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London Gypsies and Travellers (LGT)

Clemmie James

London Gypsies and Travellers is an organization that challenges social exclusion and discrimination in public life, and in policy and legislation at local, London-wide and national levels, working for change in partnership with Gypsies and Travellers.

Clemmie James is the Community Development and Campaigns Officer at LGT. Over the last few years she has supported residents groups on Traveller sites to identify issues that affect them and liaise with local authorities to get these solved. For example, the impacts of site relocations in Newham and Tower Hamlets due to the Olympic Park and Crossrail developments.¹

Clemmie also supports Gypsy and Traveller community members who are self-employed or seeking to start their own businesses. For example, she has worked with men in the scrap-metal trade to understand the negative impacts of the 2013 Scrap Metal Dealers Act² and ask the government to conduct an early review. Clemmie has also developed a training programme for young women looking at pathways into self-employment that are manageable alongside other responsibilities, such as being mothers or carers – for example, in floristry, hair and beauty, and catering. An important aspect of her work with individuals has been addressing the problem of domestic abuse, which underpins many of the barriers to the community getting involved in initiatives related to training, accommodation and activism.



Reclaim our Spaces: A gypsy camp in the east of London threatened with eviction by the construction of the new Crossrail train line (in the back of the photo the ventilation shaft of Crossrail can be seen).

Reclaim our Spaces

Because of the legislation and policies that forced most Gypsies and Travellers to settle, over the last few decades the caravan has become a mere symbol of their ethnic identity, as it rarely moves any more and has lost its practical purpose for many community members. For those who live on Traveller sites and on encampments, it's not the caravan itself that is the most important but the space between caravans: the doorstep and the social spaces that emerge between homes. That's where community happens, where children play, where people talk to each other. This is also a reason why fairs are still very important for Gypsies and Travellers, as spaces where they can meet, where economic exchanges happen, where the culture can still be performed. That space shrinks immediately when people are forced to live in houses and flats. The dilemma of ethnic identity is amplified for housed Gypsies and Travellers, who make up over 80 per cent of the community in London. For some, the struggle is not necessarily related to the type of dwelling they're in but dealing with isolation and loss of family and community support. For others, however, the added loss of identity associated with the caravan has taken a great

toll on health and well-being. Even more difficult is the struggle to have their need for living on a site recognized as legitimate.

If there were a choice between fighting for the ability to travel again and fighting for more caravan sites, perhaps most Gypsy and Traveller activists would prefer the first. Campaigning for more sites is a residue of what the community can still fight for. As local authorities are required to identify land for more caravan sites, it feels like this is the only hook on which Gypsies and Travellers can hang their identity and claim a visible space in the city. There are some very good examples of sites that are integrated in their neighbourhoods and fit very well among Victorian terraces, high-rise blocks, nurseries, parks and boaters communities. Other sites have been built in very polluted areas, near highways or railway lines, or have become very ghettoized, surrounded by high walls and barbed wire. However, I believe that this line of campaigning is still important because we ask for a society in which there is flexibility, allowing different cultures to live the way that suits them and where there is the physical and political space to enable this.

Common Good

In working with a community that faces systematic prejudice and exclusion and has always found itself on the fringes of society, we have not explicitly addressed the notion of the common good in our recent campaigns and activities. I believe that Gypsies and Travellers have more values in common with wider society than is ever recognized. Family is central to the culture, and this manifests in joy and celebration of bringing children into the world and supporting them throughout life. Religious and community gatherings, such as christenings, engagement parties, weddings and funerals are important events that mark significant stages in Gypsies and Travellers' lives. In trying to understand attitudes in the community towards education and how these mirror or conflict with how society values it, we have produced a short film titled 'What Does it Mean to do Well?' Through interviews with community members from all generations, the strongest message coming across related to being close to family, looking after children and ensuring they have the best chances for education and development – all principles shared with mainstream society.



Common Good: 'I believe that Gypsies and Travellers have more values in common with the wider society than is ever recognized.' The church is an important place of community for many Gypsies and Travellers.

Despite this, a lot of the public perceptions surrounding Gypsies and Travellers emphasize difference, reinforcing feelings of distrust and isolation. For example, housing and planning policies often exclude the provision of caravan sites because they are seen as meeting a minority need, compared to the pressing general accommodation crisis. Pushing for high-density profitable development is an interpretation of common good which discriminates against those with needs and cultures that differ from the mainstream. Yet politicians have repeatedly claimed that Gypsies and Travellers take advantage of the planning system due to their ethnicity, and have changed how the community is defined for planning purposes to exclude all those who have permanently settled. Being oppressed and prohibited from living their culture – similarly to other nomadic communities around the world who have been forced to settle – has prevented Gypsies and Travellers from thriving and being seen as 'integrating' into mainstream society.

I think it's difficult to use the concept of the common good when working with diversity of culture and needs, as it requires the recognition that these communities don't start from an equal standpoint and that institutions, policies and public opinion have to take into account these disadvantages and build on messages of solidarity rather than divisiveness.



Identity: 'We are asking people to be nothing else but themselves and to move away from being categorized and judged only according to their ethnicity.' Marian Mahoney, LGT trustee and Irish Traveller activist from the Old Willow Close site in Tower Hamlets.

Identity

Historically, Gypsies and Travellers worked while they travelled, and 'pulling off' seasonally was associated with making a living. Young men would leave school early to work with their fathers but in the 1980s and 90s it became increasingly difficult to continue moving around in large family groups. The 1994 Criminal Justice Act removed the duty on local authorities to identify spaces for authorized caravan sites and increased eviction powers. Nowadays leaving school early is still quite common, but the opportunities to travel and work have almost disappeared and unemployment is very high. The young generation is facing the traumatic repercussions of Gypsy and Traveller identity caused by legislation and enforcement introduced a few decades ago. Children growing up on caravan sites now are not likely to continue living in the traditional way. There is a feeling shared by many parents that they would not know what to do if they were able to travel again, that the resilience and independence central to their culture has been lost through settling.

Many Gypsies and Travellers taking the role of community activists feel pressed to speak with only one voice and fight for a single cause,

which is shaped by this conflicting ethnic identity. I've recently worked with four inspiring Romany Gypsy women who have a high profile in the world of civil-society organizations, exploring the implications of focusing on just one aspect of identity. While these activists play a multitude of roles as mothers, workers, authors and academics, they are often recognized and valued publicly only as 'community representatives'. For the majority of Gypsies and Travellers the stigma associated with this identity can be crippling, leading them to hide who they are. Deeply engrained prejudice has made people extremely insecure and shy outside of the safe spaces of their social networks. These kinds of conversations are very important but difficult to justify in a context where charities are required to deliver 'hard', measurable outcomes to sustain their funding. This poses questions about the ability of community development and organizing to respond to the reality of the challenges facing Gypsies and Travellers in reframing not only public stereotypes but also the values, emotions and discourses embedded in their culture.

Our current focus is on a campaign developed together with members of the community which seeks to start addressing the persistent prejudice and discrimination facing Gypsies and Travellers. The campaign, named 'We are all so many things', portrays five Gypsies and Travellers who are active in LGT but also in their communities and neighbourhoods, who perform multiple roles and identities in their day-to-day lives. Through this work we are asking people to be nothing else but themselves and to move away from being categorized and judged only according to their ethnicity.

Notes

- 1 The Olympic Park is an urban development area at the site of the London 2012 Olympics, and Crossrail is a major ongoing transport-infrastructure project.
- 2 UK legislation regulating scrap-metal dealing with the intention of preventing metal theft. It places heavy administrative burdens on metal dealers.