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Article (Accepted Version)

Hinton-Smith, Tamsin, Danvers, Emily and Jovanovic, Tanja (2018) Roma women's higher education participation: whose responsibility? *Gender and Education*, 30 (7). pp. 811-828. ISSN 0954-0253

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# Roma Women's Higher Education Participation: Whose Responsibility?

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There are striking gaps between Roma and non-Roma higher education (HE) participation rates, with less than 1% of Roma possessing a tertiary-level qualification (UNDP *et al.*, 2011a). As the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015) closes, this renders the present a salient moment to reflect on Roma students' HE experiences. Widening educational access for marginalised groups raises specific questions about where responsibility for doing so lies - with tensions between individualised articulations of raising aspiration and notions of collective responsibility framed in a social justice agenda. Drawing on interviews with 5 Roma women students, this paper unpacks the contradictions between desiring access to HE for individual self-betterment and concurrent pulls towards educating for the wider benefit of 'improving' Roma communities. Using Ahmed's (2012) work on institutional belonging, we explore the specifically gendered nature of these narratives in how 'doubly' marginalised bodies are positioned as outsiders, in receipt of an educational gift.

## **Roma Women in European Higher Education**

Roma are Europe's largest and most marginalised minority, with Roma communities throughout the world experiencing long histories of social exclusion (Kolev *et al.*, 2015). Policies and treatment of Roma vary substantially across country-context, rendering European Union policy of paramount importance in targeting Roma's social exclusion. Most notably, 2005-2015 was designated the 'Decade of Roma Inclusion', with a commitment from 12 European countries focusing on closing the gap between Roma and non-Roma on a number of key indicators including education. Furthermore, in 2010 the Council of Europe introduced a major policy framework - the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma. This aimed to focus further the attention of European governments on dealing with neglected issues around Roma social inclusion. The same year the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was launched following the tenth anniversary of the Bologna Declaration, aiming to ensure 'comparable, compatible and coherent systems of HE in Europe' (EHEA, 2015). Developing the 'social dimension' of universities is seen as central to the current priorities of EHEA, and is consequently concerned with widening access for underrepresented groups to higher education (HE) as a precondition for social progress as well as economic development.

However, processes of policy and intervention development, and assumptions around the potential of these to address Roma marginalisation, have been critiqued by scholars of Roma inclusion (e.g. McGarry & Agarín, 2014) as failing to address the multiple and interconnected social exclusion issues facing Roma communities. Furthermore, policies and cultures at the national level are also identified as mediating the impact of European policy developments. Indeed, the Roma Decade annual monitoring reports reveal considerable differences in the implementation and success of policy initiatives to address Roma marginalisation across the 12 participating countries (Decade Secretariat, 2015). For example, 2014 saw the European Union (EU) take action against the Czech Republic for illegally segregating Roma children in schools and providing substandard quality of

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education (REF, 2014). This renders the present, as the Decade of Roma Inclusion draws to a close, a salient moment to reflect on the experiences of Roma students in participating in European HE.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Bank and European Commission's 2011 Roma survey identified the low levels of Roma participating in HE in localities of 11 countries where Roma constituted an above national average proportion of the population (UNDP *et al.*, 2011a). While these statistics are not representative of Roma participation within these countries as a whole, they do nevertheless point to very low numbers, with less than 1% of the Roma students surveyed possessing a tertiary-level qualification:

	<b>% of Roma aged 20-24 completing post-secondary education (Bachelors Degree, Master's, PhD)[1]</b>	<b>% Non-Roma Comparator[2]</b>
<b>Albania</b>	1% women 0% men	8% women 0% men
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	1% women 0% men	2% women 5% men
<b>Bulgaria</b>	0% women 0% men	7% women 0% men
<b>Croatia</b>	0% women 1% men	3% women 8% men
<b>Hungary</b>	0% women 0% men	3% women 6% men
<b>Moldova</b>	1% women 1% men	34% women 10% men
<b>Montenegro</b>	1% women 0% men	5% women 2% men
<b>Romania</b>	0% women 0% men	16% women 4% men
<b>Serbia</b>	0% women 0% men	2% women 7% men
<b>Slovakia</b>	1% women 0% men	2% women 0% men
<b>The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia</b>	1% women 1% men	16% women 11% men

Table 1: Numbers of Roma and Non-Roma aged 20-24 completing post-secondary education (2 year College Degree, Bachelors Degree, Master's and PhD) in 11 countries. (UNDP *et al.*, 2011b)

Numbers in the published data-set are rounded up or down to a single decimal place meaning that a figure 0% does not mean that there are no Roma students are accessing higher education opportunities in these countries. Indeed, Brüggemann (2012) discusses the considerable methodological issues with the UNDP data. Yet the figures do indicate the extent to which Roma young people are starkly underrepresented in HE compared to their non-Roma peers.

There are complex factors contributing to this under-representation, including structural disadvantage and social exclusion. For example, many Roma do not have passports or resident permits, and in many European countries stateless people do not have access to post-18 education (Kolev *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, many Roma children in Europe are siphoned into segregated schooling formally allocated for children deemed as being 'educationally subnormal', and in which opportunities for learning are severely limited. Lack of access to good quality, non-segregated primary schooling is identified as the key issue affecting Roma students' educational and life opportunities, including access to HE, with more than half of Roma girls dropping out of school before age 16 (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2015).

This paper focuses on the pertinence of gender in shaping Roma women's higher educational experiences as well as how students negotiate expectations of individual and collective responsibility pertaining to their HE participation. These two issues are explored using narrative data from interviews with five internationally mobile Roma women - all of whom are students or recent graduates who have studied and work outside their home countries. We firstly locate Roma HE participation in Europe within the context of wider theoretical debates about both internationalisation and equity. This is followed by a description of the data discussed and the methodological context of the wider project from which it is drawn. We then focus on the clashing issues of individual and shared responsibility emergent from the perspectives of the Roma women students and graduates. This is analysed using Ahmed's (2012) work on institutional belonging in HE and how marginalised bodies are deficitly positioned as outsiders – as not being 'at home in the body of an institution' (p.3). Finally, we conclude with an analysis of some implications for developing a more nuanced understanding of HE equity for Roma.

### **Higher Education – Insiders and Outsiders**

Roma are often conceptualised as a homogenous category but gender, as well as other characteristics such as age, religion, nationality language and socioeconomic background intersects with Roma ethnicity to produce a complexity of factors defining becoming and being Roma (Tremlett, 2013, 2014). Increasing numbers of Roma women are advancing in HE, in some contexts in larger numbers compared to men as Table 1 outlines. Furthermore these women are frequently internationally mobile participants - affirming Vlase and Voicu's (2014) study of Romanian Roma migration which discusses the mechanisms of why women are often more likely to migrate compared to men. For example, Roma women in their interviews are particularly sensitive to the gender gap between Romania and other EU countries, citing that migration offered enhanced possibilities for respect and protection.

Yet the culmination of persistent discrimination including within higher education institutions (HEIs), alongside gendered traditional cultural values, informs particular gendered assumptions around Roma women's rights and responsibilities as HE participants. This

resonates with identification that marginalised students must negotiate discrimination from both inside and outside of the academy (Morrice, 2013). Pantea (2012) asserts the importance of theoretical insights from black feminism (e.g. Crenshaw, 1991, 2003; Hill Collins, 1990) to understanding the ways in which ethnicity and gender are bound together in the process of migration for Roma women. Oprea (2004) has discussed how, despite the impossibility of separating being Roma from being a woman for Roma women who live at this intersection, in the context of wider racial oppression it is difficult for Roma women to speak in gendered terms about intra-community oppression (2012), and hence how 'like other women of colour, they are often forced to choose their race over their gender in an effort to avoid shedding negative light on their already oppressed communities' (2004, p.35). Particularly in the policy landscape, gender remains a relative silence in acknowledging the inequalities faced by Roma students in accessing HE. Roma women's particular needs and interests are potentially overshadowed by seemingly gender-neutral policy responses blind to the gendered impact of Roma poverty and social exclusion on Roma communities (Vincze, 2013).

Higher education study and the accumulation of intellectual and social capitals is constructed as an inherent good in the lives of individuals, linked to individual benefits including higher earnings, increased employability, better health and greater life satisfaction (Naidoo & Callender, 2000; BIS, 2013a; Brown, 2013; Purcell *et al.*, 2015). Access to internationalised HE is similarly promoted as being of perceived benefit to all – in relation to cultural enrichment, developing mutual understanding, personal development and wellbeing, academic quality enhancement, technological innovation, and economic growth (Altbach, 2013; BIS, 2013b). The geographical and specific university context are likely to impact on students' experiences but there is a lack of comprehensive comparative data on European student experiences across the diversity of the university sector within and between each country, something which the forthcoming Eurostudent (2016) project aims to rectify. However existing research into equity and access demonstrates that HE's 'premium' is neither available equally to all, nor experienced uniformly. Indeed, the way in which the opportunities of contemporary international HE are seen as reproducing existing privileges (Walters & Brooks, 2010, p.217) is seen as being part of the paradox of expansion and 'democratisation' in amplifying inequalities, contrary to intentions (Stitch, 2012). Considering how idealised notions of international HE participation are accessed and experienced by marginalised groups is particularly relevant to studying a historically globally transient group such as Roma. The recounted experiences of Roma women's participation in internationally mobile HE in this paper exemplify how:

Notions of higher education and graduate mobility are gendered and classed and marked by a 'multiplicity and fracturing of past and present, belonging, not belonging, dreams, aspirations and defences' (Walkerdine, 2003, p. 237).

Ahmed's theoretical insights (2012) are used to read these experiences of educational inequalities and exclusion as practices of producing insiders/outside in the academy. For example, educational participation/exclusion can be experienced at the level of affect, whereby the processes by which 'the inhabiting of different spaces by bodies engenders feelings either of being at home, or 'becoming a stranger... of becoming noticeable, of not passing through or passing by, of being stopped, or held up' (Ahmed, 2012, p.3).

Such internalisation of responsibility for not feeling 'at home' in HE resonates with Morrice's work on refugee UK university students who, like Roma, are frequently international yet marginalised students. Here internalised feelings of shame, embarrassment and inferiority are identified as products of symbolic domination active in experiences of HE transition (Morrice, 2013). While policy interventions have focused on redressing inequalities and fostering equity in HE participation, such initiatives can also be problematised in terms of how:

To be welcomed is to be positioned as the one who is not at home. Conditional hospitality is when you are welcomed on the condition that you give something back in return...People of colour in white organizations are treated as guests, temporary residents in someone else's home. (Ahmed, 2012, p.43)

Indeed, while European level policy conveys a commitment to Roma integration including through education, this raises questions around whether this is integration or inclusion - the former supposing a cultural assimilation agenda whereby minority cultures are expected to adapt to dominant cultural norms. This resonates with Burke's observation of how HE inclusion policies are:

Embedded in regulatory practices, which aim to 'fix' or 'correct' the [marginalised] subject, so that s/he will fit in to the hegemonic expectations of what it means to be a university student. (2011, p.171)

Such a perspective is implicit in the emphasis on a one-way process of Roma graduates taking the perspective of their HE back to their minority culture:

Conventional notions of 'democratisation' are not only uni-dimensional (in that they are about making more widely available that which belongs to the elite), but also contradictory (because they simultaneously undermine any notion that all segments of society have cultural features that could be made more widely available, and devalues them. (James, 2014, p.322)

This is not to undermine the inclusion agenda but such unspoken assumptions must be interrogated in terms of their power to symbolically produce insiders/outside. The benefits and social contribution of Roma women's HE participation must also be understood in terms of the complexity of multiplier effects (Bergan & Damian, 2010), by which this investment enriches not only their own lives and those of their children, communities and Roma rights more broadly; but also the contribution made to HE classrooms and cultures, and society as a whole.

Arguably the neoliberal university promotes participation of diverse, internationally mobile constituents, but in non-altruistic ways that position the marginalised student as deficit, in receipt of an education 'gift' and, consequently as one who should demonstrate gratitude. For example, in her recent paper drawing on interviews with Romanian Roma HE students, Pantea (2015) identifies the significance of both the attitude that 'anyone could make it if they tried really hard' (p.905) and also the recurrent principle of the expectation 'to give something back' (p.896), and identification of both of these strands is also present in other research on Roma (Kolev *et al.*, 2013; Kwiek, 2010). This includes for example the Roma Access Programme's focus on developing highly educated Roma students to 'serve as role models and leaders' and 'to advocate on behalf of the Roma community' (Central European

University, 2011a, para 1). However, we argue that tensions between the onus on the individual and the collective in such understandings imply a need for further space to be given to thinking through notions of resistance through assertions of collective identity, for example as educated Roma women operating within the context of persistent inequalities. While not focusing on the HE context, Vlase and Voicu (2014) have explored the interplay between structural constraints and the drawing on of capabilities and resources by Romanian Roma, and how negotiation of these processes is mediated by aspects of identity including gender. In this paper we attempt to tease out the complexity of the relationship between assumptions of individual and collective responsibility relating to Roma HE participation, and to reconcile apparent contradictions. In drawing on experiences of Roma women students specifically, we also identify the gendered dimension to negotiating such expectations and assumptions.

### **Researching Roma Women**

Insights discussed in this paper come from a very small segment of in-depth interviews, some carried out over multiple opportunities, that formed part of a much larger Horizon 2020 project: *Higher Education Internationalisation and Mobility: Inclusions, Equalities and Innovations* (HEIM), a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research and Innovation Staff Exchange (RISE) initiative running from January 2015-December 2017. The international research team includes the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER) at the University of Sussex, UK; Umea University, Sweden; the University of Seville, Spain; and Roma Education Fund (REF), a non-governmental organisation with offices in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The on-going 3-year project addresses broad issues of inequalities in internationalised higher education, through the lens of focusing on Roma as Europe's largest and most marginalised minority (Kolev *et al.*, 2015).

The project includes six separate work packages each of one-two months, hosted in each of the partner countries, and undertaken by different members of the project team along with early stage researchers selected to participate. The project's core aims are focused on mobility, knowledge-exchange and capacity building between different countries, career stages, majority and minority groups, and academic and non-academic partners. As such, much of the work package focus is oriented toward activities including training development, targeted toward generating direct impact in terms of positive change, rather than being restricted to the more traditional research ends of mere measurement through data collection. Subsequent work packages undertaken by our colleagues in the wider project have included interviews with particular cohorts of Roma in higher education, focused on specific targeted issues including perceived benefits of international training and mobility opportunities for students, and career progression experiences of Roma academics.

While data collection in the project as a whole is on-going, we focus here on insights from a small sample of interviews carried out as part of the initial scoping work package of the project, which we were involved in leading. These early interviews set out primarily to map key issues for further investigation, through in-depth exploration of the experiences of primary informants affiliated to Roma NGOs. As three feminist academics however, we soon identified from the interviews rich insights into gendered dimensions of experience described by the participants. This paper focuses specifically on insights provided by the participants around notions of responsibility, given that this emerged as a salient theme between individuals. In other publications in preparation and in press (Hinton-Smith & Danvers, 2016)

we discuss other prominent dimensions of experience from the data. While the sources of these insights were at this stage small, we felt them nevertheless to be of significant value to merit identification of emergent themes warranting of further larger-scale investigation by ourselves and other researchers.

Importantly, we do not set out here to replicate or review existing available large scale quantitative data (Erasmus Impact Study 2014; Eurostudent, 2015; UNDP *et al.*, 2011a), to provide a representative account of the experiences of all Roma students, nor to systematically account for the extent to which each of these identified aspects of experience is exclusive to Roma women students. While such large-scale survey data is undoubtedly important, commentators have identified the problems in representing Roma that are present in such research (Messing, 2014). Instead, we wish to focus in-depth on the particular intersectional experiences of these Roma women, including the specifically gendered elements of this, drawing from the richness of our interview data. Approaches that validate the meanings that individual actors attribute to their own experiences offer vital insight. The contribution of such in-depth, small-scale qualitative data lies 'not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something' (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.224). Some of the issues discussed here also emerged as relevant to Roma men students, as they may well be also to other marginalised groups in HE independent of gender. This is in line with the capacity of such in-depth empirical approaches to illuminate 'issues of the common and the specific, without diluting either' (Fine *et al.*, 2000, p.111).

The data we draw on in this paper comes from in-depth interviews with 5 Roma women, identified via snowballing sampling through REF colleagues. All participants were interviewed face-to-face at least once, with some further interviews to follow up specific identified issues taking place via Skype depending on current location. This was particularly important given the often highly internationally mobile nature of participants' professional, personal and student lives. The semi-structured interviews explored their educational histories and experiences of accessing and progressing in higher education as well as discussing their experiences accessing the labour market as educated Roma women. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and analysed using atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software.

Because of the relatively small number of Roma women graduates working in international Roma activism, we have avoided providing cameos and have used pseudonyms in order to protect anonymity. However, to summarise, these participants were all aged in their twenties or thirties; with three of the women currently studying towards PhDs, while the other two were employed in professional level occupations, having graduated from HE. They came from Albania, Macedonia, Romania and Serbia; and all were active internationally in Roma rights, whether through their paid work, unpaid activism, or both. For all of them, their studies, work and activism had involved international mobility, often to several different countries including Hungary, Italy, Denmark, Turkey and the UK. To this extent they cannot be seen as indicative of those Roma students who remain within their countries of upbringing to access HE, but rather explore experiences that include international mobility, informed by indication from the data that such mobility can often be perceived as necessary for Roma women to be able to participate in HE, both because of available HE opportunities and family/community response. Furthermore, these participants spanned multiple demographic and perspective differences, specifically in relation to social class, age and



geographical location, which cannot be unpicked in such a small sample. However what we hope to do at this stage is point to the need for further research on how Roma higher education experiences are differently experienced as a result of participants' intersectional embodied locations.

The way in which previously silenced voices telling their stories challenges hegemonic power constructs, has underpinned our approach to research process and relationships working together as Roma/., UK/international, academic/non-academic and graduate/non-graduate women. Such reflexivity around the dynamics of co-production of knowledge is central to our feminist politics as Roma and non-Roma researchers writing collaboratively to produce this and other publications. Indeed in working towards this article we were acutely aware of the danger of occupying a position of 'speaking for' other women. Postcolonial feminism has critiqued mainstream feminisms' tendency toward being a 'tourist' (Mohanty, 2003, p.518) and of a perceived 'white woman's burden' implicit in the motivation of feminists from the Global North to 'save' women from 'other' cultures perceived as more oppressive (Mullally, 2011). In turn, Roma feminists have critiqued western feminist approaches to researching 'third world women' for contributing to feminist silence around Roma women's vulnerability to domestic violence, through conveying an anthropological interest that wishes to avoid criticism (Oprea, 2004, p.30). Oprea has charged Roma women's marginalisation to be 'a consequence of the exclusivist feminist and antiracist politics in European political spheres' (p.29), and that:

There is nothing white women and Romani men face that we do not face. Our experiences and those of other women of color should form the starting points for race and gender policies in Europe. Our experiences should become the quintessential foundation for feminist and antiracist politics and policies, as opposed to being an afterthought, a footnote, or a special section. At the risk of stating the obvious, this also means that Romani feminists have to be the primary architects of these policies or at the very least systematically consulted. (Oprea, 2012, p.19)

Crucially, Oprea identifies an 'absence of Romani women from Romani and feminist discourses' (p.29).

Mindful of such tensions, we were drawn to Kvale's (1996) metaphor of the researcher as 'traveller' (rather than tourist) 'wandering together with' their participant in the process of arriving at insight (p.4). Consequently, the research process was guided by the principle of speaking next to rather than for, as described by Trin Minh-Ha (cited in Chen, 1992), and by the need to reflect critically in an on-going way on the ethical dimensions of the research process and situations presented by it (Guillemin & Gillam 2004). One aspect of this was the extent to which early research participants including some of those discussed in this paper, contributed actively to the process of identifying important areas that should be included in the focus of interviews. Furthermore, our analysis of interview and documentary data identified the significance of spoken and written texts in actively constructing both discourse (Tlili, 2007) and, through this, lived experience (Fenwick *et al.*, 2011). This resonates with insights from other researchers about how narratives of Roma experience frequently convey the logic of dominant discourses, or what people assume researchers want to hear, at the expense of articulations of experience (Tremlett, 2015), hence reinforcing inaccurate representations.

Undertaking this research engaged us directly with some major and messy issues we are negotiating in our feminist thinking. This includes how to manage the balance between respecting the importance of women's differential experiences, and resisting collapsing of difference or speaking for; whilst also keeping hold of the means to identify and theorise the significance of patterns in gendered experience underpinning similarities between particularised positionings of Roma women, and other gendered experiences. Yet we argue that protecting this potential is vital to asserting (and challenging) how particularised micro-inequalities of gender are not isolated instances, but part of something bigger. Inspired by this, our approach advocates a 'feminist solidarity' model as a means of crossing borders and building bridges to negotiate the politics of knowledge in international feminism (Mohanty, 2003). Such coproduction of knowledge is central to our feminist politics.

### **Narratives of Responsibility: Aspiring More and Giving Back**

Much of the discourse around Roma HE participation conveys a focus on the language of raising aspiration, implicitly inferring individual responsibility rather than wider social inequalities (Pantea, 2015). While Roma students' perspectives in our research have replicated dominant discourses of aspiration and responsibility to the wider Roma community, they have also problematised these through identifying resistance to these narratives. The remainder of the paper explores the ways in which tensions between individual and collective responsibility play out in the experiences of Roma women university students and graduates.

The importance of aspiration and self-motivation as strategies for increasing educational participation emerged as salient in the research, across individual interviews and informal conversations. The perspective of Mila, a Roma graduate working in the HE programme for a Roma NGO, was typical of such a perspective:

I strongly believe that no matter how difficult circumstances are, you have to have that inner voice talk to you and have that power of continuing and going further and further in the challenges.

However, there appears a tension between apparently contrasting narratives of individual responsibility for academic success or failure, juxtaposed against an onus on collective responsibility, as Mirela and Liliana describe:

It is our duty, as Roma educated persons, as...Roma educated woman, to help, first of all my community, to be in school and to be educated. (Mirela)

What do we have to do? ...We need more Roma people...to be educated. When you have more Roma educated people, first, they're going to change their personal life and second, they're going to change other Roma's life, because when you have more educated people I think, in general, we're going to change the general picture for Roma everywhere in Europe. (Liljana)

This clash between individual and collective responsibility emerged as one of the most prominent themes in interviews. It is also notable that Mirela is studying Social Work. Roma students are overrepresented in social science and healthcare disciplines, potentially associated with the motivation to 'give something back' (Danvers 2015, p.21), as also observed with other non-traditional student groups (Burridge, Payne & Rahmani, 2016;

Reay, 2003, Reay *et al.*, 2010; Hinton-Smith, 2012a). Narratives around the benefits to the wider Roma community of increasing education levels of individual Roma, focus predominantly on the potential to act as either an ambassador for Roma interests in the public sphere, or a positive role model encouraging other Roma to advance in education and philanthropic professional vocations (Kolev *et al.*, 2013). Assumptions underpinning such emphasis on collective action may have more deeply pervasive roots. For example, Tremlett (2009) has explored assumptions around 'an ideology of nurture and shared social activity' asserted in Stewart's *The Time of the Gypsies* (1997, p.59).

In various ways, social class was relevant to the educational experiences and expectations of the women presented in these narratives. These women identified childhood background as having been significant to their educational opportunities and parental attitude to these either because of having economically secure backgrounds compared to other Roma around them, or having parents employed in teaching or other professional occupations. For example, Liliana, who was of mixed Roma and non-Roma heritage, described feeling very comfortable in HE. She also identified the significance of her relatively privileged upbringing, living mainly amongst non-Roma. The relevance of occupying such differently privileged social positioning was also recognised by Mila, who had travelled, studied and worked internationally; and whose parents had been very supportive of her education. This resonates with Pantea's assertion that the potentially emancipatory power offered by migration opportunities for some Roma women are far from being equally distributed (2012, p.1264). These experiences of relative privilege fed into the onus by self and others on the perceived responsibility to 'give back' to the wider community.

There are however identified problems with assumptions that educated Roma will automatically become spokespersons for Roma issues. Our findings unearthed some tensions experienced by this burden of representation:

Adja: It can be a burden on my shoulders to always be seen as a Roma - the expectation to give back. Giving back to the community is a personal choice, but I do not see it as my personal responsibility.

Gizi: Should we all work on Roma questions? We can't all work with that - we must work in public organisations etc. and show that Roma can do that as well.

These narratives attend to both the tension between a wish to give back by becoming 'role-models' of educated Roma in their communities and a desire to be free of the need to be 'marked' by their Roma categorisation as they become graduate choice-makers.

Research participants asserted the right of, and desire for Roma to embrace opportunities to move into areas of mainstream society more widely:

The motto of the Decade [of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015] was 'Roma with Roma', like, working with the Roma community but also by Roma, and I don't see it as a negative thing, it was a positive, but in the long run, I don't want to see our graduates nor me working, like, in Roma related projects, you know? I want to see scientists, I want to see theatre, presenters, you know (Mila)

Georgeta's perspective identified the significance of gendered expectations in Roma culture to problematising the assumption that Roma automatically identify with successful Roma in prominent positions as promoting their shared interests, as also discussed by McGarry and Agarin (2014):

Because you, to go into academia and you are assimilated, it's very hard for a woman, for a girl from a traditional community, to take you as a model. Do you understand? (Georgeta)

Yet she nevertheless identified it as also being important that Roma girls and women should have women role models:

We have to have models. Until now, the Roma movement - I'm speaking now from the Roma movement, you know, as an activist, if you want, even if I don't consider myself as a big activist; but it was led by the men, let's be honest; and it's very difficult if you are, like a girl, to learn from a man. (Georgeta)

There was an important tension between personal desire to give back to Roma communities and at the same time a desire to escape this burden and have access to the same opportunities as non-Roma graduates. Furthermore, the expectation to use education to 'give back' to the wider community is gendered through pervasive policy and community narratives linking Roma women with motherhood. Much rhetoric around Roma women's education focuses not on education as a right for their own selves, but how as mothers or future mothers, having an education will positively affect the community as they educate their children (e.g. Romani Women's Rights Conference, 2010; Vincze, 2013). This resonates with findings around lone parents in the UK, as a marginalised group for whom becoming a positive role model to one's own children through university participation can be seen as offering an avenue to be seen as worthy and respectable (Hinton-Smith, 2015). Here the value on the perceived importance of the positive role model is emphasised as for women taking place within the home, contrasting with the perceived tensions in promoting Roma women as positive role models in the public sphere:

There is an expression that is saying the child is the mirror of the parent, so a child learns from the behaviour of the parent with whom they live. (Mirela)

The Roma women in our research who had succeeded in HE and graduate careers as internationally mobile subjects, frequently related having overcome contradictions between this and what they saw as traditional assumptions around their role as Roma women. This included for several, divorce from the Roma men whom they had married when they were young, and for others through describing having consciously foregone marriage and having children, or not having returned to their community, as Mirela describes:

In Roma families, the woman does not have voice, they don't have, if the man decides, as my husband decided for me. For example, if my husband says, you are not going to work in this job, I couldn't work in this job. This will start a big conflict within me, but my husband was supportive to me and in this I am lucky. But I know a lot of other cases that the women are not supported in their ideas by their husbands. So the husbands are saying, you are not going to do that, and that's it. (Mirela)

Mirela exemplifies the traditional gendered norms shaping Roma women's access to educational opportunities and the ways in which, for some, voice, power and opportunity were linked. Access to HE was particularly associated with enabling the development of a voice that could be deemed legitimate. For Mila, being highly educated allowed her not just to speak, but to be heard. This problematises notions of international mobility as 'choice' because for many, their decision to move away to study was motivated by a perceived, gendered lack of support for educated Roma women in their homes and communities. This chimes with work on women and HE in Afghanistan (Burrige, Payne & Rahmani, 2016), in its identification of the tensions of gendered expectation that often inform the notion of a 'choice' between education and family for women.

Also relevant to understanding the complexity of processes of simultaneous opportunity and inequality in such international trajectories for Roma women however is Pantea's exploration of how 'migration often provides the enabling circumstances for Roma women to enjoy a different way of life' (2012, p.1259). The women in our interviews emphasised the importance of Roma women's education and graduate employment not only as a potential good to the community for them to give, but also as a right of and for themselves:

On a general note, I think that what we need to do is actually make them think that as a woman they have that right. (Mila)

Research participants' narratives also however made connections between traditional expectations as Roma women and their experiences as mobile university subjects and graduates, which problematises notions of a straightforward juxtaposition between these. For example, Tatjana explicitly connected her heavy childhood domestic responsibilities as a Roma girl (which she carefully contrasted with expectations of her brothers), to her current position carrying out her PhD while working as a research assistant, waitress and NGO consultant:

I didn't have a room, for example, to study...We had a religious celebration every year, St. Nicolas, that we celebrate at home, and I was cooking for 30 people when I was nine. Taking care of two babies, cleaning, cooking, going to school. And after that...And after that when I came here [my colleague] asked me, how are you dealing with the multitasking job? What? I grew up with these multitasking jobs (Tatjana).

As well as illuminating connections between roles, self and others in Roma women's personal lives, Tatjana's insight points to the importance not to see increasing Roma education levels in culturally imperialist terms, as a one-way street of knowledge and benefit from academic understanding to a traditional culture assumed not to have anything to offer in return. Rather there is a need for HEIs to work to support participation by diverse constituents including Roma students, by validating the contribution that different experiences and ways of knowing can bring to HE.

While the discussion here has problematised the emphasis on individual aspiration as the predominant strategy for tackling Roma educational disadvantage, and identified tensions between this and a parallel focus on collective responsibility, insights from research participants illuminated the connectedness between these two apparently oppositely pulling priorities. The desire to self-present as a successful agentic chooser, moving forward in

adaptation to evolving circumstances (Taylor, 2012) is strongly revealed in the narratives of Roma students and graduates. This can be seen as symptomatic of the need to internalise individual responsibility as a strategy in the context of limited opportunities caused by deep discrimination:

This is the only way that the people will break this poverty cycle... If we want to ask for our rights, first of all we have to understand and read our rights. If you don't know, who you are, your rights, and you are not able to read it, how can you claim to understand and to protect your rights? (Mirela)

### **Whose Responsibility? Framing Tensions Between the Individual and Collective**

As revealed in the data above, the importance of aspiration and individual responsibility for academic success or failure arguably problematises the marginalised for their own exclusion. This resonates with criticisms of much of the wider discourse of widening participation in HE over recent decades (Hinton-Smith, 2012b). For example O'Shea (2015) argues that an effect of approaches to university transition for marginalised students has been to negatively position such students as deficit or replete in capitals as a result of their background. Such emphasis on individual deficit serves to obscure the persistence of structural inequality, and responsibility for the development of policies at the European, state, and individual HEI levels, to develop policies fostering more inclusive learning opportunities and environments (Haggis, 2006), in which diverse students can belong and succeed (HEA, 2012). Actively promoting institutional responsibility acknowledges and addresses the pervasive messages that 'you are not from here' (Ahmed, 2012, p.179) that can all too often be experienced by marginalised 'non-traditional' students, including Roma, in HE. Insights from Roma participants show how focusing on what can be changed by the self (e.g. attitude to learning) can become an important means for empowerment against a backdrop of marginalisation and exclusion. This emphasis on individual aspiration further resonates with identification that without targeted parental investment of economic and cultural capitals, underprivileged students have to struggle to get to university, requiring a strong self-reliance that translates into attitude to university participation (Reay et al., 2010). Yet co-existing with notions of individual responsibility for academic success or failure is Roma students' responsibility to act as Roma ambassadors. Discourses of educated Roma 'giving back' to their communities are identified as risking situating Roma graduates in work providing only for Roma issues and communities. There is a need for policy to validate educational participation as a right for Roma students' own selves, rather than as a debt to be repaid. Here Ahmed's (2012) assertions resonate, of being:

Continually reminded that we were the recipients of generous funding. We were indebted. The gift economy is powerful: a means of some asserting the power they have to give to others, which is at once a power to expect or demand a return. (p.153)

The practical reality is that as students and graduates of internationally mobile HE, similarly to Pantea's (2012) exploration of Romanian Roma women's migration:

It may be that Roma women with experiences of successful migration have to choose between responding to the social expectations to help exerted upon them by their networks and the individual incentive to succeed. (p.1257)

Pantea's perspective is further relevant however in identifying how these apparently contrasting priorities may in fact potentially be reconciled by acknowledgement of both expectations asserted on the individual, but also the personal nature of accomplishments. Coexisting emphasis on Roma students' individual responsibility for their own success alongside collective responsibility to use their education for the advancement of their community can appear contradictory, or reconcilable only through the idea of recourse to aspirational discourse in the face of the impermeability of structural inequalities. But there is a third dimension to this relationship of individual and Roma community responsibility. Both serve to locate Roma outside the realm of belonging in the mainstream HE culture, rather than being entitled to participate in the full opportunities of education on a par with others, designated by both narratives as being as those who are not at home in HE.

Several participants in the research identified the chasm of inequality and discrimination between mainstream society and their own community as being too deep and wide for them to hold hoping to ever completely overcome this as a goal:

For the broader society, I think it's difficult to fight the discrimination, you know, because you are fighting with a person's beliefs, you know, and what is valuable, you know, prejudice and stereotypes that were incorporated and entrenched in you since forever, you know, so it is dangerous when these kinds of prejudice and stereotypes are influencing the policies within the institutions of society, you know? (Mila)

It's hard to negotiate with the government to change things, to measure the impacts. Sometime you ask yourself why am I doing this? Working with Roma communities, it's, in the same time you have this sense of being in peace with your soul, but in the same time you have this feeling that you will never change something. (Georgeta)

These perspectives resonate with existing literature identifying the extent to which Roma remain excluded by the majority from mechanisms of political leverage and are likely to continue to do so (McGarry & Agarin, 2014, p.1987; Redzepi, 2013). Mila offered further insight into the reconciling of individual aspiration and structural inequality through her assertion that people not realising what they can achieve if they work towards it, is a central feature of the discrimination that keeps people down.

Ahmed (2012) has theorised the impenetrability of the wall, as a metaphor for immobility that changes and moves, but does not disappear, instead reappearing elsewhere in a new form. She identifies how:

The wall is invisible to those who can flow into the spaces created by institutions, but when you don't quite inhabit the norms, you notice the wall, solid and tangible, as you come up against it (p.175).

Ahmed's insight informs the necessary centrality of the insider insight of Roma activists to addressing persistent inequalities. This addresses identification of how 'very often minority groups remain outside of the scope of institutions that would provide them with visibility' (McGarry & Agarin 2014, p.1976). The tension between individual and institutional responsibility is implicit in the identification that:

Policies facilitating Roma participation seek to enable them to compete on a more equal basis with the majority, but in doing so such policies tend to perpetuate the very marginal position of Roma which they seek to abolish because they provide disadvantaged individuals with special treatment to overcome their apparent inability to cope with extant institutions. (McGarry & Agarin, 2014, p.1979)

This leads McGarry and Agarin to assert a paradoxical dilemma in the 'participation puzzle' negotiated by Roma. There is an identified need to achieve an adequate minimal presence in public life to ensure that their interests are not assumed by policy-makers and that they have the potential to influence policies affecting them. Yet at the same time it is important to ensure that these steps to guarantee their voice do not reinforce their status as a group marked by exclusion. Emphasising the role of Roma agency in improving outcomes may as such represent a strategically beneficial approach in targeting unequal policies and institutions, without evoking the stigma of victim-hood. It is nevertheless vital that in order to have emancipatory potential, all policies must begin with acknowledging the deep discrimination that exists. McGarry and Agarin also assert that the state alone has the power to create institutional avenues ensuring Roma public participation and mechanisms of influence in decision-making. Yet, despite the pressure placed on candidate countries including Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria by the EU, incentive to improve the situation of Roma was removed once accession was secured. This informs the on-going role of Europe in securing greater equality for Roma in educational participation, as in employment, and other areas of social life.

### **Reflecting on Roma Women's Higher Education Participation**

This paper has drawn on interviews with five Roma women current students and recent graduates to explore experiences of negotiating European HE as internationally mobile constituents of a marginalised minority. In doing so it has identified the co-existing emphasis and contradictions between individual and shared responsibility for educational success. We also identify a strong sense that, using Ahmed (2012), educational access for marginalised groups such as Roma women is experienced as a gift, for which the student feels a symbolic responsibility to demonstrate gratitude.

Yet the information-flow between dominant academic assumptions and perspectives from marginalised minority cultures is too often assumed to be unilateral. Insights from Roma students including those discussed here contribute centrally to understandings of the relationship between structure and agency in addressing educational marginalisation, by asserting the importance of individual motivation not as a substitute for tackling wider discrimination, but as a means of doing so against a backdrop of such impermeable inequality. In specifically addressing the context of European HE, this builds on recent insights including those of Vlase and Voicu (2014) of how:

Migration is one active life strategy that some of the Roma use to change their situation and to transform the state of affairs, while gender, religion and traditional subgroups' identity mediate the effect of structural constraints and shape migration decision-making and the migration process (p.2433).



Such onus on agency contrasts with dominant trends in UK academic HE discourse over recent years, in which rhetoric of aspiration has been moved away from in being seen as in opposition to recognition and critiquing of the significance of inequalities of opportunity. This has informed a focus on problematising the inequity neoliberal university, which remains obstinate in its ascent regardless of our critique. In contrast, insights from Roma students and activists explicate how rhetoric of aspiration does not automatically predicate an undermining of structural inequality; but given a more conciliatory framework, can rather be utilised as a tool in chipping away at it. Such emphasis on the importance of the agency of the marginalised to challenging persistent inequality resonates with critical perspectives from Marxist class analysis to the assertion from Lorde's assertion that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (1979, 1984).

This must nevertheless be contextualised against identification of the need to move beyond conceptions of Roma representation and voice in public life and political participation, given that Roma's minority status means that they will always be outnumbered. Instead, as McGarry and Agarín (2014) argue, the focus must be on increasing influence. As Oprea (2012) argues:

(Roma feminists) should have leading roles in the government, in nongovernmental organizations such as the European Women's Lobby, and in the European Roma Rights Center. It is time that we have not just any "place at the policy table" but a central place at that table. (p.19)

Central to this is continuing development of a body of highly educated Roma in professional positions not only in Roma activism, but also across mainstream institutions including media, politics, education, business, and social care; and representing a diversity of perspectives in terms of gender, sexuality, socioeconomic background, nationality and religion. This is vital to ensuring that the much needed presence of robust intervention in Roma rights at the level of European policy, acknowledges diversity and resists treating Roma as a homogenous cultural category (Tremlett *et al.*, 2014, p.729). Roma students' narratives convey the multi-causal complexity of relations between structural inequality and agentic choosing, individual rights and collective responsibilities, and the simultaneous pulls of the past and future.

Roma students' 'becoming' as successful, international HE participants cannot be temporally contextualised purely in the future-focused orientation implied by much policy and academic literature. This is a challenge for international HE policy; to develop complex understandings of inclusion that acknowledge the complex relations between structure and agency; the individual, minority community, and mainstream culture; that foster mutual respect for diverse cultures; and create spaces for minority students to enrich learning environments through the calling in, and validating of, marginalised knowledge and experience. We know that education has empowering potential to transform lives. But we also know that this cannot be assumed unproblematically. The potential of education to empower depends fundamentally on the motivations behind processes of inclusion; informing the importance of interrogating the lived reality of participants, underlying rhetoric of educational opportunities. Too often, how to promote inclusion is decided by those in relatively powerful positions with insufficient consultation of the marginalised, in doing so leaving relations of unequal privilege unchallenged, and empowering potential short-changed. There is a vital need to engage with, hear and respond to voices of educationally marginalised groups including Roma, to

continue to identify both persistent and newly emerging inequalities, and responses to these at individual and collective levels. We need to continue to work to both imagine and create more democratic and empowering spaces in education by engaging in direct dialogue between the marginalised and majority, by increasing the influence of marginalised groups within powerful institutions while continuing to problematise the inadequacies of these institutions, and by recognising the complexity of the relationship between individual agency and institutional responsibility as a means for tackling persistent inequality.

### **Acknowledgements**

Particular thanks to the interview and focus group participants who gave up their time to speak to us about their experience. We would also like to acknowledge the help and support of all colleagues at the Roma Education Fund, including Judit Szira and Dr Stela Garaz, who provided not only access to key stakeholders, knowledge networks but also helped to ensure that we asked the right questions. Thanks also to the other project partners Dr Mayte PadillaCarmona, Alejandro Soria, Professor Nafsika Alexiadou, Anders Norberg and Professor Louise Morley.

A Project funded by Horizon 2020: The EU Programme for Research and innovation Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Research and Innovation Staff Exchange (RISE). Grant agreement No 643739

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