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## The Self- Esteem of Roma Women - Case of Shkodra

**Adelina Kakija<sup>1</sup>**

**Bujane Topalli<sup>1</sup>**

**Arnisa Bushati<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Social Work,  
University of Shkoder "Luigj Gurakuqi"

Email: adelina.kakija@unishk.edu.al

### Abstract

Self-esteem is defined as a core aspect for an individual's well-being, given its association with self-perception. Multiple studies on this subject matter suggest the qualitative approach, especially regarding the recognition of self-esteem within certain groups or cultures. The present study focuses on analyzing the concept of self-esteem among Roma women residing in the city of Shkodra. The aim of this research is to highlight the dimensions influencing the self-esteem of Roma women. The research objectives seek to understand aspects of self-esteem from their perspective and identify the factors they consider most significant in self-evaluation. Two main research questions are posed and guide this research: How is self-esteem manifested in Roma women in the city of Shkodra? and What are the prevailing factors in determining self-esteem? *Methodology:* The authors employed a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 10 Roma women residing in Shkodra. The research tools such as open-ended questions and content analysis of discussions through an interpretative approach intended to uncover the subjects' experiences and feelings regarding their self-esteem. *Key findings:* The initial results indicated the pivotal role of Roma culture in shaping the self-esteem of the women involved in this study. Other social factors also considerably influence how they perceive self-esteem. The scope of this research is to contribute valuable insights into understanding the determinants of self-esteem among members of a specific minority, paving the way for future data to serve as a basis for studies of a wider population.

**Keywords:** self- esteem, women, Roma culture

## Literature

When discussing the concept of self-esteem, we refer to an individual's self-evaluation and self-affection. From a constructivist viewpoint, the self-esteem takes shape within the social environment in which an individual resides, and thus, the culture of the community has an impact on our self-esteem.

The majority of research in this field suggests that scientific researchers, in their attempts to assess this concept, have primarily focused on quantitative research employing standardized instruments. These are frequently tested within the white population and among the adolescents, thereby leading to the omission of many facets of self-esteem, such as gender perspectives or the culture of minority groups from which individuals hail.

Women, typically linked with self-evaluation, have often been reported to exhibit lower self-esteem levels compared to men. Nonetheless, several studies have indicated that this discrepancy may arise from the instruments employed, such as standardized questionnaires, which may assess specific aspects of self-assessment that hold less significance for women. Additionally, the underestimation of the impact of gender stereotypes could also influence the responses of study participants.

In light of all these barriers but also recognizing that self-esteem is a social product that is self-determined by the individual, researchers should prioritize more an in-depth examination of this phenomenon among specific populations, such as women or certain minority cultures, in order to gain insight what these groups consider significant for their self-evaluation. At this point, qualitative approaches are very necessary to explore this concept in depth (Chatham-Carpenter, A., & DeFrancisco, V., 1998).

Through this study, the authors aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of the self-assessment phenomenon within the Rom minority community in the Municipality of Shkodra, with a specific focus on Roma women.

As is known in the history of our country, the Roma settled in Albania over 600 years ago, in the second half of the 15th century, during the Ottoman rule. Later, their history in communist Albania was subjected to efforts to homogenize with the rest of the population. It was in 1989 when the first efforts and organizations of the Roma in Albania gained official recognition as a minority. The era of democracy, while enabling the organization of the minority, were also accompanied by many challenges, such as unemployment and lack of education for the younger generations, and so on. However, over the years, the Roma minority, despite the challenges it has faced, has managed to preserve its identity, thanks to the influence of distinctive aspects of their culture, one of which, as noted by author Fonseca (1995), is the practice of prioritizing the group over the individual (Koinova, 2000, pp. 4, 6, 8).

Meanwhile, regarding the Roma minority in the Municipality of Shkodra, they exhibit a pattern of seasonal settlement (or nomadic behavior), which means that most of them come from other cities and do not appear as residents in this city. They come from cities like Fushë-Kruja, Cërrik, and Elbasan. They are known to establish temporary settlements in the vicinity of the Buna, Drin, and Kir rivers in Shkodra during the May-October period. Their primary purpose for migration to Shkodër is often related to trade, and they return to their cities of origin when their trading activities conclude.

The emphasis of this study on Roma women encourages us to focus more on research that mainly explore the culture of the minority and the role of Roma women in the field of self-esteem.

The analysis of the concept of self-esteem in the context of minorities is of great interest to social researchers, as it is widely recognized as a source for self-concept, psychological functioning, well-being, and is strongly intertwined with other variables such as overall life satisfaction (Kaplan, 1982; Rosenberg, 1985, *cited in* Verkuyten, 2003).

Being part of a minority has undoubtedly an impact on self-esteem. Numerous studies have shown that members of minority groups exhibit lower self-esteem in relation to the dominant group in the society they inhabit. To gain a deeper insight into this concept, researchers have identified two crucial components that “nurture” self-esteem: the public sphere and the private sphere. When we talk about the public sphere and how it affects self-esteem, we refer to the role played by important socializing institutions such as school. In contrast, when we talk about the private sphere of self-assessment, we refer to the culture of the group to which an individual belongs. In the case of minorities, individuals belonging to these groups are more likely to exhibit lower self-esteem in the public sphere and higher self-esteem in the private sphere (Martinez, Ruben, and Richard L. Dukes, 1991, pp. 318-319). Studies have also pointed out that being part of disadvantaged minority groups with relatively low social status has an impact on psychological well-being (see Vega & Rumbaut, 1991). As a result, psychological well-being not only depends on the assessment of individual characteristics but also on how people assess their own groups (Verkuyten, M., & Lay, C., 1998). The phenomenon of social exclusion that minorities may experience is noted to have a more powerful negative effect on self-esteem compared to the positive effect that social inclusion can have *cited in* (Verkuyten, 2003).

Regarding the Roma minority in Albania, studies indicate that their relationships are characterized by a strong sense of solidarity. Education within Roma families revolves around learning the rules, culture and tradition of the Roma community. Thus, Roma children inherit this culture knowledge through their grandparents, parents, older siblings. This tradition compels Roma to behave as an isolated population (Koçollari, 2013). Compared to the rest of the population, Roma are more marginalized and

experience social exclusion in many aspects of social life in our country. Among the issues that Roma still face today are civil registration, education, unemployment, lack of housing, and more.

However, in addition to the implications for self-esteem in being part of a minority, gender identity plays a significant role. To better understand the self-esteem of Roma women, insight from studies focusing on the role of women in this minority are invaluable.

Referring to studies describing the culture of this minority, we find that the role of women in Romani culture is considered inferior to that of men. Their customs dictates that girls should marry at a very young age, usually with marriages arranged by the elders of the family. Additionally, according to Courthiades (1990), marital infidelity for a Roma woman is deemed unacceptable, which is not the case for men (*cited in Koinova, 2000*).

Recognizing the importance of gender dynamics and being part of a minority group in the matter of self-esteem, the authors of this paper are dedicated to gain a deeper understanding of this reality, specifically within the Roma women population in the Municipality of Shkodra.

### **The Research Methodology**

For this study, a wide range of secondary sources have been utilized, such as research reports on the Roma minority, national and international official reports and documents, local official data from the Municipality of Shkodra, various scientific articles, etc. The primary objective of this research is to highlight the dimensions influencing the self-esteem of Roma women. The aim of this research is to shed light on the factors and dimensions influencing the self-esteem of Roma women. The research objectives seek to understand aspects of self-esteem from their perspective and identify the factors they consider most significant in self-evaluation. This study is guided by two research questions: *How is self-esteem manifested in Roma women in the city of Shkodra? What are the prevailing factors in determining self-esteem?*

In an attempt to address the research questions, the authors adopted a qualitative research approach, utilizing data collection instruments by conducting structured interviews with 10 members of the Roma community in the Municipality of Shkodra. These interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded in audio or by taking notes, after informing the participants in the study and obtaining their informed consent. *The study sample* was selected using convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling is a type of nonprobability sampling method where individuals from the target population who meet specific practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or a willingness to participate, are included for the purpose of the study (Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S., 2016). Specifically, the researchers chose to involve women from a Roma camp located near the Drin River within the Municipality of Shkodra. This

selection was made because access to this particular camp was facilitated through a trusted and respected member of the Roma community, ensuring the feasibility of data collection in that location.

For the analysis of the data collected from the interviews, *thematic analysis* was employed. Thematic analysis, as defined by Grbich (2007), is the process of segmenting, categorizing, and relating aspects of the data before their final interpretation (*cited in* Mathews, B. & Ross, L. 2010). This analysis involves working with the raw data to identify and interpret key ideas or themes. During the analysis phase, attention was given to the coding system for organizing the data using an Excel spreadsheet. Subsequently, the process continued with the analysis of what the interview participants had expressed (in their own words). The authors used *an analytical/interpretative approach*, relying on the data and returning to the raw data throughout the analysis phase (*cited in* Mathews, B. & Ross, L. 2010). Understanding from the researchers' perspective then continued with an interpretation of what the interviewees wanted to express regarding the discussed themes.

Regarding the ethical aspects of the study, the audio recordings and interview analysis are archived and will only be used for research purposes. Access to them is planned to be authorized only by the study organizers.

### **Data Analysis**

Based on the analysis of the data from the 10 interviews conducted with Roma women from the camp near the Drin River in Shkodra regarding the concept of self-esteem, several *areas* and codes were identified. These were organized into categories and subcategories and became the subject of discussion in this study.

From the analysis of individual interviews, two main areas were identified:

1. Roma women and the determination of self-esteem at the individual level
2. Roma women and the determination of self-esteem in the community/public plan

### **I**

- a. Self-denial
- b. Helping others
- c. Fulfilling parental duties
- d. Good communication
- e. Conflict resolution
- f. Coping with poverty
- g. Altruism

- h. Solidarity between generations

## II

- a. Absence of education
- b. Lack of state and community support
- c. Experience of illegal migration
- d. Lack of reference figures or models in the community

Based on these data extracted from the interviews and identified through analysis, the researchers attempted, through an analytical/interpretative approach, to gain a deeper understanding of these facts by comparing these findings with those of similar studies in the field.

### **Discussions on Study Findings**

The analysis of qualitative data has revealed two main themes related to the self-esteem of Roma women in Shkodra. These two aspects will serve as a central focus of the discussions in this study.

#### **Discussion about Roma women and the determination of self-esteem at the individual level**

*"-The most difficult situation is the one we are living in! What can I say good for myself?! I have the patience to take care of my grandchildren. I spend all day with them" W1*

*"-I think I'm not a successful woman or a skillful one, but I'm a good mother!" W3*

*"-I think that I communicate well, that I get along well with my family! I have no conflicts with anyone in my family. I raised my children and married them!" W5*

*"-We Roma help each other a lot" W10*

*"-I tried to get along well with each other, here at the barracks!" W7*

*"-Parents gave us love, but they were not harsh with us" W9*

*"-My family of origin is very supportive of me. They helped me a lot!" W2*

As we cited above, regarding the self-esteem of the individual, researchers define two determining factors, those related to individual aspects and those related to public/group aspects.

Based to the sentences extracted from the interviews, it is clearly evident that life in the camp, so Roma culture, is the one that has the most influence on the concept of self-esteem for the women of this minority.

Most of the interviewees based the perception of their self-esteem on supporting roles in the camp. Very few of them were able to highlight their specific qualities.

Suffering, poverty and efforts to raise grandchildren, helping each other are the factors that most affect the self-esteem of these women.

Roma women attribute their self-esteem more to private factors and especially to the way their life is organized in the camp (Martinez, Ruben, and Richard L. Dukes., 1991).

### **Roma women and the determination of self-esteem**

*"-I have been in school for 5 years and this has helped me to read and write, but I don't have any support from the surrounding community" W4*

*"-I am not educated, but my children are! Apart from the people here in the camp and my husband who works, I have no help from anyone!"W8*

*"-I don't have any figure as an inspiration or guide in life!"W3*

*"- I remember the suffering as the most influential event in my life! All our lives we have been without housing in the open sky, without any kind of social support. Our children were born, raised and married here in the camp, without any conditions. We miss the support from our state " W1*

*"-The experience of emigrating to Germany has influenced me for the better! We lived there much better than here".W5*

Regarding the public dimension of self-esteem, based on the data of our interviews, we see a very low influence of the school, community, or the state in the domain of self-esteem or Roma women.

In populations such as the Roma minority, where the poor economic situation is emphasized several times by the interviewed women and where housing or schooling conditions for children are difficult, it shows the high potential of experiencing high levels of social exclusion that they suffer. As previous studies highlights, self-esteem decreased more from social exclusion than increased from inclusion. It is based on this facts that we justify their limited self-esteem regard the public sfere.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

- Roma women are influenced by cultural factors in determining their self-esteem.
- Their self-esteem concept is more influenced by personal factors (Roma culture and especially the gender role that this culture dictates to women).
- The great impact of culture on self-esteem is closely linked to the social exclusion experienced by this population. The exclusion isolates them from the influence of other institutions within the public sphere when it comes to shaping their self-assessment.
- In the future, comparing the concept of self-esteem of Roma women with those of the dominant population, could generate interesting data to

understand the differences and to identify intervention strategies with policies and services for the benefit of increasing the well-being of Roma women.

- We emphasize that self-esteem is equivalent to well-being and since it is not a static concept, we believe that it can be strengthened with appropriate interventions.

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