



An introduction to Gypsies and Travellers

- **The Romany peoples** left India over 1000 years ago, settling all over Europe and arriving in the UK in the 1500s.
- **Irish Traveller** culture is known to date back at least to the 11th century.
- **Many New Travellers** chose a travelling life but they are now into 2nd and 3rd generation.
- **Roma** are Romany people from central and eastern Europe.
- **Other Travellers** include *Showmen, Bargees* and *Circus people*

Around 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers live in the UK. Around 200,000 live in houses and 100,000 in trailers (caravans). Some continue to live a nomadic life, travelling from area to area for part or all of the year. Around 25,000 Gypsies & Travellers are homeless and have nowhere legal to stop. Gypsies and Irish Travellers are recognised as ethnic minorities under the Race Relations Act.

European and UK Gypsies have their own dialects of Romani related to Sanskrit. Irish Travellers have their own language called Cant or Gammon. Parts of conversation may include phrases in their own language, but most will be in English with dialect.

Education

Gypsy and Traveller children experience many disadvantages in education, not least because of being moved on. Many children experience bullying and racist abuse in school. After puberty, there is pressure for some girls to stay at home to avoid mainstream culture. The result is relatively low literacy in adults, making it difficult to access services.

Gypsy and Traveller culture

Whatever their accommodation, traditional Gypsies and Travellers share many of the same customs and beliefs:

- *Close to extended family*
- *Often male and elder dominated*
- *Tend to gender specific roles "Man as the head of the family, woman as the heart"*
- *Strong customs around cleanliness and modesty*
- *Many have an aversion to bricks and mortar.*

Cleanliness

There are cleanliness rituals that many Gypsies and Travellers still observe

in some form, known as the mochadi laws. For example:

- *One bowl for washing up, another for washing the body.*
- *Animals and other domestic pets would not normally be housed with the family- they would live outside.*

Gypsy and Traveller women may worry about not being able to stick to such standards in a refuge or other hostel accommodation. They generally have high standards of cleanliness, and, for example, may use bleach in washing up, which can cause problems with other residents.

Modesty

Women's underwear would not be displayed on a washing line, but may be hidden under a t-shirt or towel. Older girls and boys sleep in separate trailers. Most Gypsies and Travellers would consider it immodest to undress in front of anyone else, possibly even their parents.

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Domestic violence

Because Gypsies and Travellers live on the whole in a closed community, there is a tendency to try and resolve disputes within the extended family. For many issues it is an effective way of dealing with problems – not so for domestic violence. Cultural expectations can also make it difficult for domestic violence to be challenged:

Belief that many men are violent and a woman has to accept such behaviour

Taboos exist against interfering between spouses where violence occurs

Expectations that marriage is for life - women who leave marriage are often ostracised

Barriers to escaping Domestic Violence

The difficulties of Gypsies and Travellers living with domestic violence can be made worse by attitudes and reactions of people outside their communities, Gypsy and Traveller women may feel unable to contact the police or other agencies for support.

Most Gypsies and Travellers will have a social life that is mainly based around their extended family and community. Leaving because of domestic abuse



means a woman not only losing her home and partner, but also her community, her culture and way of life. It also leaves her open to prejudice of the settled population, without the security and protection that a living with her own community brings.

- **Loss of community**
- **Fear of racism**
- **Concerns about living in a house**
- **Beliefs that it is impossible to escape violence as the partner will find the women and children**
- **Lack of knowledge of mainstream services and mistrust of authority**
- **Racism by or within some refuges**
- **Many refuges unable to take large families**
- **Some refuges won't take more than one Traveller woman.**

Advice for workers in refuges and temporary accommodation

- Recognise Gypsies and Travellers in your diversity training and celebration – for your staff and in your refuge. Gypsies and Travellers are the group against which people are the most prejudiced in the UK.

- Offer support with forms and learning the rules – many Gypsy and Traveller women can't read or write well. A CD or DVD version of the rules and information may be helpful.

- Explain that you know some of the cultural differences of Gypsy and Travellers and are willing to help. Ask her what she needs – perhaps new washing bowls for use in the kitchen.

- The children may not have attended school regularly and might not be keen to do so. They may



worry about being teased and picked on. Try to reassure them that they can tell you about any problems that crop up. Contact the local Traveller Education Service through your Education Authority.

- It is always important to reassure woman that leaving their partner or family may not result in losing their children.

- Attend to any health issues the family may have. Families who travel may not have a regular doctor. Contact the local Health visitor about specialist health support available to Gypsies and Travellers.

- Gypsy and Traveller children are used to having a large degree of freedom in their play and may find it difficult to be cooped up in a refuge.

- Traveller children may not be used to having structured bed-times – they are used to being independent, and being part of whatever is going on, at any time of day.

A Safety Plan

- Speak to the woman and children about a safety plan to increase her and her children's safety (this does not necessarily mean permanently leaving her partner)

- If the family has a vehicle, advise her to get spare car keys cut and hide them with money in case of emergency (this may be their only form of escape)

- It is also a good idea to have important documents together in one place to bring if possible- for example ID documents, birth certificate insurance cards, medication and children's health records (red books).

- Explain to the children that they are never to blame for the abuse, and can't stop it. If their father

gets violent, they should get out of the trailer and call for help.

- Who can they get help from? Is there a friend or relative nearby who they can tell? (they may not be willing to call the police). Accept that the woman may return to her community – she may feel she has little or no choice. The Gypsy and Traveller community firmly believe that "marriage is for life" and divorce is rare. Older children may be particularly reluctant to leave permanently.

- Reassure woman that even if she does return to her partner she can still access information and support from the refuge services, but if she needs accommodation, she may need to go to another refuge from the one she was originally in.

Local Contacts

**National Domestic Violence
24 hour Helpline 0808 2000 247**

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Supporting Gypsies and Travellers living with Domestic Violence