

REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK WITH ROMANI WOMEN: RACE, CLASS, AND FEMINISM IN BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

Jennifer Erickson, University of Oregon

© 2003 Jennifer Erickson All Rights Reserved

The copyright for individual articles in both the print and online version of the *Anthropology of East Europe Review* is retained by the individual authors. They reserve all rights other than those stated here. Please contact the managing editor for details on contacting these authors. Permission is granted for reproducing these articles for scholarly and classroom use as long as only the cost of reproduction is charged to the students. Commercial reproduction of these articles requires the permission of the authors.

This paper describes differing notions of feminism, which arose during my fieldwork experiences in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It is based on research that I coordinated with Romani women (Gypsies) while working as a volunteer for *Medica Infoteka*, a local women's NGO (nongovernmental organization) in Zenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1998-2000. The present analysis is an attempt to evaluate that research and the issues it raised regarding race, class, and gender.

Medica Infoteka was established in April 1993 to provide psycho-social and medical assistance to survivors of war-related rape. During 1998-2000, *Medica* consisted of a medical clinic, a team of psychologists, a daycare center, two separate accommodations for women and children, workshops in weaving, sewing, hair design, and furniture upholstery, a political and research wing (*Infoteka*), and a hotline for women and children victims of violence (SOS Telephone). During this time, *Medica* was shifting its focus from war-related issues to domestic violence against women. Bosniac (or Bosnian Muslims), Bosnian Croat, and Bosnian Serb women make up the teams of *Medica Infoteka*.ⁱ

I worked for *Infoteka*, the team that establishes and maintains networks with other NGOs and governmental institutions. *Infoteka* invited me, as a volunteer, to design and coordinate a research project because of my background in psychology; they did not specify a topic but encouraged me to find something relevant to *Medica's* mission of promoting women's rights. I was hesitant to undertake a project for several reasons. As a young American with limited research experience, I did not feel comfortable coordinating a project for a Bosnian organization. I protested, but my colleagues repeatedly encouraged me and I ultimately accepted the challenge of leading the project after I learned about the alarming

situation of Roma, and Romani women in particular, in Bosnia.

Romani women are in a precarious position in Bosnia. Due to a multiplicity of factors such as lack of formal education, low socioeconomic status in a weakened welfare state, fierce competition in the destabilized service sector, and racism, Romani women have been left at the margins of all aspects of life. Romani women are present in the streets in Bosnia but they are politically invisible.ⁱⁱ

At the time I became interested in the Roma in Bosnia, NATO was bombing the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. As a result of my interest in the intersection of race, class, and gender, in addition to my ambivalent feelings about the bombing, my colleagues and I had a number of defining in-depth conversations about feminism. For example, they were vehemently against domestic violence against women, but due to their intimate experience with war, they (unlike me) were not against violence in general. As a "liberal" American woman, I believed that feminism must include a supportive stance for women of differing races, classes, ethnicities, and sexual orientations and furthermore, I associated domestic violence with large scale or state-sponsored violence. My colleagues repeatedly reminded me that I could not understand their perspective of violence because I had not experienced war. I agreed. Furthermore, all of my colleagues claimed they were against racism, but they believed racism was a phenomenon only in the United States or South Africa; they believed that racism consisted of a clear dichotomy between "whites" and "blacks". According to my colleagues, they themselves were not racist. I naively challenged what I believed to be their narrow understanding of feminism which included ethnicity (Serbs, Croats, and Muslims) but did not include race; namely they did not include Romani women in their dialogues about feminism.

I worked independently for nine months to explore the possibility of a project with Roma. As my Bosnian language skills improved I was better able to explain my impression of the situation of Roma in Bosnia to my colleagues. My curiosity incited heated debates about the validity of Romani history and the supposed discrimination against them.ⁱⁱⁱ Both educated and uneducated people believe in the stereotype of Roma as dirty, lazy thieves, an “exotic” population. Some of my colleagues asserted that Roma deserve to be discriminated against because they chose their own lifestyle; they had only themselves to blame for their problems. Others said that Roma use their culture or music to gain sympathy. Some Bosnian teachers told me that the problem with Romani children in school is that Gypsy children “stink” (*smrde*). They explained that one solution to the “Gypsy problem” would be to buy them soap. All of my colleagues assured me that racism was not a problem in Bosnia. Promoting Roma rights was considered to be foolish and naïve but I was not forbidden to pursue my interests.

I visited local Romani organizations and spoke with Romani leaders, all of whom were men, about their lifestyle, challenges, and concerns. They explained to me the lack of support for Romani communities in Bosnia and discrimination against them in general. For example, Romani organizations were not invited to NGO meetings in Bosnia regardless of the topics being discussed. Because these men wanted more working knowledge about NGO development, I arranged a meeting between Romani leaders and Infoteka.

This meeting was a turning point in my research and in my relationship with my colleagues. One of the Romani leaders described common experiences with racism against Roma in Bosnia, which my colleagues had previously asserted did not exist. He had been a well-respected supervisor, whom his colleagues called “Maestro” before they discovered he was Rom. When his colleagues discovered that he was not only Rom, but also the President of a Romani organization, they began calling him “*Cigo*,” a racial slur for “Gypsy.” The men spoke in depth about the need for higher education in Romani communities and more knowledge of NGO development, especially in regards to funding. They did not specifically mention Romani women. Although we had requested that a Romani woman attend this meeting, this did not

happen. One woman later told me that she wanted to come the meeting but the male leaders had not allowed her to attend. She believed that sexism was the reason.

In March 2000, with permission and advice from my colleagues, I received a grant from Oxfam for a project with Romani women. Thereafter, I received almost immediate support from most of my colleagues and was able to fund three research assistants. My Infoteka colleagues and I initiated a project on domestic violence with a semi-random sample survey of Romani women in the Zenica municipality. We gained support from the local Romani organization in exchange for workshops on NGO development. Three colleagues and I completed 114 quantitative interviews, which asked Romani women about their socioeconomic status, prevalence of domestic violence, whom they turn to for help and for which reasons, and what they think about violence against women. I analyzed the data and compared it with the research completed by *Medica Infoteka* in 1999 with non-Romani women and found that significantly more Romani women experience domestic violence in the Zenica municipality than do non-Romani women (*Medica Infoteka*, 2001).

Forty percent of Romani women had never attended school as compared to only 9% of non-Romani women. Thirty three percent of Romani women said that their partner had abused them over a long period of time as opposed to 24% of non-Romani women. My analysis included a summary about the intersection of race, class, gender, and domestic violence. I utilized W.E.B. DuBois’ notion of dual identity (DuBois, 1989) to explain the situation of Roma. Many of the Romani women we spoke with considered themselves to be at once “Bosnian” and “Roma” but neither identity was fully acceptable to Roma and/or non-Roma. For example, some non-Roma with whom I spoke negatively labeled all Roma as stereotypical “Gypsies” and questioned the Roma’s loyalty to Bosnia. Another stereotype is that all Roma left at the onset of the war; they did not stay to fight because they do not have strong nationalist ties to Bosnia-Herzegovina.^{iv} Some Roma we interviewed did not want to be identified as Rom at all but simply as a Bosnian. The consequences of classism, sexism, racism and ambiguity in perceived identities created multiple levels of violence: individual violence against Roma because they are Roma (by, for

example, skinheads), state level marginalization, and finally, violence against Romani women by Romani men because they are women.

The second part of our research included oral history interviews with Romani women (*Medica Infoteka*, 2001). During the interview process, my colleagues revealed their blatant and latent racism and I realized the important distinction in motivation for the project between me and my colleagues. I was concerned about racism in Bosnia and they were concerned about financial security for themselves, their families, and *Medica Infoteka* in general. The assistants were irritated by the time and concentration it took to complete and transcribe the interviews. I was frustrated that they were not as “excited” about the project as I was. Since I had written the quantitative analysis, I asked the two assistants to write an essay about their perspectives of Romani women as a result of the project. This provoked a great deal of anger in one of them. We had an intense confrontation in front of other colleagues about my expectations regarding this project. My colleague told me that her perception of the Roma, before or after the project, was none of my business. No one else spoke.

The silence in the room during and after our conversation was indicative of the contemptuous attitude of my colleagues towards the project and Roma in general. When none of my colleagues intervened in the argument, it became clear to me that up until that point, the project had not been as collaborative as I had imagined or hoped it would be. My colleagues did not want to discuss racism in the context of Bosnia; perhaps I was enforcing my attitudes inappropriately. They continued to support the project, however, due to financial incentives.^v

Later, after the two assistants and I had resolved most of our differences, we began to choose which oral history interviews we would publish and how we would edit them. All of my colleagues in *Infoteka* began to read the interviews aloud and comment on the importance of this project. Many said that their opinion of Roma had changed as a result of this project and the oral history interviews in particular. One young Romani woman’s interview had a remarkable impact:

I mean there’s no justice for us Roma... I don’t want my kid going to the streets to beg. I don’t want my kid to be without work, without schooling. I don’t want my kid to be drugged up, to drink, to get messed up in anything in life. I want my kids...to finish school, to get a job, to have their own place... We all want that. Now, they don’t understand, for example, the rest of them. They don’t think about that, that we, Roma, how they call us, that we think about the future... They think we’re all like that, dirty, we don’t send our kids to school, we don’t like to work... It’s not like that... Why don’t you come and see for yourself? Come on over and say, “Hey, I’ll think about that guy or that woman’s situation for a minute!? What would I do? How would I be if I was in their place?... (July 24, 2000).

Many of the Romani women we interviewed did not explicitly acknowledge “prejudice” or “discrimination” (*predrasude/diskriminacija*). However, this young woman made a clear distinction between “us” and “them” and showed that she is aware of the stereotypes of Roma. My colleagues and I noticed that many Romani women did express discrimination, not only as Roma, but also as women.

My colleagues and I agreed that we did not want to speak for Romani women or impose our notions of feminism upon them. After each interview, we explained the services *Medica Infoteka* offered and encouraged them to use *Medica*’s services if and when necessary. We stressed that all services are free to women and children. Because we were aware of the hierarchal power dynamics inherent in the interview process and did not want to capitalize on Romani women’s experiences by theorizing them according to our perspectives, we chose to print six of the interviews in their entirety. Two assistants analyzed some of the oral history interviews, addressing common themes. We chose to include a brief analysis of some of the interviews in order to make the material more easily digestible to readers. Anthropologist Aihwa Ong best summarizes our perspectives with regards to the oral histories:

Given our privileges, there is greater betrayal in allowing our personal doubts to stand in the way of representing their

claims, interests, and perspectives. The greater betrayal lies in refusing to recognize informants as active cultural producers in their own right, whose voices insist on being heard and can make a difference in the way we think about their lives. The most critical point is not that we reap material and social benefits from their stories but that we help to disseminate their views and that we do so without betraying their political interests as narrators of their own lives (Behar and Gordon, 1995, p. 354).

At the completion of the research in 2000, we published a book and printed English, Bosnian, and Romani versions. The title, in English, "How We Live(d)", is taken from a Romani woman's narrative. When asked how they learned how to make dishes and other crafts from tin, she replied, "No, that's not what we learned, that's how we lived" (Medica Infoteka, 2001).

In summary, many scholars have focused on ethnicity and gender in Bosnia; few mention the Roma.^{vi} In addition, NGOs themselves, even feminist NGOs, are subject to the prevailing racist stereotypes of Roma. The Roma are a marginalized group in a country focusing on hegemonic discourse related to Bosniacs, Serbs, and Croats. Romani women experience triple discrimination as Roma, as women, and as members of a low socioeconomic class. I believe that the post-war transformation in Bosnia allows room for ethnographers to bring race, class, and gender to focus in Bosnia in new and different ways. Including Romani women in dialogue on Bosnia offers a more complete picture of the intersection between race, class, and gender.

References

- Anthias, Floya and Yuval-Davis, N. 1989. Introduction. In Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias (eds.), *Woman-Nation-State*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Barany, Zoltan. 2002. *The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethnopolitics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Behar, Ruth and Deborah A. Gordon (Eds.). 1995. *Women Writing Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cockburn, Cynthia with Meliha Hubić and Rada Stakić-Domuz. 2001. *Women Organizing Change*. Zenica, BH: Medica Infoteka.
- Crowe, David M. 1996. *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
- DuBois, W.E.B. 1989. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Bantam Books: New York.
- Fraser, Angus. 1995. *The Gypsies*. Blackwell: Oxford.
- Hancock, Ian. 2000. *The Consequences of Anti-Gypsy Racism in Europe in Other Voices*, 2(1), text delivered to the Joint Seminar on Roma (Gypsies) in Europe, Warsaw, September 20-23, 1994: 5 pages.
- Hancock, Ian. 1997. *The Struggle for the Control of Identity*. *Transitions*, 4(4) September 1997: 36-44.
- Hancock, Ian. 1987. *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution*. Ann Arbor: Karoma Press.
- Kukić, Slavo S. 1999. *Pozicija Roma u Bosni i Hercegovini*. Center for Minority Rights: Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- Medica Infoteka. 1999. *(Ne) Živjeti s Nasiljem*. Infoteka: Zenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina
- Medica Infoteka. 2001. *Nismo Naučile(i) Tako smo Živjele(i)*. Infoteka: Zenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- Memišević, Fadila, (Ed.). 1999. *Roma of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Documentation of the Bosnian Section of the Society for Threatened Peoples. Society for Threatened Peoples - Section for Bosnia and Herzegovina: Sarajevo*.
- Seferović, Ragib. 1999. *Prošlost, Sadašnjost, i Budućnost Roma*. Zagreb: Unija Roma Hrvatska.

Williams, Brackette F. 1995. Introduction. In Brackette F. Williams (ed.), *Women Out of Place: The Gender of Agency and The Race of Nationality*. New York, London: Routledge.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1995. *Gender and Nation*. London: Sage.

Endnotes

¹ During the 1992-1995 war, “Bosniac” (Bošnjak) replaced the term “Bosnian Muslims.” It is an ethnic and cultural term, not a religious one, as not all Bosniacs are practicing Muslims.

² For a literature on the topic of the marginalization of Roma in Eastern Europe, see e.g. Barany, 2002; Hancock, 1997, 2000.

³ For a literature on the broad history of Roma, see e.g. Crowe, 1996, Fraser, 1995; Hancock, 1987.

⁴ See Memešević, 1999 for a more in-depth literature on the number of Roma who fought in the 1992-1995 war.

⁵ For a literature on notions of feminism and a feminist movement in Bosnia, see e.g. Cockburn, 2001.

⁶ There is a significant literature on gendered nationalism and the intersection of gender and sexuality with concerns about race, class, and ethnicity. For examples, see: Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Williams 1996; Yuval-Davis 1997. For a literature on the situation of Roma in Bosnia-Herzegovina, see e.g. Kukić, 1999; Memešević, 1999; Seferović, 1999.