



The need for a safe place: Roma, Gypsy and Traveller LGBTIQ people online

By Lucie Fremlova



Social media are an important tool for empowerment, particularly for marginalised and disenfranchised minority groups. They have become a powerful tool, too: in fact, nothing is more powerful than sharing stories. Stories have the power to connect us to the world and other people: whether they are stories told in pictures or in words. These days, social media and blogs are how and where we tell our stories in order to have impact on other people. No matter who or what we are, or are not, stories have the power to change us.

About four years ago, I started a Facebook page to bring together LGBTIQ migrants from eastern European countries who live in and around London, and administered another page called Queer Czech. In the course of running these online forums, which also served as platforms for generating international support for the very new Prague Pride, I came to appreciate the freedom these safe virtual spaces offered. Even though, luckily, the pages were not subject to any form of cyber attacks in the forms of hate speech or other expressions of intolerance, homophobia, xenophobia, racism or anti-Gypsyism (as some of the LGBTIQ followers were also of Roma heritage), little by little I started to wonder about setting up a closed, private group that would bring together Roma, Gypsy and Traveller LGBTIQ people, their like-minded friends and supporters. It was also a conscious move, as it turns out not all non-Roma LGBTIQ members were interested in and/or had sympathy for Roma and Roma-related issues.



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That is how the Facebook group LGBTIQ Roma came to exist sometime at the end of 2010. Initially, it had about 50 members, mostly recruited from my circle of LGBTIQ Roma, Gypsy and Traveller friends and acquaintances, as well as like-minded non-Roma LGBTIQ and/or non-LGBTIQ people. Currently, the group has 148 members, spanning over 15 different countries across Europe and North and South America. The average age of the members of this forum is around 27.

The group has never expressed an aspiration to become an ambitious activist page, mobilising huge crowds of people as some groups or pages do. It has had the modest aim of sharing stories and spreading information about different initiatives and events among the members, and raising awareness regarding LGBTIQ-GRT people (Gypsy, Roma, Traveller; an umbrella term used in the UK to refer to the different subgroups of itinerant, semi-settled and settled indigenous and migrant Roma from central and eastern Europe and the Balkans living in the UK), the dynamics of the lives of these often invisible and misunderstood groups and some of the strategies for negotiating their roles and positions in their respective societies, as well as within the Roma-rights and LGBTIQ movements.

Thus far, the group has provided a safe and peaceful environment where the principles of diversity, equality, inclusivity (not exclusivity, which the title of the group might suggest), democracy and respect for difference are adhered to, promoted and encouraged. The group is always developing: the vast majority of the members appreciate the fact that the group is closed and does not aspire to be a dating site or a virtual space fostering hostility towards non-Roma of majority sexualities and/or gender identities. As the main administrative supervisor, I make sure to regularly consult with all the members.

In the group, we primarily share life stories

as experienced by members of LBGTIQ Roma communities, as well as the stories of non-Roma LGBTIQ people who experience similar types of multiple discrimination, whether it is on the grounds of their race/ethnicity or skin colour (for example, black LGBTIQ people), religion or disability. The issue of coming out within Roma communities, including within traditional, patriarchal Roma communities has been discussed on several occasions, usually in connection with the airing of documentary films like *Roma Boys*¹ made by David Tišer, one of our members. The issue of Roma lesbian women has also been discussed recently in relation to the online publication of a European Roma Rights Centre supported report entitled “Dzuvljarké: Roma lesbian existence”.² However, we also focus on issues related to social (in)justice faced by the Roma: the Roma Holocaust, expulsions of Roma from France, Roma asylum seekers in Hungary, anti-Roma marches across central and eastern Europe or removals of children from Roma families. There was recently much discussion in connection with a case in which an English court entrusted two Slovak Roma siblings into the care of a single-sex, non-Roma family. In the group discussion, some of the participants suggested that it would be great if spokespeople from the Roma community in the UK and from the LGBTIQ communities made a public statement that no matter the situation, a child’s welfare comes first so as to avoid extreme right wing parties such the UKIP or the French FN seizing such a case and simply taking the side of the birth parents, creating confusion and not caring at all about who gets hurt in the middle. In the group, we also share information about Roma LGBTIQ-friendly organisations in order to signpost potential users, as well as information about Roma LGBTIQ-related visual arts, music and literature (for example, Mikey Walsh’s stories *Gypsy Boy* and *Gypsy Boy on the Run*, based on his real-life experience as a young English Gypsy boy coming out and consequently having to leave his family and community and move to London).

1. <http://vimeo.com/25854654>
2. www.errc.org/article/dzuvljarké-roma-lesbian-existence/4295

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Since early 2013, the group has started promoting the idea of Roma participation at various European pride events. Thus far, the members have not been able to participate in pride events as a group, mainly due to financial constraints and the geographic dispersal of the members. However, individual members have participated in pride events in their respective countries, encouraging and providing one another with ideas with regard to participation at events such as Paris, Bratislava and Prague Pride parades, and have been seeking allies among other ethnic minority LGBTIQ groups. The group plans to step up these efforts over time.

LGBTIQ Roma has been promoting Roma LGBTIQ-related events such as the May 2014 IGLYO and Transgender Europe (TGEU) study session “Equality in action: mobilising LGBTIQ youth around the Council of Europe Recommendation on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity”, or the June 2014 Council of Europe United for Dignity conference, or other Roma LGBTIQ groups and their activities, such as the Spanish “Ververipen – Roma for Diversity” or the Czech “ARA ART” in an attempt to make sure that our virtual initiatives are translated directly into the real world and grounded in reality. ARA ART is possibly one of the most dynamic LGBTIQ associations, represented by Czech Roma LGBTIQ activist and the Czech Green Party candidate David Tišer, whose life story is featured in the recent publication *Barabaripen/Equality: young Roma speak about multiple discrimination*. At the beginning of May 2014, ARA ART held the first ever Roma LGBTIQ event in central and eastern Europe. It brought together over 20 participants from across the Czech and Slovak Republics. The group is currently preparing events and activities for Prague Pride 2014, which will feature a Roma-themed and Roma-led vehicle for the first time in the history of Czech pride marches. Several members of the group LGBTIQ Roma are planning on attending as well. ARA ART envisages holding an international Roma LGBTIQ conference in spring 2015, which is currently in preparation.

The reader may wonder why the activities of other organisations are being mentioned here in detail although they are not organised by the group LGBTIQ Roma. The reason for doing so lies in the nature of and the freedom afforded by the virtual space, as well as in the fact that even though members of minority groups communicate and even form new groupings through the Internet, while living lives plagued by homophobia, transphobia and/or anti-Gypsyism, we rely on each other's solidarity and support in our struggle to achieve equality.

SOCIAL
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DAVID TISER



Work in progress: youth work addressing multiple discrimination

By Mara Georgescu

Thanks to its mission and underlining values, youth work can have an important role in helping young people become aware of the forces that influence their lives and in working for their equality and access to a dignified life, therefore combating multiple discrimination.

What follows are some questions and hints for youth workers regarding how to deal with this problem of multiple discrimination, as well as some suggestions for action.

Your personal views about the various groups that young people belong to

What are your views about these groups?
What is your level of knowledge about their background and the problems they face?
How often do you discuss this with your colleagues and the young people themselves?

Ignorance, bias and prejudice are strong factors that can lead to reproducing discrimination towards young people or to not taking any action when discrimination affects young people. What should you do? Find information about these groups; look for their history, characteristics, etc. Ask the young people themselves. Create moments where young people can learn about given groups their peers may belong to (ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, etc.).

Your awareness of discrimination and racism

How much do you know about discrimination, which groups are victims, how it happens, legislation against it? Which groups of young people are seen as the “bad and the ugly” in the media, or in your neighbourhood? How much do you know about the agencies or organisations fighting discrimination? How much time do you spend talking with young people about these agencies and organisations or services that can support them in case of discrimination?

What should you do? Get training for yourself and your organisation on this topic and encourage young people to do the same! If you change your practice as a result of the training, then make sure to review its effects with young people and your colleagues.

