

INTERVIEW IRINA ILISEI (Kif Kif) – EDITED ENGLISH VERSION (Evelien Geerts)

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Evelien Geerts (Kif Kif): *Could you tell our readers a little bit more about yourself?*

Irina Ilisei: Like many others, I wear more than one hat in my professional life: I work as a researcher, trainer, community facilitator, and an activist. The main topics that I work on are gender, minorities, education and active citizenship.

My academic background is in social sciences, specifically sociology. Two years ago, I earned my PhD on the topic of Roma participation in education. Right now, I am doing empirical research on the involvement of parents from disadvantaged backgrounds – mostly of Roma ethnicity – in the education of their children, while particularly focusing on these parents' participation in decision-making process when it comes to schools. Next to that, I run *Plural Association*, which is a small NGO that focuses on non-formal citizenship education. With this NGO, I hold seminars with young people, teachers and others on topics such as gender roles, diversity awareness and social inclusion. Last but not least, I am also a founding member of a feminist NGO working in Bucharest, called *Front/ Feminism Romania* (also see www.feminism-romania.ro).

EG: *When did you first become interested in the notion of gender? How and when did you first encounter the notion? Is gender studies as a discipline popular in Romania, and is it an institutionalized discipline or not?*

II: Gender is not exactly a topic that is incredibly visible in Romania. But there are of course clear societal gender expectations and gender roles. Like in most parts of the world, gender in Romania is seen as ‘given’; as a ‘natural’ thing that does not need to be – or cannot be – negotiated. It’s the same when it comes to the notion of feminism: The term itself also does not have a good reputation here, mostly because a lot of people do not know what feminism means and to what it entails to.

Being raised in this specific environment, I didn’t know much about feminism and gender before I started my studies. I do remember that I had some moments during my adolescence when I got annoyed by the various gender expectation that were imposed on me – but that was it. During my time studying political theory, however, I started to reflect more upon the social environment I was raised in, and I also took some university seminars in which gender inequality was an intensely-discussed topic. When I went to Germany during an academic exchange program, I also started following the media debates on the situation of Muslim women living in Western countries. And it was then that my interest in women’s rights and in understanding different forms of gender inequality really grew.

After that, I decided to focus my MA education on the politics of gender and minorities. This MA program was founded by professor Mihaela Miroiu – who is a well-known feminist figure in Eastern Europe – and it was one of the very few places in Romania where gender and gender relations could be researched in an academic context. I am still very grateful to professor Miroiu for guiding me while discovering feminism. I know she had to fight a lot to have this program institutionalized. During this MA program, I also got in touch with other feminists from various backgrounds and with different experiences. This MA thus offered me an environment in which I could think about what it means to live as woman.

EG: *What about the political analytical tool of intersectionality? Is this a tool that is employed much in Romanian academia/activism?*

II: Feminism is in itself a very small niche of Romanian activism. So intersectionality is a concept that is even less well-known. However, in the Romanian feminist circles I am in, intersectionality is considered to be very important. I personally admire the work of my colleagues who do great work developing a local form of Romanian feminism, and speak out about the challenge when it comes to trying to bring their gender identities and their ethnic identities together. I by the way think that feminisms all around the world need to be aware of different forms of power structures and identity categories, such as social class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, body politics, and so on.

EG: *Could you inform our readers about your current project for the Council for Europe that focuses on Roma rights? What is the subject exactly? And how do you use the notions of gender and diversity, and the framework of intersectionality, in your own research, and in this project specifically?*

II: I work as facilitator for the *Romact*-program which is run by the *Council for Europe*. My role there is to work together with various municipalities so that we can develop policies, measures and projects at a local level to improve the inclusion of Roma in disadvantaged social situations. It is key in this kind of work to try and understand the needs of the people you work for, and to involve all the stakeholders in the decision-making processes. Gender mainstreaming is an important dimension of the program, but it currently isn't its main focus. Seen through an intersectional lens, what I do is all very basic, like making sure to involve women of all ages in the meetings with the Roma community; making space for women, especially younger women, to speak up during the meetings; encourage them to say what they think and help make their priorities and

interests more visible – priorities and interests that often vary from the interests of the rest of community.

Another project that is very close to my heart is *One Europe Many Realities*, an international seminar where we bring young people from different countries together, both Roma and non-Roma, to discuss gender roles and their identities. We mainly use non-formal educational methods during this seminar, and we discuss all of these issues and their impacts on both an individual and more structural level. The seminar is a place where we can discover that being a woman can mean completely different things, depending upon when one is born in either rich or a poor family, or in a community where education is valued or isn't valued at all.

We recently organized the third edition of our seminar, and, as always, the discussions were very lively and exciting!

EG: *How is the current political situation in Romania? Are nationalist political parties also on the rise? And how is the situation for Romania's minority groups, and Roma & Roma women in particular? Has the situation become better or worse in the last five years, and why? Do policy-makers in Romania still use the notion of multiculturalism, or are there other notions that are currently being used?*

II: Looking at the most recent EU Parliament elections, we were very happy that Romania did not provide any rightwing extremist political parties. However, I see rightwing extremism, anti-gypsism, and misogyny being embedded in so many of the Romanian mainstream parties that this might actually be scarier than having one rightwing extremist party...

We for instance have a high number of politicians of all the current parties – including the former president of Romania – that express very negative views towards Roma and Roma

women in particular. There are no discussions whatsoever on how to support the existing diversity in Romania! Just before Romania's access to the EU, there were some efforts to get a legal framework implemented that would be supportive to the creation of a more inclusive society. But this all stopped when Romania became part of the EU, and many activists in fact state that we are now even more behind than ever before. There are very high rates – and attitudes – of discrimination in Romanian society, and that worries me.

EG: *Do you have any tips for our readers that would like to get involved in activism?*

II: For me, the most important thing in activism is to try and capture the needs of the group that you do activism for, while never forgetting the social environment they are living in. So, not patronizing people, but supporting them the way they want.

EG: *What are Europe's biggest challenges today (and for the future) in your opinion?*

II: Wow, that is a very complex question to answer!

I think what is missing now, is solidarity. And I am afraid that this is not solely a European phenomenon. Raising empathy to understand the Other and her/his views, should be the key priority of every society. One particular example that makes me upset and angry as an Eastern European woman, is seeing that on the one hand there are high numbers of Romanian women leaving their families to do care work in Western countries – which is a development that is happening together with Romania's brain drain – and that on the other hand there is a lot of Western anti-immigration populist rhetoric going on as well. The contribution of East Europeans to the EU isn't really recognized, which I do not find fair.

It makes me think that the “Unity in Diversity” motto of the EU is more of a slogan, and never really formed the spirit of the European Union...