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

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Abstract
In the midst of the global financial crisis and in the 'anti-race era', Europe has witnessed a revival of deeply racialized discourses targeting the Roma, leading to new discriminatory practices and legitimating existing ones in many social domains. While westward Roma immigration has spurred these discourses, it has also favored the emergence of invisible grassroots reactions against them that need to be further analyzed. Drawing on interviews with migrant Romani women, this article aims to shed light on these unknown processes, as experienced by women in Romani women-based solidarity networks. Data show that these networks help the women to access basic social facilities, while also challenging the abovementioned racialized discourses.

Keywords
Discrimination, immigration, racialized discourses, Romani women, solidarity networks

Introduction

If there is one group in Europe that knows better than any other what it means to be the target of racialized discourses, then that group is undoubtedly the Roma. Although most Roma are European Union (EU) citizens and are granted full political and social rights, in reality this is far from being fully accomplished, as there is still a myriad of barriers

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that hinder Roma participation in society. The Romani diaspora itself is the result of systematic racialization, for it is known that their nomadic status is not a cultural feature *per se*, but rather the result of fear and the need to flee from persecution and expulsion (Lucassen et al., 1998; Matras, 2002; Okely, 1983). Highly racialized discourses have been developed since the Roma's initial exodus in the ninth century right through to the present: they have been condemned to slavery, murdered during the Nazi Holocaust, been victims of hate crimes, and inevitably trapped within a cycle of poverty. After the fall of communism, and the conflicts in the Balkans, new waves of Roma migrated and took refuge in Western Europe and North America. These discourses do not disappear when Roma become immigrants, but can even be reinforced. Roma immigrant women's experiences of discrimination are inextricable from racialized discourses, which means that Romani women and men have distinctly gendered experiences that should be acknowledged.

In recent decades and in the current global climate, the struggle against racism and discrimination has been placed in a prominent position on the political agendas of such supranational bodies as the EU and the United Nations. For this reason we are in an anti-racist era in which, in order to secure their human rights and fight against racism (Bello, 2009; United Nations, 2001) the Roma people have even been recognized by the European Parliament (2005) and such national parliaments as the Spanish Congress (2005). However, in the anti-racist era, while an inherently non-racist collective western political ideology is generalized (Lentin, 2008), Roma migration flows and mobility within the EU boundaries have posed a series of challenges to particular states and to supranational institutions. Expulsions of Roma EU citizens from France and Italy illustrated the vulnerabilities that affect Roma within the EU. In 2008, the Italian Minister of the Interior and several mayors called on the people to take justice into their own hands and help eradicate 'all Roma settlements that exist in Italy' (Povoledo, 2010); some people responded to this call by attacking Roma camps. The political unwillingness to address the problem of Roma settlements and the related conflicts is connected, among other factors, to the lack of recognition of the Roma reality (Sigona, 2005) or the connected labeling process going on, for instance, associating Roma with nomadism. In France, we can go back to the 2000 Besson Law, which represented a backwards step with regard to guaranteeing the *Gens du Voyage* rights to move freely around the country (RAXEN, 2009). France imposed a moratorium until 2012, extendable to 2014, by which time nationals of Romania and Bulgaria would need a work or student permit in order to stay in the country for more than three months. Relying on this framework, the Ministry of the Interior sent a circular to all police officers and constables in the summer of 2010 calling on them to start systematically dismantling illegal camps, particularly those of immigrant Roma. Over a period of one month (August 2010), 129 encampments were dismantled and almost 1000 Roma were deported. The aforementioned circular broke international and European human rights laws on discrimination as it directly targeted an entire group based on its ethnic origin. This is one clear example of how the Roma are at the core of a racialized discourse maintained not only by citizens but also by politicians in high positions. Indeed, these episodes have continued not only in these countries but also in other parts of Europe.[1]

Within this panorama, Romani women are situated at the forefront of these racialized discourses. Within Roma migration, as occurs in other ethnic minority groups, women face multiple discriminations: for being women, Roma and having low educational levels. 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 due to low formal educational levels and not having any educational certificate, they have to face exclusion from many social domains, given the importance of education, for example, for accessing the labor market. If their migrant status is added to this, migrant Romani women are even more vulnerable and trapped in *social, economic racialized spaces that are very difficult to escape from* (Lazaridis, 2001). The *intersectionality* of race, gender, class and sexual identity reflects the complexity of multiple forms of oppression and discrimination (Schultz, 2005) and prevents Romani women benefiting from their social rights.

This article, based on data collected by two research projects on the Roma migrant population in Spain, namely '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 solidarity networks that migrant Romani women of different origins are creating, and how these promote access to education, employment, social participation and social services. Besides benefiting Romani immigrant women, in the context of the current economic crisis, these networks can be a resource 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 being women. Solidarity networks are an example of transformation based on these two elements. This article is divided into five sections. First, there is some insight into how the abovementioned racialized discourses operate in a Europe that aims to be multicultural and antiracist. Subsequently, the contributions of Romani feminism provide the theoretical framework for this article. Third, the methodology is described. The fourth section presents the research findings, which highlight the transformative dimension of gender through the voices of Romani immigrant women. The article ends with some final conclusions.

Racialized discourses on Romani immigrant women

Despite the EU's commitment to Roma equality and anti-discrimination, there is still much to be done to transform these formal guarantees into concrete realities. '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) shows that ethnicity is still seen as the most widespread cause of discrimination in the EU.

Far from providing scientific evidence to dismantle these racialized discourses, academia has often reinforced them. Particularly, part of the existing knowledge on Roma has been generated from problematic perspectives based on deficits and prejudiced thinking. Two different racialized discourses can be identified. The first is ethnocentric

and relies on the idea that Romani culture is less advanced or even underdeveloped; it is, therefore, deeply stigmatized. From this perspective, studies have reinforced images of the Roma as being naturally disaffected with school, with a natural tendency to commit crime or to be disinterested in working, among many others (Cavalli-Sforza and Cavalli-Sforza, 1994; Hancock, 1975). Romani women further encounter racist stereotypes combined with gender stereotypes that hinder their struggles for equality and make them virtually invisible (Bitu and Vincze, 2012; Oprea, 2005).

The second type is discourse derived from relativism. From this standpoint, Roma poverty and their lack of access to education opportunities are simply 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, the relativist perspective has very often been accompanied by a process of objectification of the Roma. Kende (2000) argues that while cultural anthropologists have focused on the exploration of Roma otherness, examining cultural patterns and exalting exoticism, especially of Romani women (Oprea, 2005), sociologists have tended to be more concerned with analyzing and classifying whether certain people are really Roma or not (Salo, 1979). Very little research has been dedicated to eradicating poverty or to analyzing the role played by Romani women in the heart of their community, in which they represent an important inner force of change. In recent years, Romani women have organized among themselves, creating their own organisations at the local, regional, state and international level. As one Romani elder said once, 'if Romani women shut up then, the Roma would be in total silence'. Romani organisations have strongly rejected studies conducted from the two abovementioned discourses as perpetuating negative images and discrimination towards their people.

Being no exception, both types of discourse are strongly present in Spain, legitimating existing prejudices or even reinforcing new ones. They are especially found towards Roma migrants, an almost non-existent collective in Spain before the 1990s, but that increased substantially in the new century. Romani migrants have, therefore, become a minority within a minority. Discrimination has led to exclusion from the labor market, reduced earnings from the informal economy, and hinders their access to decent housing, healthcare and other basic social rights such as education, closing the vicious circle of marginalization and severely affecting their vulnerability in mainstream society (European Commission, 2004). Within this group, Romani women are in an even worse situation. For women of cultural minorities such as the Roma, racism is one of the elements that hinder their struggle against sexism within their own community, since this often implies confrontation between the family and community (Oprea, 2004); in this regard racialized discourses and processes are strongly gendered. Thus, stereotypical images are very often generalized to all women. For instance, migrant Romani women, and especially those who wear traditional outfits (e.g. long skirts and headscarves), are associated with being submissive to their men, not being interested in participating in society either by working or through education, with committing crimes or illegal activities, and asking for money in the streets while cradling babies. These stereotypes are

translated into serious barriers to access to basic social rights and facilities, as our research showed.

Hence, gender and racialized discourses intersect, exposing Romani women and especially migrant women to greater 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 were no sexism in general society. Moreover, when Roma women are critical of the patriarchal practices within their community, such as child marriage and virginity tests, they are stigmatized as traitors or accused of being *westernized* (Oprea, 2004). Roma feminists demand the ideals of equality, since these do not belong to any cultural group. However, they are facing extremely violent emotions, as made explicit by such cases as that of Romani feminist Nicoleta Bitu, who was severely attacked for fighting against gender oppression in Roma communities (Oprea, 2004), or that of the only Roma member of the European Parliament (Lívia Járóka), who have been victim of sexualized racial harassment (Oprea, 2012).

Despite these adversities, many Romani women are promoting change within their communities, 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 makes them key enablers for the 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 such social services as health or education. Our study has identified that this role is very often not played in isolation but through the creation of solidarity networks that serve both as a bridge and as a challenge to the existing racialized discourses.

Romani feminism

Feminist and gender studies, while heeding black, Latino or indigenous feminist claims, have barely incorporated Romani women, and even conceive the practices of Romani women under the veil of highly negative stereotypes (Oprea, 2004; Sordé et al., 2013). In the European context, Romani feminists like Bitu (Bitu and Vincze, 2012) reveal the success of the participation of Romani women in the movements for women's rights in Spain, Serbia and Macedonia. Other feminists, such as Schultz (2012), analyze the model of the Roma Women's Initiative (RWI) led by Romani women and in collaboration with non-Romani feminists, which focuses on their contribution to the struggle for human rights and global feminism. Gelbart (2012) analyzes feminism in the Czech Republic and, regarding gender equality, highlights the many similarities between diverse ethnic groups and how the term feminism is not as rejected among Roma as it is among Czechs. Silverman (2012) analyzes the more specific case of the Macedonian Muslim Romani women that live in New York and the results show once more, in line with Sen (1999) and Schultz (2005), that education can transform and lead to the achievement of more equality, social influence and improved leadership skills.

Romani women have been portrayed as dominated by men, emphasizing how their childbearing roles are produced and reproduced, ignoring the increasing number of Romani women who are transforming their relationships while deciding not to give up the 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, certainly not all, Romani women embrace. Authors such as Brooks (2012) defend Romani women's activism, questioning the ethnocentric discourses that consider feminism and Roma culture incompatible. Gelbart (2012) also affirms through the concept of 'true Romnia' that it is possible to apply gender equality without giving up such values as femininity. But as Izsak (2008) highlights, mainstream women's rights movements have not managed to include the perspective of Romani women on their agenda. It has been the dialogic turn in feminist studies that has illuminated the contributions Romani women are making to women's emancipation. Undoubtedly, Romani women are defining a new feminism, *Romani feminism* (Bitu and Vincze, 2012; Sordé et al., 2012), and in this line Oprea (2004) criticizes the European feminist discourse in the name of all women, since by excluding Romani women and not tackling racism, such feminism only favors privileged white women. The dialogic feminism of the 'other women' (Beck-Gernsheim et al., 2003), those who have low educational levels and have traditionally been excluded from the spaces of debate and decision-making, has opened up the possibility for Romani feminism to be recognized.

Several studies have already been conducted from this new perspective (Elboj, 2004–2006; García et al., 2011). Researchers have analyzed different aspects of Romani feminism. Far from being an institution to be abolished, the family as a core institution in Roma culture is a strong value of 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 that are a historical feature of their culture. The group as an organisational motive is another key value for Romani women, as they consider their fight to be 'of all and for all' women. This is highly related to the importance of unity for the Roma, a deeply rooted principle in their own culture, no matter what their national origin, and which is based on mutual respect and even more importantly, on respect for 'people of respect' – the elders of the community. Another pillar of Romani feminism is motherhood, which is considered not to be incompatible with being feminist but something more conscious, agreed and freely chosen. Demands from Roma feminism are not only seeking to overcome gender inequalities; there is also a demand for respect and equality for all Roma people. Each of the abovementioned features being claimed and defended by Romani women are part of ongoing discussions within Romani feminism.

The analyses conducted from this framework help identify how Romani women challenge the stereotypes and racialized discourses that fall on them, and in turn, which actions lead them to create broad solidarity networks. The latter shed light, as will be explained in the following sections, on how social exclusion and marginalization can be averted.

Methodology

Traditional research approaches used in investigations on the Roma have mainly been exclusionary, leading to the reproduction of stereotypes, especially of Romani women (Touraine et al., 2004). Data presented in this article have been gathered using the Communicative Methodology (Valls and Padrós, 2011), which has been specifically recommended by such international organisations as the European Union (2010) for conducting research into socially vulnerable groups. The Communicative Methodology is grounded in egalitarian dialogue between researchers and the end-users of their research. This enables vulnerable groups to not only be mere providers of information but also to participate in the intersubjective creation of knowledge, from the definition of the social problem that research is to address to the interpretation of the conclusions. This methodology requires the participation of the researched subjects throughout the whole research process, during the design, development, analysis and evaluation. Therefore, an advisory council was created in which Romani women representing this group validated the results obtained by providing their objections and opinions on them. So, this methodology has helped shed light on the voices of migrant Romani women who have traditionally been silenced.

Data presented in this article stem from fieldwork carried out between 2009 and 2011, from 19 in-depth interviews and one focus group with migrant Romani women living in Spain. This fieldwork is in line with the research conducted into Roma, and more precisely forms part of the projects funded by the OSCE/ODIHR (2008–2009) and by the Ministry of Science and Innovation (2009–2011). The women interviewed were aged between 18 and 51 years and had diverse profiles in terms of country of origin (Portugal, Romania and the United States), migratory trajectory, socioeconomic situation, employment, education level, marital status and family responsibilities. At the time of the interview, some of them had work and residency permits but some were living in Spain without such permission. They had a wide range of different jobs: there were stallholders, a hotel waitress, an employee of a Romanian Roma association, an English teacher at a language academy, a researcher at a Spanish university and housekeepers, among others. The interpretations of the migrant Romani women interviewed constitute the basis of the article. We selected a sample of women who could make a valuable contribution to the research. The article presents five cases of very different women (Valeria, Miriam, Olga, Liana and Lucia) in terms of age, education, work and origin. Valeria is Portuguese, 51 years old, illiterate, and has lived in Spain for 20 years. She was working as a stallholder until her husband died. She has a son with disabilities and receives minimum social aid. Miriam is a Romanian Romani woman of 42 years who has lived in Spain since 2000. She is separated with one son, has basic compulsory education from Romania and works as a cleaner in a hotel. Olga is also a Romanian Romani, and is 44 years old with no education. She arrived in Spain in 2000 and set up a cooperative to provide 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 in Spain with her family in 2009. She has a university degree in economics from Romania, works for a social organisation that provides adult education and is studying for her PhD at a Spanish university. Finally, Lucia is a Romani woman of 25 years, born

in the United States to a Spanish Romani mother. She has a master's degree and came to Spain in 2011. She works for a social project with Roma families that she is combining with another master's program.

The trajectories of these five women show their ability to take an active leadership role in their community together with other Romani women, as well as demonstrating the possibility of overcoming the stereotypes created by racialized discourses through the creation of solidarity networks and from very diverse paths. The fieldwork analyzed the intersection of gender, ethnic origin and migrant status in relation to accessing different social spheres: the labor market, housing, education, political and social participation and others, as well as their migration journey and their own understandings and reflections about what being a migrant Romani woman represents in Spain. The interviews conducted did not aim to represent all migrant Romani women, but to highlight those elements – often invisible – that are already a driving force for the women that were interviewed.

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

Findings

In this section, part of the findings of the two projects are presented, shedding light on how Romani immigrant women in Spain are creating solidarity networks as a strategy to challenge the existing racialized discourses against them. Data show 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 Romani women facing the challenges of gender and ethnic inequalities are striking. Cases such as that of Nicoleta Bitu[2] are cited in the scientific literature as references for Romani feminism and other women (Brooks, 2012; Schultz, 2012). The following cases 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 shown that Romani migrants, especially those living in more disadvantaged situations, often do not use social services and healthcare for manifold reasons: they do not have a legal address (or are not locally registered), they fear discrimination by the staff, they do not know where they are located, or they are afraid of not being able to navigate through all the bureaucracy they would have to face. Our data shed light on

which strategies these women have developed in order to overcome these difficulties. Effective ways to break down the barriers are very often transmitted by word of mouth or through someone introducing them to the service.

Valeria represents one of the testimonies that show how Romani women established these types of relationships, especially when there is hardship in life. A Portuguese Romani woman, she arrived in Spain two decades ago with her husband, of *Gitano* (Roma) descent. She is now a widow and in charge of her handicapped son. Her narrative reflects how she has learned to cope with and navigate through the system, but also how hard it was at the beginning, without her speaking the language fluently and dressed for mourning. Although she knew that this would stigmatize her, she did not hesitate to mourn for her husband. Valeria vividly remembers when her husband died, and how women of all ages from her neighborhood took care of her:

> [Regarding the relationship and the support received from 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 that were gathered reveal that if the support received is provided by other women, more confident and closer relationships are established. So, sensitive aspects of private life are more comfortably shared and tackled. They show how networks tend to be female-based with a strong intergenerational component, as very diverse women were committed to helping her.

Valeria shared how she needed to find a place for her son to stay and be cared for, and it was because of him that she made the first contact with the social services through the help of other women. After that, she proudly explains how she guided other Romani women, some of them migrants, though not exclusively:

> [Regarding 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 all of them, little by little, we have learned it that way.

In other cases, older women found it difficult to understand 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 Romani woman who has transformed her situation thanks to solidarity and interactions with other Romani women. These transformative relationships show that Roma women do not accept poverty and exclusion as a trait of their identity, as suggested in racialized visions of Roma as 'other' or exotic (Kende, 2000). Rather, the experiences of women like Valeria show that the lack of information and resources can be overcome through the networks they create among themselves, thus transforming the visions that stigmatize them.

Miriam and Olga: Getting a 'legal job'

Research shows that migrant networks are powerful mechanisms for promoting access to employment in times of economic growth. Roma migrants are no exception, Miriam and Olga's stories being illustrative of how solidarity among migrant Romani women can make it possible for the most excluded ones to find employment.

The labor situation of Miriam, a Romanian Roma, has greatly improved since she arrived in Barcelona in early 2000. Once she had obtained residency and a work permit, she started to work in a hotel as a cleaner. The hotel became her main source of contacts. Miriam's solidarity and her empathy with the other migrant Romani women who were like she had been in the past, not working, facing major barriers to integration in society, and often begging in the streets in order to survive, led her to use her network of contacts to help others:

> [Related to Romanian Romani girls who beg in the underground] Because I felt bad to see them this way … Because there are many beautiful girls, very beautiful … and when I see them I don't believe that [she was a] 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 to 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 Olga also 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 was the chance for many to find a formal job and make a living for their families. As a result, the lives of many women were reorganized and their children were finally able to go to school. Olga vividly remembers this experience as an engagement with women, 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 cooperative that allows women to have basic food and get their children enrolled in school. Through this project 510 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 with the cooperative is close to the road and we use the bus, number 17, to get the children to school.

Through the foundation of the cooperative, Olga helped to create a solidarity network that has produced other initiatives (e.g. a bakery school) that are also aimed at breaking down the barriers that the migrant Roma group faces. Her testimony destroys all the

existing stereotypical images about migrant Romani women, as she is the one who is 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 who everybody knows, and who they can go to ask for support and help.

Far from being subordinated to their husbands, or not being interested in learning or working, there are many Miriams and Olgas throughout Europe that are invisible because of 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 occur on an individual level but there is also an emerging worldwide trend of collective thought and action. In less than 20 years, Romani women have become organized and have created their own mobilization, distinct from the larger Roma Rights Movement. Through their political and social mobilization, Romani women are disproving stereotypes about their gendered subordination and disinterest in education or employment. The case of Spain illustrates this process, where 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 have become organized on local, regional and even state level from West to East and from North to South. This organisation process was not only within state boundaries. Mirroring the transnational nature of their people, Romani women also reached beyond nation-states and into the international sphere. The International Roma Women's Network (IRWN), launched on 8 March 2003, is working to improve the situation of Romani women and lobbying states to comply with the international conventions relating to Roma people. These organisations represent a milestone in the Romani women's movement because of the important networking that they 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 change, this is also the case for Romani women. Their personal relationships of friendship and networks among activists and academics reach beyond national frontiers and ethnic identities. Brooks (2012) states that Romani feminism, as well as promoting such 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 form the necessary basis for the international feminist movement of Romani women of recent years. The role played by grassroots Romani women in these efforts to organise networks has also been captured in our fieldwork. The involvement of Romani women in organisations in the local community is usually achieved because a friend, a member of the family or simply other Romani women invite them to join, to share realities and to look for common solutions to their 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 in Barcelona with her parents and brothers three years ago. She works for an NGO and is now trying to complete her PhD. Her first contact with the associations in Spain was through her cousin:

> [Regarding who gave her the information on 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 researcher's question about how her cousin got to know the association] I think through friends and through the local council. The Council of Cornellà because they have an assistant, a social assistant, yes … I know that.

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

> Yes, look I'm running an association now … I'm thinking of doing this here and now 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 places and to also support them and make them understand that education is on 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 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 undertake a PhD, as there were people there who encouraged her, and supported her in getting through the university system, which was so totally unfamiliar and different from Romania. The women's solidarity and encouragement to study that Liana found also came from her mother. She supports Liana's decision to continue studying so that she can find a good job. This shows how Romani women acknowledge the importance of education for improving their prospects, which is shared across generations, dismantling the prejudices that view the Roma as disaffected with 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 migrant Roma women and autochthonous Roma women as sharing experiences, worries and hopes that prevail over differences and enable them to work together in associations such as those mentioned:

> We are all enthusiastic about achieving a better life, and for people to listen to us and for us to be able to unite … 'cause we have common customs. I think we are more distant because of the language and what each of us brings from our countries, this is normal, but we also have customs in common.

A similar experience was shared by Lucia, a young Romani woman who has a Spanish Romani mother and a Serbian father and was born in the USA. She came to Barcelona because of her boyfriend's job. Lucia, who is very used to living 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 of Romani women from Spain and from other countries as well as non-Romani women, had an impact on her views and her experience of the new city, as she felt connected to her own community:

> In Barcelona I relied on the women at the NGO Drom Kotar Mestipen. When my partner got sick, a friend from the Drom helped me. Also they helped me by offering their ideas, talking and giving opinions on the stuff with the documents and work … This NGO changed my life! 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 a lot of solidarity with them …

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

The narratives of Valeria, Miriam, Olga, Liana and Lucia illustrate how solidarity networks help to overcome racialized discourses and stereotypes by providing another very different image of Roma people and Romani women: one of unity and personal and collective commitment to themselves and to their people to overcome their plight and fully benefit from their social rights.

Conclusion

Migrant Romani women are one of the groups that suffer most from discrimination, as a result of the existing racialized discourses that have been reinvigorated by the social and economic crisis in Spain. If barriers exist for all Romani women, it is the migrants that encounter the most obstacles to accessing basic social rights and facilities. Our data have shed light on the strategies that these women have developed in order to face such challenges. This article has shown how the emergence of solidarity networks is one example of these strategies.

The solidarity networks analyzed here seem to be based on a strong sense of belonging to the same ethnic group in an explicit but by no means exclusive way. In many instances, the testimonies showed how receiving the support and help of other Romani

women encouraged our interviewees to become helpers later on. The replicating effect of these networks is well narrated by some of the participants in the study, as when they feel empowered, they feel the urge to give back to their community what they have received from it. This occurs through word of mouth, by taking others to social services, by sharing contacts and information, and so on.

These solidarity networks are, thus, composed of strong gendered relationships. In other words, many participants in the study highlighted the importance of being only with women. These networks have been shown to be spaces for exchange and developing bonds of sisterhood among the women, while at the same time showing a lot of respect for tradition and the freedom to decide one's own life. The actions on different scales that these women are leading in their everyday lives are often ignored or overshadowed because of the strong stereotypes that exist about them. However, in spite of these actions being invisible in the political, academic and public discourses in the media, they are an important part of Roma people's reality. The framework of Romani feminism makes it possible to identify them and make them visible. The existing diversity in these networks is apparent from their composition: women of all ages, of all educational levels and of all origins. The examples of different women presented in this article reveal the importance of the mutual support among the women in the community.

Last but not least, this article has also shown how these solidarity networks are challenging existing discrimination by opening up new opportunities and resources for these women. Not only have they enabled many women to enter the social service system, but also to find work, create their own jobs, or continue their studies. So, their mere existence is a challenge to the racialized discourses *per se*, as they show that these women are not subordinated or disengaged from society. On the contrary, they are taking the lead, for themselves and for their communities.

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Notes

1. Among these attacks on Roma people we mention only some, one in a camp in Torino (Italy) in 2011 (Kington, 2011), and the closing of a Roma camp in Oslo (Norway) in 2012 by the municipality (*The Nordic Page*, 2012).
2. Nicoleta Bitu is a researcher and human rights activist. She works to shed light on and fight the discrimination against the Roma minority in Romania, specifically against women. She is affiliated with the Romani CRISS organisation (Roma Center for Social Intervention and Studies), a member of the Romanian Women's Lobby and board member of the ERRC (European Roma Rights Center).

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