



Gender Implications of the Covid 19 Pandemic

Traveller and Roma - Ireland

Name of Organisation: National Traveller Women's Forum and Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre

- 1. Has your organisation considered whether or not the policies that it has put in place or that are planned in response to the Covid 19 pandemic have different implications for men and women?**

The **National Traveller Women's Forum** is a network of national Traveller women and Traveller organisations throughout Ireland that recognises the particular oppression of Traveller women in Irish society. The prioritisations of our work throughout this pandemic has been to ensure that Traveller women and girls have the information relevant to them and support they need to stay safe. We are informing government policy responses to the COVID 19 pandemic, particularly in areas of accommodation and education. Traveller women and girl's experience of racism, marginalisation and disadvantage has resulted in the need for them to be recognised as a vulnerable group in this context so it was vital that our responses to this crisis were done with this in mind.

Pavee Point as a national non-governmental organisation applies a gender lens throughout its work in promoting Traveller and Roma rights. Through our Traveller and Roma networks and partnerships we have been monitoring and collating information about the situation for Travellers and Roma on the ground, including for women and girls. This information and our gendered analysis are not only used to inform responses to the pandemic at community level, but also to inform our work in influencing and driving service and policy responses.

Traveller and Roma women are one of the most marginalised groups in Irish society and Traveller and Roma women's experience of inequality and discrimination differs to that of the majority population or other minority groups, as is their experience of racism and discrimination is different to Traveller and Roma men. The needs of Traveller and Roma women may not be met by responses and strategies designed to confront and tackle gender inequality or ethnic discrimination alone, i.e. without an examination of the interaction of ethnic disadvantage/discrimination. Acknowledging and addressing this experience is central to outcomes for Traveller and Roma women, as the experience of a Traveller or Roma woman will sometimes be distinctive because she is a woman, sometimes because she is a Traveller/Roma, and sometimes because she is both.

The NTWF and Pavee Point strongly recommend that the state's planning for post COVID 19 be inclusive of Traveller and Roma Women to ensure they are not further disadvantaged or marginalised post COVID 19.

Resources and budgets to support Traveller and Roma infrastructure need to be protected. Traveller organisations and other community groups were adversely affected from the cuts imposed during the last recession and are still recovering.

2. Is it collecting data to track the implications of the Covid 19 pandemic? Is that data disaggregated by gender?

In the absence of an ethnic identifier in health systems it is impossible to ascertain the true impact of COVID-19 on both Travellers and Roma, including women and girls. However, Pavee Point has been monitoring cases nationally by working in partnership with Traveller Health Units, local Traveller organisations and Primary Health Care Projects and other NGOs working with Roma. From Pavee Point's data, we note over 150 positive cases of COVID-19 amongst Travellers nationally, reflecting a 12% confirmed positive infection rate - this is higher than the current estimate of 7.8% in the general population.¹ In the Eastern Region alone, we note at least (*and we know this is an undercount*) 55 confirmed Traveller cases with 3 deaths. At a national level there have been 61 confirmed Roma cases with 6 Roma deaths. Disaggregation of data in relation to the fatalities of COVID-19 reveals that the majority of deaths are male. This data should be used to identify potential health implications of the pandemic on Traveller and Roma women and girls and inform future policy responses.

3. Is it collecting data that would identify potential implications for men or boys with disabilities / women or girls with disabilities / ethnic minority men or boys / ethnic minority women or girls?

The main issue in the current situation is the difficulty for government departments and agencies to identify potential implications of the pandemic for minority ethnic women and girls due to lack of data collected by ethnicity. Where such data is collected it is often rendered unreliable due to data collection and disaggregation not taking place in line with good practice and human rights framework.

Data in health-related services and administrative systems

In May, the Department of Health noted that they have issued a communication to the HSPC to include an ethnic identifier in their COVID-19 data collection system (the Computerised Infectious Disease Register - CIDR). This is to be welcomed. However, it is not clear if ethnic data is recorded in testing centres and other relevant settings/data systems. We are also concerned with the Traveller and Roma data provided in news reports² and, in particular, numbers being provided to the CMO as reported at the daily Department of Health press briefings. The figures seem to be reported from the Eastern Region, but have been inaccurate and are an undercount. We are also concerned that deaths are not being reported accurately, in other words, Traveller deaths haven't been reported and the Roma deaths are

¹ The current national positivity COVID-19 figure as of 23.05.2020 (https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/casesinireland/epidemiologyofcovid-19inireland/COVID-19%20Epidemiology%20report%20for%20NPHE%2020200523_v1_website.pdf). Caution: national data fluctuates based on total tests carried out vs. positive confirmed cases; while our data reflects a constant 12% positivity rate amongst Travellers.

² Cullen, P., 'Coronavirus: Number of female deaths outnumbers males deaths for first time', *Irish Times*, 20 May 2020, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/coronavirus-number-of-female-deaths-outnumbers-males-deaths-for-first-time-1.4258535>.

underreported in the data provided. Therefore, it is important that the General Register Office (GRO) records ethnicity and reports mortality data on the basis of gender and ethnicity. Pavee Point is currently seeking clarification on the implementation of the ethnic identifier into the CIDR and in particular, where and how the data is being collected as it is imperative this takes place within a human rights framework.

A small number of health and other public services have also introduced ethnic identifiers in their data collection systems over the years. However, in these services ethnic categories are often not standardised; ethnicity is often ascribed to Travellers and Roma by using proxies such as address, name or dress; and the data is not disaggregated, analysed or provided to stakeholders within an appropriate time frame.

There is an urgent need to ensure all government departments and statutory agencies, beyond health, implement ethnic equality monitoring, inclusive of an ethnic identifier, in their data collection systems in line with government policy³ and obligations set out in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act (2014). The European Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) is publishing regular reports about the fundamental rights impact of COVID-19 over the coming months and the need for disaggregated data to monitor the crisis. Ireland needs to have this data for reporting under the EU Framework for National Traveller Roma Inclusion Strategies, as well as other European and UN monitoring bodies. Without this data it remains impossible to identify the true scale and nature of the implications this pandemic has for Traveller and Roma women and girls in the immediate, medium and long-term basis and will severely impact on post COVID-19 planning.

Data - Tusla Child and Family Agency and domestic violence services

Tusla funded domestic and sexual violence services are asked to collect data by ethnicity but in reality we understand that there are significant barriers, reluctance and/or inconsistencies in how this data is collected, disaggregated, analysed and used.⁴ In addition, we understand that ethnic data is not available in quarterly reports by Tusla and is only published once a year. This risks that the needs and issues of Traveller and Roma women won't be accounted for in measures and/or budget allocations related to domestic and sexual violence during and after the Covid-19 outbreak.

Data - Garda Síochána

In a recent report to the Minister regarding policing responses during Covid-19 outbreak,⁵ the Policing Authority highlighted that the collection of ethnic data is one of Ireland's international commitments under human rights conventions, and would also seem part of the Garda Síochána's responsibilities under Section 42 of the IHREC 2014 Act. The absence of any ethnic identifiers within the Garda data systems means that it is not possible to get a picture of the policing responses that Traveller, Roma and other minority ethnic women receive during this time. In its recent report, the Policing Authority encouraged the Garda Síochána to engage with and seek the advice of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission as to the best approach in this regard.

³ As per the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (2017-2021); Second National Strategy on DSGBV; Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2020; The National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020.

⁴ As per the Second National Strategy on DSGBV.

⁵ Policing Authority, *Policing Performance by the Garda Síochána in relation to COVID-19 Regulations*, 6 May 2020,

https://www.policingauthority.ie/assets/uploads/documents/Report_on_Policing_Performance_by_the_Garda_S%C3%A0ochána_in_Relation_to_COVID-19_Regulations_6_May_2020_final_for_publication.pdf.

4. Has it identified differences by gender in the patterns of access to any services offered by it or by organisations under its auspices? and 5. Has it identified differences by gender in the patterns of access to any supports offered by it or by organisations under its auspices?

Access to health services by Traveller and Roma women during Covid-19

We are concerned that the shift to online/telehealth during this crisis has further exacerbated existing issues between GPs and Travellers. Many Travellers do not access GPs within their local geographical areas- both because of difficulties in getting onto GP lists as medical card holders but also because they often have built up a good relationship/ trust with a particular GP and therefore when they move locations (even from different counties) they prefer to maintain the relationship with their original GP. This has caused problems with Travellers having to travel miles to access GP services and being told to return at different times to access appointments, but this has also potentially criminalised some with getting stopped at Garda checkpoints while travelling to their GPs. Many older Travellers in particular often cannot use mobile phones, do not have mobile phones, do not have access to computers or internet connection, and have either no or low levels of literacy. For instance, many Traveller sites/group housing schemes do not have broadband. Roma women often face these same barriers but have an added language barrier which poses significant difficulties with accessing and use online/telehealth, particularly when translation service may be needed. Additionally, many Roma families share a mobile phone which has raised issues in relation to accessing telehealth but also in seeking refuge during COVID-19.

In terms of sexual and reproductive health, the pause in screening of women as well as pause in gynae appointments and procedures has raised concerns for Traveller and Roma women who have been on waiting lists. In the context of already existing health inequalities, this has further delayed receiving essential checks, procedures and care. It is also important that abortion care is available and accessible to Traveller and Roma women. The HSE has changed the way that they provide abortion care, everything is being done to make sure that a consultation by phone is as much like a consultation in the clinic as possible. The HSE have issued guidance on appointments, medical consultations, information, support and Home Care packs. The IFPA have also issued more general information in relation to IFPA appointments, prescriptions and fees. Given the living conditions (including overcrowding) for many Traveller and Roma women and girls - which does not lend itself to privacy we would be very concerned about the impact of these necessary changes. Again as in other health services we will have no way of monitoring the impact to Traveller women and girls other than the feedback we receive through our advocacy work.

We were particularly concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on Travellers' mental health, which was at crisis point before the pandemic.⁶ We are increasingly receiving reports from Traveller organisations nationally that the pandemic has further exacerbated these issues with rising numbers of Travellers self-harming and unfortunately, Traveller suicides. This has particular consequences for Traveller women who have been advised to cocoon, especially older Traveller women as well as those with a disability.

⁶According to the All Ireland Traveller Health Study (2010), suicide for Traveller women is 5 times higher than the general population; with 6 out of 10 (62.7%) Traveller women disclosing that their mental health was not good enough for one or more days in the last 30 days; this was compared to 1 in 5 (19.9%) women in the general population.

Mental health service providers have indicated that there will be a greater reliance on digital resources post COVID-19, which we have serious concerns about. This would further marginalise Traveller and Roma women who have limited capacity to engage with tele-mental health due to low literacy and language skills, lack of ability to use and access suitable technology, and lack of privacy when living in severely overcrowded accommodation.

Roma women were facing significant structural barriers to accessing health services already before the pandemic: 31.5% of Roma women respondents are reported to not have a GP and 44.6% to not have a medical card. With many experiencing lack of sufficient income, high cost of health care, and lack of interpretation and translation services, access to health services has continued to pose a major issue for Roma women during the pandemic.⁷

Access to domestic and sexual violence services and supports during Covid-19

From the start of this crisis, there has been an immediate concern for Traveller and Roma women and children who might be experiencing domestic abuse. A 'shelter-in-place' order is especially dangerous for those at risk confined to their own homes.

The pandemic has highlighted the shortcoming in the number of refuges provided in Ireland, which doesn't meet the Istanbul Convention standards of one family place per 10,000 population. It has also highlighted the lack of gendered analysis of homelessness, which would recognise women and children fleeing domestic violence as homeless and would result in improved access to safe and secure accommodation and housing for women and children in short, medium and long-term basis.⁸

Reports by Traveller organisations during the pandemic have highlighted Traveller women to have had limited access to refuges. Traveller women are reported to have poor access to information about how services are operating, some have had no access to mobile phones and/or credit to call services, or haven't had the means to travel to services, particularly those women who live in rural areas. Other women have ended up fleeing violence to stay with family members – often in already overcrowded conditions.

Domestic violence services themselves have reported having to turn women and children away due to refuges being oversubscribed and difficulties experienced by some of the services with securing alternative accommodation options for women. While we do not have access to data disaggregated by ethnicity in domestic violence services to cover the period of the pandemic, some services have indicated that the numbers of admissions from Traveller women in refuges has gone down. Again, this is another area in which having an ethnic identifier would be helpful in collecting data.

Members of the Irish Observatory on Violence against Women⁹ have expressed concerns about the lack of a national coordinated response to accommodation needs of women experiencing domestic abuse during the pandemic. It is understood that securing alternative accommodation for women during this time is dependent on the capacity of local services to work with local authorities to secure accommodation for women. However, each local

⁷ Curran, S., A. Crickley, A., R. Fay, F. Mc Gaughey (eds), *Roma in Ireland - a National Needs Assessment*, Department of Justice and Equality and Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, 2018.

⁸ Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, available at <https://rm.coe.int/16800d383a>.

⁹ The IOBVAW is convened by the National Women's Council and has representation from national and local domestic and sexual violence services.

authority has been responding differently. While some domestic violence services have been able to work with their local authority to secure short-term emergency accommodation for women, others have had to negotiate accommodation on a case-by case basis and resource arrangements with landlords and Air B&Bs because things were moving slowly with the local authority.

A similar response as in the homeless sector to the pandemic, which led to a rapid identification of beds for homeless people in a relatively short period of time, has not happened in the domestic violence sector. Women and children fleeing domestic violence are not categorised as homeless, nor are they integrated into strategies dealing with housing and accommodating homeless people. This has meant that refugees struggle to access resources and referral pathways for women when it comes to accessing safe and secure accommodation and housing.

At a recent¹⁰ National Strategy for Women and Girls meeting, the Department of Justice and Equality shared their Action Plan for Domestic Violence during Covid-19.¹¹ This is divided into three main strands: awareness raising, services and access to justice.

The 'Still here'- campaign by the Department of Justice and Equality has been welcomed. However, as Traveller women have faced difficulties in accessing refuges during this time, this has sent a mixed message to women in the community, particularly when refuges have not been able to accommodate all women and children. It is essential that the campaign is matched with a national coordinated response to accommodating women to ensure that all women fleeing domestic violence can be accommodated.

The Operation Faoiseamh by An Garda Síochána has been welcomed and there have been welcomed reports by some Traveller organisations of improved approaches to policing in the Traveller community during the pandemic. However, some Traveller organisations have reported concerns about whether the Operation Faoiseamh is reaching Traveller women. In the absence of ethnic identifiers being used in Garda Síochána's data system it remains impossible to monitor policing responses when it comes to minority ethnic women and domestic violence responses during the pandemic. An Garda Síochána needs special powers to remove a perpetrator from the home especially in remote isolated areas. Some Traveller organisations have reported incidences of hands-off approach to enforcing domestic violence orders by members of An Garda Síochána during this pandemic - unfortunately, such incidences were common reports by Traveller organisations already before the pandemic. One Traveller organisation also reported that a car of a Traveller woman who was fleeing domestic violence from Limerick to Cork was confiscated and she was sent back home due to having travelled beyond the 2km zone. Such incidences illustrate a lack of consistent approach to policing and domestic violence during the pandemic.

There have been some small examples in which Traveller organisations collaborated to secure a small number of alternative accommodation specifically for Travellers who have tested positive for Covid-19 and need to self-isolate as well as Travellers fleeing domestic violence. However, it was clearly stated as well that more accommodation is needed.

While courts have continued to deal with urgent matters, including prioritising Interim Barring and Protection Order applications, it is unclear whether Traveller and Roma women have been able to seek legal protection from domestic violence during this time as the

¹⁰ 13th May 2020

¹¹ http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Information_regarding_the_Justice_Sector_COVID-19_plans

Courts Service does not collect data by ethnicity. Concerns are also raised in relation to the backlog of full hearings that the pandemic has created, and the reduced number in certificates for domestic violence orders.¹² It is understood that remote options are being explored for hearings. This raises concerns for those Traveller and Roma women who do not have access to technology, have language and/or literacy issues, and who have a particular fear of the legal system and professionals. It also poses questions and challenges in terms of translation services for those with limited language skills.

It is urgent that a 'post' re-opening plan to ensure sustainability, expansion and consistency of services for those who are experiencing domestic violence is developed in consultation with domestic violence services and Traveller, Roma and other civil society organisations; is clearly laid out; and widely circulated as soon as possible. Traveller and Roma women and children must be prioritised and given particular considerations within this action plan.

Access to social protection and welfare supports for Traveller and Roma women and girls during Covid-19

Ireland's Roma community faces significant barriers to accessing PPS numbers and social welfare supports and protection. The Roma Needs Assessment commissioned by the Department of Justice and Equality showed that:¹³

- 57% of Roma women are not successful in applying for social welfare supports, and 12.7% of Roma women don't have a PPS number
- 40% of Roma households with children are not successful in applying for social protection payments

During the pandemic, once off emergency needs payments have been granted to some Roma even if they did not satisfy the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC). This has not been a sustainable solution as the individuals have not been able to access ongoing payments as necessary. However, the Department of Employment and Social Protection has recently indicated that it may be possible for some applicants, who do not have any source of income and do not qualify for any other payment, to receive Urgent Needs payments on an ongoing basis.

The current online application system has made it impossible for many Roma to apply for a PPS number due to literacy and language barriers as well as issues with access to technology and internet connection. However, Pavee Point is currently working with DEASP on a more accessible procedure for Roma to apply for PPS numbers nationwide.

The switch from weekly social welfare payments to fortnightly payments has posed significant challenges for Traveller and Roma women, many of whom already live with limited income and/or in poverty. Managing large families and households in particular when payments are not made on a weekly basis makes it difficult to manage household budgets and ensure the needs of children are met during the pandemic. Women who experience domestic violence and financial abuse from their partners have been particularly vulnerable during the time of fortnightly payments.

¹² Phelan, S., 'Domestic violence applications halved since lock-down began, aid board says', *The Independent*, 29 April 2020, <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/domestic-violence-applications-halved-since-lock-down-began-aid-board-says-39166387.html>.

¹³ Curran, S., A. Crickley, A., R. Fay, F. Mc Gaughey (eds), *Roma in Ireland - a National Needs Assessment*, Department of Justice and Equality and Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, 2018.

The CCMA are stating that it is not appropriate for Local Authorities to provide generators to families living on the roadside or in unauthorised accommodation where there is no electricity connections, this they say should be accessed through hardship grants within the Department of Social Protection. We have raised key concerns at the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee¹⁴ (28th of May 2020) at the potential delays and layers of bureaucracy in accessing this hardship grant in a speedy fashion, we have also raised concerns that due to its localised delivery there may not be consistency in the responses. We have asked the Traveller Accommodation Unit in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to issue some guidance to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection on the need to prioritise these requests under the hardship grant from Traveller families where there are no electricity connections. We strongly recommend that guidance is issued to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to ensure a consistent and speedy response to the hardship grants seeking generators.

Access to employment services and supports for Traveller and Roma women and girls during Covid-19

Traveller and Roma women and girls have consistently had challenges in accessing resources and support to obtain employment. The CSO 2016 Census shows that 80.2% of Travellers were unemployed and 55% of Travellers have experienced discrimination at work¹⁵. The cost of childcare acts as a major barrier for Traveller and Roma women in accessing employment, further education and training opportunities.¹⁶ Additional costs associated with schooling¹⁷ put extra pressure on families who are unable to afford to purchase school uniforms, books or lunches.

Now in the context of Covid-19, and many Traveller and Roma families are confined to their homes, women may be relegated to full-time care work, where they might have depended on the time when children were in school to go to their work. We need updated data to assess the changes in unemployment for the Traveller community and Traveller women. We are concerned that with the doubly difficult challenges in online access and remote work, that Covid-19 has had negative effects on Traveller and Roma women's work and employment experiences.

We also would like you to consider how the temporary COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme in place from 6 April 2020 has/will support Traveller and Roma women if their children are not in or cannot access childcare facilities.

Access to education services and supports for Traveller and Roma women and girls during Covid-19

There are stark inequalities between Traveller and Roma girls/women and the general population in participation, attendance, attainment and progression through second to third

¹⁴ 28th May 2020

¹⁵ Kelleher et al., All Ireland Traveller Health Study, University College Dublin & Department of Health & Children, 2010.

¹⁶ Ireland has the highest childcare costs in the EU as a percentage of family income, making it inaccessible for many Traveller and Roma women. OECD, Benefits and Wages: Statistics, 2014, cited in Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Submission to the UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, June 2015, www.ihrec.ie.

¹⁷ Barnardos, *School Costs Survey 2016*, Available: <http://www.barnardos.ie/assets/files/Advocacy/2016SchoolCosts/BarnardosSchoolCostsSurveyBriefing2016.pdf>.

level.¹⁸ This has wider human rights consequences by exposing Traveller and Roma girls and women to low educational attainment, future unemployment, poverty and social exclusion.

The school closures in March, while a necessary development in a public health response, has been a challenging disruption for Traveller and Roma families. It is particularly concerning for families with children who are set to transfer between levels or preparing to sit state exams and very challenging for parents who are trying to support their children to stay in school. The impact of school closures extends beyond disruption to education – they also carry other risks to Traveller and Roma children who may rely on school meals or other school supports.

Challenges for Traveller and Roma women and girls include:

- Infrastructure issues: Limited to or in most cases a complete lack of IT equipment necessary to keep in touch with school and college and submit work. Many Traveller and Roma families are living in areas with poor or no broadband and the cost where it is available is prohibitive.
- Access to Resources: Many learners have no access to books/libraries and have little space for homework and study. Students in particular who are working part time now are without a job. There will be less part-time work available next year leaving students and families with less capacity to meet the costs of third level.
- Access to Support: For the most part Traveller families have been dependent on individual positive relationships with teachers/lecturers/tutors for immediate support needed. Where they have had no institutional support it has come from Traveller organisations and youth services. Pathways for support need to be much more formalised
- There is much anxiety around transitions – between primary and post-primary and between junior and senior cycle. Concerns that many students will not return to school in September. Many families are living in overcrowded conditions with immune-compromised family members and huge concerns of a risk of infection coming from the school environment. In addition, there may be some children who are at risk of early school leaving and this gap in the school year may compound that.
- Traveller and Roma leaving cert students have like other leaving cert students found this period very challenging. The Department of Education and Skills new system of calculated grades is currently underway. Traveller and Roma students are concerned with how these will operate in practice, given the levels of racism they experience, will unconscious bias be a factor in grading.
- For Travellers who are undertaking the leaving Cert independently, outside of the school system, it is not clear how they will be graded
- For students who are parents themselves having a family and childcare responsibilities has been hugely challenging
- Where parents themselves have poor literacy skills they are finding it hard to support their children in their school work and also find accessing online resources very difficult.

Recent Department of Education and Skills guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting students at risk of educational disadvantage¹⁹ for primary and post-primary schools sets out a strong rationale for the importance of supporting the continuity in the learning of students

¹⁸ More Traveller girls are completing formal education in comparison to Traveller boys; no figures are available for Roma girls. The Department of Education and Skills introduced an ethnic identifier at primary level in 2014 and at post primary level in 2016. Data has not yet been made public.

¹⁹<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/guidance-on-continuity-of-schooling.pdf>

at risk of educational disadvantage during the school closures associated with Covid-19. “While all students need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, learners at risk of educational disadvantage need even more support at this time.” The guidance encourages school leadership teams to “ensure that the school’s resources are targeted at those most in need”. In addition the Department has issued guidance for parents.²⁰ Additionally the Department issued schools with guidance²¹ to help them operate the School Meals Programme amid the extended Covid-19 restrictions. A €40m ICT grant was notified to schools in January. Schools have been asked to re-prioritise this funding where needed to support the continuity of teaching and learning for students. An additional €10 million fund to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students. A total of €7 million additional funding is being provided in the post-primary sector and €3 million in the primary sector.²²

Guidelines on their own will not bring about change, advocacy from national and local Traveller and Roma organisations and other supporters will be required to support Traveller and Roma students through this period. The next tranche of ICT grants should have a ring-fenced portion to ensure the needs of Traveller and Roma students are met. Monitoring of implementation will be a challenge, and currently there is no government data available on the impact of Department of Education and Skills COVID-19 guidance and schemes and what impact they are having on Traveller and Roma women and girls.

We would be concerned that the longer children are out of school, the more difficult it will be for them to return to school. The DES along with primary, post primary and third level/further education and training must put in place easy-to-use distance learning tools and ensure that any technologies used aren’t excluding Traveller children. New education measures must not further disadvantage Traveller children.

Access to accommodation services and supports for Traveller and Roma women and girls during Covid-19

Housing/Accommodation has a particular effect on women as women spend more time in the home and are the primary carers so they 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 can lead to ill health and other issues.

Almost 1 in 3 Traveller households living in mobile or temporary accommodation have no sewerage facilities and 1 in 5 have no piped water source. A significant number of families in group housing or sites report lack of footpaths, public lighting, fire hydrants and safe play areas²³. A review of fire safety in September 2016 found significant shortcomings in Traveller accommodation units with 76% not having a working smoke alarm; 72% having no working carbon monoxide alarm; and the condition of electrical installations being an issue in 78% of the sites. The All Ireland Traveller Health Study 2010 states ‘There is little doubt that the living conditions of Travellers are probably the single greatest influence on health status, stress and infectious disease including respiratory disease and accidents are all closely related to the Traveller living environment.’

²⁰<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/continuity-of-schooling.pdf>

²¹<https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Management-Organisation/school-meals-programme-guidance-to-schools.pdf>

²² https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0032_2020.pdf

²³ Kelleher et al., 2010, AITHS.

The accommodation situation for Traveller and Roma women and children at the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic was in crisis and continues to pose significant challenges for both Traveller and Roma women and girls to stay safe from Covid-19.²⁴ Living in overcrowded conditions has prevented members of Traveller and Roma families from being able to self-isolate when contracting Covid-19, and facilitated the spread of the virus at a faster and greater scale, particularly during the first weeks of the pandemic. The lack of access to decent accommodation, electricity and running water has also prevented many Traveller and Roma women and girls being able to comply with the HSE guidelines on hand hygiene and social distancing in an effort to stop the spread of the virus, while language and literacy barriers have prevented access to up to date information about Covid-19 and services and supports available during the pandemic. We advocated for the necessary supports to be identified and put in place for any Roma or Travellers who are advised to self-isolate and do not have the facilities to do so using a mainstreaming and targeting approach. In March, the HSE committed to providing a self-isolation facility for Roma who have been advised to self-isolate and do not have the facilities to do so. The facility finally opened in May 2020 for Roma but can also be accessed by Travellers in that region needing to self-isolate and have no other safe alternative.

The Traveller Accommodation Unit (TAU) in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in consultation with the National Traveller Organisations represented on the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee issued a Circular for Local Authorities advising Local Authorities to take all necessary measures to ensure safety of Traveller families. Further written clarifications were issued in May. However there still continues to be significant issues in the roll out of COVID 19 measures at local level where funding and guidance is not a barrier at national level:

- Slow speed in which COVID 19 measures are being addressed in some Local Authority areas.
- There continues to be a need for very basic services such as electricity, sanitation units and water for roadside Traveller families and families living in authorised accommodation in some Local Authority areas
- Overcrowding continues to be an issue overall, even where Local authorities have taken measures to put in place other services in responding to COVID 19, significant inroads have not been made in addressing overcrowding.
- There continues to be a need for provision of mobile homes to adequately address overcrowding and to facilitate self-isolation on sites. We do recognise that there has been 40 such mobile homes provided but we know from Local Traveller organisations that this is not near enough.
- There is a need for better communication by some Local Authorities with Traveller organisations and Traveller families on COVID 19 measures - In some Local Authority areas there has not been an LTACC meeting.
- Twenty eight Local Authorities have made requests for funding - Five have made no requests for funding.

The TAU will again issue guidance by the end May or early June, to Local Authorities to make permanent electricity connections where they can in unauthorised Traveller accommodation.

²⁴ Research shows that 12.4% of Roma respondents had no kitchen; 9.6% had no cooker; 13.5% had no fridge; many sometimes didn't have enough food, gas, water and/or electricity; 45% didn't have enough beds in their accommodation; 6.6% of Roma respondents reported to be homeless and 45.7% had been homeless at some stage. In many instances Roma families pay rent for unsafe and unhygienic warehouses with no electricity or water, in Curran, S., A. Crickley, A., R. Fay, F. Mc Gaughey (eds), *Roma in Ireland - a National Needs Assessment*, Department of Justice and Equality and Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, 2018.

We need to see speedy delivery of these measures. We have raised the concerns with regard to the provision of electricity to roadside families under Social Protection measures above. In the current context electricity is not just an accommodation issue it has a significant impact on the right to education for Traveller women and girls already impacted by the school/college closures in March.

A major concern we have is that we do not see a removal of the COVID 19 accommodation measures which have been put in place once long-term solutions are found to combat COVID 19. Many of these measures that have been put in place in Traveller accommodation are only the tip of the iceberg in what has been said for many decades needs to be done to address the Traveller accommodation crisis. During the pandemic, we have also been made aware of Roma families that have become homeless as a result of some local authorities limiting access to emergency accommodation for those who are not on local authority lists. The fact that local authorities and many other services do not usually offer a translation service adds another barrier for Roma women who do not speak English and/ or are illiterate. To date there has been no leniency regarding the conditions in applying for social housing support to ensure Roma women and children are not left homeless.

As a result, we are aware of many instances where Roma have moved to stay with family or friends in already over-crowded conditions or sleeping in cars. For example, a Roma family evicted by their landlord ended up staying with friends, with 23 people living in a three-bedroom house and sharing one bathroom. Since the family were not on a Local Authority Housing List, the family was told they would need to be assessed to determine their need for accommodation.

Traveller Women in Prison and Covid-19:

It is recognised that there is a disproportionate number of Travellers within Irish prisons although Travellers only account for 0.6% of the overall population in the Republic of Ireland they account for 22% of the female prison population.²⁵ The issues for Traveller women in prison are challenging. In one study poor mental health was identified as being a significant factor in the lives of the women linked to domestic violence, drug use, the availability of drugs in prison, discrimination (in and outside of prison), name calling in prison and being away from family.²⁶

Irish prisons are currently on lockdown as a Covid-19 prevention measure and no external visits are allowed, including external services. There is little if any information emerging from the prison service. The most accurate information we have obtained is coming via the family members of those in prison.

Concerns in regards to the health and well-being of Traveller women in prison and their vulnerabilities regarding mental and physical health, well-being, separation from families. Some mothers have not seen their children since late February/early March. Also where prisons have overcrowding issues as we know the Dóchas Centre has had earlier in the year we would have concerns where single cell occupancy during Covid-19 may be needed and cannot be facilitated but again we do not have relevant information on this.

We have sought information on the early release or return to community programmes of Traveller women, so as to signpost them to post release support and services. There is still no information on this and while we acknowledge the challenges for the Irish Prison Service

²⁵ <http://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/>

²⁶ Hearing their Voices' Traveller Women in Prison. 2017

who are working from home without full access to files, this is important information that must be urgently established. We know that many pregnant women, a vulnerable group to the virus, have been released in the UK but do not have clear information on whether this has happened in Ireland. In the UK women have been given mobile phones to keep in contact with family who can no longer visit, measures like this could prove useful/beneficial in the Irish context where we know there are challenges regarding online video calls (we have been unable to get the relevant information on this). While we are aware that the IPS is endeavouring to facilitate video calls with families we understand that the prisons are experiencing significant difficulties in arranging this. We would welcome feedback on the number of successful video calls that are facilitated per week in Dóchas and Limerick women's prison (and the no of unsuccessful attempts). Feedback from families is that children are particularly disappointed when they are prepared for a video call which is subsequently cancelled.

We also suggest that the phone calls are extended in terms of both length of call and number of calls and that prisoners are offered the opportunity to add additional names on their cards such as NTFW peer-support worker, National Traveller Counselling Service and Exchange House as well as other external services.

5. Has it consulted civil society organisations or other experts on the implications of the Covid 19 pandemic for the policies for which it has responsibility? Have they identified any concerns relating to different implications for women and men?

The ongoing pandemic has demonstrated the value of a strong Traveller health infrastructure underpinned by community development as Traveller Health Units and Traveller Primary Health Care Projects have mobilised across the country, working collectively to ensure that Travellers, especially those who are most vulnerable, are protected. It has also underscored the importance of a whole of government and interagency approach in responding to these challenges given the public health issue at hand. Since the emergence of the crisis, we have seen goodwill, support and collaboration from colleagues in the HSE and other government departments in working with us to ensure that Traveller and Roma health concerns relating to COVID-19 are addressed in an accessible and culturally sensitive manner at this challenging time when the communities are very fearful of the impact of the virus on their families and communities.²⁷

There has been positive engagement at national level with officials from the Traveller Accommodation Unit and a number of meetings between the Minister Damien English (Minister of State for Housing and Urban Development) and National Traveller organisations resulting a letter²⁸ issued for Local Authorities advising Local Authorities to take all necessary measures to ensure safety of Traveller families. Further written clarifications were issued in May. However this positive engagement needs to translate into action at local level to ensure it is meaningful (we do acknowledge there have been some examples of good practise by some local authorities on COVID 19 but this has not gone far enough to address overcrowding issues in particular).

²⁷ This includes: Bi/weekly teleconferences with Traveller Health Units and Roma groups, the HSE, Chief Officers and the HSE National Office for Social Inclusion; Resourcing targeted public health measures for Travellers and Roma (e.g.) dedicated Traveller and Roma COVID-19 phone line, self-isolation facility for Roma; Collaboration and support in the development of targeted health resources resources for Travellers and Roma

²⁸ <http://www.tvgcork.ie/sites/default/files/downloadableResources/ToAllDirectorsOfService.pdf>

Engagement has taken place with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Department of Education and Skills a letter was also sent to the Minister for Education and Skills Joe Mc Hugh highlighting the challenges and issues of school/college closures on Traveller learners. A Forum on the implications of COVID-19 for current Traveller and Roma Third Level students and those who have applied for third level places was organised by the NTWF and Pavee Point in association with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) Higher Education Section and the HEA in order to discuss the challenges faced by current and prospective students and inform responses by DES, HEA and the colleges.

Traveller organisations were successful in lobbying to ensure that Community Response Forums (CRFs) were inclusive of Traveller representation, resulting in the Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government issuing guidance to Local Authority Chief Executives through the County and City Management Association (CCMA) to ensure Traveller representation on these structures.

The NTWF in conjunction with the Traveller Prison Initiative have made attempts to engage with the Dóchas and have been forwarding information and resources and would welcome more regular updates and information sharing.

We urge all relevant government departments and state agencies to engage in consultation with Traveller and Roma sectors to identify emerging issues and solutions for Traveller and Roma women and girls during the pandemic. This should include resuming any relevant monitoring/strategy committee meetings of government policies.

6. Does it plan to undertake any research on the implications of the Covid 19 pandemic? Will such research also consider whether or not there are gender differences in the implications of the pandemic for its area of enquiry?

Due to lack of data collection by ethnicity and gender in relevant services and administrative systems, research is needed on the experiences and implications of Covid-19 on Traveller and Roma women and girls. Such research needs to be commissioned by the government and relevant agencies, and take into account various issues and needs, including in areas of health, domestic and sexual violence, accommodation/housing, employment, social protection and education. Any such research must be undertaken in partnership with Traveller and Roma organisations, and used to inform development of special measures and budgetary decisions to address the short, medium to long-term needs of Traveller and Roma women.