

SIX

Romani young people's activism and transformative change

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Introduction

This chapter arose from conversations between two Romani women activists working with young people (Daróczi and Smith) and a non-Romani woman researcher (Cemlyn). It considers lessons for transformative change from empowerment work with young Roma. Daróczi and Smith led the direction through their knowledge, ideas and direct experience, and Cemlyn framed the content. Broader personal reflections are indicated through direct quotations from Daróczi and Smith.

We outline four underpinning approaches: terminological issues relating to the groups we focus on; discrimination and inequality affecting Romani young people; the conceptual framework informing the discussion; and the current policy framework for empowerment work by and with Romani youth. We describe selected areas of work in national and international contexts through the organizations with which Daróczi and Smith are involved. We then analyse and reflect on these currents and contexts of activism under

themes of: empowerment; identity and diversity in Romani movements; Roma/non-Roma solidarity; and policy implications. The conclusion focuses on new and inspirational directions for Romani young people's activism.

Note on terminology

We take a cross-national perspective through the work of a European organization, Phiren Amenca, working in ten countries, and a group of UK organizations, including *Travellers' Times* (TT) youth section and Roma Rights Defenders. The umbrella term 'Roma' has increasingly been used by the European Commission and other institutions to include groups in both Eastern and Western Europe. Simhandl (2006) refers to inherent silences and unspoken assumptions about boundaries around essentialist categories concerning these groups in European Union (EU) political discourse. There are numerous groups from Western Europe to the Balkans who do not identify as 'Roma'; however, as an endonym, it has been widely adopted (see [Chapter One](#)).

'Roma' is used inside Phiren Amenca, and often across Europe in relation to pan-European policy development and civil society networking. Within the UK, however, it has been common to refer to 'Gypsies, Roma and Travellers' (GRT), of which Gypsies and Travellers have a tradition of commercial nomadism, whereas 'Roma' signifies largely sedentary groups entering the UK from Eastern and Central Europe over three decades but with strong connections to some UK Romani Gypsy groups. An alternative umbrella term adopted by the Council of Europe (CoE) Commissioner for Human Rights (2012) is 'Roma and Travellers', which includes the wide variety of groups its work covers. The dynamic between self-definition/representation and externally applied terms and boundaries is inherent to the political process of self-empowerment and activism (McGarry, 2014). With reference to terminology, we refer to racism directed at Roma/Gypsies

and Travellers as 'antigypsyism' (for wider discussion, see [Chapter Three](#) by Tabá) but retain 'anti-Gypsyism' in quotes.

Inequality and discrimination

Inequality and antigypsyism have intensified in recent decades despite policy measures such as the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS). The Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) has reported stark statistics on the exclusion experienced by Roma (see [Chapter One](#)).

The European Youth Forum (2014) explored young people's experiences of discrimination across multiple domains and dimensions, including gender, ethnicity, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT), and refugee status. Being 18–24 years old was itself considered grounds for discrimination, magnified by intersectional experiences. A total of 55.7 per cent saw Roma as discriminated against generally, as the most discriminated group in terms of education, qualifications and renting accommodation, and as highly discriminated against in health and other services. The multifaceted denial of rights, opportunities and affirmation means that Romani young people are 'denied the right to be young' (Phiren Amenca, 2016: 6) because they lack space to explore freely and develop their own identities, characters and aspirations.

The FRA's (2013) analysis of 2008 and 2012 surveys reveals the compounding of discrimination by gender, reporting lower levels of literacy (77 per cent, compared to 85 per cent), post-16 education (37 per cent, as against 50 per cent) and employment (21 per cent, compared to 85 per cent) for Romani women than for men. Jovanović et al (2015: 3), discussing the diversity and complexity of the Romani Women's Movement, relate how intersectionality theory has helped make sense of the 'hybrid structures of inequalities Romani women face', identified lacunae and challenged the general (white/non-Romani) discourse of the feminist movement, the general (often patriarchal) discourse of the Romani movement and

the broader patriarchy. Jovanović and Daróczi (2015) highlight how much more work is needed to develop the strengths of a truly intersectional Romani movement. Jovanović et al (2015) also refer to tensions between older and younger Roma, possibly related to the latter moving away from conservative and restrictive discourses concerning women's roles. LGBT Roma/Gypsies have explored how these identities can lead to exclusion or invisibility within both Romani and LGBT communities, and the struggle to assert and celebrate these identities (Baker, 2015).

Educational opportunities to open doors to future active citizenship are systematically denied to Roma in many European countries (Cemlyn and Ryder, 2016). Segregation in separate classes/schools and misclassification as pupils with special educational needs remain key obstacles in many countries (see Chapter One). Infringement proceedings were launched by the European Commission against the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary in 2014, 2015 and 2016, respectively; however, so far they have resulted in cosmetic rather than meaningful change (ERRC, 2017).

In England, ineffective mainstreaming policy approaches, coupled with austerity – as seen in the demise of nationwide local authority Traveller education support services by 2018 – have left youth with no targeted education support or information, and a loss of knowledge on identity and inclusion within educational institutions. The UK 'Race disparity audit' (Gov.UK, 2017) highlighted stark inequality of educational and health outcomes. In 2018, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Racism noted that Gypsies and Travellers had the highest rates of fixed and permanent exclusions, alongside informal exclusions, arising from negative teacher stereotypes, low teacher expectations and the absence of ethnic and cultural representations in the curriculum (United Nations, 2018). In the first national survey of prejudice in Britain for over ten years, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2018) showed that more people openly expressed negative feelings

towards GRT (44 per cent) than any other group of people in society. Rising antigypsyism continues to be fuelled by media depictions of Gypsies and Travellers as threatening 'invaders' of local communities, and has manifested in local and national politics, with recent government proposals to criminalize a nomadic existence further (Gov.UK, 2020).

Conceptual framework

This chapter is based on the key concepts of human rights, interculturalism, empowerment and antigypsyism. The international and European human rights framework, incorporating civil-political, socio-economic and representational rights (Cemlyn, 2008), underpins Romani youth campaigns, like other movements for social justice (Donnelly, 2007). There is a dynamic between top-down convention-framed human rights work and grass-roots, bottom-up struggles (Ife and Fiske, 2006).

While human rights can be flouted by regressive regimes and right-wing movements, and perceived divisively by majority groups in relation to minority groups (Bell and Cemlyn, 2014), there are also left-wing critiques. These include: their assumed universality; postcolonial arguments concerning imperialist imposition on non-Western countries (Gosavi, 2016); and anti-capitalist arguments of its co-option by neoliberalism, consumerization and privatization, with human rights, free markets and democracy being a widely accepted triad, despite exacerbation of poverty and human rights violations (Evans and Ayers, 2006). The EU has focused on economic inclusion of Roma within neoliberalism but continuing social and political marginalization undermines this aim from within.

Therefore 'the notion of human rights ... [is] subject to both historical and social contexts' (Gosavi, 2016: 63) and there are 'many defensible implementations' (Donnelly, 2007: 299). The notion of 'human security' (Yuval-Davis, 2014), drawing on development and capabilities studies (Sen, 1999), also incorporates

emotional dimensions, the need for belonging and safety from violence, alongside recognition and redistribution. The Romani rights movement and Romani feminist, LGBTIQ and youth movements negotiate these complexities but the human rights framework remains a strong foundation for all campaigns.

Postcolonial theory links to interculturalism, a core approach for activist projects, alongside intersectionality. While ‘multiculturalism’ mainly celebrates difference and can essentialize and exclude (Cantle, 2012), interculturalism refers to constant and equal dialogue between different groups mutually influencing and modifying each other, and seeks to transform unequal power relationships between minority and majority groups, and enable mutual adaptation rather than one-way integration into a flawed dominant system. Although even multiculturalism is currently seen as dangerous to national identity in state policies and programmes in Hungary, a few small civil society projects do adopt an intercultural approach, mostly educational and sensitizing events where organizers bring together Roma and non-Roma for building dialogue and cooperation between them, while utilizing the experiences and knowledge of the Romani participants/facilitators as expert input.

Intersectionality developed from critical race feminism and postcolonial theory as a challenge to essentialist identity politics in the Black movement (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983), and is a tool in understanding multiple identities and generating a ‘transversal politics’ that facilitates reflexive dialogue between people of different positionalities (Yuval-Davis, 1999). However, there remains a role, albeit contested, for strategic essentialism in the struggle of marginalized identities for social justice (Brubaker, 2004). In the state socialist era, cultural preservation was the only flag under which Roma could officially gather in Hungary; today, for many national and international organizations, a cultural focus also still seems to be the only politically viable way to advocate for Roma’s own institutions.

Dynamic change also informs notions of empowerment. It can focus on individual development of skills, awareness and confidence in taking control of one's own life (for example, Zimmerman, 1990) but also be co-opted by state systems as a regulatory or oppressive rather than emancipatory tool (Baistow, 1994). Here, we focus on collective empowerment and analysis encompassing individual self-empowerment, reflecting also Freire's (1972) critical pedagogy and development of critical consciousness. Empowerment of Roma has become part of European policymaking goals but reality has not matched rhetoric in incorporating Romani voices in policies and programmes (Acton et al, 2014).

There are related critiques of how Romani civil society has become distorted by 'NGO-ization', dominated by donor agendas, remote from the Romani grass roots and preoccupied by specific interventions (Trehan, 2009). Those organizations that are closer to their constituencies have struggled, reduced services or closed because of austerity cuts 'at a time when demand for these services is increasing considerably' (EWL, 2012: 14).

The barriers faced by Roma are magnified in the broader context of antigypsyism. End (2012) explores its role historically and currently as a majority society mechanism to stabilize itself through projecting uncertainty onto a minority population, framing a notion of Roma – unconnected to reality – as having unstable identities and lifestyles or a 'non-identity', being 'parasitic' in the sense of non-productive, and having an absence of discipline.

Youth empowerment policy

The definition of youth empowerment of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2018) refers to young people's leadership, mutual connectivity and support. The CoE (2015a: 13) more clearly asserts a human rights framework, claiming a pioneering role in mainstreaming human rights

education in youth policy and practice generally, and that this ‘provides the optimal educational approach and content to understanding human rights as a common asset of all humanity and, conversely, to understanding the violations of the human rights of anyone as a violation of the human rights of all’.

Human rights education and combating antigypsyism are at the core of the CoE’s (2011) *Roma Youth Action Plan*, developed from recognition that Romani youth had no specific support channels, either in mainstream youth councils or within Romani forums (Phiren Amenca, 2016). Thus, the goal has been ‘double mainstreaming ... [to] ensure, on the one hand, the inclusion of youth issues in Roma policies and programmes and, on the other, that of Roma youth issues into youth policies’ (CoE, 2011: 2). The plan is elaborated around six themes, ‘strengthening Roma youth identity; addressing multiple discrimination and recognising multiple identities; building a stronger Roma youth movement; increasing the capacity of Roma youth organisations to participate in policy making; human rights and human rights education; combating discrimination and antigypsyism’ (CoE, 2015b: 10). It references the need to help young people identify and challenge structural discrimination, combat racist attitudes, build self-esteem, and increase human rights awareness and support to remove obstacles (CoE, 2015a), but it is an uphill task.

One of the principles outlined in guidelines for the *Roma Youth Action Plan* (2016–20) is ‘Participation and consultation of Roma youth and Roma youth organisations, from the local to the European level, including their involvement in policy advocacy’ (CoE, 2016: 4). However, until 2019, the Hungarian Youth Council had no Romani lead member. Similarly, the first Romani member of the European Youth Forum joined in January 2020. Meanwhile, the EU Youth Guarantee is economically focused, namely, that all young people under 25 receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education (European

Commission, 2018), but there is only limited evidence of these objectives being fulfilled for Roma.

Case studies: youth empowerment work internationally and within the UK

The main mission of Phiren Amenca is to build dialogue and engagement between Romani and non-Romani youth and organizations as a tool for youth participation in public and political life, to advocate for double mainstreaming, and to challenge stereotypes, racism and antigypsyism. Funded by the European Commission and the CoE, it is an international network of Romani and non-Romani volunteers and voluntary service organizations, with members in ten countries (within and outside the EU) and partner organizations beyond. 'Phiren Amenca' is a Romani expression meaning 'come and share a journey with us'. This journey is personal, its space and length are different, but the final aim is the respect that develops between Roma and non-Roma.

Phiren Amenca's work rests on three pillars: voluntary service, non-formal education methods and advocacy. Voluntary service coordinates nine to 12 months of exchange of Romani and non-Romani volunteers between Romani and mainstream non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The educational programme involves seminars, training and conferences for volunteers, activists, youth workers, educators, and professionals about: racism and antigypsyism; human rights; intersectionality; challenging stereotypes; and Romani history – Remembrance and the Roma Genocide. In advocacy, Phiren Amenca trains, supports and empowers young people, and builds the advocacy capacities of organizations on local, regional and European levels. Connections are built with decision-making bodies, advocacy groups and organizations, though Phiren Amenca lacks capacity for steady, strategic work in this field. Together with the youth, it conducts research and drafts policy recommendations for intergovernmental bodies

(for example, CoE and EU) and for national decision-making structures through its member organizations. As Daróczi notes:

‘Our vision is totally in line with the concept of a Social Europe. Our work with Roma youth is self-empowerment at its best: through our seminars, local activities and international events, we give them tools and knowledge they can use in order to participate, represent their own interests, advocate for their needs and their rights. Given the diversity of needs and interest among Roma youth, the main issue is the lack of access to decision-making processes where Roma youth could vocalize their needs, whatever they may be. Through voluntary service, Roma young people can get to know and practise how NGOs work, what the structures of local or EU policymaking are, and how local communities can be organized around social justice causes. Personal contact is essential, to trust and support young people in moving on with their own ideas.... This ... entails sharing and transferring power as we would like the young people to take our place. There is a need to be more courageous, enable young people’s contributions, listen to young people when shaping our methods, facilitate young Roma being in the lead.... We also promote an attitude with non-Roma volunteers and seminar participants which does not position them as “the saviours” of Roma, but as partners, where Roma are the ones knowing what they need and the agents of their actions. White folks are not there to teach or help them, but to assist and accompany them on the way.’

Daróczi also reflects on the constraints of a neoliberal and antigypsyist economic context, EU policy structures, and limited staff resources:

‘The EU volunteer programme’s main goal is to provide skills and knowledge to the youngsters which they can later use in the job market, and as a side goal, they also acquire intercultural skills, learn to be tolerant, etc. It would be nice if tolerance were a job-market skill too. Our projects have to prepare youth for the job market but ... many of them will have no chance to get a job because of hate and antigypsyism ... we prepare them for a labour market which is not prepared for them ... when the young people go back home, they can rarely stay optimistic as their realities do not provide them with high hopes.’

Equally:

‘We organize international seminars ... to give them advocacy tools and opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, for which one needs a mindset of goals, dreams, visions and practical skills. We try to increase their involvement ... but we are very limited because the space for citizenship participation is shrinking, let alone for Roma youth.... With the authoritarianization of states, the number of democratic tools and the number of people brave enough to use them are decreasing.... It is still not evident to invite Roma youth advocates or organizations to forums where Roma and/or youth policies are discussed and decisions made. When invited ... we do not always have the resources to participate meaningfully [or] keep the young people we prepared in the loop.’

TT (*Travellers’ Times*, 2018a) is a national media and communications project. TT produces a biannual print magazine and daily website. It is a long-standing project of Rural Media, a charitable production company creating

issue-driven films and heritage and digital arts projects that support people to acquire practical digital skills, participate in cultural production and influence change. Funded by the Big Lottery, it was set up to challenge negative representations of GRT in mainstream media and is designed, predominantly written by and features GRT communities, giving a platform to promote positive imagery, challenge stereotypes and provide support, tools and opportunity for self-advocacy.

A consultation with beneficiaries identified a demand by older Roma and Travellers that young people were the ‘future generation’ and resources should be put into supporting them to get their voices heard. In response, Youth at Travellers’ Times (YTT) was also developed as a website platform for youth journalism and media production for young people to develop media skills, news-writing courses and events to train young people to tell their stories. A national youth advisory group was established to ensure the youth section was led by beneficiaries. This attracted a pool of young, proactive Roma and Traveller activists, from varying backgrounds, with some from activist families and others finding out later about the network of organizations supporting GRT communities. A small network of activists emerged and TT created a space for peer-to-peer support and mentoring to develop, alongside training in youth journalism and digital safety, and for self-advocacy and access to information about European training and study sessions. However, the project’s media focus sets limits on how TT can support their activism and there is disconnection from the European opportunities that TT promotes. As Smith comments:

‘Often, funding priorities can act as a barrier to supporting young activists’ ambitions, so we work hard to find creative ways to establish new spin-off projects that are community-driven and youth-led. To my knowledge, there is no youth organization specifically targeted at Roma and Travellers in the UK that equips youth

with tools in strategic advocacy, promotion of political engagement and its relevance to their lived context, challenging and recognizing antigypsyism, building knowledge on how the NGO sector operates for youth to develop their own project ideas and access funding mechanisms. I see this type of work being essential to the development of the Romani movement in the UK; otherwise, we have young activists being pulled into all different sorts of projects but with no guidance on a coordinated approach to their advocacy, or focus on how their own personal aspirations and ambitions can be supported and harnessed.

Youth rarely take the opportunity [of training sessions in Europe], though we have had a few individual cases where young people have gone to study sessions in Budapest through promotion of events via TT and it has been “life-changing”. My perception is that there is minimal knowledge about the existence of the Council of Europe and the *Roma Youth Action Plan* and the benefits it can present amongst youth in the UK. I question if the terminology of “Roma” when advertising prevents participation of young people who identify as “Gypsy” or “Traveller”.... Either they don’t understand how it can relate to their lived context or the promotion of events is simply not reaching them. My concern is that Brexit will result in further isolation and reduced capacity for Roma and Traveller youth to develop European networks of solidarity and support.’

The 2019 It’s Kushti to Rokker project was designed to raise awareness about how high levels of social and educational exclusion and antigypsyism impact young people’s mental health and wellbeing. After consulting with young people in 2018, the YTT Advisory Group recognized that there was a clear lack of video-based informative content that accurately reflected young Gypsies’ and Travellers’ own perspectives on

their lived experiences. In the project, young people worked with writers and filmmakers to create a series of five short films based on their experiences, addressing education, bereavement, online hate and double layers of discrimination. The impact of racial discrimination on well-being, feelings of self-perception and self-worth was an overarching theme.

An accompanying information pack provided advice and signposting to support for young people and families. Furthermore, a ten-minute documentary for policymakers and education and health professionals aimed to raise awareness of the inequalities and antigypsyism Romani and Traveller youth experience, and the impact on mental health risks. Also, a downloadable toolkit supported the facilitation of discussions on mental well-being, and offered resources promoting Romani and Traveller history, language and culture.

Romani and Traveller youth involved in the project were supported to lead a series of screenings across the UK attended by policymakers and health and education providers. The youth-led production process enabled the viewer to see the subject through young people's eyes, facilitated discussions about mental health, combatted feelings of isolation and offered a creative approach to addressing challenging issues.

The YTT Advisory Group also engaged in wider European organizing. An activist from the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) was invited by Smith to talk with the other young activists about his experiences working in Central and Eastern Europe and the situation for Roma. They joined forces in July 2018 at Appleby Horse Fair to support the ERRC in launching Roma Rights Defenders (2018) in the UK, a pan-European activist network of Roma and non-Roma (*Travellers' Times*, 2018b), through which 'we can share and receive information, collaborate, and mobilise strategically against Roma rights violations'. Smith commented that "To my knowledge, this is the first international network of this kind established in the UK."

A small group of Romani activist Labour Party members formed alliances through political advocacy and engagement with parliamentary allies. The 2017 Labour manifesto stated that ‘We will end racism and discrimination against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, and protect the right to lead a nomadic way of life’ (Labour Party, 2017: 112), and many were prompted to vote for the first time. Progress was slow but a Labour ‘friends of’ group developed to provide official representation and knowledge, and crucially to create spaces for community activism within the party. As Smith comments: “This type of independent advocacy is important for the Romani movement as a whole ... the term ‘antigypsyism’ has not been recognized or adopted by the UK government and is a fundamental step towards acknowledging the situation of its Gypsy, Roma and Traveller populations.”

Discussion

Human rights and Roma empowerment in a European context

The account of Phiren Amenca’s work illustrates implementation of several principles of the CoE’s (2011) *Roma Youth Action Plan*: addressing and combatting multiple discrimination and antigypsyism; human rights education; strengthening Romani youth identity; building a stronger Romani youth movement; and increasing the capacity of Romani youth organizations to participate in policymaking. Together with opportunities offered for intercultural dialogue, educational engagement in civil society organizations and support to develop their own initiatives, this kind of inspiring empowerment work, if multiplied and well resourced across Europe, could make a noticeable difference to the resources, strengths and skills of Romani youth, and consequently their ability to promote transformative change. Moreover, the advocacy and networking opportunities offered by larger, donor-funded NGOs such as the ERRC (albeit that NGOs are sometimes found to distort grass-roots momentum), as well as educational seminars for

Roma like those at the Central European University (CEU), enhance the apparent benefits of European connectedness and cooperation, and can be ‘life-changing’ for individuals.

For Smith, in the UK, “We are lacking training in policy advocacy that guides Romani and Traveller activists in a structured approach to tackling systemic issues surrounding education and health that would enhance their grass-roots activism.” Therefore, the European examples of processes and structures represent a possible new model:

‘for improving the life chances of Roma and Traveller communities across Europe. Shall we also start investing in more advanced forms of youth empowerment and mobilization and learn from organizations like ERGO, Ternype (which provides in-depth reflections on antigypsyism through a Roma Genocide education lens) and Phiren Amenca in their approaches and relationships?’

However, Daróczy’s experience also illustrates the current limits of this model because of constraints on Phiren Amenca and similar organizations, through insufficient resources and staffing, to follow through on higher-level opportunities for young people to influence policy, lack of support for them after involvement in the project, and the antigypsyist context limiting access to jobs, with reality not providing “high hopes”. Moreover, there are wider dangers in the rise of right-wing politics and increasing racism. At the same time, smaller and independent activist initiatives, as in the UK, suggest sources of energy and determination to enable the Romani voice regardless of lack of support.

Barriers, tensions and challenges to empowerment within civil society

These discussions evidenced a number of challenges for civil society and the work of NGOs, including funding and firefighting pressures, organizational objectives, and internal

tensions, together with pointers towards more powerful activism. Civil society can be conceptualized as radical and transformative, but in the context of austerity and antigypsyism, it may primarily be dealing with immediate issues of health, employment, accommodation and violence, without opportunities for strategic work and with declining funding. Activists can sometimes shape organizational opportunities to promote change, though within limits. TT is a media rather than a human rights organization, so despite the youth group stretching its brief, it is unsuited to sustaining direct activism.

However, even with relatively secure, albeit circumscribed, funding and empowerment objectives, as at Phiren Amenca, conflicts can arise with workers' own activist values. Despite the overall balance of positives that many on the Left (not all) would ascribe to EU membership, it remains a neoliberal, capitalist project. For workers like Daróczi who envision a more equitable non-capitalist system, this can create a contradiction: "Personally, sometimes it is hard to operate from EU funds while being anti-capitalist. The EU is first and foremost a [capitalist] economic union, and we keep trying to decorate this base with some values of human rights and tolerance and justice." Alternative fundraising approaches raise similar dilemmas: "One could go for other ways of raising funds but we cannot afford a professional fundraiser; plus, I don't know how I feel about approaching companies, such as Coca Cola or the like." The project-based system undermines fundamental change:

'Civil society organizations should play a key role in transformative change but the project-based operation makes it almost impossible. You either have to set aside your strategic goals or not comply with the grant's objectives. So, you either define your goals, as an organization, in line with those of the donors, or your work is considered not needed.'

The UK experienced a rapid withdrawal of the state from service provision, especially in the years 2010 to 2020, through increased privatization and drastic budget cuts to local authorities and other bodies. Civil society has a crucial role in picking up on deficits in government services but NGOs do not have the capacity or resources for such a role, which would also further divert them into firefighting and away from wider change. Moreover, there are systemic barriers for Romani young people's involvement in these organizations. A no-deal Brexit might result in even deeper cuts.

Autonomous Roma-led groups across Europe are supporting communities and exposing antigypsyism and historical wrongs. In the UK, a small but growing population of educated and politically engaged young Roma and Travellers are challenging the status quo and want to take an active role in building up their communities. They are bypassing NGOs and creating their own advocacy structures and relationships with politicians, supported by non-GRT allies, but can meet some resistance from the NGO sector. Projects built and sustained by well-meaning *gadje* can be less than empowering and sometimes instead promote a culture of dependence. Young activists face a gap of organizations offering tools of agency and self-advocacy that place knowledge into the hands of the individuals themselves. As Audre Lorde (1984: 110) said, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. For Smith:

'It feels like we are at a significant time in the movement ... many NGOs are being challenged on how they are supporting the development of Romani and Traveller youth to eventually move into positions of leadership and employ more community members. In order to allow the Romani and Traveller movement in the UK to develop further we must acknowledge some parts of the sector are outdated, and space and support must be given for new community-led initiatives and ideas to thrive, with young leaders at the forefront who nurture and strengthen Roma

and Traveller youth activism and identity, building on and developing links with the Council of Europe, *Roma Youth Action Plan* and European Roma youth organizations.'

Therefore, while NGOs can relieve hardship, help people to negotiate within the parameters set by the system and stretch those limits a little, they may fail to transcend barriers to empowerment such as inaccessible labour markets, be more individually based than collectively transformative, or fail to adapt and empower Romani leadership. They fit into a broader oppressive system in contradictory ways, helping to sustain it by alleviating some pressure (Daróczy et al, 2018). Yet, civil society more broadly is crucial both to protecting basic rights and to radical democratic and transformative change, with grass-roots autonomous initiatives breaking through boundaries.

Romani movements, identity, diversity, intersectionality and intercultural solidarity

The experience of different organizations illustrates fruitful cross-currents, as well as challenges in relation to identity, diversity, intersectional and intercultural exchange, and the development of Romani movements. Phiren Amenca celebrates culture but focuses away from identity politics to common human rights across differences. This is partly practical since young people sometimes come from more than ten countries with different traditions, values and identity constructions, but also because their mission is empowerment, activism and dialogue-building. Their educational events demonstrate that Roma have culturally and geographically diverse identities but should cooperate and fight together for recognition. Politically, identity politics and movements have also taken various directions, with Romani (youth) activism more focused on nation-building in some countries and on universal human rights in others. This causes tensions and the organization's goal is the opposite: to create dialogue and

community – for that, the common denominator is human rights, even though universalist values might discourage certain types of activism.

In its external relationships, Phiren Amenca builds alliances with other groups, ethnic, national and religious minorities, LGBTIQ communities, feminist organizations, and so on. This can be difficult, especially if they focus on specific identities rather than common themes, because other groups are not necessarily favourable to Roma, so the common aims of human rights – the right to recognition and redistribution – are more helpful when creating cooperative spaces and alliances, though the continuing emphasis on multiculturalism and identity politics in the global arena of minority groups makes this harder. At the organizational level too, despite a highly diverse membership of the international network, differences become an asset, and the human rights culture mediates any conflicts.

Similarly, at YTT, self-representation promotes non-homogeneous views of diverse ethnic groups and is a means to highlight diversity and intersectionality. Roma Rights Defenders and other groups include diverse ethnicities, as encompassed in the term ‘Gypsies, Roma, Travellers’.

However, there is a persistent threat to a nomadic existence, including: the UK government’s tighter creation of ‘gypsy status’ for planning purposes, which many saw as a direct attempt to ‘define Gypsy and Traveller communities out of existence’ (*Travellers’ Times*, 2016); measures restricting travelling and Traveller self-employment; and, more recently, current proposals to criminalize trespass (Gov.UK, 2020). Therefore, identity can be used as a mechanism for cultural perseverance related to nomadic heritage, which becomes a shield for some against a society that views them as ‘out of date’.

Although ‘Romani movement’ is not a frequent term in the UK, and might suggest NGOs often not led by community members, there have been advances since the 1990s. Across the UK and Europe, technology and social media have furnished opportunities to gather and tell varied, intersectional

experiences and provide collective support, increasing awareness and networking. When it can move away from front-line work and public awareness campaigns, this movement may develop a more complex approach, providing opportunities for Romani and Traveller youth to reflect on issues around human rights and equip them with tools for collective mobilization and the self-empowerment that comes through being part of a collective battle.

GRT civil society has played a critical role in nurturing and developing a prominent feature of the growing Romani and Traveller movement, namely, the predominant number of GRT women working and volunteering within civil society, including at TT. These activists vary on how they self-define as feminist but are increasingly coming together across different groups. However, Smith notes how “funding constraints and the need just to get the job done mean many voices are silenced, or dominated within the sector by non-GRT allies who are not conscious of power imbalances and dominate meetings, unintentionally disempowering GRT women by speaking on their behalf”.

Some advances in raising awareness of LGBTIQ experiences in the UK include Gypsy-authored research among Gypsy gay men (Baker, 2015). More recently, Traveller Pride was founded in 2019 as a self-organized network collective of Roma and Travellers to provide a platform for community intersectionality and ‘advice, guidance, support and information to make life easier for LGBT+ Travellers’ (Traveller Pride, 2019). On 6 July 2019, Traveller Pride marched at Pride London, the first official representation of Travellers in the UK at a Pride march. The 2019 *Its Kushti to Rokker* project captured the historic occasion through a short film, ‘Hard Road to Travel’, based on the lived experiences of those involved and aimed at promoting visibility of intersectional identities.

In Hungary and elsewhere in Europe, many successful Romani NGOs are led by women but it is an underpaid sector. In Daróczi’s experience, male leaders are more numerous

where NGOs have more secure funding and higher pay. In parts of Europe, there is a clearer identification of Romani feminism than currently in the UK, and this balance is reflected in the staff composition of Phiren Amenca. Four women manage the network who either identify as or effectively operate as feminists. Being led by women has a high impact on their work as they always keep in mind, and talk/train about gender equality, feminisms in their various forms and intersectionality. This includes conscious decisions about supporting Romani girls' and women's participation, for example, including a male relative in activities in cases where traditional families will not allow a girl to travel alone, and making efforts to secure the representation of LGBTIQ Romani individuals or groups at events, which might not happen with Hungarian male staff.

Yuval-Davis (2014) has argued that part of the oppression of women is that they are constructed 'as embodiments of collectivity boundaries' but that this 'might make it easier for women to transcend and cross boundaries and engage in dialogical transversal politics'. This dynamic – the opportunity to experiment, challenge and form new connections across boundaries that comes with marginalized status – is often evident in the Romani women's and youth movements, though less so as yet in the developing LGBTIQ movement.

Alongside the complexity of exchanges across different Romani ethnicities and intersectional positionalities lies the question of solidarity with non-Romani allies, which can be problematic where non-Roma are unaware of dominating, but alternatively supportive and respectful of Romani leadership, as in the independent advocacy examples, the structured approach of Phiren Amenca and elsewhere (Daróczi et al, 2018). This returns to questions of transformative change. The examples of powerful Romani activism point to more fundamental challenges to systemic oppression that reverse rather than mitigate it. In Daróczi's words:

'It is time for white people, men, straight folks to integrate to the society which is non-white, non-male, etc in majority. As long as we think of ourselves who need to be integrated to messed-up societies and systems, we cannot talk about empowerment. If we want transformative change, we cannot seek the one-sided integration of the oppressed into a system which was built to create and maintain inequalities.'

Policy implications

In most countries, the policy environment is not favourable to the needs and interests of Romani youth. Phiren Amenca has been advocating with others for the representation of Romani youth in policymaking and decision-making structures. National youth councils, the European Youth Forum and all mainstream youth organizations should reflect on how their structures contribute to strengthening Romani youth participation, as well as the internal barriers. Advocacy work by Romani youth organizations locally, nationally and internationally requires recognition.

Since the European Commission launched the EU Framework for NRIS in 2011, institutional racism has continued to manifest itself through policies and practices. The NRIS after 2020 should have a clear focus on Romani youth, participation structures, non-formal education, mobility and support for Romani youth organizations. The NRIS in some countries, for example, Slovenia and Croatia, started to develop this focus. Organizations such as Phiren Amenca and TernYe indicate tested methods for developing critical awareness, participation, dialogue and activism.

Intersectional identities and issues for young Roma need to have dedicated space in policy discussions. While attention to gender has proved crucial in mobilization, LGBTIQ Roma face violence and ostracism by families/Romani

community members, discrimination from majority society, as well as exclusion from mainstream LGBTIQ organizations (Tišer, 2015).

Conclusion

A step change is needed to support young people's involvement in transformative change based on the premise of 'nothing about us without us'. A wider concept of Social Europe that moves away from the shackles of neoliberalism to foreground equality, dialogue, redistribution and respectful recognition of all minority perspectives is needed to underpin greater progress.

The energy and dynamism for such change is ready in a range of social movement and civil society initiatives highlighting the potential of Romani young people and movements to be in the vanguard. There are continuing dangers from antigypsyism, and increased threats from racist populist and nationalist political movements, while a hard Brexit may lead to more regressive and unregulated UK policy and add further challenges to solidarity networks for transformative change. It is vital to keep these channels and networks flourishing that enable Romani young people to learn from and with each other, resist the disempowering messages of their social and political environment, and hope and act for change that will break out of the current system. While young activists need support to maximize their activism, the changes they create must be in their hands.

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