Familial Frictions: Intersectional Inequalities Faced by Romani Queer Women

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Abstract

This article reviews the growing but still scarce scholarly work on queer Romani women in Eastern and Central Europe to highlight how economic and symbolic inequalities are inseparably intertwined and mutually strengthen each other in the case of this group. The review finds that cultural and symbolic injustices dominate the analysis of the situation of queer Romani women; economic deprivation is often mentioned when providing an overview of the situation of Romani people but is hardly ever brought up when the specific experiences of queer Romani people are discussed. The article zooms in on one area where the interplay between economic and symbolic inequality is pronounced: the central role of familism in the lives of Romani communities, and the detrimental impact it has on the situation of queer Romani women. The article also proposes a set of other mechanisms undermining the equality and well-being of queer Romani women where economic and symbolic inequalities are similarly intertwined.

Introduction

In the last two decades the attention of academics and policymakers dealing with social inequalities have turned to individuals and communities that belong to several disadvantaged social groups at the same time, or in other words whose social position is defined by the intersection of two or more axes of inequality (Crenshaw 1991; Verloo 2006). Such an intersectional approach questions the mono-categorical bias of law, policy, and social movements that make invisible the experiences of and thus cannot address the specific forms of oppression suffered by these groups.

Queer[1] Romani women form such a multiply disadvantaged social group in Eastern and Central Europe, lying at the intersections of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. What is interesting about this intersection is that the various axes of inequality constituting it are traditionally approached in very different terms. Fraser (1995) makes a difference between two understandings of injustice: socio-economic and cultural or symbolic injustice. While the social position of Romani people is more often than not described in socio-economic terms,[2] that of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT or queer) people is accounted for in cultural terms. Gender has both economic and cultural components (in Fraser's terminology, it is a bivalent collectivity), and different forms of feminism/academic approaches to gender tend to prioritize one over the other.

While Fraser's analytic separation between the economic and symbolic have often been subject to criticism (Butler 1997; Young 1997; Honneth 2003; Swanson 2005), it is particularly difficult to maintain if one approaches inequalities with an intersectional approach (Yuval-Davis 2011). The aim of my paper is to analyze the growing but still scarce scholarly work on queer Romani women in Eastern and Central Europe to highlight how economic and symbolic inequalities are inseparably intertwined and mutually strengthen each other in the case of this group.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section will be devoted to supporting the claim that "Roma-ness" is mapped to economic, sexuality to symbolic, and gender to both economic and symbolic inequalities. Key policy documents on the European level will be analyzed to support these claims. The second section reviews published (semi)academic work on queer Romani women[3] exploring whether the authors emphasize the economic or cultural aspects of inequalities, or some form of an interplay between the two. The third and final section will zoom in on one explanatory factor often cited in the

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1 Throughout this paper I use the term "queer" in the broad sense to refer to persons marked by same-sex sexual and emotional attraction, including people with homosexual or bisexual sexual orientations, as well as those with more fluid sexual identities and/or practices. While queer has a more specific use referring to fluid, non-identitatarian conceptions of sexuality, it is increasingly used in both popular and academic literature as an umbrella term to grasp sexual non-normativity in times of ever-proliferating sexual identity categories. For an overview of different uses, see Somerville 2014.

2 Fraser's article considers "race" as a bivalent collective as well, but I will argue that unlike "race" in the American context, being Roma is predominantly grasped in socio-economic terms.

3 Some of the works analyzed talk more broadly about queer Romani people; in those cases I will highlight those findings that clearly apply to women as well or apply to them particularly.

literature for the specific vulnerability of queer Romani women – the importance of family values in Romani communities – to show the interaction between economic and symbolic inequalities shaping the social position of queer Romani women.

1. Roma-ness, Gender and Sexuality, and the Economic/ Symbolic Divide

To better understand the complexity of the multifaceted inequalities faced by queer Romani women, I turn to Nancy Fraser's highly influential distinction between socio-economic and cultural or symbolic forms of injustice (Fraser 1995). By socio-economic injustice, Fraser means injustices rooted in the "economic structure [...] of society" (75), the purest form of such injustice being social class. Cultural or symbolic injustice, on the other hand, is "rooted in the reigning social patterns of interpretation and evaluation" (76), for which she gives homosexuality as an ideal-typical example. Fraser sees the distinction as the two endpoints of a "conceptual spectrum" and acknowledges that most collectivities lie somewhere in-between. Fraser uses this distinction to criticize contemporary social movements and progressive political projects that focus solely on cultural or symbolic injustices and prioritize recognition as the main solution for overcoming injustices. Instead, she suggests that adequate attention should be paid to socio-economic injustices as well, which necessitates another form of intervention: the redistribution of material resources.

In Fraser's classification, the injustices Romani people face fall predominantly in the socio-economic category. While Csepeli and Simon (2004) describe that there has been no consensus in Eastern and Central Europe among experts and politicians about how to best conceptualize Roma (some consider them an ethnic or cultural group, others a social class or stratum (136)), policy documents at the EU and national level, however, tend to focus on the socio-economic aspect of the situation of Roma. The *EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020*, for example, departs from the statement that Romani people "are marginalized and live in very poor socio-economic conditions". The document then proceeds to tell a narrative proceeding from the educational disadvantage suffered by Roma people, which results in mass unemployment, and leading to economic deprivation, geographical segregation and a lack of access to health and vital services. The subsequent document, the *EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation for 2020–2030* has a more complex understanding, and among the seven objectives the first is fighting and preventing antigypsyism, which is understood as originating in "how the majority views and treats those considered '[G]ypsies'", and the processes of "othering" and "stereotyping". Nevertheless, the six other objectives still focus on socio-economic aspects such as reducing poverty and social exclusion, increasing access to mainstream education, employment, healthcare, and social services, as well as housing and essential services.

In line with Fraser's classification, sexual and gender minorities are mapped nearly exclusively to the symbolic. The European Commission's *List of Actions by the Commission to Advance LGBTI* departs from the statement that the "figures on the lack of social acceptance of this group are alarming", and proceeds to propose measures to enhance the legal recognition of sexual orientation and gender identity,

highlighting the importance of reaching citizens, fostering diversity and non-discrimination. The report of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights *Discrimination on Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Europe* also starts from an overview of negative social attitudes linking it to religion and traditional values. The report explains how these social attitudes promote a sense of shame and internalized homophobia. The report then proceeds to discuss a lack of legal recognition for sexual orientation and gender identity. Problems concerning education and employment are relegated to the last chapter, and even in these chapters the focus is predominantly on the heteronormative content of curricula and harassment at the workplace. Educational disadvantage, unemployment, poverty, or homelessness are not thematized. The European Commission's recently adopted *Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025*, the EU's first ever officially adopted strategic document on sexual and gender minorities, begin by covering widespread stigmatization and the sharply different levels of social acceptance among EU countries; it then briefly thematizes poverty, homelessness, and social exclusion, and the proposed actions focus on strengthening legal recognition and promoting the values of diversity and inclusion.

Similarly to Fraser's assessment that gender is a "bivalent" category incorporating both socio-economic and symbolic aspects, policy documents tend to emphasize both aspects. The European Commission's newest gender equality strategy (*A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025*), for example, covers topics such as labor market participation, pay gap, the glass ceiling, care work and work-life balance, sexist hate speech, gender-based violence and gender stereotypes.

With this brief analysis, my aim is not to argue that these policy documents are mistaken when they prioritize different aspects of inequality for the different groups. Indeed, the social realities of Roma, women, and sexual and gender minorities differ immensely, which require different approaches. My aim is to highlight that when one focuses on the groups lying at the intersection of these axes of inequality, socio-economic and cultural-symbolic aspects of inequality are likely to overlap.

2. Mapping the Literature

Recent academic publications cite Daniel Baker's Master's thesis (2002) as the first scientific treatment of Roma/LGBT intersection. Baker summarizes the findings of his research based on interviews with four gay Romani men in the UK in the 2015 issue of *Roma Rights* as follows (Baker 2015): identities are not fixed but rather contextual, subject to constant contestation and reconstitution. An openly gay sexual identity and Gypsy ethnic identity are irreconcilable, so Gay Gypsies either stay in the closet or detach from their ethnic communities. The skill of passing as non-Gypsy that they learn from their early childhood helps them hide their ethnic and/or sexual identity. This, however, renders them completely invisible not only in their gay and Gypsy communities, but also towards each other, which makes community building and the construction of a shared Gay Gypsy identity impossible.

A study commissioned by the UK's equality body, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, in 2009 notes that "no research on the subject of sexual orientation within Gypsy and Traveler communities appears to have been carried out in the UK or Ireland" (Cemlyn 2009). The study's findings are based

on consultation with Roma and LGBT civil society organizations, and it study ascertains that sexuality is a taboo in the Romani community and that there is a very strong expectation to find a (opposite sex) spouse and have children, especially for women. Many Romani LGBT people do marry and have children; men often have parallel lives in which they establish sexual relations with other men, while women lack this possibility due to their limited freedom outside the household. Women are forced to stay in their heterosexual relationships in fear of losing their children if they come out. LGBT Roma who do come out risk isolation from their community and/or violence from relatives and other community members. Those that do not come out experience immense psychological pressure leading to depression, substance abuse, and suicide.

The first studies on Roma/LGBT intersections in Eastern and Central Europe were carried out in the early 2010s. Vera Kurtic (2013) interviewed 15 Romani lesbian women and 10 non-LGBT Roma in several cities of Serbia. While most non-LGBT respondents claimed that both gay men and lesbian women are treated the same in the Romani community, they only knew gay or bisexual men and transgender people in the community; Romani lesbian women were completely invisible. Kurtic explains this invisibility by the patriarchal control of women's sexuality in the Romani community, which is maintained by religion and traditional values, economic dependence, and physical violence targeted at women who do not conform to these ideals. Kurtic notes that older women are also complicit in maintaining the patriarchal order; mothers are often at the forefront of sanctioning non-normative sexual behavior. Some Romani lesbians face arranged marriages, but even if they marry voluntarily, they do so under immense communal pressure. Kurtic also stresses that the isolation of Romani women (in the ghetto, as a result of societal racism, and in their home, as a result of patriarchal values) isolate lesbian women from one another, leaving them without any form of communal support. Romani lesbians are unlikely to rely on the police to solve violence: if they were to report an incident, they would likely hide the sexual orientation aspect of the attack. Similarly to Cemlyn, Kurtic also notes that isolation from the community is the ultimate social sanction, which might lead to the loss of contact with children, and – due to the lack of education or experience with gainful employment – a loss of livelihood.

In parallel, David Tišer (2015) carried out a similar project in the Czech Republic, with the participation of 15 Romani LGBT people (two of them women). Tišer's approach is focused on identifying the deep cultural roots of anti-LGBT sentiments in the Romani community. He claims that Roma culture still revolves around the notion of ritual purity, and homosexuality is considered "impure" or *degeše,* requiring that objects used by a gay or lesbian person be thrown away after use or kept for use solely by that person. Homosexuality is also considered shameful (*ladž*). Both uncleanliness and shamefulness can result in excommunication (either by *kris*, an internal conflict resolution mechanism of Romani communities or simply by communal practice), and they also carry over to the whole family: if a family does not discipline their gay or lesbian family member, they also risk excommunication. Tišer, however, notes that that is more a fear than actual practice, as only one person from his sample recounted such an experience. If not excommunicated, openly gay or lesbian members of the community still risk mockery and verbal abuse, as well as physical abuse from their family members.

Tišer argues that while all but one of his interviewees reported their family to be religious, religious arguments were never used to argue against homosexuality; it was rather the failure to have a family that was most often mentioned. Tišer, however, underlines that the centrality of family values is not simply a remnant of the past, but a coping strategy that many Roma use to deal with the hostility of the external world. Family is the guarantee of emotional and economic security; being open about one's sexual orientation means letting go of this security. Tišer closes his study by showing that even if Romani LGBT people face common rejection and discrimination from their family members, they are still more likely to consider their Romani ethnicity as the greater source of injustice that permeates all aspects of their life. A short section is also devoted to prostitution, arguing that oftentimes it is the only source of income for gay Romani youth excommunicated by their communities.

In the same year, in 2015, Dezső Máté also published the first results of his interview-based study with 15 Romani LGBT persons in Hungary (Máté 2015). At the center of Máté's article is a set of contradicting expectations that Romani LGBT people face during their identity development, from majority society, from Roma themselves and from the LGBT community. Máté argues that both Romani and LGBT people go through similar stages of identity development (shame/shock, anger/denial, proof, reconciliation, pride), but that this takes place at different times in the individual's life, and results in the development of a number of defense mechanisms. Similarly to Cemlyn and Kurtic, Máté also asserts that all of his interviewees had long-term relationships with heterosexual partners before they were able to establish same-sex relations. Máté notes that both the awareness of and later practice of same-sex desires often occurred together with a spatial move (to high school, university or abroad). In his later works Máté discusses the development of Romani LGBT activism (Máté 2017) and explores why intersectionality did not form part of the intellectual horizon of earlier generations of Romani activists and intellectuals (Máté 2018).

The fourth author with several published works on the Roma LGBT people in Eastern and Central is Lucie Fremlova. She was one of the editors of the Council of Europe's educational resource *Barabaripen* (Fremlova and Georgescu 2014) that featured life histories of young Roma facing multiple discrimination (among them two gay and one lesbian youth), complemented by a conceptual introduction to multiple discrimination and a summary of common features found in the interviews. The introduction differentiates between serial, additive, and intersectional discrimination; the summary highlights that Romani LGBT people "feel torn" due to the cultural clash between their sexual orientation, Romani traditions and gender roles. Besides discrimination from majority society and the LGBT and Romani communities, the summary also mentions exclusion as a fourth aspect limiting access to services such as police and healthcare. The summary reiterates Tišer's claims about purity and shame. The authors also assert that coming out in the Romani community is structured differently: families and communities are more close-knit, meaning that selective coming out common in other segments of the LGBT population are difficult to maintain. The text also stresses that some Romani communities are accepting of LGBT people, especially if they play an important role in the community.

Fremlova continued to study the Romani/LGBT intersection, which became the focus of her doctoral dissertation (Fremlova 2017). Fremlova's main aim is to provide an alternative to a fixed, essentializing, ethnic model of Romani identities, emphasizing instead hybridity, super-diversity, and intersectionality;

or as she called it "queer assemblage". Fremlova's research was built on participant observation at international Romani LGBT gatherings, 14 in-depth interviews and two focus groups with Romani LGBT people from Central Europe and the Balkans. Her main finding is that antigypsyism takes a pre-eminent place in the lived experience of Romani LGBT people, often overshadowing other forms of oppression. The family and community responses to non-normative sexuality and gender identity is much more diverse than in other accounts; Fremlova claims that social rejection and ridiculing is largely limited to lesbian women and effeminate, passive gay men. She talks at great length about the ambivalent role family and community play in the life of Romani LGBT people both as a social safety net and the source of heteronormative and patriarchal oppression. As her most recent article summarizing the main findings of her research claims "both nuclear and extended family relationships play a crucial role in terms of material and economic security [...] LGBTIQ Roma may choose to 'stay in the closet' fully or partially in order not to sever vital social bonds and relationships" (Fremlova 2020, 11).

This short review of the existing literature on Roma LGBT provides ample evidence that queer Romani women face a variety of forms of oppression. According to Young's (1990) terminology, the faces of oppression most often mentioned in the literature fall under the categories of cultural imperialism (invisibility, internalized homophobia and racism, identity conflicts, shame, impurity) and violence (by family and community members), although marginalization also appears in some texts contributing to isolation and lack of access to services.

Linked to the above, cultural and symbolic injustices dominate the analysis of the situation of Romani LGBT people. Unemployment, educational disadvantage, and housing conditions are often highlighted, but only in introductory chapters describing the general conditions of Romani people, and hardly ever when the specific experience of Romani LGBT people are discussed. In fact, several researchers highlight that Romani LGBT people interviewed have a significantly higher level of education and better economic position than the average Romani population (Tišer 2015; Fremlova 2020). This, of course, might be largely attributed to sampling bias, but two alternative hypothesis have also been put forward in the literature to explain this phenomenon: (1) Romani LGBT people value education higher than other members of the Romani community as they see it as the only way to escape their sexually repressive communities (Tišer 2015); (2) education provides Romani LGBT people with a cultural vocabulary and financial independence so that they can be out about their sexuality or gender identity (Kurtic 2013, 64).

The topic where economic inequalities become most pronounced is the ambivalent role that families of origin play in the lives of Romani LGBT people, in particular queer Romani women. The literature analyzed above offers a rudimentary analysis of the detrimental impact that an interplay between the economic and normative aspects of family relations have in the lives of queer Romani women.

3. Familism beyond the Economic/Symbolic Binary

The central role of family ties and family values in the lives of Romani people is well documented. As Angus Fraser, in his by now classic anthropological study on Roma notes, "family values are the important cement in much of Gypsy life" (1995, 306). Similarly, Liégeois observes that "[e]very aspect of

Gypsies' and Travelers' lives gravitate around the family" (1995, 83). Familism offers a strong normative framework in which having a family is an indispensable part of a good life, and having feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity towards members of the immediate and extended family is expected under all circumstances (Peterson and Bush 2013, 383). This latter aspect constitutes family ties as an important economic safety net that family members can rely on for their survival. It is this latter, economic function of family ties that has prompted scholars to see familism not simply as a remnant of traditional values, but an adaptive coping strategy for social groups facing economic hardship or hostile social environments (Zinn 1982). While familism offers normative guidance for both men and women, it restricts the lives of women in a more fundamental way in societies with a gendered division of labor, as reproduction, child-rearing, and maintaining family ties is perceived to be a woman's job.

There have been numerous studies on the impact of familism on the lives of queer women and men in diverse social contexts. Familism and the subscription to traditional family values has been used in both theoretical (Adam 1998) and empirical (Callahan and Herek 1988; Vescio and Biernat 2003; Vescio 2011) studies to explain anti-queer prejudice. Comparative studies that aim at explaining different levels of legal protections and social acceptance afforded to sexual minorities have also relied on the varying centrality of familism in different cultures as an explanatory factor (Adamczyk and Cheng 2015; Wakefield et al. 2016). Finally, studies among ethnic minority queers in Western social contexts (especially of Asian and Latinx descent) also show the specific challenges they face due to higher levels of familism in their ethnic communities (Diaz 1998; McKeown et al. 2010; Patel 2019; Patrón 2021). Muñoz-Laboy (2008), however, warns against treating familism as intrinsically negative for sexual minorities: an overriding loyalty to family members might pierce the walls of prejudices and prove to be a factor facilitating acceptance rather than rejection.

While the literature on Romani LGBT persons in Eastern and Central Europe analyzed above touch upon the negative impacts that familism have on the lives of these social groups, the exact mechanisms through which familism contributes to the oppression of queer Romani women remains to be properly analyzed. A number of hypothesis on how familism and its interaction with the gendered division of labor, institutionalized homophobia, and the social exclusion of Romani people might contribute to the vulnerable position of queer Romani women.

Both the normative and the economic aspects of familism contribute to such vulnerability. Women living in same-sex partnerships cannot have biological children without the involvement of others, so they cannot fulfil the main moral and cultural obligation of familism to have a family of their own. While adoption and modern reproductive technologies would enable queer Romani women to become mothers, restrictive legislation on adoption and assisted reproduction, limited access to health services, and class biases in adoption procedures makes this nearly impossible for queer Romani women. Many of these women thus "voluntarily" enter into heterosexual relationships to have children. Exiting such relationships is impeded by several factors. Leaving their children behind would mean failing as a mother and thus not living up to the expectation of familism. In case they decide to remain with their children, they face significant disadvantages during the (legal) dispute concerning the custody of their children. A lack of trust in public institutions, lower level of education, and the lack of financial resources makes it very difficult for these women to take such a case to court. Even if they do, prejudiced social attitudes

and discriminatory legislation concerning same-sex parenting severely limit their chances, which are further weakened by the fact that the father will likely be supported (socially and financially) by the whole community, while she will be left alone. Even if the courts act in a non-discriminatory way, the stronger financial position (and community support) of the father will likely tip the balance towards him.

The close-knit, family-based structure of Romani communities makes it very difficult for queer Romani women to develop and maintain same-sex partnerships in secrecy: the gendered division of labor relegate many of them to the domestic sphere, and their mobility and social contacts are more restricted than for gay or bisexual men. If a queer Romani woman wants to develop a same-sex partnership, her sexuality becomes public to all members of her community. Declaring one's sexual orientation, however, carries the risk of social isolation and excommunication, that is, being cut off from the economic safety net of family ties. This can be particularly difficult for Romani women, who have a lower level of education compared to Romani men and are less likely to be employed.

While recent studies on the social networks of Roma show that family ties as a support structure or economic safety net are significantly less widespread than commonly expected (Messing and Molnár 2011), the belief that without the support of their families they would not be able to survive still holds strong among queer Romani women guiding their life choices as evidenced by the interviews in the studies presented here.

Focusing on the role of familism in understanding the complex, multi-faceted form of inequality faced by queer Roma woman showcases a truly intersectional form of discrimination where ethnicity, gender, and sexuality operate not as separate axes of inequality, the impacts of which are added up in case of queer Romani women, but are mutually constitutive (Yuval-Davis 2006): the intersectional experience of queer Romani woman is greater than the sum of racism and sexism (and homophobia) (cf. Crenshaw 1989, 140). Without social exclusion of Romani people, neither the normative nor the economic aspect of familism would be so decisive; without a gendered division of labor, women's economic dependence would not force them to choose the maintenance of family ties over exploring their sexual orientation; and finally, without institutionalized homophobia, these women would not be forced to enter into and remain in heterosexual relationships if they wish to have children.

Familism is, of course, not the only aspect of the lives of queer Romani women where racism, sexism, and homophobia interact. Access to employment, education, healthcare, housing, support services and community infrastructure, as well as levels of self-acceptance, assertiveness, relationship quality, and well-being are also impacted. A proper analysis of such mechanisms, however, would go beyond the confines of the current article.

Conclusion

In this paper I provided an overview of the growing but still scarce scholarly work on the Romani/LGBT intersection in Eastern and Central Europe, focusing in particular on the situation of queer Romani women. The article argues that the existing scholarship focuses primarily on the cultural or symbolic

inequality faced by Romani LGBT people, but highlighted one factor present in the literature, the familism of Romani communities, where economic and symbolic inequalities are inseparably intertwined and mutually strengthen one another. Existing research on the social determinants of prejudices (Carvacho et al. 2013), the relationship between social exclusion and religiosity (Aydin et al. 2010), and isolation and internalized homophobia (Detrie and Lease 2007) might provide further mechanisms to better understand the interplay between economic and symbolic inequalities contributing to the intersectional discrimination suffered by queer Romani women. This would require systematic research into the attitudes of Romani people towards sexual and gender minorities (preferably using standardized quantitative measures, such as social distance (Bogardus 1926), the Modern Homophobia Scale (Raja and Stoker 1998) or the Modern Homonegativity Scale (Morrison and Morrison 2008)), as well as further qualitative studies with Romani LGBT people focusing on less privileged members of the community.

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