

Resource for ISVAs

Working with victims and survivors from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities

Introduction and Overview

Purpose

The beliefs, cultures and experiences of specific groups or communities may impact on individuals' ability or willingness to engage with ISVA services and report their experiences to the Police. It is imperative that all victims/survivors can access specialist sexual violence support and receive an equitable service that is conscious of and tailored to their specific needs.

LimeCulture has developed this resource to assist ISVA services in identifying areas within their service delivery model that can be adapted to meet the needs of victims/survivors from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, and to specifically support ISVAs in their work with this client group.

This resource has been created in consultation with advocates from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, academics, and ISVA services who have supported members of these communities. LimeCulture would like to extend a special thanks to Zoë James, Professor of Criminology at the University of Plymouth, for her guidance and contribution.

Aims

This resource aims to:

- Provide a brief introduction to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.
- Highlight specific barriers for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in accessing ISVA support and engaging with ISVAs and professionals.
- Equip ISVAs with accurate information to inform practice and provide practical suggestions and tips to make ISVA services more accessible and equitable for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

Terms

- 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller' is a broad term frequently used to describe a diverse range of people/communities whose social identities are underpinned by historic categorisation, nomadism and/or ethnicity. This umbrella term encompasses numerous groups and communities who have their own unique histories, beliefs, cultures, traditions and languages; however, it is also recognised that the use of such a broad term may serve to overlook the unique and distinct cultures within individual communities.¹
- 'Travelling communities' is commonly used within this resource to refer to all communities and people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups. Non-Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are commonly referred to as 'settled' communities.
- The terms 'victim' and 'survivor', and 'sexual violence' and 'sexual abuse', will be used interchangeably throughout this resource.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities

Background

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities have been present in the UK for hundreds of years and whilst historically Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities have lived nomadic lives, not all communities travel. For example, Roma (who more recently travelled to the UK as migrants during the post-war period from central and eastern Europe) are often perceived as 'settled' people. It is important to note that, even when people are settled, nomadism often (but not always) remains central to their identity.

Today, many families live in bricks and mortar homes or on permanent pitches and authorised sites, with some having both houses and caravans.² The term 'Travelling' can incorporate:

- Being on the road and moving regularly from site to site
- Living in caravans and mobile homes on approved sites or private sites
- Living in settled accommodation during the winter and travelling during the summer
- Living in built houses, settled together
- Living on a boat and travelling on the waterways.

However, due to experiences of discrimination within local planning systems and the removal or lack of legitimate spaces and sites, many Travelling communities feel pressure to move into bricks and mortar homes where the alternative is living on unauthorised sites and/or the roadside.

Systematic violence, the lack of provision of legitimate space and the threat of eviction creates forced movement and the use of unsafe spaces among Travelling communities, often positioning them in direct conflict with settled communities. This can result in hostility, violence, and marginalisation leading to social and economic exclusion – including being unable to access critical support services.³

Legislation

Many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are protected from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010 and the Race Relations Order (Northern Ireland) 1997. Yet not all communities (i.e. Showpeople, New Travellers) are afforded protection within legislation, and those who are still experience frequent discrimination, racist sentiment and hate crime.

Discrimination, Marginalisation and Hate

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are some of the most disadvantaged and excluded groups in the UK.⁴ There exists a long history of persecution, discrimination and unfounded association with vagrancy and criminality, which ultimately leads to vilification, marginalisation, and social exclusion.⁵

Experiences of discrimination, persecution and hate manifest differently for different Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, with their experiences distinct and individual to their history, culture, ethnicity and circumstances. For example, Roma (Romani or Romy) people face very different prejudices and inequalities to those faced by Gypsies and Travellers. Roma people migrated from Europe following their oppressive treatment, vilification, enslavement, and racial genocide. It is estimated that between 250,000 and 1.5 million Gypsies, Roma and Travellers were killed as part of the Nazi regime's policy of ethnic cleansing.⁶ For these groups, discrimination embedded in racism and stigmatisation as migrants remains prevalent today.

Racism is frequently experienced by many Travelling communities, such as those of Roma and Irish heritage; discrimination also often focuses on the nomadic identities of Gypsy, Roma or Traveller people in general.

A wealth of research identifies hate, hostility, and harassment towards Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. For example, a small study of 79 people by Professor Zoë James in 2020 reported 225 hate crimes or incidents committed against them based on their identity as a Gypsy or Traveller.⁷ These combined factors mean that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are often overpoliced as offenders and unrecognised and unsupported as victims.

“ Crimes committed against Gypsies and Travellers that ranged from name calling and abuse, to criminal damage of vehicles (homes), stone throwing and serious physical assault which overall constitutes an endemic level of hostility towards Gypsies and Travellers. ”

**Zoë James (2020:12) The Harms of Hate for Gypsies and Travellers:
a critical hate studies perspective**

The discriminatory experiences of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are often amplified by negative and harmful stereotyping in the media. For example, reports often feature inaccurate themes of uncleanliness and criminality when, in reality, many communities practice a commitment to cleanliness ('mochadi'); and there is no evidence to support the existence of higher crime rates.

As a result of discrimination and hate crime, Travelling communities can construct “virtual and physical boundaries as a means of protection from a society that is hateful of them”.⁸ This habitually manifests in unmet educational, welfare or health needs and insufficient support for issues such as mental health, domestic and/or sexual abuse, sexuality, and substance misuse, often resulting in poorer life outcomes and high rates of suicide.^{9,10}

Domestic and Sexual Abuse

Current UK data estimates domestic abuse is experienced by 25 to 35% of women and girls and sexual abuse is experienced by 18% of women and girls.^{11,12} Very little is known about the extent of sexual and domestic violence in Travelling communities and Police reporting rates are unsurprisingly low. However, the limited data available indicates that domestic abuse rates are disproportionately higher within Travelling communities with estimates of between 60-80% of women and girls having experienced domestic abuse; data also indicates that Traveller women may experience more severe abuse over longer periods of time.^{13,14,15,16}

Within the Parliamentary Women and Equalities Committee's inquiry 'Tackling Inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities', it was reported that women from these communities are not always able to identify abusive behaviour. They can believe it is their husband's right to have sex with them, or perceive abuse as 'just the way things are'.¹⁷ In addition, Police reporting is considered a cultural and social taboo and victims/survivors are less likely to seek support or ask for help as they both fear prejudice and are often unaware of services and/or how to access support.¹⁸

“ Anecdotal information suggests that insecurely accommodated or nomadic women experiencing violence will often put their family first, prioritising the need to maintain a home over their own health and well-being. ”

**South East Wales Women's Aid Consortium:
Domestic Abuse & Equality, Gypsy & Traveller Women Briefing (2010)**

When support is sought, it can often be accompanied by a loss of family, friends and community. Emergency accommodation can be difficult to access especially for individuals with larger families and unfamiliar necessities such as navigating legal and welfare processes and financial management can be daunting.

It is, however, important to note that many women take great pride in their roles within the family and community, and consider their Gypsy, Roma or Traveller identity irrelevant in situations of domestic abuse and/or sexual violence. In addition a 'generational shift' has been identified in which women and girls are exercising more choice and control in their lives.¹⁹

Barriers to Support

There are many barriers and issues for victims/survivors of sexual violence from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities that together contribute to individuals from these communities being less likely to disclose sexual violence and seek support from mainstream services. Experiences will of course be unique to each community and differ from person to person; however, there are common and intersecting barriers to accessing support experienced across these communities that ISVA services will want to consider.

1 Discrimination and Mistrust

2 Exclusion and Isolation

3 Culture and Moral Codes

4 Education, Literacy and Language

5 Risks and Repercussions

For victims/survivors of sexual violence, initial and continued engagement with specialist sexual violence support services may prove difficult unless services are able to adapt their approaches to ensure accessible, equitable and tailored support for clients from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

In response to the barriers that can exist for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people when accessing services and support, ISVA services may choose to consider the following questions:

- How can ISVA services ensure Travelling communities are able to access and engage with services for crucial support?
- How can equitable and tailored support be delivered to Travelling communities?
- How can practice, protocols and ISVA support models be adapted to meet the specific needs of Travelling communities?
- How does the background and dynamic of Travelling communities impact on initial and subsequent risk and needs assessment? Are specific needs and/or risks heightened?

Areas ISVA services may wish to address are explored in more detail in the following section.

“ Gypsies’ and Travellers’ trust in local authorities, policing agencies and even civil society has been disrupted by their ill-treatment over time and the multiple harms they have suffered as a consequence. ”

Zoë James (2020:56) The Harms of Hate for Gypsies and Travellers: a critical hate studies perspective

Due to an extensive history of discrimination, prejudice and hate, there is often resistance to and mistrust of external services among Travelling communities. This, combined with forced control and fear of children being removed, has resulted in a collapse of trust in mainstream agencies and low rates of reporting and accessing support.

In a 2016 study by the Traveller Movement, 98% of survey respondents disclosed discrimination due to their Gypsy, Roma or Traveller identity as well as evidence of discrimination around authorised accommodation sites and emergency housing access.²⁰

It has been suggested that public agencies providing welfare, health, and education services have previously ‘acted in a policing role’ by gathering and sharing information to assist evictions and push people into housing.²¹ As such, involvement with such services is generally avoided: “I think social services are one of the biggest barriers in why Traveller women are not asking for help ... You have to stay at home, be a punch bag and cover up your bruises in order to keep your children”.²²

Trust previously established between Travelling communities and agencies can quickly break down due to communities’ movement out of an area or when professionals move on. Individuals may not know how to contact new services and/or be reluctant to establish new relationships with professionals.

Top Tips for ISVAs:

- > Building trust is integral to enabling access and engagement with ISVA services. Demonstrating empathy and understanding of the history and culture of individuals’ communities and the barriers to support will build trust and rapport.
- > Partnership working with local Gypsy, Roma and Traveller organisations can assist in creating trusted relationships and promoting ISVA services in a sensitive way.
- > Challenge misconceptions or discriminatory language/practices among other professionals.
- > Individuals will often share information about trusted professionals within their community. Therefore, explore opportunities to retain clients who may move around geographically through telephone or online support to facilitate access to new services.

“ The prejudice and discrimination they face in their everyday lives means that they are rarely effectively supported by health and welfare agencies, nor are they acknowledged as worthy of support from, or as part of, their local settled communities. ”

**Zoë James (2020:12) The Harms of Hate for Gypsies and Travellers:
a critical hate studies perspective**

Some Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities have felt the need to create social and physical barriers from settled communities in response to marginalisation and exclusion. As such they will often turn internally for support, or even hide their identities from public agencies as a form of protection. Research from the Traveller Movement showed 55% of individuals reported having been refused services simply due to their Gypsy, Roma or Traveller identity.²³

Whilst the close-knit nature of Travelling communities can be supportive, the close living arrangements between families and neighbours can limit safe spaces and privacy – this may prevent those who are considering reaching out to external agencies for support from doing so.

Victims/survivors of sexual violence and abuse who do choose to leave their community may experience isolation from support networks and their entire way of living. Adjusting into mainstream communities can be immensely difficult and, for many, the combined trauma of the abuse and the upheaval of their life is often too significant to contemplate leaving. If internal support (from other community members) is not available, and external support considered unsuitable, victims/survivors can be left with nowhere to turn.

It is vital that external specialist support following domestic or sexual violence is promoted and perceived as a viable, accessible and safe option to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

Top Tips for ISVAs:

- > Work in partnership with local Gypsy, Roma and Traveller organisations to support service inclusivity, open communication channels, and set up simplified referral pathways.
- > Consider alternative routes into services such as drop-ins and the placement of promotional material in community-accessed spaces to promote and explain the role of ISVA services.
- > Challenge other professionals/services on discriminatory practice or refusal of services based on Gypsy, Roma or Traveller identity.
- > Ensure support plans respond holistically to the unique needs of the individual, especially in relation to safe engagement, community isolation and partnership working.

“ There is a strong belief within the Gypsy and Traveller community that marriage is for life. Divorce is rarely acceptable and women who do leave their husband often experience shame and discrimination or have to leave the community entirely. ”

**South East Wales Women’s Aid Consortium, Domestic Abuse & Equality:
Gypsy & Traveller Women Briefing (2010)**

Within some Travelling communities there exist strong cultural and traditional moral codes including those on relationships and sex. These moral codes are intended to serve as protective factors within communities; however, language, behaviour or incidents which contradict these codes can result in the belief that ‘shame’ has been brought on the family or community with possible repercussions including, threats, violence and even death.^{24,25,26}

Strict gender roles may also operate, with women and girls expected to be subordinate and dedicate their lives to the household and the maintenance of family units.²⁷

There is a perception of a lack of understanding from professionals about the history, culture, and challenges for Travelling communities. The Parliamentary Women and Equalities Committee’s 2019 report ‘Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities’ highlighted that a trusted professional who understood their specific needs and did not ask intrusive or offensive questions was a critical factor in engaging successfully with Travelling communities.

A failure to understand and respond sensitively to the specific needs and moral codes of Travelling communities will reinforce assumptions that ISVA services are unsuitable or unwelcoming for individuals from these communities.

Top Tips for ISVAs:

- > Knowledge, respect, and cultural sensitivity in addition to an awareness of Travelling communities’ traditions and moral codes are essential to enabling ISVA services to build trust and sustain engagement.
- > Avoid intrusive questions and adapt language to be culturally sensitive and non-offensive.
- > Recognise that, in some situations, abuse may be perceived as normal. Additional support to exploring consent, healthy relationships and the dynamics of abuse will be key to ensuring the long-term safety of victims/survivors.
- > Prioritise partnership working with local Gypsy, Roma and Traveller organisations – this can help inform knowledge and practice internally and assist in the formation of trusted relationships with ISVA services.

“ One of the biggest issues I faced was my client not being able to spell her surname and her children’s surnames were also spelt differently. It caused huge problems when working with and advocating to agencies on her behalf or trying to complete paperwork. ”

ISVA

Among some Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, there are feelings that their heritage and identity are poorly reflected in the school curriculum. This, combined with personal and community experiences of discrimination and bullying within education settings, may result in informal exclusion from the education system.^{28,29}

Poor educational attendance and attainment among Travelling communities may also result in literacy difficulties for individuals, although rates of illiteracy are falling and indeed vary greatly between different Travelling communities (and therefore should not be assumed). ISVA services should consider whether existing service leaflets, posters, self-referral routes and websites are accessible for those with literacy difficulties.

Some Travelling communities have strict moral rules in relation to sex education in school – as a result children, and therefore adults, may lack knowledge on sex education, healthy relationships, and issues relating to domestic and sexual abuse. Moreover, language itself is important and powerful to many Travelling communities, and can be considered ‘dirty’ or ‘polluting’ when in relation to sex, pregnancy and menstruation.

Culturally insensitive use of language can be offensive and may result in victims/survivors being deterred from contacting services or their rapid disengagement following initial contact.

Top Tips for ISVAs:

- > Consider and adapt your language when making initial contact and supporting victims/survivors from the Travelling communities.
- > Consider adapting the ISVA service’s promotional material and resources to include image-based information and culturally sensitive language. Short videos and soundbites of information can also be helpful.
- > Supporting individuals to challenge issues within and barriers to education can be an important step in accessing education and, specifically, knowledge about healthy relationships.
- > External services outside the education system may be able to complete healthy relationship work in a safe and accessible space. Some Traveller organisations have been known to assist local services with the development of culturally sensitive packages of education on sex and relationships.

5 Risks and Repercussions

It can be argued that when certain cultural traditions (such as females living with males' families) and moral codes (such as the belief that marriage is for life) intersect with discrimination and marginalisation, the risks facing an individual are compounded.^{30,31}

Where victims/survivors of sexual violence or domestic abuse continue to live with their abuser and/or on site with the abuser's family, then the risk of violence and further harm can be significantly heightened from both the perpetrator and other family members. As with all incidents of domestic abuse, the point of leaving an abusive relationship can escalate risk. The tight-knit nature of Travelling communities can result in victims/survivors who leave being readily located; the notion of 'internal community surveillance' is an ever-present risk to the safety of victims/survivors from Travelling communities.

Reporting to the Police or engaging with domestic abuse or sexual violence services may result in the loss of family and friends, ostracisation from the whole community and, in some cases, violent and extreme repercussions. The enormity of leaving a community and way of life in exchange for potential isolation among settled people constitutes a huge barrier to reporting and/or accessing support. For Roma communities in particular, many repercussions following reporting or accessing support may relate to welfare and immigration rights – often the threat of homelessness or deportation is enough to ensure silence.

For many Gypsy, Roma or Traveller people, reporting abuse, accessing external support and leaving their community to escape violence may feel impossible.

Top Tips for ISVAs:

- > Rigorous and repeat risk assessment and safety planning is essential. In some situations, additional questions around honour-based violence may also need to be explored.
- > The implementation of safe contact and communication plans is essential to avoid compounding or escalating risk.
- > Utilising safeguarding partnerships with domestic abuse services, the Police, and housing will be of paramount importance when considering the immediate and long-term safety of your client.
- > Partnership working with local Gypsy, Roma and Traveller organisations can assist with opening communication channels and effectively and sustainably implementing safety plans.
- > Avoid visiting victims/survivors on site or at home – it is likely to be quickly noticed by neighbours and could result in serious repercussions.
- > Those who leave or are cast out from Travelling communities are likely to experience dramatic impacts on their way of life, health and emotional well-being. ISVAs should ensure holistic support plans are in place to address safety, isolation, housing, and health needs among others.

Some Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Definitions

Bargees Travellers

Bargees Travellers are ‘live aboard’ boat dwellers, who usually navigate and travel using canal systems. They tend to have chosen this lifestyle to live and travel by boat. Many have jobs and children at school on land; however, a significant minority have no fixed ties and travel long distances on the waterways.

Irish Travellers

Irish Travellers can be traced back to the 12th century and are a nomadic community with their own unique culture, traditions, and language. Some Travellers of Irish heritage identify as Pavee or Minceir, Shelta or Cant.

The majority of Irish Travellers are of the Catholic faith and culture is family-oriented, with specific moral values and codes (i.e. in relation to relationships and hygiene – ‘mochadi’).

Irish Travellers are recognised as an ethnic group under the Equality Act 2010 in Great Britain and the Northern Ireland Race Relations Order 1997.

New Travellers

New Travellers (formerly known as New Age Travellers) took up a nomadic style of living in the UK during the music, hippie and free-festival movements of the 1960-1980s. Some were inspired by traditional Gypsy and Traveller lifestyles; however, research has shown that many were pushed into a travelling lifestyle through poverty or social exclusion.

Under planning law, New Travellers are recognised as a Gypsy and Traveller community.

Roma Romany Romani

Roma, also called Romany or Romani, are a European ethnic group who originated in northern India and Pakistan but migrated principally in Europe and more recently to the UK during the post-war period due to racial persecution.

Many Romani groups refer to themselves by different names such as Sinti, Kalderashi, or Lalleri. Sinti are Roma with historical roots in German-speaking lands.

Most Roma speak some form of Romany, as well as the primary language of the country in which they live.

Romany Gypsies Romany Gypsies migrated to the UK from Europe and India during the 15th century. The term ‘Gypsy’ comes from ‘Egyptian’ due to settled communities’ incorrect assumptions about their heritage.

Culture is family-oriented, with specific moral values and codes (i.e. in relation to relationships and hygiene – ‘mochadi’).

Romany Gypsies are recognised as an ethnic group under the Equality Act 2010 in Great Britain.

Scottish Gypsies / Travellers Scottish Gypsies or Travellers have been documented in Scotland since the 15th century.

Communities are unique, speaking a variety of different languages/dialects that pertain to distinct customs, histories, and traditions. Scottish Travellers are linked culturally to Romany Gypsies and, depending on location, a mix of languages are spoken including Scottish Gaelic, Scottish Cant or Beurla-reagaird. Scottish Travellers follow similar cultural norms in relation to relationships and hygiene (‘mochadi’).

Scottish Travellers are recognised as an ethnic group under the Equality Act 2010.

Showmen Showmen are economic/commercial Travellers who have a distinctive culture and lifestyle. They operate circuses and funfairs and move from town to town in the fair season between February and November.

Showpeople’s identity is largely connected to the family business; however they do share similar cultural traditions to other Gypsies and Travellers.

Showpeople are not recognised within the Equality Act 2010 due to being classed as ‘occupational Travellers’. They are however provided with some protection for their settlements in planning law.

Welsh Gypsies / Travellers Welsh Gypsies/Travellers are made up of two distinct groups: the Kale and the Romanichal. They migrated to Wales from the southwest of England during the 17th and 18th century. For several generations they lived their nomadic lifestyles separately from the Welsh settled communities. The authentic dialect of the Kale ‘Welsh Romani’ was spoken at least until the 1950s in North Wales.

Welsh Gypsies are recognised as an ethnic group under the Equality Act 2010.

Language and terms to be familiar with

**Gorja, Gorgers,
Gaujos, Gaje,
Buffers, Dossers**

Non-Gypsies/Travellers who do not travel. Gorgification:
become like a non-gypsy

**Managing
Females**

The control of females within the family/community

**Mochadi,
Mahrimé, Melali**

A strict hygiene code called 'mochadi' (meaning 'unclean') that requires individuals to ensure that they are clean and consider cleanliness at all times. This means regular hand washing, use of appropriate tools to carry out tasks, and generally having a constant awareness of dirt.

Nomadic

Travelling regularly from place to place, for economic reasons

Vardo

A Vardo wagon is a horse-drawn wagon traditionally used by British Romanichal Travellers as their home.

Further Reading

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Roads From The Past | A Short Film | Travellers' Times Online

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