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Dialogic traits of Roma women leadership

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Abstract

Against of what mainstream society believes, Roma women are participating in public spaces of debate and decision-making and taking the lead in opening educational and labor opportunities for themselves, their families and their communities. The specific traits of the type of leadership developed and exercised by Roma women in civic organizations is yet scantily researched by academic literature. Aimed at filling this gap, this article presents and discusses what we have identified as dialogic traits in Roma women leadership when engaged in social and political actions. We call these traits “dialogic”, as all of them are constructed and emerged based on egalitarian and intersubjective dialogue among Roma women themselves, and their communities. These traits are, leadership assumed in a relational way, as a collective responsibility and developed with others; putting the Roma values and shared identity at the core; and with a strong understanding of the need of intergenerational solidarity among themselves as a motor of organized action. Findings are drawn from qualitative interviews conducted with Roma women of diverse ages, and Spanish regions, who are all of them leaders engaged across diverse organized spaces of civic participation, namely Roma women civic organizations, or other types of political institutions.

Keywords: roma women, leadership, shared identity, dialogue, Intergenerationality

Aspectos dialógicos del liderazgo de mujeres gitanas

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Resumen

Las mujeres gitanas están participando en espacios públicos de debate y toma de decisiones y tomando la iniciativa para abrir oportunidades educativas y laborales para ellas, sus familias y sus comunidades. Las particularidades del tipo de liderazgo que desarrollan y ejercen las mujeres gitanas en las organizaciones cívicas es un aspecto aun escasamente investigado por la literatura científica. Con el objetivo de llenar este vacío, este artículo presenta y discute lo que hemos identificado como aspectos dialógicos en el liderazgo de las mujeres gitanas cuando se involucran en acciones sociales y políticas. A estos aspectos los llamamos “dialógicos”, ya que todos ellos se construyen y emergen a partir del diálogo igualitario e intersubjetivo entre las propias mujeres gitanas y sus comunidades. Estos aspectos son, el liderazgo asumido de forma relacional, como responsabilidad colectiva y desarrollado con los demás; poner los valores gitanos y la identidad compartida en el centro; y la intergeneracionalidad como base de la acción organizada. Los resultados se extraen de entrevistas realizadas a mujeres gitanas de diversas edades y regiones españolas, todas ellas líderes involucradas en diversos espacios organizados de participación cívica, concretamente organizaciones cívicas de mujeres gitanas u otro tipo de instituciones políticas.

Palabras clave: mujeres gitanas, liderazgo, identidad compartida, diálogo, Intergeneracionalidad

Existing literature in the field of leadership studies and collective action has explored leadership in relation to racial and ethnic minority groups (Begeny, Huo & Ryan, 2022; Begeny et al., 2022).

Some authors have done so related to the leadership experience of people of colors in the USA (Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Johnson & Fournilier, 2022), and it is pushed with the BlackLivesMatter movement. Similarly, also from USA, other scholars have explored this theme in relation to Latino migrants (Nunez, 2009; DeAngelo, Schuster & Stebleton, 2016). In Europe, some of this literature has focused on studying Muslim organizations (Pfaff & Gill, 2006; Lillevik, 2019; Adamson, 2011), or more recently, refugees and how they have organised since the EU refugee crisis in 2015 (Milan, 2019; Sahin, 2021). If looked at the current literature about leadership and Roma, the picture is more diffuse and vaguer, and very few works have stopped at carefully analysing how leadership works in Roma communities, to what extent differential traits can be observed, and how this plays out when adding the gender perspective, that is, looking at the case of Roma women leadership.

Much has been progressed in the last decades about how scientific research with the Roma communities is being done. Every time more, traditional ethnocentric and relativist perspectives at the time of studying “the Roma” which for long characterised anthropology and some social sciences’ studies, are being abandoned towards doing research “with the Roma”, from a dialogic and communicative perspective (Flecha, Gómez & Puigvert, 2003), and thus including their lifeworlds and own interpretations of reality. This is a major step towards creating new knowledge that is both not solely fair with the Roma social reality -and thus advancing to debunk stereotypes that are still associated with the Roma-, but which can also inform potential solutions to help improve their living conditions (Aiello et al., 2022; Flecha et al., 2022).

Taken the above-mentioned into account, this study is framed within this dialogic turn of Roma studies and women’s studies (De Botton, Puigvert & Sánchez-Aroca, 2005), and draws on the line of research about Roma communities and Roma women which assumes that grassroots Roma women are every time more being motors of social transformation in their own communities, exercising their human agency, and looking for collective ways to improve not only their lives, but also the ones of their children and their communities (Munté-Pascual et al., 2022; Aiello et al., 2019). Besides, we draw from the understanding of leadership that goes beyond traditional

‘charismatic’ Weberian conceptions of leadership to engage with the type of leadership proposed by Ganz (2010), in which this is understood as enabling others to achieve their shared purpose under conditions of uncertainty.

How the specific traits of the Roma culture interact and intersect with the gender dimension, and how this capitalises in shaping a Roma women type of leadership? This is the main research question with which this study engages. We hypothesize that Roma women leadership has its own traits, moving away from individualistic approaches of understanding leadership, and tapping into specific aspects of the Roma cultural identity. For doing this, this study is framed in the Narratives4Change research project (H2020 Nr. 841355), aimed at studying leadership and Roma women. More specifically, qualitative interviews have been conducted with Roma women of diverse ages and Spanish regions, who are all of them leaders engaged across diverse organized spaces of civic participation, namely Roma women civic organizations, or other type of political institutions. Interviews have been complemented with the analysis of the interventions of ten Roma women leaders of different ages who participated and contributed to the International Seminar “Narratives4Change. Stories that matter: Roma women leading the change” (21 June 2022).

Literature review

Leadership and social movements

The study of leadership in social movements and collective action has become since the late decades of the 20 century a topic of interest by itself within the literature of social movements and organizations, as it has become relevant to understand its influence in the outcomes of the social movement as how they contribute to social change (Aminzade et al., 2001; Morris, 2000; Morris & Staggenborg, 2007; Skocpol, Ganz, & Muson, 2000, Ganz, 2010, Andrews, Ganz, Baggetta, Han, & Lim, 2010). Some scholars have analysed the role of leadership and especially the contributions of the leaders to the movement and its success or failure. These types of studies highlight a variety of elements such as the story-telling or narrative, the leader’s background, personal life story as well as strategic capacity and the power to engage people in collective

action (Couto, 1989; Davis, 2002; Han, Andrews, Ganz, Baggetta, & Lim, 2011; Morris and Stagerborn, 2007).

Marshall Ganz is one of the most recognised scholars within the field of leadership, organizing and civil society, whose contributions have helped to understand the capital role that leadership play for the success of social movements. Ganz understands leadership in a relational way, defined as ‘accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve shared purpose under conditions of uncertainty’. As he explains, doing this not solely requires a strategy (“head”), but also understanding which are those values that leaders have that feed their “call” to lead (story of self), how own’s values can be shared values among other people setting the base for a shared purpose (story of us), and why action to protect those shared values needs to take place now (story of now). Both Ganz (2000) and Morris and Stagerborn (2007) highlight the previous life experience of the leader as crucial for shaping their call to dare to take the lead, and thus assume responsibility.

Morris and Stagerborn (2007) point to the fact that the personal background based on the lived experiences, education and knowledge acquired during the participation in diverse social institutions, lead to different strategic choices and, hence, to failure or success. The authors particularly point to the participation in civic associations such as religious institutions or any other public space that serves as an inspiration to the people. Furthermore, Morris and Stagerborn (Ibid) emphasize the ability of leaders to construct meaning through storytelling which engages others to join the movements (Ibid.; 19). According to them, the leader is the inspiration to others and works as a strategic decision-makers who organises others in the social movement. Other authors have also analysed the role that narratives play for their contribution of a historical precedent that stands for individual and collective resistance (Couto, 1989).

Drawing from the contributions of Bourdieu, Putnam, and the literature on social movement leadership, Nepstad and Bob (2006) developed the concept of ‘leadership capital’, a broad term in which they include three different components that effective movement leaders have: cultural, social and symbolical capital. As evidenced by Nepstad and Bob (2006) in their analysis of several social movements in the USA and in Latin America, leadership capital can allow movements to compensate for a lack of traditional material

resources, or a lack of political opportunities, and so this might be what explain the change in the social and political structure.

Several authors have pointed out the ability of movement leaders to frame goals and issues (Einwohner, 2007; Snow et al., 1986; Morris, 2000). Leaders are the ones who make the interpretations and compel others to engage in the movement, making them attractive to the public, and inspiring individuals to get involved. According to Einwohner (2007), authority work varies across movement settings, and it is especially important in situations in which there is uncertainty, and where traditional sources of authority and leadership may be in flux or absent. Under these situations, the presence of leaders' authority work as a source of leadership may become a key element for the emergence of successful collective action.

Although there is vast literature exploring the role of leadership in social movements, as well as how for instance specific types of civic organizations can enhance leadership development (Andrews et al., 2010), much needs to be known about how ethnicity and gender is related to this, and even more, how the theme of leadership, civic organizing, collective action, ethnicity, and gender plays out in the specific case of Roma women leadership in community organizing.

Leadership, civic organizations and Roma women

As for the case of Roma ethnic minority, literature specifically focusing on leadership and related to the Roma has been mostly related to self-organizing across social areas (Bhabha et al., 2017; Schneeweis, 2013; Schafft & Ferkovics, 2018; Álvarez-Díaz & Sopeña, 2022; Hetherington et al., 2020), and more recently, explored against religious congregations, and most commonly in Evangelical church (Canton-Delgado, 2017; Ripka, 2015; Slavokova, 2021).

As part of this broader body of literature, every time more scientific literature is engaging in researching how Roma women are not passive and subdue to Roma men, but also taking the lead to engage in civic organizations, as well as in institutional politics (Munté et al., 2020). From women's studies and interconnected to Roma studies, literature has explored how specific type of grassroots-based associations promote the participation of Roma women, and foster its leadership capacity. The specific case of how the Drom Kotar

Mestipen Roma Women association does this through one of its activities, the “Roma women students’ meetings”, is an example (Aiello et al. 2019), and how this type of Roma women organizing has also used online mechanisms to cope with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Aiello et al., 2022).

Other works have also explored how grassroots Roma women are opening space of transformation in the field of education, and how due to their organizing based on deep solidarity networks, they are setting the ground for Roma girls to have positive role models once reaching higher education (Serradell et al., 2022; McDonagh & Fonseca, 2022). Literature has explored how in these cases, collective action of Roma women does not solely impact on themselves, but also on their kids, and their whole communities. Some works have inquired some of these examples for the field of health, challenging racist prejudices and stereotypes against Roma. In this line, in a qualitative work, García-Espinel and colleagues (2017) examined the role that Roma elders as leaders in the Roma community due to the respect for their life experiences, can help mediate in potential situations of conflict with health providers within the healthcare system.

Also, some Roma and non-Roma feminist scholars have been for a long time now claiming to be considered, and listened to in an equal footing, by mainstream white feminism and feminist discourses (Oprea, 2004; Bitu & Vincze, 2012; Sordé et al., 2014). Again, feminist and gender studies are making a turn and trying to capture how Roma women are participating in women’s rights across Europe, at the grassroots and also at national and European level. Grassroots non-academic Roma women are advocating for a feminism that is in line with dialogic feminism (De Botton, Puigvert & Sanchez, 2022), that is, based on the principle of equality of difference, and in the case of Roma women, ensuring that they can be both, feminist women and feminist Roma women. This goes in line with the critique done by feminist Roma and non-Roma scholars such as Brooks (2012), Gelbert (2012), Izsak (2008), or Khalfaoui (2021), to mention some, which denounces that European feminist discourse has many times been done in the name of all women, but excluding Roma women, working-class women, and not tackling racism. Hence, Roma feminism advocate for the right of Roma women to freely decide about how they live their womanhood, stating that important values such as the value of maternity, deciding upon virginity, or marriage, as

aspects of the Roma culture on which they are the one who freely want to decide, and not that they are imposed on, as sometimes argued by ethnocentric views (Sorde et al., 2013).

Dialogue as intrinsic value of the Roma cultural identity

Many has portrayed the Roma culture as highly hierarchical, relegating women to the margins, and in which all the authority is concentrated in the male elder leader. These types of statements, far from being scientific, have been elaborated from ethnocentric perspectives, and turning the back to a serious analysis and understanding of how the Roma culture works, and what are the cultural traits that Roma value and observe (Flecha & Gomez, 1995). Against this, dialogue penetrates the Roma way of organizing their individual and community life, this is due to the persisting of the oral tradition in the Roma culture, and how it is used in myriad ways, to reach agreements among members of the community, to enact sanctions, when celebrating rituals, among others (Garcia-Espinete et al., 2017).

Cultural intelligence is another aspect identified in the Roma culture, understood as the human capacity that everyone has for engaging in an egalitarian dialogue (Flecha, 2000). Cultural intelligence underlies the Roma cultural identity as the results of centuries of having to strategize to navigate racist European societies, which tried to annihilate their cultural identity as a people and force their cultural assimilation (Sorde, Flecha, Mircea, 2013). Wherever they have lived, Roma communities have built networks of solidarity among themselves, and among non-Roma allies, developing dialogic mechanisms to agree upon their own rules, values and norms, and self-proclaiming as a people without a territory, and being recognized as one transterritorial community spread across the nation-states, able to (Ibid.).

Hence, the centrality of dialogue has been central for the Roma, not just for organize their social lives, for instance, finding cooperative ways of working together (Aubert, 2011), at the time of solve problems with non-Roma communities (Gómez, Munté & Sordé, 2014), when navigating public health and education systems which are blinded to ethnic and cultural diversity (Aiello, Flecha & Serradell, 2018; Serradell et al., 2022), as well as at the time of defining the priorities of the Roma women's movement (Munté et al., 2020).

Even though all the progress done in the last decades by scientific literature and its dialogic turn to capture and understand Roma organizing, and the specific role of Roma women in both the Roma rights movement, as well as in the women's movements, including grassroots Roma views (Aiello et al., 2022; Sordé et al., 2013), more needs to be done to better understand how the specific traits of the Roma culture interact and intersect with the gender dimension, and how this capitalises in shaping a Roma women type of leadership which has its own traits, based on the Roma cultural identity, as well as with the intrinsic value of dialogue. This is the endeavour we approach in this article, this time not looked not from the perspective of civic organizations, but from the perspective of grassroots Roma women leaders themselves.

Methods

This study is part of the research done in the framework of the Narratives4Change project (H2020, Nr. 841355), which lasted 36 months and aimed at better understanding how the public narrative framework for public leadership is used across diverse cultural settings and social areas. The project had two phases, the first one was developed at the Harvard Kennedy School and focused on the study of public narrative (Aiello & Ganz, 2021), and its impacts. The second phase was developed at the Department of Sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, and focused on researching on Roma women leadership, and to what extent there were elements of the public narrative framework that could be adapted and capitalized in the leadership development promoted by specific grassroots Roma women civic association in Spain.

In this article we report results of a specific study of the general Narratives4Change project, which focused on identifying and better understanding the specific traits of the Roma women leadership. This study was aimed at shedding light on the following research question: *How the specific traits of the Roma culture interact and intersect with the gender dimension, and how this capitalises in shaping a Roma women type of leadership?*

Round 1. Qualitative fieldwork interviews to Roma women

For this, co-authors conducted 19 in-depth interviews with Roma women of diverse age, and Spanish regions, who are all of them leaders engaged across diverse organized spaces of civic participation, namely Roma women civic organizations, or other type of political institutions. Interviews were done in Spanish, and they lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. All of them were recorded, and for this study selective transcription was done verbatim.

Table 1 below shows Roma women who have participated in the fieldwork. For data protection issues, pseudonyms have been used.

Table 1. Profiles of study participants

Pseudonym	Age	Region	Type of organization in which participate: civic, political, other
Juana	58	Andalusia	Roma women organization
Sofia	57	Andalusia	Roma women organization Political institution (national level)
Carmen	56	Andalusia	Roma women organization Political institution (regional level)
Veronica	36	Aragon	Roma organization
Manuela	41	Aragón	Grassroots Roma organization
Rocio	54	Aragón	Roma organization
Ainhoa	26	Basque Country	Grassroots Roma women organization Grassroots Roma organization
Carla	40	Basque Country	Grassroots Roma women organization Grassroots Roma organization
Helena	58	Basque Country	Grassroots Roma women organization Grassroots Roma organization
Míreia	26	Cantabria	Roma Youth organization
Lucia	45	Catalonia	Grassroots Roma women organization Political institution (local level)
Maria	40	Catalonia	Grassroots Roma women organization
Juana	46	Catalonia	Grassroots Roma women organization Political institution (local level)
Sulamita	22	Castile and León	Roma organization
Paula	28	Catalonia	Grassroots Roma women organization
Dolores	28	Catalonia	Political institution (regional level)

Pseudonym	Age	Region	Type of organization in which participate: civic, political, other
Pilar	22	Catalonia	Grassroots Roma organization
Elisa	39	Valencia	Grassroots Roma organization
Ana	45	Navarra	Roma organization

Round 2. Complementary data extracted from the “International Seminar Narratives4Change: Stories that matter”

Qualitative data gathered from the fieldwork interviews was complemented with the analysis of data gathered from the interventions of 10 diverse Roma women (age, nationality and institution) who participated as speakers in the International Seminar “Narratives4Change: Stories that matter. Roma women leading the change in Spain and Europe”. This seminar was held online on 21st June, and it was the closing event of the Narratives4Change project, led by Dr. Emilia Aiello (UAB), and in which other co-authors have acted as members of the research team.

The seminar was aimed at opening the dialogue about what are the current challenges and opportunities regarding organizing of Roma women at the Spanish and European level, mainly in both the field of education and the field of health and gender violence prevention. For this, the seminar counted on the participation of Roma and non-Roma people from the field of academia, policy and civil society who are working at the intersections of local, regional, and European level to advance the rights of the Roma community as well as other at-risk groups.

The seminar was structured in two main parts. The first one, held in English, counted on speakers from the policy, advocacy, and academic sphere, all of them working at the European level with the Roma community. They shared their viewpoints about what is the state of the art of the Roma in Europe, and what is the role that Roma women are playing to contest situations of inequalities. Specifically, speakers were asked to share their expertise and work about how European institutions working with the Roma people are helping to facilitate Roma and Roma women organizing at the national and grassroots level, and how this is impacting on contesting situations of social exclusion. The second part of the seminar, held in Spanish,

focused on sharing the viewpoints of those working towards advancing the rights of Roma women in Spain and beyond. It brought in the voices of Roma women leaders, researchers, and stakeholders from the policy field, who have for long organized and/or conducted scientific research in the field of education and health. In this second part the Spanish case was discussed, reflecting on how Roma women are opening spaces for social transformation in education and health.

The whole event was recorded, and interventions of nine Roma women who participated in the different roundtables were transcribed verbatim. These women have different profiles: some of them are scholars, others are representatives of some political or social organization either operating at the European level, national or regional level (Spain), or local level.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted considering different analytical dimensions of both leadership, and Roma cultural identity, thus ensuring that analysis responded to the research questions. For this, a first coding scheme was drafted extracting categories from literature review on the themes tackled. This initial coding scheme was refined while the analysis was done, adding categories that were considered of relevance by co-authors. Also, for the purpose of ensuring validity of the coding scheme, it was dialogically discussed by all co-authors. In doing the dialogical refinement of categories of analysis co-authors were guided by the following question: *to what extent does these categories represent worldview of Roma people?*

Coding scheme is represented in Table 2 below, in which it can be observed the specific categories defined for each dimension of analysis, and for some categories, concrete subcategories (dimensions) were defined.

Table 2. Coding Scheme

Analytical dimension	Code	
<i>Leadership – at individual and team level</i>	Enhancement of subjects’ agentic capacities – empowerment	
	Awareness of the “strength” of showing vulnerability	
	From being at the shadow to daring to take the lead and to speak up at the public sphere	
	Individual conscientization/awareness	
	Defining shared purpose	
	Facilitating strategy	
	Creating and strengthening social relationships among team members	
	Effective conflict solving	
	Building team culture and holding others accountable	
	Yield the ground for organizational effectiveness	
	Enhancement of social capital and solidarity networks among team members	
	Meaning creation and shared social identity (“USness”) - Collective awareness/conscientization	
	Other	
	<i>Roma cultural identity</i>	Value of the extended family
		Taking care of the elders and respect of elders
Solidarity networks based on cultural identity		
Transterritorial sense of identity – Roma people		
Value of maternity		
Men included as key allies		
Strong value of the community		
Intergenerational dialogue		
Other		

Ethical issues

To protect the participants’ identities and personal data, pseudonyms have been used. Consent forms with detailed information about the study and an explanation that participants have the right to withdraw from it at any time were provided to all the persons participating in the research.

All information gathered under the Narratives4Change project (EU-funded project, Project Nr 43855) in which this specific study is framed complies with the Ethics Appraisal Procedure required by the Horizon 2020 research program, funded by the European Commission. Accordingly, the Narratives4Change project follows the Regulation (EU) 2016/679, the EU new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Results

In this section the results are presented and discussed. They are organized in three sections: leadership assumed in a relational way, as a collective responsibility, and always done with others, both non-Roma and Roma; putting the Roma values and shared identity at the core; and with a strong understanding of the need of intergenerational solidarity among themselves as a motor of organized action.

Relational Leadership: a collective responsibility

Traditional approaches in leadership that have tended to portray leaders as unbreachable charismatic entities, and leadership as something that is done individually. This is a critique posed by scholarship that explores the relevance of the relational aspect of leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006), or shared leadership as broadly distributed within group or team of individuals (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007). Accordingly, evidence gathered for this study shows how in the case of Roma women leaders and members of some type of civic organization, the relational dimension of leadership is inherent to how they understand and conceive their mission as community and public leaders.

In most of the cases, although having a public role representing their organizations, women interviewees for this study do not even consider themselves as “leaders”, as for them this label tends to be associated with “payo” (non-Roma) types of leadership, that of, one charismatic person outstanding among others. This reflection emerged when dialoguing with them and observing that many of them are indeed public leaders, but exert their leadership in a different, relational way, with others. For instance, Maria explained how according to her, leadership is something that *emerge from the inside*. In Maria’s words:

(1) I don't see myself as a leader, I do what I do because it emerges from the inside. Because we know well what we have experienced and how your life can change [once starting collaborating in public organizations]. It helps you improving, it rises... as Roma we have the need for taking care of each other and sharing very rooted. Then, it rises, and when it does so, it impacts in your context and at the community level. (Maria)

What Maria explains as “something that emerges from the inside”, is then described by her as something that the Roma have, the need of taking care of each other, and working side by side with each other. Hence, leadership in the Roma, and in this case in Roma women leaders, is not innate, but crafted and shaped by their own cultural identity. As Maria stated, the values of sharing and taking care of each other are at the very heart of their leadership.

Dolores, a young Roma women leader who is participating in the Catalan Network of Roma University Students (CampusRom) also highlights this idea of leading not for the one's sake, but assuming responsibility and taking the lead always thinking in “their people”, all those people behind them, in a collective way:

(2) I believe our leadership is different from many others, since we don't do things just for ourselves, but for the Roma who come behind. It's based in the community and not in the individual. It is not the person for the sick of herself, but for the entire community. (Dolores)

Dolores point of view is also shared by Blanca, a senior Roma women who emphasized the responsibility that Roma civic associations have of working for those in their community who are in a more vulnerable situation, not just for those who are already participating. She mentioned how for her, taking the lead involved setting the goal of promoting that Roma women from small towns could also have the social opportunities that others living in the city have:

(3) That's why I'm here, and I will continue helping women in the workshops [organized by the association], and listening to them (...)
Because the women of Ortuella (town) didn't even know that there

was an association of Roma women, and we have been working with them for three and a half years organizing different types of activities like workshops on self-esteem, empowerment... well... haute couture... a bit of everything. I have made them participate in an activity related to March 8, in the town hall, reading communications, participating in the activities that were there, that they did not know about. They were Roma women, yes, but invisible in their own town (...) (Blanca)

While the target is the entire community, Roma women leaders interviewed in this study shared how achieving positive results for all of them implies enhancing human agency of their peers, and thus engaging and weaving synergies around the most pressing challenges they all face. This appears as a common aspect mentioned by all the interviewees, who are operating in different type of civic organizations.

Other of our interviewees, Sulamita, when commenting about her mission in the civic association in which she is involved, and also about the mission of some Roma women organizations, the first thing she mentioned is the contrast between the bureaucratization and managerial approach used in some non-Roma organization when trying to work with the Roma community. According to her, that type of “leadership” is not how Roma women work; in her words, the humanistic way that Roma women have of working with and for each other is lost when just thinking in a managerial way:

(4) The associations created by Roma women, even if they work together with non-Roma women, most of them work for (improving the situation) the Roma women, thinking in the person. On the contrary, other sort of associations [referring to some non-Roma organizations] are much more bureaucratic, just ensuring to manage things in a technical way. This is not how things should work (Sulamita)

A relevant aspect is observed in the narrative of Sulamita when she shared her understanding of leadership in the Roma culture, that of who gets the protagonism. Sulamita reflected that being pointed out as the protagonist and the one standing out among others, being among Roma or non-Roma audiences, is not something cheered in the Roma culture and something for which to presume. For her, Roma people appreciate more being recognized

with their group, not as individuals doing “great things”, as this can be seen as being egocentric, a value associated with non-Roma people:

(5) In the way we understand the mission we have; I think that we avoid protagonism. At least in what I've seen or so... unless it's a person who has come out egocentric (she laughs). And I think that this is much more common in the Roma culture rather than in the payo (non-Roma culture). In payo culture, they like that there is a leader, like a main head who directs the rest of the group... And that in Roma culture, this does not look good, it looks even bad, I think. It looks bad, because even if the person is very good, and charismatic... it doesn't look good that you presume about it... A person who brags about it, usually is not liked... (Sulamita)

As observed in Sulamita's narrative, according to her, *paios* need to have a head of the group, something that works differently in the Roma culture. This very aspect is of relevance as the mainstream understanding among non-Roma is that of the Roma having one leader, the “patriarch”, the ones who takes all decisions in the group. Deepening and dialoging with Roma women leaders themselves we observe how this is not the case, and how subjectively (as perceived by themselves), and objectively (observing how civic organizations of those Roma women interviews work), leadership is distributed among members, and responsibilities passed from elders to youngsters.

“She knows what we have gone through”: shared identity based on Roma values

Other underlying traits of the Roma women leadership is a strong identity based on their shared identity as Roma, honoring their cultural values as a people, and also as Roma women, that is, women who have been challenging generation after generation a triple discrimination: that of being women (gender), that of being Roma (ethnic identity), and many times with no education credentials and poor (social class) (De Botton, Puigvert & Sánchez, 2004). This shared identity based on Roma cultural values, which impregnates the way how Roma women exercise their leadership is observed in the testimonies and narratives of all interviewed women.

Carmen, a senior leader who was the founder of one of the oldest Roma women organizations in Spain, and who was one of the first Roma women holding a public position in a local government explained how the centrality of the extended family in the Roma culture shapes their overviews not only at the time of taking the lead, but also at the time of understanding their community life. Moreover, she emphasized the importance of freedom for the Roma people, and how contrary to non-Roma women, Roma women have been since even, even back in the 15th century, a key figure in the public life:

(6) And our trait is respect, for nature, for the family, for women, for children, it is something unique to us. As for the Roma, our goods are not counted by the amounts of euros that are in a bank, our great treasure is our extended family... These are clear traits of the Roma identity, that way how we understand civic and community life. (...) And Roma men know that, and they recognize that, they have supported us, because they know the capacity that we have (...) Of course we share things with non-Roma women, but we have a different serious situation... we are talking about racism, denial of education, denial of work... envy (Carmen)

Interviewees also acknowledge this shared sense of identity deeply rooted in Roma values, and beyond this, they make out of this the flag of the Roma women leadership. This very idea is well explained by Sofia, a leader who for the last 30 years has had a key role in the cultural and political life of Roma women organizations and who currently holds a public position in a high-ranking government institution at the national level:

(7) And if we add all these [Roma women] role models we can also show how women are changing... We need to transmit this to newer generations of young women leaders. And I think that these are the challenges of current feminist movements, they are most of the times blind to non-white women. We need to explain and claim that yes, we are also feminist, and that for us being feminist also involves taking deep care of the family. Our families go with us and are with us in this struggle. This is part of our cultural identity (...) Mainstream feminist movement must open up. Too many times it is dogmatic and blind to other non-white voices (...) All women have common interests, with our differences. (Sofia)

In the abovementioned quotation, when talking about leadership Sofia brought to the debate the critique to mainstream feminism which many times leaves behind and do not listen to what feminist Lidia Puigvert and colleagues (Ibid.) have called the “other women”, those women who have not academic credentials and because of this have been left at the margins of public debates. Sofia’s strong advocacy for an inclusive feminism, based on the equality of differences, goes in line with what other Roma women interviewed also commented. In line with this, Maria, a mother of three and who have been active in different civic associations at the regional level, and in her own neighborhood explained how many grassroots Roma women do not feel identified with the “feminist label”, which according to her, is many times linked to a *payo* type of feminist. However, she sees that if looking at the actions that organized grassroots Roma women are doing on the ground, there is no doubt that they are also feminists:

(8) I have always said that although I consider myself a feminist, and I love to say that feminism is Roma... I believe that we carry out actions that not only change the lives of women, but also the lives of the entire world, of all people, be they men or women. And for me, Roma feminism is fundamental, because perhaps it is not as visible as the *payo* feminism... but Roma women have 600 years of struggle. We have been always struggling (...) Many Roma women don’t feel like feminism is something that goes with them, but of course they are feminists! (Maria)

The way how Roma cultural identity shapes the sense of shared purpose and shared identity of Roma women leaders also expresses through advocating for the history of the Roma people to be known by all Roma and by mainstream society. Paula, a young Roma women leader explains how the Romano language is something unique that the Roma culture has, and that Roma women leader need to claim it as their treasure as a people. She also explains that this is an added value for Roma women working in the public sphere. And although many of them are not able to speak Romanó, just knowing that their share this language provides them a bigger sense of sisterhood, she states:

(9) When I went to the second conference of Roma women, organized in Barcelona in 2018 by Drom Kotar Mestipen I found out that Romanó existed... that it is our language! I didn't know until then! How this can be possible? I knew that there was Caló here in Spain, but I didn't know that Romanó existed... And what we share a Roma woman is something bigger than the sum of all of us, is our culture... We need to vindicate this. Because this helps when we embrace any activity. For instance, this helps when we organize the “Trobadas” (Roma women students’ gatherings) (Paula)

Another trait that emerged in the interviews with Roma women leaders is the centrality of dialogue in the Roma culture, and how this is something that Roma acquire since their childhood, which later impacts in the way how they solve and agree important decisions in their community life, but also in the public sphere. Pilar, one of the youngest Roma women leaders interviewed, emphasized how talking and listening to each other, not only helps you to share your point of view, but also to defend your own ideas and have critical capacity:

(10) You always listen to the views of others ... And that counts for the organization of anything (...) I think that the way how Roma people do things and listening to others’ opinions helps you a lot to debate, to defend your opinion, to defend your point of view, because when you share it, you need to really make your point (...) I don't have a university degree... but for me has been always important to surround myself with people who have known more than me, because that way you learn much more. We the Roma since we are children, when something happens, or there is some sort of conflict, you see the older ones gathered, and you see that they expose the case, and they go like: it's like that, like that or like that. But then you see that the other answers: no, it's just that... because this, this or this. And so, they teach you to see the two different points of view. And that teaches you that even if it's your family, if you're not right, you're not... And I think that this has really helped me at the time of assuming responsibilities (Pilar)

Quotations presented and discussed in this section reveal how the aspects of the Roma cultural identity as well as the shared plight the Roma have gone through for years, generations after generations, gives Roma women in

positions of leadership a deep sense of shared social identity which enhances a sense of shared purpose. Their shared purpose, even operating in different civic associations and at different levels (local, regional, national), is linked to improving their own situation as Roma women, and with this, claiming for the economic, political, social, and cultural rights of the Roma people. Besides, the Roma cultural identity and their sense of people became as sources of courage and unity for grassroots Roma women.

Youth, adults and also grandmothers, here all voices count

Intergenerationality is another of the traits identified in the way how Roma women leader understand and conceive their leadership mission, as well as something that according to senior women leaders needs to be remembered to younger ones when assuming collective responsibilities and embracing challenges.

Sulamita shared in her interview how listening to the advice of Roma women elders is key for anything that she does as young leader, and that is something that she always reflects upon. According to her, elder Roma women are their protectors, for their wisdom, and because these women know what it means having been left out of those spaces where important decisions were taken in mainstream society:

(11) I think we need to always work with older generations. Because they are the protectors. We need your blessing and your advice, in everything, and especially in things that are collective. And we need older generations to be part of this (Sulamita).

In this sense, Maria explained how since she started to collaborate with the Roma Association of Women Drom Kotar Mestipen and other local organizations in her neighborhood, she has promoted that both her mother and her daughter also join her in the activities she leads in these civic spaces. She explained how for her, taking the leadership involves listening to the advice of older Roma women in the community, as well as teaching younger generations like the ones of her daughter to also do this. She explains that accumulated wisdom of elder women in the community is something that many times is not valued by *paios*, that somehow the opinions or the tasks that

elder can do are disregarded, but this cannot happen in the Roma culture. Besides, she emphasized that this is an added value for the type of leadership embraced by Roma women:

(12) Even my mother now participates in the activities... Because she has seen the change through me... My mother participated as role model in one of the Students' Roma Gatherings ["Trobadas"] organized by Drom Kotar Mestipen, and when she said that I was her role model, I had no words to explain how I felt. And let her say, "well, I'm going to learn to read because I've seen how my daughter has done the impossible to be able to access university". And I think that above all I have done that for her. Our sense of communion among Roma women, no matter how old you are, is central in all what we do, and somehow is unique also. This works differently among païos" (Maria)

Related to what Maria explained, the presence of intergenerationality in Roma women leadership is also observed in how younger girls influenced older Roma women, and the way around. Dolores, a young Roma women leader, explained that for her starting to participate in activities organized by civic associations, and then taking an active role in the way how the association was organized also helped her mother to see that she can also embrace new educational projects. Dolores emphasized how intergenerationality is central to inspire each other and be courageous at the time of embracing new challenges, feeling that they are not alone:

(13) And this kind of leadership, and taking initiative impacts others. In my case, when I took the step of doing these things, well, my mother took the step of innovating herself: she saw that if I can, she also can do it. And she, along with other women, have begun to move and organize themselves to take courses for university access. And all because my mother has always wanted that step, but she has not known how to do it. But when she saw that I did it she took courage to be a role model with others. In my house, all my cousins have the compulsory high education. My cousin says that I've been her role model (...) (Dolores)

Most of the senior Roma women leaders interviewed for this study mentioned the relevance of promoting that young Roma women leaders listen to the advice of elders. Although this is very present in the Roma culture, they explained how this is the way of wisdom has been transmitted in the Roma culture, and beyond that, that doing this makes possible promoting the value of truly listening to others, and exchanging points of views. Sofia explained how true sorority is promoted through intergenerational solidarity among Roma women:

(14) And it seems fundamental to me that the young women speak with the older ones, that they exchange points of view, because I think I learn a lot from the young women, but also the young women learn from elders, when they hear different perspectives. This is what sorority means to me... Nowadays so many women talk about this concept... in the Roma culture this has been always present (Sofia)

In this regard, Ainhoa, a young Roma leader, highlights how fruitful is for young Roma to spend time with elder women, since it helps them to learn the unique features of a leadership model that they all admire. Ainhoa explains how when she was a little kid, she did not understand a lot of what her grandmother said. Being now 26, she realizes that she not only comprehends what her grandmother shared with the family, but now she is the one committed to overcoming the barriers that the previous generations faced:

(15) At the end, we have now the resources and the technology to advance in what the previous generations have already worked on, so we can solve certain situations to not compromise our generation. And that is the type of leader I want to be. (Ainhoa).

Discussion and conclusions

In this article we have explored some of the traits of Roma women leadership, and how this plays out in the case of leaders operating across Spain. This has been done by interviewing Roma women leaders who are engaged in different types of civic associations as well as other type of public institutions, and in diverse levels -local, regional, national. Evidence provided in this study is of relevance as studying specifically how leadership works from the women

leaders' perspective, and not solely from the organizations' perspective can help shed light about elements that either strengthen or hinder the organizing of both Roma rights movement, and in particular of Roma women's movement (Bhabha et al., 2017; Aiello et al., 2019), who gets involved, and even how allies are settled within movement organizations as well as with other non-Roma organizations which already have visibility and power in the public sphere (Sordé et al., 2013). Besides, focusing on study Roma women's understanding of leadership, considering their lifeworlds, challenges still racist and stereotypes views about them, thus claiming the agency that these "other women" have (De Botton, Puigvert, Sánchez, 2005).

Existing literature in the field of social movements studies has already pointed out to the need of deepening in understanding how leadership works for movement's effectiveness (Ganz, 2010), paying attention at how leaders act as mobilizers, sources of legitimacy, authority, and promoters of shared social identity, or even how they influence movement organization, among others (Couto, 1989; Snow et al., 1986; Morris & Stagerborn, 2007). However, if much needs to be known in the case of organized social movements such as for instance, the Civil Rights movement in the US, or Climate Movement in some Western countries, to mention some, research for the case of the Roma rights' movements and Roma women's movements is even more scant. Our investigation aims at filling this gap, this time contributing with an explorative approach of how Roma women leadership plays out in Spain. It worth to mention that even though existing literature has already approached how Roma women organize in Europe, this article solely covers the Spanish case.

Our study reveals that for the case of Spanish Roma women interviewed, the type of leadership they perform and develop presents at least three traits which, being dialogue an underlying aspect to them, are unique to how Roma women embrace leadership projects, understand their mission as leaders, and engage other women in their endeavors.

First, our evidence suggests that Roma women understand leadership as something that needs to be done always with others, in a relational way. In the case of Roma women interviewed, they explain that their mission is enhancing others to better their living conditions, thus creating opportunities for social participation. This way, rooted to this idea is the deep convincement of Roma women of their mission when joining civic organizations of "enabling others

human agency”. As shared by one of the interviewees, Roma women lead with others, and outstanding among the group can be associated with egocentric views of leadership which according to her, are more typical from “paio” (non-Roma) ways of leading. Leadership in grassroots Roma women is not something that is done by working as a head of the group, but rather as facilitating human agency in others through egalitarian dialogue, in the way Ganz proposes (2010). The presence of dialogue in the Roma culture nurtures this idea and impregnates the way of Roma women who are occupying positions of leadership develop their work and thus develop another type of leadership.

Second, the sense of shared purposed in Roma women leaders is based on their shared cultural identity, and by the Roma cultural values. According to interviewees, the centrality of the extended family, the role of elders, or the core value of dialogue are all central elements that shape not only their sense of transterritorial people (Sordé, Flecha & Mircea, 2013), but also their understanding of what their vindication as Roma women are. Linked to this, as Roma women leaders working to achieve Roma women equality, and also sharing most of the feminist claims, they also claim that mainstream “paio feminism” many times still blinded to ethnic diversity and to the voices of non-White women, as already denounced by some Roma and non-Roma women scholars (Oprea, 2004; Bitu & Vincze, 2012; Sordé et al., 2014; Brooks, 2012; Izsak, 2008; Khalfaoui; 2021). Roma women interviewed vindicates for overcoming dogmatic positions in feminism and having a voice in existing spaces of debate and decision-making at the time of debating positions related to women’s right and all what concerns their people.

Finally, the third trait identified is the presence of Intergenerationality as an element that goes hand in hand with the Roma cultural values. Roma women interviewed, although being members of different types of civic associations, being of different SES, ages and regions, explain that for them is crucial that true dialogue is promoted among elders and younger, adult Roma women and girls. In their mission as leaders, for the younger, taking into account the advice of those elders is fundamental. In the case of senior Roma women leaders, making sure that the youth are involved in organized spaces advocating for their rights, and that they learn how to navigate and organize in these spaces is also central. This finding evidence what García-Espinel and colleagues (2017) suggested about the role of elder Roma women

in the community, which challenges the idea of Roma women as subdued to Roma men. We have observed how senior Roma women have a sense of duty towards the younger ones in transmitting their “know-how” at the time of navigating civic institutions, as well as ensuring that Roma cultural values are respected as a wealth of their people identity.

In all, this research is solely an exploration of the specific traits of Roma women leadership. Future research needs to focus on to what extent younger generations of Roma women leaders are opening newer ways of engaging in civic and community life with non-Roma, as well as how Roma women vindications regarding feminism are being articulated with existing debates in mainstream feminist.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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