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Intersectional Alliances to Overcome Gender Subordination: The Case of Roma-Gypsy Traveller Women

By Laura Corradi¹

Abstract

By linking the oppression of women with other axes of oppression, the intersectional theories and methodologies employed in the last few decades have proved to be strategic in building awareness, forming alliances, and influencing transversal politics. In this paper, the case of Roma/Gypsy/Traveller (RGT) women is discussed through the multiple discriminations they suffer from, the birth of feminism and gender activism in the communities, intersectional alliances with non-Gypsy feminists, and the anti-racist and LGBTIA-Queer movements. In the second part of the paper, I offer a focus on shared political 'emotions', 'fluid identities', 'travelling activism', and the need for decolonization of concepts, practices, and relations. To deepen the reflection around intersectional alliances, coalition building, and the ongoing risk of assimilation/domestication, feminist RGT epistemology is pivotal in order to overcome subordination and internalized forms of oppression, feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, and to become resilient political subjects in ethnic and non-ethnic marginalized groups and stateless nations. The political alliances between RGT women, gender activists, and feminists of different backgrounds—in terms of economic status, education, skin color, religion, sexuality, ability, and geopolitical background—will create unity in diversity to fight for social rights and to gain freedom.

Keywords: Feminism, Margins, Differences, Roma/Gypsy/Traveller Women, Intersectionality, Transversal Politics, Alliances

Introduction

The practice of subordinating women is thousands of years old. Patriarchy was established during the third millennium B.C. in the ancient Sumerian culture, and can be seen as a system of power at the very root of all types of domination; it fathered the state, organized war, slavery, male gerontocracy, and implied the abandonment of the Goddess/Mother cults related to Nature, its cycles, and laws (Gimbutas 1974, Öcalan 2020). In the last 5,000 years, patriarchy—in all its

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political forms, from servitude to feudalism, and from capitalism to colonialism—expanded all over the world, with the exception of a few remote tribes where matriarchal relations are still found. Through the centuries, women’s subordination encompassed all spheres of life: religion, economy, social leadership, and political decision making. The women’s traditional ‘military veto’ was lifted, and even medical knowledge was expropriated from (and precluded to) women. They were forcefully placed in the lowest ranks of society, deprived of their freedom—including that of choosing a partner, education and income—and were barred from the possibility of getting any inheritance. Women were considered a piece of property to be transferred from father to husband, relegated to sexual/reproductive work, economically dependent, and socially subaltern to men in the public sphere, and often in their homes too. Patriarchy founded its authority on an elite group of older, sedentary male proprietors, a gerontocracy legitimized by religious authorities and defended by the cast of soldiers; the new status quo couldn’t be established without the use of violence. So, the state was born on a trinity of powers: older males of high status for the decision-making processes, strong, brave warrior boys as defenders of the patriarchal order, and a male God with male clergy (Öcalan 2020).

From the beginning, patriarchy was grounded on the symbolic and physical subjugation of women; as sexual objects, they were conditioned to accept heterosexuality, monogamy, and maternity. The male domination system gave supremacy to the ‘strongest’, the most cunning and greedy amongst them—those who could accumulate more belongings and richness by exploiting others. Finally, the ethical/aesthetical ‘superiority’ of sedentary people vs nomads was socially constructed; itinerant cultures were inferiorized as barbarians, and preeminence was given to fair-skinned householders, who could avoid the hardship of work, being privileged by virtue of their possessions (Cress Welsing 1991). Manual laborers, poor peasants, and serfs kept selling their products, handicrafts, workforce, and services, and lived ‘from hand to mouth’, as was the norm in the ancient hunting and gathering cultures.

Patriarchy is a system of inequalities characterized by multiple hierarchies. In order to overcome the subjugation of women (and those who do not recognize themselves in the binary opposition of male/female), other axes of difference such as class, status/cast, race/color, ethnicity/culture, religion/spirituality, sexual orientation, disabilities, and geopolitical background need to be taken into account. These disparities are not fully understood if addressed separately from one another; as ‘interlocking categories of oppression’, they need to be addressed simultaneously with gender inequalities and subalternities (Davis 1981; Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Hurtado 1989; Hill Collins 1990; Yuval-Davis 2006, 2012; Lykke, 2010; Hancock 2007; Collins, Bilge 2016; Corradi 1991, 2018). During the last four decades, intersectional theories and methodologies have proved to be a strategic instrument in building awareness, alliances, and transversal politics by linking women’s subordination with other axes of oppression.

In this paper, I will look at intersectional alliances in progress today in the marginalized Roma-Gypsy-Traveller (RGT) communities of Europe and why ‘affective politics’, ‘fluid identities’, ‘travelling activism’, and the decolonization of concepts and relations are crucial in the process. My *located knowledge* (Haraway 1988) is relevant for the topic; there is no such thing as ‘neutral knowledge’. Data, facts, and experiences are always ‘located’ in terms of gender, class, race/ethnicity, color/cast, sexuality, culture, language, status, age, ability, and geopolitical background. So, I will unveil my own positionality: I have a feminist *standpoint* (Harding 2004) as a cis-woman, traveller, scholar/activist, working-class academic, and Queer eco-feminist. My methodology goes from surface-level to in-depth, from margins to center (Hooks 1984). In my approach as a sociologist of the body, I try to combine personal perceptions, sociological

imagination, and insightful science in a non-dichotomous way (*advaita* in Sanskrit). For years, I lived as a non-Romani Gypsy, and that experience changed my discernment and sensitivity; today, I am self-reflective about the social and political privilege I enjoy as a fair-skinned person and aware of the debate around critical whiteness, introduced by Romani feminists (Vajda 2015; Fremlova 2018). Having been transcultural in the last three decades—Mediterranean Hindu-European, deeply influenced by the politics of indigeneity and nomadic thinking—I am a social hybrid, a cultural mestiza, or a ‘Halfy’, which means a person ‘whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage’, according to the definition given by anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) and re-elaborated by Romani feminist Ethel Brooks (2015).

Intersectionality and Alliances in the Roma-Gypsy-Traveller Communities

Who are the Gypsies? Originally from India, they appeared in Europe’s newspapers 600 years ago, described as ‘queer groups of pilgrims’ or ‘bands of gitans’ in Transylvania, Hungary, and Germany. Later, they settled in Switzerland, France, Italy, and eventually everywhere across the old continent. The first anti-Gypsy legislation was issued in Moravia in 1538; the British crown also produced a set of ‘anti-Egyptians’ laws, from where the name ‘Gypsie’ comes. For several centuries, Gypsies were persecuted, hanged, or burned in the old continent; in eastern Europe, they were officially enslaved as an ethnic group (in Romania until almost 1850). A few decades later, Nazist and Fascist regimes promoted genocidal politics. During the Barò Porrajmos/Samudaripen (Great Devouring or Holocaust, which halved the Gypsy population), they were deported and imprisoned with Jews and homosexuals in the concentration camps², and have never had any material or symbolic restitution up to now.

Ethnocidal politics against the Gypsies continue up to the present, characterized by anti-ziganism in social life, institutions, and in the media. State racism is expressed in the frequent practice of forced evictions of the so called ‘Nomad Camps’. Phenomena such as Tziganofobia and social scapegoating are the basis of violent attacks on Gypsy settlements, organized by right-wing militants and xenophobic groups.³ As Romani feminist Nicoleta Bitu and pro-Roma feminist Eniko Vincze posit, “We need to think and act intersectionally to understand that we have been subjected to multiple exclusions and discriminations” (2012, p. 45). Several studies intersecting gender, ethnicity, and class in the Romani contexts pointed out the necessity to renegotiate working relations with Gadge (non-Roma) women and change the Roma (male-dominated) movement’s political agenda; Romani feminists generated new forms of knowledge among activists, engaged in alliances, and reshaped the discourse on changes in the communities.

² On May 16, 1944, the Gypsies organized an uprising in Auschwitz that led to a massive escape; the SS feared the rebellion could extend from the Zigen Lager to other sectors. The revolt was ended on August 2 with the killing of thousands of Roma people and Gitans who had resisted Nazi-fascism.

³ Politicians’ Romaphobic and threatening discourses go unpunished and stimulate aggressive behaviors, suggesting the destruction or burning down of camps. Different forms of institutional racism are at the basis of ‘relocation’ strategies where Gypsies are given a final destination to environmentally degraded areas, hazardous for the community health, usually secluded, far from the city, and located in poor, underprivileged and exasperated peripheries, where neighbors do not welcome the newcomers. The other side of stigmatization and exclusion is seen in the exotification of Gypsy ‘cultural diversities’ in terms of social mis-representations, which strengthen prejudice and othering practices.

Intersectional alliances took place in the last few years among RGT⁴ women and feminists in Eastern Europe with the birth of many collectives of Romani and gender activists, well capable of working politically, both inside the communities and with Gadge institutions. After many cross-national meetings, gender issues became the focus of a conference for Roma and Sinti women activists at the Warsaw headquarters of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in 2015. The meeting brought together Roma and Sinti women activists from different nationalities. At the end, an ‘Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti’ was issued, and commitments were pledged by ODIHR and the women activists. Among them, Nesime Salioska, from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, commented that ‘providing role models and success stories for Romani women activists is crucial in changing attitudes and behavior towards women’s issues in Roma communities.’⁵

In Spain, Gitana feminists have been active during the last two decades (Muñoz 2006). An alliance between Gitana and non-Gitana women operated in mixed groups, engaging in transversal politics and mutually beneficial relations. Gitanas are active both in homogenous groups and across different Gypsy communities, such as ‘Drom Kotar Mestipen’, a Barcelona-based association of Gypsy women, active since 1999. The group is formed by women of all ages, working on ‘equality in the difference’ for a ‘same level dialogue’ among women who keep the struggle against sexism and racism as their main focus. ‘Fakali – Feministas Gitanas Universitaria’ and ‘Federacion de Asociaciones de Mujeres Gitanas por la Diversidad’ are committed to the production of knowledge, contrasting antiziganism, and increasing the participation of Gypsy women in universities.⁶ These groups bring together Gitana women across academia and society, facilitating the enrolment of Gitana students in school. Former President of Fakali, Beatriz Carrillo de los Reyes, a Romani social worker, was elected in May 2019 as a Deputee in the Socialist Parliamentary Group in Spain.

Lidia Puigvert, a non-Gitana feminist, highlighted the political experience of Roma women and how they have struggled in Europe; her writings on ‘dialogic feminism’ are based upon the idea that western women can no longer avoid a dialogue with ‘other women’. She refers to the experience of ‘mixed groups’ as political formations of Gypsy and non-Gypsy feminists that have worked together, as in the case of Gitanas and Independentist Catalana women (De Botton, Puigvert 2005; Sordé, Serradell, Puigvert, and Munté, 2013). Such alliances across different ethnicities (or nations) within the same state represent a new phenomenon in Europe and in the scene of feminism without borders (Talpade 2003; Corradi 2018), whereas the importance of the intersectional approach in self-awareness and coalition building cannot be over-stated—as in the following Romani feminist writings:

By using an intersectionality approach, Romani women respond to the limitations of ‘ethnicity’ but also to the limitations of ‘gender’ as the exclusive categories of interest to them. Intersectionality is the approach that helped more people to become reflective about the hybrid structures of inequalities Romani women face. Intersections of categories of difference still urge a need for Romani women activists to create politicized spaces where they could continue developing

⁴ I am going to use the acronym RGT—given the prevalence of Roma people—even though in some official documents GRT is preferred (<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/360/full-report.html>).

⁵ <https://www.osce.org/odihr/158801>

⁶ Anti-Gypsyism is also rampant in academia (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2018)

arguments emerging from their own experiences and challenge simultaneously the general discourse of the Romani movement and the general feminist discourse. (Jovanović, Kóczé, Balogh 2015)

In the Gypsy milieu, marital status should be added to the differences usually considered—such as class, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, and education—since it plays an important role in women’s personal experiences, especially in terms of power positions in the community. It makes a great difference if activists, educators, and professionals are married (Corradi 2018); if a woman fulfills all the ‘criteria’, such as having a husband, children, and speaking Romani language, she has a better chance of representing her gender’s interest within the Romani movement. The position of a woman within the Romani movement is said to be dependent on her husband’s position within the movement (depending on whether he is a Romani activist or not). Some advances in Gypsy pride, self-organization, and enhancement in the positive processes of interculturality have taken place in the building of fruitful, non-hierarchical relations between Gypsy communities and a multitude of pro-Gypsy groups, including grassroots activists, advocates, anti-racist groups, queer, feminists, and gender educators and trainers, all of whom supported endogenous processes of resilience in the Roma, Sinti, and Traveller communities, often with little or no financial support.

Here I want to specify what I mean by ‘alliances’ and ‘coalitions’; they are complex social devices whose role is crucial in determining the output of a struggle and require coordination, horizontal relations within groups, among Gypsy and non-Gypsy organizations, and internal democracy. This is the opposite of what we find in political discourses based on concepts such as ‘assimilation’, ‘integration’, and ‘inclusion’, and it camouflages a top-down type of perspective and a ‘pre-defined setting’ (a society, a community, a collective, or a social movement) in which it is decided whether ‘others’ should be allowed or not. Alliances are agreements among equals with common intentions regarding specific targets, founded on the very basis of reciprocal knowledge and trust, and the creation of a synergy of methods necessary for building wider coalitions with shared goals. The opposite of exclusion is not inclusion; this term requires some critical deconstruction by scholars, activists, journalists, and artists. Inclusion implies that some people are being ‘let in’ by others who have dominion over the place.

As indigenous theoretician Nelson Maldonado-Torres pointed out, ‘The opposite of exclusion, in contexts structured by coloniality, is not inclusion, but decolonization. Inclusion, in these contexts, is just another form of coloniality’ (Maldonado-Torres 2016, Corradi 2018).

Multiple Discrimination and Decolonization of Relations

Most RGT women in Europe are hit by multiple discrimination because of patriarchy, anti-Gypsyism, and extreme poverty. Gypsy women are also suffering exploitation and discrimination within the communities because of disability, gender oppression, and sexual orientation. Women’s role was crucial for survival during times of institutional persecution; it is just as pivotal today in cultural and self-reflective processes of resilience in overcoming the trauma of slavery, Porrajmos/Samudaripen, and the present antiziganism, while creating new forms of leadership. Alliances are taking place among ethnic and non-ethnic Gypsies, and groups who speak different languages,⁷ come from different paths, and are made the object of the same antiziganism. Bridges are being built between RGT activists and anti-racist movements, with associations for social

⁷ Overall, Roma groups are living in 66 countries.

rights, jobs, health care, and co-housing—including ‘joint ventures’—between Roma and non-Roma for squatting unclaimed homes in degraded urban areas (Maestri 2019). There are examples of cross-continent partnerships between RGT people and other social groups, discriminated because they belong to lower classes or casts; the case of the alliance between the Roma of Europe and the Dalits (outcast) of India is a clear example of transversal politics taking place. The same is happening with migrants, indigenous people, and ‘stateless collectives’ (Corradi 2018), as we are going to discuss in the second part of this work.

Alliances are sophisticated political tools, intricately linked with the construction of critical, complex ‘fluid identities’, and with the process of decolonization⁸ of knowledge production, methodologies, relations, and emotions (Smith Tuhiwae 1999; Bhambra 2007; Smith Hingangaroa 2012). In particular, Western assumptions about the inferiority of people of color, lower classes/casts, and indigenous and nomadic groups reinforce white supremacy. Internalized feelings of inadequacy, weakness, and self-hatred have a depowering effect on women across all marginalized groups and constitute an obstacle in resilience, activism, alliances, and coalitions. Romani feminist Vera Kurtic's narrative around the intersection between gender and sexuality is very useful in understanding the cultural and ethnic nuances of Roma activism, as it is shaped in relation to women whose value as mothers is still perceived to be predominant in the communities. Her narrative is also helpful to pin down how little attention is given to Romani women by mainstream feminism. These issues add difficulty while negotiating for shared grounds in the gender struggle agendas and may jeopardize long-term alliances:

There are a number of examples where Roma activists, or those who identify themselves as such, attempted to address, or raise awareness about ‘Romani women’s issues’. However, these attempts usually centered on organizing folklore events, which were aimed at preserving and promoting ‘tradition.’ Other efforts actually perpetuated gender roles by focusing solely on reproductive health issues among Roma populations. In fact, there has been strong resistance coming from the mainstream, male-dominated Roma Rights movement to solely discuss Romani women. I myself have received instructions from some Roma activists that I am only ‘allowed’ to speak publicly about Romani women’s oppression within the context of forced sterilizations perpetrated by state institutions in the region, and I have also been warned that I should never mention the arranged marriages or bride sales which occur in my own Roma community. When it comes to the mainstream, majority society women’s movement and women’s civil society groups generally, Romani women’s rights have been and remain an area of little interest, and for most feminist organizations there is neither time nor space on their political agendas to think or act either on behalf of or together with Romani women. (Kurtic 2012, Ivi)

⁸ The concept of decolonization is helpful to understand and change subaltern positions. Against the colonial ‘matrix of power’ (Quijano 2000, 2007), the choice of *active decolonization* (Mignolo 2007, 2008) is a theoretical and practical radical approach, requiring ‘epistemic disobedience’ to Eurocentrism within educational institutions and in society at large. This can happen through forms of *de-learning* of the imposed education and the construction/legitimation of different types of knowledge. Such a process implies an individual and collective *de-linking* from mainstream theory and methodology, finding space inside, and growing apart from, academic institutions (Corradi 2018).

Alliances should not obliterate differences. Vera Kurtic makes an important distinction between Roma lesbians and Roma feminists, which is as often assimilated in the public discourse as everywhere else: “not all lesbians are feminists or activists”. At the same time, she makes a distinction between women’s groups and feminist groups: “not all Romani women activists are automatically feminists”. Kurtic also denounces how non-Romani (Gadje) women complain about being “fed up with Romani women and their demands”, an irritation that has a racist and classist undertone, based upon an inferiorizing discursive attitude around Gypsy women. “As a lesbian, I can say that a similar dialogue takes place regarding sexual orientation. The experiences of Romani lesbians living in Serbia are a clear example illustrating the intersecting burdens of gender, race, nationality, class and minority sexual existence” (Kurtic 2012, p. 4).

Alliances are a strategic element for social movements having the aspiration to win. For women, overcoming subordination implies building coalitions among different groups, such as those oppressed because they are different in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability, or sexual orientation as well as those who are marginalized because they are underprivileged in economic terms, living in degraded areas, or have a lower level of education. Women are generally seen at the forefront of intersectional alliances, aware of their gender subjugation. Being intuitively talented in Roma traditional conflict prevention and resolution strategies, they are able to harmonize political environments with communicative wisdom (Sandu 2018), are capable of leadership in difficult and divisive periods, and competent in the negotiation of suitable deals between their group and others by finding ‘minimum common denominators’ (Corradi 2019). In their multi-centenary struggle against all types of European oppressions, patriarchies and white supremacies, and after surviving slavery, holocaust, and diaspora, the courageous Romnya (the Gypsy women) developed forms of resistance against both the capitalistic exploitation of their productive and reproductive work as well as the racist states that are used to scapegoating the communities and keeping them divided by granting as privileges to only some groups what is everybody’s right: education, health care, and housing. The double torsion of survival/adaptation and resistance/seclusion forged new identities—strong and ‘fluid’ at the same time—where there are degrees of choice. As Roma intellectual Daniel Baker posits, recalling the ideas of black theoreticians Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy:

Collective identities are generally created through recognition of commonality—shared origin, common goals or characteristics. Without disregarding the importance of this mirroring process, Stuart Hall stresses the overriding influence of difference in our construction of identity. He suggests that identities are ‘more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity.’ In other words, commonalities are important—but identities are also defined and constructed through contrast. These ideas are echoed in the work of Paul Gilroy in which he examines the construction of diaspora identities in relation to host societies. He suggests that concepts of collective identity are generally promoted and perceived as natural (or mythic), concealing the fact that they have, at some time, been socially constructed. Gilroy uses the concept of diaspora to examine cross-national workings of identity formation, questioning the relevance of identity as fixed and unchanging. Where diaspora challenges the idea of identity as essential and absolute, it also disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity: [diaspora] stages the dynamic processes of identity formation in a specific manner, accentuating the power that

people enjoy to create themselves and their distinctive cultures where this cannot be openly acknowledged. (Baker 2015, p. 89)

The in-progress alliances between Gypsy women, feminists, and LGBT-Queer activists happen in such a way that these become transformative opportunities for all social actors involved. Through common political praxes—sit-ins, demonstrations, squats, publications—the act of working together impacts GRT communities, the migrants’ milieu, and parts of the Gadge world. Economic and political common grounds are there to bridge different identities, including those belonging to lower classes, ‘white trash’, and people of color in urban areas, as the recent mobilizations in the US (organized by the social movement ‘Black Lives Matter’) demonstrated in terms of anti-racist feelings. These communities have always been played against one another in persistent *dividi et impera* strategies. For this reason, the inter-communality approach proposed by John Brown Childs (1998) as a practical theory developed in the aftermath of the Rodney King rebellion in Los Angeles, is a crucial tool to connect, communicate and associate, and to prevent and resolve conflicts in present times.

Emotions, Fluid Identities, and Travelling Activism

We often look at identities as fixed characteristics of each subject or social group. Whether related to gender, sexuality or ethnicity, identities are in a permanent state of change. Moreover, they should be regarded as prisms where differences are incorporated:

Statements implying that ‘we are concerned with national or ethnic identity’ in the struggle for the rights of Roma assume that all Roma are in the same power position in each context and disregard all other dimensions of our identities as those of high political relevance. What we would like to emphasize is that this statement is elitist and that the leaders of the Romani movement often seem not to consider elitism when conceptualizing their ideas. Being an activist within the Romani movement seems to require considerable privilege, which is not available to individuals who understand their own identities as more complex and fluid. (. . .) [Being concerned only with national or ethnic identity] suggests that national or ethnic dimensions of our identities somehow exist isolated from other dimensions. (. . .) Intersectionality clearly denies both isolation and hierarchy of social categories. Intersectionality is therefore very much still of relevance in rethinking Romani politics. (Jovanović, Daróczi 2015)

Identities are complex, highly differentiated, and fluid. Due to social and historical changes, personal and political experiences, and cultural contaminations and subjective feelings, identities transform themselves and adjust to different environments. Identities deeply renovate in flexible ways, with knowledge, understanding, and modifications in our consciousness. The awareness of the power we have in choosing, and building our identity is vital in understanding the coexistence of diverse subjectivities and communities.

A close analysis of the political implication of emotions in the making of alliances may help us in building coalitions based on self-reflective solidarity across socially constructed boundaries, starting with those social groups that share similar conditions and feelings. As Romani feminists Jekatyerina Dunajeva, Angéla Kóczé, and Sarah Cemlyn wrote, “LGBTQIA often share

the same *emotions* as we [Roma] do, and thus they could be *natural allies*” (2015, emphasis added).

Emotions are a political issue (Ahmed 2004); we all know the ‘public’ is emotive and empathy can be controlled and maneuvered by the mass media and government and used for manufacturing consent and behaviors (Corradi 2012). A focus on emotions can also serve for self-reflection among activists, social movements, and groups struggling for rights. Sara Ahmed analyzes negative emotions such as pain, hate, fear, disgust, and shame—the last was earlier discussed by Erving Goffman (1956) in an essay on social embarrassment—a feeling that plays a role as an obstacle because of reciprocal stereotyping (e.g., Gypsy-phobia vs homophobia). Ahmed also looks at positive emotions around love in the context of queer theory and feminism. Distaste and hate—related to personal aspects, color, racial/ethnic or class belonging, cultural lifestyle, gender orientation, or sexual preferences—are socially constructed emotions; they are still so active because of their political functionality, serving social hierarchies and economic powers. As Indian activist and writer Arundhati Roy explained, religious, ethnic, and social minorities (from indigenous groups to poor peasants, from Armenian to Kurdish people in Turkey) are often made objects of entomological metaphors to stigmatize their difference from the majority, the dominant race or religion, the ‘right color’, or the ‘middle class’—and mark their supposed inferiority (2008). Expressions such as ‘parasites’, ‘ticks’, and ‘rats’ are meant to stimulate social disgust among ‘normal’ people, who would then approve operations of ‘clean-up’ and ‘disinfestations’. The strategy of de-humanizing minorities serves the need for ‘eradication’ of their presence; RGT are rarely welcomed as neighbors. Anti-Gypsyism is a socially tolerated form of racism in Europe (McGarry 2017); degrading allegories, annihilating descriptions, and suppressive representations are easily found in the media, political discourse, and public manifestations in several states, at times with violent edges and threatening slogans, such as ‘Gypsies to the gas’ (Corradi 2018).

The recognition of past and present persecutions, cultural differences, social and economic disparities, and white privileges in the relations between Roma and pro-Roma feminists is a necessary step in the making of alliances, in promoting ‘real sisterhood’ and resilient political subjectivities, and valorizing feminist knowledge and intersectional epistemology. These are pivotal elements to overcome women’s subordination, which are expressed as internalized forms of oppression and feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. The African American poet bell hooks taught us that social change departs from the margins to reach the center and Gypsy women in Europe are a clear example of walking that path, despite the hostile context of anti-Gypsyism, both in social movements and institutions.

Roma women and gender activists began to appear as elected representatives in national parliaments during the 1990s. In 2004, two Roma women were elected as Deputies in the European Parliaments: Viktoria Mohacsi, who confronted Italian head of government Berlusconi about his Roma-phobia, and Livia Jaroka, who was among the writers of the ‘Resolution of Roma and Sinti Women’. In the summer of 2014, a Roma feminist was elected to the European Parliament for the first time: Soraya Post, a 57-year-old-woman, was voted as a member of the Swedish Party ‘Feminist Initiative’ (FI) which has branches in Germany and France, by earning 5.3% of the European votes. Sweden, considered a bastion of gender equality, had FI as a feminist party for many years, but it was thanks to a Gypsy woman candidate that it won its first seat in the European Parliament. Such a success was the product of a political link between pro-Roma activists, feminists, and the Roma women and men who voted for Soraya Post. Social alliances among women from different paths of life and backgrounds in terms of economy, education, skin color,

religion, and sexuality allow for coalition-building, unity in diversity, a more focused strength to overcome oppression and subordination, and to obtain freedom across borders.

As Van Baar posits, ‘Travelling activism’ may be one of the elements of such a process, opening up spaces of dialogue and direct democracy. He writes:

My examination of travelling activism explains how activist expertise travels through disjunctive circuits, and how the diverse forms of coalition building that arise from these activities can serve as a productive source for developing new kinds of policy in domains such as education, anti-discrimination, and de-segregation. (...) *Travelling activism in the Romani movement is related to mobilizing hybrid forms of expertise and knowledge across space and difference and thus aims at contesting the territorialization and ethnicization (...)*. Importantly, they do not simply enter existing public debates, but try to contribute to establishing the problems the Roma face and the rights they have as public issues and collective responsibilities. By claiming these rights, including the right to participate in public and policy debates as subjects with their own voices, those involved in travelling activism contribute to the enactment of citizenship as participation. (Van Baar 2013, emphasis added)

Roma and Gitana feminists have demonstrated that they refuse to enter existing agenda and pre-set public spaces or ask for ‘inclusion’ (or ‘integration’). Instead, they act to radically change our environments, priorities, and methodologies as welcomed ‘space invaders’ (Puwar 2004), rescuers who can release European societies from the bondages of ethnocentrism, white supremacy, inequality, and racism (Corradi 2018).

The alliance between Roma women, feminists, and Queer activists finds expression in the annual LGBTQIA Prides, jointly held in European capitals. In Budapest, the ‘Happy Gypsy Queer’ has been taking place since 2015, while in the London Pride, Travellers and Roma marched with LGBTQIA activists for the first time in 2019 (Corradi, forthcoming). Alliances between RGT people and other groups are linked to travelling activism and direct democracy; being ‘stateless collectives’, Gypsies and Queers have no fixed boundaries, country, army, or borders to be ‘defended’. Gypsy and Queer flags represent places of the soul and signal the existence of ‘nations without the state’ or ‘democracies beyond the state’. Political theories about *overcoming the state* as a historical, obsolete form—produced by patriarchy and capitalism—have been expressed in the last decades by experimenting with direct democracy and alliances among different ethnic and religious communities (Öcalan 2016). Such experiences emerged during the struggle of the Kurdish people in the liberation of north-east Syria, now called ‘Rojava’ (the nation of the sunset). Putting such ideas into practice has proven to be very useful for other indigenous groups, just as it has been for RGT communities in the struggle against assimilation, while striving for self-determination and cultural dignity. The practice of direct democracy and self-government was developed by Kurdish (historically nomadic) societies and became known worldwide during the women-led resistance in North-East Syria against the attacks of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levantine (ISIL).⁹ The international interest in the Democratic Federalism in Rojava can be explained by its emphasis on inter-culturality, inter-religiosity, and the commitment to overcome race, class, and gender inequalities by adhering to the constitution. In fact, the ‘Rojava Social

⁹ ISIL army, supported by the Turkish government, was meant to eliminate Kurdish egalitarian culture and language, and grab their land.

Contract’, signed by all ethnic groups in North and East Syria, calls for cooperation, women’s leadership, ecology, and the valorization of diversities. It is an inspirational model for nomadic, indigenous, and RGT stateless communities toward the development of self-government and transversal alliances (Corradi 2016, Öcalan 2016).¹⁰

If we analyze how persecuted groups, marginalized societies, and ‘othered’ bodies and cultures are dealing with issues of survival and resistance, solutions in terms of direct democracy, gender liberation, as well as inter-ethnic and inter-religious confederalism cannot be avoided. Surprisingly enough, they seem to bloom in the ‘margins’—camps, communes, ghettos, refugee camps—and appear to be to be practicable for all. In the last three decades of research and activism, I found deep similarities in the dispossession and oppression faced today by Gypsies, Native-Americans, Mayan, Palestinians, Kurds, Maoris, and Aborigines—who have in the past been subjected to ethnocidal and/or genocidal politics (Connell, Corradi 2014, Corradi 2018). At the same time, I found deep connections in their liberation theories, struggles, and visions for the future. It would be strategic to have an open dialogue about common social and political solutions in order to face old challenges—aggravated by ecological and health emergencies—and in dealing with new ones, such as the pressure for integration/inclusion, cultural assimilation, and cooptation in a globalized world, with pernicious forms of political/academic ‘domestication’ of activists and scholars. These processes are not unavoidable; they can be deactivated through critical attention, valorization of subaltern epistemologies, and decolonization of concepts, methodologies, and practices while empowering the community through collective and transversal processes of knowledge construction, participated political elaboration, consensus, and social action for the common good (Tuhiwae Smith 1999, Hingangaroa Smith 2012).

Conclusion

In this work, I wanted to highlight some of the ways in which Gypsy women are overcoming subordination through intersectional alliances, instead of focusing on gender issues alone—more specifically, between women activists in the RGT communities and other social movements against sexism and racism—for social rights and LGBT+Queer activism. These alliances happen both at the local level and across national borders. The election of Soraya Post in the European Parliament was the result of an agreement between the Feminist Initiative party and RGT communities, in which women had played a pivotal role.

More needs to be done in terms of ‘class and gender alliances’ by increasing the presence of RGT women in the Unions, in organizations with unemployed people, and in activists’ groups committed to fighting poverty and claiming their social rights. Patriarchy is under scrutiny in the RGT communities; LGBTIA-Queer subjectivities should obtain a full acceptance as members of the community (Máté 2015); and those who are gender activists or feminists (at times being called derogatory names such as ‘white Roma’) should be recognized as valuable resources. Alliances in the gender/sex intersection are aimed toward the diffusion of agreements and public initiatives to contrast sexism and homo-lesbo-bi- and transphobia in the communities (Corradi, Forthcoming), which are a source of suffering for families and individuals.

At the same time, a parallel process is taking place in which a politically mixed environment of Gypsy and non-Gypsy women is starting to process diversity and disparity, with

¹⁰ Feminism in Rojava is based upon ‘Jineology’—the science of women that covers subjects ranging from economics to ethics and esthetics. It is a politics of feelings, keeping into account emotions around relations of reciprocal support and understanding among women.

the admission of privileges and related emotions. For alliances to work among feminists of different class, status, education, ethnicity/culture, religion, and age, some self-reflective discursive practices are implemented as well as a criticism of white supremacy and its power to define Gypsy lives. The decolonization of concepts, methodologies, relations, and attitudes is crucial in the political relations among women with diverse experiences and identities—which are ‘fluid’—by transforming themselves through emotions, the politics of affect, friendships, and travelling activism. Hybridization may result as a two-way process that takes place over decades, based upon reciprocal trust and commitment; metissage cannot be confused with the cultural theft of objects and identity suffered by all marginalized groups—from indigenous people to African Americans and RGT communities across Europe. To use Margareta Matache’s words, Gadge-ness is a form of white supremacy inscribed in a Gypsy’s everyday life throughout history; it permeates knowledge production and appropriates cultural products and identities in a colonial way:

We are stolen artifacts, physically, mentally, artistically. (. . .) How we are perceived by ‘others’ is still valued more important than how we see ourselves in the world view. (. . .) A colonialist way of seeing dominates the language that surrounds us and many others still, and continues to try and suppress us (Matache 2016)

In synthesis, for alliances to become real, several steps need to be taken. The first may be related to the recognition of privileges among Gadge women in their relations with RGT women, differences that are often perceived as embarrassing and avoided as a taboo topic. The same can be said for the political alliances between women activists and men who want to be supporters. As Romani feminist Alexandra Oprea powerfully explains:

It is only through recognizing our privilege, whether it be white privilege, male privilege, class privilege, light skinned privilege, or heterosexual privilege, that we can challenge hierarchical relationships. It is essential (...) male activists acknowledge their male privilege as a first step to challenging patriarchy. (Oprea 2004)

Gypsy/Roma/Traveller feminism and gender activism bear a richness of struggles and epistemologies. As mentioned earlier, similarities are found between Native American, Zapatista, Aboriginal, Maori, Kurdish, Dalit, and Adivasi feminisms; all of them are facing the challenge of keeping a dynamic connection between valorization of cultural traditions and self-determination of women and LGBT+ people in the communities. Therefore, the necessity to actively decolonize the relationship between GRT and Gadge women is crucial for any type of intersectional alliance or coalition building.

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