

Weaving Strong Relationships Within Roma Women Associations to Overcome Violence Against Women

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Abstract

Cultural relationships shape individuals' response towards some of the most pressing challenges, such as the urgent one of tackling violence against women. In this sense, women from ethnic minorities have to face more systemic barriers in accessing care and protection services for victims of gender violence. Despite the progress made in recent years, the official circuits continue to be far from the Roma reality. In this research, authors explore the key role played by two Romani women association in fulfilling this gap. Through the communicative methodology this research bridges together participants' and scientific knowledge in a co-creation process to illustrate how, despite systemic barriers, two Romani women associations are working to prevent and overcome violence against women. The findings of this research warn of the impact of training in gender violence for Roma women, accompaniment and counselling for victims, to overcome the problem by strengthening intercultural relationships. Thus, the article analyzes the bridging work of those Roma associations and identifies how they are contributing to closing the gap between Roma women who had suffered gender violence and the institutions. How these two Roma-women associations counteract the under-representation of Roma identity in official services is also discussed.

Keywords

Roma women, Roma associations, Roma relationships, gender violence.

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Tejiendo Relaciones Sólidas Dentro de las Asociaciones de Mujeres Romaníes para Superar la Violencia contra las Mujeres

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Resumen

Las relaciones culturales moldean la respuesta de las personas ante algunos de los desafíos más apremiantes, como el urgente de abordar la violencia contra las mujeres. En este sentido, las mujeres de minorías étnicas tienen que enfrentar barreras más sistémicas para acceder a servicios de atención y protección para víctimas de violencia de género. A pesar de los avances logrados en los últimos años, los circuitos oficiales siguen alejados de la realidad gitana. En esta investigación, los autores exploran el papel clave desempeñado por dos asociaciones de mujeres romaníes para colmar esta brecha. A través de la metodología comunicativa, esta investigación une el conocimiento científico y de los participantes en un proceso de co-creación para ilustrar cómo, a pesar de las barreras sistémicas, dos asociaciones de mujeres romaníes están trabajando para prevenir y superar la violencia contra las mujeres. Las conclusiones de esta investigación alertan del impacto de la formación en violencia de género a mujeres gitanas, el acompañamiento y asesoramiento a las víctimas, para superar el problema fortaleciendo las relaciones interculturales. Así, el artículo analiza la labor puente de estas asociaciones gitanas e identifica cómo están contribuyendo a cerrar la brecha entre las mujeres gitanas que han sufrido violencia de género y las instituciones. También se analiza cómo estas dos asociaciones de mujeres romaníes contrarrestan la infrarrepresentación de la identidad romaní en los servicios oficiales.

Palabras clave

Mujeres gitanas, asociaciones gitanas, relaciones gitanas, violencia de género.

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More than 35% of women have suffered physical and / or sexual violence at some point in their lives, whether by a partner or not. In the same way, Roma women are also exposed to this social problem. However, the research that addresses the issue is still scarce and the data that we consider in this regard is very limited.

Thus, research has already proven that the inequalities and difficulties faced by women place them in a situation of vulnerability to violence, which increases when it intersects with other factors of discrimination, such as those that often affects those belonging to ethnic minority communities. While some authors point to the exclusion and discrimination suffered by ethnic minorities as a cause of overexposure to violence (Breiding, Black & Ryan, 2008, Nilan et al., 2020), other authors resort to the characteristics of the ethnic minority itself. This second approach is very recurrent when we refer to the Roma community, since historically it has been attributed that the community has a special predisposition to violence and is considered more sexist than other groups (Erickson, 2017; Timmerman, 2004; Laguna 1996).

It should be noted that the Roma community represents the largest non-migrant ethnic minority on the European continent. It is estimated that the volume of Roma population on the continent is around 12 million, however it is also present outside Europe. Research has already identified the Roma community as the group most at risk of suffering poverty and rejection in Europe. This reality conditions their future opportunities and is marked by barriers in access to the labour market, the health system, education, the judicial system and participation in social life (Yaprak, Baumann, Dutta , 2010; ERRC, 2004; FRA, 2014; Varga, 2020). This often translates into a worse state of health, research points to a higher incidence of chronic diseases, infant mortality and less healthy lifestyles (Pappa et al., 2015; Carrasco et al. 2011). This vulnerability is aggravated when we refer to Roma women, affected by the so-called “triple discrimination” that is due to the fact that they are a Roma, woman and in most cases have not had access to higher education (Sordé, 2006). It should be noted that women in the Roma community have less life expectancy than Roma men, contrary to what happens in the majority of society and this emphasizes the gender inequality. that of the majority.

In the case at hand, it should be noted that this inequality is also manifested in the access of Roma women to the official circuits of care for victims of gender violence. In fact, the Roma Migrants in Spain project (Sordé, 2011) funded by the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) shows that there is a sector of the Roma population in Europe that is outside the official circuits of the State. International research, focused on ethnic minority women, also shows that they tend not to attend care services for victims of gender violence, a reality that also exists in the Spanish State (Vives-Casas et al., 2017).

In Spain, statistics estimate that the percentage of complaints filed by victims of Roma violence is low and lower than those filed by the general population (Emakunde, IVM, 2013). Research warns that this data, far from indicating a lower incidence of gender violence in the ethnic minority, warn of the existence of barriers that keep Roma women away from official circuits (Vives-Casas et al., 2017; Emakunde, IVM, 2013). Along these lines, different factors are pointed out to explain the low presence of Roma women in care services for victims of gender violence in relation to the demographic weight of the group. Among them is the mistrust that Roma women feel towards these resources. In general, Roma women perceive that the cultural characteristics of their community are not understood, which is an

added problem to that of gender violence, assuming, for example, that they will be pressured to file a complaint (Emakunde, IVM, 2013). At this point, this article illustrates the crucial role of Roma associations in promoting care for these victims from a more Roma perspective. This implies considering, the needs and particularities that are due to the ethnic identity of these women and that have often been ignored.

In this sense, Roma associations have been working to overcome the barriers that they have been denouncing for a long time, focusing their efforts on the access of Roma women to official circuits. Thus, Roma associations play a crucial role as a speaker for the ethnic minority to make the main needs of these women known (Timmer, 2010). Consequently, the political concern on the part of European actors and agencies to combat inequality and gender violence in the collective is increasingly evident. In fact, research has already emphasized the importance of supporting activism in order to enhance the success of gender-based violence prevention programs (Vives-Casas et al., 2017). Thus, this article presents those contributions developed from within the group itself, specifically from Roma associations with a prominent role of Roma women, to respond to this social problem.

As has already been pointed out, Roma women experience triple discrimination (Sordé, 2006), in this sense, they have had to face barriers related to sexism, racism and classism that have frequently placed them in a disadvantaged situation and also increases the risk of exposure to violence (Vives-Casas et al., 2017).

Roma women have even been excluded from some feminist discourses that have left them on the side lines. In this sense, Roma feminism, also through the Roma women's associations, has been claiming the incorporation of its needs into the demands of the feminist movement, which would ultimately benefit from including Roma's claims thought fruitful intercultural exchanges (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Oprea (2005), denounces that Roma identity has often been portrayed as a chauvinistic, archaic culture anchored in the past, expressing its rejection of the treatment it is given in some media. The reproduction and consolidation of the stereotypes that characterize it as a more macho culture, with a greater acceptance of violence and the subordination of women, feed the exclusion and invisibility of Roma women. In fact, the idea is reinforced by a collision between the Roma identity and the ideals of the feminist movement that would make them incompatible. However, women's associations are working hard to make their way into feminist discourses and aiming to make visible the contributions made by Roma women throughout history, and claim that it is possible to be Roma and a feminist and fight for women's rights, and specifically that of the Roma. In fact, from a Roma feminist standpoint, a feminism is claimed in general terms and focuses on the defense of the rights of all women, especially with regard to the fight against violence. Roma feminism denounces the invisibility of some minority groups in feminist debates and pontificates that such a position has a collective harm with negative effects for all women.

In this sense, Oprea (2012) warns that the effects of Anti-Gypsyism can end up harming all women. An obvious example is the discriminatory policies that, in Romania, prevent Roma women's access to shelters for victims of gender-based violence. Thus, under a racist argument, some discriminatory policies discourage the construction of such reception centres, alleging that homeless women and Roma women who are not victims of gender violence would misuse and even abuse such spaces and take advantage of the systems.

Investigations have already detected the obstacles that keep out Roma women from official circuits and those include the following: a) the consideration of violence as a private problem of the Roma community b) the scarce use of primary care services, c) the distrust of Roma women towards primary care professionals as resources to seek help, d) the lack of professionals of Roma ethnicity in health services, e) the lack of cultural sensitivity of health professionals in relation to the Roma population, and f) the fact that health protocols for action against violence focus on reporting (Briones-Vozmediano et al., 2019; Emakunde, IVM, 2013).

Likewise, intercultural relationships with Roma have often resulted in stereotypes, many of which are detected among some social care or health professionals. For instance, the idea of a more chauvinistic community, with greater gender inequality, with a greater normalization of violence and the passivity of the victims are among the most common stereotypes when it comes to the Roma community and gender violence (Briones-Vozmediano et al., 2019; Valero et al., 2020). This has an impact on the quality of victim care services. Thus, research warns of the tendency to normalize violence in the collective among some professionals. This can trigger non-intervention, reducing on the one hand, the detection of cases, as well as the provision of information to victims because they understand that "they do not want to seek help". Inevitably, it also increases victims' mistrust of official services and increases their dissatisfaction because they feel prejudiced because of their ethnic identity. Faced with this reality, Roma women's associations are placing the issue of gender violence among their priority lines, and consequently they have also impacted on the political agenda. The associations have drawn up action protocols to support the victim and have specified measures to work on mediation (Valero et al., 2020).

The project I+D+i: Mestipen Romi: "Roma women and associations in Spain. Challenges and contributions (2004-2006)" has already shown that Roma women weave relationships of trust and complicity that favour a climate of zero tolerance towards gender violence. Therefore, in this scenario, the associations consider a series of internal resources that could be very useful in combination with official resources to respond to cases of violence, nurturing equitable intercultural relationships. In accordance with these advantages, research has already emphasized the importance of involving community activism in violence prevention programs (Vives-Casas et al., 2017). However, there are still few studies that investigate the contributions that are being carried out from within a stigmatized community, and specifically from the associative movement of Roma women.

Methods

This research is framed within the Communicative Methodology of research (Gómez, Puigvert & Flecha, 2011) to create knowledge, promoting active involvement throughout the research process of participants. The Communicative Methodology is defined as an intersubjective dialogue between researchers and participants (in this study, Roma women). This active incorporation of the participants allows a deeper and more rigorous level of analysis (Gómez, Racionero & Sordé, 2010). Within this study dialogic discussion groups and Communicative Daily Life Stories were used within the data collection process. The

communicative daily life story is aimed at establishing a collaborative dialogue on participants' reality by means of thoughts, reflections, and analysis (Aubert, Melgar & Valls, 2011).

It is a research strategy that brings different perspectives, experiences and points of view into contact through a carefully planned conversation. This strategy is particularly appropriate when the study aims to describe and understand perceptions about a certain social situation. The communicative perspective is rooted on an egalitarian dialogue, which allows collective interpretation and reflection, among equals, where the researchers and participants are considered equals. The aim of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of the potential drivers Roma women encounter in Roma associations for overcoming gender violence. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. Study the perception and experience of Roma women regarding gender violence.
2. Detail the needs of Roma women in order to carry out good prevention and awareness
3. Analyse knowledge of the sexist violence care network and mechanisms to respond to these situations, identifying the obstacles and opportunities that women identify.
4. Identify strategies that can be applied to prevent and overcome gender violence in the community.

Participants

With the Communicative Methodology underpinning the work there were two case studies that were carried out with two distinct associations. These are the entities located in Spain and one is the *Romani Women's Association Drom Kotar Mestipen* (Way of Freedom) based in Barcelona (cat) and the other is *Sim Romi* based in Bilbao (northern Spain). In order to actively include the Roma population in the course of all the research and guarantee the communicative perspective of the study, in the first place, the discussion groups were specified, selecting two Roma women's associations with a long history of working with women. For this, a series of criteria were taken into account, such as the presence of Roma women among the entity's work team, work with grassroots women and the gender line in their field of work. Taking this into account, two associations with which the authors had already collaborated on numerous occasions to develop other investigations were chosen.

Data Collections and Analysis Strategy

Two discussion groups were held in 2019 with each Roma Women Associations. In addition 3 Communicative Life Stories was carried out among workers and participants of Sim Romi and 5 Communicative Life Stories were also made to workers and end-users of the Drom Kotar Mestipen entity. The focus groups were audio recorded, and then transcribed and analysed.

Findings

The findings have been divided into two categories, firstly, those results that can contribute to preventing gender violence in the Roma community. Secondly, the contributions developed by Roma associations with an impact on overcoming violence are illustrated, that is, they promote the breaking of silence that can help victims to get out of situations of violence.

Training in Gender Violence

The associations identify training in gender violence as a necessity among Roma women. Having identified this need, they attempt to respond entailing a wide range of different activities. Taking into account that the family plays a very prominent role in the Roma community, it is very positive to provide this training to women and their families, to equip them with more tools that allow them to prevent and detect situations of violence, beyond physical violence:

The greatest difficulties we have is that there is no real awareness of what violence is because only the physical is recognized, so many women find themselves tied hand and foot because they cannot find support from the family. The mother-in-law must be taken into account, as she has a fundamental role in influencing both support and difficulties. That is why our function as social mediators is to work with mothers-in-law, work with women, work, with the environment, precisely to ensure that all the references they have a point of support, which we are, a point of support for them and for the families. (Raquel)

Therefore, preventive work is carried out that also includes the environment of women, with special emphasis on the women in their family to reinforce solidarity between them and build a female alliance across families. The responsibility of women in the family is to ensure the well-being of couples, to help prevent any violent behaviour and to be alert to any sign of violence is reinforced. This way of working is in tune with the unwritten commitment that already exists between Roma families, when a couple and their relatives, especially those of the groom, commit themselves, they assume the responsibility of ensuring the well-being of the couple and preventing violence within this. The mother-in-law also plays a crucial role in preventing and detecting a situation of violence in the Roma identity. The association, therefore, is exploiting an internal resource, without generating division with the community, also adding training in gender violence to achieve even more results.

We note, then, that training on gender violence is offered, sometimes specifically, usually aimed at preparing agents who can instruct women in the community to build these female alliances that contribute to the prevention of violence. In this sense, from the Sim Romi association, grassroots Roma women are trained in gender violence so that they work as mediators and educate other women and better attend to victims. It is a more professional profile and strengthens the agency of the Roma women themselves. The aim is to go where official resources do not reach and to pay attention to the victims, taking into account the codes and the reality of the Roma community. In this way, agents are trained who already

have the necessary cultural background, who know internal resources, but who also incorporate new tools that allow them to give victims better care.

However, we also recognize these activities are, in parallel to the content of other training or activities with a different orientation. Thus, entities such as Drom Kotar Mestipen offer training in violence that is not aimed at training a professional profile such as mediators, but rather works directly with the women who participate in the association and provides them with knowledge to being able to detect a situation of violence and know the resources that exist to get out of that situation. This training on gender violence is often incorporated into training or activities of other content, organized by the entity. Transversal training is one of its main lines, in this sense, it incorporates training in gender violence as part of its contents to many of these training activities aimed at labour insertion.

We have been working with gender violence formations for some time, for example, in the course of monitors, some courses are given on the matter, so that women have indicators to identify the cases of women and girls who may be suffering violence, and that they know how to handle those cases. (Lucy)

Training in gender violence and prevention strategies are aimed at women in the broad sense, that is, they incorporate different generations and women from different contexts and families from the conviction that it is necessary to network with them. At the same time, these trainings allow the creation of community spaces for dialogue around gender violence. These formations in relation to violence in different spaces, involving different members of the community, give rise to debates on the subject and to the visibility of referents who have overcome situations of violence.

Detection, Address and Repair -Women's Associations as Bridges Connecting Roma Women with Institutions

Access to Official Circuits Through Accompaniment to Victims

We recognize barriers to Roma women's access to care services for victims of gender violence. In this sense, discriminatory practices and the invisibility of the Roma identity in the design of the circuits of attention to the victims, often generate reluctance towards these services and separate the Roma victims from the public mechanisms. The participants perceive that the institutions do not protect them against cases of violence.

Because when we go to the police, we feel like a rejection. And we don't like that, because nobody is above anybody. I know this from experience, because I have lived it with my little daughter. We have been to the police several times for issues we have discussed with her. We go to social services and the police, we count our miseries, we count our whole lives and they don't help you. I think that we fix it better than justice. There should be women and men prepared to serve us. (Susana)

The mistrust towards institutions, already pointed out by the research, is corroborated by the participants. Among the causes of this mistrust are the lack of sensitivity to cultural difference, specifically to Roma identity, discrimination and institutional racism often perceived by women. The accompaniment of Roma victims by the associations during the access and the passage through the official circuits, improves their confidence, since unlike the official State circuits, the Roma women's associations are highly valued by women who trust them. The Roma women claim the need for a trusted person to accompany the victim when they take the step and go to care services for victims of gender violence.

(The victim) needs a person who is by their side, who gives them love without asking for anything in return. Entering a police station you already feel discriminated against for being a Roma, they think you have stolen or that you have committed a crime. Spaces are needed where Roma women feel safe, that not everyone will find out, like an association. (Susana)

The associations help Roma women a lot. They help inform them of things they have to do, resolve concerns, find solutions to things they need. They accompany you, they cover you in front of your fears. (Olga)

Women's associations deal with all these barriers and try to find solutions that take into account the needs of Roma victims and institutional requirements, in order to find a meeting point.

Access to Roma associations is easier for women; cultural codes are already understood and their practices and any differences aren't seen as negatives. Coordination between institutional resources and women's associations is crucial to promote Roma women's access to official circuits:

The difficulties when dealing with gender violence is being able to access the references that we have closest in terms of resources, since they are not prepared because there is no cultural diversity to deal with gender violence. They teach us a unique pattern and we are asked to conform. Roma women are extremely suspicious of speaking to a non-Roma person, and that is why our important role is to try to reach out to resources with them. Make a comprehensive accompaniment so that they feel calm and confident if it is not very difficult to deal with violence with them. (Raquel)

Starting the process and breaking the silence through initial contact with the association is easier for women. Next, the associations promote access to official circuits through accompaniment that improves trust, contributes to the maintenance of circles of trust and incorporates in the process someone with knowledge of the Roma reality in which the victim lives and who knows that she is not going to question it. In this sense, respect for their decisions is very important.

The associations, in addition to facilitating the access of Roma women to official circuits through measures such as accompaniment, are also demanding, in parallel, changes in their operation so that the spaces promote better care for Roma victims. The associations denounce the situation in which the institutional system places pressure on the Roma women when it does not consider their differences, does not take into account the Roma reality and forces

them to choose between their ethnic identity or the protection of victims offered by the State. In this sense, the associations reject some requirements established as a *conditio sine qua non* for the State to intervene in a case of violence, even when, as in the case of the complaint, the investigations have shown that it is an appeal that was rejected by Roma victims. They demand alternatives that respond to the needs of Roma victims and prevent them from being excluded from the official circuits.

The requirements to access resources should depend on the person in front of you. Roma women are known not to report. This should not be a requirement. The right of that citizen should prevail for the State to take care of her and that this does not depend on something that you know is not going to be, because it is not typical of the culture to which she belongs. (Lucy)

Legal Advice

The fear of losing children and reporting are the two concerns that, according to the participants and the investigations, hold back Roma victims the most when reporting (Briones-Vozmediano et al., 2019). Therefore, the need to generate natural and trustworthy spaces for women is identified, where they are provided with rigorous information to break some myths, and look for alternatives. The support should always begin with respect for the will of women to decide for themselves, once they have all the information. In this sense, specialized spaces must be created where they can have detailed advice on the case they are experiencing and how to address the violence they are suffering.

Therefore, one of the important aspects regarding the approach to gender violence lies in legal advice, which is of vital importance from the outset. The participants have the feeling that police institutions and, sometimes, those related to Social Services, treat them from the negative stereotype that relates the Roma people to crime. If we take into account that crimes related to gender violence have a great burden of questioning the victims and we add it to the previous aspect, we see that there is a great vulnerability to Roma women when they face these attacks and engage with services.

Women's associations have already detected this need, which is why they are providing legal advice to Roma women. This counseling sometimes comes from the hand of another Roma woman who has been trained as an *equality agent* and who, therefore, masters the available resources and knows how to respond to the concerns of the victim. Oftentimes, such equality agents have already established a bond with women that they know and who understands the Roma reality because they too live it or have been trained to understand the nuances of the community.

A successful experience can be the training of equality agents, who are women close to those women who raise their purple glasses and can detect the women who are suffering. (...) Offering resources in one way or another, if you cannot go to an emergency resource, they could find psychological and legal support, which can be more accessible so that women can make informed decisions. (Raquel)

On other occasions, associations have external support from legal clinics for social purposes, which provide free legal advice. This is the case of the Drom Kotar Mestipen, where they act as bridge and such entities are recognized for their important role once again. Thus, the associations detect Roma women who seek advice, either because the entity suggests it or because the woman directly requests it. Then the association contacts the legal clinic to put them in touch and respond to this need, accompanying the women, if they so wish, during the process.

There is an agreement with universities in a program called Dret al dret. Which is so that women who need it can have legal advice. We also have contact with the police and social services, so that if we need to, we can accompany and refer the woman. (Diana)

As has been outlined, the associations play a vital role connecting the Roma women with the relevant social services that treat gender violence.

Discussion

Despite the fact that research on gender violence and the Roma community is not yet sufficient, the data we are considering and the barriers to access to official circuits show that the services for the victims of violence, unfortunately, are not reaching many Roma women (Briones-Vozmediano et al., 2019).

Here strategies and interventions have been illustrated, carried out by Roma women's associations, with success in preventing and overcoming gender violence. Likewise, there are some deficiencies that Roma women and associations detect in the care services for victims of gender violence. The purpose of these findings is to generate new scientific knowledge that contributes to improving care for victims of gender-based violence against the Roma ethnic group and thus impact on overcoming this social problem.

The inequality and discrimination that the Roma community has been facing have often led to the interpretation that more than a group with problems, it is a group that in itself already represents a problem (Timmer, 2010). This trend can also be seen in the literature where, often, Roma values are not considered in the study of gender violence in the ethnic minority or are identified as handicaps. While the investigations detect contradictions and family resistance when breaking the silence for the sake of their honor (Briones-Vozmediano et al., 2019), no advantages have yet been recognized, associated with the values of ethnic identity, to combat gender violence. However, this research presents, for the first time, interventions against gender violence, developed by women's associations, which draw on some values of the Roma identity. These are, therefore, values known and respected by the community. These values and principles constitute internal resources that are being used by the associations to prevent and overcome the problem, but unfortunately the official circuits are not yet exploiting these resources.

In the field of prevention and from a more community perspective, the associations direct their training in gender violence to women and people around them, since they know the crucial role that family members play when it comes to caring for Roma women and men

(San Segundo & Codina-Canet, 2019). There is an unwritten pact that exists between Roma families when they formalize the commitment of a couple, by which they must ensure their well-being and avoid any situation of violence, otherwise the aggressor's family can be held accountable, and they may arrive to apply sanctions such as exile. This responsibility, far from the acceptance and normalization of violence emphasized in this group (Tokuç, Ekuklu & Avcioglu, 2010), involves family members in the fight against violence. And here, the mother-in-law plays a key role, since female solidarity is also an outstanding value in the ethnic minority (Sordé et al., 2014). Associations understand these cultural nuances and are able to exploit these values and codes. Thus, they train and work with different generations of women from the same family context to provide them with more knowledge and tools and at the same time generate female alliances and reinforce that responsibility to prevent and intervene in the event of violence. This solidarity and way of honouring these pacts is central to the preventative aspect and by empowering this role, especially among older women who enjoy recognition and legitimacy in the community, is vital. This mode of operating obeys values such as respect for the elderly, who often alert or intervene in case of detecting a situation of violence. Official protocols and State services do not consider these networks of female solidarity, nor do they include these female figure role models in the community, ignoring very valuable internal resources that are essential to the preventative actions. However, the associations do understand these dynamics and use this as part of their work.

Respect for women's decisions is a very recurrent criterion in the dynamics analysed, highlighted by the associations themselves to guarantee success. In this sense, the stereotypes that portray the Roma community as a more macho group and women as submissive, justify interpretations that indicate that the maintenance of some traditions and many of their decisions are not a choice product of free will, but the result of an imposition, often male (Oprea, 2012; Oprea, 2005). Here we illustrate how questioning the agency and the decisions of Roma women can influence the quality of official services. Research has already identified hierarchies of power between some health professionals and Roma patients. Cases are described in which professionals decide, for example, that it is better for a Roma woman to have a professional woman assist her in order to avoid conflicts with her husband, or when faced with a Roma patient with ovarian problems they decide not to provide exploratory tests due to consider that it may represent a problem with the family by virtue of the young woman's virginity (Aiello, Flecha & Serradell, 2018). These dynamics have also been detected in care services for victims of gender violence. The stereotype of passivity in Roma victims and the idea of the normalization of violence in the collective, sometimes causes professionals not to intervene or do not inform Roma victims of the resources available to them because they believe that they are not interested in seeking help (Briones-Vozmediano et al., 2019). These practices are very harmful and widely rejected by women and Roma associations that, from a feminist perspective, claim that no one decides for them. They demand that they be provided with the necessary and rigorous information to make their own decisions without having to justify themselves in front of those who consider that they are still under a veil of ignorance.

In the field of intervention, the associations provide support to the victims that incorporates identity traits such as community organization, and in coherence, the importance of the family and the environment. This reality is reinforced by the historical trajectory of the

ethnic minority, recognized as the group most at risk of suffering poverty and rejection in Europe (European Commission, 2004). Consequently, the feeling of community also represents a strategy for protection and survival. This reality influences the access of Roma women to official circuits. This community support and accompaniment collides with the individuality that predominates in the protocols provided in the official circuits. In this sense, single access to care services for victims of gender violence, although it may represent a barrier for many women, is a clear obstacle for Roma women because they go against their identity traits. In fact, the participants point out that when they leave their family and community context to access the official circuits individually, they feel alone, vulnerable and sometimes discriminated against.

Access to spaces that are not perceived as safe, according to guidelines that are not natural for the victims, represents an added problem to the situation of violence. Attending to this cultural trait and favouring Roma women's access to official circuits in the company of whomever they wish would bring them closer to these resources, otherwise many will continue to be excluded. The women's associations, aware of this barrier, offer this accompaniment to the Roma victims during the access and the passage through the official circuits. Ignoring this reality and forcing individualism in such a cohesive community generates rejection and distances Roma women from official circuits. This barrier highlights the invisibility of the Roma identity in the design of the protocols of attention to the victims, blind to the cultural diversity that coexists in our society. This trend, far from compensating for the special vulnerability that women belonging to an ethnic minority experience in the face of gender violence (Breiding, Black & Ryan, 2008), reproduces it. Thus, Roma women are forced to renounce their preferences, in accordance with their cultural identity, in order to conform to a homogeneous protocol. These feminist associations with their demands are contributing to the development of more plural services, which also consider the needs and differences of women traditionally invisible and excluded, while rejecting the tendencies towards assimilation.

There is also a lack of information among Roma women, also linked to this distancing from institutional resources. This misinformation feeds false myths that reproduce the fear of reporting out of fear of the consequences that it may represent with respect to the children and the safety of the relatives (Vives-Cases et al., 2017). In addition, academic exclusion and the low levels of education registered by the ethnic minority also have an impact on the defence of their rights (Aiello et al., 2019). To all this, we must add the institutional racism that creates a fundamental barrier for the victims. Along these lines, organizations such as the Advocacy Program have shown that in Serbia Roma women who denounce run the risk of being ridiculed and of receiving advice such as that "if they had behaved" they would not have this situation. Along the same lines, the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC, 2005), through a study carried out on 166 women, observed that 70% had suffered violence, 34% reported, but 60% of women who reported had had to face degrading treatment by the police for racist reasons.

Associations also take this scenario and these barriers into account when designing their interventions. In this sense, they have provided legal advice to women in order to provide them with legal and rigorous information to clarify their doubts regarding the situation of violence they may be suffering, the available resources and the possible consequences. Once

again, the importance of certain criteria when offering this advice must be stressed. Again, horizontality between professionals and women is vital to avoid hierarchies, questioning and pressure on women. It is necessary to work knowing that they have the last word, respect for their decisions is crucial to foster trust and access to resources. In order to nurture that trust, it is intended that women do not feel alone and that is why accompaniment by someone from the entity during the counselling is foreseen, if they so wish. Confidentiality is also an aspect highly valued by women, breaking the silence is very complicated, even more so when this will have consequences not only for the victim, but also for their environment.

Well, it has already been illustrated that in the Roma community, family members also have responsibilities in the prevention of violence, they can mediate before the detection of an assumption and even carry the sanctions for violence that are agreed. Women are very aware of this reality and when they are offered a resource, they must be aware of it. In addition, we are talking about extended families and it must be taken into account that the couple can be part of the same family context. Resorting to resources other than community mediation still generates suspicion among some members of the Roma community for interpreting it as a renunciation of the collective's own resources. This also implies special needs in terms of the protection of the victim and their families. That is why this whole scenario must be taken into account, the pressure that falls on the victims and their emphasis on the private treatment of these issues. Thus, it is important to incorporate the needs and differences of Roma women in the resources and interventions, but also during the deployment of these, taking into account criteria such as those shown here detected in the day-to-day operations of the entities analysed.

Conclusions

This research illustrates some of the keys that are promoting the success of interventions with Roma women, carried out by two associations in Spain, to prevent and overcome gender violence. In this sense, two key aspects are recognized. On the one hand, working and incorporating internal resources of the group itself, such as some values of the Roma identity is necessary. This is the case of female solidarity, community organization, family mediation or respect for the elderly. In this sense, trainings on gender violence are carried out that are aimed at women from the same environment and family context to be able to work in a network, create alliances between women, involve more families in the prevention and overcoming of violence and create spaces for female dialogue. On the other hand, it also highlights the accompaniment of the victim in access to official circuits to avoid the collision between the protection that women connect to the collective with access alone to the State circuits, perceived as unsafe and distant spaces to the Roma reality in which they live. From the very protocols of the Roma community, in many cases the aggressor is isolated and it is a collective process. In contrast, women perceive that in social services it is an individual process that isolates them. Finally, legal advice is presented as an intervention that aims to respond to misinformation and dismantle the fear of losing children and denouncing that they are two obstacles in access to official services. Unfortunately, official protocols and interventions do not take into account this cultural baggage and propose a series of

homogeneous resources, alien to these values, often triggering a collision with them. The associations denounce the invisibility of Roma women in official circuits and demand that these also incorporate cultural differences in order to reach all women victims of gender violence.

For now, the system ignores cultural difference and turns it into a handicap that falls on victims of ethnic minorities. Roma women are the ones who must decide whether to renounce their identity traits to gain access to official circuits and bear the consequences, or to avoid this resignation and thus be excluded from official resources. According to the data, the most recurrent trend would be the second, that is, many Roma victims are being excluded from care services for victims of gender violence and this places them in a situation of special vulnerability and exposure to violence. A second key aspect in the success of the interventions promoted by the associations is horizontality in working with women, equal dialogue and respect for their decisions. This is a claim already launched from Roma feminism, which denounces the questioning of the agency and the elections of Roma women (Oprea 2012; Oprea, 2005). In this sense, the stereotypes that point to a more macho culture and the submission of Roma women are used to interpret that the maintenance of cultural traditions in women is always an imposition of a male figure denying the choice of those women who choose keep them. This type of argument can be very perverse and can be used so that professionals, experts, feminists or institutions decide for Roma women, considering that they are still under a veil of ignorance. Here are some examples collected in the literature in the field of health. In the field that concerns us, the normalization of violence in the collective and the passivity of Roma victims are also prejudices that reproduce violence in the ethnic minority. In this sense, the investigations recognize hierarchies of power according to which professionals decide not to intervene in a case of violence or not to inform the victim of the available resources, when she is a Roma, because they interpret “that they do not want to seek help”.

These trends violate the rights of Roma women, reproduce discrimination in the circuits of the State, lower the quality of the services offered, generate mistrust and distance Roma women from official resources. This represents an added problem to gender violence. Women's associations, from the feminine solidarity that characterizes the group, are leading an arduous fight against gender violence, dismantling stereotypes that point to the normalization of violence in the group or the submission of women. In addition, through the analysis of their interventions, elements that promote their success are recognized. Transferring these elements to official resources can help overcome the barriers that currently hinder Roma women's access to care services for victims of violence, create more plural circuits that are respectful of cultural differences, and better combat violence from gender in ethnic minorities, especially exposed to this social problem.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Community of Researchers on Excellence for All ethics committee. The ethics reference number is 20210118.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

We do not wish to make the data available.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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