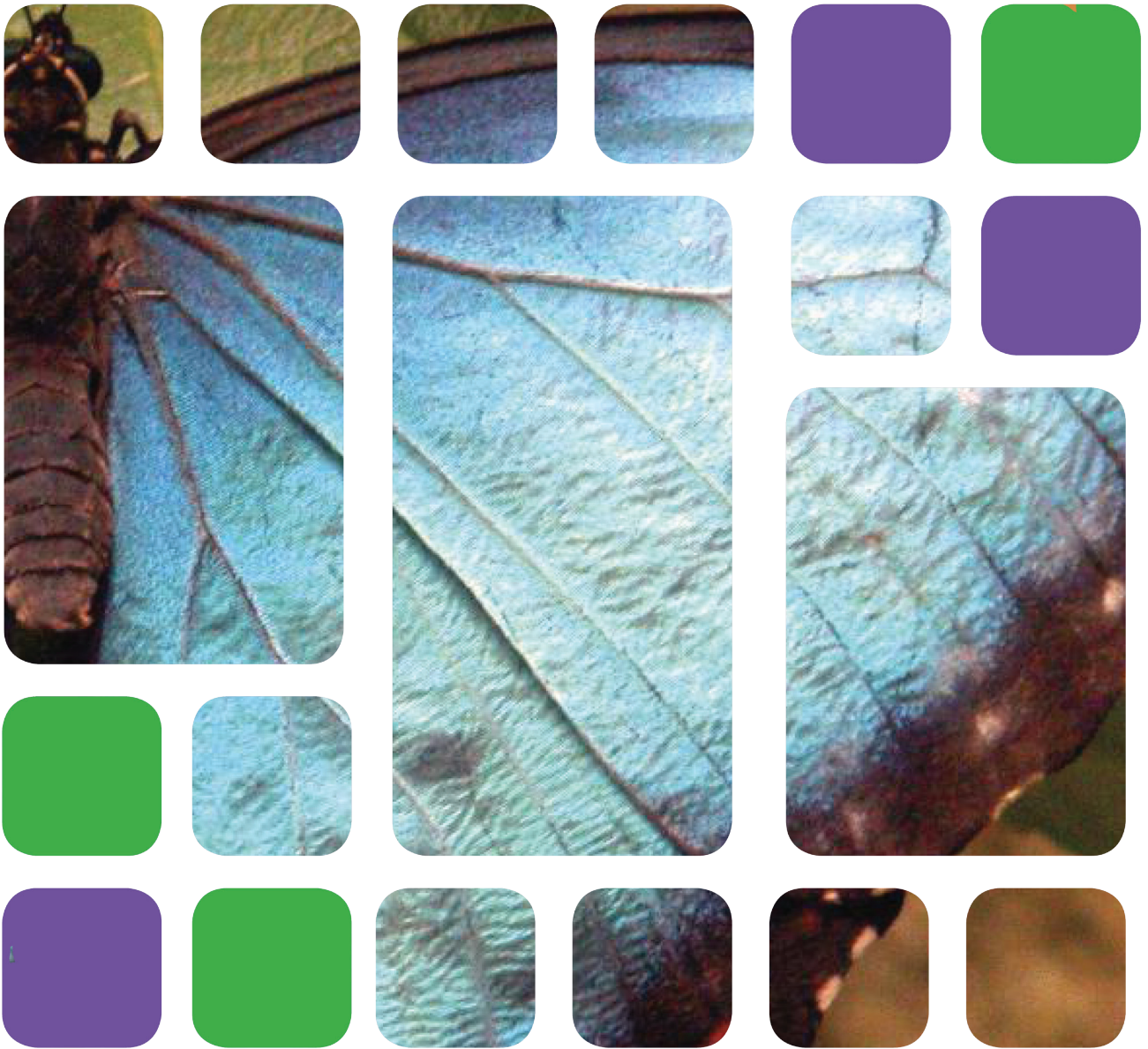
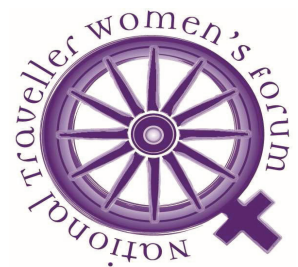


Gender Position Paper



NATIONAL TRAVELLER WOMENS FORUM



Gender Issues in the Traveller Community

The National Traveller Women's Forum (NTWF) is the national network of Traveller women and Traveller women's organisations from throughout Ireland. The NTWF recognises the particular oppression of Traveller women in Irish society and is working to address this issue through the provision of opportunities to enable Traveller women develop collective strategies and skills to work towards the enhancement of their position in society.

This position paper sets out the principles which underpin the NTWF's approach to working with Traveller women and outlines some of the primary gender issues which affect Traveller women. In so doing, the NTWF recognises that Traveller women as members of Irish society are subject to the same systematic and structural barriers to equality as women in the settled population. The issues outlined in this paper document the additional dimensions of inequality which are specific to Traveller women.

1 Principles

The following principles underpin our work:

- We believe all women have a right to equality, dignity and respect. This value base lies at the heart of our work.
- Our ethnic status as members of the Traveller Community is the foundation on which all our work is built. We are proud of our identity as Travellers. We recognise that in highlighting issues which we face as Traveller women we risk inviting criticism or re-enforcing stereotypes from the settled population. This will not inhibit our work. We embrace this challenge as we do not compromise on our rights to equal status either as Travellers or as women.
- We recognise the diversity of women's experience within the Traveller Community which varies according to age, socio-economic status, educational levels, economic activity and other factors. We value the diversity of those experiences equally and welcome debate which helps to reach a deeper understanding of these differing perspectives.
- Our work is informed by the reality of women's experience, recognising that the inequalities we experience are derived from complex structures and systems, both internal and external to the Traveller community, which limit and influence personal choice and freedom.
- We work from a rights based approach. We see equality and freedom from discrimination and oppression as part of our core human rights both as women and as members of an ethnic minority.
- We are committed to the creation of women only spaces for dialogue and debate as means of refining and defining our own analysis as Traveller women. These will be safe, confidential spaces in which all voices are valued.
- We recognise the importance of building strategic alliances with other organisations and with women in the settled community as part of our commitment to drive social and societal change. We recognise the fact that gender inequality is an issue that must be addressed in all sectors and at all levels of Irish society.
- We are committed to representing the needs, interests, experiences and priorities of Traveller women. Our policy and practice will be based on an informed analysis of those. We will provide leadership to and for Traveller women, both amongst Travellers and within wider society.

2 General Profile - Traveller Women

The National Traveller Health Study conducted in 2008¹ states the Irish Traveller population as 40,129; 36,224 in the Republic of Ireland and 3,905 in Northern Ireland. The population profile of Travellers is

similar to that of developing countries with a high birth rate and a young population coupled with high mortality rates and a life expectancy much lower than that of the general population². For example, 62% of the Traveller population is aged less than 25 years compared with the national figure of 35.3% while 2.6% of the Traveller population is over 65 years of age compared to 11% of the national population. Only 25 Travellers were over 85 years of age when the field work was conducted in 2008.

Traveller women have a life expectancy of approximately 71 years, which is 11.5 years less than women in the general population, and is equivalent to the life expectancy of the general population in the early 1960s. This is despite an improvement from 1987 when life expectancy for Traveller women was 65 years.

Travellers, in particular males, continue to have higher rates of mortality for all causes of death. Traveller women, despite there being a 35% reduction in mortality rates since 1987, have a mortality rate 3.1 times that of women in the general population.

Traveller infant mortality is estimated at 14.1 per 1,000 live births. This is a small decrease from an estimated rate of 18.1 per 1,000 live births in 1987. Over the same time period, the general population infant mortality rate has reduced from 7.4 to 3.9 per 1,000 live births.

These headline statistics provide an overarching indicative demographic profile of Traveller women, one which is characterised by a significant disparity in health status compared with women in the overall population in Irish society. For more detailed information on the health status of Traveller women see the [NTWF Factsheet on Health](#).

3 Gender Issues

While this position paper will discuss some areas where discrimination exists for women within the Traveller population, gender issues or differences do not always involve discrimination. Identification of a gender dimension to an issue will sometimes simply draw attention to the fact that women and men have different experiences of that issue. This means it needs to be addressed differently (requiring a different practice or policy response) for women and men. It may also mean that Traveller women who experience an issue experienced by women in wider society such as domestic violence will experience it differently as Traveller women.

In other words, the experience of a Traveller woman will sometimes be distinctive because she is a woman, sometimes because she is a Traveller, and sometimes because she is both.

Role of Traveller Women

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, PHNs, local authority personnel with responsibility for accommodation, schools, etc. In this context, the well documented existence of institutional discrimination and prejudice directed at members of the Traveller Community is more likely to affect Traveller women than Traveller men.

Within the Traveller movement in Ireland, Traveller women have played a significant role in the development of Traveller organisations and in this arena have made a valuable contribution to the improvement of the lives of Travellers in Ireland. Over the last ten years, a significant number of Traveller women have progressed from working in Traveller organisations in a voluntary to a paid capacity, representing a significant and positive development for both Traveller women and Traveller organisations alike.

Broadly speaking, gender roles are clearly divided in the Traveller Community 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 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.

¹ All-Ireland Traveller Health Study, 'Our Geels' (2010), Dept. of Health

² <http://pavee.ie/ourgeels/traveller-population>

Traveller Identity

For ethnic minority groups, expression of identity and pride in identity is an important feature of creating a sense of belonging to society. That identity being positively received and welcomed by the majority population is also a critical factor in the extent to which people experience a sense of place in society. The extent to which that experience is positive or otherwise will affect confidence and self esteem both on an individual level and on a collective level as a community. The extent of discrimination and racism against the Traveller community in Irish society is such that it is not uncommon for Travellers to make deliberate attempts to hide their identity (in a physical sense), to deny their identity or to choose not to disclose it. In the main, this affects Traveller women more than Traveller men because of physical characteristics or traditional style features. In other words, because women may be more readily identifiable as Travellers because of their physical appearance, they are more susceptible to discrimination and may be more likely to conceal their identity to prevent that discrimination from taking place.

Social and Sexual Freedom

Strongly held beliefs, traditions and expectations around accepted social and sexual practice remain prevalent within the Traveller population. This, combined with Roman Catholic beliefs³ 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.

Changing Roles / Younger Women

Issues of social and sexual freedom are matters on which there are diverse opinions, attitudes and perceptions amongst Traveller women and which benefit from ongoing debate to ensure that those differences are respected. As in most communities, issues around sexual practice and social freedom are highly sensitive. 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.

Young Traveller women are faced with the challenge of re-defining their role as young women in the Traveller community. There are more young 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.

³ Religion may be more important to Travellers than to the general comparable population. Religion is 'important' or 'very important' to 89.4% of ROI Travellers and 85.3% of NI Travellers. Source: All-Ireland Traveller Health Study, 'Our Geels' (2010), Dept. of Health.

Accommodation

Recent statistics from both the All Ireland Traveller Health Study 2010 and the 2011 Census show that the majority of Traveller families are accommodated in housing accommodation (both public and private) which is designed with the needs of the settled community in mind and as such is not the preferred accommodation choice of many Travellers. Furthermore, many Traveller women continue to live on sites which lack the most basic provisions required for a healthy and safe environment. The All Ireland Traveller Health Study 2010 shows that there are still significant numbers of Travellers living without access to running water.

One of the more striking developments over the past number of years has been the increase in the number of Traveller families living in private rented accommodation, a particular feature amongst young Traveller families. This creates a particular form of Isolation for younger Traveller women as it involves removal from supports traditionally provided by the extended family. Year on year, these increases have accounted for approximately 25.1%⁴ of all families recorded. In the 2010 Annual Count⁵ the number of families in private rented accommodation rose by 377 to 2,380 families and in 2011, there was an increase of 178 families to 2,558.

Despite Government policies to the contrary, the Traveller Community as a whole cope with the challenge of living in a society which does not accommodate either a nomadic lifestyle or the preferred Traveller specific accommodation choices of members of the Traveller Community. To date, we haven't seen the necessary progress made on the provision of Traveller accommodation following from the publication of the Task Force Report on the Traveller Community in 1995. This report recommended 3,100 units of additional Traveller accommodation. The 2010 annual count of Traveller families conducted by the Dept. of Environment, Community and Local Governments showed that 444 families were living in unauthorised sites and another 2,380 families were living in private rented accommodation, that is, a total of 2824 families were without permanent accommodation at the end of 2010. Also at this time, 451 families shared accommodation; many in overcrowded conditions.

The significantly high number of families living without permanent accommodation or in inadequate accommodation has significant consequences for Traveller women. Women spend more time in the home and are the primary carers so bear the brunt of having to cope with basic conditions such as lack of clean running water, lack of adequate refuse collection, poor sanitation and unsafe areas for children to play. Furthermore, problems with accommodation and poor living conditions can lead to ill health. In particular, it can have an effect on women's mental health as they cope with a challenging combination of tasks; looking after the family, dealing with the local authority, making sure the children have an education, etc. in difficult, challenging circumstances.

Domestic Violence

Violence of one form or another is part of the real life experience of many Traveller Women. The nature of this violence is broad and varied and is experienced within a domestic situation as a member of a community isolated from mainstream society or in the form of institutional violence where services and supports are not accessible or appropriate to the needs of Traveller Women.

The report on the National Study of Domestic Abuse identifies that a disproportionate number of Traveller Women use refuge accommodation and within this, there is also a need for greater awareness amongst Traveller Women of the various support services that are available outside of the refuge model. The Safe Ireland study⁶ shows that 37.7% of all refuge users in 2009 were Traveller women. Meetings with services undertaken by the NTWF during 2010 highlighted that the problem of finding accommodation for Traveller women post-refuge is a significant explanatory factor in why Traveller women access refuges so frequently and why their stay is prolonged. This also appears to be a factor in why Traveller women use the refuge model and do not access support services to the same degree. The National Women's Strategy⁷ identifies 'awareness raising' as a key priority and recommends that local regional and national organisations be resourced to provide this awareness training / support to women. It is commonly agreed that the issue of violence against women is no more prevalent within the Traveller Community than within the settled community but factors such as educational attainment, employment, accommodation and different health status make it

⁴ National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee: Annual Report 2010. Table 1; P.13

⁵ Department of Environment, Community and Local Government Annual count P2

⁶ Safety & Change, A National study of support needs and outcomes for women accessing refuge provision in Ireland, 2009, p.17

⁷ National Women's Strategy 2007 – 2016, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, p. 86

more difficult for Traveller Women to move out of violent relationships and seek help through mainstream services. In some situations, poor relationships with service providers including the Gardaí, Social Welfare, Social Work Depts. of the HSE have also been identified as factors which contributed to Traveller women returning home. Traveller women have cited a history of mistrust, and a lack of understanding on the part of frontline services of the experiences and cultural practices of the Traveller community as being barriers to their safety in situations of domestic violence.

Whilst Traveller women are speaking more of their experiences of domestic violence there remains a significant taboo in relation to sexual assault, rape and childhood sexual abuse. Traveller women rarely access rape crisis centres for support or information. The national statistics provided by the SAVI⁸ report cite 20% of women have experienced sexual assault as adults. In this context, the NTWF is concerned that Traveller women who have similar experience are not accessing emotional, physical or legal support.

Public Representation

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. As a consequence, women are subjected to racism and discrimination more so than men because they are more involved in community and voluntary activities, participate on more committees and have a higher degree of engagement with mainstream services. Furthermore, frustration from within the Traveller Community at the lack of progress as a result of the work of various committees and initiatives is more likely to be directed at Traveller women as a result of the disproportionate nature of their representation.

Anecdotal information suggests that Traveller women are frequently treated differently to Traveller men on committees. Other committee members have pre-conceived ideas of Traveller women and this combined with the societal tendency to attach different values to women and men's perspectives often mean that it is the voice of the Traveller man who is listened to and acted upon.

Employment

The 2002 census shows that 63% of Traveller women are unemployed compared to the national figure of 8%. The Census 2006 records a low level of labour force participation for Travellers with 74.8% of Travellers in the labour force unemployed compared with 8.5% unemployed amongst the national population.

Access to and participation in mainstream employment opportunities for the most part continues to be outside the reach of Traveller women. This is due in part to low education attainment but discrimination from employers is also a major contributing factor. For example, over 55.1% of Travellers who were interviewed as part of the National Traveller Health Study felt they had been discriminated against in attempts to secure work on one or more occasion.

Traveller women who do secure employment continue to face challenges for a number of reasons. Work environments are not necessarily multi-cultural environments and tend to be organised around the needs and expectations of the majority culture. In this context, Traveller women are frequently faced with decisions between honouring the norms of their culture or meeting the demands of their workplace. When these come into conflict, Traveller women are faced with the choice of letting themselves and their community down or letting down their employers. A tangible example is the necessity for Traveller women to attend major family functions which is essentially seen as one of the central and unifying tenets of Traveller culture. However, in the main, employers have terms and conditions of employment in relation to family obligations and compassionate leave which fall far short of expectations within Traveller culture.

Secondly, some of the challenges referred to above for young Traveller women are also faced by women in employment. In being engaged in full time employment, Traveller women have started to re-define what it means to be a Traveller woman. However, in many cases, they have done so with the expectation remaining in the Community that they will continue to fulfill primary roles in rearing children, managing the home and having overall responsibility for the welfare of their families. Therefore, working after normal working hours, at weekends or being involved in work which involves over-night stays away from home can be

⁸ Sexual Abuse & Violence in Ireland Study (SAVI)

viewed as reneging on family responsibilities and can create tensions within the family. The fact that the number of Traveller women in full time employment is a small minority of the overall population makes the challenge of fulfilling both paid work and family roles all the more difficult. Traveller women in employment lack the critical mass necessary within the Community to create a sense that these changed roles may require a change in domestic arrangements involving both women and men.

4 The Challenge for Traveller Women

Traveller women like every other specific grouping in Irish society are disadvantaged in multiple ways. However, challenging gender norms, expectations, stereotypes and discrimination is a complex issue for Traveller women.

The Traveller Community as a whole is subject to widespread negative stereotypes and perceptions within Irish society. This has far reaching consequences in terms of access to education, health care, accommodation and other services which affect Traveller ability to realise their full potential and play a full and equal role in Irish society.

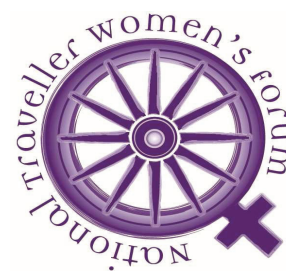
Despite much discussion on this in recent years, many government, public service and NGO agencies fail to collect and analyse data on an ethnic minority basis thus making monitoring the situation of Travellers virtually impossible and significantly effects the ability of Government departments to equality proof their policies or programme in a way which would respond to the needs of Traveller women. Where data is available, it is not gender disaggregated, making a clear analysis of the position of Traveller women in Ireland, the development of specific provisions for them and monitoring progress extremely difficult.

Over the decades, changes forced on the Traveller population by mainstream society, living within a system which is intolerant of a nomadic lifestyle, and persistent attempts at assimilation by successive governments has affected the integrity of Traveller culture. Despite this, Travellers have succeeded in retaining their status as a strong vibrant grouping with a distinct proud identity. However, one of the outcomes of the pressure from mainstream society has been that members of the community, both individually and collectively, are sensitive to, and affected by, perceptions of the Traveller population and of any developments which may result in a further erosion of Traveller culture.

Traveller women, in challenging gender discrimination within their own community may find themselves in a position of divided loyalty. To highlight certain issues and opinions may contribute to re-enforcement of negative stereotypes of their own community in mainstream society, possibly resulting in further experience of discrimination. Failure to highlight and address those practices may help ensure that discriminatory practices against women within the Traveller Community continue. In addition, Traveller women are also conscious of the fine line between culturally accepted norms and cultural practice which actively oppresses women. Traveller women see the need to maintain their culture and to ensure it is passed down the generations, but are faced with an enormous challenge and burden of responsibility when that culture is used as justification or camouflage for the oppression of women within their community.

There have been significant changes over the past number of years to the human rights and equality infrastructure in Ireland as a result of major cuts imposed on the Equality Authority and the Irish Human Rights Commission. Furthermore, a proposal to merge these two bodies is currently under consideration. There have also been severe cuts in the resourcing of community development organisations and the Community Development Programme has been integrated into the Local Development Programme (Partnership). All of these changes have combined to diminish the dedicated time, resources and space available for development work within the Traveller Community. In this context, it is more important than ever to ensure that Traveller women only spaces are retained and that the Traveller women's agenda continues to develop and retain priority in the years ahead.

There remains a pressing need within the Traveller Community to further develop a sense of solidarity between Traveller women and to make positive links with the wider women's movement. The latter will be essential to ensure that the specific needs and issues of Traveller women are included in the gender thinking and analysis which informs the development of policy and practice.



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