

Solidarity in struggle: The case for greater solidarity between Irish Travellers and Roma

By Chelsea Mac Donnchadha

Across the world, there is growing division, but as an Irish Traveller, I think that it is more important than ever to connect across our collective struggles, particularly the struggle against antigypsyism. It is only by connecting and fighting together that we can make a change as oppressed peoples.

The first time I remember being called a Gypsy was when I was seven years old and I had just moved to a new school following racist bullying in the previous one. I was a bit confused and probably offended, too. I wasn't a Gypsy because I wasn't English. I was an Irish Traveller and very proud of it, but that didn't matter to them. I realised that when non-Travellers said Gypsy, they meant me too, regardless of what I called myself. I didn't come across the term antigypsyism until I entered the activist space, and it allowed me to understand how all of our communities are targeted and oppressed through this lens.

Growing up, my interactions with Roma people were limited to the kids who played in the same park as me in London or the families I saw from a distance when travelling in France during the summer holidays. My interest as a child was piqued, and without being able to explain why, I knew that they were similar to us. Stepping into the world of youth activism has allowed me to build friendships and connections with other Romani activists, bonding over shared experiences and laughing through the struggle (with a dash of trauma bonding, too). These experiences have changed me beyond measure and recommitted me to the fight that takes so much out of us on a daily basis.

In the fight against antigypsyism and fascism, it is important that we look beyond language, ethnicity and the nation-state. Irish Travellers and Roma might have different origin points and languages, but we share so many cultural similarities and values, alongside shared experiences in the manifestation of antigypsyism through oppression, stigmatisation and marginalisation.

At a time when the far right is growing and many politicians across the world are aligning themselves with fascist ideals, it is more important than ever that, as oppressed peoples, we do not view our struggles in isolation. Antigypsyism is so effective because it targets so many of us who are disconnected from each other and lack the power to create change, but by building connections and organising together, we can push back and fight. We cannot allow them to sow seeds of division amongst us, and instead, we need to be intentional in making space and speaking up for each other. I am not free until every Roma person is free, until everyone who is oppressed is free.

This blog is born out of the conversations and connections I made with fellow youth activists and friends through ERGO and TernYpe's study session: Youth Ambassadors of the Decade against Antigypsyism – From Passion to Action: A New Generation of Roma Activists.