

Pavee Beoirs and Lackeens Our Health, Our Words



Traveller Women's Mental Health in Focus



“The right to health is closely related to and dependent upon the realisation of other human rights, as contained in the International Bill of Rights, including the rights to food, housing, work, education, human dignity, life, non-discrimination, equality, the prohibition against torture, privacy, access to information, and the freedoms of association, assembly and movement. These and other rights and freedoms address integral components of the right to health.”

UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2000

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre is a non-governmental organisation committed to the attainment of human rights for Irish Travellers and Roma. The organisation works from a community development perspective and promotes the realisation of human rights and equality for Travellers and Roma in Ireland. The group is comprised of Travellers, Roma and members of the majority population, who work together in partnership to address the needs

of Travellers and Roma as minority ethnic groups experiencing exclusion, marginalisation and racism.

Travellers are a minority ethnic group, indigenous to the island of Ireland. Travellers maintain a shared history, language, traditions and culture. Travellers are recognised as one of the most marginalised groups in Irish society as they experience structural and systematic discrimination, state neglect and active prejudice.

Travellers: Mental Health and Suicide in Context

Though Irish Travellers make up less than 1% of Ireland's population, they are 6 times more likely to commit suicide than the majority population, with suicide accounting for approximately 11% of all Traveller deaths (*All Ireland Traveller Health Study - Our Geels, 2010*).

Travellers' poor mental health and suicide is rooted in interlocking systems of oppression which has particular consequences for Traveller women and girls. Traveller women experience multiple forms of discrimination based on their gender, ethnicity, sexuality,

nationality, socio-economic status and so forth.

Research unveils stark health inequalities for Traveller women due to structural inequalities and failure to address the social determinants of health, including poor accommodation conditions, poverty, illiteracy and discrimination.

Pavee Beoirs and Lackeens: Our Health, Our Words, contextualises the complex and often nuanced structural and institutional forces that shape Traveller women's mental health in contemporary Ireland.



Missie Collins

Photo: Derek Speirs



Everybody has a role to play, the health services, service providers

and Traveller organisations. Traveller organisations need to be resourced to make sure our work continues to support Traveller women on the ground as we are the important link between Travellers and health services. We have a strong relationship built up over years with Traveller families and from working on the ground we, as Traveller Primary Health Care Workers, see women living in very bad accommodation and how this impacts on their mental health.

We also work with health services to make them more culturally appropriate. We have done in-service training with lots of doctors and I've told them, when you come across a Traveller woman you need to think, where is she coming from? Is she educated? What are the conditions that she's living in? Because if she's not educated and she's sitting there in front of a doctor who is highly educated and they start putting big words to her, she might not understand what's being said or have the confidence to ask questions.

This isn't going to really help her and she might not want to come back to the service. These are the things that they don't teach doctors and that's why our work is so important."

Missie Collins



Rosaleen McDonagh

Photo: Derek Speirs



As a Traveller feminist, women's health issues will always be a priority.

When sexism and racism are everyday realities, it is incumbent upon us as Travellers that we mind our mental health. Our mothers had a map of what their lives would be and what their lives could be. It's in us, it's in our bodies. We are the custodians of Traveller culture. It's our responsibility to stretch, twist and push the boundaries of historical gendered specific roles. Many Beoirs are heading into uncharted waters. We have a generation ahead of us that are going to do the Leaving Cert, go to college. A book on one hand, a baby on the other. There is no sat nav or road map. Asking the questions, 'what did other Traveller women write about managing this journey?' This can feel very daunting and isolating. Symptoms of mental health often make us believe that to be static is to be safe. Progress was normal, it's vital.

We know, we trust, we offer wisdom, pride and confidence in the form of language, customs and heritage. As a community, we will support the next generation of Beoirs to make their own reference points, for this has always been a defining element of Traveller culture."

Rosaleen McDonagh



Melissa and Megan Collins

Photo: Derek Speirs



Mental health services need to understand Traveller culture and accept Traveller women for who they are and that might mean giving practical support such as reading and filling out forms.”

Melissa and Megan Collins

Census, 2011

- 17.7% of Travellers had no formal education compared with 1.4% of non-Travellers.
- 69% of Travellers were educated to primary level or lower.
- 90% of Travellers ceased their full time education at 17 years old.
- 115 or 1% of Travellers completed third level education. Of the 115, 76 were women.



Bridgie Collins

Photo: Derek Speirs



I would rather talk to my mother or another Traveller because I don't

feel a connection talking to a settled person because they don't understand what you are going through and they don't know you personally."

Bridgie Collins

All Ireland Traveller Health Study - Our Geels, 2010

- The level of complete trust by Travellers in health professionals was only 41%; this compares with a trust level of 82% by the general population in health professionals.
- 53% of Travellers "worried about experiencing unfair treatment".
- Over 40% of Travellers had a concern that they were not always treated with respect and dignity.
- Over 50% of Travellers have experienced discrimination in their daily lives.
- 83% of Travellers reported receiving health information and advice from Primary Health Care for Traveller Projects (PHCTPs).



Emma Collins

Photo: Derek Speirs



Positive mental health would be someone who is comfortable and

happy about where their life is and good things are happening. When I think of poor mental health, it is someone who is stressed or worrying and depressed about certain things such as someone who just had a baby and are afraid they might get sick or something else might happen.”

Emma Collins

All Ireland Traveller Health Study - Our Geels, 2010

- The infant, neonatal and post-neonatal mortality rates of Travellers are among the highest in Europe.
- The infant mortality rate for Travellers is 2.8 times the EU average.
- The neonatal mortality rate for Travellers is almost 2 times the EU average.
- The post-neonatal mortality rate for Travellers is 4.5 times the EU average.



Tessa Collins

Photo: Derek Speirs



If a Traveller woman is feeling isolated from services and needs

help, there shouldn't be barriers in the way for that woman, it's time barriers were removed and services need to help Traveller women accessing their services. When a woman seeks help from mainstream services there shouldn't be a fear that they will be discriminated against, there shouldn't be a fear that her children will be taken from her. That fear needs to be removed. Services need to work with Traveller organisations to combat these issues."

Tessa Collins



Kathleen Reilly

Photo: Derek Speirs



When I think of mental health, I think of anxiety, stress and loads of it.

Traveller women with families are quicker to hide it because they wouldn't want the shame. They would want to be occupied with the children but it's when they sit down or have alone time, they would actually feel it."

Kathleen Reilly

All Ireland Traveller Health Study - Our Geels, 2010

Various institutional, cultural, social and structural barriers restrict Traveller women from accessing and engaging with mental health services. These include:

- Discrimination and racism (both at individual and institutional levels).
- Lack of trust with healthcare providers.
- Lack of culturally appropriate service provision.
- Lack of engagement from service providers with Travellers and Traveller organisations.
- Social and cultural stigma attached to engaging with mental health services.



Theresa Reilly

Photo: Derek Speirs



I think Traveller women suffer more now than ever with mental health

and services not being culturally appropriate isn't helping. We get our health information from the Traveller Community Health Workers but the services also need to support Traveller women to make them more accessible and make sure they get the help they need."

Theresa Reilly

All Ireland Traveller Health Study - Our Geels, 2010

- Life expectancy for Traveller women is 11.5 years less than women in the general population.
- The infant mortality rate is 3.6 times the rate of the general population.
- Suicide for Traveller women is 5 times higher than the general population.
- 62.7% of Traveller women disclosed that their mental health was not good enough for one or more days in the last 30 days; this was compared to 19.9% of General Medical Services (GMS) female cardholders.



Rebecca McDonnell

Photo: Derek Speirs



Mental health is not a well talked about subject in the community, for Traveller women. It is very under the radar, pushed to the side, not expressed enough. As a Traveller woman you might be able to confide in a friend but there is that taboo with mental health.”

Rebecca McDonnell

Recommendations to Improve Traveller Women's Mental Health

- Recognition and understanding of the multiple forms of discrimination on Traveller women and girls, and how this impacts negatively on mental health.
- Mental health services to work in partnership with Traveller organisations to ensure that Traveller women and girls have equitable access to mental health services and supports. This includes identifying institutional and structural barriers that prevent Traveller women and girls in accessing mental health services/supports and developing appropriate responses in consultation with Traveller organisations.
- Engage and work in partnership with Traveller organisations and Primary Healthcare Traveller Projects (PHCTPs) to develop and deliver a gender specific positive mental health awareness and suicide prevention campaign.
- Support and resource the development of culturally appropriate mental health education materials in partnership with PHCTPs targeting Traveller women, girls and family members.
- Support and resource Traveller organisations to deliver cultural awareness and anti-racism training to mental health service providers and support workers to increase cultural awareness and competence.
- Encourage and facilitate Traveller mental health peer support programmes using the PHCTP as a model of good practice.
- Work in partnership with Traveller organisations to ensure mental health and suicide strategies and initiatives are inclusive and respond to the needs of Traveller women and girls.
- Work with PHCTPs to develop an accessible and Traveller-proofed directory of available mental health supports, services and pathways of care.
- Ensure that Traveller women who are pregnant have equitable access to perinatal mental health services and supports and are provided with quality and culturally appropriate care.
- Prioritise the implementation of an ethnic identifier across all routine health administrative systems to monitor equality of access, participation and outcomes to suicide prevention and mental health services for Travellers.

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Compiled by Lynsey Kavanagh, 2017

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