

How the youth of Britain's Roma, Gypsy, and Traveller communities fight the injustices they face

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/roma-gypsy-traveller-youth/

*The youth of the Roma, Gypsy, and Traveller communities are committed to fighting the injustices they face, writes **Colin Clark**. He argues that this form of activism may finally end the racism and stigma against them.*



A recent [article](#) by Cassie Marie McDonagh in *The Guardian* reflected on her negative and discriminatory experiences of the state education system as an Irish Traveller woman, and the fact that similar experiences are continuing for younger generations of Traveller children today. This inequality of access, take-up, and delivery of education to the approximately [300,000](#) plus Roma, Gypsy, and Traveller communities in Britain is emblematic of a second-class citizenship that needs to end. The communities are no longer silent and biting their tongues, instead choosing to speak out and [challenge](#) such discrimination when it appears. This enactment of Traveller [agency](#) – telling it exactly how it is to those who will not usually listen – is just one way that the last ‘acceptable’ form of racism towards the communities will end.

Powerfully, Cassie also reflected on the findings of a recent [YouGov](#) poll that demonstrated the lack of progress in terms of combatting anti-Traveller prejudice across many areas of everyday life. This poll found that many settled people (40%) have a serious issue with close relatives forming relationships – that is, falling in love – with someone from the Roma, Gypsy, and Traveller communities. Further, despite what racial equalities [legislation](#) has guaranteed for decades now, 34% of the sample still do not consider Gypsies and Travellers to be a ‘proper’ ethnic group. Challenging this denial of [ethnic identity](#) is another important way to combat everyday racism.

Nor is such racialized, systematic exclusion confined to UK education systems. In Parliament and in the press – and most likely on the outskirts of your own town – the communities endure forms of hostile treatment that many assumed had been confined to the vaults of genocidal history. This is not the case. Various forms of legislative and public policy discrimination continue across all the key UK social policy areas: evidence demonstrates that Roma, Gypsy, and Traveller people are the [neighbours](#), [workers](#), [patients](#) and [pupils](#) that no one wants. It is surely shaming that in 2017 Beveridge’s infamous ‘[Five Giants](#)’ continue to thrive amongst our most marginalised communities? This unacceptable situation must end.

Cassie also mentions recent debates in [Parliament](#) and a new [report](#) from [The Traveller Movement](#) as illustrative of the struggles that remain to secure justice, equality, and fair treatment for the communities. And she is right. In that House of Commons debate, like most others, Roma, Gypsies, and Travellers are represented in a static, stereotyped, and two-dimensional light; a Parliamentary spotlight that tends to either demonise or, very rarely, romanticize the communities. This is unhelpful at either end of the spectrum and

our elected officials have a duty of not just representation but also of care towards the diverse communities they serve. A sense of perspective and balance is important and words need to be chosen carefully by our MPs, lest they come back to haunt them.

Likewise, items carried by national and local press are often inaccurate, hostile, and tend to inflame situations rather than offer factual and balanced reporting. This is particularly the case regarding so-called 'illegal sites' – or, in another form of words more meaningful to Gypsy and Traveller families, 'roadside encampments'. Indeed, Communities Minister Alok Sharma recently announced another review of planning and trespass laws that are already explicitly designed to prevent Gypsy and Traveller families from owning their own land as well as evicting them from their trailers – that is, their homes – if they are fortunate enough to purchase land to build sites on with the required planning permission. He suggested that the current position isn't working and there is a perception that: 'There is one law for Travellers and one for the rest of society.' This inaccurate view is widespread and is based, almost entirely, on post-Dale Farm campaigns of misinformation, designed to ensure larger sites are forever curtailed.

And it isn't just the issue of roadside sites where the spotlight will glare, as it did recently in Cromer, Norfolk. It is on Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children as well. The Times recently launched a lurid investigative report into Roma communities from central and Eastern Europe living in Govanhill, Glasgow. In its lead article, journalist Marc Horne stated that 'children [are being] sold for sex on the streets of Govanhill'. Yet this shocking claim was not supported by evidence taken to the police, but rather on pub gossip and local hearsay.

A local Roma-led NGO, Friends of Romano Lav – of which I am a trustee – reacted to the article, issuing a statement that condemned the inflammatory reporting and suggested that issues of child protection should not be 'racialised' but rather, where evidence exists, should be taken forward to the police. At the time of writing, an enquiry has been launched but no such evidence has been presented to the authorities. The nature of the reporting on Govanhill was remarkably similar to the moral panic over the case of 'Maria', supposedly 'stolen by Gypsies' in Greece in 2013, as well as a recent case in Norfolk of human slavery.

It has been evident that life after 'My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding' and its various spin-offs has been an awakening for the Roma, Gypsy, and Traveller communities of Britain. Used to being on the fringes, trying to live quiet, everyday lives, suddenly the glare of a harsh spotlight fell on families who were unaccustomed to such attention. It could be argued that some unintended benefits have arisen from this televised form of invasive 'door-stepping'. For one thing, a new generation of mainly young women activists have stepped-forwards to claim space, tell their stories, and challenge what is said about them and their kith and kin.

This, in many ways, is exactly how the last 'acceptable' form of racism will end: a new generation who are brave, empowered, and committed to fight the injustices they see around them. As John Lydon once put it, 'anger is an energy' and today this anger is

fuelling a new wave of Roma, Gypsy, and Traveller consciousness and activism that may well spell the beginning of the end of their stigmatization.

About the Author

Colin Clark ([@profcolinclark](#)) is Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of the West of Scotland and a Trustee of Romano Lav.



All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Featured image credit: [Pixabay](#)/Public Domain.