Multiple Struggles in Fighting Violence against Women: Implications among Romani women leaders in Spain

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Introduction

• Our paper focuses on emergent activism developed by Romani women’s civil society groups
• Romani women as leaders of social change.

• Study aim: to identify different struggles that women from Roma organizations in Spain have dealt with in relation with VAW.
Methodology: qualitative

- 12 in-depth interviews with women who were actively involved in Roma Spanish associations.
  - Different cities in Spain.
  - Different types of Roma associations
Overview of Findings

• Struggles around three topics:
  ▫ Between persistence and rupture of gender norms
  ▫ Invisibility and normalization of violence against women
  ▫ Willingness in daily work with women
Between persistance and rupture of gender norms

- Consciousness of different forms of discrimination.
  - Being aware of the reality faced by the women is essential to work with them.
- One form of oppression is related to the dominant ideal of femininity associated with mothers and faithful wives. An image frequently evoked as belonging to the Spanish society in the past.
  - “The problem with the Roma population is that we are a perfect copy of the majority society, but 100 years behind…” (AG, 6).
The interviewees also referred to the way in which some groups of younger Romani women have begun to break with this dominant image.

- “... as a Romani woman, having another type of thinking and having other aspirations in life besides getting married and filling up the house with children...” (AG, 6).

This process of rupture is not free of difficulties, and in some cases they have generated a sense of false rupture:

- “There are many people (...) who think they are free but they aren’t, they live in a glass vase ok? They are like helium balloons that rise but when they rise you can pull on their string and pull them back down, that’s it, but we don’t want this, we want to be the motor of the twenty-first century for Romani women” (AG, 6).
Invisibility and normalization of VAW in the Romani community

• VAW seems to be **invisible**, even for Roma organizations.
  - A means to avoid damaging the image of the Roma community.
    ▪ Violence is hidden in a similar way to what happens in the general population.

• **Normalization** of VAW, reflected, for example, in messages where they seem to represent a social position derived from dominant gender socialization.
  ▪ However, some interviewees reject this supposed normalization: It could affect responses from outside the Roma community.
Willingness in daily work with women

- Strategies to approach VAW: tools need not to be different, although they should improve in terms of quality, accessibility and response capacity.
  - “We don’t need any specific resource for Romani women or for anything, all that we need is that the resources that we have are of quality and are well coordinated” (AG,7).
- However, the interviewees approach the topic in an indirect way:
  - “It’s a subtle question, we work on these issues but mask it....” (AG, 3).
- Their work responds more to their sensitivity and willingness to change things than to the ultimate aims of the organizations.
  - “It wasn’t something that was publicly established outside of the area of equality, ok, (...) because the Board wasn’t very clear that this topic of gender violence in Romani women should be made public” (AG, 8).
Conclusions: Struggles in three areas

- **Persistence and rupture of gender norms:** confronting different forms of discrimination of Roma women.
  - Their identities are related to these desires for change. At the same time they acknowledge, even share, dominant gender relations.

- **Recognizing the invisibility of violence against women:** this invisibility can reduce stereotypes. And they also **rejected a supposed normalization** of VAW, pointing to the existence of informal strategies, more effective than institutional alternatives.
  - A discourse that recognizes the importance of adequate and accessible services and at the same time acknowledges the gap between Roma people and the formal sphere.

- The work developed by the informants aligned with their **personal initiatives and capabilities** more so than with the strategies assumed by their organizations.
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