, ”de annorlunda”, de som inte är som vi! Allt på grund av att de inte har en likadan, eller liknande, kultur.

Trots likheter och gemensamma erfarenheter som finns mellan kvinnor med olika etnisk bakgrund försöker svenska feminister ofta att hitta och fokusera på olikheterna för att på så sätt distansera sig från andra kulturer, däribland den romska kulturen.

Ett exempel när det gäller den romska kvinnan där konflikter uppstår är den så kallade romska kläddstilen. Speciellt finska romer har varit föremål för sådan uppmärksamhet, där svenska feminister drar sina slutsatser om ojämlikhet.

Ett annat exempel är att romer ofta gifter sig i jämförelsevis unga år. Detta brukar vara ett återkommande debattämne mellan romska feminister och svenska feminister. Svenska feminister brukar skrika i jämställdhetens namn att de romska kvinnornas kultur och synsätt är ”fel” och ifrågasätter hur romska kvinnor kan acceptera sin situation?

Det verkar som om vissa svenska feminister vill ändra på den romska kvinnan så att de ska ge avkall på sin kultur och dela samma kultur som majoritetssamhället.

En del svenska feminister har en tendens att bortse från romska kvinnors önskningar och erfarenheter. Rasism är ett viktigt exempel – något som den romska kvinnan ständigt måste leva med och hantera.

Självklart kämpar romska kvinnor för sina kvinnliga rättigheter, men i första hand måste vi slåss för våra mänskliga rättigheter. Utan våra mänskliga rättigheter, som svenska kvinnor ofta tar för givet, kan vi inte kämpa för våra kvinnliga rättigheter.

Det verkar som om svenska kvinnor ofta tror att vi alla åtnjuter samma respekt och möjligheter här i livet. Man ska inte glömma att även feminister kan vara rasister och ha fördomar. Ibland måste man som romsk feminist kämpa mot svenska feminister på grund av det.

Som nämndes tidigare har kvinnor ibland bara en sak gemensamt; att vi är just kvinnor. Ur mitt eget perspektiv måste jag säga att det är intet för intet som romerna är en av Sveriges fem minoriteter. Vi är det för att vi har behandlats - och behandlas fortfarande - illa. Människor har olika fördomar mot oss.

Det är oerhört svårt att hela tiden försvara sig, något som jag ständigt måste göra bara för att jag tillhör den romska minoritetsgruppen. Man känner sig ofta kränkt och ledsen. Man kan beskriva situationen som om man måste ständigt kämpa för att få existera. Fler än en gång har man fått höra att Hitler borde ha gjort ett bättre jobb när det gäller den romska gruppen. Inte sällan vill folk ta till våld för att visa sin ståndpunkt.

Som ensam romsk kvinna på universitet har jag mött många fördomar, hånskratt och i bästa fall ignorans från andra svenska feminister. Svenska feminister har en tendens att tro mer på böcker skrivna av icke-romer än på romerna själva.

Att vara en romsk feminist och aktivist är oerhört svårt, speciellt om man är ensam på någon plats. Ibland känns det som om man kämpar mot vinden. Min högsta önskan är att fler romska kvinnor ska utbilda sig, trots alla fördomar vi får utstå. En dag är jag ensam, nästa dag är vi två, nästa dag är vi tio. Man ska aldrig ge upp – det vinner inte den romska kvinnan på!

## **Litteratur**

Freedman, Jane. *Feminism - En Introduktion*. Stockholm: Liber, 2003