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## Dialogic Leadership of Roma Women: A Case Study

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### Abstract

Research demonstrates that Roma women can be leaders to support educational processes that contribute to social change and transformation. However, there are few studies addressing the case of the role of Roma women in the learning communities project to show the ways they are committed to education, specially of young Roma women. This article analyses in depth the case of a learning community in which Roma women organize dialogical meetings to share their concerns about education, thus exercising dialogic leadership. Through the communicative methodology, a case study was developed using different techniques. The data analysis and results illustrate the powerful and inspirational narratives of change resonating with the dialogic leadership of the Roma women participating in the school.

### Keywords

Roma women, leadership, dialogic leadership, learning communities, education

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## Liderazgo Dialógico de Mujeres Gitanas: Un Estudio de Caso

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### Resumen

Las investigaciones demuestran que las mujeres gitanas pueden ser líderes para apoyar procesos educativos que contribuyan al cambio y la transformación social. Sin embargo, existen pocos estudios que aborden el caso del papel de las mujeres gitanas en el proyecto de comunidades de aprendizaje para mostrar las formas en que se comprometen con la educación, especialmente las mujeres jóvenes gitanas. Este artículo analiza en profundidad el caso de una comunidad de aprendizaje en la que mujeres gitanas organizan encuentros dialógicos para compartir sus inquietudes sobre la educación, y por tanto ejerciendo liderazgo dialógico. A través de la metodología comunicativa, se desarrolló un estudio de caso utilizando diferentes técnicas. El análisis de los datos y los resultados ilustran las poderosas e inspiradoras narrativas de cambio que resuenan con el liderazgo dialógico de las mujeres gitanas que participan en la escuela.

### Palabras clave

Mujer gitana, liderazgo, liderazgo dialógico, comunidades de aprendizaje, educación

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Leadership and Roma women is an emerging research topic in social sciences and education. Several authors have analyzed the role of Roma women in developing, sharing, and practicing leadership. According to Aiello, Sordé-Martí, Khalfaoui & Redondo-Sama (2022), the leadership role among Roma women is of an egalitarian nature where the women leaders prefer to work in unison with the other women and encourage their abilities. The authors argue that a managerial style is associated with non-Roma leaders and is not favored by Roma women, as they believe that it does not support the egalitarian spirit of leadership that they practice and promote. Melgar, Larena, Ruiz & Rammel (2011) exemplify this leadership in an association called the Drom Kotar Mestipen, in which Roma women gather to discuss social issues such as ways to increase the retention of Roma girls in school. According to them, it is one of the ways that they believe can contribute to poverty reduction within the Roma community, and they develop their leadership practice through building dialogic relations where their voices are recognized as equal to the other women working at the association.

The role of Roma culture for Roma women is relevant for the exercise of their leadership. Aiello, Sordé-Martí, Khalfaoui & Redondo-Sama (2022) show that leaders are united by a common cultural identity, which gives them a common goal to preserve and honor their identity and values. As leaders, Roma women highly value the advice of the older women and ensure that the younger generation is close to the generation of older women. They do this by promoting dialogue between the generations, which prevents an intergenerational gap from forming. In this way, Roma women form networks of solidarity that function to help those girls or women facing difficult situations (Melgar et al., 2011). So, the Roma culture plays an imperative role in bringing together the Roma women leaders and community.

### **Roma Women in Education to Facilitate Dialogic Leadership**

Historically, Roma people were not included in many of the educational practices as the mainstream belief was that the Roma would not be easily integrated into formal education spaces as they are more engaged in other activities such as working in the marketplace (Flecha & Soler, 2013). When further exploring stereotypes against the Roma in higher education, it was found that women experienced more discrimination because of their gender (Flecha et al., 2022). In some regions, Roma women hold student gatherings in which they discuss their concerns about these social issues that affect them, attempting to challenge the existing stereotypes against the Roma in education and beyond (Flecha & Soler, 2013). In a school in Albacete in Spain, where the majority of the students are Roma, a dialogue-based learning model was implemented. Through this approach, the authors showed that including family members in the education process, can result in better educational outcomes. Similarly, Melgar, Larena, Ruiz & Rammel (2011) illustrate that when Roma women took on jobs in a school such as working in a cafeteria, they challenged the stereotypes against them. For the authors, taking up diverse roles and being involved in the school not only challenged stereotypes but also made the Roma women be seen as role models and leaders. Padros & Flecha (2014) termed this approach of developing leadership practice through dialogic interactions as dialogic leadership, which is aligned with the theory of the dialogic society

(Flecha, 2022). It is when all the community members come together and lead through dialogue, regardless of their differences. So, the leadership practice of the Roma women can be seen as being in congruence with dialogic leadership.

While some Roma women are increasingly becoming enrolled in and completing formal education, this is not the only way Roma women have become involved in education. Some Roma women who do not have a background of formal education, are contributing with their skills and experience (Flecha & Soler, 2013). For example, in the case of La Paz School in Albacete analyzed by Flecha & Soler (2013), Spain, Roma women are engaged in school activities by managing the behavior of young ethnically diverse students, and in helping students learn by sharing different learning techniques. The authors found evidence that among the Roma students enrolled in universities, Roma women had higher levels of overall academic engagement than men.

### **Roma Families in Education**

Analyzing the situation of the Roma in education, it was found that the families of Roma students were actively involved and were providing motivation to the students who were enrolled, in contrast to the popular opinion (Munté et al., 2020). The commonly held belief about the Roma was that they were not interested in education, and overcoming this stigma has been a goal of those Roma who have been working in the area of education. According to Díez, Gatt & Racionero (2011), the interest and active participation of the Roma was evident in the case of a school in Spain in a very deprived neighborhood. The authors describe that the Roma community displayed enthusiastic involvement in their children's education after the school adopted a transformative approach involving families and relatives, regardless of the parents' own formal education.

For the Roma, there is an increasing awareness that education can change the course of their lives. It is evident from the cases of the Roma families discussed by Munte et al. (2020) that educational attainment has brought about two noteworthy outcomes. Firstly, receiving education while enabling them to gain knowledge, has exposed them to a multitude of opportunities. Having access to a wide array of opportunities enables them to have various career opportunities. Secondly, having university education gave them more confidence and they felt more empowered to support their community to move forward.

### **Methodology**

The study is framed under the communicative methodology (Gómez et al., 2011) and conceptualized as a qualitative case study, integrating the exclusionary and transformative dimensions in the research. This approach implies the identification and analysis of what works to overcome the barriers faced by disadvantaged groups, such as the Roma women at the core of this research. The communicative methodology has been implemented in previous research with the Roma community, achieving results that have demonstrated the impacts of its use (Gómez et al., 2019; Munte et al., 2011). The study was implemented through a qualitative approach and the discussion group as a technique to collect the data. The

egalitarian dialogue throughout the research process underlines the dialogue between the researchers and the people participating in the study.

### **School as Learning Community and Participants**

The learning communities project has demonstrated to overcome educational inequalities affecting Roma families and other vulnerable groups, with successful educational actions being implemented in schools all over the world (Soler, 2017). Successful educational actions are actions that work in any educational and social context, being universal and replicable. Considering this framework, the school selected for the case study is a learning community with the presence of Roma students and family involvement in the school. The participants in the discussion group were six Roma women involved in school activities, including family training. They had no academic background and lived in the neighborhood, a deprived area of a Spanish city. They organized regular coffee talks as dialogic meetings to share common concerns about education and Roma people, and the ways to advance towards the improvement of educational success, among other topics. The friendship atmosphere underlines the dialogic meetings, as the one analyzed in this work.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection was based on a dialogic process to capture the concerns about education that Roma women participating in the learning community had. According to the communicative methodology, the questions of the guide for the discussion group included not only the barriers the participants face but also the transformative dimension of the possibilities to change and overcome the difficulties. The participants were encouraged to ask questions to the research team, about the study, their work, or their families. The generated environment was very positive to create confidence among the participants and the research team. The research team collected and analyzed the data according to the exclusionary and transformative dimension of the communicative methodology, identifying the emerging categories, and selecting the most relevant quotations from the transcripts.

### **Ethical Issues**

The research was designed and developed according to the ethical issues of the Framework Programme of European research. The participants were provided with information about the aim of the study, the voluntary basis, the permission to publish data, and the anonymity of all the names. The research team provided the informed consents, that were dully saved.

## **Results**

The result section is organized into three sections based on the themes extracted from the group discussion transcripts. The three categories are improvement in learning, dream and leadership beyond the school. These categories reflect the themes along which the

participants spoke when asked about the role of education and educational agents regarding the Roma community. Particularly the barriers faced by the Roma, the inadequacy of opportunities, their hope for the future, and leadership, were some of the areas highlighted.

### **Improvement in Learning**

The Roma women who participated in the study had been involved in the selected school for five years. In the conversation in which the women explained the steps towards learning and education, they also explained some of the barriers that previously existed and some of the transformative actions that have been taken to overcome these barriers.

Getting involved in the school gave them the opportunity to broaden their knowledge and to diversify their skills. As the Roma were conventionally seen as being engaged in skilled trades, which did not require any formal education, so they were normally given training accordingly. Even if they were enrolled in a school, they would have an opportunity to leave after secondary school and learn a skill instead of continuing their education. This was a barrier to attaining formal education and then getting a professional position. This is reflected in the words of participant 1:

Participant 1: Before, we had “skill-building sessions on gardening, carpentry...”, we did not use books (...) There were more “skill-building sessions” than “teaching classes”.

Here Maria explains the norms around training and education that were previously observed for the Roma. The focus used to be on helping the women develop an income-generating skill which included skills such as gardening, building furniture, stitching among others. However, the focus was not on increasing or improving literacy even though their current engagement shows their interest and ability. The absence of books and the emphasis on developing skills, reflects a mindset that the Roma are more suitable for skilled trade and also an expectation that they would continue being involved in it. Another Roma woman, participant 2 also highlights the same issue while remembering her childhood:

Participant 2: I had the same books every year. Every year, I had to go through the same material, and I knew my homework by heart.

Here Susan recalls that as a child they did not get new textbooks every year, so there was no progression in their knowledge. As school curriculum generally follows the pattern of developing on the previous content and increasing the complexity of the content every year, to support the cognitive development of the students. However, Susan recalls that instead of being exposed to new material, they had to study the same content, so there was no intellectual stimulation and further she mentions having memorized the homework assignments by heart. Adding to this another Roma woman Ana expresses her regret for the children about the scarcity of opportunities:

Participant 2: There are Roma children, who are worth a lot, who are worth studying, and it's a shame that they can't pursue a career. That does make me sad.

Here Ana shares her sorrow for the current state of affairs for the Roma children. She believes that there are many Roma children who have great potential to achieve academically, progress and have a good career. However, due to the circumstances in which they do not receive optimal educational opportunities, they are deprived of good career opportunities. This is a barrier that Ana highlights and it shows her feelings of sympathy for the children and sorrow for their missed opportunities.

After discussing these barriers, the Roma women also discussed how they became involved in the school and how that helped them. Among these women, there is a desire for their children to acquire an education. To achieve this outcome, they show their willingness to be integrated in different activities in the school. It also demonstrated their desire for themselves to progress and learn more. A quote from one of the mothers, highlights the reason for joining one of the activities being held at the school – interactive groups:

Participant 3: We entered and participate in the interactive groups, for the children to behave well.

Another mother expresses her desire to be involved in multiple activities as she says:

Participant 4: I want to attend gatherings on Wednesdays and interactive math groups on Thursdays so that my daughter can stay active.

This indicates that she would like to attend two different activities - dialogic literary gatherings (DLGs) and interactive groups on consecutive days. The aim of the DLGs is to encourage the reading of classical literature and engage in dialogue on it, and the Roma women participating at the school show their favorable response to it. Moreover, this Roma woman expressed that participating in the interactive groups – an activity in which children work in groups with the help of an adult volunteer – helped her daughter to stay mentally alert and improve her academic focus.

In this respect, a Roma mother spoke about the unity shared among the mothers and children as they all work together towards a common goal – to transform the school into the best possible learning space for the children and their families:

Participant 3: We all walk together, trying to do our best and to do good things at school for the kids.

So, the overall involvement of the Roma women in the school activities shows their commitment towards the improvement in the education of the children and of the community at large. While they remain cognizant of the various challenges that they face due to their Roma identity, they remain committed to overcoming them.

## **Dreams**

The Roma women and young boys and girls at the school, dream of positive changes that would begin with education. There is a realization that the current state can be improved and that things need to change. It is now that they have begun to think of the future and how potentially things could change if all children acquired education. For example, a woman recalls a question that was posed to the children by the man driving the school van,

Participant 4: What do you want to be when you grow up?

At the school, the majority of the students are Roma and as the parents are involved, there is great involvement of the Roma community overall in the school. This makes the Roma a majority rather than a minority (which can quite often be the case) at this school. So, the problem of being singled out or being marginalized as a result of being a minority is reduced. At regular schools where Roma students may not get recognition for their identity as Roma, they can face discrimination and this is an apprehension that many Roma students have. A Roma mother expresses this sentiment in the following statement:

Participant 1: Explaining the need for support when starting high school, especially for girls, they have the level but there is a barrier when leaving the neighborhood, going to another school... there are fears.

So, in order to be able to continue the education and not feel singled out the Roma students prefer being at this school where they have support from their own community. It is especially important for them to see positive role models who share the Roma identity. However, currently, the school is only till the secondary level. As expressed in the following words by one of the Roma women, it is a dream for them to complete their high school education at this school:

Participant 5: Having high school education here, that is a dream of the families and the teaching staff...

Therefore, it is a dream of the Roma students and their families who are involved in the school, that the school be extended to the high school level. This would allow these students, especially the girls to carry on their education without the fear of readjusting to another institute where they fear being judged negatively.

## **Leadership Beyond the School**

The Roma women talked about how participation in the school was affecting their lives outside the school as well. Firstly, speaking about the stigma associated with the Roma identity, they explain how they face challenges associated with the image of the Roma. For example, one Roma woman said the following words:



Participant 6: Some people are afraid of us (the Roma) because they don't know us, and they judge all of us based on one. It's tough when you get on the bus, and someone says, 'I'm getting off here, in the Roma neighborhood,' and you just stay there, feeling... (pause) I want it to be a normal neighborhood, where they don't call it that way.

So, it is apparent from the words that the Roma people face prejudice from the non-Roma people, and they feel discriminated against. This is because of the long-standing stereotypes held and believed in, against the Roma. Labelling an area as the 'Roma neighborhood', gives it a certain negative connotation in light of the commonly held stereotypes against them. So, the common desire among the Roma people is that they should be treated as everyone else and not be seen differently or in a negative light.

Furthermore, a Roma women's congress was held in which many of the women from the school participated. While recounting the conference, Maria, a Roma woman said the following words:

Participant 2: I loved it, I loved it... the way they talked about education, how everyone in their family, from the oldest to the youngest, had their high school diploma. And she, at her age, had earned her high school diploma. It was magnificent, it was beautiful.

It is clear that the conference promoted education, especially amongst the Roma. Maria's words highlight the importance of the moment where a girl earned her high school diploma and the significance of this moment for her and everyone else there. This moment was important not only for the girl and her family because of her achievement. Rather for them it was the representation of a larger reality – of seeing her and through her, other Roma girls, overcoming obstacles, persevering and being rewarded for it. Academic achievement is valued highly and is seen as the way towards emancipation from poverty and enduring difficult circumstances.

Overall, the Roma women in this context who were engaged in the school, also commented on their life outside and how it is impacted by other people's perceptions of the Roma. The women who earn their diplomas, have the potential to become leaders who would serve as role models for other Roma women and girls. They demonstrate how resilience in the face of difficult circumstances can lead to positive outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

Roma women are leading change in diverse educational settings, including schools as learning communities. The results obtained show that the way Roma women are developing leadership in the analysed case is dialogic and democratic. There is an alignment with the conceptualization of dialogic leadership and the dialogic leadership practices, in which very diverse members of the educational community can lead in dialogue with others. The dialogic meetings enable Roma women to share common feelings about their experiences in school,

making them aware of the exclusion and the potential they have to improve education. The relation of what happened in the past with the Roma community in schools is directly connected with their current commitment to change. The creation of meaning starts with a dialogical talk among the Roma women participating in the school and therefore, with one of the first aspects highlighted in the results: the improvement in learning. This improvement in learning is linked to the relevance of making dreams possible, which is in coherence with the aim of the learning communities project and the increase of commitment and awareness among Roma families that education can make a difference for the future of Roma children. The school included in the data collection and analysis of this study shows that dialogic leadership facilitates family members with no academic background to participate in school in transformative ways. Thus, the practice of dialogic leadership through dialogical meetings of Roma women in this school is opening opportunities to lead change beyond the organizational walls.

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