

Social biases against Roma people across nations: A continues struggle of Roma for inclusion

Dr. Garima Shukla
Assistant Professor
SPMC, University of Delhi

Abstract

The Roma community is the largest nomadic population in the world, residing across Asia, America, Europe, Australia, and other continents. They have been facing struggles related to their social, cultural, and national identity for centuries, often experiencing marginalization and social biases from the native populations in several countries. Social biases manifest in various forms such as stereotypes, prejudices, and negative attitudes, and can significantly impact the Roma community.

This study aimed to explore the different types of social biases against the Roma community and their impact. The specific objectives were:

1. To study the social biases towards Roma people across various nations.
2. To understand the impact of social biases on the Roma people.

The study was based on empirical research and involved qualitative research analysis. A sample of 24 Roma people (12 male and 12 female) aged 25-65 from countries including Romania, Croatia, Turkey, Bucharest, Macedonia, Russia, Bulgaria, and Austria were interviewed using random sampling. The interviews were conducted in either English or Romani Language, or both, during an International conference and Cultural festival in India on 12th Feb 2016, organized by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations. The study utilized interviews and observation methods, with qualitative research analysis for content analysis.

The study revealed several main themes: stereotypes, prejudices (threat to society, criminal propensity), discrimination, hate crimes, and the impact on psychological well-being. The findings showed that psychological biases against Roma people were similar across various nations, leading to discrimination, hate crimes, and negative impacts on their well-being.

In conclusion, the results of this study can be valuable for organizations such as NGOs, human rights organizations, and the UN, which are working to protect the rights of Roma people and help them integrate into mainstream society.

Keywords: Roma, social biases, discrimination, stereotypes, prejudices.

Abstract

The Roma is the largest group of nomadic people, estimated to be 10–12 million strong, according to the European Commission (2011). For centuries, it has been challenging to establish this community's cultural roots, nationality, and cultural lineage. Due to their unidentified cultural roots, the Roma have faced brutal oppression and suppression, which continues to this day. Social exclusion and marginalization have been persistent issues for the Roma (Mezey, 1998). In the 18th century, information campaigns depicted the Roma as “uncivilized,” and there were show trials that accused Roma wanderers of 33 instances of cannibalism, leading to their execution based on coerced and false confessions (Puskas & Vegh, 1998). Nazi Germany considered Roma people as “sub-human” and exterminated them in concentration camps alongside the Jewish population. Today, anti-Roma (or “anti-Gypsy”) sentiments represent a complex set of attitudes and beliefs, including stereotypes stemming from exotic myths (Pivetti, Melotti, & Bonomo, 2017) and extremely high levels of prejudice (Villano, Fontanella, Fontanella, & Di Donato, 2017). Throughout Europe, Roma people face forced evictions, physical violence, discriminatory policing, school segregation, and more. Acts of discrimination and hatred against Roma people are still witnessed across Europe (2014). Likewise, social bias against Roma people remains prevalent in society and takes various forms such as stereotypes and prejudices. The impact of social biases is seen in the form of discrimination and hate crimes, affecting the psychological well-being of the Roma people.

Social Bias:

Social bias is defined as “Prejudicial attitudes toward particular groups, races, sexes, or religions, including the conscious or unconscious expression of these attitudes in writing, speaking, etc” (Winn, 2011). The research above shows that Roma people still face social biases against them. The present study intends to explore the dynamics of social biases against the Roma. The study is based on interviews with members of the Roma community to understand the nature of the social biases prevalent in today's society across various nations. The following objectives were set for the present study:

1. To study the social bias towards Roma people across various nations.
2. To understand the impact of social biases.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and better understand the experiences of Roma people. Qualitative data were collected to explore biases against them and the impact of these biases on their psychological well-being. In this study, our two main research questions were:

- (a) How similar are the Roma people across various countries in experiencing social bias?
- (b) What is the impact of social biases on Roma people in terms of their well-being?

Methodology:

Sample: Participants for this study attended an international Roma conference and cultural fair jointly organized by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Indian Council for International Cooperation from February 12-14, 2016, at Azad Bhavan, New Delhi, India. Twenty-four Roma participants (12 male and 12 female) were randomly selected from the age group 25-65 and different nationalities across Europe. All participants were literate and able to read and write either in Roma or English. The demographics of the participants are presented below:

Table-1(N=24)

Participants	Gender	Country	Participants	Gender	Country
A1	M	Romanipam	A14	F	Crotia
A2	M	Viennas	A15	F	Bulgarias
A3	M	Romanipen	A16	F	Bucharest
A4	M	Austria	A17	F	Budapes
A5	M	Bulgaria	A18	F	Turkey
A6	M	Crotia	A19	F	Argentins
A7	M	Rromanipen	A20	F	Servia
A8	M	Rromanipen	A21	F	Macedonia
A9	M	Tukey	A22	F	Macedonia
A10	M	Romania	A23	F	Servia
A11	M	Turkey	A24	F	Croatia
A12	M	Turkey			

M= male

F= Female-

Procedure and Data collection:

A research team comprising faculty members from SPM College, Delhi University, and students from the Delhi-National Capital Region conducted face-to-face interviews guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. The interviews lasted 30-40 minutes per participant, with assistance from translators. All ethical considerations and confidentiality arrangements were

explained, and consent was obtained from each participant; for those who did not speak English or Hindi, translation to and from the Roma language was provided.

The translation process involved bilingual translators proficient in English and Romani who had prior experience in document translation and back-translation. Study materials, such as consent forms, short demographic surveys, and semi-structured interviews, were translated from English into Romani using a combination of translation and back-translation approaches. This process involved an initial translation into Romani, a review by a second translator, and the resolution of any discrepancies by a third person. Finally, the study materials were back-translated into English for verification.

Participants were recruited through random sampling from the Roma community in India. After translating the study measures and obtaining subjects' approval, participants were selected from those interested in the study. Interviews were conducted in English or Romani, with 70% in English, 25% in Romani, and 5% in Romani and English. The interviews were audio-recorded.

A different bilingual research assistant transcribed and checked the audio recordings of the interviews to ensure accuracy. Participants were assigned codes to maintain anonymity.

For data analysis, inductive content analysis and emergent coding procedures were used to identify meaningful dimensions of the responses. A team of three researchers read the sentences multiple times, identified key themes and dimensions, and defined categories of statements to be coded. A transparent coding scheme and detailed definitions for each category guided the coding procedure. Categories for statements included stereotypes (e.g., liars, lazy, cheaters) and prejudices (e.g., disregard for social institutions, a threat to current social norms).

2) Prejudices 2-(criminal propensity) (2e) having animalistic traits (3f) are barbaric and aggressive

To understand the second objective of the study, 346 out of 483 statements were selected.

The following categories emerged to serve the purpose of the second objective

(3) Discrimination

(3a) lower wages for the same job (3b) accommodation not readily provided for living on rent(3c) fired from jobs for small mistakes

(4) Hate crimes (4a) keeping social distance(4b) heaping verbal abuse (4c) Harass /make obscene telephonic calls(4d) victimize with murder , rape , or physical abuse

(5) Impact on Psychological well being; led to (5a) Depression (5b) frustration(5c) anxiety (5d)Aggression (5e) low self esteem (5f) Personality disorders etc
(6) Finally, a category was created to include those negative statements that do not belong to the above-mentioned categories.

After creating the coding schemes, two independent raters were trained to code the data based on the predefined coding categories outlined above. The coding system was slightly modified and clarified based on a preliminary analysis of open-ended responses from 25 members of the sample. This initial coding round revealed acceptable levels of inter-rater reliability for coding ($r=.88$). Raters agreed on 98.25% of the statements (770 possible statements). Raters discussed disagreement until a consensus was reached. Any ambiguity regarding unclear statements or overlapping categories was clarified with the support of the third expert. In these cases, all four coders talked through coding rationales and discussed until agreement (unanimity) was reached. If unanimity was not reached, those statements were dropped from the analysis.

Result Analysis

Content analysis: To address our first research goal, we identified 757 statements that could be organized into five main coding categories and one miscellaneous category. In many cases, subcategories were also differentiated. The category system is described in detail below. More than one category for each sentence (sentences reported by the participants) were also coded.

Stereotypes (88.9% of the responses). This category refers to stereotype content against Roma people; the subcategory represents frequent negative characterizations

associated with Roma people, such as liars, lazy, cheaters, quarrelsome, loud and vocal, etc.

(1a) liar includes i.e., “Roma are pathological liars” and ‘they can lie to any limit.’

(1b) Laziness includes statements such as “Roma people shirk their work” or ‘“They are not in habit of working hard or honestly”’.

(1c) This deals with cheating on others by the Roma people e.g., ‘they make a fool of others’

(1d) ‘they easily get involved in fights verbally or physically.’

(1e) ‘They talk in very high pitched voice’ or ‘Roma are noisy’ or “ Their loud tone manifests their uncivilized manners.’

(1f) Poor personal hygiene—includes references to Roma’s ‘dirty places for living’ or ‘do not wear neat and clean clothes.’

Prejudices Threat to Society (80% responses). This category shows how Roma people are a threat to the society due to various reasons such as their disregard for social institutions and social norms, inability to adapt to the "civilized culture", etc. This category also reveals the “Roma phobia” prevalent in certain populations (e.g., as manifested in: “people are afraid of Roma people”). Threats to the society by Roma people were expressed in various ways, including threats associated with equality distribution of social resources, demographic changes, etc. (e.g., “Majority of them . . . are dangerous to the civilized society ”).

The category also includes statements that describe Roma people as dependent, such as "They live off financial support from the state". The category also contains statements that depict fear of the growing Roma population and how their number could soon double that of the native people (e.g., “In a few years, they will become the majority,” or “Gipsy population is getting bigger than the non-gipsy one.” or "They are creating demographic threats".

Criminality(88% responses) This subcategory represents frequent criminal actions associated with Roma people as perceived by the non-Roma people, such as animalistic instincts, tending to steal or kill or indulge in such other types of criminal behavior (e.g., “Roma have criminal propensity and animalistic instinct,” or “are barbaric and aggressive”). The ‘Animalistic traits’ category refers to Roma people as animals or insects ‘they are like dogs’ (3c), Being barbaric or savage (e.g., “Gypsies are primitive” “They are barbaric and uncultured”). (3d) The ‘Less than human’ category refers to Roma people as being not fully human (e.g., “Gypsies cannot even be considered human beings).

Discrimination(90% Responses) – This category deals with how Roma people face discrimination across various countries. The participants of this study reported explicit discrimination (40.9%). The category represents explicit action suggested for/towards Roma (e.g., “All Gypsies should be thrown away from the civilized society”). This category includes (4a)lower wages for the Roma people are given lower salaries for the same jobs(4b)Being fired – they are fired for petty reasons at the workplace (4c) They are not provided accommodation for rent (4d) People prefer not to have any kind of social contact with them such as marriage, friendship, etc.

(5)Hate crimes (92% responses) Hate crime can be seen in various statements reported by the Roma people(5a) keeping social distance from Roma (e.g., 1- Don’t make them friends 2- No marriage can happen with this community 3-Keep them away from our neighborhood (5b)verbal abuse(e.g., they are pigs, bastards),(5c) Harassment / obscene calls,(5d) murder, rape, physical abuse, etc

(6)Impact on Psychological well-being (88% responses)

DISCUSSION

In this study, we aimed to identify the social biases faced by the Roma community across various countries and the impact of these biases. Our research contributes to a deeper understanding of the different aspects of biases against Roma people and their effects. Biases manifest as discrimination, stereotyping, and negative attitudes. The study reveals various types of stereotyping against the Roma community prevalent across nations. Stereotyping, as defined by Tajfel (1969), is the process of categorization. Stereotypes are associations and beliefs about the characteristics and attributes of a group and its members, shaping how people perceive and respond to the group (Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010).

Overall, stereotypes produce a readiness to perceive certain behaviors (Dovidio et al., 2010). In the present study, 76% of participants reported stereotypes against their community. Previous studies also found widespread stereotypes about Roma, such as those reported by Mauec, which include beliefs that "Gypsies steal," "Gypsies are mentally handicapped, spread diseases, and don't want to pursue education," and "Gypsies are parasites on others." Media reporting has also propagated stereotypes and prejudices against Roma people. According to UK.Com (2010), the news media often portrays Romani people negatively, treating them worse than other ethnic groups with sensationalist, stereotypical, and prejudicial reporting. Despite this, the media can play a vital role in eradicating these stereotypes and prejudices.

Participants in this study also reported prejudices against Roma people. Prejudice is defined as an individual-level attitude toward groups and their members that creates or maintains hierarchical status in relations between groups (Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010). Two main categories of prejudice emerged: (1) Roma is a threat to society, and (2) Roma has a criminal propensity. In the study, 80% of participants felt that other communities view Roma people as a threat to society. Previous studies support these findings. For example, Mauec reported that many Europeans believe "Gypsies are work-shy parasites worthy of contempt" and "Gypsies prefer to live in isolation."

The study also reveals prejudices attributing criminal propensity to Roma people, who are perceived as having animalistic instincts. Previous studies found consistent results, such as the belief that "Gypsies are antisocial and destroy their dwellings."

The second objective of this study was to explore the impact of social biases. Kahneman and Tversky (1972) suggest that an individual's construction of social reality may dictate their behavior in the social world. Social biases are reflected in behaviors such as hate crimes and discrimination against certain groups. The present study shows that participants reported discrimination in employment, education, and housing. Previous reports, like "The Glass Box" (2007), found that Roma are often rejected from employment opportunities because they can be visibly identified as Roma. According to EUMD (2009), 69% of Roma respondents considered ethnic discrimination widespread, and 25% had been victims of personal crime, including assaults, threats, and severe harassment, in the past year.

Social biases and discrimination also lead to hate crimes against Roma people. Nicole Garbin (2018) defines hate crimes as prejudice-motivated crimes where perpetrators target victims based on their membership in a particular social group. Findings from this research are consistent with previous studies, indicating that Roma across Europe face aggressive hate speech and racist violence.

The study also reports psychological trauma among Roma people as a result of social biases. Participants reported feeling depressed, having low self-esteem, and experiencing frustration and aggression due to stigmatization by the non-Roma population. Social biases impair their mental health and contribute to clinical disorders. These biases hinder their social, educational, and personal growth. Previous research, such as the S.P.E.R. survey (2009), showed that Roma tend to be more pessimistic about the future compared to other ethnicities. Roma adolescents also reported higher hopelessness (Kolarcik, Madarasova Geckova, Reijneveld, van Dijk, 2012).

The study also explores gender-specific social biases, finding that Roma women are more often victims of discrimination and hate crimes compared to Roma men. Roma women are more psychologically affected by depression, anxiety, phobias, and personality disorders due to these biases, while Roma men are more aggressive and frustrated.

In conclusion, the study found that social biases against Roma across various nations are similar in the form of prejudices, stereotypes, and negative attitudes. The impact of these biases includes discrimination, hate crimes, and psychological distress among Roma people. Governments, NGOs, and other organizations should develop community-based programs to eradicate social biases against Roma people. Society should change its attitude towards Roma, and social messaging by various actors will help Roma assimilate with mainstream societies

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