



DŽUVLJARKE

Roma Lesbian Existence

Vera Kurtić

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Džuvljarke [ʒuvlǎrke] – is a term from the Roma language (*Romani*) and used among Roma living in Serbia. Together with its Serbian-influenced suffix, it is used to refer to a lesbian, a woman emotionally and sexually oriented towards women. This term usually implies a negative connotation, particularly within the heteronormative patriarchal Serbian and Romani social matrix.

All interviewees' personal information and potentially identifying details have been altered to protect their identities and safety.

Let us use our invisibility to our benefit!

I Introduction

Silence, ever more than diversity, is a force of women's oppression—within the power coming from women gathering in solidarity and support, lies the possibility of complete expression and change.

Chris Corrin¹

The importance of publishing this paper

It has been a while since the idea to conduct this research project and publish the results was first born within me because I personally believe it is important to

¹Chris Corrin, ed., *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (Zagreb: Kontra, 2002), Forward, Croatian edition. Translation from Croatian: Vera Kurtic

speak about Romani lesbians living in Serbia. Within the general discourse of the majority non-Roma Serbian population Romani women are usually only mentioned as the subjects of racist and sexist jokes. Negative images of Romani women are common in the Serbian media, which often characterizes Romani women as criminals or as parasites burdening social care system. News stories and articles about Romani women are almost always followed by a number of racist comments on interactive news web sites or on social media. On the other hand, within the circles that can be defined as the Roma activist, there are oftentimes talks about Romani women emphasizing their 'traditional' roles and responsibilities towards the community and the family, as the ones whose job it is to hold the home together. Generally speaking, the existence of Romani lesbians is either ignored or when they are talked about, it is in a manner that denies their equality with others. In this way, Romani lesbians living in Serbia suffer from multiple forms of marginalization, forced to live an invisible existence, and as such remain vulnerable to all possible forms of discrimination and violence. The aim of this paper is to ensure that when lesbian existence is discussed, the conversation opens a path leading to the empowerment of these women, who are, at the moment nameless and invisible and remain objects of shame and victims of multiple forms of violence and discrimination.

Present day society provides just enough space to allow people to assume that the experiences of all individual

members of a marginalized group are the same as the other members of that group. However, when we look more closely at the lives of these individuals, we see that this is not the case and actions directed to discussing multiple discrimination are few. There have been some efforts aimed at revealing the intersections of multiple-discrimination confronting Romani women, and this paper is a contribution to those initiatives as my intention is to draw attention to the multiple-discrimination faced by lesbians of Roma origin living in Serbia. Just fifteen years ago, in Serbia as well as in other East European countries, it was unimaginable to talk about Romani women and the fact that they suffer multiple-discrimination. It was Romani women themselves who introduced this topic and pushed for the inclusion of Romani women's rights on the women's and Roma rights political agendas. However, other efforts to include Romani women's rights in various rights movements made by others claiming to speak for Romani women did not adequately represent Romani women or their lives, and demonstrated a partial or even complete lack of understanding of Romani women's experiences or needs. Often these attempts to include Romani women's rights in political agendas actually reinforced common stereotypes and ended up replicating Romani women's oppression and exclusion. There are a number of examples where Roma activists, or those who identify themselves as such, attempted to address, or raise awareness about 'Romani women's issues,' however, these attempts usually centered on

organizing folklore events, which were aimed at preserving and promoting ‘tradition.’ Other efforts actually perpetuated gender roles by focusing solely on reproductive health issues among Roma populations. In fact, there has been strong resistance coming from the mainstream, male-dominated Roma Rights movement to solely discuss Romani women. I myself have received instructions from some Roma activists that I am only ‘allowed’ to speak publicly about Romani women’s oppression within the context of forced sterilizations perpetrated by state institutions in the region, and I have also been warned that I should never mention the arranged marriages or bride sales which occur in my own Roma community. When it comes to the mainstream, majority society women’s movement and women’s civil society groups generally², Romani women’s rights have been and remain an area of little interest, and for most feminist organizations there is neither time nor space on their political agendas to think or act either on behalf of or together with Romani women. As a Romani woman, when I am among women’s rights and feminist activists, I am often subjected to the commonly held opinions claiming that

² In this paper, I make a distinction between women’s and feminist groups as not all women’s groups are necessarily feminist, just as feminism is not always or necessarily a woman-only space. Except in theory, such a distinction is not always clear. It is especially important to stress that not all Romani women activists are automatically feminists, just as not all lesbians are feminists or activists.

Romani women can achieve exactly the same rights and quality of life as other women if they only try hard enough, and moreover, how non-Romani women are “fed up with Romani women and their demands”. As a lesbian, I can say that a similar dialogue takes place regarding sexual orientation. The experiences of Romani lesbians living in Serbia are a clear example illustrating the intersecting burdens of gender, race, nationality, class and minority sexual existence.

Women of color have made progress in their fight for inclusion and equal representation in the mainstream Western liberal feminist movement, but also politically. Because of their continuing efforts, these women have greatly influenced the Romani women’s rights movement, in terms of both theory and activism. Our black sisters inspire and sustain us as activists, and in our work to develop a theoretical framework that includes the multidimensional marginalization of Romani women, especially by introducing it through the notion of *intersectionality*³. The idea of the intersections of race, class, gender and sexual orientation became the subjects of political theories which first sprang out of legal academic circles in the US. Legal scholars had

³ The notion intersectionality itself was introduced into feminist theory in 1989 by feminist theorist and attorney, Kimberly Crenshaw in her work *Mapping the Margins*. This work represents an important contribution to feminist scholarship, and has become a standard within the multidisciplinary approach when examining identities and discrimination.

become aware of the potential dangers of so-called neutral and objective law and legislation, which does not mean that women activists had not been aware of the intersectional dimension of different types of oppressions onto their lives even before this term was introduced. They realized that racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, classism and all other forms of discrimination are related and cannot be examined separately from one another. Despite the growing acceptance of Intersectionality theory in the US and mainstream Western Liberal feminism, the idea of the intersection of different oppressions—racism and homophobia—for example, is rarely applied when it comes to Romani women in Serbia. I contend that the topic of intersectionality deserves greater attention in Serbia as well as in other countries in the region and it is my hope that this paper will serve as a tool to encourage these discussions and lead to a comprehensive political agenda that includes the human rights of LGBT Roma.

The topics I have chosen to discuss in this paper—the existence of women who are both Roma and lesbians, women who have emotional and sexual desires towards other women, and the issue of sexuality in itself—represent subjects which have been historically taboo, despite the fact that sexuality is one of the essential attributes to our very beings. Sexuality is a part of our personal identity; our sexuality informs our connections, relationships, our communities, and our entire society. It is a strong taboo to talk about female sexuality, not

only within Romani communities but also more broadly in Serbia. In fact, no matter how 'developed' or 'modern' Serbian society is considered to be, especially when compared with other societies, or how 'evolved', or less patriarchal, Romani communities are now when contrasted with those in the past, women's sexuality is still a subject that no one likes to discuss. Whether Roma or non-Roma, highly educated or illiterate, as women we continue to be faced with our sexuality being oppressed by society, the media, commerce, to the extent that we ourselves feel uneasy when we talk about it. There are problems when either the sexuality of Romani women or the sexuality of those whose sexual orientation diverges from normative heterosexuality is in question. For either group individually, there is a shared experience of pressure to conform and persistent human rights violations. For those of us who live at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, these problems are multiplied. It is especially difficult to be a Romani lesbian in Serbia for a number of different reasons: not only does the subject of LGBT rights itself represent a topic which elicits a number of reactions (ranging from disregard to violent), but there is also currently a growing racism against Romani men and women. In addition, the rigidity of Romani communities is not supportive of Romani lesbians, as I will discuss below. Taken together, these factors lead to the complete negation of our lives.

The problem that I most want to highlight in this paper is the role of patriarchy and the impact it has on the lives of Romani lesbians in particular. While the concept of patriarchy is commonly discussed in many of the papers published in Serbia on the subject of rights and equality for Romani women and men, these papers often fail to offer a broader critique of social reality, and the ways in which the current situation within society is the result of widely accepted patriarchal norms (the problem of capitalism is left aside although it is equally important). Topics and problems that we work on within our activism represent just consequences of patriarchy as it represents a power hierarchy of one group of people over the other and the governance of “the father, the king, the priest” in male-dominated societies. Such power relations do not only denote domination of men over women, but also refer to a hierarchy of relations between men—and this power hierarchy is evident in nearly every social structure and society. Dominance, subjugation and exploitation are all characteristic of modern civilization. White men hold the power and control over white women; also they hold power over women and men and women who are not white. In turn, men of color hold power and control over women of color (though not over white women). Patriarchy can also frame the analysis of power relations between those who possess land, property, and independent means of income generation towards those who do not have access to these resources.

For centuries patriarchy—through laws, religion, customs and practices—has been the basis for control over women’s labor and women’s bodies (controlling both women’s production and reproduction) and women’s sexuality. In patriarchal societies, sexuality is the primary weapon used to control women and enable continued male power and dominance within society. Control over female sexuality is not specific to Roma culture. With very few exceptions, patriarchy is present in virtually every community in the world. Adrienne Rich, along with many other feminist authors, discusses the various methods utilized by men to assert control over women—from physical force to control over the conscience. Rich, quoting Kathleen Gough, outlines eight “characteristics of male power in archaic and contemporary societies”⁴ These eight characteristics include the denial or imposition of female sexuality, managing and utilization of women’s labor in order to control women’s production, control over and the taking of children, limiting women physically and preventing women’s free movement, using women as objects of exchange within male transactions, hampering women’s creativity, and controlling women’s access to social knowledge and cultural achievements. If we consider only practices such as: punishing women for loss of virginity outside wedlock, for adultery or for

⁴Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, Kontra, Zagreb 2002. pg. 36, quotes Kathleen Gough, *The Origin of the Family*

lesbian relations; classifying women as either 'clean' or 'unclean'; disempowering and isolating menstruating women; denying female sexuality after menopause (Purdjaja); rape; arranged marriage and bride selling; prostitution; controlling women's reproduction through limited access to abortion and birth control and forced sterilization; withholding access to health care; denying divorced women custody of their children; preventing women from accessing education; inability to find work; prohibiting women from leaving the home; reducing women to the roles of wife, mother and homemaker; confiscating women's earnings; domestic and intimate partner violence; and even common social behaviors such as sexist jokes, we begin to see that we have created a strikingly accurate depiction of the daily lives of many Romani women, both throughout history and today.

As illustrated above, within patriarchal power structures, women are tightly controlled and strictly defined as objects in relation to men. Women who act outside of this relationship experience retribution through social exclusion and isolation, poverty, and violence. In many ways, lesbians represent a significant challenge, and therefore threat, to male control over women and the entire system of patriarchy. One of the earliest and most detailed accounts of lesbian existence can be found in writings of lesbian feminist Adrienne Rich, who introduced this concept into feminist theory. The exploration of lesbian existence remains the key to disclosing the socially compulsory nature of

heterosexuality. The theory of compulsory heterosexuality provides a critical aspect missing from previous descriptions of lesbian lives: not only regarding the sexual act and choice of partners but also the understanding of how sexuality relates to all other aspects of women's social interactions. Lesbian existence deconstructs common conceptions of family, intimate partner relationships, parenthood, social relationships, language, security, and belonging to a community—all institutions that patriarchy has to offer. Lesbian existence also means the dislocation women outside of the bastion of male dominance because it challenges what it means to 'belong' to a nation, a state, father, husband, church. As Rich writes: "We're out in a country that has no language no laws, [...] whatever we do together is pure invention the maps they gave us were out of date."⁵

The visible existence of Romani lesbian women challenges the dominant white patriarchal discourse and it poses a threat to male dominance and control as embodied within heterosexism—the system under which we live and which is our reality. Essentially, being a lesbian means rejecting economic and sexual dependence on men and being a Romani lesbian is a subversion of gender roles both within the Romani community as well as within the majority, non-Romani

⁵Adrienne Rich, "Twenty One Love Poems: XIII", in *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978)

community. Romani lesbians create tension within the social order by not conforming to racist and sexist stereotypes of Romani women: the Romani woman as pregnant with many children around her skirt, and with an abusive husband—a prime example of unequal gender power relations—or Romani women as highly sexualized objects (like Esmeralda or Carmen) whose talents are enticing men as prostitutes or exotic entertainers, which are the images that many from the majority non-Roma population are accustomed to.⁶ Though the Romani lesbian community does not yet have a concrete politically articulated set of demands, the existence of Romani lesbians, who are located at the intersection of several marginalized identities bears a reminder that entire society must take into consideration the needs and demands of the most marginalized members among them. Human rights and liberation from oppression in order to live full lives are not exclusive privileges for some but must be available to all. The internal and external social forces acting to preserve the current status quo are immensely strong and Romani lesbians face violence, isolation and oppressive traditional practices. Moreover, Romani

⁶Readers' comments to an article online "Roma Lesbians live threefold discrimination". One comment by a reader offers an example of the kind of hostility Romani Lesbians are met with: "Roma lesbians... Where does this world go???" Full article is available in Serbian at:

<http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/814912-romkinje-lezbijke-zrtve-trostruke-diskriminacije-video>. (Accessed September 3rd 2013)

communities serve as both direct and symbolic oppressors: direct because they strive to preserve the existing system within each localized Romani community and symbolic in that the community structure actually preserves the white male hierarchical order. The part of Serbian society that is homophobic, and unfortunately this is the majority, does not have an especially developed consciousness that LGBT rights relate to members of other minority groups. In their effort to simply live their existence or perhaps even change their position in society, members of minority groups of both sexes encounter their initial challenges within their own communities first; their families and home environment. The demands of Romani women and men for LGBT rights do not reach majority community. Therefore, the most visible individuals in Serbia advocating for LGBT rights are indeed those from majority population—at least according to their skin color or ethnic background. This is not because the demand for LGBT rights is a matter of courage but because society, in its tendency to constantly produce enemies, can imagine only one type of diversity at the time.

It is necessary to explain why I use the term “Romani communities” rather than “Romani community.” I believe that being a Romani woman or man does not mean having lived experience identical to other Romani women or men. Our lives can be similar, certainly, but our lives are also very different due to many influencing factors. Moreover, as I have worked on this report, I

have confirmed my original opinion regarding readiness for change. I have found that some Romani communities are more 'traditional' and closed whereas some are more open to changes and outside influences. These differences occur as consequences of an intricate combination which includes social relations, economic status, and the availability of access to education and employment as well as the extent to which available resources are owned by non-Roma. In her text *Understanding Patriarchy*⁷, feminist theorist Suranjita Ray accounts that, in the Indian context, the manifestations of patriarchy can be different between casts and religions, and this observation is relevant to Roma culture as well. Ray's explanation of the varied manifestations of patriarchy in the Indian context is similar to the experience of oppression of women within developed countries as well, but what patriarchy does have in common everywhere globally is the control over female sexuality and the influence of class, ethnicity and religion on female reproduction. The modes of operation of patriarchal control over women's sexuality and reproduction have been evolving throughout history and have become institutionalized and legitimized through various ideologies, social practices and systems of family, religion, class, education, the media, legislation and policy, the state

⁷Suranjita Ray, *Understanding Patriarchy*, (course material, University of Dehli, Daulat Ram College Department of Political Science, Dehli).

and society. For Romani women, what this means in terms of their experience with patriarchal oppression is that it is not the same to live in a Roma settlement or to live outside the ghetto, in a city or in a village, to be born in the south or in the north of Serbia, to be displaced from Kosovo or deported from Western countries, to come from a family with regular income or to be born into a family where the adult members are unemployed. Because of these variables each of us is faced with a different manifestation of patriarchy, something I will address further on in the text.

I am well aware that this paper will provoke numerous critiques, not just from Romani men but also from Romani women, because I have already witnessed this phenomenon each time the position or status of Romani women has been openly discussed within the community. It is my hope that this time the discussion will be based on evidence, rather than denials and the too often heard claims that *it is not like that with Roma at all!* Virginia Wolf's has a well-known quote that "the history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of emancipation itself."⁸ I cannot think of any reason why a message should not be publicly sent to the Roma community—an open invitation for critical reflection and to change ourselves, as too much self-assurance

⁸Virginia Wolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Oxford University Press)

and arrogance can never lead to betterment. I also extend this invitation to the broader society. The freedom from prejudice is the responsibility of the entire society. Perhaps our differences can help us confirm that we are the ones leading the general liberating struggle but we cannot see this without looking at a larger picture. As stated by bell hooks: "Individuals fighting to uproot sexism without supporting struggles to end racism or classism undermine their own efforts. Individuals combating uprooting racism and classism and supporting sexist oppression assist in preserving cultural basis for all forms of group oppression."⁹

The existence of Romani lesbians is not a specific topic relevant only to women's groups, Romani women's groups or even the entire Romani community. It is my hope that this paper will serve as an inception for further researching the voices of those silent for too long, and that it will contribute to an opening of the subject of Romani lesbian existence, both within and outside of Serbia, and finally that this paper will serve to encourage support self-organization of autonomous civil society and community-based groups in the near future. In a recent issue of *Time* magazine there was an inspiring sentence which read: "Yesterday's impossible

⁹bell hooks, *From Margin to Centre*, Feministička 94, Belgrade, 2006

now looks like tomorrow's inevitable."¹⁰ LGBT human rights are not just the priority of the LGBT community, but they have become a goal that is increasingly gaining new allies from different areas: "Instead, the impetus has come from disparate forces in seemingly unconnected realms: courtrooms, yes, but also hospitals, nurseries, libraries and soundstages."¹¹ Similarly, Romani lesbian existence and its visibility cannot remain as separate issues from the problems both within and confronting the Roma community, nor can it be separate from the challenges that are encountered by non-Romani LGBT individuals in Serbia. Romani lesbian existence needs to be on the shared agenda, just as yesterday's impossible is tomorrow's inevitable.

Methodology

The story of Romani lesbians cannot be written differently than this: as a Romani lesbian critique of the patriarchal hierarchy that starts with white men, non white men, Romani men, white women, Romani women themselves, and is maintained and perpetuated through systems of forced heterosexuality and internalized racism, sexism and homophobia. This issue requires an investigation that goes beyond statistics and legal

¹⁰David Von Drehle. "How Gay Marriage Won", *Time Magazine Online* (28 March, 2013), available at:

<http://swampland.time.com/2013/03/28/how-gay-marriage-won/>

¹¹Ibid.

analysis; Romani lesbians are invisible, hidden deep in reality and especially in theory.

To write responsibly on the subject of Romani lesbians means to start from the experiences of women, as women are the real protagonists of their lives. For this paper I invited Romani lesbians living in different Roma communities throughout Serbia to talk with me. I also interviewed activists from mainstream women's organizations as well as women from, Romani women's organizations, activists working on Roma issues within LGBT organizations as well as women from lesbian organizations. For most of the Romani lesbians I know in Serbia, it was a difficult decision to meet with me and talk openly about their life stories. Because fear and isolation remain deeply rooted in our bodies and many of us are still unable to express ourselves, there were some women who I was only able to learn about through other women. Still, 15 women accepted my invitation to share their stories and be involved in this research, knowing that the text will be published by the European Roma Rights Centre, understand that this means that Romani women and men activists will be able to have an insight into parts of their stories. The bravery of these 15 Romani lesbians was followed by the readiness of ten men and women, Romani activists who spoke to me about their views on lesbian existence and the views of Roma communities and the ongoing violations of their human rights. In addition, two lesbian human rights organizations also contributed to my research: Labris, based in Belgrade, and the Novi Sad

Lesbian Organization and I also interviewed the coordinator of the project *Multiple Discrimination – LBGTIQ Roma men and women*, (the group for support, research and sensitization of other non-governmental organizations and state institutions). The project was implemented during 2008-09 within the Belgrade-based NGO, Gayten LGBT.

I conducted all interviews included in this research between November 2012 and April 2013 in several Serbian cities.

The paper before you contains voices of women I have talked with, women whose voices have for too long been unspoken and unheard. The women who I was able to interview here, as well as those who remained silent, all irreversibly inspired me to continue with much more analysis and action. The fact that I believe that the personal is political has brought me the courage to share my own personal experience as a Romani lesbian. It is not my intention to present all possible aspects of the lives of Romani lesbians, nor is it my intention to speak on behalf of all Romani lesbians. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that each of us comes from different context and have different experiences.

Aside from the authentic personal stories, it was important to point out that, in the example of Serbia, there is a fundamental lack of recognition of multiple discrimination, both in law and in practice, and this has serious consequences for those who suffer from

multiple forms of discrimination. All data given in this paper are relevant to the period concluding 2012.

As far as I know, this study is the first attempt at researching Romani lesbian existence, not only in Serbia but in other countries as well. I would like to be wrong about this, and have the opportunity to read other accounts, detailing Romani lesbian existence and exploring the similarities, differences and richness of our experiences, but so far, in my research, I have not found any such resources. The text in front of you contains the stories of the brave women with whom I spoke; you are the audience for the unspoken voices belonging to these women who speak out in front of you.

II Reminder of the present reality – Setting the context in Serbia

Discrimination based on gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation is a broad topic, and it cannot be entirely covered by this paper. However, as I am dealing with a system which includes all of these properties, let me first provide some basic illustrations, which shed light on key insights into the positions of women, of Roma, and of LGBT people living in Serbia, which are important to understand when documenting the multiple problems Romani lesbians face.

The position of women

Discrimination against women is one of the most wide spread forms of discrimination in Serbia. A key reason for this is the deeply rooted traditional and patriarchal stereotypes about gender family roles of men and women within the family and the broader community. Women hold less favorable positions in all spheres of social life when compared to those of men.

Relevant bodies report¹² that some areas of discrimination against women which are especially concerning include a lack of women's participation in decision making, participation in the economy and in the education system, gender based violence and violence against women, and gender inequality in the media (both in manner of presenting women in the media and in holding leading positions), etc. Although official state institutions have conducted a few serious studies on discrimination against women in Serbia, data from the Victimology Society of Serbia, a women's organization based in Belgrade, shows that one in three women in Serbia are victims of physical violence (30.6%) and that almost half of all Serbian women have experienced psychological violence (46.1%). One in four women has at least once in their lifetime experienced physical violence, yet, physical domestic violence is reported to police only in 16.5% of domestic violence cases.¹³

¹²Office of the Equality Commissioner, *Regular Annual Report for 2011*, March 2012, <http://www.ravnopravnost.gov.rs/jdownloads/files/2011%20Regular%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

¹³Vesna Nikolić-Ristanović, *Porodično nasilje u Srbiji*, (Family Violence in Serbia), Belgrade, 2002

Violence against Romani women in families and communities

For Romani women, the data on gender based violence evidences an even greater problem. Research conducted by Women's Space, an organization based in Niš, focused on the fact that 100% of women interviewed said that they had experienced in the past, and at the time of the interviews continued to encounter physical violence and 94% of participants stated that they were familiar with physical violence. The remaining 6% of this group responded that they have never experienced situations of physical violence, but reported that their husbands would "sometimes as a form of joke" slap them in the face, though these respondents were not able to say that this was violence. Of those who stated that they were currently suffering physical violence, 98% answered affirmatively when asked whether the perpetrators were their husbands. The most common reasons for violence, according to the interviewees, are jealousy and alcoholism of their spouses. Every fourth woman reported to have suffered physical violence from her father-in-law while as many as 45% reported that they had experienced psycho-physical violence at the hands of their mothers-in-law. 15% of respondents indicated that other perpetrators of violence within the family included brothers- and sisters-in-law, and one participant even mentioned her husband's grandfather as a perpetrator of violence. Although a small number of women reported to have experienced violence before they were married, 90% of

interviewed stated that their spouses beat their children and the same percentage reported that their mothers also suffered violence from their spouses, thus giving us reason to conclude that the interviewees experienced violence throughout their childhoods.¹⁴

Discrimination and violence and against Roma

According to a 2002¹⁵ study sponsored by the Serbian Ethnicity Research Centre, there were 593 Roma settlements in Serbia, each with a minimum of fifteen or more families.¹⁶ The majority of Roma settlements are located in Belgrade, Central Serbia, Vojvodina and Southern Serbia.¹⁷ As of 2002, 43.5% of all settlements

¹⁴Vera Kurtić, “Violence against Women: Report on Roma Women Human Rights Violations”, from a manual for working with women traumatized by male violence by the Autonomous Women’s Centre, Belgrade (2008)

¹⁵Unfortunately, there are no more recent studies providing updated information on these statistics. This represents a significant gap in the data.

¹⁶Bozidar Jaksic, PhD and Goran Basic, LLD, Roma settlements, living conditions and the possibility for integration of Roma in Serbia, Belgrade, 30 December 2002; Possibility for integration of the Roma in Serbia, results of the social research, Belgrade, 30 December 2002.

¹⁷United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Human Development Report Serbia 2008: Regional cooperation*, Belgrade, 2008, available at:

http://www.undp.org.rs/download/nhdr2008_eng.pdf (accessed: 15 November 2011), pg. 136

were classified as either unhygienic or slums by UNDP.¹⁸ Most of these settlements are segregated and located on the outskirts of larger cities, some even being physically isolated by fences.¹⁹ Houses are often built with scrap materials, with neither sufficient protection from the elements nor access to the electricity network. More than a quarter of settlements remain bereft of any water supply and only one third has paved roads.²⁰ Apart from substandard living conditions, forced evictions remain an on-going problem disproportionately affecting Roma communities throughout Serbia. The vast majority of evictions either carried out or imminent occurred in Belgrade.²¹ As confirmed by the Regional Centre for Minorities, municipal authorities in Belgrade city forcibly evict many Romani men and women from their homes located in informal Roma settlements. Roma lose their homes and often all of their property, along with the ability to work for survival. They are never compensated

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Praxis, et al. Information Submitted to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on the occasion of Initial Periodic Report of Serbia, 78th Session, (Belgrade: February 2011), available at:

http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cerd/docs/ngos/Praxis_RegionalCentreforMinorities_CEKOR_CHRIS.pdf

(accessed: 15 November 2011), pg. 5

²⁰Ibid., pg. 16

²¹European Roma Rights Centre, *Serbia: EU Enlargement Programme*, (Budapest: May 2012), 3, available at:

<http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/ecprogress-serbia-2012.pdf>

for these losses. Displaced Roma are often forcibly placed into settlements with shipping containers as housing. The Belgrade-based organization, Praxis in November 2012 filed a complaint on behalf of the Coalition against Discrimination with the Commissioner for Equality Protection because of the discriminatory legal regime which was established within the container settlements.²² This legal regime applies only to the Roma, who were displaced after Belgrade's forced evictions of informal settlements.

²²The Praxis report states that: "City government prescribed that in case Roma who live in the container settlements do not adopt 'mannerisms towards institutional representatives of the city of Belgrade', and do not show 'active relation towards city efforts to socialize individuals and their families' or even yet 'receive guests within the containers they live in', they can be forcefully evicted again. These discriminatory legislations assisted City Government to evict 11 families with the total of 44 members". Evictions and resettlement along with other human rights violations have been detailed in numerous reports on progress under the Platform for the Right to Adequate Housing by organizations including: Praxis, Regional Minority Centre, CHRIS, NSHC, YUCOM, Minority Rights Centre and Amnesty International; See also: Amnesty International, "Home is more than a roof over your head", (London: Amnesty International, 2011), available at:

http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/eur700012011en_1_2.pdf; and Amnesty International, "After Belvil Serbia needs new laws against forced eviction", (London: Amnesty International, 2012), available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR70/015/2012/en/d97ae40c-0701-452a-b9b8-d2491a7322e1/eur700152012en.pdf>

Attempts to resettle Roma often cause resistance among the local majority populations.²³ In 2012 there were riots in the Belgrade suburb of Resnik after city officials decided to relocate Roma from the Belvil settlement. Ironically, these anti-Roma riots happened on April 8th, the International Day of Roma. One report recounts that 13 policemen were injured along with two other men, and 20 individuals were charged with rioting.

Over the last four years, the European Roma Rights Centre has been monitoring the increase in forced evictions of Roma in Serbia. Since 2009, the ERRC and several different local NGOs organizing around the Platform for the Right to Adequate Housing have registered 18 forced evictions in Belgrade alone, affecting over 650 Romani families numbering more than 2,700 individuals.²⁴ Almost all reported instances of forced evictions have been marked by the same human rights violations, notably the failure to provide evictees with adequate (or indeed any) alternative housing or

²³EuActiv rs, *Položaj Roma i dalje težak u Srbiji (Position of Roma population in Serbia is still difficult)*, (Serbia: 9 April 2012), available at: <http://www.euractiv.rs/srbija-i-eu/3871-poloaj-roma-i-dalje-teak-u-srbiji>

²⁴Praxis, et al., "Platform for Realization of the Right to Adequate Housing", press release, 26 December 2012, available at: <http://www.mc.rs/platforma-za-ostvarivanje-prava-na-adekvatno-stanovanje.4.html?eventId=8820>

accommodation, despite the fact that Serbia has undertaken to do so under international law.²⁵ Moreover, authorities failed to consult with affected communities at any stage, and failed to provide due process or compensation.²⁶

Romani communities in Serbia do not suffer just from discriminatory policies and actions on the part of state and municipal authorities, but there is an upwards trend of anti-Roma sentiment growing throughout the population, and individual Roma (including both settled Roma and Roma IDPs) are subjects of attack. According to an ERRC report: Hate speech and violence against Roma are on-going problems in Serbia [...] Such violence is not limited to any geographic area, but prevalent throughout the country [...] Attacks have occurred in both public and private settings, by individual perpetrators and groups, by private entities and policemen. Victims are also diverse in character, including women, children, men, or entire communities, targeted indiscriminately.²⁷

The gravity of the occurrence of hate crimes is often diminished, and thereby aggravated, by a refusal on the part of law enforcement and/or judicial bodies to

²⁵European Roma Rights Centre, *Serbia: EU Enlargement Programme*, (Budapest: May 2012), 3-4, available at:

<http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/ecprogress-serbia-2012.pdf>

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid

acknowledge and prosecute them as such. The situation as it stands constitutes an environment of impunity for anti-Roma hate crimes. The Commissioner for Equality Protection has noted that very frequently Roma are targeted in racially-motivated attacks which are often neither investigated nor punished properly.²⁸ The ERRC monitors Serbian media and NGO reports for instances of violence against Roma in Serbia. Since 2008, the ERRC has registered 24 reports of violence against Roma, including one incident involving a Molotov cocktail. Anti-Roma violence also takes place in the aftermath of forced evictions. While this does not constitute a comprehensive review of all attacks, it highlights some of the key incidents involving Roma.

Roma access to education and employment

The educational situation of Romani children is characterized by exclusion, low enrolment rates, high dropout rates and the disproportionate placement of Romani students into 'special schools' and classes offering substandard education.²⁹ Inclusive education is

²⁸Office of the Equality Commissioner, *Regular Annual Report for 2011*, March 2012,

<http://www.ravnopravnost.gov.rs/jdownloads/files/2011%20Regular%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

²⁹ERRC and Minority Rights Centre, *Parallel Report by the European Roma Rights Centre and Minority Rights Centre Concerning Serbia*, (Budapest: ERRC and Minority Rights Centre, 16 July 2012,) 3, available at:

still not fully enforced, and too many Roma children are still being enrolled in special schools.³⁰ However, the number of Romani children enrolled into these ‘special schools’ has decreased from 8% to 6% in recent years.³¹ Preliminary data on the educational attainment of Roma from the 2011 population census indicates that more than 15% of all Roma in Serbia above the age of 10 are illiterate³² compared to the national average which is below 2%.³³ 69% of all illiterate Roma are women and 34.2% of Roma have not completed primary education, compared to 11% of the overall population.

<http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/serbian-un-upr-submission-16-july-2012.pdf>;

³⁰European Commission, *Serbia 2012 Progress Report*, (Brussels: European Commission, October 2012) available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2012/packa/ge/sr_rapport_2012_en.pdf

³¹Official Gazette of Republic of Serbia, *Strategija razvoja obrazovanja u Srbiji do 2020. godine*, (Belgrade: Official Gazette of Republic of Serbia, Strategy for developing education in Serbia to 2010, accessed November 9th 2012), No. 107/2012, 29, available at:

<http://www.mpn.gov.rs/prosveta/page.php?page=307>

³²Radio Beograd 1, Romano Them: interview with Mrs Snezana Lakcevic, Head of the Census Department, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, (Belgrade: Radio Beograd 1, 07 February 2013), available at:

<http://www.rts.rs/page/radio/sr/story/23/Radio+Beograd+1/1262072/Romano+Them.html>

³³Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, *Educational Attainment, Literacy and Compute Literacy – data by municipalities and cities*, (Belgrade: 2013), 102, available at:

<http://popis2011.stat.rs/?lang=en>

The Romani population, and especially Romani women, are the most discriminated against in the labor market.³⁴ A 2011 report from the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) highlights that Roma in Serbia face low economic activity and there is almost total exclusion of Roma from the public sector, which indicates a pattern of discrimination against Roma.³⁵ The low educational attainments among the Roma are reflected in low Roma employment rates, with only one in five Roma in Serbia is working. The employment gap between Roma and the majority population of working age is 29 percentage points. The low education levels are also reflected in much lower earnings. A World Bank study shows that the average net monthly income of an employed Roma is 48% less than the income of a member of the majority population.³⁶

³⁴Serbia 2012 Progress Report, European Commission, Brussels, October 2012, available at http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2012/packa/ge/sr_rapport_2012_en.pdf

³⁵European Commission against Racism and Intolerance Secretariat, *ECRI report on Serbia (fourth monitoring cycle)*, 31.5.2011, p. 18, available at: <http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/country-by-country/serbia/SRB-CbC-IV-2011-021-ENG.pdf>

³⁶World Bank, *Economic Costs of Roma Exclusion*, (Washington D.C.: World Bank Europe and Central Asia, April 2010), available at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTROMA/Resources/Economic_Costs_Roma_Exclusion_Note_Final.pdf; for comparison: in Bulgaria the average monthly income is 31% less; in Romania, 55% and 58% in Czech Republic.

Discrimination and violence against LGBT citizens

The fact that LGBT rights are usually only discussed in Serbia when it is time to organize annual Pride Parade provides a clear picture of the state of LGBT human rights and their right to public assembly and visibility. In Serbia, as opposed to other countries in the region, the organization of such a manifestation of pride was only planned and attempted for the first time in Belgrade in 2001. Organizers believed that after the democratic changes in Serbia it would be possible to carry out this public demonstration that would clearly show that there were indeed LGBT individuals in Serbia. However, the initial event ended before it actually began. Participants were beaten by right-wing groups, football fans, members of cleric-fascist groups and at least one priest of Serbian Orthodox Church (it is possible that there other priests present but without their robes). The police reaction was inadequate and there is video footage available at the Internet³⁷ of the police standing passively by and observing attacks on the Parade participants (there were also several attacks on the policemen as well). A number of Pride Parade participants were injured, but several passers-by who the attackers mistook as LGBT were also hurt. Neither government nor state officials have issued a formal statement regarding this event.

³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUOH7nrVfys>

Subsequent Pride marches have been planned and canceled both in 2004 and 2009. The Pride Parade held on October 10th 2010 was accompanied by extreme rioting among right-wing and cleric-fascist groups, who were attempting to enter a protective circle, formed by police around the Pride Parade participants. There were about 1,000 Pride participants with five times as many police officers securing the event. The result was a war that broke out in the streets of Belgrade, which lasted for five hours, and which saw 141 injured and 207 arrested.³⁸ For the next two years the authorities prohibited Pride Parade, canceling planned events just moments before they were scheduled to begin. Any announcement of plans for a Pride march is always followed by hate-filled statements by nationalist groups and is accompanied by an increase of violence against LGBT individuals. Violence against individuals simply *perceived* as LGBT also goes up.

A 2012 report by the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) on the condition of LGBT human rights in Serbia³⁹ observes numerous cases of attempted and actual physical attacks on LGBT individuals. These attacks made up about 70% of reported hate crimes in 2012, with the other 30% being threats and intimidation, hate speech

³⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT3NC9LOozE>

³⁹ Gay Straight Alliance, Annual report on the condition of human rights of LBGT in Serbia 2012, (Belgrade: Gay Straight Alliance, 2013)

and discrimination. The Alliance reported 14 physical attacks and four threats on the basis of real or assumed sexual orientation or gender identity. The most notable and brutal case within this report is the one of V.M., a 25 year-old gay man who was beaten by a group of men near a Belgrade gay club in September 2012. The attackers most likely used a butcher's hammer as the weapon in this attack and V.M. sustained severe bodily injuries as a result. Because cases of violence against LGBT are most often left unreported to state institutions and even to LGBT organizations, this report notes that in 2012 a slight increase in the number of cases reported to the police by victims'. However, due to an extreme lack of trust that LGBT people have in the police and judicial system, their readiness to report attacks and seek prosecution of offenders is minimal. During 2012 out of the total number of actual and attempted physical attacks on LGBT people reported to GSA only about 70% were reported to the police and/or further pursued by legal or judicial institutions overseeing hate crimes.

In November, 2012, the office of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality together with the non-governmental organization CESID (Centre for Free Elections and Democracy) conducted a joint study entitled "Citizens' Attitudes on Discrimination in

Serbia”⁴⁰ which report polled a representative sample of 1,196 individuals over 15 years of age in Serbia, part of ongoing efforts aimed at monitoring citizens’ attitudes about discrimination, the degree of existing (in)tolerance and prejudice, and the level of social and ethnic separation amongst some social groups. 30.2% of interviewees stated that it would bother them to have an LGBT individual as a neighbor, 32.5% responded that they did not wish to have an LGBT colleague while having an LGBT boss would be undesirable to 40.6% of respondents. An elected official who is LGBT would be unwelcome by 48.4%, and 46.2% even replied that they would not want an LGBT friend. 58.8% did not want LGBT people to be working with preschool children, and finally a full 79.5% of participants would not want LGBT individuals in their families. This is a notable increase over the responses to the same question from the 2009 study, where 69% said that they would not want LGBT family members.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Commissioner for Equality Protection and CESID, Report On Public Opinion Research "Citizens' Attitudes on Discrimination in Serbia", Belgrade, 2012

http://www.ravnopravnost.gov.rs/jdownloads/files/anti-discrimination_report_november_2012.pdf

⁴¹ Ibid., pg. 31

Violence as a mechanism for preserving homophobia and patriarchy

The Belgrade-based lesbian human rights organization Labris indicates that violence against lesbians and the fear it produces represent key mechanisms for preserving the patriarchal and homophobic system that persists today. The data presented within their study entitled *Living between violence and subcultural ghetto: LGBTTIQ individuals and their daily lives in Serbia*⁴², reveal that as many as 90% of the men and women interviewed stated that same-sex orientation, or any behavior that deviates from the heterosexual matrix, produces a violent response within the majority society.⁴³ The study illustrates that many of those interviewed have witnessed various forms of violence (emotional and physical violence, existential insecurity) which they have either personally or indirectly experienced. Participants also witness the immediate consequences of violent episodes survived by their

⁴² Isidora Jarić, “LGBTTIQ osobe i njihova svakodnevnica u Srbiji” (“LGBTTIQ individuals and their everyday lives in Serbia”), *Antropologija (Anthropology)* 11, sv. 2, (Belgrade: 2011). This work originated within the scientific research project: “Challenges of the new social integration in Serbia: concepts and actors, Institute for sociological research of the Faculty of Philosophy”, Belgrade; field work was done with the organizational and financial support of Labris – Lesbian human rights organization.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142

friends, acquaintances and partners.⁴⁴ However, all attest that none of those interviewed who experienced violence went to the police because they did not believe that reporting these incidents would make any difference.

The analysis this study indicates that for all of those interviewed, their awareness of their own gender identity, sexual orientation remains inseparable from their awareness of violent threats or from the very experience of violence. The violence induced by cultural stereotypes and adopted within the process of socialization becomes experienced as one that is impossible to change or avoid and that potential or real perpetrators are not unknown individuals, football fans or persons with psychological problems but rather their family members, friends, coworkers, members of the same subcultural community, etc.⁴⁵

The Novi Sad Lesbian Organization (NLO) counseling for lesbians notes numerous experiences both with violence and fear of possible violence that inflect attitudes and lesbian behavior. Judging by the research

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 142 The sample of total 183 individuals, 86 of them, or 46.9%, have personally experienced violence. 17 have experienced both physical and psychological violence, 9.29% of the total sample. Out of this 85% have experienced both psychological and physical violence, and among those who experienced psychological violence 19.78% also experienced physical violence.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 155

findings about the violence against LGBTTIQ individuals fear from homophobic reactions in Serbia represents a limiting factor in other social situations.⁴⁶ As many as 56.3% of NLO's clients agree that the high level of homophobia within Serbian society influences the quality of same-sex relationships. The conclusion is that our environment produces constant fear in order to hold LGBTTIQ individuals within the position of lesser power and under control.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 150 The percentages of individuals who responded that they have come out to family members illustrate the current social context. In answering the question about persons to whom they revealed their sexual orientation, the interviewees exhibited the high degrees of mistrust LGBTTIQ individuals commonly feel towards other people in their environment. Only 26.8% of those interviewed have told their fathers, 49.7% their mothers, 26.8% brothers and 31.7% their sisters. Grandparents are aware of the interviewed sexual orientation in only 13.1%, whereas children – if the interviewees have them – know in just 6% of reported instances. Extended family members and others in the community further illustrate this: Responses show that just 21.3% of cousins, 20.2% of extended family, and just 29.5% of other individuals from the immediate environment are made aware of the interviewees' sexual orientation. More than half of those interviewed chose not to speak about their own sexual orientation with people from their immediate environments.

⁴⁷ Tijana Popivoda, "Specifičnosti u pružanju podrške lezbejkama koje su preživele nasilje" ("Specificities in providing support to lesbians who survived violence"), *The Manual for Counseling and Psychotherapy Work for individuals of different sexual orientation than heterosexual*, Labris, Belgrade, 2012.

Roma, LGBT, and the Law

Serbia has signed and ratified numerous international documents⁴⁸ for the protection of human rights and women's rights, amongst which perhaps the most important is the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Domestic legislation also includes prohibition of discrimination; Article 21 of the Serbian Constitution prohibits discrimination, although there are no explicit definitions of discrimination and no recognition of potential discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation.⁴⁹ Under the second part of the Constitution, which refers specifically to human, and minority rights and liberties, Article 49 explicitly prohibits inciting or promoting hatred and intolerance based on racial, national, religious or other difference.

The most important act for combating discrimination in Serbia is the Law on prohibiting discrimination which was adopted by the Serbian Parliament in 2009. Adoption of the law was met with criticism and

⁴⁸ As a legal successor of former Yugoslavia (SFRJ), Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Union of Serbia and Montenegro, the Republic of Serbia remains a party to previously ratified international conventions.

⁴⁹ Article 21 of the Serbian Constitution states: All direct or indirect discrimination based on any grounds, particularly on race, sex, national origin, social origin, birth, religion, political or other opinion, property status, culture, language, age, mental or physical disability shall be prohibited.

obstructions coming from conservative and ultra-conservative forces, such as right-wing political parties, the Serbian Orthodox Church, a number of football fan clubs as well as pro-fascist groups. The fact that it took just one law guaranteeing human rights and liberties to create such shock and division in Serbian society is an indicator on the state of democracy and human rights here. The most controversial piece of the law was Article 17, which covers discrimination based on sexual identity and sexual orientation, and only after several interventions and compromises was this law finally adopted and is now in force.

With this law special independent body was set up – the Commissioner for Equality Protection which serves to ensure successful prevention, prohibition and combating of all forms of discrimination. With the creation of the office of the Commissioner, Serbia has taken a step towards fulfilling its international obligations and living up to international standards in the area of combating racism and racial discrimination. The European Commission Progress Report states that several issues remain to be addressed, however, such are the fact that Roma continue to be the most vulnerable minority community and are the target of verbal and physical harassment from ordinary citizens, police brutality and societal discrimination. Similarly,

LGBT people, national and ethnic minorities and disabled people still face discrimination in Serbia.⁵⁰

In its regular annual report for 2012,⁵¹ the Commissioner for Equality Protection stated that they had received a total of 433 complaints wherein just one personal characteristic was given as the basis for the complaint while in only 32 cases the complaint cited more than one personal characteristic as the basis for discrimination. Since its founding, a significant number of the complaints made to the Commissioner on the basis of national background relate to Roma.⁵² Such large number of these complaints can lead to a conclusion that members of national minorities feel discriminated against almost in all spheres of social relations, especially when dealing with the state authorities. The fact that individuals filing complaints

⁵⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index (BTI), *BTI 2012: Serbia Country Report*, (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012) available at:

<http://www.btiproject.de/fileadmin/Inhalte/reports/2012/pdf/BTI%202012%20Serbia.pdf>

⁵¹ The report is available in its entirety at:

http://www.ravnopravnost.gov.rs/jdownloads/files/cpe_annual_report_2012.pdf

⁵² The Commissioner for Equality report for 2012 states: There were most complaints on the basis of belonging to the Roma national minority (31), whereas there were significantly less complaints on the basis of belonging to other national minority – Albanian (4), Macedonian (4), Bosnian (3), Croatian (3) and Hungarian (3).

are beginning to include multiple grievances indicates a step toward necessitating the recognition of multiple discrimination on the part of the state. Although still relatively new, the Equality Protection Commissioner has begun to be utilized more frequently, however, as of yet there have been no cases filed to this institution that cite multiple discrimination from Romani men or women. To date, there have been no cases where the complainants suggest other personal characteristics alongside sexual orientation, as the basis for the complaint. In other words, two of the most marginalized and discriminated against populations, Roma and LGBT, have yet to report discrimination based on multiple and intersecting aspects of their identities.

In accordance with the Law on personal data protection, under the current regulations governing the office of the Commissioner, the forms used by individuals filing a complaint do not collect data about national or ethnic background. Therefore the exact number of complaints relating directly to discrimination on the basis of national background, i.e. race or ethnicity remains unknown.

One of the basic roles of the Commissioner's office is to provide opinions and recommendations for procedures, and even initiating court cases, after discrimination complaint is submitted. However, the Commissioner's office states that there should never be more than one personal characteristic as basis of a discrimination complaint, as providing more than one personal

characteristic would create unclear base for discrimination.

Thus, system remains permanently blind to multiple discrimination.

III Witnessing real life – Multiple Discrimination

The challenge is that the specific nature of violence against lesbians and against Romani women is that it is not recognized in a holistic manner, since the state has no official stance on or approach to, including relevant institutions, to address issues of violence and discrimination at the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, class and sexual orientation (for example). Official recognition of multiple discrimination is an important plank in the platforms for both Roma inclusion and gender equality, however, because implementation of these platforms is sorely lacking, therefore the intersection of two or more aspects on identity is not taken into consideration when addressing violence and discrimination.⁵³ As a result, Romani

⁵³ Due to the nature of this paper, I cite only the Law on Gender Equality, The National Strategy for Women Position and Gender Equality Improvement, The Strategy for Roma Position

lesbians remain completely invisible to society and to social and political institutions. Sadly, Romani lesbian existence is either ignored, or becomes the basis for discrimination.

To illustrate this point, I have included the story of a young woman facing violence and discrimination based on gender, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Her story is not contained within official documents, because no one has ever asked her about it before.

I have been living with K. for 4 years and she is my family. I came to Belgrade because my father wanted to marry me off, and there was much violence and I could not stand it anymore. I stayed with my cousins for a while and then I met K. and we started living together.

The two of us lived in a Roma settlement and we knew it had been scheduled to be demolished,

Improvement in Serbia and The Action Plan for implementation of the Strategy for the Improvement of Roma Status in Serbia. Each of these documents provide analysis for recognizing women from marginalized social groups and the Action Plan for Roma Position Improvement in Serbia contains a special section regarding Romani women. What is important is the lack of implementation of these policies. See: Woman Space, *Achieving Roma women human rights in Serbia: Analysis of existing institutional measures implementation*, 2012, available at:

<http://zenskiprostor.org/images/vesti2012/publikacije/eng%20tp%202012.pdf>

but we had no jobs and no place to go to. One day when we returned home the settlement had been torn down. No one offered us accommodation; we were homeless with all that we had destroyed. Now we must rent a room in another house also scheduled for demolition – we pay the rent and do not know when they will come and tear this down either. I had a temporary Belgrade residence in order to be able to have health insurance—under the law Roma can have this benefit. [The authorities] told me I have no right to housing. At the Centre for Social Work they wondered how K. and I were one family and told us only real families could receive housing and they would not put us together even if we were given a container. She is from Belgrade, that is where she was born and her parents also do not own a home, and I was told I should return where I had come from, to my parents, and perhaps there seek shelter from the municipality.

People think they have the right to make decisions about my life. The social worker I contacted when I fled from my father was interested in my case but then she started saying that I must be a prostitute since I do not live with my parents or cousins. On several occasions she talked to me about my reasons for living with K. and asked me why I was like that. But this is my private life.

After being evicted we gave an interview to a non-governmental organization and our stories were on the Internet. [Because of this] my Belgrade cousins attacked me in the market place telling me I was a shame for them for being with K. Some people that we know told us: “You should not bring shame to us, we are Roma and this is not something that we ever do!” And on the Internet we saw terrible comments about our story online telling us to get the fuck out of Serbia. We live believing that we can go out on the street tomorrow and somebody may kill us.⁵⁴

Apart from the struggles they encounter in their personal lives, many Romani women also struggle to make society better, face the fact that they are seen as different and therefore are faced with numerous obstacles and threats. As part of women and peace movement in Serbia, Romani women contribute to various social processes. An illustration of what it means for them, and in particular, the challenges they must overcome, when Romani women fight for justice and equality for all, is illustrated by the statement below provided by one of these activists:

It is our skin where we know and feel racism, we know what it is like not to be safe. We support Pride since we believe everybody has the right to

⁵⁴ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Belgrade, November 2012

*choose. It is not the same when some of us from the association came to Belgrade to be part of the Pride march than when someone else came. We could not enter the Pride march because police blocked all entrances to the Pride parade. Riots started to break out. We did not feel safe, not just because someone could know where we were going but because it was visible we were Romani women. It was horrible for us to be in the streets on that day.*⁵⁵

Organizations that dared to exist

Discrimination runs much deeper than the system can prohibit through its existing laws and protection mechanisms and it is important to note that this is not all, and therefore efforts to confront discrimination must also be broader. Many Serbian lesbians and Romani women join or create independent women's organizations and although there is not a separate Romani lesbian group in Serbia, there are a few notable groups which have recognized the intersecting burdens of racism, misogyny and homophobia, and have dared to confront and combat these issues. These organizations and groups aim to support lesbians and work on issues relevant for lesbian existence is within

⁵⁵ Interview with a Romani woman activist, South Banat, November 2012

their primary goals. Therefore, they represent a progressive part within each movement they fall into.⁵⁶

Rromnjako Ilo (Roma Heart) based in Zrenjanin, works in the South Banat province of Vojvodina and has been part of the Roma Women Network of Banat since 2007. This Network, founded in 2000, is led by Novi Becej Roma Association, which is also a women's and feminist association primarily dealing with combating male violence against women and providing emergency hotline services in the languages of ethnic and national minorities. The Network/Rromnjako Ilo conducts workshops in Novi Becej and Zrenjanin. The workshop topics relate to empowering women of non-heterosexual sexual orientations. As a result of these activities there are organized groups of women in these municipalities who have come out with their sexual orientation to other women in their organization.

Beginning in 2008, Gayten LGBT, an organization from Belgrade, implemented a three-year project entitled *Multiple Discrimination: LGBTIQ and Romani men and women* which was a support group that worked on conducting research and raising awareness among other NGOs and state institutions. The project gathered Romani homosexuals and bisexuals as well as

⁵⁶ There is often a tendency to classify people into certain, limited categories and therefore it is often easiest to categorize one group as Roma, women or LGBT. These organizations are explicit that they represent all of these categories, and this sets them apart.

transgender individuals. Women did not attend joint meetings, but instead, the project coordinator had periodical meetings with women outside organization's premises since the women expressed that they would feel more comfortable with this arrangement. According to the women, they believed there was less of a chance that someone might see them entering the building where Gayten is located (there are no visible signs or any other information for Gayten LGBT on this building).

Women's Space, founded in 1997, is an organization which works to empower women from socially marginalized groups, primarily Romani women. Women Space is based in Niš but covers the area of South Serbia and also has national outreach through cooperation with sister organizations from the Roma Women Network. It is one of the first organizations to discuss the subject of male violence against women within the Roma community as well as the topic of forced marriage and bride sale, in addition to racism and authorities' disregard of the anti-fascist heritage in our country. Women Space was the first organization to organize the LGBT community in Niš and has participated in the work of other organizations that have since followed.

The personal stories, which form the basis of this paper, were collected with women who are convened by the aforementioned groups. These organizations currently represent, both metaphorically and literally, the only space where Romani lesbians state they can feel safe as they share their stories.

Although, within this patriarchal environment it is men who have more agency and are the first to conquer the public space in Serbia, it was the women who first spoke about sexual identities other than heterosexuality. In the three Serbian cities where there are initiatives to work with Romani lesbians i.e. LGBT Romani women and men, women were the ones who initiated, led and are still leading this work. Romani lesbians are part of women, feminist and Roma organizations. The fact that they are invisible or not recognized does not mean they are not present in the field or are not working in other places. Therefore it is important that we create new groups which will be founded by Romani lesbians and which will work with Romani lesbians as they open the path of liberty for all.

IV The reality of Romani lesbian existence

Social differences between homosexuality and lesbianism

Between 1959 and 1974, the Criminal Code of Yugoslavia (SFRY) criminalized homosexuality and held that homosexual acts (specifically male homosexual acts), was punishable by imprisonment of up to one year. After the changes introduced into the Constitution in 1974 and legal reforms that included the transfer of jurisdiction to respective republics and provinces the common Criminal Code of SFRY was nullified. The Autonomous Province of Vojvodina decriminalized homosexuality in 1978 but when in 1990 the Provinces lost their power to adopt legislation, homosexuality was reintroduced into Criminal Code at the national level within the Republic of Serbia. The age of consent for same-sex couples was set at 18 years whereas for heterosexual couples it was 14, however, this discrepancy was eliminated on January 1st 2006 with

the age of consent set to 14 years of age regardless of sexual orientation.

In order to understand sexual orientations other than heterosexuality, it is first necessary to explore the ways that the different experiences of women and men manifest in non-heterosexual existences. Within the dominant political and social discourse, male homosexuality, just as lesbianism, is considered a threat to the *status quo* as it usurps the existing system of sex relations and subverts conventional ideas of manhood and womanhood. Lesbianism questions male-centered (or andocentric) heterosexuality, and challenges traditional gender roles and male superiority. Historically, it has been assumed that the sole purpose of female sexuality has been to serve and satisfy male sexuality, and therefore even lesbian sexuality⁵⁷ is often regarded as directed for male pleasure, or as less relevant and fundamentally changeable. Adrienne Rich wrote that even the possibility of lesbianism is deemed invisible as lesbianism negates male dominance over and physical, economic and emotional access to women while male homosexuality has either been desexualized or categorized as ‘abnormal’ or sexually deviant behavior, as opposed to ‘normal’ heterosexual behavior.

⁵⁷ For example porn movies that contain scenes of lesbian intercourse solely for male consumption.

In one of the rare accounts of lesbian existence from the region, Marija Blizanac provides another illustration of difference between the lives of gays and lesbians: “It is suspicious if two men want to rent a flat together, whereas two girls in the same situation are deemed as normal, they are just friends”.⁵⁸ As the author explains, these kinds of statements or practices do not mean that the predominant heterosexual and intolerant society sees women as better, chaster, more reliable...but rather depict the condition within the society where male homosexuality is considered to be real and female homosexuality is not.⁵⁹

The next logical question is then to ask whether there is a difference between Romani communities’ acceptance of gay men and lesbians. In order to provide an answer I have talked to Romani men and women from Romani communities in Belgrade, Nis and Novi Becej.⁶⁰ For the most part, their responses to this question were similar, and they agreed that Romani communities, to a certain degree show more tolerance towards homosexuality than is the case in majority communities, however this

⁵⁸ Marija Blizanac, “Glas za različitost među različitima”, (Voice for diversity among the diverse) Puls Demokratije, available at: <http://www.pulsdemokratije.ba/content/glas-za-razlicitost-medu-razlicitima>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Interviews were conducted with a total of 10 individuals, some of whom are activists. Due to the sensitivity of this topic, their names will not be given here.

does not assume full tolerance. Visibility of gay men existence in relation to the visibility of lesbian existence is important for the purpose of this paper as it can be indicative of higher level of tolerance. They spoke of knowing gay men and transgender individuals, or at least having heard of them, and that gay men and transgender individuals have often been present both at annual Roma celebrations and at the circumcisions (*Suneti*) of male children in South Serbia. All expressed the opinion that communities treat same-sex oriented men and women equally. However, one of the activists I interviewed, a Roma activist and feminist, has a different opinion:

It is easier for men. They can be visible and there is not so much hatred and resistance as with women. Women hide it more as they are exposed to violence and fear conflict because they are not accepted. Men do not have such a big problem; the community is more tolerant of them. Women will be shamed if anyone knew. I remember couple of gays from my childhood who worked in homes mostly doing women's jobs and were not as despised by the community. It was very unusual for us children – men who were all dressed up with lipstick and nail polish. I don't remember any women. Women have a hard time inside the community. Whenever something like this is mentioned harsh words are exchanged, insults, accusations of them being nasty, that they do not deserve to live. Attitudes

*towards lesbians are the same as within the majority, perhaps even more rigid. These women are rejected both within their families and their surroundings as absolutely unacceptable.*⁶¹

The topic of different sexual orientation than heterosexual with men in Roma communities is not remotely being done here, especially because interviews were done both with the activists. Of course, these remarks do not adequately address the issue of discrimination against non-heterosexual men living in Romani communities within the majority community, and, given their higher visibility, gay Romani men experience physical, sexual and verbal violence from majority community. This falls under another issue that Roma communities need to address. However, what is important when considering lesbian existence is the general perception among many Roma regarding the tolerance Romani communities have towards gay Romani men in contrast to the relative intolerance towards Romani lesbians. I believe the disparity in tolerance toward gay Romani men and Romani lesbians in Romani communities comes from a common acceptance of the relative status of all Romani women within the community.

⁶¹ Interview with a Romani woman and activist. Belgrade, March 2013

Control over female sexuality

The question then becomes why is it that, within Romani communities, it is easier to be a homosexual Romani man than it is to be a homosexual Romani woman? The answer is that there is undeniable, patriarchal control over Romani women's lives, and female sexuality is especially under its prying eye. Many Romani communities preserve clear unwritten rules directly governing sexual activity and sexuality itself, particularly when it comes to Romani women. These include: protection of virginity, lack of sex education and an emphasis on obedience and devotion. These rules are imposed under traditional societal mechanisms and are reinforced through social, economic, political and cultural manipulation including coercion, physical force and violence against women. Customs and traditions, along with religion, are oftentimes very powerful instruments for social control and manipulation while at the same time offering legitimacy to the methods used to violate women's human rights. Compulsory heterosexuality and the subordination of women do not allow them any opportunities for choice. Arranged marriages are a prime example of compulsory heterosexuality, and are quite common especially within poor and less educated communities. These girls are being brought up to believe there is no alternative to heterosexual marriage or life outside heterosexually ordered communities.

As I have found in my research, lesbians from Roma communities, much more so than men from the same communities or women from the majority community, have difficulties in reaching out to other lesbians. They talk about their loneliness and their fear of being revealed and they dread making the mistake of opening up to a woman who might ridicule them or confiding in friends who may reject them. Existing prejudices and hatred towards lesbians place these women under great pressure. It is extremely difficult for them to come out—either to admit to themselves or to others, that they are gay. Individually, they must find a way to live and survive without the visible support of the lesbian community, or any other organization or institution for that matter. Only those who do manage to find support are the ones who have spoken out in this paper.

It is my understanding, based on the interviews that it is rare for these women to gather as small circles of friends who are of lesbians. Only a small number say that they have had any contact with lesbian organizations and just a few more say that they have either accessed on-line forums and chat rooms for lesbians or have had the opportunity to attend workshops conducted by Romani women's organizations. Currently, the topic lesbianism has only recently been taken up by Romani feminists, while in Serbia the only time LGBT citizens are discussed in the media are through sensationalized reports on the Pride Parades. This leads to an environment in which Romani

women still do not have a place to talk about their existence or what is happening to them.

Words that sear

Her friend asked her in front of me – What is this Gypsy doing here? And she told him his words are hurting her. He answered: “I don't give a fuck, it is my right to say what I want.” She withdrew with an 'OK' and as a comfort I got a kiss on the shoulder and for the next two days we did not speak because I was hurt and she would not answer because she knew I wanted to talk about it...⁶²

In order to spend some time with my ex-girlfriend I accepted [an invitation] to have coffee outside the building, inside a car in a parking lot when she wanted it or on a park bench since I was not good enough to enter her apartment because of my skin color [and] so she would not have problems with her brother who used to be a skinhead and now is a little bit intolerant to Roma.⁶³

Internalized homophobia and internalized racism

The power of homophobia is so great that it holds in fear both those whom it directly targets and those

⁶² Interview with Romani lesbian, South Serbia, February 2013

⁶³ Interview with Romani lesbian, central Serbia, March 2013

employing it. Homophobia is one of the patriarchy tools—another form of controlling sexuality. It is much more visible when used against men, both in speech and in public spaces, whereas when it is used against women it is often directed often at preserving the condition of lesbian invisibility. Lesbians are not taken seriously and violence against lesbians remains invisible and most often within the private sphere. Compulsory heterosexuality, aided by homophobia, is at the root of fear, unease and hatred towards individuals of homosexual orientation. Many LGBT individuals themselves have internalized some measure of hatred towards themselves because of their sexuality. The ability of someone to accept their sexual identity is usually followed by several painful processes including hiding or negating sexuality, or attempting to change it. The difficulty and pain of everyday life as a self-hating LGBT person can lead to self-destructive behaviors and self-inflicted harm, and even suicide. For some lesbian-identified women, it can result in self-hypermasculinisation, assuming the role of the classic patriarchal male and identifying with men and masculinity.

In addition to homophobia, Romani lesbians, Romani gay men and transgender Romani people are often also faced with internalized racism which functions in similar ways as internalized homophobia, and is accompanied by feelings of lesser worth and low self-esteem due to constant repetition of racist feedback from the outside world. Auto-racism can manifest by emphasizing

Serbian majority identity through tattoos or jewelry with nationalistic symbols in order to be 'better' accepted by members of the majority community. This is usually followed by behaviors aimed at hiding, diminishing or negating one's Roma identity. For many Romani women is a constant need to distance themselves from those traits most commonly attributed to Roma, and to expend an immense amount of energy every day to be dressed impeccably, to be spotlessly clean and overly responsible at work, in order to avoid being identified as a Romani woman if not able to fulfill these standards.

Auto-racism and auto-homophobia leads not just to a lack of self-recognition, but also results in tolerating chronic violence, physical and psychological, economic and sexual, within the family, the school or other public places where LGBT community gathers. But quite often it leads to persisting in long-term, abusive intimate partner relationships.

Her family already accepted her as lesbian and other girls could visit with her in her house, but I could not enter her home for a year. This hurt and insulted me; it was clear why she would not want me. I was never in the same room with her family. Nothing has changed: we do not sit at the same table and do not talk. When it was her birthday none of them was in the room with the guests since I was there. We never talked about this and I don't want to. She tells me to relax but

I know what they think about me and that my skin color is the reason for this. This affects our relationship and I feel very bad about it. This led me to feeling bad about my [ethnicity], to blame myself and I get these self-destructive thoughts.⁶⁴

Adaptation and assimilation

Though there is very little discussion about class division within the Roma communities we should not ignore the class privileges enabling different levels of personal freedoms and opportunities. Throughout my entire life, I have listened to stories about the differences among Roma groups, about how some are different—more successful and better—than others. My status as a relatively privileged Romani lesbian means that I am able to write and publish this kind of paper. In fact, privilege applies to whether someone can be interested for this topic at all. As a Romani woman, although I came from a working-class Romani family, I am aware of the privileges that I had while growing up. We lived apart from the Roma settlement, among majority population, and with steady jobs and reliable income, life was much less burdened by social expectations. As a child, I oftentimes wondered about what I had in common with other Romani children who went to the same primary school as I did. I did not have much contact with them, we had never hung out, and I had

⁶⁴ Interview with Romani lesbian, Vojvodina, February 2013

little chance to really meet them because their school attendance was irregular. My family never socialized with their families. But at the same time I was very much aware that at school, in the eyes of both the teachers and the other pupils, I was a *Gypsy* and nothing more—and quite the same as other Romani kids.

Presently in our deeply stratified society the crucial—but highly unpopular—term social class has a great impact on our abilities to exercise our liberties. Within the Romani communities, being of an upper class can help enable integration. Perhaps integration, and oftentimes assimilation, can aid us in embracing LGBT identity. I feel it would be unfair of me not to point out that being integrated into the broader society and being completely dislocated from Romani communities is a common characteristic among those Roma who publicly identify as LGBT and are part of the activist community. Education and economic independence provide opportunities for us to be true to ourselves but also give us a vocabulary for defining ourselves.

But education, economic independence, and insulation from rigid Roma traditions which reject homosexuality does not mean that the process of searching for a quiet life is over. Racism and nationalism are present in Serbia to great extent and affect our lives on daily basis, making us feel extremely isolated and vulnerable without the support of extended family and close friendships offered by a Romani community. Those who

can—whether because of their fair skin, their name or places of residence—typically avoid mentioning their Roma background within the majority community, where people are initially not aware of the fact that these individuals are ‘different,’ apart from being LGBT. When a person is discovered to be Roma they often face hostility, even within the LGBT community. However, after entering relations with other members of the majority LGBT community, their awareness about the existence of Roma LGBT begins to rise.

They started picking on Roma in the lesbian chat room on the Internet. I said something in their defense and then someone asked me privately if I was Roma. I confirmed and then she wrote all kinds of insults – that we are dirty, stealing, that she never liked Roma people...⁶⁵

My ex-girlfriends do not know that I am Roma. I believe that would be a problem so [that] is the reason I did not tell [them].⁶⁶

I do not know about any other Romani lesbians.⁶⁷

I know that besides me they do not have Roma friends. Many times I heard they do not see me

⁶⁵ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Niš, April 2013

⁶⁶ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Vojvodina, February 2013

⁶⁷ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Vojvodina, February 2013

*as a Roma. They say: you are not like other Roma; we cannot see you like that.*⁶⁸

As Romani women become emancipated they leave the community they come from as this environment oftentimes limits their full development and liberty. Although I have not spoken with any women who hide their Roma background (as I most likely do not know them as Roma women), it is my guess that there are plenty of these women. Our inability to reach out to other women and share our experiences and identities reinforces the matrix preserving the mechanisms of isolation and control. Within Serbian society we need our Roma community. It is important since the voices of the women who are included here affirm that we cannot and must not negate our experiences and identities as Romani women.

The unspoken word

To be a lesbian feminist means being familiar with the mechanisms that produce the fear to even utter the word 'lesbian' as well as the forces that seek to remove this word, and its meaning, from the language and the law. Most of the women I talked with while doing this research called themselves "it." There is no public word to describe their existence, even among other lesbians. When there is lack of any outside lesbian support another word is created that carries a meaning for a

⁶⁸ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Belgrade, March 2013

certain group and the very meaning of the word can vary. Liberation of the language is liberation in other segments of life. There is a long way ahead of us.

How do I define myself? I can say that I am in a relationship with a woman. That word “lesbian” is unsightly to me as I keep thinking about what others say: lesbians, dykes. They have made that word so repulsive. I would always rather say that I am in a relationship with a woman or just say that I have a relationship.⁶⁹

Sometimes I hang out with other women who are the same as me.⁷⁰

It is very different when we talk with people who do not think that word means something bad – then I can say that I am a lesbian, but with people who are not lesbians I cannot. I just cannot utter the word without feeling there is something in my throat.⁷¹

Never in my life have I said what you just mouthed to describe myself, lesbian.⁷²

We say that we are girls to each other, before we spoke only that we are in love.⁷³

⁶⁹ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Vojvodina, March 2013

⁷⁰ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Niš, December 2012

⁷¹ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Niš, April 2012/2013

⁷² Interview with a Romani lesbian, Vojvodina, March 2013

I would say for myself that I love women. I rarely use the word lesbian as I think this way is more polite. Perhaps I can offend someone. Some may think it is disgusting, not nice, not to be done.⁷⁴

I have just lately started saying I was a lesbian, before this I said I was 'in the game' or 'it.' This is fear and shame to say to yourself you are lesbian. Feminism strengthened me. Only after several seminars I started saying what I am.⁷⁵

Due to our invisibility within the language and our inability to recognize ourselves in others, we often believe that, if we are not only completely alone in the world, we are certainly the only lesbians among Roma. And from here spring the feelings that we are alone and not belonging anywhere.

Identities

Starting from my own personal experience as a person who is constantly building my own identities (first as Roma woman and then as a lesbian), one of the important topics within my interviews is that of identifying ourselves as Romani women and lesbians. Here is what some women said about this:

⁷³ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Belgrade, November 2012

⁷⁴ Interview with a Romani lesbian, South Serbia, April 2013

⁷⁵ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Vojvodina, March 2013

*Aside being a lesbian I'm much more. I don't like when someone is being identified only with that.*⁷⁶

*I do not have any absolute sense of belonging to any community. It is most likely because of all my identities; I feel I am not accepted fully anywhere. This is something that can be easily felt.*⁷⁷

*I do have a sense of belonging to the Roma community but I have made a step away and am not fully part of them now. I am different. This brought me closer to those that are not Roma, but I will never be completely part of that world also. I am neither on heaven nor earth.*⁷⁸

Đorđe Jovanović, a Roma human rights activist and an openly gay man is the author of one of the rare but important texts dealing with the intersection of identities. In his testimony as someone who is both Roma and gay, he reports: *There are many people that [sic] I know and some of them are very close to me but they are unable to talk to me about being Roma and gay. Even when they are particularly interested in the topic they just do not know the way to approach it. For*

⁷⁶ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Niš, December 2012

⁷⁷ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Niš April 2013

⁷⁸ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Vojvodina, March 2013

*some this represents a complete taboo – especially the fact of being gay.*⁷⁹

Of course, I met women who identify themselves as lesbian, and as both Roma and lesbian. For some, being able to self-identify as Romani lesbian is part of the process of acceptance and liberation, but others will either never utter the word lesbian, or they will forever hide the fact they are Roma. This is because of either straightforward or concealed messages that it is impossible to be different and yet be accepted as an equal. What Romani lesbians have in common are overlapping feelings of being different from the majority (either ethnically or sexually) and feelings of not belonging within their own communities; the latter identity (lesbian) prevents us from feeling complete belonging with those with whom we share the first identity (Roma) and well known social constructs that a Romani woman cannot be a lesbian are imposed on us: If a woman is a lesbian than she is not a “good Romani woman,” that Roma cannot be anything other than a heterosexual, that there are no transgender Roma individuals, that the LGBT community is always just that and nothing else, etc.

The lack of recognition that we can both be Romani women and lesbians contributes to our confusion and

⁷⁹ Rob Kushen, “The Challenge of Multiple Discrimination”, in *Roma Rights 2* (2009), available at: <http://www.errc.org/roma-rights-journal/roma-rights-2-2009-multiple-discrimination/3564>

alienation. The fact we are different makes us vulnerable.

Isolation and solitude

Traditionally, within Roma culture, the most severe punishment that can be handed out to any individual Roma person is isolation from the community. In the past, this punishment usually resulted in an inability to survive and even death. As Roma began settling, and started establishing and maintaining connections with members of other nations, the gravity of this punishment changed over time, but the sense of necessity to belong and have a network of support within the community still prevails. Threats of isolation concern women more than men as men have more liberties and are thus under less risk of being rejected by the community. Racism works to keep Romani women in the ghetto whereas patriarchy within Romani community helps keep Romani women in isolation within the home. Women come to accept their position in the community and family structures and the social expectations put upon them through hearing examples of the negative or positive validation of the lives of other women from the community on a daily basis.

The reaction of the Roma community towards lesbians is, in most cases, not supportive towards the individual woman. Most often women do not expect to find a partner within their own community since there are no opportunities to meet other Romani lesbians. Not only

are they forced to keep this important part of themselves hidden but because they cannot discuss their personal lives, they remain isolated from each other.

I just need comfort. I am completely alone. If I should find her, I do not want anybody to know. I want everybody to think we are friends. No one knows about me. I have no place where I can meet a girl. How should I look, tell me please. I do not know. I do not want anybody knowing about me. If they do, I do not know what would follow.⁸⁰

Our surroundings, our upbringing, and our aspirations enable each of us to have different world views, and how impact we perceive things like tradition, gender roles and life expectations. Growing up as Roma, being part of a community is an important part of our identities. So far, the experience of Romani lesbian existence is one where we are usually rejected from our communities—our Romani communities, the majority Serbian communities, the LGBT communities. Therefore, isolation represents a constant threat to us, and many of us choose to hide or deny our identities, or choose self-destruction, rather than face isolation.

⁸⁰ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Vojvodina, March 2013

Marriage – voluntary or forced

When I interviewed women gathered in one of the aforementioned cities, many of them asked me whether I had ever been married. Knowing that I was a lesbian, they were curious about why I had never married and whether my family knew about my sexuality. Although aware of their sexual orientation and their desires, some of the women I interviewed entered the marriage voluntarily, we must not neglect the forcible character of such marriages as these women had no real possibility of avoiding these marriages nor were they given an option to reject entering the marriage imposed on them.

This is one the story of one of those women:

I was married, to a boy my parents found. I did not want that, they forced me to marry as they noticed I had begun to change. I remember pleading to both parents, extended family, even some of my friends not to force me to marry. It was all in vain and finally I agreed. My friends helped me dress in a wedding gown which was the first time I had ever put on a dress. They plucked out my eyebrows and put make up on my face – I did not know how to do any of that. At the wedding, I was very sad, I did not laugh or dance – I just sat and stared in front of myself. Everybody noticed this, but I would not say anything. Married life started as hell for me. I

knew I needed to sleep with my husband and that he expected this. The thought of him touching me gave me panic attacks. For two weeks I managed to refuse intimacy with him but after that I just could not avoid it anymore. It was unbearable for me but I survived by imagining a friend of mine thus actually realizing I liked her. My marriage lasted for two months; I could not stand it anymore and escaped to my parents telling them that if they wanted me dead they could return me there. I did not tell the full truth as they would not understand and would beat the hell out of me. Soon I realized I was pregnant and my parents would not hear about it if there was not to be a father for this child. They forced me to have an abortion – I did not want it. Today I would have a grown up child and I am sorry they forced me to do it, too.⁸¹

There are stories of women who discovered their sexual orientation after being married and chose to remain within marital unions as to preserve the image of a married woman within their communities. This is one of their stories:

I do not have a good life with my husband but divorce is impossible. I am with this woman in a relationship for 4 years and have not been

⁸¹ Interview with a Romani lesbian, South Serbia, February 2013

sleeping with my husband for a long time. I think we are together because of the children, now we already have grandchildren. First I was afraid, she is my neighbor, 10 years older than me and had quite a number of affairs with women. I never had an affair with a woman before and never had thought about it. Our relationship started when we comforted each other – at that time I knew she had gone with women. I was telling her about the beatings from my husband and inability to sleep with him and she had seen me on several occasions with bruises. One time, while we were alone, this happened and I could not believe it: how is it possible when she was not a man, when she was a woman. All people around me [say] hideous things and I also thought that being a lesbian was ghastly. She did it first, it was impossible for me to make the first move – I simply had not known how. We are together when we can, when I can escape. I live with my husband but we are not intimate because I don't want it. I know he has other women, people talk about it but I am not angry. We are where we are because of the children. He sees me with women and is not jealous. At first he thought I had another man and was unfaithful to him, the idea that I can be without sex was unconceivable to him. Now, I feel a little

*bit ashamed as I never talked about this to anyone.*⁸²

Violence and threats of violence

As seen in the interviews here, closed communities do not leave many possibilities for anonymity and freedom of choice. Even when a young woman is educated and economically independent, her family and community continue to control her life and dispute her freedom of choice. The sentence "*You know how Roma ways are*" is often directed at women and youth and it prevents any recognition of diversity and sexual freedom generally. This message is also directed at lesbians, but lesbians use it as well. Of course, a similar statement was heard within the majority community – *There is no such thing with us!* In case of sexual orientation we used to hear this prior to LGBT activists' coming out but now almost nobody say it anymore. But within the Roma communities such claims are still present.

Reactions of both majority and Roma population to a sexual orientation that is different from heterosexual regularly include violence and threats of violence, and in that way, patriarchy preserves control and power over women and other marginalized groups. Therefore rare are the cases of LGBT Roma men and women who report violence or threats to authorities precisely because they fear that it might provoke judgment or

⁸² Interview with a Romani lesbian, Central Serbia, December 2012

even more violence. When the fear of possible violence paralyzes victims and prevents them from reporting, violence remains invisible.

Below is an account from an activist from one of the organizations supporting Romani lesbians, followed by several accounts of women who have been directly affected by violence against them:

The husband was at work and after he had returned earlier than usual he found his wife and their neighbor. At first he thought they were playing a joke on him and could not believe his wife was IT. He drove the neighbor away and beat his own wife. Then he called the neighbor's husband and told him everything and after that the other husband beat his own wife too. The first husband threw his wife out and for some time they did not live together but then she returned, told him some story about wanting her family and kids back and he agreed to allow her to come back. He could not believe his wife was IT especially because she was a Romani woman. She never reported her injuries to the police or anyone, just told us [in the organization].⁸³

⁸³ Interview with a Romani women activist, Vojvodina, November 2012

*I do not know what I would do if anybody would find out about me. I would escape from here since anything might happen.*⁸⁴

*I don't see threats to myself coming only from the extremists but from regular people [as well]. They are so uninformed and poisoned [with hatred] that I often believe all of them to be a threat. I can't know their reactions if they find out I am lesbian – some might only insult me and some might also physically attack me.*⁸⁵

It would have been naive to claim that only men employ systems of patriarchy against women. Power and control is exerted by women to great extent when they become *symbolic tormentors*, preservers of patriarchy. Mary Daly in her book *Gyn/Ecology* describes women in Africa perpetuating oppressive customary practices against younger women and thus paying obedience to the male order. Confirmation of similar behaviors can be found in every cultural community. In Romani communities, mothers are the ones responsible for preserving traditional, patriarchal practices, which include restricting their daughters' movement, ensuring sexual inactivity and thus securing virginity and preparing brides to be married. Where the expression of lesbian sexual orientation is concerned, my research shows that mothers are most often at the forefront of

⁸⁴ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Central Serbia, December 2012

⁸⁵ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Vojvodina, December 2012

defending and sustaining compulsory heterosexuality, as these testimonies illustrate:

At some point, when my mother heard information that I kissed my girlfriend, I was just a teenager and she asked me if this was true. After I confirmed I received the most horrifying beating. She took a pair of scissors and cut my hair off. I could not go to school both because I was hurt all over and because of the way I looked.⁸⁶

I wanted to live with a girl so we rented a flat. My mother came and beat me. Then we had to move.⁸⁷

Mother found me a boy to marry but I declined. After that I lied about having boyfriends and showed her my male friends. I was afraid to tell her the truth.⁸⁸

Trusting the Institutions

In answering the question if and where they would report violence and threats of violence because of their sexual identity, most Romani women say they would report it to the nearest of the three given organizations. A small number of them said they would contact the

⁸⁶ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Niš, April 2013

⁸⁷ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Belgrade, November 2012

⁸⁸ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Niš, April 2013

police and in that case they would try not to reveal their sexual orientation—even if the attack was related to their status as lesbian. A great number of the women I have interviewed reported having experience with violence which, keeping in mind the data about presence of violence in the lives of Romani women, is not surprising.

I had never talked to anyone about what was going on in my home after my parents found that I am lesbian. I can say that I felt lonely but this would be putting it too mildly. There were periods when no one would talk to me in my house. I started to be withdrawn, silent. At school, my grades started falling, I just sat there and I might as well be not there. I feared the weekends and school holidays as I had to be home then and my home was a violent place. I wanted to go to the Centre for Social Work but dared not. I knew somehow that if I would go there they would charge my family but eventually I would have to go back home and be exposed to violence again.⁸⁹

I left home two years ago but had to return since I was unable to pay the rent and everything else. I was forced to return and now everything is

⁸⁹ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Niš, April 2013

*much worse. It is very difficult for me that I had to return there.*⁹⁰

Mutual support and mutual perceptions

There are two organizations in Serbia directly working on protecting lesbian human rights and offering support to lesbian community. In the interviews I conducted, just a small number of Romani women, as lesbians, address lesbian organizations. It was important for me to hear activists from these organizations perceptions of the Romani women who came to them. My interview with a representative from Labris, a lesbian human rights organization, confirmed that there is a feeling of unease among Romani women in their relations with women from majority population. Ever since Labris was founded in 1995, they have been visited by just a few women of Roma ethnicity. Labris activists report their experience from a seminar on empowering lesbians in 2007 where one of the participants was a Romani woman who came there through a referral from Romani women's organizations:

We did not know anything and behaved as always. Afterwards we received an e-mail and were very surprised. We thought that she had just left early to bed as the invitation to socialize after official program was for everyone. She, apparently, expected a more direct invitation.

⁹⁰ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Belgrade, November 2012

She wrote that seminar was great but that she had felt different both because she was a lesbian and a Romani woman. She needed from us an additional confirmation that we want her in our company and that we accept her. We really had no idea, none of us had ever thought about it and felt this did not need to happen and talked a lot about it later within our team.⁹¹

Data from the Novi Sad Lesbian Organization (NLO) show that during the period of 2011-2012 their counseling service for lesbians and bisexual women offered assistance on 416 occasions to 36 different women (individual, e-mail and phone consultations). Out of these, just two women were of Roma background and accessed the individual consultation services: one for a shorter and the other for a longer period of time. NLO activists state that Romani women only occasionally frequent 'lesbian places', and that while they indeed have lesbian friends, it is the general impression that Romani lesbians cannot feel completely part of that community because it was the space where they had some unpleasant experiences (rejection, judgment, discrimination) because they were Romani women. Lesbian counselors reported that Romani

⁹¹Consultation with activists of Labris - organization for lesbian human rights, Belgrade, March 2013

women talked of feeling inferior, isolated and rejected, as if they do not belong there.⁹²

As far as Romani lesbians perceive lesbian organizations I note that only those Romani women who are otherwise involved in activist circles are even aware of the existence of Labris and the Novi Sad Lesbian Organization. All of them also stated that in an event of violence they would first reach out to the organizations they gather around, then Labris and NLO and finally to the police and judicial system.

The Future

When asked about their personal visions for the near future (for the next five years), thirteen out of 15 interviewees answered that they can only imagine themselves happy and free living somewhere abroad. One girl from a small city answered that she planned to move to a bigger city, while a girl from big city responded that she wanted to leave home and live independently.

Most responses confirm that Serbia is not a place where diversity is accepted and where these women feel they can lead a normal life.

I do not see anything positive in the future. I wanted to leave Serbia many times because I am

⁹² Consultation with activists of Novi Sad Lesbian Organization, Novi Sad, March 2013

*very tired. The conditions in which I work and live are extremely difficult and exhaust my energy and life force.*⁹³

*I do not see myself in Serbia in future. I cannot live within my four walls as it is expected from me. This would eventually suffocate me.*⁹⁴

*I wish I had my own home. [I want to] complete my education and become somebody. I am interested in being attached [to someone] but all that would be secretly.*⁹⁵

*I do not have work and I think that I will not be able to find it because of my ethnicity. I think that all ethnicities should be equally employed. It does not matter what one does when they leave work, all must have equal rights. Politicians should take our side and should not be permitted to make judgments and express stupid opinions unless they experienced it. They are not the ones in our skin. They have no idea of how it is like to be hungry or beaten... They have no idea!*⁹⁶

⁹³ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Belgrade, November 2012

⁹⁴ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Niš, April 2013

⁹⁵ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Vojvodina, March 2013

⁹⁶ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Vojvodina, December 2012

Romani women's activism and Romani lesbian activism

Despite the fact that all over the world, women actively contribute to social change, and fight for rights and liberties, they often remain invisible, and may even refrain from taking advantage of their rights and freedoms. Therefore, it is not surprising that even those Romani lesbians who are also activists likewise do not often access their freedoms. They oftentimes feel uneasy in the public spaces within their home towns (coffee shops for example) and do not feel as if they can speak freely without fear of being overheard and discovered as lesbians. For me, this freedom was won through socializing with lesbians and lesbian activists who are non-Roma. Claiming spaces which have been reserved for men of any sexual orientation, is a task we, as women, need to take on. Activism being done in a closed spaces and protected workshop environments is another victory for patriarchy.

The lack of support for lesbians and Romani women leads to further marginalization and invisibility. Very often, feminists find themselves in situations where their feminism can negatively influence their positions within the community, and even their careers. Others often automatically associate Romani feminists with lesbians. Some men, often Roma rights activists themselves, speak about Romani women activism being made up of prostitutes and lesbians, hoping that these epithets will discredit the female activists' work and actively seeking to weaken us. These statements

provide evidence of their attitudes about women in general, but, they also represent an attempt to publicly degrade women's solidarity and networking and to further prevent any possible inclusion of other women within Romani women organizations or initiatives. These critics disregard the facts that the Romani women movement accepts lesbians and that the majority of women working towards Romani women rights are heterosexual. The sole response to such prejudices can be the stronger solidarity among Roma women.

The support of other organizations and institutions from outside just the Romani women's and lesbian right communities is especially important, particularly when it comes to organizations that have the power and resources to support social change. We need more than just the good will of those who work directly to fight against inequality. We need support from institutions and organizations that can help sustain our work. Yet, the experiences of the activists I have spoken with show there is little of such support. This is due, in part, to the invisibility of Romani lesbian existence but it is also because of a lack of recognition about the importance of the other areas where activists work. In other words, because institutions and donors don't see us, or understand the importance of our work, we receive little support. Therefore, the rare and precious initiatives working to better the lives of Romani lesbians often come to an end. One of the project coordinators speaks about her efforts to create space for Romani lesbians:

Upon the completion of our project, we applied to several donors but received nothing. After that I stopped writing proposals and we do not have any project activities now. I am unable to see women as numbers but rather persons and one cannot work with them on a purely mathematical level. But because of my personal financial standing I had to accept work that took up all of my days and I did not have the time to gather the group, nor did we have the money to meet at coffee shops.⁹⁷

With or without outside support, the fact is that activism exists and persists because it comes from the real needs of real women.

I know we are stronger when we are together but women could not come out from their space, their settlement, their room. Now they can.⁹⁸

And ultimately, this is the reason I have written this paper: to help us escape our four walls, if we have walls at all.

It is not shame and it is not disgraceful to love a woman⁹⁹.

⁹⁷ Interview with a Romani lesbian activist, Belgrade, February 2013

⁹⁸ Interview with a Romani lesbian activist, Novi Bečej/Zrenjanin, February 2013

⁹⁹ Interview with a Romani lesbian, Vojvodina, November 2012

V Conclusion: Creating community

When I asked participants about whether there are lesbian communities living in Romani communities, this was the response I received: there are fewer Roma lesbian communities when compared with the women within the majority population. The sense of isolation and loneliness emphasized by many of the women I spoke with supports this claim, and illustrates the need to make Romani lesbian existence visible; however, since there are but a few out Romani lesbians, the creation of a community is not an easy task. In my work I am often in a position to speak in the media about Romani women, about their position within the society and about our activities to improve this position. For me this is a constant coming-out. I keep speaking about myself as Roma with a small yet constant internalized sense of unease. Talking with other Romani women who have invested in their personal emancipation has shown me that this is something we have in common. Our life experience has not allowed us to come out as Romani

women, since it was always connected with other prejudices. In order to live true to our full identities and avoid lies and autoracism, we need the support of others – of Romani women that will give us strength and although we never had all of them close, when we would meet it was important. The same goes for other lesbians.

We are now faced with the challenge to publicly come out as ‘different’ in a society where it is, to say the least, not very popular to be different. We are threatened with rejection, ridicule, blame and harassment over the phone or online, as well as with physical violence and intimidation. In addition to perpetuating our isolation, normative heterosexuality and forms of patriarchy have an impact on how we set standards for engaging in any other relationships. The negation of women’s lives as well as the negation of lesbian lives within Romani communities is a manifestation of deeply rooted misogyny, homophobia and racism. Moreover, we cannot forget the fact that with this we are in the possession of many other identities that are important to us and to which we desire to dedicate our energies. There are no existing models or examples for us as we work to create a culture that will allow us to freely express all of our identities and live full lives. The omnipresent homophobia and heterosexism in majority and Romani communities makes it difficult to see the connections between the lives of Romani women and lesbians. How many of our grandmothers, aunts and female neighbors have lived without men? We have

grown up with unspoken truths which became semi-truths and complete lies all in an effort to ignore their existence and make their lives completely invisible. Although not all lesbians may be aware of the subversive effect they have on patriarchy, the experiences of racism and sexism that we have had as Romani women can prepare us for change.

Being subversive is a reflection of our ability to strengthen ourselves by accepting the fact that throughout our entire lives, we have perceived ourselves through the eyes of others; others who have told us what is beautiful, normal, acceptable and desirable. It is through them that we have adopted values, thoughts and actions and built our relationships with ourselves and others. Although important to forming individual personalities, our identities oftentimes have an oppressive function and the fact that unless we have strong identities and do not feel as if we belong is not our mistake – but rather a mistake in the limited ‘acceptable’ identities we were offered. The necessity of deconstructing concepts of identities and subjectivity that originated within the western science tradition and policy, racist capitalism governed by male dominance, progress and adopting nature as the resource for culture production.¹⁰⁰ Authors like Haraway, Chela Sandoval and bell hooks reveal new

¹⁰⁰ Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York, 1991

possibilities for us: instead of asking ourselves whether we are good Romani women, we can find strength in our not belonging. It is necessary to discover an oppositional awareness with those who have been, as we have been, denied membership to accepted social categories for a long time¹⁰¹, those who, the same as us, have been marginalized within oppressed groups, those who do not easily fit into preexisting identities. Why is it important to accept the fact that we do not belong and identify with all others who also experience rejection? Because the community of those who do not belong represents a new political voice whose historical position is in total opposition to the position of patriarchal dominance, capitalism and colonialism and who, from such a position, can construct an identity of their own comprised of respect for the other and our diversity.¹⁰² The Roma community can be a part of this, as it shares the experience of not belonging to the majority, the same as the LGBTIQ communities.

Our resistance to patriarchy will enable us to create a community of Romani lesbians. Through mutual recognition, solidarity, building strategic coalitions and strong political affiliations within a society that has degraded women and all those who are 'different,' we can begin to build networks of support to help us begin to accept ourselves for who we are. Many lesbian

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

feminists have said, and still believe, that the love of oneself and the love of other women represent the most radical act that a woman can take. In order for love to exist, it need not be uttered. Silence may hide it but cannot kill it. When we are connected we receive strength to talk about love. With this text, love is being spoken.

*I wrote these pieces because I believe that women must wage a war against silence: against socially coerced silence; against politically preordained silence; against economically choreographed silence; against the silence created by the pain and despair of sexual abuse and second-class status. I believe in people: that we can disavow cruelty and embrace the simple compassion of social equality. I don't know why I believe these things; only that I do believe them and act on them.*¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Andrea Dworkin, *Letters From A War Zone*, New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993

Vera Kurtić is a radical feminist and a Romani woman. She is an activist and one of the coordinators of Women Space, an organization based in Niš, Serbia. Vera is a founding member of the Romani Women Network of Serbia that gathers organizations and groups from across the country into a joint and unified force directed to enhance the position of Romani women. In addition, she is the member of Labris – Lesbian Human Rights Organization from Belgrade. She studied sociology and communications and is enrolled in the Gender and Media graduate program at Singidunum University, Belgrade. Vera is enjoying her lesbian existence.

Džuvljarka by Vera Kurtić is a research that tangles the problem of invisibility of Roma lesbians who are denied a part of identities, achieved relations and personal connections – both within the Roma and broader social communities. Through the examples of Roma lesbian existence the author explains burdens of gender, race, nation, class and minority sexual existence and their intersectionality within discrimination. This paper is written for the feminist movement, Roma and LGBT activist community and all those that advocate for human rights protection and implementation.

A quotation from the interviews:

I have been living with K. for 4 years and she is my family. I came to Belgrade because my father wanted to marry me off... and I met K. and we started living together... The two of us lived in a Roma settlement and we knew it had been scheduled for demolishon, but we had no jobs and no place to go to. One day when we returned home the settlement had been torn down... The authorities told me I have no right to housing. At the Centre for Social Work they wondered how K. and I were one family and told us only real families could receive housing and they would not put us together even if we were given a container... People think they have the right to make decisions about my life. The social worker I contacted when I fled from my father was interested in my case but then she started saying that I must be a prostitute since I do not live with my parents or cousins. On several occasions she talked to me about my reasons for living with K. and asked me why I was like that... Our stories were on the Internet. Because of this my Belgrade cousins attacked me in the market place telling me I was a shame for them for being with K. Some people that we know told us: "You should not bring shame to us, we are Roma and this is not something that we ever do!" And on the Internet we saw terrible comments about our story online telling us to get the fuck out of Serbia. We live believing that we can go out on the street tomorrow and somebody may kill us...