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Solidarity networks that challenge racialized discourses: The case of Romani immigrant women in Spain

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Abstract

Amidst the global financial crisis and in the anti-race era, Europe has witnessed a revival of deeply racialised discourses targeting the Roma, leading to new discriminatory practices and legitimating existing ones in many social domains. While Westwards Roma immigration has spurred these discourses, it has also favoured the emergence of invisible grassroots reactions against them that need to be further analyzed. Drawing from interviews with Romani immigrant women, this article is aimed at shedding light to these unknown processes, for instance, Romani women based solidarity networks. Data shows that it is through these networks that these women contribute to fulfil their access to basic social rights facilities, at the same time that they challenge the above-mentioned racialised discourses.

Introduction

If there is one group in Europe that better knows what means to be the target of racialised discourses, the Roma is undoubtedly it. Although the majority of Roma are European Union (EU) citizens and are granted with full political and social rights, the reality is far from its full accomplishment, as there is still a wide myriad of barriers that difficult Roma participation in society. The Romani Diaspora has been the result of systematic racialisation, for instance, it is known that the nomadic condition is not a cultural feature *per se* but rather it is the result of the fear and the need to flee from prosecutions and expulsions (Lucassen, Willems and Cottaar, 1998; Matras, 2002; Okely, 1983). Highly racialised discourses were also developed throughout the Roma journey from the initial exodus in the ninth century to the present: condemned to slavery, murdered during the Nazi Holocaust, victims of hate crimes, and inevitably trapped within a cycle of poverty. After the fall of communist regimes, and the war conflicts in the Balkan area, new waves of Roma have migrated and taken refuge in Western Europe and North America. These discourses do not disappear when Roma become immigrants, but they are even reinforced. In this vein, the gender discrimination is added to the racialised discourses and specifically affects Romani women. For instance, according to Oprea (2012), only few times violence against women is included in violence against Roma.

In the last decades and in the current global conjuncture, the struggle against racism and discrimination has been situated on top of the political agenda of supranational bodies such as the European Union or the United Nations. For this reason we are in a anti-racist

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era in which through the effort of accomplishing the Human Rights and the commitment against racism (United Nations, 2001; Bello, 2009) even the Roma people is recognized by the European Parliament (2005) and national parliaments such as the Spanish Congress (2005). However, in the anti-racist era, while a Western collective political imagination inherently non-racist is generalized (Lentin, 2008), Roma migration flows and mobility within the EU boundaries has posed a series of challenges to particular states and to supranational institutions. Expulsions of Roma EU citizens from France and Italy brought up the vulnerabilities that affect Roma within the EU. In 2008, the Italian Minister of the Interior and other mayors called on the citizenry to take justice into their own hands and contribute to the eradication of “all Roma settlements that exist in Italy” (Povoledo, 2008) and some of them did so, attacking Roma camps. In this case, the political unwillingness to address the problem of Roma settlements and the related conflicts is connected to the lack of recognition of Roma, among other factors (Sigona, 2005). In France, it is necessary to go back till the 2000 Besson Law which represented a backwards step in guaranteeing the *Gens du Voyage*’ rights to move freely throughout the country (RAXEN, 2009). Thus, France imposed a moratorium until 2012, extensible to 2014, by which nationals of Romania and Bulgaria need a work or student permit to stay in the country for more than three months. Relying on this framework, the Interior Ministry sent to all the police officials and chiefs in summer 2010 a circular calling to begin a systematic dismantling of the illegal camps, particularly those of immigrant Roma. Thus, in a period of one month (August 2010), 129 encampment were dismantled and almost 1000 Roma were deported. The mentioned circular broke the international and European human rights laws on discrimination as it directly targeted a whole group based on its ethnic origin. This is one clear illustration of how the Roma are at the core of a racialised discourse hold not only by citizens but also by highly positioned politicians. Indeed, these episodes have continued not only in these countries but also in other parts of Europe.

Amidst this panorama, Romani women are found at the forefront of these racialised discourses. Within Roma migration, as happens in other ethnic minority groups, women do face multiple discriminations: for being women, Roma and non-academic. Thus, as women, they suffer from sexism within their own ethnic community and in society at large; as Roma, they are affected by social and cultural discrimination; and as non-academic, they have to face their exclusion from many social domains. If the immigrant status is added, immigrant Romani women are even more vulnerable and trapped in *social, economic racialized spaces very difficult to escape from* (Lazaridis, 2001). The *intersectionality* of race, gender, class or sexual identity reflects the complexity of the multiple forms of oppression and discrimination (Schultz, 2005) and prevents Romani women to fulfil their social rights.

This article, based on the data collected under two research projects on Roma immigrant population in Spain, precisely the *Roma Migrants in Spain* (OSCE/ODIHR, 2008-2009) and *DROM-IN. Roma immigration in Spain: the challenges of social inclusion and coexistence* (Ministry of Science and Innovation, 2009-2011), sheds light on the networks of solidarity that Romani immigrant women of different origins are creating, and how these promote access to education, employment, social participation or social services. Besides benefiting Romani immigrant women, in the context of the current economic crisis these networks can be a source for overcoming racialized discourses that legitimate ancient discriminatory practices or foster new ones. Romani women are united by their strong sense of belonging to the same ethnic group, and also by the fact

of being women. The networks of solidarity are an example of transformation based on these two elements. Therefore, this article is divided into five sections. First, some insights on how the above mentioned racialised discourses operate in a Europe that aims to be multicultural and anti-racist. Subsequently, the contributions of the Romani feminism provide the theoretical framework of this article. Third, the methodology is described. The fourth section presents the results obtained that highlight the transformative dimension of gender through the voices of Romani immigrant women. The article concludes with some final conclusions.

Racialised discourses on Romani Immigrant Women

Despite the EU commitment to Roma equality and anti-discrimination, there is still much to be done to transform these formal guarantees in concrete realities. As “anti-Gypsyism” or “Romaphobia”, as Ian Hancock (2002) has called the sentiment against the Roma people, is still very present in European societies. The Eurobarometer on Discrimination and Social Inequalities (European Commission, 2012) evidences that ethnicity continues to be seen as the most widespread cause of discrimination in the EU. Far from providing scientific evidences to dismantle these racialized discourses, the academy have often reinforced them. Particularly, part of the existing knowledge on Roma has been generated from problematic perspectives based on deficits and prejudiced thinking. In this sense, two different racialised discourses are identified. The first one is ethnocentric based and relies on the idea that Romani culture is less advanced or even underdeveloped, and therefore deeply stigmatized. Under this perspective, studies have reinforced images of the Roma as naturally disaffected from school, with a natural tendency to commit crime or disinterested in working, among many other (Bernasovksy and Bemasovka, 1999; Cavalli-Sforza, 1994; Hancock, 1975). In this context Romani women further encounter the racist stereotypes combined with the gender stereotypes which hinders and makes their struggles for equality imperceptible (Oprea, 2005; Bitu and Vincze, 2012).

Discourses arisen from relativism are the second type. From this standpoint, Roma poverty and lack of access to educational opportunities are only manifestations of their cultural difference. From the relativist perspective, respect for difference means considering a group’s marginality as a cultural factor. When living conditions are understood as a cultural feature, members of that ethnic group are blamed for their own poverty and society is exempted from finding ways to eliminate it. Thus, relativist perspective has gone very often accompanied by a process of objectification of the Roma. Kende (2000) argues that while cultural anthropologists have focused on the exploration of the Roma otherness, looking at the cultural patterns and exalting the exoticism, especially of Romani women (Oprea, 2005), sociologists have tended to be more worried to count and classify whether someone was really Roma or not (Salo, 1979). Very few research efforts have been dedicated to eradicate poverty or to analyze the Romani inner force of change. Romani organizations have strongly refused studies conducted from the above two mentioned discourses as perpetuating negative images and discrimination towards their people.

Not being an exception, both types of discourses are strongly present in Spain, legitimating existing prejudices or even reinforcing new ones. They are specially found towards the Roma immigrants, a collective almost inexistent in Spain before the

nineties, but increased substantially in the new century. The Romani immigrants become then a minority within a minority. Discrimination leads to exclusion from the labour market, reduced earnings from informal economy, and hinders their access to decent housing, healthcare or other basic social rights such as education, closing the vicious circle of marginalisation and severely affecting their vulnerability in mainstream society (European Commission, 2004). Within this group, Romani women are even in a worse situation. For women of cultural minorities such as the Roma, racism is added to the elements that hinder their struggle against sexism within their own community, since this often implies to confront the family and community (Oprea, 2004) and in this regard the racialised discourses and processes are strongly gendered. Thus stereotypical images are very often generalized to all women, for instance, Romani immigrant women specially those wearing traditional outfits (e.g. long skirts and headscarves) are associated to be submissive to their men, not to be interested in participating in society neither working nor in education, to committing crimes or illegal activities and just asking for money in the streets while holding babies. These stereotypes are translated into serious barriers in accessing to basic social rights facilities as our research showed.

Hence, gender and the racialised discourses intersect exposing Romani women and especially immigrant women to major vulnerability. The stereotyping of Romani women is a general issue. Also in countries such as Romania the media focus “on the *exotic* oppression of Romani women and the essentialist portrayal of Romani culture as primitively oppressive” (Oprea, 2005: 136) as if there was no sexism in the general society. Moreover, when Roma women are critical of the patriarchal practices within their community, such as child marriage or the virginity tests, they are stigmatized as traitors or accused of to be *Westernized* (Oprea, 2004). From the Roma feminism the women claim for the ideals of equality, since these do not belong to any cultural group. However, they are facing extremely violent emotions towards them which is made explicit in cases such as the one of the Romani feminist Nicoleta Bitu who was severely attacked for fighting against the gender oppression in Roma communities (Oprea, 2004) or the one of the only Roma member of the European Parliament (Lívia Járóóka), victim of sexualized racial harassment (Oprea, 2012).

Although these adversities, many Romani women are leading a change within their community, as they are opening up opportunities for their families without giving up their own origins and traditions (OSCE/ODIHR, 2008-2009). They are also assuming a dynamic role within the migratory process, which make them being a key enabler for the social inclusion of the whole family in the host society. This is closely related with Sen’s (1999) considerations that women serve as the bridge between their families and society and, thus, employment, housing and social services such as health or education. Our study has identified that very often this role is not played in isolation but through the creation of networks of solidarity that are serving both as a bridge but also as a challenge to the existing racialized discourses.

Romani Feminism

Feminist and Gender Studies while listening to the Black, Latino or Indigenous Feminist claims, have barely incorporated the Romani women, and even conceiving Romani women practices under the veil of strong negative stereotypes (Oprea, 2004; Sordé, Flecha and Alexiu, 2013). This is due to the traditional gentrification of that field (Fahy Bryceson, Okely and Webber, 2007). In the European context, Romani feminists

as Bitu (Bitu and Vincze, 2012) show the success of the participation of Romani women in the movements for women's rights in Spain, Serbia or Macedonia. Other feminists such as Schultz (2012) analyse the model of Roma Women's Initiative (RWI) lead by Romani women and in collaboration with non-romani feminists which focus on their contribution to the struggle for the Human Rights and the global feminism. Gelbart (2012) analyses feminism in the Czech Republic and, regarding to gender equality, highlights that many similarities exist among the diverse ethnic groups and that the term feminism is not that rejected among the Roma as among the Czechs. Silverman (2012) analyses a more specific case on the Macedonian muslim Romani women that live in New York and the results show once more and in line with Sen (1999) or Schultz (2005) that education can transform and achieve more equality, social influence and leadership abilities.

Romani women have been portrayed as dominated by men and emphasizing how their childbearing roles are produced and reproduced, ignoring that there are an increasing number of Romani women who are transforming their relationships deciding not to give up key values of their culture. Traditional values like maternity, the preservation of virginity, and respect for elders are very often read as an imposition and not as a cultural option that some Romani women embrace; for sure, not all of them do. Authors such as Brooks (2012) defend the Romani women's activism, questioning the ethnocentric discourses that consider feminism and Roma culture incompatible. Also Gelbart (2012) affirms with the concept of "true Romnia" the possibility to apply gender equality without giving up their values such as femininity. But as Izsak (2008) highlights mainstream women's rights movements have not managed to include the perspective of Romani women in their agenda. It has been the dialogic turn in Feminist Studies which has allowed to illuminate the contributions Romani women are making to the women's emancipation. Undoubtedly, Romani women are defining a new feminism, the *Romani feminism* (Bitu and Vincze, 2012; Sordé et al., 2012) and in this line Oprea (2004) criticises the European feminist discourse in the name of all women since excluding Romani women and not facing racism this feminism only favours the White privileged women. The Dialogic Feminism of the "other women" (Beck-Gernsheim, Butler and Puigvert, 2003), those non-academic women who have traditionally been excluded from the spaces of debate and decision-making, has opened up the possibility to recognize it.

Several studies have been already conducted from this new perspective (García, Ferrada and Ruiz, 2011; Elboj, 2004-2006). Researchers have analyzed different aspects of Romani feminism. Far from being an institution to be abolished, the family as a core institution in the Roma culture is a strong value of the Romani feminism, as Romani women include it in their transformations as an essential element for their lives and their people. Romani feminism is also based on dialogue and consensus, two essential axes for coexistence which are a historical feature of their culture. The group as an organizational reason is another key value for Romani women, as they considers their fight to be "of all and for all" women. This is very related with the importance of unity for the Roma, a principle deeply rooted in their own culture, no matter their national origin but based on mutual respect and even more important, in the respect of those "people of respect" –the elders of the community. Another pillar of the Romani feminism is motherhood, which is considered not incompatible with being feminist but as something more conscious, agreed and freely chosen. Claims from the Roma feminism are not only to look for overcoming gender inequalities; there is also a claim for respect and equality for all the Roma people. Each of the above-mentioned features

that are taking place which are claimed and defended by Romani women are part of ongoing discussions within the Romani feminism.

The analyses conducted from this framework allow identifying how Romani women challenge the stereotypes and racialised discourses that fall on them, and then, which actions lead them to create wide networks of solidarity. The latter are, as it will be explained in the following sections, a light in the way out from social exclusion and marginalisation.

Methodology

Traditional research approaches used in investigations done on the Roma have been mainly exclusionary leading to the reproduction of stereotypes on them and especially on Romani women (Touraine, Wieviorka and Flecha, 2004). Data presented in this article have been gathered using the Communicative Methodology (Valls and Padrós, 2011), which has been specifically recommended by international organizations such as the European Commission to conduct research on socially vulnerable groups (European Union, 2010). The Communicative Methodology is grounded on egalitarian dialogue between the researchers and the end-users of the research. This enables vulnerable groups to not being mere providers of information but participate in the intersubjective creation of knowledge, from the definition of the social problem that research is to address to the interpretation of the research conclusions. This methodology requires the participation of the researched subjects during the whole process of the research, during the design, development, analysis and evaluation. Therefore an *Advisory Council* was created in which Romani women representing this group validate the results obtained by providing their objections and opinions on them. Thus, this methodology has contributed to shed light on the voices of those immigrant Romani women that have traditionally been silenced.

Data presented in this article stems from fieldwork carried out between 2010 and 2012, and precisely from 19 in-depth interviews and one focus group with Romani immigrant women who live in Spain. This fieldwork is in line with the research conducted on Roma by the Research Group on Immigration and Ethnic Minorities (GEDIME) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, and more precisely it is part of the projects funded by the OSCE/ODIHR (2008-2009) and by the Ministry of Science and Innovation (2009-2011). The women interviewed are aged between 18 and 51 years and have diverse profiles regarding their country of origin (Portugal, Romania, and United States), their migratory trajectory, their socio-economic situation, employment, educational levels, marital status and family responsibilities. At the time of the interview some of them had a work and residency permission but some were living in Spain without this permission. They develop a great diversity of jobs: stallholders, waitress in a hotel, employee in a Romanian Roma association, English teacher in a language academy, researcher at a Spanish university and housekeepers among others. The discourses of the immigrant Romani women constitute the basis of the contribution of this article. In this regard, we selected a purposeful sample of women who could be a valuable contribution to the research. The article presents 5 cases of very different women (Valeria, Miriam, Olga, Liana and Lucia) regarding age, education, work and their origin. Valeria is Portuguese, 51 years old, illiterate, and lives in Spain for twenty years. She was working as a stallholder until her husband died. She has a son with

disabilities and receives a minimum social aid. Miriam is a Romanian Romani woman of 42 years who lives in Spain since 2000, is separated with one son, has basic compulsory education from Romania, and works as a cleaner in a hotel. Olga is also Romanian Romani, is 44 years old and has no education. She arrived in Spain in 2000 and started a cooperative that provided work to Romanian Roma people. Moreover she is the founder and president of a Romanian Roma Association. Liana is a Romanian Roma woman of 33 years who arrived to Spain with her family in 2009. Liana has a university degree in economics from Romania, works in a social organization that provides adult education and does her PhD in a Spanish university. Finally, Lucia is a Romani woman of 25 years born in the United States and has a Spanish Romani mother. She holds a Master degree and came to Spain in 2011. Lucia works in a social project with Roma families that she combines with a different Master programme.

The trajectories of these five women show their ability of having an active leadership role in their community and together with other Romani women, as well as it demonstrates the possibility of overcoming the stereotypes created by racialised discourses through the creation of solidarity networks and from very diverse paths. Through the fieldwork it was analysed the intersection of gender, ethnic origin, and the immigrant status in the access to different social spheres: labour market, housing, education, political and social participation and others as well as their migration journey and their own understandings and reflections about what represents to be a Romani immigrant woman in Spain. The interviews conducted do not aim at representing all the Romani immigrant women, but at highlighting those elements –often invisible– that are already a driving force for the women from this group that have been interviewed.

Their narratives have been analysed according to the two dimensions of the communicative research: an exclusionary and a transformative dimension that represent the social reality. The contribution of this article stems from those actions that these women take to transform their personal situation of discrimination and the discrimination of their community (transformative dimension), and not from the former (exclusionary) dimension. Thus the analysis focuses on identifying the strategies of Romani women to access the previously mentioned areas crucial for their social inclusion, the processes of solidarity and the life experiences with other women and the impact it had on their lives, their families and their communities.

Results

In this section, part of the results of the two projects are presented shedding light on how Romani immigrant women in Spain are creating networks of solidarity as a strategy to challenge the existing racialised discourses that fall on them. Data shows how these networks serve to overcome the discriminatory practices that hinder their access to social services and healthcare, employment, social participation and education.

Among the most recent contributions of Romani Feminism the actions carried out by those Romani women who face the challenges of gender and ethnic inequalities are striking. Cases such as the one of Nicoleta Bitu are cited in scientific literature as a reference of Romani Feminism for the rest of the women (Brooks, 2012; Schultz, 2012). In this line, the cases presented in the following represent a reference for Romani girls

and women from a private sphere that can be transferred to a public sphere and advance the feminist ideal of equality.

Valeria: Accessing social services

Our research has showed that Romani immigrants, especially those living in a more disadvantaged situation, oftentimes do not use social services and healthcare because of manifold reasons: they do not have a legal address (or lack of local registration), they fear to be discriminated by the staff, they do not know where it is located, or because they are afraid of not being able to navigate through all the bureaucracy they would have to face. Our data sheds light to which strategies these women have developed in order to overcome them, very often the word to mouth or to have someone that introduce you to the service become effective ways to break down the barriers.

Valeria represents one of the testimonies that show in which ways Romani women established these types of relationships, specially, when hardships come through in life. Valeria, a Portuguese Romani woman, arrived to Spain two decades ago with her husband, of Gitano's descend. Now she is widow and is in charge of her handicapped son. Her narrative reflects that she now has learned how to cope and navigate through the system, but how hard was at the beginning, without speaking fluently the language and dressing for mourning. Although she knew that it would stigmatize her, she did not hesitate to mourn for her husband. Valeria vividly remembers when her husband died, how women from all ages from her neighbourhood were taking care of her:

[Regarding the relationship and the support received by other Romani women] *With them, with them... well: the Romani women, well, it is kind of frowned upon if a Roma man gets close to a woman, and even more to a widow..., so with them, they help me more.*

Valeria's narrative and others gathered reveal that if the support received is provided by other women, more confident and close relationships are established. Thus, sensitive aspects of private life are more comfortably shared and tackled. So, it is showed how the networks tend to be female-based and with strong intergenerational component, as very diverse women were committed to help her.

Valeria shared how she needed to find a place for her son to stay and be attended, and it was because of him that she had made the first contact with social services by the hand of other women. After that, she proudly explains how she was the one in guiding other Romani women, some of them immigrant although not exclusively:

[In regards to how to access social services] *Through the children, through what one says and what the other says, and so on.... Because honestly, the assistant, of the Portuguese the first one was me and through me, of course I took Mrs. Isabel, and then the all of them, little by little, we have learned it that way.*

In other cases they were older women who found difficulties in understanding the bureaucracy and Valeria offered to help them:

Her assistant [helped us], but well since Mrs. Carmen was quite old I went to get the papers, I went to talk to her.

The case of Valeria is that of an immigrant Roma women who has transformed her situation, thanks to the solidarity interactions with other Roma women. These transformative relationships evidence that Roma women do not accept poverty and exclusion as a trait of their identity that racialised visions of Roma may see as otherness or exoticism (Kende, 2000), but as the result of the lack of information and resources that can be overcome through the networks they create among them, thus transformed those visions that stigmatize them.

Miriam and Olga: getting a “legal job”

Research showed that immigrant networks are powerful mechanisms to promote the access to employment in times of economic growth. The Roma immigrant are not an exception to it, being Miriam and Olga’s stories illustrations of how solidarity among Romani immigrant women can make possible for the most excluded ones to access to the labour market.

The labour situation of Miriam, a Romanian Roma, has greatly improved since she arrived to Barcelona early 2000. Once she obtained the residency and work permission, Miriam started to work in a hotel as a cleaner. The hotel became her main source of contacts. The solidarity of Miriam and her empathy with the other Romani immigrant women who were like her in the past, not working, facing hard barriers to integrate in society, and in many times begging in the streets in order to survive, make her to use her network of contacts to help others:

[Related to Romanian Romani girls who are begging in the underground]
Because I felt bad for them to see them this way... Because there are many beautiful girls, very beautiful... and when I see them I don’t believe that this Romani girl really, and I see them begging for money and I tell her “Why do you do that? Why don’t you look for a job? Ask me and I’ll find you a job (...)”. I found her a job and I said “look Gina, I found you a job, they need a kitchen assistant in a restaurant”.

Olga, a Romanian Romani woman, married and with four grown up children, is an outstanding example of how these networks operate. Her initiative is a paradigmatic case of promoting solidarity which could overcome barriers and create opportunities even in the most disadvantaged contexts. In 2006, her association decided to found a worker owned cooperative to provide jobs to the Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants, mainly Roma, who were living in extreme conditions mostly in abandoned isolated houses. The cooperative provided a hundred jobs, as agricultural workers but also Olga negotiated for the families to work in the harvest, in different regions of Spain, such as in Castilla-La Mancha, Catalonia and Valencia. The cooperative represented for many to have access to a formal job and to make a living for their families. This way the lives of many women were reorganised and their children who did not go to school before now went to school. The younger children were taken care of by the elder women. Olga vividly remembers this experience as an engagement with women, the children and their community:

I was at a meeting with representatives of the consulate and I told them about it and they said to me: How did you manage to do that? How did you manage to make it work? A co-operative that allows women to have basic food and get their children enrolled in school. Through this project five hundred and ten Romani children were enrolled in the schools of Borriana in 2006. This project is there in order to provide legal employment and it leads to schooling too. (...) This is my commitment. I take the bus to Borriana every morning and I'm there when the workers get in, they bring their babies too, the older ones take care of the babies. The farm where the co-operative is close to the road and we use the bus, the number seventeen, to get the children to school.

Through the foundation of the cooperative Olga contributed to create a network of solidarity that has brought up other initiatives (e.g. a bakery school) also oriented towards breaking down the barriers that the Roma immigrant group face. Her testimony breaks down with all the existing stereotyped images around the Romani immigrant women, as she is the one in taking the lead in creating new opportunities and connecting people from her community to jobs and other services. She has not only become one of the spokespersons of the Roma in the region but also a person of reference to whom everybody knows who can go to ask for support and help.

Far from being subordinated to her husbands, and not being interested in learning or working, there are many Miriams and Olgas throughout Europe that are invisible because of these racialized discourses, but whose lives are real examples of how Romani women have become the catalyst for change in their communities, helping them to escape the circle of social exclusion (Macías and Redondo, 2012).

Liana and Lucia: This NGO changed my life

Romani women led transformations are at the individual level but also an emerging worldwide trend of collective thought and action. In less than twenty years, Romani women have got organized and created their own mobilization differentiated from the larger Roma Rights Movement. Through their political and social mobilization, Romani women are disproving stereotypes about their gender subordination and disinterest in education or in entering the labour market. The case of Spain illustrates this process as the first association was created in 1990 and in 1999, *Kamira*, the first federation was created in Madrid. Similar processes have been developed in other parts of the world, as Romani women got organized at the local, regional and even at the state level from West to East and from North to South. This organizing process was not only within state boundaries. Mirroring the transnational nature of their people, Romani women went also beyond nation states reaching the international sphere. The International Roma Women Network (IRWN), launched on the 8th of March 2003, is working to improve the situation of Romani women and lobbying states to comply with the international conventions. These organizations represent a milestone in the Romani women movement because of the important networking task that are currently leading: uniting and connecting Romani women from all around the world on the basis of feminist solidarity and ethnic belonging.

If, historically, feminism had played an important role in the development of collective actions and efforts that generate social changes, this is also the case for Romani women.

Their personal relationships of friendship and networks among activists and academics go beyond national frontiers and ethnic identities. Brooks (2012) states that Romani feminism, besides promoting this kind of relationships among Romani women, also generates solidarity and networks on which policy actions are based. These friendship and solidarity networks created through the social movements are the necessary basis for the international feminist movement of Romani women of the last years. The role played by grassroots Romani women in these network organizing efforts have been also captured in our fieldwork. The involvement of Romani women in organisations of the local community is usually achieved because a friend, a member of the family or just other Romani women invite them to join, to share realities and to look for common solutions to the problems. The experiences of Liana and Lucia illustrate these particular processes and what it means for their lives to be part of these social networks.

Liana, Romanian, single and a university degree holder, arrived to Barcelona with her parents and brothers three years ago. Liana is working in an NGO and now she is trying to pursue her PhD. Her first contact with the associations in Spain was through her cousin:

[Related to who gave her the information of one of the associations in which she participates] *My cousin, it was my cousin. When I started in this association it was because of my cousin. She was doing a course there... One of the courses that you are paid for. She is Roma, too. [Answering the researchers question on how her cousin got to know the association] I think through friends and through the local government. The Government of Cornellà because they have an assistant, a social assistant, yes... I know that.*

However, it was through a friend she met in her church that she got involved in the Roma Association of Women *Drom Kotar Mestipen* (Way to Liberty), and after some time of being an active member of it, she decided to found the Romani Immigrant Association *Savore* (Together), in order to help other Roma to have access to information and education:

Yes, look I'm doing an association now... I'm thinking of doing this now here to provide information, to inform... I think that, as I didn't have this information, to give this information to other people, to pass on the information that I have, that I had to look for in other sites and to also support them and make them understand that education is son top, that they can learn the language to go and talk to people to ask for help.

In both associations, she has been actively recruiting women, as they work as an initial window to other services, by the means of exchanging information or other ways of supporting each other. In turn, Liana also explained that it was through her involvement in these networks that she decided to pursue her PhD. as there were people there who encouraged her, and supported her in navigating through the university system, totally unknown and different from Romania. The women's solidarity and empowerment to study that Liana found also came from her mother. She supports her to continue studying so that she can find a good job. This shows Roma women's acknowledgement of the importance of education to improve their life prospects, which is shared across generations, dismantling the prejudices that see the Roma as disaffected from school:

My mother supports me, yes, she supports me very much: you have to do this, this, and it is enough... because also over the years you achieve more if you fight.

Not only women of different ages but also of different origins share the same concerns. Liana identifies immigrant Roma women and autochthonous Roma women shared experiences, worries and hopes that prevail over differences and enables them to work together in associations such as the ones mentioned:

We all have enthusiasm to achieve a better life, and that people listen to us and then we can unite... 'cause we have common customs. I think we are more distant for the language and each of us brings things from her country, this is normal but we also have customs in common.

A similar experience was shared by Lucia, a young Romani woman, with a Spanish Romani mother and a Serbian father born in the USA. She came to Barcelona because of her boyfriend's job. Lucia, very used to live in different cities and countries, explained how she started to improve her personal situation and to feel integrated in the new city when she got involved in *Drom Kotar Mestipen*. This association composed by Romani women from Spain and from other countries as well as by non-Romani women, impacted her views and her experience in the new city as she felt connected to her own community:

In Barcelona I relied on the women of the NGO Drom Kotar Mestipen. When my partner got sick, a friend from the Drom helped me. Also they helped me offering their ideas, talking and their opinions on the stuff with the documents and work (...) This NGO changed my life! The fact of being part of this NGO was an incredible experience that helped me to integrate in Barcelona. (...) Now the relations I have in Barcelona, thanks to the Drom, are very positive. The Spanish Romani women that I know, I have great solidarity with them...

Lucia, similar to Liana, was strongly encouraged to continue her studies. Education is one of the crucial aspects that these associations are committed to. Among the participating women in *Drom Kotar Mestipen* there are grandmothers, aunts, mothers, sisters, cousins and friends of very diverse profiles, illiterate women as well as young university students and graduates. In different activities, both local and immigrant Romani women participate and dialogue about the barriers Romani girls and women face in the educational system such as discrimination (in many cases they are victims of segregation) or racism (practiced by teachers or other students), and how they can overcome them. They also support Romani women who have left education system to get back to it and to improve their job opportunities. The women that participated highly appreciate the emerging solidarity networks and to learn from each other.

As evidenced through the narratives of Valeria, Miriam, Olga, Liana and Lucia, these women are examples of how networks of solidarity are contributing to overcome the racialised discourses and stereotypes by providing another very different image of the Roma people and the Romani women: the one of unity and personal and collective commitment to themselves and to their people to overcome their plight and fully accomplish their social rights.

Conclusion

Romani immigrant women are one of the groups who suffer most from the discrimination as a result of the existing racialised discourses which have been invigorated amidst the social and economic crisis in Spain. If barriers exist for all Romani women, the ones holding an immigrant status are the ones who very often encounter more obstacles in accessing to basic social rights facilities. Our data has shed light to the strategies that these women have developed in order to face them. In this article, it is showed how the emergence of solidarity networks is an example of these strategies.

The solidarity networks analyzed here seem to be based on a strong sense of belonging to the same ethnic group, explicit but by no means exclusive way. In many instances, our testimonies pointed out in which ways the fact that they received the support and the help of other Romani women encouraged them to become the helpers later on. The replicating effect of these networks is very well narrated by some of the study participants, as when they feel empowered, they feel urged to give back to their community what they have received from it. This takes the form of word of mouth, taking them to the social services, sharing contacts and information and so on.

Thus, these solidarity networks are composed by strong genderized relationships. In other words, many study participants highlighted the importance for them to be only women. These networks have showed to be spaces of exchange and develop sisterhood bounds amongst the women, at the same time that there is a lot of respect for tradition as well as freedom to decide upon one's live. The fact that the small and big actions these women are leading in their everyday lives are very often ignored or shadowed by the strong stereotypes does not mean they do not exist. On the contrary, by the means of the Romani Feminism frame, it is possible to identify them and to make them visible. The existing diversity in these Networks is showed by their composition: women from all ages, from all educational levels and origins. The examples of the different women presented in this article reveal the importance of the mutual support among the women of the community.

Last but not least, it is also showed in which ways these solidarity networks are challenging existing discrimination by opening up new opportunities and sources to these women. Not only had they allowed many women to enter the social service system but also to find a job or to create their own jobs, or to continue their studies. Thus, their mere existence is a challenge to the racialized discourses per se, as they show not to be subordinated o disengaged from society, on the contrary, these women are the ones taking the lead, for themselves and for their communities.

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