THEMED SECTION • Roma in a time of paradigm shift and chaos

article

Gender, ethnicity and activism: 'the miracle is when we don't give up…'

Anna Daróczi
Romani feminist activist

Angéla Kóczé, koczea2011@gmail.com
Central European University, Budapest

Jelena Jovanovic, jovanovicjns@gmail.com
Researcher and Roma rights advocate

Sarah Judith Cemlyn, Sarah.Cemlyn@gmail.com
Independent researcher

Violeta Vajda, V.Vajda@sussex.ac.uk
University of Sussex and Institute of Development Studies, UK

with

Vera Kurtić
Activist and writer

Alina Serban, sudestica@yahoo.com
Actor, writer, director

Lisa Smith, Lisamezzysmith@outlook.com
Educational and women's activist

This paper is grounded in feminist standpoint and critical race theory, intersectionality and a critique of the neoliberal system and austerity to explore Romani women's activism. In-depth interviews with four prominent activists showed the strength of identity and experience growing up as Romani women in their motivation for activism, the complexity of projects in arts, acting/ directing, writing, policy advocacy, education, networking, mobilisation to challenge injustice and promote transformation; and barriers of hostility, oppression and austerity. Key findings concerned the central importance of solidarity, support, respectful listening between Roma women and allies to counter the isolation of neoliberal individualism.

Introduction

This paper arises from the aspiration of a collective of Romani and non-Romani women to explore the highs and lows of Romani women's activism through in-depth interviews with four women at the forefront of diverse forms of mobilisation in different European countries. The authorial collective was also diverse in key respects, including age and geography as well as ethnicity, nor did we all know each other personally in advance. Throughout the project, we discussed positionalities as Romani women, non-Romani women, activists and academics.

We frame this article through the lens of feminist scholarship and critical race theory, and a critique of the neoliberal system, recognising that power relations concerning race/ethnicity, gender and other social, economic and political positions are the big enablers/obstacles when it comes to Romani women's empowerment and fulfilment.

Our aim has been to open up space to reflect on collective and individual dreams for change, to explore connections, examine barriers and the impact of the neoliberal context, in the hope of deepening our understanding of challenges and highlights and sharpening tools for social justice for Romani women.

We present the theoretical framework informing the paper, features of the political and economic situation which generate and worsen the conditions against which Romani women activists struggle, and the methodology underpinning our approach, before moving into our central discussion arising from the interview data.

Theoretical framework

Neoliberalism, austerity and the impact on Romani women

In the current era, all our lives are framed and permeated by neoliberalism, though it is both an excruciating and paradoxical phenomenon, mainly based on marketisation, financial and trade deregulation, privatisation of public resources, and withdrawal of state welfare protection (Clark, 2008; Harvey, 2005). Clark (2008) argues that neoliberalism as a concept is omnipresent, omnipotent and promiscuous: promiscuous in a way that is divergent, variegated, overlapping and cross-fertilised with many other phenomena. For instance, in Central and Eastern Europe neoliberalism in connection with the Roma population coalesced and assembled with the social, cultural and political legacy of state socialism (van Baar, 2011; Sigona and Trehan, 2009). In the UK, discrimination against Romani/Traveller groups dates back decades particularly in relation to caravan-dwelling sites, but has entwined with the multiple tentacles of neoliberalism and austerity, for example through privatisation and cuts to educational support services.

The neoliberalism era paradoxically offered some political possibilities for Romani women, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Developmental policies were justified as based on empowering women and reducing poverty. However, as Hickel (2014) points out, these gendered development projects simply expanded access to the uncertain labour market and credit system, promoting women in new forms of subservience as workers, consumers and debtors, and ignoring the most substantive economic policies that contributed to poverty: debt, tax evasion, labour exploitation, financial crisis and austerity.

The *Warsaw Romani, Sinti and Travellers Women's Declaration* highlights the vulnerable situation of Roma, Sinti and Traveller women and the negative and long-lasting impact of government austerity measures on them. In the economic crisis, 'there is evidence of significant rises in violence against women and disadvantaged ethnic groups' (OSCE, 2012). Many austerity measures do not protect spending on social services; governments are decreasing these expenditures, and transferring the burdens onto women.

The cuts are silencing women's voices and the struggling women's organisations are less able to react to austerity policies: 'Many of the organisations affected are providing vital support services and many have had to curtail their services at a time when the demand for these services is increasing considerably' (EWL, 2012, 14). The situation has also worsened in countries where NGOs rely on private project grants. The European Women's Lobby argues that in Central and Eastern Europe, the danger is that foundations will withdraw their support.

The lack of (state) funding and the fight for private donors' grants have shaped Romani women's activism in many ways. Other minority women's experience is also indicative. In the UK and France, Emejulu and Bassel (2015) found that, on the one hand, minority women are more likely to participate in third-sector jobs than previously because of the harshening of their difficulties, and feeling increasingly that something needs to be done to help their fellows. On the other hand, these women often cannot work towards the issues they find burning, because those are not identified as crucial by policy makers and funders. Minority women generally do not have 'participatory parity' (Fraser, 2005), and this is particularly acute for Romani women (Járóka, 2006).

Politics of location

Black feminists and other women of colour offered a theoretical frame to understand and interpret the gendered and racialised hierarchy of our societies. The notion of 'politics of location' showed to Romani women how local context created very specific gendered relations. *Black feminist standpoint theory* built on the understanding of black feminists' specific politics of location that differed from those of white middle-class feminists (Hill-Collins, 1990), empowering Romani feminists to value their own politics of location and seek a specific perspective that reveals systemic oppressions even in the era of austerity. It also inspired Romani women to create social change and challenge dominant narratives.

Critical race feminism/intersectionality/transversal politics

Critical race feminism, as a sub-field of critical race theory, examines the intersection between race, gender and class, conflict with the white gender movement and their internal patriarchy. The experiences of indigenous women, black women, third world women and post-colonial feminists resonate with the concerns and problems articulated by Romani women. Concepts and theories from anthropological literature offer a unique contribution to writings about Romani women.

Intersectionality emerged from critical race feminism and postcolonial theories to challenge the mono-focal identity politics in the black movement (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983; Crenshaw, 1989). Most Romani activists and scholars of political activism

have not viewed gender as a central category of their analysis perceived exclusively through the ethnic category (Kóczé, 2009; 2011). Intersectionality provides tools for further complicating our understanding of political and social activism as a fluid interconnected process interrogating the institutional reproduction of inequality through practices and discourses.

Yuval-Davis (1999) later developed the notion of transversal politics, building on standpoint theory, and seeking to avoid hierarchies and essentialising differences. It emphasises reflexive dialogue between people of different positionings in 'epistemological communities'.

While critical race theory maintains that everything we do or say in this racialised world is beholden to the concept of race (Warnke, 2007), whether consciously acknowledged or not, critical whiteness (Leonardo, 2002) theorises how those of us who are not directly oppressed because of the colour of our skin and identify as politically 'white' and in our context non-Roma, nevertheless are deeply affected by a world that is divided into black and white and shades thereof, with all the negative effects of one or other of the racialised identities that arise in people's everyday lives (Vajda, 2015).

Critical whiteness is not just a theoretical concept. It compels those white or non-Roma people who recognise it and are aware of its effects to do something, to take action ranging from a deeper awareness of implicit racial identity, to activism, or taking full accountability for our role in the constellation of oppression (Love, 1997). One of the interesting by-products of the current complex and contradictory historical period is that people oppressed because of race and those playing the roles of oppressors are finding new and productive ways to enter into dialogue to dismantle the racialised system (Land, 2015).

Romani feminist politics and social movements

Romani women are involved in a spectrum of activities and campaigns, with differences concerning how explicitly they self-define as feminist or constitue a 'movement' (Ovalle, 2006). The conceptual framework depends on individual experience of activists, the local context and the extent of broader networks of solidarity (Jovanović et al, 2015). Women's projects may focus on supporting key women's issues with a primary focus on service delivery, or they may be explicit feminist activities challenging patriarchal practices (Schultz, 2012) or political discourse (Jovanović and Daróczi, 2015).

As sequences of contentious collective action, social movements encompass myriad forms (Tarrow, 2011), with a core activity the 'struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing meanings' or 'framing' (Benford and Snow, 2000, 613), to inspire participants and convey movement ideas externally. This interactional, dynamic process involves three core tasks: diagnostic (what and why is the 'problem'), prognostic (what should be done) and motivational (why collective action is needed). Hewitt (2011) analysed lessons from transnational women's rights activism in generating different kinds of frames to build solidarities, including oppositional frames, rights based frames and process and capacity building frames. Each of these is evident in this paper to some degree.

Methodology

This article results from the collaborative work of eight women, all dedicated activists and/or academics of Romani women's issues. There were five primary authors, three Romani (Daróczi, Jovanović and Kóczé) and two non-Roma women (Cemlyn and Vajda); three other Romani women were primarily interviewees (Kurtić, Serban and Smith), and one of the original authors (Daróczi) undertook a dual role and was interviewed to capture her activism.

As the project developed, the role of interviewees evolved to that of associate authors. Sharing the authorship with those initially understood as interviewees, if they wished, acknowledged the important analytical contribution each of us made. While this was complex, it also reflected our commitment to transversal politics and dialogue and the principle that for Roma there should be 'nothing about us without us'. Throughout the dialogues between the authors, they continuously reflected on positionalities and identities.

These dialogues have been an important research element as the focus evolved from non-hierarchical and reflective discussions. During a first meeting of three of us residing in Budapest in late 2016, questions relating to the activism of Romani women emerged as more important than the ones identified by policy-makers without the participation of the people concerned. It was agreed that research and the whole policy cycle related to Romani women lack the participation of their 'target group'. The women are seen merely as passive sufferers, then beneficiaries, but their interests are not visible; areas of intervention and indicators are determined without them.

During a second Budapest meeting, with the participation of three Romani activists/researchers and one pro-Roma activist, and electronic contributions by the other non-Roma researcher, research questions were refined and tasks distributed. The research design perspectives and priorities of the Romani women were emphasised, but contributions of the non-Roma team members were incorporated due to their extensive experience in researching questions related to Roma and women. Meetings and discussions continued throughout the project through direct, electronic and internet based dialogues. Insights and relationships grew in tandem.

Guided by these common understandings, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with four Romani women activists who originate in different European countries: Hungary (Anna Daróczi), Romania (Alina Serban), Serbia (Vera Kurtić) and the UK (Lisa Smith). These women were approached because of their known activism in very different fields across arts and politics in different national contexts. Some are migrants and some continue to live in the country where they were born, though all have international contacts through their work.

The interviews were semi-structured. We outlined topics and issue-areas, including changing objectives in activism if there were some; if these changes were conscious; systemic factors that could hinder the realisation of their aspirations or help them keep to their initial plans; the role of the community of support. The interviewees were free to interpret this broad topic guide to develop their own priority foci. As a result, the interviews took a variety of directions, while covering similar overarching topics in different ways.

The interviews were conducted in English. We were aware of non-native language use as a barrier to access and activism. However, though some interviewees could have spoken in their mother tongue and perhaps expressed different thoughts, because

of their excellent level of English we and they chose to use that language – making the job of writing the article easier, but perhaps skewing its message very slightly. All our interviewees had completed higher education and had built or were developing a profile in the world of Romani activism and studies. Our own positionality as highly educated Romani and non-Romani professionals was therefore reflected in that of our interviewees. This facilitated our aim of opening up a discussion about feminism and activism in intimate ways. However, we acknowledge that because of this bias and not being able to include the voices of Romani women activists without formal education, our findings may be incomplete.

The interviews were transcribed, themes and sub-themes were identified, and commonalities, connections and divergences explored. We looked for links with insights from the literature and how our data expanded and added depth to these understandings.

Discussion of findings

In this discussion, we are not seeking to generalise given the small group involved, but to shed further light on Romani women's activist experience in terms of its sources, manifestations, challenges and achievements, and to consider how this illustrates or develops the literature considered above.

Origins of activism

The ethnic and gender politics of location are clearly evident in the interviewees' reflections on why they became activists. All the interviewees inhabited a strong identity as women and Romani which informed their standpoint and a concomitant responsibility and motivation, all having experienced significant and persistent discrimination. The oppression and lack of voice of Romani women was a primary driver of their involvement, as they were inspired and indeed driven to confront injustice. Naming and challenging injustice is key in diagnostic and prognostic framing in social movements. Here, in addition to conceptual analysis, we see a passionate commitment that resonates with activists' core sense of self.

This centrality of ethnicity and of growing up as a Romani woman pervades the interviews. 'If you ask me to separate myself from the idea of being Roma even in my imagination, I cannot. It's the only self I know' (Serban). 'This isn't a job for me, I can't just close the door and go home. It is part of me' (Smith). The oppression of women in her family profoundly affected Kurtić: 'I consider myself a feminist since I was a little girl because I saw my mother's and my grandmother's life. I knew that I don't want to live as they lived.'

Discrimination along ethnic and or gender dimensions was integral to their activist commitment. 'People would ask "How did you become an activist?" and I'm like, 'it's because I know what it's like not to have…to be treated bad, so…if I see something around me I cannot just stand and do nothing' (Serban). Kurtić highlighted the exclusion of LGBT Roma within both Roma and LGBT communities: 'There are no Roma activists in the LGBT movement and…they don't go to clubs because they are black, they are different, they don't feel they belong.'

For Smith, the family and community experience of hostility resulting from Romani identity, poor living conditions and limited education were a profound source for her

desire to see improvements, especially in educational equality. 'My whole life we've always experienced things…my brothers were really badly bullied in school, my own experiences…in higher education, my…family's experience of being discriminated against (in) planning permission.'

This wider commitment becomes a personal mission. Kurtić, who wrote a book on Roma lesbian existence, spoke of the inner need to make minority experience visible: 'I wrote because I wanted to write, that was something inside of me, some voices I wanted to put on the paper and show to the others.' Serban similarly explained: 'I don't go for projects because it is a job. It has to…become a need in me so I can do it.' Despite intense personal and political struggles to maintain the integrity of her art, in which drama is used to express her identity and stories of her people and other minorities, for Serban this also transcended her individual voice. 'I know it's not about me, this issue, it's not about my ego, it's about representing some people who are really vulnerable.'

Activism, however, can be felt as something that Romani women cannot avoid or leave behind because the injustices are so great and are not being dismantled by others. 'Oh my God I NEVER tried anything in my life which is not related to Roma…That's…a form of oppression too…but I was very young when I decided that I want to spend my life with…saving my people from the oppressors…Now I see that I didn't have a choice really. My whole family is and was of…Roma rights activists whatever that is' (Daróczi).

While Daróczi was influenced by growing up in a politicised family, albeit a patriarchal politics, Smith is the first activist in her family. 'I never had a role model or…even knew this world existed until two years ago when I got involved with [an educational NGO].'

The diversity of the Romani women's movement was reflected in the roots of activism for these women, and in the impact of relationships with family especially mothers in relation to feminism, which might not be named as such, or women's lives might be re-evaluated through reflection once the door to feminism was opened.

For Serban, feminism was an early perspective which she gained from her mother, who was not constrained by gender roles: 'This is what my mum gave me. Seeing her being both a man and a woman in many situations. That's a self that I always had… my mum is a feminist but she doesn't need the academia to call her a feminist…in this type of family, of life, we don't need the word for it.'

Having witnessed domestic violence experienced by her mother and grandmother, and hearing news reports concerning Jane Fonda's feminism, Kurtić autonomously adopted this world view at a young age. 'As a very young [girl], I heard about the word 'feminist' and knew that's it…I was very much aware of…male domination, patriarchy…in society and in my family. They considered me as a freak because I said that I don't want to live like that.' With her help, her mother later broke free of the abusive relationship and also became an activist.

Smith drew from the strength of her late mother and her battle through persistent discrimination in her activist journey, which then enabled contact with European Romani feminists and feminism as a perspective which she embraced, while also celebrating what she saw as the power of women in their family role over generations. 'I mean women have always taken power in my community…women…were the breadwinners…were the…strong ones…but I don't think we recognise the power that is within that role because you're influencing these children's lives.' She felt that

these women would be 'really passionate' about feminism in their daily lives 'but not necessarily know even that word "feminism" and that's associated with how they feel and how they're acting…it's just something that is within you, and…hasn't been labelled'.

For Daróczi, whose Roma activism was reinforced through the male dominated political activity of her family, her introduction to feminism was through a non-Romani university lecturer who 'always ended up talking about the structural differences between the position of men and women in society, and…at that point it wasn't really conscious, but then I realised that, Wow! This is something for me, I should really fight for gender equality.'

Like Kurtić, she reacted against family roles: 'but then later when I started to reflect on why I was so passionate about this topic…it was the gender roles that I saw in my family that I always felt [were] not OK'. She was critical of the romanticisation of Romani women's traditional roles and the culturalism of parts of the wider Roma movement, 'trying to keep the traditions, and it's just not good for women, and it's difficult to talk about', noting that some women justify their position by internalising sexism. Daróczi also experienced family opposition: 'in my personal life it's very difficult for me. In…my father's family I don't even mention this word [feminism]' A sister remonstrated: 'Oh my God, nobody will want you like this, you will never get married!' However, she introduced feminism to her mother: 'With my mum it's different now she knows what it means and I think she realises she is a feminist, in some ways.'

Our findings thus echo some of the complexities of Romani female power and divergent views on women's role from different cultural or political perspectives as discussed by Gelbart (2012). Here strong mother–daughter connections extended the reach of feminist critical awareness of family roles.

Forms and development of activism

There are many strands to the activism discussed by interviewees, and as such it is indicative of the wide and creative range of activism of the Romani women's movement.

This discussion focuses on four strands illuminating key characteristics and challenges: arts and the role of the artist, writer, performer and director; policy advocacy; mobilisation; and the role of higher education. The significance of networking and intersectional alliances is further discussed in a subsequent section.

The role of the artist as activist is highlighted as a particularly powerful tool in opposing both racism and sexism. Daróczi had pursued a dream for a creative online platform mocking sexism and racism as a means to enhance reflection among those with power to oppress: 'So not boring articles but I wanted to involve some artists and graphic designers…the main idea was to make fun of racists and sexists…there is this thing when you read an article and in the beginning you are smiling and then you think, Oh! but it's about me, shit!'

This idea had, however, not *reached* implementation and Daróczi reflected on lack of support to achieve it. 'What's stopping me? I don't know actually, this community of support maybe…I have one or two friends who agree with me, but nothing happens. We don't write a concept.'

Kurtić had responded to a call for research to make the lives of Roma lesbians visible. Her book, exploring exclusion within mainstream feminist and LGBT groups as a Roma and within Roma activist groups as a lesbian, led to further networking. 'I wanted to write about Roma lesbian existence.' Another activist published hers with similar work, people connected through Facebook and a conference was organised. 'We are making a kind of a little movement.'

Sometimes, art is seen as the most powerful way of keeping true to one's voice. Serban's work as writer, actor and director focuses on different facets of her own and Romani experiences including plays based on autobiography, the experience of immigrants in the UK and the history of Roma slavery in Romania.

> When I started work on the slavery play…not only had I to fight my own cynicism, I had to fight the cynicism in Romania. As an artist…a woman, cynicism is always around. 'You're doing that? Why? Who are you?' And I took this story which is so taboo…so uncomfortable, as the slavery story is, I had to fight my own insecurities…because obviously…I was hiring male actors who are older than me and I had to explain to them that even though you knew me when I was in Romania, when I was little, now I am your boss…you have to listen and this is my concept.

Representation was a complex issue for Serban, who could not 'live with myself if I don't get this out there…it's the idea of a work…a message greater than me', but who needed to ensure personal artistic integrity which was often threatened by those with more structural power: 'To have the Roma voice which is mine, in this point I'm not representing other Roma people, I'm just representing my point of view.' But she acknowledged that the power of her work meant that others saw it differently 'cos you never just represent yourself, in a strange way, I do it just as my point of view, but in the eyes of the others…you don't represent just yourself'.

The issue of being seen as speaking on behalf of a community plays out differently in an artistic/political context compared to a social policy/political context. Speaking from one's own experience is powerful. While it cannot be representative it can advocate (Yuval-Davis, 1999) and reveal. For a Romani artist-actor, engaged in live theatre as an 'act of political subversion' (Gilbert and Tomkins, 1996, 3) disrupting hegemonic cultural and political narratives, this is a process of being true to Roma experience and making it visible despite the obstacles. For a social policy Romani activist, it is a more direct process of advocacy and using her own voice and experience to enable the voice of her community to be heard in policy circles.

Smith had taken on an advocate role at national level in relation to education policy for her community because no-one else was speaking directly from this experience. The absence of Romani representation in her view enabled inequality to persist. 'And there was only one community member who was actually on that panel…that was me.' She realised that 'there weren't many Travellers who…were in a privileged position enough to be making a change' so 'government…are relying…on this stereotype, are blaming Gypsies themselves…for the lack of success in the education system…rather than looking at any issues of structural inequality'.

She moved on to wider organising among Gypsy, Roma, Traveller women and children including involvement in a young women's empowerment network sponsored by an NGO; setting up a youth advisory group at a Travellers' publication;

selection as a global leader for young children at the World Forum Foundation in 2017 and to attend a Council of Europe conference on Roma youth employment and education. Advocacy and learning operated in parallel, she felt 'blown away by the knowledge'.

The longstanding NGO framework supporting Romani and Traveller educational rights and the previous network of Traveller Education Services have underpinned Smith's move into advocacy and mobilisation, but she also recognised situations where 'invisible power' wielded by these organisations is shaping the direction of initiatives and inclusions.

Smith hoped to establish an autonomous Romani-run UK network for women activists to share experiences. 'I…feel like we need something that is central… this coming together of inspirational Roma…Gypsy…Traveller women…have this conference where…you hear their stories and…their activism.' She saw the need to reach out to the most hard-pressed women, for example younger women who may not know of organisations (Ovalle, 2006), and t*o* 'hear the experiences of our older women…who have done amazing things, but we don't know about [them]'.

Kurtić outlined more developed stages of mobilisation in a series of feminist organisations and projects in Serbia where nothing existed before, and emphasised the collective nature of this undertaking and the strength of mutual support. 'When you don't have something in your city…you can make it. I was part of different groups…There was no woman's organisation…no women's festival in Niš…no LGBT organisation, so we made it…I don't want to be a leader of the organisation, I want to be part of something bigger. I want to have people around me.'

All the interviewees had been through higher education prior to the full development of their activism and some credited this education at least partly with their current thinking and development. The critical awareness of experienced activists as 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci, 1971) has itself sometimes been the precursor to entering higher education (Cemlyn et al, 2014).

Daróczi was awakened to feminism through 'a professor, a white, blonde, upper middle-class lady' but referred to this lecturer having to repeat the same arguments year after year. Smith was 'the first person in my family to have ever gone to university'. But while university enhanced her understanding of the ramifications of neoliberalism, she experienced blatant racism in teaching about the education of Gypsies, Travellers and Roma. At a time when she was '*protecting*' herself from self-identification as a Traveller, she rebelled against the acceptance of this ignorance by fellow students 'something inside me, I…get really angry and…put my hand up and said "Well actually, that's not true."' She reflected that 'Having the knowledge after doing a Masters and…being more involved in things, I wish I had that knowledge then…because I would really have been able to challenge him.'

More positively, Serban gained a place at RADA where 'life pushed me, teachers… to have my one-woman show in English and to regain the power of the show' despite the difficulties of English being a second language.

The reflections of interviewees on their higher education experience illustrated the polarity between the positive aspects of this opportunity and the damaging manifestations of sexism and racism still permeating some higher education institutions. While university can provide useful conceptual tools in relation to activism, it cannot be relied on as a safe space for Roma.

In resistance to the neoliberal shaping of higher education, the education controlled by minority groups such as feminist and Roma summer schools was experienced as positive, a source of pride, enhancing frameworks for understanding and providing crucial networking opportunities. These may be more common experiences in Central Europe, but for a UK participant (Smith) the Central European University's summer school provided powerful new perspectives: 'discussing topics that I'd never ever discussed before because my university had very little knowledge of… my community…things were…so much more advanced and I was like "Wow, these people know what they're talking about."'

Kurtić also discussed the importance of self-organised, standpoint education and of maintaining this intellectual activist tradition. 'We are proud of feminist education. We decentralised feminist scene from the capital…and we opened our doors for feminists. There is a feminist summer school we organise. It's also important for us because it is inherited from some previous feminist initiative.'

Internal Romani and intersectional solidarity

This was one of the most important themes in the interviews. Solidarity experienced within the Romani movement and from other Romani women is a signification factor in making resistance to oppression possible, while its absence is particularly undermining.

Networks and women's lobby groups operate throughout Europe, and, as above, are major tools for organising and solidarity. Kurtić spoke of 'success with the [Serbian] Roma women's network, we had one and now we have 30 organisations, for ten years', and of work developing a new regional level project about LGBT Roma, 'an informal European network'. 'We are trying to have some kind of networks, a coalition with people who are dedicated to the topic. We are travelling through the region and…speaking to human rights activists, Roma activists, LGBT activists, Roma community and try to support initiatives of Roma LGBT.'

In the UK there have been Gypsy/Traveller/Roma women's groups for many years, but not self-defining as feminist. Smith, inspired by the 'brilliant' Roma Summer School, where she 'spoke to Roma from all different countries', wanted to work towards a similar movement in the UK. 'They created…a feminist movement for young Roma women…We need this in this country.' She believed that an informal women's network would lead to more fruitful exchange than a formal organisation. 'I feel…we can hide behind an organisation…but when we come as ourselves we're speaking on behalf of ourselves and…I think we'd be more open with each other to talk about…more personal things.'

For Serban and Daróczi, pioneering more individualised initiatives, sharing ideas in a facilitative, understanding context or being listened to unconditionally were seen as key to progressing their own ideas. 'What makes me feel supported is just talking to people who think alike…when I feel that they know what I'm talking about, they don't…even have to agree' (Daróczi). For Serban the point was 'Just stop talking about this and just listen.'

Roma solidarity and activism are, however, undermined by clear fault-lines and challenges brought on by internalised sexism and racism within the '*Romani bubble*' as Daróczi put it. Serban felt let down by a lack of support from other women, especially Roma. 'I'm even more hurt when a woman is saying this bullshit because I have this

romantic idea of solidarity…I'm like "Noo, noo, not you, Brutus!" And especially when it's a minority…even more.' She also felt let down by what she perceived to be a disingenuity and a demonstration of ulterior motives in claiming identity: 'Or so-called Roma artist women who are just used to using subjects that make them famous…and they use the word "feminism" but only for them…the other two Roma actors are so hungry for becoming famous that they were just not saying a thing, and I was the only crazy one.'

What was 'really difficult' for Daróczi was 'the lack of support from other women within the movement…when people…tell you what to think about things'. She expressed disappointment in others giving up their dreams or principles which left her isolated and undermined the possibilities of going beyond the limits reached by previous activists: 'I remember one woman who was really a role model…seemed to be a very strong Romani feminist who says her ideas loud even if nobody around will approve. And then…she changed, she got into projects [which] I think are… counterproductive…I feel I don't have anyone whose footsteps [I am able] to take and to…stand on her shoulders.'

Smith was aware of other inhibitors to solidarity, including barriers for those experiencing the hardships of lack of caravan sites. 'I'm not meeting other people who've been nomadic in their lifetime…who still live in a trailer or…are still facing evictions and planning battles…seeing it, feeling it every single day.' Smith also wanted to overcome the gap between her and more experienced activists: 'I've never had any communication with these older activists.'

Support felt especially lacking from Romani men who, Daróczi explained, maintain that 'advocating for Romani women's rights is dismantling the movement, and causes fragmentation…And everyone is sexist!' Lack of male solidarity is experienced as one of the biggest challenges by Romani feminists who are trying to change the male-centred or gender blind paradigm inside the Roma movement (Jovanovic and Daróczi, 2015), about which most interviewees expressed considerable scepticism: 'There are Roma leaders, Roma politicians…they are all rich males, there is [a] matter of power. They will support only people who can bring profit to them' (Kurtić). 'Everybody thinks that the oppression of the group is more important than these sub-topics or themes' (Daróczi).

There is the bigger challenge of finding common ground with non-Roma, many of whom are described simply as racists by Serban and Daróczi, despite appearances. 'Even the very nice open minded [mainstream], non-racist people are racist, it's the culture, it's the lack of self-reflectivity…they really try hard not to be racist, but for that you have to understand the whole system and your place in the system and that's really difficult' (Daróczi).

This is compounded when those supposedly open-minded people take the attention and space and speak on behalf of Roma and when challenged get confused and feel victimised by Roma: 'I asked 'Why are you crying, woman? You were being racist!' but everybody was backing her up.' Covert attitudes add further injury: 'If some man is blatantly, openly condescending to me, I know how to explain that, but if he is covering his condescending racism and all that in a nice tone, and also…having that magic of the teacher' (Serban).

Some non-Roma allies, however, had provided important insights or support that facilitated the development of Roma women's thinking and projects. It seems that

a capacity to respect and value the specific thinking of Romani women is what is needed to fully support their paradigm-changing work.

'With their friendship [they] are not teaching me, no, just in daily life telling me "Ali, actually you don't need to explain to people, you are not there to educate, if you want to speak you speak, if you don't, no." We are not used to the exercise of listening to the other' (Serban).

Serban recounted day-to-day interaction with a strong non-Roma friend who agreed to follow her thinking at all times. 'That situation was in a way so beautiful and so sad. Because my friendship with my…female friend, became…so strong, she didn't let [go of] my hand. It brings tears, because oppression is very real and it's so beautiful that a Roma becomes a complete sister to someone that is not a Roma and can speak truth to power.' She referred to other 'female friends that had the exercise of seeing aggression, and call it by its name…their exercise of killing joy and really putting the finger on what's happening helped me also…they were saying "This is white people's fears, this is racism."' However, these allies bore a cost for backing Serban. 'They are still being avoided, they are an outcast in social life.'

Despite experiencing that 'with men it's even more difficult, to tell them "it's not about you"', Serban also gave an example of a male ally who provided a channel for her voice when it might otherwise be silenced. 'We two make a very good team in this way: he understands his privilege and he facilitates things in order for my voice to be heard.' In addition to needing 'many groups of women', Daróczi added 'and not only women, men too'.

For Kurtić, who sees LGBT, feminist and animal rights activism as equally important to Roma activism, intersectional solidarity was key despite 'little disagreements with everyone'. She focused on a broad range of alliances and was averse to narrow ethnically based ideas of solidarity. 'You have different positions in each interaction…I don't like the fact that there is no meaning of solidarity among Roma activists. They think it's necessary to have solidarity inside a group, not with other groups…[But] that's the only way. Black movement…they had support from white people, they joined them. We have support from some people, but we need to show support for other groups…We must see the whole picture…we are part of this world.'

Pressures and resilience

The neoliberal system in which we are obliged to live, and which thrives on division to maintain privilege, creates the need for activism and also limits dreams and thwarts projects. Governments maintain this system and fail to deal with or even acknowledge gross inequalities: 'I do…feel like I'm banging my head on a brick wall…the government, do not want to listen to me…they would rather ignore me…The only way I can get through is just by banging on the door constantly, I'm locked out' (Smith).

Interviewees referred to funding constraints, especially gaining funds for smaller and more innovative projects. For Kurtić this uphill struggle meant: 'It's very hard to be an activist in Roma community because you are doing one step forward and then three steps back occur.' She was concerned that shortage of funding will bury human rights activism in Serbia (Ciobanu, 2013), especially feminist and Romani rights: 'there are a lot of groups closed…it's a kind of filter where only the biggest survived and shrinking spaces is a continuing process…I don't know how many of us will stay.'

Such difficulties are compounded by the domination of agency agendas: 'We don't want someone to say to us you must speak about that issue because you received our funds. So, we don't apply for state…there is a rule you don't tailor your idea according to call for donors' projects. But it's not possible' (Kurtić).

Sometimes this domination is insidious when funders appear to be supportive, or an individual employee may be, as Daróczi found, and effort is put in to build wider support and write applications, but in the end the underlying agency agenda kills funding or diverts the applicant and distorts the vision. 'Now I think they really wanted to use me for their own strategic purposes. Which is understandable but I don't think that's what civil society is for.'

Serban referred to a package of barriers that threatened to compromise her vision including 'lack of resources, austerity, but also some sort of nepotism…of abuse of power'. Smith left her job with a Traveller Education Service because it was outsourced to a private company which had no background in or understanding of Traveller culture and 'was about purely turnover of profit…it was no longer about helping people'.

The structural factors of identity which underpinned activism also made it a harder task: 'I've always felt like I've had to work doubly harder than everybody else… because I am a Traveller' (Smith); 'a man would not work so much, he would not have to fight so much' (Serban).

For Serban, as 'a Roma independent artist woman, coming from an unprivileged background', exposing this pain was a central but deeply challenging mission: 'it was a huge battle, huge risk to just go up there and say "I want to speak about something that is not likeable" because what people want…is to be liked…to be loved…to be secure, and I would go against that in saying, this is where…it hurts so bad that…this and this happened, and it's really showing your biggest vulnerabilities as a woman.'

Gaining employment in NGOs may divert from activism. While a project may claim to promote rights, the agency agenda can subtly shift people's focus as they become embedded in the organisation. 'Administrative work affects energy and then creativity' (Kurtić) and long hours reduce possibilities for finding and building support among other activists. 'There is so much administration. It's not activism, it's reporting…We are just part of the system…Activism is when you go to the street… it's…spontaneous' (Kurtić). Daróczi thought that some Romani women had given up their dreams under this pressure: 'People start up with big dreams and then somehow they…become soldiers of the system, so they get into these big institutions…and instead of still working on changing the system, they get comfortable…and…forget… what they stood for in the beginning.'

Daróczi's need to generate support was in direct conflict with her work demands. Support might be there 'if I could have time to talk to other women. But I don't have time because I try to do the work I do right. So maybe I have to decide whether I do my work in the right way according to my principles, OR I build my community of support. Because I cannot do both at the same time.'

The isolating effect of operating as an activist within a hostile environment inevitably means sometimes self-doubt sets in. The need to be reflective and self-critical could rebound: 'You have to be critical about what you are doing, but there is a limit… Because sometimes it seems self-reflectivity but it's actually reproducing the system which oppresses us' (Daróczi). Serban similarly 'had to fight…my own fears and push the fear'.

A significant factor impeding implementation of activist dreams for non-native English speakers is the linguistically imperialist assumption of English as the lingua franca. This greatly increases the workload involved in seeking to action a vision through complicated application forms alongside myriad other pressures and means that some voices are never heard, notably those of Romani women activists who were not educated abroad or in the closed spaces of the Romani movement's elite systems such as the Central European University.

Given these multiple obstacles, women's resilience, continuing activism and willingness to speak their mind in the face of misunderstanding and resistance to their views is all the more impressive. 'The miracle is when you don't give up because in this system the only rational thing is to give up' (Daróczi).

Sometimes the biggest obstacles are transformed into sources of strength. For Smith the extreme racism her family experienced over many years motivates and empowers her advocacy. Moreover, the fact that she is a young Gypsy woman is 'My biggest barrier to be taken seriously, but it's my biggest weapon.' Serban describes the turning point when she rejected the intrusion of outsiders on her world view as 'becoming ashes and then rising up as a phoenix. I took my play, the story of my life, into my own hands.'

Interviewees talked about how they stay strong because of their vision and because they can see that they are making a difference, even when those around them are opposed to their point of view and when Roma women feel that any pronouncement they would make is one of 'killing joy' in others.

Funders did not grasp Daróczi's online project idea, but this did not stop her nurturing a wider dream to take forward this agenda with other stand-up comedians, despite the lack of support and a positive role model.

Kurtić urged radical strategies: 'You cannot influence the system, you have to reinvent it.' 'There is a misunderstanding of feminism. I really think we have to be more radical,' echoing Fraser's (1997) arguments about 'transformative' rather than merely 'affirmative' remedies to injustice.

Conclusion

Jovanović et al (2015, 12) argue that 'Romani women are agents of change but are also deprived of safe places where they could both conceptualize and search for solutions for [the] many challenges they face.' This paper has identified many of the ways in which they are deprived of these safe places to promote transformative change: direct discrimination; manipulative patronage; lack of self-critical understanding and support by non-Roma; failures of solidarity within the wider Romani movement but also among Romani women; lack of funding; the pressures of survival in neoliberal economies; and pressures to undertake individual activist initiatives without support.

We suggest that this pressure is itself reflective of the individualised, enterprise culture fostered by neoliberalism. Black women have also found that 'solidarity is often dictated and controlled by people with power and privilege' (Hearns and Lindsey, 2017). This adds further emphasis to the need for process frames and collective spaces where Roma women can take the time to share stories and reflections, and provide mutual validation and empowerment. Feminist movements have provided such safe spaces and investment in women's initiatives in the past, with good effect. There is a felt urgency for individuals to address injustice, but some of the most positive messages

from the interviews are about collective networks, supportive listening, reflection to turn shared experiences of marginalised identity into a powerful momentum for change, and the value of working across identities in intersectional and international solidarity.

Non-Roma allies have also shown examples of unconditional listening and a willingness to name oppression that have supported activists' energy and vision, including exposing the working of 'invisible power', a concept which describes 'how social processes create and perpetuate inequality by shaping the boundaries of what is felt to be acceptable, normal or possible' (Howard and Vajda, 2016, 46).

In this paper we have sought to work from an 'epistemological community' which can 'share common value systems and exist across difference' (Yuval-Davis, 1999, 96). We think that such collaborative models, carefully constructed not to overshadow Romani women's voices, have the potential to highlight and enhance their key contribution in arenas from which they have been traditionally excluded.

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