# Strengthening Romani Voices in Colombia: Reflections on a Participatory Approach

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## Abstract

Latin America's diverse Romani populations are seldom represented in policy debates, and frequently misrepresented in popular culture and the mainstream media. In Colombia, the *Proceso Organizativo del Pueblo Rrom de Colombia* (Organizational Process of the Roma People of Colombia, *Prorrom*), among other organisations, was established to promote Romani inclusion in the country's multicultural policies. But despite legal recognition of Romani populations in Colombia, their identity continues to be framed officially in aesthetic terms that reinforce prevailing stereotypes.

This article reflects on our collaboration with *Prorrom* in the design and delivery of two workshops in Bogotá, where 32 appointed Romani cultural mediators are hired by the District Secretaries and other official institutions to provide input around census-taking and policy actions.

Although government agencies rely on Romani mediators for decision-making, the mediators receive little if any training for their role, and often find it difficult to overcome stereotypes that stigmatise or exoticise. Our collaborative workshops addressed this problem, creating spaces for the co-creation of tools and resources to better engage with government bodies, strengthening Romani capacity to better advocate for inclusion and anti-racism.

The article offers a brief history of Romani presence in Colombia, and an outline of the specific issues Romani populations face in the country. We then examine the problems identified by Romani mediators, which our collaborative workshops addressed. Finally, we explore how Romani participants viewed the collaborative process and its outcome, in their own words, and reflect on our own learning.

## Introduction

Latin America's diverse Romani populations are seldom represented in policy debates, and frequently misrepresented in popular culture and the mainstream media. In Colombia, organisations such as the *Proceso Organizativo del Pueblo Rrom* (Organisational Process of the *Rrom*[1] People, *Prorrom*) and *Unión Romaní* (Romani Union) were established to promote Romani inclusion in the country's multicultural policies. But despite legal recognition of Romani populations in Colombia, their identity continues to be framed officially in aesthetic terms that reinforce prevailing stereotypes (Acuña Cabanzo, 2021).

This article offers a critical reflection on our collaboration with *Prorrom* in the organisation and delivery of a two-day workshop in Bogotá in June 2023 as part of an ongoing impact project, 'Strengthening Romani Voices in Colombia' (2022-2025). In Bogotá, 39 appointed *referentes* (cultural mediators) are employed by the District Secretaries and other official institutions to provide input, on behalf of Romani communities, around census-taking and policy actions. Yet although government agencies rely on *referentes* for decision-making, they receive little or no training for their role, and in their interactions with state institutions often find it difficult to overcome stereotypes that stigmatise or exoticise. Our collaborative workshops addressed these problems. We used participatory, arts-based methods to create spaces for *referentes* to identify and explore issues of priority for Romani communities, and

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[1] The *Rrom* People (or *el Pueblo Rrom*) is the ethnonym Romani families in Colombia prefer. The word *Gitano* is used occasionally, since it is also used in daily life to talk about their identity. However, *Rrom*, which comes from the word for (male) person in the Romani language, has become the main official way to refer to these families in Colombia.

to co-create tools and resources that would support them in their work with government bodies. In this article, we reflect on our use of arts-based methods to generate trust, mutual understanding and knowledge exchange with a view to subsequently exerting influence on local government policy.

The article starts with a brief history of Romani presence in Colombia. We then outline the specific issues Romani populations continue to face in the country today, and the ways in which Romani communities have sought to address these through the establishment of legal organisations. The article then examines how community-based creative arts methodologies can create spaces for people to discuss their needs, values and priorities with dignity and agency, and facilitate the sharing and recognition of 'other' forms of knowledge. Our methodology and results from the collaborative workshops are then discussed. We conclude with some critical reflections on the process of co-organising and co-delivering our collaborative workshop, and explore how participants viewed the collaborative process and its outcome.

## Romani presence in Colombia

Romani people have been present in the Americas since the early conquest and colonisation of the continent by European imperial powers, including the possible presence of Romani crew members in the third of Columbus's trips (Gómez Fuentes et al., 2000; Paternina Espinosa, 2013). Given the Spanish Crown's prohibition of 'Gitano' presence in the Americas during the 16th century, Romani individuals are counted among the populations that crossed the Atlantic using passing strategies. As the Spanish Empire enacted orders for their imprisonment or use in the galleys in Europe, as well as their deportation from American colonies, for many Romani people going unnoticed was a matter of survival (Baroco and Lagunas, 2014: 101; Sánchez Ortega, 2005). During colonial times these ways to avoid control allowed for an erasure of Romani populations in national official history until very recently, when archival work has shown glimpses of their lives in certain regions: (i) in Mexico, inquisitorial cases show the tolerance of the Catholic Church of fortunetelling as a practice (Baroco and Lagunas, 2014: 102), as well as the prosecution of at least one woman of Romani origin, María de la Concepción (Sabino, 2020); (ii) in Brazil, sources confirm the presence of the Calon group since early colonial times through

evidence of their deportation from Portugal to the colonies and even their participation in the colonisation process (Fotta and Sabino Salazar, 2021), and; (iii) in Argentina, mentions of Romani groups by local government, police records and even Jesuit missionaries show glimpses of their lives in the Southern Cone (Galleti, 2021: 117).

The end of the nineteenth century marks the renewal of Romani arrivals to the continent. A combination of factors caused a number of families from Central and Eastern Europe to migrate West. These include the abolition of serfdom and slavery in Moldavia and Wallachia (now Romania); the dissolution of guilds; the expansion of railways after the 1850s; the liberalisation of the economy, and; the introduction of universal rights, among others (Davis, 2017: 17). As nation-building projects drove countries in the Americas to privilege European migration due to racial notions of eugenics, families followed larger trends of mobilities from Europe (Fotta and Sabino Salazar, 2021). For some families, movement was motivated by travelling business practices, while looking for better life conditions (Sutre, 2017). In other cases, it was violent displacement and persecution leading to the Second World War and the Romani genocide that were the main drivers of transatlantic crossings (Lignier, 2012). However, family trajectories often include a mixture of both.

In Colombia, migration policies were particularly harsh even after independence from Spain, which led to an irregularity and lack of documentation of Romani presence which persists even to this day. Oral history accounts evidence their continuous presence in the country since at least the late nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. Families arrived by boat to ports in the Caribbean and Brazil, among others, and eventually made their way to Colombia given the need for metal work, horse breeding, peddling, and other skills and trades that they could provide (Acuña Cabanzo, 2020). Although kinship groups, better referred to as *vitsi* (sing. *vitsa*), have been defining for Romani experiences in Europe, they were transformed in the transatlantic crossing. A direct paternal line is usually the most common sign of belonging to a particular *vitsa*. However, these lineages are intermingled, and who belongs to which one is highly contextual and not mutually exclusive, given constant exchange and intermarriage. In Colombia, several *vitsi* exist, among them the *Ruso*,

the *Bolochok*, the *Greko*, the *Demetrio* (sometimes also referred to as Migueles), the *Mighai*, the Anes, the *Bimbay*, the *Churón*, and others.

Although Colombia's internal conflict caused the majority to leave during violent periods, such as the 50s and the 80s, a number of families stayed (Acuña Cabanzo, 2020). During this time, trades that have given them sustenance since their arrival, such as metal work, horse breeding, fortune-telling and peddling, had to adapt to industrialisation and neo-liberalisation policies and trends in the country. Families progressively moved to urban centres, adapting to uncertainties and a lack of security that affected both the ways they earned their living and how they moved around the country. Copper and aluminium work became industrial stainless steel appliance craft, horse breeding became leather work, hydraulic repair and car restoration and trade, among other transformations. In this new context, passing also gained more importance, as more permanent houses and neighbourhoods became the rule.

There is evidence of Romani families and individuals having to deal with stereotypes as early as their migration passage, as 'Gypsies' were considered undesirable European arrivals to the Americas (Fotta and Sabino Salazar, 2021; Sutre, 2017). Preconceptions at border controls were mixed with less negative, but romanticised, notions of who they were: even the press portrayed them as tent dwelling, colourful 'travellers' whose lives corresponded more to literature than to a historic presence in the country (Acuña Cabanzo, 2021: 139–140). In this context, it is no surprise that most families chose (and some still do) to not display their belonging publicly, a fact that was challenged in the 1990s.

## The establishment of Romani organisations

Globally, there are significant similarities in the historical treatment of Indigenous peoples, who contend with discourses and practices that maintain colonisation and prevent their self-determination in social, political, and economic life (Hammond et al, 2018: 260), and Romani people. The case of Colombian Romani organisations is particular, given both how rare it is in the Americas and its relation with the stereotypes mentioned before. Besides Colombia, only Brazil has officially recognised Romani groups as recipients of differential rights, albeit using the label of 'traditional

peoples' (Dolabela and Fotta, 2021: 2). Although Colombian families had preferred passing strategies as their main way of dealing with majorities, in 1997 a perfect storm of discriminatory treatment and recently available new spaces in politics pushed forward the creation of the first Romani organisation. The official recognition of Romani people as an ethnic group could only happen after the implementation of the 1991 Constitution, fruit of the influence of more global multicultural policy trends in the country. Its Article 7 established the State as guarantor of the country's ethnic and cultural diversity, which has prompted the revival of identities and collective processes of Indigenous and racialised populations.

Six years later, looking to file complaints against the unethical portrayal of Romani women as thieves by the local press of the city of Bucaramanga, Romani families would reach out to academics working in official institutions (Acuña Cabanzo, 2021; Paternina Espinosa, 2013). The individuals who reached out broke the implicit no-contact rule that had permeated most of their relationships with the Colombian State until that moment; this occurred, however, in an uncertain context in which ways of making a living considered traditional were disappearing or changing rapidly. Out of these first exchanges came the creation of *Prorrom* (*Proceso Organizativo del Pueblo Rrom* or Organisational Process of the Rrom People), which later was joined by other individuals and their families in the Colombian capital, Bogotá. As the organisation expanded, frictions caused some families to form *Unión Romaní* (Romani Union), which has continued to gain influence since 2008. Both organisations have consolidated over time, rallying around their representatives.

Thanks to the work of these organisations, Romani groups have appeared in the last two iterations of the national census. The 2005 census used only self-ascription, and determined that 0.012% (or 4,857) of Colombians considered themselves Romani. This went down to 0.006% (2,649) in 2018, a number that was reached with methods that attempted collaboration with Romani organisations for the first time[2]. *Prorrom* itself has been instrumental to Romani ethnic recognition, pushing for the inclusion of the *Rrom* people in national legislation. Inspired by the 1991 Constitution, the extension of cultural rights to the Romani people was recognised at the national level

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[2] Source: National Statistics Department, or DANE (Departamento Nacional de Estadística de Colombia).

through presidential decrees 2957 of 2010, and 4634 of 2011, together with Law 1381 of 2010. These were drafted in order to protect *Rrom* cultural diversity in Colombia, including their language, and guarantee their reparation for the collective victimisation they suffered during the armed conflict. The 2957 decree also created a new type of territorial unit, the *kumpania* (pl. *kumpany*)[3], as well as the framework for a differential approach (*enfoque diferencial*) to cultural and ethnic specificities in services provided by the State.

The two organisations have been particularly active in the capital city of Bogotá, where *representantes* work to set up policies based on the current legal framework, while *referentes* work with institutions to implement them. The city also has its own legal framework for working with Romani families, composed primarily of the 582 mayor's decree of 2011 and article 66 of the city's 2020 to 2024 development plan (*Plan de Desarrollo Distrital*). Both instruments are set up to guarantee prior consultation of public policies that might affect *Rrom*, as well as the mutual construction of programmes, plans and projects oriented towards protection of their rights. However, *referentes*, understood as mediators that guide institutions to be culturally sensitive and guarantee differential treatment based on these public policies, are only mentioned in operational documents called 'affirmative action plan matrixes', which detail specific actions that institutions must take to reach their goals when it comes to the Romani population.

## Participatory approaches: antecedents

In previous reviews of Romani Studies in Latin America, the Colombian case has been characterised by its participative research (Fotta and Sabino Salazar, 2023). The ethnic recognition process is in itself an example of such joint work, given that Romani members of the organisations and non-Romani supporters have worked together to publish books and reports where research and activism came together (Gómez Fuentes et al., 2000; PROROM, 2005), as well as for more engaged work with official institutions in drafting and executing public policy (Gómez, 2011).

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[3] The decree resignified a term in the Romani language to create administrative units that comprise the families that live in particular localities where historically there has been more presence: Bogotá, Girón, Cúcuta, Pasto, Ibagué, Sabana Larga, Sampués, Sahagún, San Pelayo, and Envigado.

More recent projects also deserve a mention, given that they are direct antecedents to the workshops detailed here. Mayorga and Sabogal (2015), for example, mention participatory methods as a way to approach guitar lessons for young musicians, agreed upon with *Unión Romaní*. They conceive of music as a 'social phenomenon of encounter' that allows for knowledge exchange among participants (Mayorga and Sabogal, 2015: 60). Their understanding of 'informal' spaces as learning opportunities was also recreated during the pandemic, when the idea for a special set of sessions focused on Romani themes arose among anthropology students at the Externado University in Bogotá. Out of this initiative a collaborative online movie forum arose, organised by both young Romani people and anthropology students (Acuña Cabanzo, 2021). These sessions, in time, were the inspiration for the introductory courses that Acuña Cabanzo designed for the Instituto Caro y Cuervo later that year, as well as an article written jointly by a Rrom and a non-Romani student reflecting on their own academic collaborations (Mendoza Vivas and Gómez Gómez, 2021). However, to the best of our knowledge, 'Strengthening Romani Voices' is the first instance of participatory impact-oriented workshops in contexts beyond State policy consultation, especially one using art-based methodologies. It is a collaborative initiative that we consider worth exploring in detail here.

**Arts-based methodologies**

In many regions of the world and for many marginalised, minoritised and racialised peoples, 'the arts are indigenous forms of communication and deeply woven into the fabric of everyday life' (Sonke et al, 2018: 402). Engagement in artistic activities brings people together not merely for leisure and entertainment, but to work out how to meet their needs and address their problems (Huss et al, 2016: 298). This section offers a brief survey of the literature on arts-based methodologies, which are gaining traction across disciplines as a means of democratising the production of knowledge (Lenette et al, 2019: 173). In his poem 'The Nobodies' (1989), the late Uruguayan poet and writer Eduardo Galeano highlights the ways in which colonial practices have generated knowledge about colonisers and the colonised, such as what constitutes 'language' or 'dialect', what is deemed 'religion' or 'superstition', and what is regarded as 'art' and 'culture' in contrast to 'handicrafts' and 'folklore'. As Argentinian theorist

Walter Mignolo argues, the Global North has had the 'epistemic privilege' (2011) of inventing such classifications of knowledge about the world and its peoples, of defining which types of knowledge are authoritative and legitimate, and which lack credibility and aesthetic worth. These dominant Western and Eurocentric classifications ignore or undermine 'other' ways of knowing the world (Lenette, 2022: 3). Indeed, as Smith (2021: 1) argues, knowledge about Indigenous peoples has been 'collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West' before being represented back to the colonised through Western eyes. Moreover, while the West extracts and claims ownership of non-Western ways of knowing, it 'simultaneously reject[s] the people who created and developed those ideas and seek[s] to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations' (ibid.).

Arts-based methodologies are intended to disrupt the perpetuation of such processes, and challenge the dominance and reproduction of Eurocentric forms of knowledge (Coemans and Hannes, 2017; Fernández Carrasco et al, 2016; Knowles and Cole, 2007; Leavy, 2018; Mohr, 2014; O'Neill, 2008; Seppälä, Sarantou and Miettinen, 2021). The knowledge generated and shared through participatory, arts-based methods is produced collectively and collaboratively. Underlying such methods is a conscious intent to avoid the 'uncritical imposition of Western norms' (Datta et al, 2015: 582) that 'maintain a narrative of Indigenous victimhood and extinction' and frame Indigenous cultures as 'destitute, maladaptive to modern industrial life, and dying out' (Hammond et al, 2018: 260).

Researchers who use arts-based methods aim to 'privilege the perspectives, needs, and values' of the communities and peoples they work alongside (Lenette, 2022: 3), and raise the status of hitherto marginalised ways of knowing the world. Narrative, visual, kinaesthetic and audio forms of expression can 'elucidate otherwise hidden knowledge as participants give meaning to their experiences in forms beyond the spoken or written word' (Nathan et al, 2023: 796). Story-telling, drawing, social cartography, painting, dancing, drama, music and singing, are activities that can create opportunities for the articulation of knowledge about issues and experiences that may not emerge in traditional social science interviews, but which participants themselves deem to be important for their lives and communities. The arts enable the expression of non-

cognitive ways of knowing the world, such as emotions, feelings and experiences that may be difficult to put into words. Moreover, engagement in artistic activities creates spaces for people to express not only their needs and problems, but also their skills, capacities and achievements. The arts generate opportunities for people to express multiple and intersecting aspects of their identity, in ways of their choosing (Marsh, Armijos and Few, 2020).

As Tuck and Yang (2013: 223) argue, an arts-based approach can facilitate research that avoids a Western focus on 'stories of pain and humiliation' amongst the subjects of study, and a reliance on Eurocentric notions of power as 'scarce and concentrated' in ways that leave communities 'with a narrative that tells them they are powerless' (ibid, 227). Community narratives about what does and does not work, and about what makes sense, are often 'difficult to articulate to outsiders, and when they are spoken, they tend to translate as 'attitudes' or 'opinions' rather than knowledge: 'anecdotal' rather than proven, and thus ultimately, of less weight' (Eversole, 2012: 34-5). An arts-based approach recognises and values community knowledge. It is therefore an approach that reflects a social justice agenda, and privileges Indigenous and community ideas about what matters and has meaning (Liebenberg, Wood and Wall, 2018: 339).

Arts-based methods are diverse and varied, including photo elicitation (Edmondson et al, 2018; Patricia et al, 2017), music elicitation (dos Santos and Wagner, 2018; Levell, 2019; Marsh, Armijos and Few, 2020), body mapping (Gaete et al, 2023), and many other creative forms such as quilting, dance, and theatre (Finley, 2007; Seppälä, Sarantou and Miettinen, 2021). Social cartography involves the drawing or creating of maps in order to represent specific aspects of people's experiences of and interactions with their physical and social environments, which may otherwise be invisible to outsiders (Leal Landeros and Rodríguez Valdivia, 2018; Saravia-Ramos, 2021; Vaughan, 2018). What unites these methods is the aim of effecting social action and 'raising the status of forms of knowledge that arise from the experience of those living or working in the arena that is the focus of the research' (Cook et al, 2019: 380).

In her previous collaborative research and impact work with people displaced by armed conflict in Colombia, and with the government and non-government institutions that support them, Marsh used multiple arts-based methods including dance, muralism, story-telling, drawing, music elicitation, theatre and walking to create spaces within which participants could share their knowledge, needs and capacities, on the subject of disaster risk management, with dignity and agency (Marsh, Armijos and Few, 2020). For internally displaced people, arts-based methods: (a) enabled healing from trauma, (b) increased confidence and self-esteem, (c) built trust and collaboration between researchers, neighbourhoods, communities and institutions, (d) raised awareness of legal rights and responsibilities, and (e) transformed institutional perceptions of the skills and capacities of internally marginalised people, leading to changes in institutional practices. Creative expression offered ways for conflict-displaced people to be seen, heard and validated. With this precedent, in order to better understand *referentes*' experiences of navigating their work with government institutions, we hoped social cartography and other creative expression would elicit rich information about *Rrom* experiences of and feelings about their work environment.

### 'Strengthening Romani Voices'

### Inception

The 'Strengthening Romani Voices' workshop, held in Bogotá in June 2023, was research-informed and impact-oriented. It emerged from our discussions with Romani communities about the specific challenges they face in Colombia. In particular, the workshop aimed to respond to issues and concerns expressed by community members directly to Acuña Cabanzo during a series of online seminars, designed as an introduction to Romani Studies in Colombia, held during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 and organised by the Instituto Caro y Cuervo. The seminar was attended by university students, public officials and young Romani men and women who also happened to be *referentes* (mediators) with public institutions, and who expressed the difficulties that this in-between position entails. Their concerns related to the persistent stereotyping and 'exoticisation' of Romani people in their interactions with government officials, and the failure of state policy to recognise and address the needs of Romani communities.

The workshop grew out of pre-existing relationships of friendship, solidarity and deep trust, forged between Acuña Cabanzo and Romani families and communities over more than fifteen years of ethnographic fieldwork in Colombia and the Americas more broadly. Marsh, who is of English Romani descent, first contacted Acuña Cabanzo in 2017 upon learning about his PhD work from a mutual acquaintance she met at an event in London to mark Romani Holocaust Memorial Day on 2 August. On her next and subsequent research trips to Bogotá for separate projects with internally displaced people, Marsh was introduced to Romani families in Bogotá by Acuña Cabanzo. In 2020, Acuña Cabanzo relocated to North America, and during the COVID-19 pandemic Marsh, Acuña Cabanzo and representatives of *Prorrom* maintained contact remotely. We include these details to highlight what Wright et al (2012: 45) call the '"behind-the-scenes" emotional work of preparing for research, building relationships and rapport with others, thinking, conversing, and representing' which is 'typically removed from conventional academic accounts'. The planning of robust and feasible arts-based participatory work with communities, we argue, best emerges from strong and sincere relationships of trust and solidarity, even if physical distance sometimes gets in the way. Such relationships do not develop organically within the usual timeframe of academic research funding calls.

## Planning

In Bogotá, there are currently 39 appointed *referentes* (cultural mediators) who are employed by the District Secretaries and other official institutions to provide input, on behalf of Romani communities, around census-taking and policy actions. But although government agencies rely on the *referentes* for decision-making, they receive little if any training for this. The workshop we organised together with *Prorrom* was therefore intended to achieve three goals: (1) to create opportunities for *referentes* and representatives from Romani organisations in Bogotá to meet and discuss the problems they experience in their work with state institutions, (2) to generate new understandings of and knowledge about the *referentes*' capacities, skills and strengths in their work lives, and (3) to decide what tools or resources we could co-create through the project to better support the work of the *referentes* and strengthen their voices in the state's decision-making processes.

Having discussed this proposal and its relevance to the *referentes* with representatives of *Prorrom*, they agreed to facilitate and co-organise a workshop planned for June 2023. First, *Prorrom* would allow the use of their premises, the *Casa Gitana*, which was inaugurated in April 2022 in the Zona Industrial district of Bogotá. This physical space was important, not only for practical reasons but for its symbolic significance. The *Casa Gitana*, a space that belongs to Bogotá's Romani communities, is a space of ethnic pride, safety, and belonging, while being located in a neighbourhood with historical Romani presence in the city. Second, *Prorrom* would organise the catering. For Romani meetings of any kind, the preparation and serving of traditional Romani food is a crucial cultural element; in Colombia, organisations and *kumpeny* have even emphasised food as one of the cultural markers of their *zakono*, sometimes translated as custom or tradition (Moncada Franco, 2021). Third, *Prorrom* would contact the *referentes* and extend invitations to the workshop, which was scheduled for 6-7 June 2023.

Figure 1: *Casa Gitana*, Puente Aranda, Bogotá.

Figure 2: The Romani flag, displayed inside *Casa Gitana*

## Methods

We wanted the methods we used in our collaborative workshop to be engaging, beneficial and enjoyable for the participants. Participatory arts-based activities, we hoped, would create opportunities for the *referentes* to share experiences, analyse problems, issues and priorities, as they defined them, and generate new ideas about culturally relevant tools to support them in their work with government bodies.

As the workshop was scheduled to take place over two days, we decided that on day one, we would seek to create opportunities for participants to define the problems they regularly encounter during communications with government bodies, and discuss specific moments when they confront issues relating to stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings. On day two, we would seek to generate new ideas about how to challenge and overcome these stereotypes in order to deal more effectively with state institutions. On both days, we planned to focus not only on problems, but also on achievements, strengths, capacities and skills. We wanted the workshop not

only to yield insights into the problems and challenges *referentes* face in their work, but also to generate new knowledge about their successes and their potential to effect positive change.

In order to achieve these goals, we started on day one with activities adapted from social cartography. For the first activity, which we called '*Mapear tu ciudad* (Mapping your City)', we asked participants to work in small groups or pairs to draw maps of the physical spaces they move and travel in for their work as *referentes*, indicating on their maps places where they felt safe and comfortable, and places where they felt unsafe and insecure. For the next activity, which we called '*Mapearte* (Mapping Yourself)', we asked participants to work individually to draw a timetable representing a typical day in their work as *referentes* from morning to night, and to indicate when during that day they felt safe or unsafe.
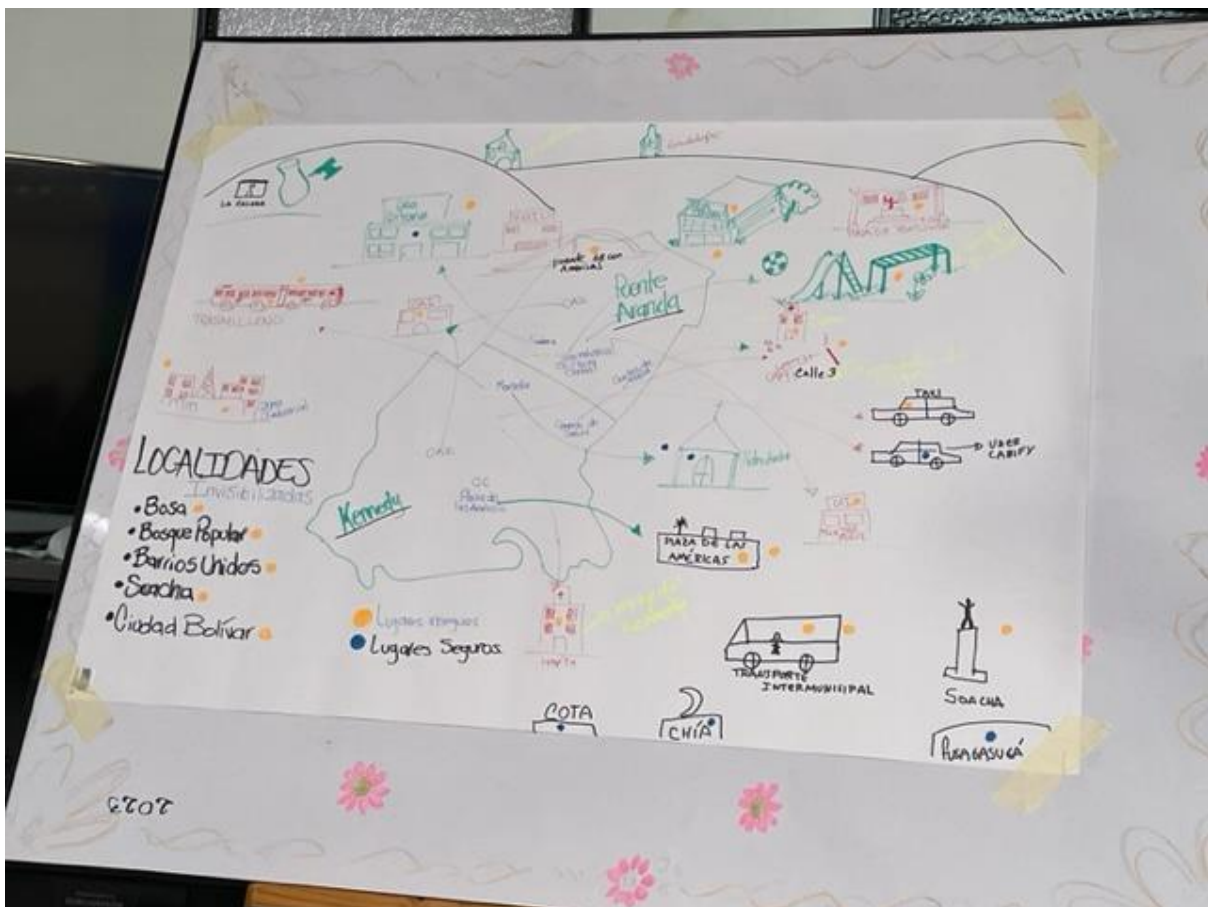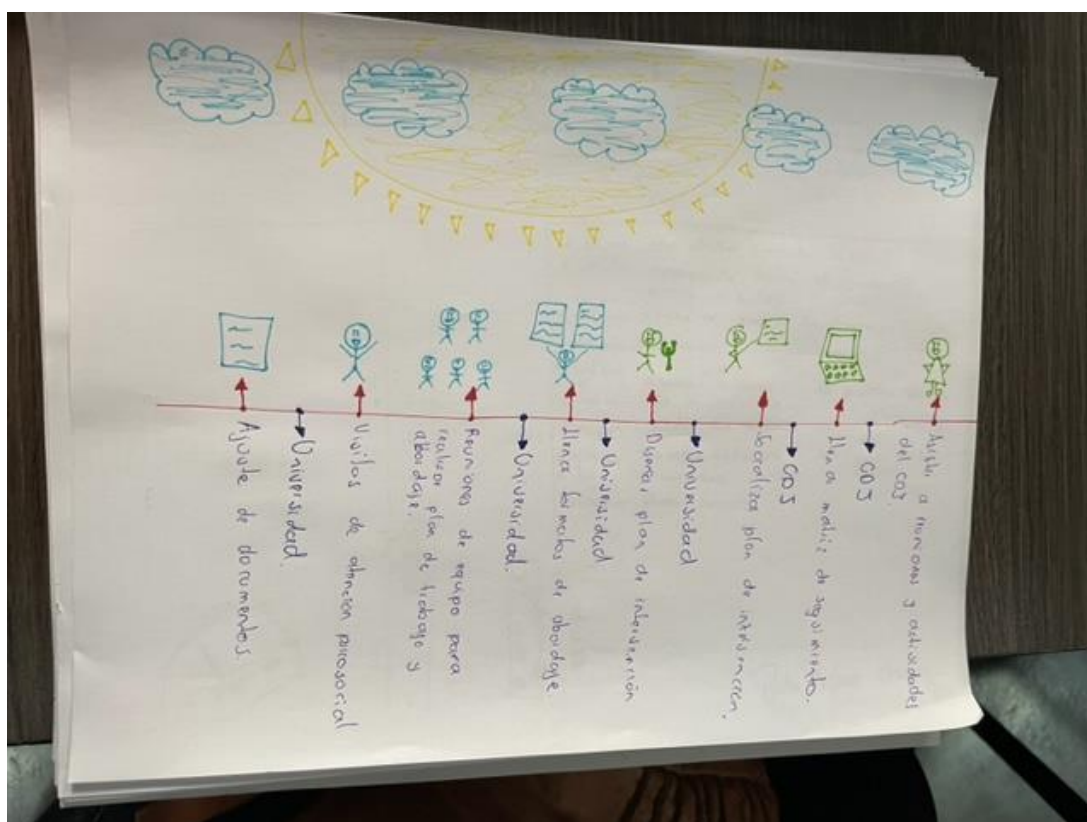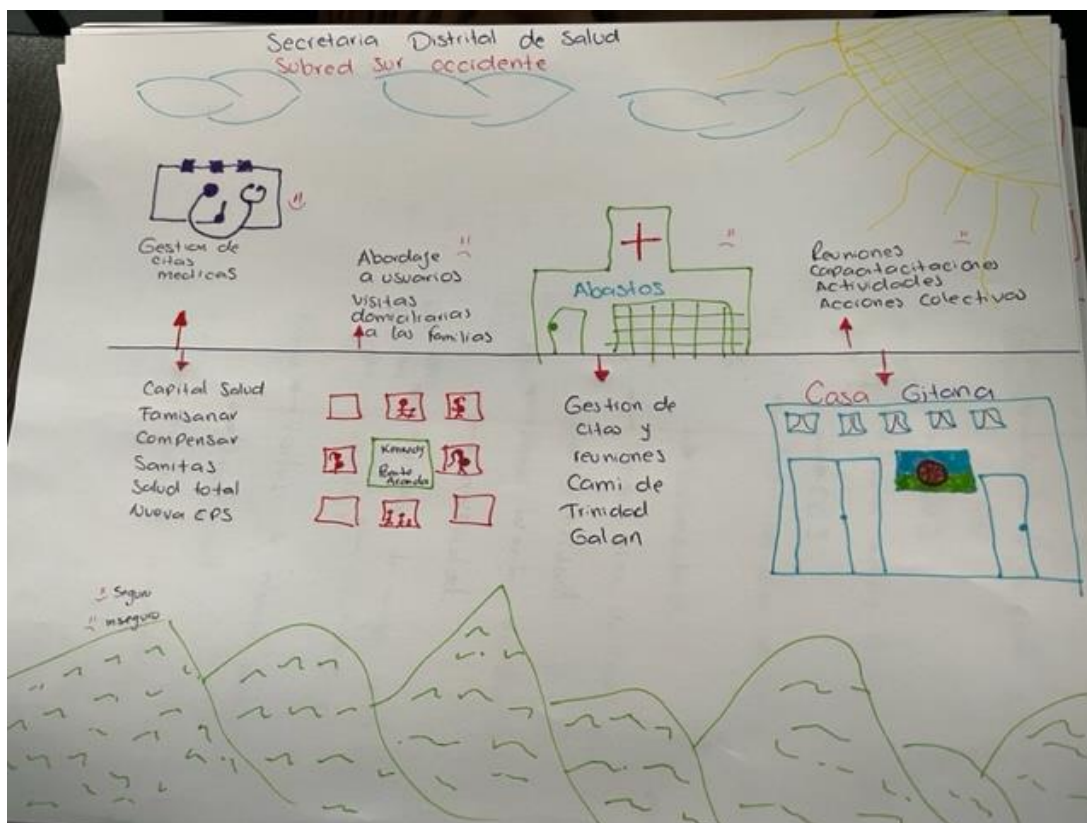


Figure 3: 'Mapping your city' activity. The blue dots indicate safe places, the yellow dots unsafe places.

Figures 4 and 5: 'Mapping yourself' activity. Drawings of a typical day in the work of a *referente*, with safe and unsafe activities indicated.

After lunch, the workshop continued in the afternoon with an activity we called '*El Muro Gadyé* (The Gadje Wall)'[4]. For this, we distributed two sets of post-it notes, one yellow and one blue. We invited participants again to think about their work as *referentes*, but this time to write down positive and negative points about interacting with non-Romani people (or, for *Gadyé* participants, of working with *Rrom*). First, we asked participants to write these down, one point at a time, using yellow post-it notes for the negative aspects, and blue for the positive. We then asked the *referentes* to stick their yellow post-it notes on the left side of the wall, and the blue post-it notes on the right side, to create a 'wall' of two colours. Finally, we invited participants to spend some time reading and discussing the positive and negative points they had identified, and we closed the day with reflections on the activities. Before leaving, we asked the *referentes* to bring with them the following day a photograph, video, image or object that would, we requested, demonstrate 'an enriching experience in your work as a *referente*, something you can show with pride'.

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[4] *Gadyé/Gadje* are words used by Romani populations to refer to non-Romani people.

Figure 6: Beginning the *Gadje* Wall activity. *Rrom* metalwork can be seen in the foreground.
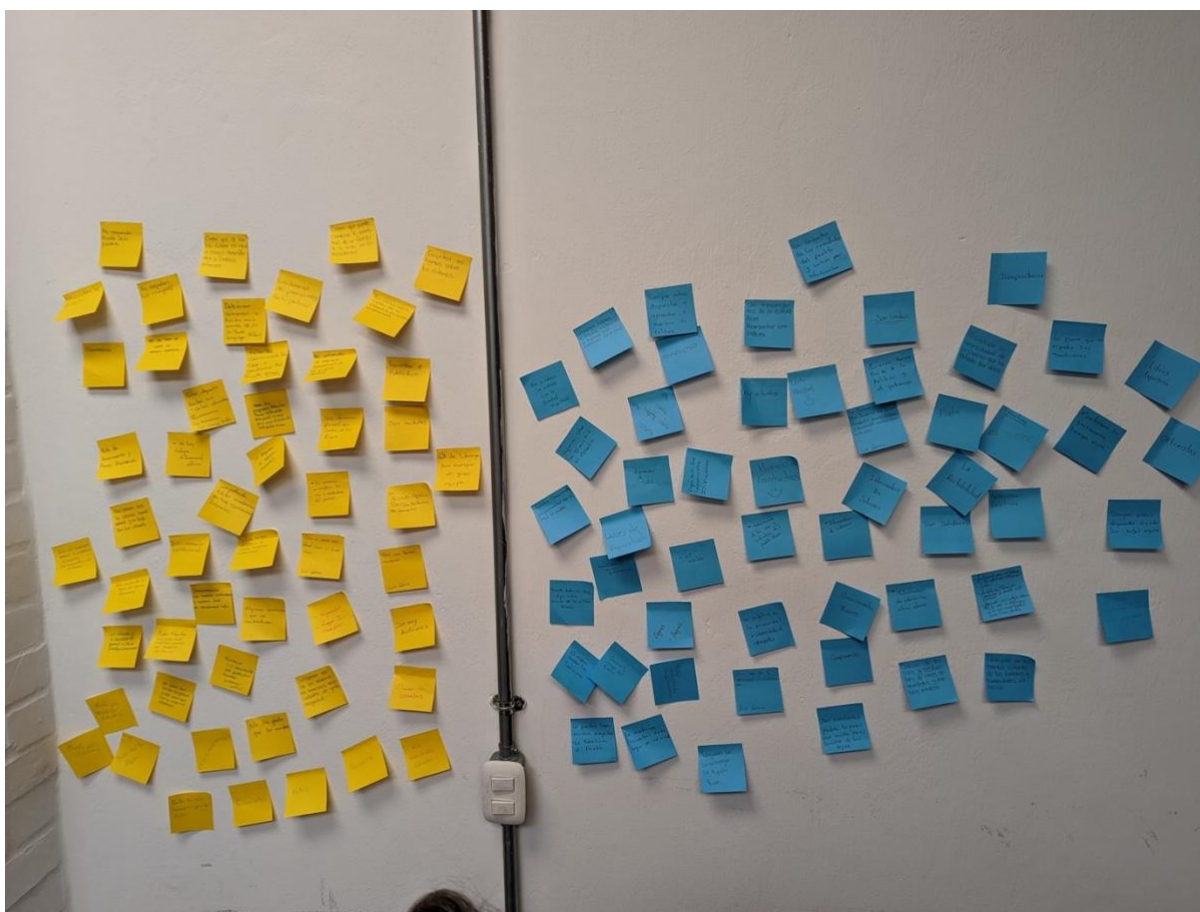
Figure 7: The *Gadje* Wall

We began the second day with an activity we called '*Imágenes y soluciones* (Images and Solutions)'. For this, each participant presented their photograph, video or object, and talked about its personal significance and the work achievements it represented. We then asked the *referentes* to work in small groups to discuss their ideas for a digital tool or resource that would help and support them, and new *referentes*, in their future work. A representative from each group then presented their group's ideas to all the workshop participants. After lunch, we concluded the workshop with final reflections, and invited participants to share with us what they had enjoyed or not liked about the activities they had engaged with over the course of the workshop.

## Discussion: Romani Voices

A total number of 28 *referentes* attended the workshop over the two days of its duration, 7 men and 21 women, representing both *Prorrom* and *Unión Romaní*. It is important to note that the Colombian government employs *referentes* on fixed-term

*contratos de prestación de servicios*, or contracts for the rendering of services, and usually on minimum wage. The *referentes* are responsible for their own pension contributions, national insurance and healthcare plans, which are compulsory expenditures for all Colombian employees on this type of contract. The low remuneration and precarious nature of such work mean that it is difficult to rely on it alone to provide for a family. Consequently, most *referentes* employed by the government are women or young men looking to supplement their household income. The resulting over-representation of women in the role of *referentes* was reflected in the gender composition of our workshop. It is also important to note that the level of education and IT skills required to work as a *referente* mean that few *Rrom* are currently qualified to apply for the available jobs, as they have until recently been afforded scant opportunities to access Higher Education. The Colombian government has only recently agreed with *Rrom* authorities to start a process of ethno-education, or a culturally sensitive approach to formal education that takes into account *Rrom* needs and perspectives. As a result, we were surprised to learn at the workshop, a small minority of Bogotá's *referentes* are *Gadyé*, mostly – but not in all cases – integrated into *Rrom* communities and with close links to Romani families through marriage.

The 'Strengthening Romani Voices' workshop was the first opportunity the *referentes* had ever had to gather as a team to discuss their collective work experiences, and share ideas, in a setting they felt ownership of. Prior to this, the *referentes* had only met to discuss specific tasks and activities when summoned by District Secretaries and government departments, and usually in smaller groups. Although these official meetings are intended to involve *Rrom* communities in collectively building affirmative action, they take place in extremely formal settings the *referentes* are unfamiliar with, and in which they feel ill at ease. *Rrom* generally experience such meetings and negotiations as unwelcoming: they are long and boring, require highly formalised written and spoken language, and adherence to a strict obligation to speak in turns and in an orderly fashion, as defined by *Gadyé* conventions. Given the power imbalance in such meetings, *Rrom* feel that they have to fight excessively hard for funding to support their communities' needs, and that state authorities do not value or respect their views.

Here, we discuss the themes and topics that the *referentes* raised during the workshop activities. All comments from the *referentes* have been translated from Spanish into English by the authors.

### Day One: *Mapear tu ciudad, Mapearte* and *El Muro Gadyé*

In their representations of work-related environments and activities, through mapping and the *Gadyé* wall activity, the most common themes that emerged related to (i) concerns about security and physical safety, and (ii) a perception that the government lacks sincere commitment to supporting *Rrom* people's ethnic rights.

#### i.  Security and physical safety

In their mapping of the city and their work days, all of the *referentes* highlighted serious concerns about their physical safety when travelling for work. The *referentes* felt unsafe when using the *Transmilenio* bus transport system, due to fears about pickpocketing and crime at bus stops and on board buses. Perceptions of high levels of violent crime in the centre of Bogotá, where *referentes* are often required to attend meetings in government offices, and in low-income peripheral neighbourhoods the *referentes* are asked to visit for work, meant that the mediators also felt unsafe when walking between bus stops and work locations. In addition, the *referentes* felt unsafe about travelling after dark, which is often necessary due to the time needed to reach some areas of the city by public transport. Moreover, most of the *referentes* are expected to make these journeys alone, causing additional anxieties about security. Many of the *referentes*, being women, felt travel for work made them highly vulnerable to gender-based violence and harassment. For this reason, they preferred to travel by taxi or Uber, though their salaries made this difficult. The *referentes* therefore felt that the state expected things of them, with regard to mobility, that they were deeply uncomfortable with.

These safety concerns are not unique to *Rrom* or any group in Colombia, where the state has historically failed to manage high levels of chronic violence rooted in issues around poverty, political exclusion, unequal access to land, corruption, international market dynamics, and political reactions against attempts to change the situation (Luna, 2019). In Bogotá, official discourses about crime have given rise to security measures that perpetuate and justify forms of urban segregation and exclusion. While

public space is predominantly seen 'through the lenses of those who govern crime' (Tamayo and Ariza, 2022: 258), urban security policies protect more privileged groups while simultaneously excluding marginalised groups from certain public areas (ibid, 244).

It is interesting to note that in the mapping activities, the *referentes* expressed feelings of comfort and safety in their own neighbourhoods, which are located primarily in industrial and low-income areas of the city that outsiders may well perceive to be dangerous areas of high crime. The *referentes* feel a sense of security and belonging in their neighbourhoods and churches[5], and in the *Casa Gitana*, none of which are located in more privileged or middle class areas. This suggests a subjective evaluation of physical safety that is influenced both by official discourses about security, and by personal experience and knowledge of specific urban spaces.

Beyond concerns about travel for work exposing them to the risk of crime, a concern shared by many in Bogotá, the *referentes* feel additional anxieties and insecurities that relate specifically to aspects of their ethnic identity. For example, shopping centres are widely perceived to be safe, protected physical spaces for most citizens. However, when *Rrom* visit these commercial spaces, they frequently take measures to mask their ethnicity in order to avoid being perceived by security personnel as foreign or potential thieves. They may therefore speak to each other in Spanish, rather than Romanés, and women may choose to wear Western clothing such as jeans, instead of their preferred long skirts. While the use of long dresses and Romanés are symbols of ethnic pride within *Rrom* communities, outside these spaces such markers of identity attract hostility and unwanted attention, 'as if we were freaks [*bichos raros*]', as one participant put it.

In *Rrom* households, it is usually women who take on caring responsibilities for children, the sick and the elderly, and it is therefore women who are most likely to deal with schools, medical appointments and grocery shopping. During the mapping

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[5] After arriving in Colombia, many families converted to Catholicism. However, in the last three decades there has been a gradual conversion to Pentecostalism that coincides with a more generalised trend in Latin America. A majority of the families regularly attend services in Romani and/or Spanish speaking churches.

activities, women highlighted the difficulties they experienced juggling such domestic obligations with the demands of being *referentes*. The job requirements do not take into account caring or family responsibilities, and women working as *referentes* shoulder the additional burden of organising childcare and other domestic support.

ii.    Lack of institutional commitment to *Rrom* people's ethnic rights

In expressing their concern about travelling to other areas of the city for work, the *referentes* conveyed scepticism regarding the government's commitment to defending their ethnic rights. In the eyes of the *referentes*, the government's discourse about guaranteeing the rights of a diverse population did not appear to be sincere when it came to *Rrom* peoples; as one participant put it, 'we're last on the list'.

The mapping activities revealed that the *referentes* feel the distances they are often required to travel, to engage with communities who are racialised or marginalised but not in fact *Rrom*, is evidence that the government assumes all ethnic minorities are interchangeable. As one participant said, the government does not have an approach that is sensitive to different ethnicities [*no hay enfoque diferencial*]. The mapping exercises generated discussions about how the *referentes* frequently do not understand why they are being asked to work with certain non-Romani groups, who they have no knowledge of, and experience these work demands as state indifference to their specific needs as *Rrom*. Indeed, the *referentes* experienced ostensible attempts by government bodies to include them in discussions around policy as a mere 'box-ticking' exercise. One *referente* recounted an experience whereby a government representative claimed to have held meetings with *Rrom* about their needs, but was unable to produce any minutes to support this claim. This personal experience was interpreted as institutional indifference to *Rrom* peoples. Amongst the *referentes*, this feeling is heightened by the high rotation of officials who are in charge of dealing with Romani representatives and *referentes*. Participants noted the need to start all over again with each change of local and national government, as incoming officials invariably start from a position of ignorance concerning the presence of *Rrom* in the country. Government employees who are involved in community consultation and inclusion processes, the *referentes* noted, do not routinely receive appropriate training that prepares them to work with *Rrom*.

In the *Gadyé* wall activity, the *referentes* articulated similar frustrations about their work with *Gadyé* institutions. A common negative aspect noted on the yellow post-it notes concerned a perceived lack of institutional interest in and concern about their needs and ethnic identity. Comments included 'A lack of knowledge. Not much willingness', 'The bad thing is they don't take into account our customs', 'They think the *Rrom* people are the same as other communities or ethnic groups', and 'They consider that, because we're a minority, our needs are of no importance'. Other comments indicated experiences not just of indifference towards *Rrom*, but of negative stereotyping and prejudice: 'Racial discrimination', 'Discrimination because of our low level of education', 'They mock our language/customs/clothes', 'They don't know that *Gitanos* exist, or think we just read palms, they underestimate us', and '*Gitanos* are stigmatised'.

### Rrom *and* Gadyé *perceptions of each other*

We had originally intended for the *Gadyé* wall activity to create opportunities for *Rrom* participants to think about the positive and negative aspects of working with *Gadyé* people and institutions. However, after realising that not all the *referentes* were *Rrom,* we adapted the activity and invited *Rrom* participants to think about what they liked most and least about working with *Gadyé,* and *Gadyé* participants to do the same thinking about their work with *Rrom.* The activity generated roughly equal numbers of yellow (negative) and blue (positive) post-it notes, which were stuck to the interior wall in two blocks of colour for the *referentes* to examine and discuss.

While the post-it notes were anonymous, in discussion it became clear that the non-Romani *referentes* mostly enjoy the opportunities for learning that their working collaborations with *Rrom* communities provide: 'Learning something new every day about *Rrom* culture', 'Enjoying the gastronomy', 'Getting to know the unity of a people', and 'They're excellent parents'. However, a few negative comments indicated some problems with intercultural exchange: 'They're noisy', 'Their beliefs are contradictory' and '[They don't respect] timetables'. *Rrom* referentes expressed a few problems accepting what they regarded as the 'individualism and selfishness' of *Gadyé* and their lack of family unity, in particular with regard to care for the elderly, while also admiring *Gadyé* punctuality and educational levels, and opportunities to learn and earn wages from *Gadyé* institutions. Most comments indicated a positive attitude

towards working collaborations between *Rrom* and *Gadyé*: 'We can share our culture and transmit our knowledge', 'Make visible the needs of a people who've struggled for years', 'Learning about politics', 'A chance to make our culture visible to mainstream society', 'Solidarity', 'Knowledge exchange', and 'Honesty and respect'. The day ended with *referentes* highlighting the strengths of *Rrom* people, and animated discussion about the compatibility of *Rrom* and *Gadyé* people. All *referentes*, it was felt, have great capacity but are used by the government to do 'filler' jobs. It is the institutions, the *referentes* felt, that need training to better understand the diversity of the country's ethnic groups.

### Day Two: *Imágenes y soluciones*

All of the *referentes* present for the first day of the workshop returned for the second day, indicating high levels of engagement and interest. For the second day, participants were invited to bring a photograph, video, image or object that would illustrate 'an enriching experience in your work as a *referente*, something you can show with pride'. The *referentes* enthusiastically shared images, short videos and prizes they had brought in. Many of them had taken the time to create photo stories, editing together series of images, and they described not only the work depicted in these photographs but also their feelings about it and its impact. The work was diverse, including: trips with *Rrom* schoolchildren to botanical gardens and parks; environmental workshops with elderly *Rrom* and the planting of trees; talks in schools about *Rrom* customs; the inauguration of the *Casa Gitana* with Bogotá's mayor, Claudia López, in attendance; sewing workshops for *Rrom* women and girls; workshops about ancestral medicine; dance classes; workshops on the impact of armed conflict on *Rrom* peoples; the creation of modest swimwear to encourage *Rrom* women to take up swimming and exercise; awards and prizes in recognition of *Rrom* achievements in metalwork, and in equity, diversity and inclusivity; the inclusion of the Romani language in a TV feature about the languages spoken in Colombia; celebrations of International Romani Day (8 April), and other initiatives. The activity generated extensive discussions and sharing of experiences. As the *referentes* viewed each other's photographs and videos, and heard about each other's work, a palpable feeling of pride and achievement grew in the room. The *referentes* were keen to emphasise that, before the workshop, they had no idea about the variety and volume of work projects their colleagues were engaged in across Bogotá. They had not

realised how much they had accomplished collectively as a team, both to improve conditions for their communities, and to raise awareness of their ethnicity amongst *Gadyé* communities.

Having shared and discussed their images and videos, the participants formed small groups to share ideas for a digital resource or tool that would support their capacities and strengthen their voices as *referentes*. A representative from each group then presented their ideas to the team. It became apparent that what the *referentes* felt would be most useful would be a digital space where they could share and collate information about their projects and work activities. When called to attend official meetings, the *referentes* explained, they can discuss their own work, but know very little of their colleagues' activities as *referentes*. With a digital resource gathering together all the *referentes*' work projects in one accessible place, it was felt, they would have examples of successful work activities ready at their fingertips. This would put them in a stronger position, from which to better advocate for their communities, and to argue more effectively for the financial resources to continue such activities.

## Reflections

The 'Strengthening Romani Voices in Colombia' project is ongoing. At the time of writing, a number of *referentes* are being employed to create a digital resource, which they have called 'EncicloRrom'. Our reflections here, therefore, relate only to the workshop activities.

### *Arts-based methods*

Feedback from the workshop participants indicates that the activities were enjoyable and held their attention. Comments include 'We loved the methodology', 'The pedagogy was really great', and 'The activities are very dynamic, we like the pictures and the format'. The arts-based methods were experienced as culturally appropriate and sensitive, with participants commenting 'This was done in our way' and 'This was adjusted to us'. Another participant highlighted the ways in which the arts-based methods provided engaging opportunities for learning and sharing ideas, and contrasted this with the formal institutional meetings the *referentes* are used to: 'We've had several activities with several institutions. But yesterday and today flew

by. We're usually bored. I loved the wall activity'. A further participant made a similar comparison: 'We felt good, the time flowed. In other workshops, we've felt exhausted'.

### Growth and learning

The workshop was experienced, as one participant put it, as 'enriching' and a space for 'knowledge exchange'. Participants said it had generated opportunities for learning and growth that had not existed before: 'We've all grown as human beings, as a people', 'I've learned about what others do', 'We learned from the exercise, we can have results that affect us positively', and 'We never had the space to share and talk together before. This helps strengthen us, improve the team. We learn from each other'. The arts-based activities, one participant said, created 'A space to strengthen us as a group, recognise our strengths and weaknesses. We want to learn. We learn from each other'.

### Pride and self-esteem

The workshop enabled *referentes* to discuss their achievements and capacities with pride in their ethnic identity. One participant commented that it had created an opportunity 'To know the pride of all the *referentes*, to learn and show the work and love'. The pride was primarily in *Rrom* customs and traditions, and then in their work as *referentes*. This contrasts with formal institutional meetings, during which attendees are instructed to act first as *referentes* and second as *Rrom*. One participant commented that the workshop '… should be done at the beginning of each year', since it strengthens the group and their collective work as *Rrom* people.

### Conclusion

'Strengthening Romani Voices' happened to coincide with the negotiation of the 'New *Rrom* Public Policy of Bogotá' (*Nueva Política Pública de Bogotá*) that will define affirmative actions for the next twelve years. These public policy negotiations are usually seen by their participants as a series of contentious meetings in which representatives and *referentes* belonging to Romani organisations discuss the action plans attached to particular components of the administrative framework (education, health, culture, economic development, women's issues, environment, mobility, habitat, security, among others). *Referentes* themselves have to attend these meetings,

all while sitting in the middle of two conflicting sets of interests: the communities that they belong to, and are meant to represent, and their official employer. In this context, the workshop can also be seen as a way to kick start an internal discussion about this ambivalent position, as a space to vent the frustrations that stem from it, and imagine alternatives to *Gadyé* governmental impositions.

The participatory workshop, drawing on arts-based methods, created a new opportunity for *referentes* to meet and discuss the problems they experience in their work. It also generated new understandings of and knowledge about their capacities, skills and strengths, and enabled participants to share their achievements and successes as *Rrom* and as *referentes*. This increased feelings of pride and self-esteem. The workshop generated ideas for a resource, 'EncicloRrom', that is intended to support *referentes* and strengthen their capacity to advocate on behalf of *Rrom* peoples. At the time of writing, this resource is being created, and our next steps in the 'Strengthening Romani Voices' project will include evaluating its usefulness for the *Rrom* communities in Bogotá.

## Acknowledgements

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