


Article

Contributions from Research with (and Not without) Roma Women to Social Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Ane López de Aguilera 

Social Work Training and Research Section, University of Barcelona, 08034 Barcelona, Spain; alopezdeaguileta@ub.edu

Abstract: Scientific literature has evidenced that some social work practices and research tend to foster assimilation and silence ethnic minorities. In the case of Roma, previous research has shown that many social welfare practices do not consider their voices and end up in actions for surveillance and control over social transformation. However, the successful practices in social work with the Roma population that overcome these limitations remain underexplored. This work contributes to this gap in the scientific literature by uncovering one key criterion of some successful actions in this regard. Through the communicative methodology, six women's focus groups and 30 life stories were conducted. In total, this included 47 Roma women and 33 Roma men from three different Spanish regions, as well as interviews with 30 professionals from education, social services, and civic organizations. The results from the studied context present evidence of a main successful criterion in some social work practices: the inclusion of scientific evidence in the intervention with co-creation with the end-users through egalitarian dialogue. That is, in this context, through the use of scientific evidence together with the co-creation process, the results were very positive.

Keywords: Roma women; social work; co-creation; scientific evidence of social impact



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1. Introduction

Extant scientific evidence has outlined the existing barriers in social work with the Roma community. Racism and stereotypes about Roma are present in social work practices, hindering the relationship between professionals and Roma people [1]. The existing stereotypes of the Roma population in social work often result in control approaches toward them [1,2]. Some of these assumptions among social workers include the idea that the Roma are not interested in improving their situation, that they do not care about being integrated with mainstream society, or that their way of life is not compatible with obtaining a job or a new education degree, among others.

In the case of Roma women, these stereotypes also focus on portraying them as more submissive and subordinated to their husbands [3] than the wider society's women, even regarding gender-based violence. However, research has shown that violence against Roma women is not very different compared to that exerted against the wider society's women [4]. In all, Roma women are subject to control and surveillance by many social work practices instead of transformative approaches [2,5]. Roma women are at an intersection of multiple discrimination by ethnicity, gender, and class [6]. The difficulties of Roma women regarding social work have already been stressed in the scientific literature [7]. The inclusion of Roma women in research has also been analyzed, with positive outcomes both for scientific production and for Roma women [5,8,9]. However, the inclusion of Roma women's voices in dialogue with the scientific evidence has not been explored in depth in the case of social work research. This article contributes to this gap in the literature.

Regarding research in social work, the increasing literature outlines the need to include the voices of the end-users in the very research design and process [10,11]. Much research, even scientifically published papers, does not take into account participants' opinions and

views, claiming to be in favor of a supposed objectivity achieved by such distance [12]; however, this has, in many cases, only fostered more stereotypes toward the most vulnerable populations, as are the Roma people [13]. Therefore, in the Roma case, many of the stereotypes are rooted in scientific publications as well, although increasing literature highlights and questions them [14].

Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that most of the existing scientific publications focus on the barriers of Roma people in regard to social work. However, there is also scientific evidence that has demonstrated the feminist actions of many Roma women in the development of actions that are beneficial for their communities and themselves, for instance, in terms of education, access to health, or access to social services, among others [5]. Indeed, as opposed to what the widely extended stereotypes claim, there is a sector of Roma that is very active in transforming their situation in many areas, not only in health or education but also in social work [11].

This paper is based on the theoretical framework of the dialogic society [15,16]. It builds on the increasing dialogic turn [17] of all the sectors of our society and on how to improve it by overcoming inequalities and power relations. To exemplify this dialogic turn, it can be seen in a concrete change in many households worldwide: the previously named man or head of a family no longer decides all the rules of a house without dialogue; his wife, daughters, and sons question and demand their voices to be heard in decision-making [15]. Likewise, this also happens in social work (as in all other fields of knowledge), where professionals and researchers can no longer impose their views and steps on the service users and participants of a study. Increasingly, citizens do not accept impositions, even if they come from professionals or experts [18,19]. In the current dialogic society, dialogue (both with and without words) becomes the key in every relationship. There are only two ways of engaging in human relationships: dialogue or violence. A third one has not been invented yet [15]. Therefore, scientists are currently looking for ways in which to expand dialogue and overcome power relations. This present research is embedded in this task, particularly in the field of social work.

In this framework, increasing scientific programs such as the one by the European Commission have established two priorities and requirements for all sciences: co-creation and social impact [16]. Co-creation refers to creating the knowledge of research projects together with participants and stakeholders interested in the results. Social impact is related to an improvement toward democratically set goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals [20,21].

Regarding the first requirement, co-creation, the previous literature on social work, education, health, and other areas has shown that many decisions for the presumed welfare of Roma people, especially women, are made without considering their voices and opinions [2,13,22,23]. In this vein, successful actions in these fields that are developed in co-creation from the beginning are increasingly being demanded and studied [10,19].

The aforementioned second requirement is social impact. A wide body of research has outlined the need to include scientific evidence of social impact [21] in interventions directed toward Roma people's success [11]. However, in social work, the inclusion of scientific evidence in everyday practice or research projects has sometimes been overlooked or neglected [24–26].

Bearing all this in mind, the present paper addresses these gaps with the main objective of identifying the elements that some social work practices with the Roma people have in common. The results presented here are part of the ROM21: Roma Women Leading Communities' Transformation project, funded by the RTD program of the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain. The project is focused on better understanding the feminist action of Roma women facing the COVID-19 pandemic to bring their communities forward in relation to social services, civic organizations, and education. This concrete paper, however, responds to the following main question: which elements are making some social work practices successful in the context of the Roma community?

2. Materials and Methods

This research (as well as the project as a whole) has been developed through the communicative methodology [27,28]. Such a methodology focuses on the egalitarian dialogue between the research participants and researchers in all stages of a research project. This egalitarian dialogue is based on the scientific evidence provided by the researcher and the lifeworld knowledge of the participant [27,28]. The research presented here has been designed, from the very beginning, in dialogue with Roma and non-Roma people, both within the research team and with participants and people who would be interested in its results.

This methodology has previously been employed with outstanding success with the Roma people, overcoming the widespread negative stereotypes about them. For instance, the Workaló project that was developed through the communicative methodology was the one that promoted the now-required co-creation and social impact criteria in the European Commission's framework program of research. This project's results were approved by unanimity in the European Parliament, recognizing the Roma people as a minority people in Europe for the first time [15,29].

The communicative methodology was chosen in this study due to the evidence of its social impact in very diverse fields, such as education [30], economics [31], gender studies [32], and social work [8], among others.

2.1. Data Collection and Participants

Within the framework of the communicative methodology, the following methods were used: six communicative groups were formed by Roma women, with 23 participants in total; 30 life stories with 22 Roma women and 8 Roma men were documented; and semi-structured interviews with 30 professionals from the fields of social services, civic organizations, and education were conducted. All these were conducted mainly in three Spanish Autonomous Communities: Aragon, the Basque Country, and Catalonia.

Communicative focus groups were formed by two to six Roma women and the person collecting the data. In them, both the challenges and responses to the pandemic were discussed, especially regarding the Sustainable Development Goals, such as gender equality, no poverty, quality education, decent work, and reduced inequalities.

The life stories had the same topic as the focus groups; however, they were one-on-one, in-depth interviews with Roma women and men. The main objective was to gain more insight and deepen the individual experiences Roma women had on the topic of the study. In the case of men, the role women had during the pandemic was also discussed in semi-structured interviews, deepening the experiences of the Roma women and their communities during the pandemic and in relation to the mentioned Sustainable Development Goals. The interviews, thus, were focused on the mentioned goals; however, other information that the participants wanted to include was always welcomed and encouraged. Therefore, although the interviewed men were asked about their experiences, the interviews with them were mainly focused on their perceptions of the actions led by women. In this paper, only the role of women will be reported.

Last, the semi-structured interviews with professionals were focused on the experiences and responses of Roma people in relation to their professional area during the pandemic. The women's role was deeply discussed.

From Catalonia, four discussion groups were held where 13 women participated; in the Basque Country, two focus groups were conducted with 10 participants. Regarding the daily life stories, in Catalonia, 14 were carried out with Roma women and 5 with Roma men, while 5 were conducted with Roma women and 1 with a Roma man in the Basque Country. In Aragon, they were conducted with three Roma women and two Roma men. The ages of the participating Roma women ranged from 19 to 73, and the men ranged from 18 to 64.

Regarding the women's characteristics, most of them had not completed compulsory secondary education, and only three of them had completed post-compulsory secondary

studies, being one of the only ones to obtain a higher education degree. Only six of them were single, and most of them were mothers (except for five). Regarding occupation, at the time of the interviews, most of them were students searching for a job, retired, working in the cleaning sector, in the mobile selling market, in hostelry, or in non-governmental organizations as professionals. The interviewed men worked in associations in the urban cleaning sector; some were students or worked in the state's security corps.

In the case of interviews with professionals, eight were social workers from Catalonia (two of them were decision-makers), two social workers were from Aragon, three decision-makers were in the field of education from Catalonia, two professionals were from Aragon, and three were from the Basque Country (one of them a decision-maker). Three were members of Roma associations from Catalonia, and three were from Aragon. Three others were members of other types of civic organizations that also worked close to the Roma people, where two were from Aragon and one was from the Basque Country.

2.2. Data Analysis

The data analysis was developed following the communicative methodology [13]. It thus consisted of the identification of exclusionary elements, that is, the barriers that prevent some social groups, in this case, Roma people, from accessing certain social practices, goods, or services equally, and the transformative elements, those that have enabled the Roma access to these social practices, goods, and services.

In this particular case, the exclusionary elements were those that prevented Roma people from achieving the analyzed Sustainable Development Goals regarding social work: gender equality, no poverty, quality education, decent work, and reduced inequalities.

The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Researchers from the ROM21 team categorized all the data in light of the five studied Sustainable Development Goals. For each goal, the exclusionary and transformative elements were categorized. Four researchers carried out an initial individual analysis, which was later put into common and in dialogue.

The results of the analysis were shown to the advisory committee of the ROM21 project. This committee is formed by both Roma and non-Roma people, including social workers, members of Roma associations, public servants, and Roma and non-Roma experts. This is again a characteristic of the theory of dialogic society: dialogue with diverse people in order to create better knowledge and better scientific outcomes without making elemental mistakes that an individual or a homogeneous group tends to make [15].

Finally, the Web of Science database was consulted in order to ensure whether the practices mentioned in the interviews were based on scientific evidence or not.

2.3. Ethical Statement

This research has received ethical approval by the Ethical Committee of the Community of Research on Excellence for All (CREA) with reference number 20230212.

All participants have signed an informed consent form. The form contained information about the purpose of the project, the use it would make of their data, the potential benefits and risks of their participation, and the possibility to withdraw from the project without any harm at any time.

3. Results

The main results of the analyzed contexts underscore two main aspects: co-creation and the application of scientific evidence of social impact. As stated by the participants, the analyzed social work practices that unite egalitarian dialogue with Roma people and scientific evidence were obtaining very positive results.

3.1. Analyzed Practices with Only Co-Creation Did Not Report Positive Results

It must be clarified that, among the analyzed cases, some examples of only using co-creation without any scientific evidence have been seen. In these cases, the results have

not been so positive regarding the achievement of the analyzed Sustainable Development Goals. Most of the social work practices that were co-created with Roma end-users were based on first needs and subsistence aids, such as food, water, aids for paying rent, and so on. Whereas these were, of course, essential, many were only focused on day-to-day problem-solving (especially economic problems) rather than on solving the problems and finding sustainable solutions.

In this vein, most left behind education and the improvement in job prospects to ensure the psychological well-being of Roma social service users. These did not apply scientific evidence that ensured the education of Roma children and adults but rather focused on non-sustainable aids. Whereas the latter was essential, the consequences in many aspects are still visible according to many Roma participants and other professionals interviewed in this research.

At the food level, for example, in our work, the resource center did not close, so we did maintain the rhythm and delivery of food as normal (...) But specifically for the Roma community in terms of food, it was clear that there were resources available to them. Above all, the biggest problem was at the educational level (EOCOA2).

So there have been a lot of children who have gone backwards in terms of education, but many, many children have not advanced (HVMA3).

A recurrent example has been related to education and the lack of technology. In many social work practices, in dialogue with families, it was detected that technological devices were missing in many Roma families, so schools or other services or associations tried to provide them. However, families did not know how to use them, nor which educational actions were scientifically proven that could better help their children continue with their education.

I used to call the families and they would tell me that ‘I got a computer but I have no idea how to set it up’. It was a huge frustration for everyone (...) they couldn’t. (...) If we could get them to make some interactive sheets that we could create, it was huge. It was very difficult (ECEPA1).

One of the interviewed Roma women complained about the alleged intromission in her life in favor of a purported co-creation process, where she felt forced to tell personal details of her life.

It’s true that sometimes they get on your nerves because sometimes I go to the social worker and they say... ‘Come on, tell me about your life’. I’m not going to tell you about my life because I don’t know you at all. I’ll explain the problem I have, right? but I’m not going to explain (...). (HVMC10)

Another example in the case of education was not only not following scientific evidence but also fostering actions that are based on hoaxes, such as proposing screening in order to supposedly help Roma students achieve the level needed in schools. Screening has been seen by scientific literature as very detrimental to students’ results [23].

3.2. Analyzed Practices Applying Scientific Evidence with No Co-Creation Did Not Report Positive Results

The same has happened in other contexts where some measures based on scientific evidence have been applied but without considering the needs and voices of the end-users. In those cases, results were not very positive either. For instance, regarding the spread of the COVID-19 disease, some social workers referred to the reduced number of people allowed with someone infected in order to prevent the spread of the virus. However, the applied measures were not co-created with the Roma people. This resulted in unrest among

many Roma populations. These measures, in this case, were seen as an imposition. Some of the Roma participants of the study were very critical of these situations.

And then on the more institutional side of social services, the only thing they have done, and I am going to say this, is to be orderly and bossy in this sense, in terms of forcefully applying the legislative framework, the legal framework, without being somewhat professional and trying to detect, as I said before, certain needs that could have limited the situations that ended up as they have ended up. For example, in a hospital, a single family member in a hospital, etcetera. So I think that the social services, not because of a lack of will, but often because of orders from above, have simply applied it and that's all they have been left with. (HVHA2)

The problem is that the customs of Roma life are not taken into account when it comes to regulations and laws and protocols or however you want to put it (EOCAGAH).

In relation to information on the new vaccines, most interviewees stated there was a good predisposition by most Roma toward them. However, they highlighted the need for dialogue for everyone to understand all the scientific evidence regarding any type of vaccine so as to make better-informed decisions.

I understand the people who are afraid (...) they were already afraid of any vaccine...in fact, the papillomavirus vaccine (...) two years ago we held a workshop to explain what papillomavirus was because they didn't want to give it to the girls (...) The problem here has been the lack of information (HVMC5)

3.3. Positive Results from the Combination of Co-Creation and Applying Scientific Evidence of Social Impact in the Analyzed Practices

The social work practices analyzed that had the most positive results regarding the achievement of the analyzed Sustainable Development Goals included both the co-creation of the actions and the application of scientific evidence.

Among those that were most successful in the analyzed cases, many were related to education. The identified scientific evidence that has been seen in many co-created measures in social work has been to extend children's learning time. That is, some social work professionals, in dialogue with Roma service users, developed educational reinforcement during out-of-school hours in order to maintain and recover their educational level.

(Interviewee1) We did reinforcement groups, we did two reinforcement groups with adults because women demanded them (...) (EOCGC1).

Another example of the combination of co-creation and scientific evidence has been seen in implementing successful educational actions [33] while in constant dialogue with Roma and non-Roma end-users. In this case, Roma women, professionals, and workers of the civic association were in constant dialogue during the pandemic. This resulted in the application of extended learning time and interactive groups [34,35]—two of the successful educational actions identified by the scientific literature. The participants explained the benefits these actions had on their children.

For the first time we saw that it was necessary and we made the two groups [of children] with the idea of interactive groups. Each group had its own questions and we tried to help with these questions of nature, social sciences... They shared their doubts and tried to solve them together (EOCGC3).

When interviewing some of the women whose children benefited from such successful educational actions, they explained very positive outcomes:

And of course, from the [Roma association's name] they even gave them English classes. [Girl's name] was happy, because she had a Roma teacher, from the UK, who gave her classes. . . And she was happy. . . We have the privilege from the [Roma association's name], that as well as the people who gave her classes being professionals, they are also references. For my brother it was salvation (HVMC13)

Another example is the integral promotion of the person without leaving behind basic needs, as well as the constant dialogue with other social agents such as civic organizations, schools, and end-users [36]. This has been seen in both maintaining the essential needs met and in creating resources to improve the situation in a sustainable way.

I would say that with the few resources and scarce funding that we had, one of the words that we have as a mission of integral promotion, the promotion sometimes could not be, but the integrality could be. That is to say, we could not be thinking about a labour itinerary without addressing this situation' and of precariousness, without talking about health, we could not stop talking about. . . In the end, it was the 360 degrees. (EOCGC1)

Many people are seeing that they are being left out because now you ask for an appointment in the census and you have to see the email to get the confirmation so many did not even know how to have an email account. as a result of this we also created workshops on mobile tools such as using the email to link it to the mobile. . . all this is taught in the courses are very practical courses to try to make them as autonomous as possible (EOCOA2).

Other examples of actions from social work that have had positive results are the Roma student gatherings. Scientific research has already analyzed their positive impact on many Roma women's and girls' educational pathways [9,11]. Co-created with participating Roma women themselves, and based on scientific evidence, the Roma women working with them saw the need to develop the gatherings online during the pandemic. The impact of the online Roma student gatherings has already been published by scientific research [37].

We have two groups that are the driving force behind the women's gatherings all over Catalonia with whom we are in regular contact because . . . as they organise the gatherings, they are the ones who carry them, the ones in charge (. . .) (EOCGC3).

Regarding health literacy, many social work practices overcame many limitations through co-creation on how to disseminate scientific evidence on COVID-19. Therefore, they followed the inclusive communication of science. The interviewed participants reported very positive results in this regard.

There have been awareness campaigns here in Sabadell. Certain Roma associations (. . .) a series of organizations have joined in the vaccination and the truth is that people here in [name of the town] have been very receptive. There is a percentage that is very afraid but there is a percentage that has been vaccinated and that wants to go out into the streets and so they have more freedom [. . .] I can say that the vast majority of people in my part of [name of the town] are receptive and the vast majority have been vaccinated" (ESOCPC3).

4. Discussion

The present study's main findings have been that, in the analyzed cases, those social work practices where co-creation and scientific evidence of social impact were applied, more positive outcomes were found. In other words, the analyzed social work practices that reported good results regarding the achievement of the analyzed Sustainable Development

Goals were based on co-creation and on applying scientific evidence. These two aspects have already been studied and identified in other fields, such as research or education, but it is the first time, to our knowledge, that this has been identified in social work.

Co-creation has been analyzed in many scientific fields and is now a requirement of many research programs for all sciences. In the case of social work, its origins are closely linked with co-creation, without any imposition from professionals on the service users of what their process and actions should be. However, in the case of Roma social service users, many stereotypes are preventing this from happening, as the scientific literature has stated. In addition, the emphasis on applying scientific evidence in social work is less present in both research and professional practice in the field. Recent research has emphasized that the key to success with the Roma community in social work is for practices to be based on scientific evidence [6].

Another key result of the present research is that practices that were based only either on co-creation or on scientific evidence in social work did not report such positive results. In the analyzed cases, the results of such practices were not so positive in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. In light of the previous scientific literature, this finding can be interpreted by studies from other areas pointing to positive results of the combination of co-creation with the application of scientific evidence [37]. On the one hand, dialogue about certain topics, such as health based on hoaxes, has proven to have negative effects [38]. For instance, a group of professionals and patients could be co-creating a treatment for a disease but without basing it on the scientifically proven knowledge of what the best cure for such a disease is. On the other side of the coin, the imposition of the power of researchers or professionals for any decision, even if it is based on scientific evidence, has also shown that it does not achieve the intended positive effect [10]. In fact, many times, the opposite may happen, with many citizens rejecting and distrusting science [39]. Therefore, in the analyzed cases, the two orientations (co-creation and scientific evidence) were seen as necessary for the actions to succeed.

However, those that included both co-creation and scientific impact were reporting positive results in relation to several Sustainable Development Goals, namely: quality education by offering successful educational actions such as extended learning time or interactive groups [33,35]; inclusive communication of science in terms of health literacy [30]; Roma student gatherings in times during the COVID-19 pandemic [9,11,40]; and the integral development of users of social services without neglecting their essential needs [36].

Regarding the strengths of this study, the diversity of participants (both Roma and non-Roma), the inclusion of Roma and non-Roma people in the research team, the project, the orientation toward social impact from the outset of the research, and the novel results are highlighted. Until now, the inclusion of scientific evidence in social work practice has not been widely addressed. In addition, in the case of social work practice and research with the Roma community, a need for improving current trends has been highlighted [11,41].

Moreover, the inclusion of co-creation and scientific evidence of social impact is now a priority of the main research programs in all sciences. Social work may be in an advantageous position toward achieving these criteria because of its original orientation toward social impact, as it is stated in its own definition as the promotion of “social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people” [42]. Therefore, it is argued that the egalitarian dialogue with Roma women based on scientific evidence in the analyzed cases helped improve the social work practice toward the achievement of its very definition.

As a recommendation for both social work practice and research, the analyzed cases showed an improvement in the results of the practice when co-creation based on scientific evidence was applied. In other fields, including both criteria has also had a positive social impact [39,43]; therefore, it is argued that research based on co-creation without neglecting the voices of Roma participants reports positive results [10,13,41]. Regarding social work practice, previous research has made recommendations on not neglecting Roma people's

voices and on developing evidence-based actions [11]. The results of the present study are also in line with those previous recommendations.

In the analyzed cases, a positive social impact has been seen, with no negative impacts reported by participants. The cases where co-creation and scientific evidence of social impact were combined reported, at the least, a community-level social impact, mainly in a reduction in inequalities: educational, economic, and social, among others. These analyzed cases could become conclusive case studies of successful actions that overcome such barriers in social work if replicated and analyzed in diverse contexts.

In Spain, the context where the study and the project were focused, the situation of the Roma community was analyzed and denounced by scientific literature and great amounts of data [44–46]. In relation to the analyzed Sustainable Development Goals, therefore, many Roma people in Spain are excluded from achieving or becoming closer to them. Thus, the present results show a promising path through social work where, in the analyzed cases, a great change toward the achievement of the aforementioned Sustainable Development Goals has been seen.

Limitations of the study must be stated. On the one hand, a greater diversity of participants (including Roma immigrants) could have helped obtain richer results. In addition, due to the qualitative nature of the study, the results are not generalizable. However, they go in line with previous research in other fields and contexts. Of course, this single research study cannot turn the individual analyzed cases into conclusive studies; nevertheless, the replication of this study in diverse contexts could help make such conclusive results applicable elsewhere.

Future research should be developed more on how to achieve successful practices that combine co-creation with the inclusion of scientific evidence of social impact in social work practice and research. In addition, it should identify transferrable concrete actions in order to apply them to diverse populations and improve both practice and research. Finally, any negative results should also be investigated.

5. Conclusions

Both in social work practice and research, the need to improve actions involving the Roma population is highlighted. In fact, the reproduction of mainstream stereotypes toward the Roma population, as well as control approaches or not taking their voices into account, has already been stated in the scientific literature. However, which actions overcome these limitations remain underexplored to date. The results of the present study have identified two successful criteria in the studied contexts in some successful practices in social work: co-creation and scientific evidence. The studied contexts that applied both criteria were identified as having better results than other social work practices without these two criteria analyzed in this study. The implications of these results are of relevance to both social work professionals and researchers. This study adds to a body of scientific literature in many different disciplines about the positive effects of combining co-creation and scientific evidence.

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Data Availability Statement: Data are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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