

# Self-Esteem among Druze Women

## Abstract

This review discusses the issue of self-esteem among Druze women in Israel in light of the challenges faced by the passage from traditional to modern society. It explores how gender roles, cultural dimensions, family structure, education and appearance influence women's self-esteem. Druze women are breaking the traditional boundaries, while at the same time protecting those boundaries and doing their best to ensure that Druze values are carried, by their community, into the future. They are supporting and enabling a different lifestyle and thus encouraging a change in the balance of power between genders; they are undermining the power and authority of the patriarchs themselves, while supporting an increase in women's self-esteem. Although Druze religious law gives women equal rights, the status of women in the Druze family is inferior to that of men. Nevertheless, today, one can see fathers who are encouraging their daughters to pursue higher education while overcoming criticism by the clergy and relatives. In the Israeli setting, Arabs and Druze belong to collectivistic societies and Jews to an individualistic society. Features of an individual's perceived self-esteem interact with ethnicity; together these play a major role in shaping behavior as well as self-esteem. Still, only a few studies have compared Druze and other cultures with respect to components of self-esteem. Gender-role identity is also positively related to self-esteem. Western culture, and today, also Arab culture relates to thinness as a determinant of good appearance and hence better self-esteem. Druze women's liberation in the last 10 years constitutes one of the Oriental culture's achievements. However, such an achievement is accompanied by a preoccupation with appearance, confidence and self-esteem. The growing interest in the relationship between cultural factors and self-esteem and body image, and the limited published empirical research on these components among Druze women, call for further investigation.

**Keywords:** Self-esteem; Druze women

## Introduction

Self-esteem refers to how people feel about themselves and how they evaluate their abilities and attributes, as well as their momentary feelings of self-worth, such as pride or shame [1,2]. Positive self-esteem has long been viewed as an essential component of good quality of life [3]. People with high self-esteem have been found to be successful problem-solvers and to use information effectively to attain their goals. Furthermore, they have been found to be in good mental health and well-adjusted [4].

Self-esteem is influenced by gender roles and cultural norms, and values change around achievements, family structure and appearance. Religion is also considered to be a significant factor shaping the perception of, attitude toward, belief in, and behavior surrounding an individual's self-esteem [5]. Moreover, a person's national identity-i.e., relatedness to civic, state, or nation norms-has been suggested to be a significant component of self-identity and self-esteem [6,7] and therefore might influence that person's social behavior [8]. Despite the importance of addressing in equalities in society, very few studies have examined the factors influencing Druze women's self-esteem.

The Druze forms a minority group in Israel and within the Israeli-Arab community. Approximately 125,000 Druze live in the Middle East: Syria, the Golan Heights, South Lebanon, the Galilee and Carmel [9]. Arabic is their mother tongue, and they are considered to live in a traditional, religious and closed social community. The Druze seek to preserve their own distinctive

culture and heritage but at the same time, wish to integrate into Israeli public life. In contrast to the Jewish society, the Druze society is characterized by its patriarchal regime which demands absolute loyalty to the values of religion, family and clan. Despite the changes occurring in today's world, traditional values are still a top priority [10]. Unlike the Druze community in the Palestinian authority, that in the Golan Heights does not face geographical or political isolation. Moreover, male-female relations are much less restricted and most schools are not segregated by gender, at the behest of the community. In fact today, literacy rates are identical among the younger generations of Golani men and women. Also nearly identical are the total years of schooling among males and females aged 15 to 30 years. The sharpest contrast is in higher education: hundreds of Golani women have chosen, and have been encouraged to pursue university educations, both inside Israel and abroad [11].

Druze women's self-esteem is being challenged by the passage from traditional to modern society. They are no longer absolutely loyal and obedient to the values of religion, family and history of the Druze community; instead, they are adopting the values of liberalization, freedom, self-choice, gender equality, and respect for humanity. While Druze women in Israel are in the process of moving from traditional to modern society, they remain, absolutely and profoundly, part of their own society. Druze women transfer an understanding to their children of the intersections of religion and self-esteem in the context of this community. There are indications that when a traditional society first shifts from agrarian to industrial, it reduces the importance of organized

## Review Article

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religion. However, religious beliefs persist, as do traditions rooted in religious values [12]. Druze women today are demonstrating their ability to make informed choices, seek out various options and make decisions that complement their lifestyle, structural resources, and financial capabilities. Several changes in the genders' roles have accompanied industrialization: an increased number of working women, decreased fertility rates, a rise in literacy and educational level among women, and increased participation of women in government and management, although they still have far less power than men [13]. Women's challenge is to keep change tied to the Druze identity. Women must break the traditional boundaries while at the same time protecting them, doing their best to ensure that Druze values move with their community into the future [13].

This review provides an overview of some of the factors influencing Druze women's self-esteem in light of the described social developments and the shortage of research exploring these factors.

### Self-Esteem among Druze Women

High self-esteem is associated with a feeling of value and pride, a perception of self-satisfaction and a sense of self-efficacy in intellectual and social skills [14]. Global self-esteem increases through adolescence and continues to increase (albeit more slowly) through the twenties [15]. Cognitive maturation through adolescence gradually allows individuals to arrive at balanced, realistic and relatively stable self-views of both positive and negative attributes. Middle adolescents still struggle with apparent contradictions in self-images and have difficulty dealing with others' differing standards and opinions.

Although several studies [16] have reported low levels of self-esteem among members of ethnic minority groups as compared to the society in which they live, others have found no significant differences between these groups [17,18].

Umaña-Taylor AG [19] found that micro and macro-contexts have an effect on the relationship between ethnicity and self-esteem, and that minority members are able to maintain higher levels of self-esteem when there are intra group social connections. Together with family and peer support, ethnic-group identification can serve as a buffer against institutional racism or prejudice that would otherwise lower minority youths' self-esteem [20]. Previous research has suggested that, in general, Israeli-Arab students have lower self-esteem than Israeli-Jewish students [21]. Abu Saad I [22] examined the level of global self-esteem among a group of 1,560 12<sup>th</sup>-grade Israeli-Arab adolescents using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [23]. He found that Arab high-school students exhibit intermediate to high self-esteem, tending to agree with positive self-evaluations and to reject negative ones. Self-esteem was higher among city dwellers, who traditionally form the highest stratum of Arab society compared to village citizens, with Bedouin youth presenting the lowest global self-esteem. Abu-Saad [22] also reported that Arab adolescents who had only infrequent direct contact with the broader Israeli society derived strength from relationships within their own reference group, which counteracted the discriminatory aspects of Israeli society on their self-esteem.

Israelashvili et al. [24] found that Druze women have a lower sense of coherence (i.e., feeling behaviors accord with personal

values) than Jewish women. Differences in coping behavior among people from different ethnic groups have less to do with the norms that regulate behavior in a specific ethnic group than with the implications of those norms for people's sense of coherence and self-esteem.

### Self-Esteem and Gender Roles

In general, the male population has a higher level of self-esteem than the female population [25]. This is also true for adolescent boys compared to girls [16,26,27]. Baldwin & Hoffmann [28] found interactions between age and gender on levels of self-esteem during adolescence. While girls' self-esteem decreased from age 12 to about age 17, boys' self-esteem increased until age 14, decreased until about age 16, and increased again in early adulthood. Gender-role identity is positively related to self-esteem. Perceiving oneself as feminine was positively related to self-esteem for females and perceiving oneself as masculine was positively related to self-esteem for males [29]. Rosenthal et al. [30] reported that minority girls are at greater risk for low self-esteem in cultures in which gender roles are more sharply differentiated and males are accorded greater prestige, as is the case in Israeli-Arab society [31,32].

According to Druze religion, the woman is at the center of society. In some ways, the clergy discriminates in favor of women, who are entitled to equal rights under Druze law [10,33]. Nevertheless, the status of women in the Druze family is inferior to that of men, and Druze women often experience gender exclusion. The domestic space has traditionally defined women's roles and activities, as well as their relations with men [34]. The traditional Druze society is patriarchal. The men in Druze families have authority in all decisions regarding women and are responsible for them [35]. The patriarchal Druze family and Druze social and cultural norms prohibit women from expressing their views and beliefs, as well as their exposure to mixed society. Thus, if they want to avoid religious sanctions, women must stay in the house; they are not allowed to drive or to pursue higher education, nor can they work in public places where they might interact with and be influenced by external forces; moreover, they have no inheritance rights [33,36]. The prevailing normative structure justifies inequality between men and women.

For example, the administrative positions in Druze schools are still largely held by men: according to the Israeli Ministry of Education [37], there are 81 Druze educational institutions run by 72 principals, 9 of them women (0.8%), and 28 senior positions (supervisors) staffed by 20 men and 7 women (35%). Over the last 20 years, the position of women has been transformed through public occupation and higher education [38,39]. Although some changes have occurred over the last few decades, men still maintain considerable power in the family [33], as reflected in their superior economic and social status. Today, Israeli Druze women have permission to express themselves more freely, have more freedom to exercise their wishes and determine their futures, and are allowed to be independent and even live by themselves outside the family 'Hamula'. Abbas R [10] presented the results of in-depth interviews with three Israeli-Druze women who serve as school principals. Each of these three women was diligent, patient, hard working and determined to achieve success. Each had a professional mentor or program that gave her a push forward.

Today, many more Druze women are study in gat university, attending public workplaces and holding influential positions (such as school principal), and less women are presenting a traditional appearance [10]. Most men in modern Druze society tend to encourage women to break through the gender-based power system and enter occupations, encouraging a higher level of independence and shattering traditional gender-role barriers. They intentionally allow cracks to develop in hierarchical social structures and effect change by altering the position of women in their families. Moreover, they support and enable a different lifestyle, there by shifting the balance of power between the sexes and undermining the power and authority of the patriarchs themselves [40], while supporting increases in women's self-esteem. Those women who have broken out of the low self-esteem "prison" serve as role models for girls and as such, can enhance global self-esteem among Druze women.

### Self-Esteem and Cultural Dimensions

In the Israeli setting, Arabs and Druze belong to collectivistic societies and Jews belong to an individualistic society. To illustrate, in the Arab and Druze societies, smaller numbers of in-groups are reflected in the overlap of kith and kin, so that close-age siblings and other family members overlap with one's peer group. Emphasis on accumulation of shared resources leads to a higher rate of marriage among first cousins, as well as power distance and male dominance, to a strict family honor code applied to girls and young women. Sometimes, disobeying the family honor code by, for example, engaging in a sexual relationship, might lead to being murdered by the family males.

Seginer et al. [41] collected data from 617 11<sup>th</sup>-graders (mean age 17.5 years, SD = 0.7), including 226 (124 girls) Arab, 196 (129 girls) Druze, and 195 (119 girls) Jewish adolescents. They found that peer relations are perceived to be more strongly related to family relationships for Israeli-Arab and Druze adolescents than for Israeli-Jewish adolescents growing up in a neighboring but socioculturally different society. However, when family relations are poor, Jewish adolescents draw greater support from peers than do Arab or Druze adolescents.

Oyserman [42] and her colleagues [43] suggested that features of an individual's perceived self-esteem interact with ethnicity and together play a major role in shaping her or his behavior, as well as self-esteem. Only a few studies have compared Druze and other cultures with respect to components of self-esteem. Mittelberg et al. [44] performed a qualitative case study of two grade 5 classrooms in Israel, one Jewish and one Druze, to identify classroom factors contributing to the differences in gendered patterns for Jews and Arabs. When boys and girls are treated differently, and teachers hold gender-biased beliefs and expectations, students' achievements seem to be impacted along gender lines. They found marked differences in the Druze vs. Jewish teacher's gender-related interactions with students. The Jewish teacher's beliefs and behaviors were consistent with the commonly held stereotype of mathematics as a male domain; she interacted more frequently with boys than with girls and had higher expectations for the boys, believing that their mathematical superiority over girls was genetically determined. The Druze teacher was proactive in challenging this traditional stereotype, believing more generally that for girls to break free of traditional cultural expectations within the Druze community in Israel, they

needed to be well educated, and that mathematics was the golden pass to achieving that.

Israelashvili et al. [24] compared 100 Jewish students with 93 Druze students (age range 18-55 years) at three Israeli universities. All participants voluntarily completed a questionnaire. They found that, among Israeli Druze, the higher the individual's self-esteem, the more frequent the use of problem-focused coping and the less frequent the use of disengagement-focused coping. In addition, the stronger the individual's national identity, the higher his or her use of emotion-focused coping. Among Israeli Jews, the higher the person's religiosity, the more he or she tends to use emotion-focused coping strategies, the lower his or her personal resources, and the higher the tendency to adopt disengagement coping.

Seginer & Halabi Kheir [45] compared 276 Druze and 308 Jewish males and females with respect to their future orientation. Both samples included 9<sup>th</sup>- and 12<sup>th</sup>-graders. The Druze and Jewish sample was drawn from high schools in Northern Israel. The Druze culture was characterized by religiosity/loyalty to family and community and deference to family elders and community religious leaders, resulting in reduced investment in the prospective life domains. Druze adolescents compensated themselves by having dreamlike hopes of being happy/content/well-liked by others close to persons of authority, and rid of pessimistic feelings, as well as by extensive investment in significant others and collective issues. The Druze's relatively lower investment in prospective life course domains and greater investment in existential domains was related by the author to Druze adolescents' tendency to enter adult roles at an earlier age than do Jewish adolescents.

### Self-Esteem and Family Structure

The average age at first marriage is 20.4 and 24.9 years for Druze women and men, as compared to 24 and 26.8 years for Jewish women and men, respectively [46]. According to Jewish religion, women cannot divorce their husbands; only the men can decide to divorce their wives. In the case of divorce, children stay with the mother. In contrast, according to Druze religious law, women have the same rights as men with respect to applying for a divorce. The children in such a case stay with the father or his family and the woman returns to her parent's home [47].

Weiner-Levy [40] describes a father's place in his daughters' lives during childhood, using narrative research. She noted the special bond between Druze fathers and their daughters, as well as the place of the Druze fathers in their daughters' breakthrough to higher education-fathers who stood at their daughters' side, encouraged them to obtain a higher education, and helped them despite criticism by clergy, relatives and village society [40]. Thus, Druze women's self-liberalism, which can be understood in light of this patriarchal society.

### Self-Esteem and Education

Higher education often influences self-esteem. College students have to rebalance their lives and find their way into college and adult life. Most freshmen can no longer fully rely on their existing social network of friends and family and have to deal with many life changes and choices, which can lead to substantial changes in identity and self-esteem [48]. Attending institutions



of higher education has promoted a change among Druze women. College students demonstrate changes in attitudinal and psychosocial dimensions due to the need to adapt to a new academic environment and living situation. Those that live outside their family home during their studies also need to invest in independent time management as well as problem management [48]. The stories collected from these students explore the difficulties they experience in the personal context, such as those stemming from being cut off from their families, difficulties in the social and cultural contexts, in their insecurity with the Hebrew language, and threats stemming from a sense of being unsuited to the new academic world, especially being a woman and coming from a minority group. In this situation, they are exposed to peers from different backgrounds, with different values and attitudes, which can lead to substantial reevaluation of personal choices and commitments. All of these changes contribute to changes in their self-esteem, which are often, but not always positive [49].

A few studies have investigated the realm of higher education among Arabs in Israel [50-54]. They identified processes of openness, changes in modes of thinking, and a rise in self-esteem and in aspirations for equality and independence among young Arab men and women who are studying in Israeli academic institutions. The stories from Muslim women's lives demonstrate the impact of the encouragement received by the nuclear family and at the same time, the expectation to be more independent than their mothers.

Weiner-Levy [55] described the determination, perseverance and inner strength of the first young Druze women to apply for higher education despite social sanctions, as well as their role in leading processes of change affecting the status of women in their community.

Greenberg & Sagiv-Reiss [56] performed a qualitative analysis of 16 Arab students in institutions of higher learning in the north of Israel. An analysis of their life stories also demonstrated the influence of the nuclear family in encouraging their studies and the expectations to be more independent than their mothers. Furthermore, their stories revealed difficulties deriving from gender construction and informal systems of control and supervision initiated by male students in institutions of higher learning.

### Self-Esteem and Appearance

Self-esteem can be strongly influenced by appearance. The effects of body image on self-esteem can be especially powerful during the teenage years. Global self-esteem, satisfaction with appearance, and self-reported dieting are interrelated [57]. Today, Western culture, as well as Arab culture, relate to thinness as a requirement for a pleasing appearance and hence for better self-esteem. This perception is reinforced by the media, as well as by social interactions with peers and parents [58].

Moreover, when young women's and men's discursive constructions of health were investigated in Western countries, most of them construed health in physical terms and emphasized the importance of a sense of personal responsibility for the maintenance of a healthy body. Ironically, for the participants in these studies, the desire for a slender body was expressed in terms of achieving a healthy life style and thus many engaged in calorie

reduction, compulsive physical activity, and other risky practices such as the consumption of diet pills, fasting, and liposuction [59-61]. Exposure of the Arab and Druze populations to Western-oriented culture is associated with difficult body issues.

Abou-Rizkand & Rail G [58] found that young Lebanese-Canadian women conflate "healthy" and "ideal" female bodies and perceive both as thin. Participants constructed the "healthy" body in close linkage with a "normal" physical appearance that at first glance seems to be equated with a "not too fat and not too thin" body but then, upon closer examination, seems to gravitate toward thinness. Kazarian [62] investigated the sense of self-worth of 282 Lebanese adolescents using the 35-item Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale. In contrast to the research from the Western world, they did not find any association between appearance and self-worth. They did, however, find a high correlation between self-worth and others' approval.

In Israel, there is a small amount of epidemiological evidence confirming that the Arab population is less represented among referrals to eating-disorder clinics [63]. However, it has become increasingly clear that large numbers of adolescents in nonclinical settings have abnormal attitudes toward eating and weight concerns that may require attention [64]. Apter et al. [65] reported that in Israel, most Jews (270 female adolescents) and Arabs (489 female adolescents) aged 15-18 years indicated body-related and eating-related attitudes that were similar to those of females in the U.S. Kaluski, Natamba, Goldsmith, Shimony, and Berry [66] studied a cluster sample of 2,978 Israeli schoolgirls with an average age of 14.7 years (middle and high schools: 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade), representing Israeli adolescents according to population group (Jew, Arab, Bedouin and Druze). They found age and religious status to be significantly associated with disordered eating behaviors. Being Jewish reduced the odds of disordered eating by about 30% (OR 0.69, 95% CI 0.56-0.82). Due to a lack of information about the relationship between physical appearance and self-esteem in Druze women, more research is needed in this area to understand the mediators of hazardous behaviors among Druze adolescents.

### Discussion and Conclusion

An Arabic proverb says that "woman is half of society and raises the other half." Thus, women have a unique and vital role in shaping adolescent self-esteem, but their power is limited by the traditional patriarchal culture and the influence of conservative clergy. Druze women's liberalization in the past 10 years is one of the greatest achievements of Oriental culture. The achievement of liberation in working, high education and dependence is expressed in a strong desire to be an active and effective player in the community and fulfill one's wishes in every respect, whether in terms of freedom of choice in life, taking decisions for the future, choosing a husband, choice of profession or others. Mothers raise their daughters differently from the way in which they were brought up. However, these achievements are accompanied by a preoccupation with appearance, confidence and self-esteem. It is therefore not surprising that Druze women resemble Western women in their preoccupation with appearance, achievements and self-esteem. The growing interest in the relationship between cultural factors and self-esteem and body image, and the limited published empirical research on

these factors among Druze women call for further investigation. Moreover, since self-esteem is a dynamic virtue, as suggested by some researchers, that is socially constructed, learned by the individual during his or her life and constantly evolving as a result of the individual's experiences and his or her interactions with "significant others" [67-69], one can challenge this construct with prevention programs. Such interventions might be most relevant in contemporary late-modern societies that have no structure or guidance to rely on in forming a sense of identity [70], and in a population that is undergoing a cultural transition such as the Druze, where the challenge is to balance traditional and modern cultures. Lastly, the review integrates qualitative and quantitative studies and thus represent an opportunity for deeper understanding of the cultural aspects but at the same time limits the ability to generate conclusions.

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