



IN-DEPTH | LGBTI

LIVING IN THE CORNER: MINORITIES WITHIN MINORITIES

By Dafina Halili - 29.06.2020

BETWEEN RACISM ON THE ONE HAND AND TRANSPHOBIA ON THE OTHER.

Dona waits for us in her neighborhood, somewhere in the suburbs of a small Kosovar town, in front of the restaurant that served as a landmark for us while looking for the address. Wearing well-fitted jeans and a denim shirt, she immediately stands out among the clientele of the eatery, who seem like they have stopped in for a brief coffee during their break from tough physical work.

As soon as our car stops, she hastily enters and says: “Let’s get out of here!”

Her large blue irises engulfed in eye shadow and her lilac-glossed lips accentuate her stunning face. With a timid voice, she tells us the turns we should take to exit the poverty stricken neighborhood, which is largely populated by ethnic Ashkali.

Similar to other settlements in Kosovo where the Roma, Ashkali and Balkan Egyptians live, Dona's Ashkali family also carries out its life in a separate neighborhood outside of town, where public life is limited to a few grocery stores and the restaurant by the entrance. Where the last line of residence for other Kosovars ends, this remote corner is where Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians lives begin.

With a high unemployment rate and average income that for the most is around 1 euro per day, providing basic needs is an ongoing struggle for all three communities. For many families, bringing bread to the table means doing daily physical work and taking to the streets to collect bottles in skips that can be sold to recycling companies for no more than a few euros.

Away from her neighborhood, Dona leads us to an ordinary cafe near the center of town. We sit down, order coffee and slowly start talking and scratching the surface of her life.

SHE QUIT SCHOOL IN THE FIFTH GRADE.

She is only 18 years old, but she represents an incredible story of survival and violence, of powerlessness and struggle. Due to her sexual and ethnic identity — as an Ashkali trans woman — she faces rejection and double

discrimination. In Kosovo, the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian minorities are the most oppressed in society — because of this Dona deals with racism, and on the other with transphobia.

“He can’t be here”

Dona was born in a European country where she finished third grade. Her family returned to Kosovo and registered her and her siblings in the neighborhood school. She quit school in the fifth grade.

“I didn’t like school. I left of my own will,” she says.

But it is difficult to think of Dona’s leaving school as a decision of her own, independent from the circumstances. The exclusion of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians throughout history has had an effect on their education from one generation to the next, with a relatively low mandatory school attendance, low university enrollment and a high rate of dropping out, especially among girls. Furthermore, there is a fairly low number of teachers from these communities that are part of the education system in Kosovo.

Aside from social and economic factors, dropping out is also affected by the failure of schools to create supportive environments for Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian children.



Besides the treatment that the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities are subject to, they are constantly sidelined by institutions. Photo: Trëndelinë Halili / K2.0.

Dona has lived virtually all of her adolescent life without having access to information about LGBTQ+ people, terminology and an understanding of gender identities and sexual orientations. She only remembers that she “felt more comfortable as a girl.” Within the Ashkali community in town, it is difficult for her to find someone to share her experiences with.

“I know [some], but they do not open up with each other and do not present their true selves,” she says.

Her efforts to express her gender identity as a woman (manifesting her gender expression through her name, dress, hairstyle and conduct) within her household has brought about a lot of physical violence against her: Her mother has hurled an ax at her twice.

In some cases when the violence became unbearable, Dona ran away from home. With a complete lack of information about organizations that deal with the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, she once set out toward Prishtina on her own. While at a park in the capital, she was identified by a member of the LGBTQ+ community, who then let her know about the Center for Equality and Liberty (CEL), an LGBTQ+ rights organization, which helped her find temporary shelter.

Since Kosovo is still without a shelter for LGBTQ+ people who are victims of domestic violence, any safe haven is a temporary solution so Dona had to return home eventually.

**WHEN SHE BECAME AN EMPLOYEE AT ONE OF THE
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THE FIRST DAY OF WORK.**

She committed to a personal compromise to only use makeup when she leaves the house and is far from her neighborhood, which for her remains a rare event.

Being unemployed, she spends all day at home. Over the past years she has worked at the restaurant in her neighborhood, a cafe in town and, on occasion, cleaning dishes in hotels and stairs in residential buildings.

Her last job lasted only a single day. When she became an employee at one of the city's supermarkets a few weeks ago, she was told not to come back at the end of the first day of work.

“He can't be here...,” is what Dona heard people say at the supermarket. She does not know if it is her gender identity or skin color, or both, that lead to her discrimination and consequently her exclusion.

She says that over the years, she has endeavored to remain indifferent toward insults and contempt. While within the Ashkali community she has been judged for how she looks as a woman, her appearance in Albanian neighborhoods has often been accompanied by hostile and racist comments.

“Dirty stock” is what a group of people would tell her every time she passed by one street to get her daily groceries.

“All I'd want is for people not to insult me and not treat me badly,” she says. “This combination is bad in Kosovo.”

Interweaving discrimination

Dona's experience full of violence and stigmatization inside and outside of her community — whether because of her gender identity or skin color, or for both at the same time — is similar to that of four other LGBTQ + people within the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities with whom K2.0 spoke.

On several occasions, activists have told K2.0 that compared to trans women such as Dona, trans men in Kosovo — as well as in the entire region — are more easily accepted by the general public. The gender expression of trans men finds more approval due to patriarchal social stratification — while so far no trans woman has come out publicly in Kosovo.

Apart from anecdotal sources, there is no substantial research in Kosovo to give a completely clear picture of the experiences of people who are both sexual and ethnic minorities.

Researchers and human rights activists around the world — also recently in Kosovo — have long spoken about multiple discrimination within the theoretical framework of intersectionality, with the aim of understanding how aspects of the social and political identities of a person (gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.) can be combined to create unique ways of discrimination and privilege.



Activist Mirishahe Sylja believes the deconstruction of intersectionality within the context of Kosovo's society is important. Photo: Majlinda Hoxha / K2.0.

One of the first discussions in Kosovo where participants publicly talked about how different systems of oppression interact with each other was held in December 2018, at the annual Roma Summit organized by Civil Rights

Defenders in Prishtina. At the conference, gay, Hungarian-born activist and researcher of Roma descent, Deszo Mate, shared his life story to illustrate the impact of intertwined identities.

In an interview for K2.0, he recounted that during his research, where he interviewed 50 Roma people, including those from the LGBTQ + community, he was introduced to the concept of intersectionality, as the findings suggested that “we are facing different oppressions from society, from both within and outside [our groups].”

In numerous discussions organized by Kosovo NGOs in Kosovo over the past few years, activist Mirishahe Sylja has continuously approached the importance of deconstructing intersectionality within the Kosovar context.

“What we need to work on is redefining oppression and understanding that people are not oppressed [only] because of one of their identities”, she told K2.0. “Individuals who belong to minority groups and those from the LGBTQ+ community are not exclusively oppressed because of their gender, sexual and ethnic identities, but we need to understand that oppression happens on many levels and the same person can have different identities that contribute to their oppression.”

She explains that usually, people tend to invoke only one of their identities, which usually corresponds with the one that is more convenient, and so it becomes more understandable for them to see oppression as something that is one-dimensional.

“ONE OF OUR CHALLENGES IS TO UNDERSTAND IDENTITIES AND DIFFERENT FORMS OF OPPRESSION — ALL OF THEM ARE INTERCONNECTED.”

Mirishahe Syla, gender expert

“If you are Albanian and are not oppressed because of your ethnicity in a place that is majority Albanian, but are oppressed because of your gender identity or sexual orientation, then you consequently fall together with other members of the LGBTQ+ community,” she says. “But if you are a Roma person and are oppressed because of your gender identity and sexual orientation, and at the same time because of your ethnicity and race, then you draw closer to the efforts and challenges of the Roma community than those of the LGBTQ+ community.”

Syla says such divisions are repeated in history and uses the example of the feminist movement in the U.S., when white middle-class women — who have experienced oppression mainly because of gender — dominated feminist discourse by excluding, among others, women of color, who were suppressed also because of race.

“One of our challenges is to understand identities and different forms of oppression — all of them are interconnected and a person can be privileged for different reasons and oppressed for different reasons,” she says.

Titanomachy

It is believed that the vast majority of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians are unemployed, living segregated from the majority of the population, which according to activists contributes to the conservative mindset within these three communities.

“It’s no secret that most Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians have homophobia [among them], and that the majority three communities discriminate against the LGBTQ+ community. I think that religion plays a big role in this,” says Avni Mustafa, a Roma activist. “On the other hand, both LGBTQ+ people and the three communities face various types of violence and hate speech. The only way to get them involved in everyday life in society is by joining forces and [fighting] them all together.”



According to activist Avni Mustafa, a segregated life and unemployment contribute to the conservative mindset of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. Photo: Majlinda Hoxha / K2.0.

Gazmen Salijević, another Roma activist, makes an analogy with the struggle of characters from Ancient Greek mythology to describe the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals within ethnic minorities.

“It’s like fighting the Titans,” he said. “Because you have to fight within the community, and also with the majority communities, to be recognized and accepted by them,” he says. “The battles against the Titans start in your family, because you come from a community that is conservative and religious.”

He says that different groups of activists in Kosovo need to unite in their activism on certain issues, such as LGBTQ+ rights, minority rights, etc., and create a common front for human rights in general.

Mirishahe Sylja says women’s rights protests — as the most visible form of activism — have tried to be inclusive, including the needs of women from different communities and backgrounds.

But she stresses that the concept of intersectionality — as a path to inclusion — should be done on several levels that lead to the visibility of different groups within society and the creation of policies at the institutional level. She says that intersectionality should serve as an analytical framework to see how different experiences are shaped by different identities, and then recognizing these identities will lead to their involvement at different levels, including institutional ones.

“A greater representation of people with identities who are unfortunately oppressed in our society [because] they do not coincide with the identities that dominate, although it is not an end in itself, could then help in understanding the experiences and the existence of these people itself,” she says. “It would be the first step toward policymaking, ultimately by the

people themselves who come from groups with multiple identities and oppressions.”**K**

Feature image: Trëndelinë Halili / K2.0.

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