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## Traveller Movement's briefing paper on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller women, March 2017



**About TM:** The Traveller Movement (TM) was established in 1999 and is a leading national policy and voice charity, working to raise the capacity and social inclusion of the Gypsy Roma Traveller communities in Britain. TM act as a bridge builder bringing the Traveller communities, service providers and policy makers together, stimulating debate and promoting forward-looking strategies to promote increased race equality, civic engagement, inclusion, service provision and community cohesion. For further information about TM visit [www.travellermovement.org.uk](http://www.travellermovement.org.uk)



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## **The Traveller Movement**

### **Introduction**

TM recognises the particular oppression and inequality experienced by many GRT women and girls and is working to address this by supporting the establishment of a UK-wide GRT Women's Empowerment Network (GRT WEN).

Contrary to the often misleading perception that all GRT women are disempowered, there are many powerful and strong voices from within the GRT women's sector leading the charge in challenging discrimination and inequality toward the communities.

The GRT WEN aims to create a platform to harness these skills and hear these voices while also supporting other GRT women and girls to build their skills and confidence, develop collective strategies to challenge discrimination and inequality, and fulfill their potential as leaders and activists working for the rights of GRT communities.

### **The GRT Women's Empowerment Network**

The aims of the GRT WEN are to:

- develop and enhance the skills and capacity of GRT women and girls to work collectively to challenge racism & sexism and all forms of discrimination experienced by their communities
- identify, document and respond to the particular experience of inequality for GRT women and girls
- support GRT women in their voluntary and paid roles as activists for their community
- provide appropriate resources and training to GRT women and girls in leadership roles to respond to the issue of violence against women within their community/work
- facilitate discussion/debates on gender equality and sensitive topics such as sexuality and LGBT issues within GRT communities
- create safe spaces for open and structured dialogue
- become a representative authority and voice for GRT women and girls.

TM has created a proactive partnership with likeminded civil society organisations, particularly those based in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure the WEN is inclusive and reflective of local GRT women and girls.

## Challenges for GRT women

Some of the challenges facing the WEN in realising its aims include:

- supporting young women to articulate their concerns and lobby for change
- challenging attitudes on gender equality, sexuality and domestic violence within GRT communities
- building alliances to address discrimination and disadvantage
- lobbying for full implementation of rights in relation to equality and non-discrimination, health, education, accommodation and employment.

## Background information

This briefing paper sets out some background information on these challenges; it aims to highlight the primary gender issues for GRT women in order to launch a debate on addressing these issues. TM acknowledges gaps in the data and in the documentation of GRT women's experience in the UK. This paper was prepared from secondary sources; it generalises the experiences of GRT women which are individual, complex and diverse.

### *Profile of GRT women:*

*Size of the communities:* Gypsies and Irish Travellers (G&T) are an ethnic minority in **England and Wales** making up 0.1% of the total population.<sup>1</sup> The 2011 census recorded 29,084 G&T women and girls; 20,063 were aged 16 or over, of whom 5,859 were in employment; 1,047 were self-employed.

In **Scotland** 4,212 people identified as G&T, 51% of whom were female.<sup>2</sup> The council areas with the most G&T residents were Perth & Kinross, Glasgow City and the City of Edinburgh. Two councils accommodated more than 400 G&T whereas seven councils contained fewer than 50.

The census recorded that Gypsy/Travellers, compared to the population as a whole, were:

- less likely to be economically active

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/what-does-the-2011-census-tell-us-about-the-characteristics-of-gypsy-or-irish-travellers-in-england-and-wales-/sty-gypsy-or-irish-travellers.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/what-does-the-2011-census-tell-us-about-the-characteristics-of-gypsy-or-irish-travellers-in-england-and-wales-/sty-gypsy-or-irish-travellers.html)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/10/8378>; only 28% were aged 45 or over (compared to 44% of the population as a whole), and only 4% were aged 70 or over (compared to 12% of the population)

### The Traveller Movement

- more likely to have never worked
- more likely to work in elementary occupations
- were more likely to be divorced or separated, live in lone parent households and have 3 or more dependent children
- were more likely to have worse health than the population, despite a younger age profile.

### Roma:

The 2011 census did not collect information on people identifying as Roma. It was estimated that there were at least 197,705 migrant Roma living in the UK in 2012.<sup>3</sup> This study indicated that this population is predominantly urban and located in existing multi-ethnic areas; in England the Roma populations were concentrated in the North West and London with significant populations in Yorkshire and the Humber, East Midlands and West Midlands.

### Women's role in Gypsy and Traveller communities:

The National Traveller Women's Forum (Ireland) (NWTF) sets out the position as follows:

*Traveller women play a central role in Traveller society. In the domestic sphere, they assume responsibility for child rearing, care of the home and the welfare of both their immediate and extended families. Similar to women in the settled community, they are often the key point of contact with frontline service providers such as GPs, social workers, local authority personnel with responsibility for accommodation, schools, etc. In this context, the well-documented existence of institutional discrimination and prejudice directed at GRT is more likely to affect Traveller women than Traveller men...*

*Broadly speaking, gender roles are clearly divided in the Traveller with distinct divisions between experiences, expectations, decision-making authority and the sense of value associated with each sex. In the main, and undoubtedly with exceptions, men are the dominant grouping, with more access to power, control and*

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, Scullion and Martin, "Migrant Roma in the United Kingdom", 2013, available at: [http://www.salford.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/363118/Migrant\\_Roma\\_in\\_the\\_UK\\_final\\_report\\_October\\_2013.pdf](http://www.salford.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/363118/Migrant_Roma_in_the_UK_final_report_October_2013.pdf)

## The Traveller Movement

*decision-making authority. However this is a changing dynamic and the increased number of Traveller women in voluntary work, paid employment and education is having a positive effect on the choices and experiences of Traveller women.*<sup>4</sup>

G&T women often take on leadership roles and act as spokespersons for their communities. *'The majority of development, advocacy workers and volunteer representatives within the Traveller community are women. As such, women occupy that interface between the Traveller population and service providers. The struggle to assert the needs and rights of the Traveller Community often lies with women'*<sup>5</sup>

One consequence of this engagement is that women may be subjected to racism and discrimination more so than men because they are more involved in community and voluntary activities. In turn, frustration from within the GRT communities at the lack of progress in improving their lives as a result of different initiatives is more likely to be directed at G&T women as a result of the disproportionate nature of their representation.

G&T women have played a significant role in the development of GRT organisations and have made a valuable contribution to the improvement of the lives of GRT in the UK. For example, GRT women in particular were responsible for the establishment and subsequent development of TM, and have contributed to and led on many of TM's capacity building projects. Many UK GRT organisations are led by GRT women and TM can also point to some mainstream organisations led by GRT women. In Ireland, north and south, GRT women have made a particular contribution to the development of health projects, such as *Our Geels: The All Ireland Traveller Health Study, 2010*<sup>6</sup>, *Primary Health Care for Travellers* projects in Ireland; and, since 2010, as Traveller health liaison workers with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.<sup>7</sup>

In the traditional G&T economy, which involved tin-smithing, farm labouring, handicrafts and door-to-door selling, women earned income for the family. They sold pots and pans, did seasonal agricultural work, made and sold pegs, worked in factories, among other tasks. With many of these occupations becoming obsolete or being overtaken by

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<sup>4</sup> National Traveller Women's Forum, Ireland's Gender position paper: <http://www.ntwf.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/NTWF-Gender-Position-Paper.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> NWTF Gender position paper, page 2

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.paveepoint.ie/resources/our-geels-all-ireland-traveller-health-study/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.belfaststrust.hscni.net/about/TravellerHealthLiaisonWorkers.htm>

### **The Traveller Movement**

mechanisation and changes in industrial and agricultural practice, women's economic role has also changed. Discrimination and poor educational outcomes create barriers to G&T people joining the mainstream labour market but there are an increasing number of G&T women working as community workers or in service industries.

### **Women's role in Roma communities:**

Women in the Roma community are traditionally responsible for raising children, health and education. Traditionally, men are the breadwinners and are responsible for decision-making. Identity for many Roma women is deeply connected to motherhood.

Many Roma women in the UK are EU citizens exercising their right to move to and reside in other EU member states; some are also asylum seekers or economic migrants from non-EU member states such as Albania, Serbia or Macedonia. Often living in poor-quality private sector accommodation, doing poorly paid casual work or dependent on restricted welfare benefits, their needs are overlooked by the authorities. Many lack fluency in English and are illiterate in their national languages as well as in English. Roma women and girls endure multiple disadvantages and their experience of discrimination is compounded by poorly understood and poorly respected rights related to their residency in the UK.

### **Social and sexual freedom:**

There are diverse opinions, attitudes and perceptions among GRT women on issues of social and sexual freedom, all highly sensitive matters. Sexuality is often a taboo subject; gender roles are firmly defined and can be difficult to challenge. The NTWF says:

*Strongly held beliefs, traditions and expectations around accepted social and sexual practice remain prevalent within the Traveller population. This, combined with Roman Catholic beliefs around sexual practice and a strong sense of family honour, can create a limiting social environment for Traveller women. The extent to which this is the case varies greatly and can be dependent on factors such as age, the value attached to Catholic teachings within the family, etc.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> NTWF Gender position paper, page 3

## The Traveller Movement

Change in this area, as well as failure to change, can create difficulties for women who attempt to negotiate their way around differing expectations and possibilities.

## Sexual orientation

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues are sensitive ones for GRT communities. There is little research or data on this topic. The European Roma Rights Centre published (December 2015) papers on LGBT experiences in some European countries, although not in the UK.<sup>9</sup>

*In Roma communities, the family is the most important thing, partly because of discrimination from the majority society. The home is the only safe place. Except for LGBTQ people: they usually lose this safety as soon as they come out. They become stigmatised in their own family... It seems that being gay is a very shameful thing in most Roma families. To come out is always difficult, but in Roma communities people often face excommunication from the family or even from the whole community.<sup>10</sup>*

Studies done in Ireland over a decade ago reported young people committing suicide as a result of confusion or distress over their sexual orientation.<sup>11</sup> Given the expectations of early marriage and the highly heterosexualised norm found within G&T communities, this may not be surprising. In summary, the issues facing lesbian, bisexual or transgender women in GRT communities include exclusion from their conservative, traditional, being forced to live an invisible existence and as such remaining vulnerable to all possible forms of discrimination and violence.

## Changing roles/younger women

According to the NWTF: *‘Young Traveller women are faced with the challenge of re-defining their role as young women in the Traveller community. There are more young*

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<sup>9</sup> See for example, Džuvljärke Roma Lesbian Existence, 2013, <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/dzuvljärke-roma-lesbian-existence.pdf>; and <http://www.errc.org/article/roma-rights-2-2015-nothing-about-us-without-us-roma-participation-in-policy-making-and-knowledge-production/4433>

<sup>10</sup> Interview with a Roma LGBTQ activist David Tišer: *‘They become stigmatised in their own family’*; ERRC, December 7, 2015; <http://www.errc.org/article/roma-rights-2-2015-nothing-about-us-without-us-roma-participation-in-policy-making-and-knowledge-production/4433/16>

<sup>11</sup> See Pavee Point *National Strategy for Action on Suicide Prevention submission*. Dublin, 2005; and Nexus *Moving Beyond Coping: An insight into the experiences and needs of Travellers in Tallaght in coping with suicide*. Tallaght Travellers Youth Services, 2006.

## **The Traveller Movement**

*Traveller women in formal education than in previous generations, they are remaining in school for longer and are achieving a greater degree of educational success. There are a number of consequences to this increased level of engagement with the education system. In the first instance, there is a higher degree of interaction with members of the settled community which creates exposure to different value sets and moral codes, both of which can be at considerable variance from those in the Traveller community. This can create some of the challenges alluded to in the section above on 'social and sexual freedom'. Secondly, involvement in the formal education system creates a set of expectations and opportunities around individual potential which did not exist for most in the previous generations of Traveller women. Therefore, young Traveller women today have, relatively speaking, unprecedented scope and opportunity to realise their individual potential. They are however faced with the challenge of achieving this against a backdrop of a very different set of expectations of the roles they should assume amongst some in the older generation in the Traveller population. In some cases the realities of early marriage and the birth of children are still significant factors which inhibit access to and outcomes from education. Furthermore, access to further education and employment opportunities necessitates increased engagement within mainstream society, a society which in the main does not affirm, celebrate or validate Traveller identity. Young Traveller women therefore essentially straddle two cultures, one which is affirming, welcoming and to which they belong by birth and another which is often discriminatory, judgmental but within which educational and employment opportunities lie. These combined issues create a challenging situation for young Traveller women as they work through a number of complex changing situations and in so doing, carry an enormous burden of responsibility in re-defining what it means to be a Traveller woman in contemporary Irish society.'*<sup>12</sup>

## **Equality, non-discrimination & human rights**

Many GRT women experience triple discrimination: discrimination as women, discrimination as GRT and discrimination as GRT women. GRT lesbians, bisexual and transgender women face a further layer of discrimination from the wider hetero-normative society and from within their mainly patriarchal, conservative, Christian/Catholic GRT communities.

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<sup>12</sup> NWTF Gender position paper, page 3

## The Traveller Movement

### Domestic violence

Violence against women affects women from all ethnic and social groups. However *'international evidence indicates that it is most commonly experienced within relationships or communities where there is support for strongly hierarchical or male dominated relationships and where male authority over women and children is culturally expected and condoned (United Nations, 2006)<sup>13</sup>.*

The level of domestic violence in GRT communities is unknown. The EHRC's 2009 Research Report 12 referred to a study of the health of Gypsies and Travellers in Wrexham which *'reported that 61% of married English Gypsy women and 81% of married Irish Traveller women interviewed for the study had experienced direct domestic abuse'<sup>14</sup>.*

As a result of discrimination, poor health, high illiteracy levels and a *'belief that [service] provision is not appropriate or welcoming, or that services are unavailable to them'<sup>15</sup>*, GRT women face additional barriers to accessing information, services and protection from violence, which place them at further risk of domestic and sexual violence.

GRT women face particular problems leaving a violent relationship, and domestic violence incidents are underreported due to a number of factors including: *'literacy issues, taboos on contacting police, problematic access to telephones to call for help or advice, or difficulties in receiving or reading letters if an injunction or other legal advice is sought. A woman who does decide to leave home faces a form of 'double jeopardy' if her family does not support her decision to end her marriage, as "strong community connections and communication means that a woman leaving her husband virtually has to leave the whole community. However, this means losing contact with her culture and her way of life, and facing the prejudice of the settled population alone"<sup>16</sup>.*

Anecdotal information suggests that GRT women who do leave their violent partners can go unsupported by their families and by their GRT communities; taking such a step can bring shame on the family and have an adverse impact on family relationships. Women

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Equality and Human Rights Commission, Research Report 12, 2009: *Inequalities experienced by Gypsy and Traveller communities: A review* Sarah Cemlyn, Margaret Greenfields, Sally Burnett, Zoe Matthews and Chris Whitwell University of Bristol, Buckinghamshire New University, Friends Families and Travellers, p136.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid p136

<sup>15</sup> Ibid p140

<sup>16</sup> Ibid p 141 quoting Guidance from the Greenwich Multi-Agency Domestic Violence Forum *Tackling domestic violence: issues for different groups of women* 2003, p5

### **The Traveller Movement**

who leave or divorce their partners can therefore experience further isolation and criticism. TM is aware of examples of social media being used, often by other GRT women, as a vehicle to control and undermine women's rejection of domestic violence.

### **SPECIFIC ISSUES FACING GRT WOMEN include:**

**Health:** Gypsies and Travellers have a lower life expectancy (over 10% less) than the general population.<sup>17</sup> The EHRC Research Report 12 refers to '*poor take-up of preventative healthcare by Gypsy and Traveller women*' and maternal mortality rates which are significantly higher than the national average. With an infant mortality rate 3 times higher than the national average, G&T mothers are 20 times more likely than the rest of the population to have experienced the death of a child<sup>18</sup> Survivors of domestic violence are at particular risk of depression and mental, as well as physical, ill-health.<sup>19</sup>

**Accommodation:** G&T women suffer disproportionately as a result of evictions and unstable accommodation. 20% of Gypsies and Travellers living in caravans are homeless, as they have no legal place to park their caravans.<sup>20</sup> This makes day-to-day living for G&T women raising families very hard, due to the lack of basic services such as healthcare, education, water, electricity and sanitation.

**Economic inclusion:** mainly because of educational disadvantages and high levels of exclusion and discrimination from an early age, women have low rates of economic activity (41%) and very high rates of unemployment (19%).<sup>21</sup>

**Education:** G&T women experience high levels of illiteracy and poor educational attainment. This is largely as a result of G&T children being amongst the lowest-achieving groups at every Key Stage of education.<sup>22</sup> G&T children experience high levels of racist

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<sup>17</sup> ONS, 2014, What does the 2011 Census tell us about the Characteristics of Gypsy or Irish Travellers in England and Wales? <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105160709/http://ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/what-does-the-2011-census-tell-us-about-the-characteristics-of-gypsy-or-irish-travellers-in-england-and-wales-/rpt-characteristics-of-gypsy-or-irish-travellers.html>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid p54 quoting Parry, G. et al. (2004) *The Health Status of Gypsies and Travellers in England*. Sheffield: University of Sheffield, p 33.

<sup>19</sup> Humphreys, Cathy and Thiara, Ravi (2003) *Mental Health and Domestic Violence: 'I call it symptoms of abuse'* British Journal of Social Work 33, pp.209-226

<sup>20</sup> Ministerial Working Group on tackling inequalities experienced by Gypsies and Travellers, 2012, paragraph 1.1 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/2124046.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> 2011 Census data

<sup>22</sup> Ministerial Working Group on tackling inequalities experienced by Gypsies and Travellers, April 2012, paragraph 2.1

### **The Traveller Movement**

bullying in school resulting in parents removing their children from education.<sup>23</sup> This has a disproportionate affect on G&T women, as they are more likely than G&T men to enter mainstream waged employment requiring formal educational qualifications.<sup>24</sup>

**Women in prison:** GRT women and girls are significantly overrepresented in the prison population. In 2015- 2016, 6% of female prisoners self-identified as GRT in HM Inspectorate of Prison's diversity analysis prisoner survey.<sup>25</sup> HMIP accepts that numbers of GRT prisoners are underestimated and this figure may be greater. For example, in its 2014 study of HM Prison New Hall, Wakefield, 8% of women identified themselves as GRT.<sup>26</sup> There are currently 3,953 women in prison.<sup>27</sup> HMIP's data on children in custody reports that in 2015-16 in the three Secure Training Centre's surveyed, 15% of girls identified as GRT.<sup>28</sup>

### **Conclusion**

TM believes that GRT women and girls will lead the change towards achieving gender equality and it aims to support them via the WEN in addressing the multiple discrimination and social exclusion they face.

Under its GRT women's empowerment strategy to date, TM has facilitated numerous women-only certificated educational and training courses, developed a community (with stipend ) internship programme and progressive employment routes, established a partnership project with Solace Women's Aid (a specialist national women's charity to address sexual and domestic abuse), facilitated drama workshops and psychotherapeutic interventions, produced mental health and maternity care resources including DVDs, and recruited GRT women to join TM's governance structures and staff team.

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<sup>23</sup> ITMB, January 2012 Submission to the Children's Commissioner's school exclusion inquiry, <http://irishtraveller.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/ITMB-Education-Submission-January-20121.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> ITMB, 2010, *Roads to Success: Economic and Social Inclusion for Gypsies and Travellers* [http://www.irishtraveller.org.uk/images/roads\\_to\\_success.pdf](http://www.irishtraveller.org.uk/images/roads_to_success.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> *HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report 2015–16*; 6% of 343 female respondents who completed the Inspectorate's diversity analysis prisoner survey questionnaires identified as GRT; [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/571732/hmip-annual-report.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/571732/hmip-annual-report.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> *People in prison: Gypsies, Romany and Travellers A findings paper* by HM Inspectorate of Prisons, February 2014

<sup>27</sup> See population bulletin, March 3, 2017: [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-figures-2017](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-figures-2017)

<sup>28</sup> *Children in Custody 2015–16*, HM Inspectorate of Prisons, November 15, 2016;

<https://www.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/11/Children-in-Custody-Appendices-2015-16.pdf>

## **The Traveller Movement**

The WEN has ambitious but realistic plans; in the next phase it intends to focus on the following:

### **NEXT STEPS**

1. Setting priorities for action
  
2. Obtaining support to manage change, including training on:
  - a. Conducting discussion/debates on gender equality and sensitive topics such as sexuality & LGBT issues within GRT communities
  - b. Human rights including rights to equality and non-discrimination
  - c. Public speaking
  - d. Working with the media
  - e. Research to identify issues
  - f. Campaigning and influencing
  
3. Making and building alliances and links, with
  - a. GRT community organisations, including developing strategies with GRT men
  - b. LGBT and women's/feminist organisations
  - c. Trade Unions