

From Obama to Samara: What changes do the Spanish education system and the Roma movement have to make so that one day it will be possible for a Roma woman to be president?

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ABSTRACT: The American civil rights movement was started by an African American woman who was a participant in a popular education centre. This centre played a key role in the social transformations that led us to elect an African American president in the primary great world power. The Spanish education system needs progressive transformations which will contribute to overcoming the segregation and school failure of female Roma children. Roma women, as the driving force behind transformation in their population, are active agents when deciding on the type of schooling they want for the future of their children. Through associations, and hand in hand with the educational theories and practices provided by the international scientific community, in this article we present the transformations which many schools in Spain are carrying out in order to overcome the social exclusion of the Roma population. In this article we provide the foundations to build a movement of female Roma university graduates who, by including the voices of all of the women in their community, continue to be the driving force behind social transformation. In this way one day education and society in this country will have improved to such an extent that it will be possible for a Roma woman to be president. **Key words:** female Roma university graduates, schooling, the Roma movement, social transformation.

RESUMEN: El movimiento por los derechos civiles fue iniciado por una mujer afroamericana participante de un centro de educación popular cuyo papel ha sido clave en las transformaciones sociales que nos han llevado hasta contar con un presidente afroamericano de la primera potencia mundial. El sistema educativo español requiere de transformaciones progresistas que contribuyan a superar la segregación y el fracaso escolar de las niñas gitanas. Las mujeres gitanas como motor de la transformación de su pueblo son agentes activos para decidir qué sistema educativo quieren para el futuro de sus hijos e hijas. Desde el movimiento asociativo y de la mano de las teorías y prácticas educativas que propone la comunidad científica internacional, presentamos en este artículo las transformaciones que muchos centros educativos en España están realizando para superar la exclusión social del pueblo gitano. En este artículo planteamos las bases para constituir un movimiento de mujeres gitanas universitarias que incluyendo las voces de todas las mujeres de su pueblo, sigan siendo motor de transformación social para que algún día la educación y la sociedad de este país haya mejorado tanto como para que sea posible una presidenta gitana.

Palabras Clave: mujer gitana universitaria, sistema educativo, movimiento gitano, transformación social.

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AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND ROMA WOMEN: REFUTING REPRODUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVES.

Much has been said about the social change brought about by the election of an African American as the president of the primary great world power. The most significant analyses have underlined the fact that this transformation would not have been possible without the civil rights movement which especially had an impact in the sixties. The role played by Martin Luther King, who gave his life for the egalitarian ideals which we all benefit from today, has been much discussed and written about. However, it is unfortunate that it is too often forgotten that the person who started that movement was not a man but was actually an African American woman, Rosa Parks, when she refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, in 1955. It is also a pity that the fact that Rosa Parks was a participant in the Highlander popular education centre has also been overlooked. Thus the extraordinary role women such as Rosa Parks and education centres such as Highlander have played in social transformations, has been covered up.

Everywhere in the world there are people like Rosa Parks who are generating progressive social transformations. All around the world there are also educational theories and practices which are contributing to these transformations. In various parts of Spain, Roma women's associations have been founded, and these are generating changes which mean that it is now common to hear people saying "Roma women are the driving force behind transformation". One of the co-authors of this article, a Roma woman, has already had the opportunity to witness citizen's support for the transformational role of the Drom Kotar Mestipen Roma women's association in various different locations. However, sadly she has also had the opportunity to observe not only a lack of support but also attacks carried out by some educational analysts who wear the cloak of "critics."

Many Roma women are working intensively to overcome the segregation which they are subjected to by the dominant trend in the education system. The majority of female Roma children are not in the regular classrooms in schools, but are placed in classrooms and schools in which a very low level of education is provided for children from excluded cultures, as well as for poor white children. Roma women's associations now expect conservative educational practices and theories to legitimise this segregation. However they are deeply disappointed that there are theories and practices which are presented as criticisms and which support this segregation and deny every opportunity to take steps to overcome it.

Throughout the second half of the 20th Century, while many women and progressive schools were generating significant social transformations, educational analyses based on the reproductionist model categorically confirmed that schools could only reproduce the inequalities which existed in the dominant social system. This reproductionist model was created by Althusser, and he also applied the Marxist structuralism which he had created himself in books such as *Reading Capital* to educational analysis. Before he died, in his book entitled *The Future Lasts Forever*, Althusser admitted that when he wrote *Reading Capital*, he had not actually read *Capital* (apart from the first volume) and that he knew almost nothing about Marxism.

The Althusserian fallacy was not isolated. His students and followers also had

a lot of influence, both those who later moved towards poststructuralism (Foucault, Derrida), and those who never took that step (Bourdieu, Passeron, Baudelot, Establet, Bowles, Gintis, Boudon). These scholars also had the continuous support of empirical studies (Coleman, Jenks) which claimed that they had demonstrated the impossibility that education could generate social transformation through data.

In 1973, a group of African American authors demonstrated in their article entitled "Black Response", in the *Harvard Educational Review*, that these studies made it much easier for progressive educational reforms to take a step backwards. Other authors, in the same monograph, demonstrated the mistakes in the statistical calculations in these studies and condemned the fact that they were used to legitimise the desertion of progressive educational actions. Indeed, if education cannot generate social transformation, why make the effort to create transformative schools? Why invest in egalitarian educational reforms?

Many young people today find it strange that a theory which is so mediocre and was constructed fraudulently, and which has had such a devastating effect on progressive education, could be considered to be a critical perspective. The neo-liberal and post-modern offensive in the seventies and eighties, which aimed to legitimise inequalities and dissolve transformative movements, managed to confuse perspectives which work towards progressive educational transformations with those which aim to destroy them. Both of these perspectives were labelled as being critical.

Roma women's associations have learned to distinguish between critical theories and practices which generate progressive transformations, and those perspectives which, when presented as critiques, not only do not generate those transformations, but also work against them. Now they know that there are theories and practices which work rigorously to provide them with scientific elements for analysis which collaborate in the transformations which they promote. They also know that there are perspectives based on the image of being intellectual and critical, but are linked to fallacies such as that of Althusser, and are not in favour of the transformations which they promote.

THE EDUCATIONAL SEGREGATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF THE ROMA POPULATION IN SPAIN: AFTER THE BATTLE OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULATION.

Part of the segregation faced by many female Roma children in the Spanish education system has been based on those theories and practices which, although presenting themselves as being progressive, have generated an increase in social inequality.

In the case of Spain, the concept of attention to diversity in the 90's through the LOGSE educational reform led to the promotion of educational actions which were adapted to each student's needs. Adapting the context to diversity involved basing educational actions on cultural and even racist stereotypes, according to which female Roma children do not like to study and their culture does not include completing university studies. The erroneous interpretation of an non-authentic Vygostky (Aubert, Flecha, García, Flecha and Racionero, 2008) led to the implementation of practices of an adaptational nature, which only use one part of his theory, which considers that learning and development are related to the environment (Vygostky, 1978). This resulted

the development of practices in the education system such as individualised curricular adaptations (ACI), through which learning objectives were adapted, reducing them to the level of the students with difficulties. This type of adaptation denied the student the opportunity to access knowledge on an equal level to the rest of his or her classmates.

The various forms of school and classroom organisation were influenced by these adaptational reforms. Thus, a normal practice in the Spanish education system involves grouping students according to their learning level; this type of organisation has been described as *Streaming*. According to the European Commission (2006: 19) *streaming* consists of “tailoring the curriculum to different groups of children based on ability within one school”.

The only Integrated Project from the European Commission Research Framework Programmes which is dedicated to schooling² has identified and classified different forms of streaming, as well as different forms of mixture and inclusion. The different forms of inclusion generate more school success and improve coexistence more than the different forms of streaming and mixture. Amongst the different types of inclusion the one which generates the most school success and the best coexistence is *Interactive Groups* (Includ-ed Consortium, 2009, Includ-ed Project, Report 2, 2007).

Streaming entails separating students into groups with high learning levels, medium learning levels and low learning levels. Unfortunately once again it was female Roma children who suffered and continue to suffer being placed in the groups with the lowest learning levels. Female Roma children and immigrant and minority students who are overrepresented in the lowest level groups, have less opportunities to continue along an academic route or to access higher education, an area in which they are practically invisible.

Other forms of separating students which especially affect Roma children include repeating a year at school, and erroneously labelling them as special education students. Also grouping them within the same classroom into groups of students with low learning levels, and the low expectations teachers have of them (Flecha, 1990; Braddock and Slavin, 1992).

These forms of discrimination are comparable to those which the African American population has faced in the United States. The racism and social inequality faced by the African American population is reflected by the educational situation which Roma children face in racially segregated schools, and in Black Schools and White Schools. In 1954, coinciding with the civil rights movement started by Rosa Parks, the US Supreme Court, based on the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, declared racial segregation in state schools to be unconstitutional. The Court therefore put mechanisms in place in order to end this segregation as quickly as possible (Afrik, 1993; Bell, 2004).

Paradoxically, this move by the Supreme Court, which was an historic step for the civil rights movement, generated a new situation of inequality for the African American population. The forced redistribution of black students generated an increase in racism and in the non-acceptance of school councils and even other government institutions by white children and their families (Afrik 1993; Tate, Ladson-Billings, and Grant 1993). This distribution was imposed by law, and it gave no decision-making powers to African American families or to that population in general.

The segregation of Roma students in the Spanish education system, as described above, is highly similar to that of African American students in the United States. In fact, research such as that carried out by Kirp (1982) or Mickelson and Heath, (1999) found that the groups at the lowest level were predominantly black students. This had a negative impact on the academic results of those students, since they had fewer opportunities to study and to access higher education. Finally, their overrepresentation in special educational classes has been identified, as well as the high numbers of them who were expelled or placed in compensatory education classes (Hochschild, 1984, Artiles, Klingler, and Tate 2006).

Currently, similarly to African American students, some Roma students are overrepresented in special education programmes in various countries in Central and Eastern Europe (EUMC, 2004). Roma children have been segregated in Europe, and the voices of Roma families have not been taken into account. Educational policies in Eastern European countries such as Hungary have implemented measures for the distribution of students which are similar to those used in the United States in the fifties. In the case of Spain, one application of measures of distribution is known as the “Vic model” and, as the international bibliography had already predicted in these cases, this model has already generated an increase in racism and even a vote for the far right in the town of Vic.

As we have observed, traditionally European schooling has not helped the Roma population to overcome their situation of economic, social and political marginalisation. In the case of the Roma population, schools have encouraged assimilation, the reproduction of social stereotypes and thus the perpetuation of social exclusion (Gómez and Vargas, 2003). It has become necessary for European education systems, and, specifically, the Spanish one, to provide quality to female Roma children. The education system needs to carry out profound transformations in order to turn education into a tool to overcome inequalities, thus guaranteeing equal opportunities and social inclusion for everyone.

Roma women, as the driving force behind the transformation of their people, are agents who are active when deciding what type of schooling they want for their children’s future. In associations people reflect and look for solutions in order to make education the key to overcoming the social exclusion of the Roma population. The Drom Kotar Mestipen Roma women’s association organises *Encuentros entre Estudiantes Gitanas* [Meetings between female Roma Students] in Catalonia. In these meetings they create a space for dialogue in which Roma women are the protagonists and in which they all discuss solutions which will contribute to overcoming school failure and truancy. Therefore, Roma women aim to combat all forms of segregation in education systems so that female Roma children can go as far as they want to without facing any discriminatory obstacles.

THE ROMA POPULATION’S DREAM: SUCCESSFUL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES WHICH OVERCOME SEGREGATION.

In order to guarantee proposals for success rather than for failure, we need to function based on scientific foundations in education. Education systems need to start

substituting segregational practices, since their negative impact has been demonstrated. They should be substituted with effective educational practices which will promote the educational success of female Roma children, their continuity into higher education and, in short, the social inclusion of the Roma population as a whole.

Some of the effective practices which have been identified through the Included Integrated Project provide a successful educational response to the dream Roma women have of overcoming the segregation of Roma students. It is important to underline some of the practices which are carried out in the Spanish education system within the framework of a project involving the transformation of schools called *Learning Communities* (Elboj, Puigdemívol, Soler, and Valls, 2002). This project aims to achieve maximum learning levels and the best possible coexistence through dialogic learning. It involves collecting information on the development of current theories and contributions by the most significant authors from the international scientific community.

Including everyone, and never segregating. *Interactive groups* is a practice which clearly leads to inclusion, and has a significant impact on improving learning for all students. The classroom is organised into small groups of students who are heterogeneous in terms of their learning levels rhythms, sex, ethnicity, and social condition. Any segregation of the students is eliminated by incorporating more adults into the classroom, including family members, volunteers, and other professionals. In that way no Roma children leave the classroom, in fact, they even have the opportunity for their mother, cousins or grandmothers for example, to participate in the classroom. The adults who are incorporated into the classroom are put in charge of helping one of the groups, thus promoting interaction and dialogue between the children and ensuring that they help each other. In that way, there is no place for grouping by learning level or for taking students with more difficulties out of the classroom.

This is a type of classroom organisation in which two fundamental objectives are mainly achieved: an increase in and acceleration of instrumental learning, as well as solidarity. Short and varied different activities, the dynamism provided by changing group and the participation of other adults increases motivation and interest. The diversity of the activities and, above all, of the interactions both enrich and improve the quality of the learning for all of the children.

Family education. International evaluations such as PISA and PIRLS provide data which confirms what the international scientific community already demonstrated decades ago: that the socioeconomic and educational levels of families are linked to the academic results of their children. PISA 2006 (OECD, 2007) demonstrates that students from families containing members with more schooling and who have a favourable socio-economic context obtain better results in evaluations. As long as schools make more effort to promote quality family education, they will increase the educational levels of families, which will then have positive repercussions on their children's learning.

The schools which open up educational opportunities not only to teachers and students, but also to families and the community, help to improve the student's academic results. For example, Roma women from the Polígono Sur neighbourhood in Seville participate in Dialogic Literary Gatherings in their children's schools and in adult education school in that area. These literary gatherings, in which Roma families with

no education read, share and discuss classic universal literature, are an example of family education. Thus they construct knowledge together and dialogically create meaning based on the texts. This has become a space to promote literacy which then leads to an improvement in the family environment.

The dialogic prevention of conflict. The excessive expulsion of female Roma children has been reduced to the point where it has almost disappeared in schools which carry out the dialogic prevention of conflict. The involvement of the whole community (students, teachers, family members and other professionals) in reaching a consensus on the school rules, improves coexistence and prevents conflict in schools.

Through effective educational practices such as those mentioned above, the schools which are carrying out the Learning Communities project are making truly progressive transformations so that Roma children can have schooling which allows for the social inclusion of their community. The role of Roma women and the Roma movement will be decisive in order to progress towards the transformation of the Spanish education system.

FEMALE ROMA UNIVERSITY GRADUATES AND CHANGES IN THE ROMA MOVEMENT.

We should congratulate ourselves on the fact that more and more Roma women are now completing university. However, we cannot forget that the immense majority of female Roma children face intense educational segregation which impedes them from even obtaining compulsory certificates. There are many female Roma university students who are doing very well within the Roma movement as mediators and educators etc. There are also female Roma university graduates who, although they are not directly linked to the Roma movement, are an example of equality and are overcoming racism and sexism in their work in different professions. However, we also think it is essential to have a network of female Roma university graduates who are carrying out various professions that promote the Roma movement based on the support and/or voluntary work of these women.

Too often, we hear that female Roma university graduates whose salary comes from their place of work in the Roma movement are influenced by specific personal interests. We also hear that when female Roma university graduates are doing well in their professions they then disassociate themselves completely from the Roma movement. Also we hear that there are female Roma university graduates who, when they participate in the Roma movement, drown out the voices of the majority of the Roma women who are not university graduates. The racism and sexism behind many of these statements will be beaten when there is a significant network of female Roma university graduates who never receive a salary from the Roma movement and who are closely linked to it without ever drowning out the voices of the majority of Roma women and female Roma children. In order for the Roma movement in Europe to achieve what the African American movement has achieved in the United States, this network urgently needs to be developed and strengthened.

This informal or formal network will contain female Roma university graduates who have their own jobs (teachers, lawyers, doctors etc) and who are professional and

ethical, thus providing an example to the whole of society. They will never receive a salary from the Roma movement or any funds specifically allocated to Roma people from the authorities, however they will be very much linked and committed to the Roma community. Through their actions they will disprove the racist and sexist statements which have been made saying that female Roma university graduates either live off the Roma community or that, when they have achieved a good economic and social position, they want to have nothing more to do with the cause. They will also defend female Roma university graduates with a different stance who carry out their duties based on quality, such as those who do receive a salary from the Roma movement or those in different professions which are not directly linked to the movement.

Their continued commitment to the Roma movement will provide an example of altruism and solidarity for everyone. Far from drowning out the majority of the voices of Roma women and girls, they will promote the protagonism of their cousins by supporting them and giving what they can to those who need it. In this way they will become protagonists in their own lives and in the life of their community.

The defence of their Roma origins will never be an instrumental tool to obtain more resources or better positions than non-Roma women or Roma men. In fact, their continuous collaboration with all types of people, Roma or non-Roma, will lead to the achievement of the multicultural and intercultural society that they work towards.

The creation of meaning for Roma women who join this network will be found in their involvement in the Roma cause without having to live on it. Instead they will continue the battle to help improve the situation of the Roma population through female solidarity.

CONCLUSIONS. TOWARDS HOPES AND DREAMS.

Female Roma university graduates will continue to be the driving force behind change for their population through their commitment to the Roma movement. The women's network which will encourage this transformation will be based on altruism and solidarity with the Roma people. In 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus, it was not the act of an individual, but an act within the battle for the dream of equality for African American people. In the same way, female Roma university graduates who become involved in the Roma cause through the aforementioned network, will become role models in the Roma movement in order for us to have a female Roma president one day.

This network will include the voices of all Roma women and ensure that they are all heard. The dialogue between them and the international scientific community will generate new knowledge in order to transform educational practices. The transformation of schools requires the participation of all Roma women in educational spaces. The inclusion of more adults, especially Roma family members, facilitates new educational proposals which overcome the segregation female Roma children have been and still are exposed to. Thus *Interactive Groups* or *Family Education*, within the framework of the *Learning Communities* project, are effective educational practices which lead to real transformations that overcome the educational exclusion of female

Roma children.

People who know a female Roma student or university graduate tend to be scandalised or see their achievement as not being normal because they believe that people from the Roma culture do not like to study. This is the case to the point that even Roma women themselves internalise the stereotype that they cannot study, that they are illiterate, and that they cannot go to university. However luckily that is all it is, one more stereotype amongst the thousands which exist about the Roma population. Reality is very different since Roma women are the protagonists of significant cultural and social changes both inside and outside their own community. More and more Roma women are completing their education and going to university, combining their family and working lives, as other women do. Until now Roma women have been the Aristotelian *primum movens immobile*, as they moved everything without being moved, and were the generators and guarantors of changes. However in the shadows, the great unknown and the unseen perpetuated their invisibility. Fortunately today there are more revolutionary women who break down the old stereotypes and are becoming more and more visible.

The 21st Century is characterised by a constant series of changes and associations have played a very significant role in making Roma woman more visible. The changes in the visibility of Roma women and the whole Roma population, mean that we can now enjoy the freedom and equality so longed for in our population. We cannot remain disconnected from these changes, since the future of our Roma community and our cultural richness depends on them. We owe new future horizons to our culture, we have the responsibility of carrying out our professional activities while at the same time collaborating altruistically in the Roma movement and fighting for our population. It is necessary and vital that female Roma university graduates involved in the Roma cause see this as our *raison d'être*, not in order to survive, but due to solidarity, which is so important in our population. It must be based on generosity united for one cause: the development of the Roma population.

There will be more and more female Roma university students who, apart from their careers as teachers or doctors, will also work without receiving any wages, in order to care for and develop our community. It will be based on a concept which is gratuitous and not at all utilitarian nor instrumental (based on taking advantage of the poverty and fatigue of our population). This is because the only ingredients which are necessary in order to ensure that the voices of all Roma women are heard are altruism, and solidarity. These female Roma university students today have the opportunity to continue to progress and to grow, in order to ensure the success of coming Roma generations. They can change the history of our people, and regenerate a past which has been marked by a situation of social exclusion and discrimination. They can make the authentic reality of our culture known, and can dissolve the prejudices and stereotypes which are based on a lack of knowledge and on fear of what is different; thus they will guarantee the future of our culture.

In short, it is very positive for the Roma culture that we are capable of constructing an identity which has moved with the times, but also takes into account the ancient values of our culture. Luckily, the majority of Roma women are already committed to this cause and work together to achieve a shared wish, the wish to reaffirm Roma

cultural identity without any victimism, utilitarianism or instrumentalism. Always bearing in mind the commitment to vindicating their identity and not using the idea of “being a female Roma person” for instrumental reasons. That is, not carrying out an instrumental use of our Roma identity, because this would involve hurting ourselves, in our innermost depths.

The civil rights movement was the driving force behind the African American population’s dream, and now the primary great world power has a president who represents this population. The female Roma university graduates movement is about to begin. Its foundations have been constructed in this article and it will continue to move towards achieving its dream: that one day it will be possible to have a female Roma president.

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1 www.dromkotar.org

2 The INCLUD-ED *Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education (2006-2011)* project is an integrated project from the European Commission's VI Framework Programme. It involves research at the highest scientific level which analyses European education systems and their connection to social exclusion. Therefore, it is expected that the results of this project will have a direct impact on the design of more effective educational practices in Europe. www.ub.edu/includ-ed