



Submission to Traveller Health Action Plan

6th July 2018

The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi) recommends that Traveller women be included as a priority group within the Traveller health action plan. A focus on Traveller women's health is necessary because Traveller women are different from Traveller men, they experience different things while growing up and as adults; biological factors can influence their health and well-being outcomes; and factors related to gender - such as women's caring responsibilities - can affect their treatment choices.

Traveller women experience stark health inequalities due to structural inequalities and social determinants of health, including poor accommodation conditions, poverty, illiteracy and discrimination.¹ Traveller women have also identified significant barriers to health services, including: discrimination and racism (both at individual and institutional levels); lack of trust with healthcare providers; lack of culturally-appropriate service provision; and limited engagement from service providers with Travellers and Traveller organisations. The Primary Health Care Traveller Projects, which have been so effective at increasing access to health information and services for the Traveller community, are staffed by a predominantly female workforce who receive less than the minimum wage and have precarious working conditions.

Gender - A Social Determinant of Traveller Women's Health

Women from the Travelling Community are likely to experience multiple health inequalities. Traveller women experience discrimination as women, discrimination as Travellers and discrimination as Traveller women.

Health is often now understood in terms of the social determinants of health - how our health is impacted by the social conditions in which we are born, grow, live, work and age. Sex and gender are basic determinants of health, which give rise to different health outcomes and different healthcare needs for women and men.

Women's life experiences impact on their health. Although women in Ireland, including Traveller women, have higher life expectancy than men (or Traveller men in the case of Traveller women), women are more likely to: be less financially secure; undertake the majority of work in the home; experience violence from their partner; be the victims of

sexual assault; and experience anxiety and depression. Due to systemic gender stereotypes and discrimination, women experience particular inequalities in accessing healthcare, as well as having a higher incidence of negative experiences (e.g. eating disorders, depression, gender-based violence) and specific health concerns (such as reproductive and maternal health) which affect their wellbeing.

Traveller women, and other women from marginalised groups, experience greater prevalence of health risks, poorer engagement with healthcare providers and poorer health outcomes.

Traveller women's health	
Life expectancy	Traveller women's life expectancy is 10 years lower than for women in the general population.
Mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traveller women experience mental health difficulties at higher rates than women in the general population.² • The suicide rate for Traveller women is five times higher than women in the general population.³ • 63% 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 20% of female medical cardholders.⁴
Infant mortality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infant mortality is 3.6 times higher among Travellers than among the general population.⁵
Violence against women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic violence is an issue within the Traveller community, as it is in the general population. Traveller women account for the largest group in admissions to domestic violence refuges, with 49% of refuge admissions being Travellers and 57% of Traveller women recorded as repeat admissions.⁶
Health screening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traveller women have higher screening rates than the general population as a result of the work of the Primary Health Care Traveller Projects. • 25% of Traveller women had breast screening, compared to 13% of general population. 23% of Traveller women had smear tests for cervical cancer, compared to 12% of general population.⁷
Imprisonment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minority groups are often over-represented in prison. Reasons proposed for over-representation include socio-economic factors, alcohol and other drug misuse and mental health problems.⁸ Traveller women are at least 18 times more likely to be imprisoned than women in the general population.⁹

The Role of Traveller Women as Healthcare Providers

Traveller women play a vital role in improving the health of their community and their expertise and efforts must be supported and celebrated. The *All Ireland Traveller Health Study* highlighted that 83% of Travellers received their public health information through the work of Primary Health Care Traveller Projects (PHCTP) and Traveller organisations, principally from Traveller women who have been trained as health advocates and who liaise with health professionals.¹⁰

The community healthcare workers within the PHCTPs are predominantly female and there are significant concerns about their pay and conditions. The precarious working arrangements of Traveller community health workers, including low pay and lack of pension entitlement and opportunity for progression, act to reinforce gender and ethnic inequalities. These conditions are particularly concerning given the state is reliant on these community workers to deliver public health services to a community which experiences significant health disadvantage.

While each PHCTP operates differently, there are shared concerns for PHC workers across the projects which should be addressed through the Action Plan:

- Increase funding to PHCTPs to support employment on at least the statutory minimum wage rate per hour, ensuring that the roles are:
 - Linked to a relevant HSE pay scale (e.g. family support worker; care assistant; home help or Grade V post), taking account of the experience of Traveller PHC workers; and
 - Provide the option of being employed as full-time PHC workers.
- Ensure that pension and retirement payments are available for PHCTP workers via the state (given PHCTPs are 100% grant funded by HSE).
- Identify progression routes for Traveller PHC workers into mainstream employment within the health service
- Ensure PHCTP workers can retain their medical cards, given the health inequalities, mortality and morbidity rates amongst the Traveller community.
- Implement the Public Sector Duty as a means of systematically pre-empting and addressing equality and human rights issues for Travellers, including the employment rights of PHCTP workers.

Conclusion

Despite developments in recent decades, Traveller women in Ireland continue to experience persistent inequalities, including higher rates of poverty and lower representation in decision-making. The National Traveller Health Action Plan proposes a social determinants approach to Traveller health. Gender is a key social determinant of health and an effective action plan needs to be implemented in a gender sensitive manner, to take into account the differing health needs of women and men. In the past in Ireland and internationally, we have seen health plans and policies which are predominantly written from a gender-neutral perspective and which do not examine the specific experiences of women, or their service needs. The Traveller Health Action provides the opportunity to address this gender-blind approach.

NWCI recommends that Traveller women be included as a priority group in the Action Plan, with clear actions developed to address the health experiences, needs and working conditions of Traveller women.

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- ¹ Pavee Point (2017) *Shadow Report to CEDAW Committee*. <http://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Pavee-Point-NTWF-2017-Joint-Shadow-Report-to-CEDAW-Committee-19012017.pdf>
- ² Pavee Point Presentation 'Our Geels: Mental Health and Suicide'. Presentation to the World Congress on Women's Mental Health, Dublin March 2017. http://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/PP_Missie-MaryBrigidCollins_WCWMH.pdf
- ³ Pavee Point Presentation 'Our Geels: Mental Health and Suicide'. Presentation to the World Congress on Women's Mental Health, Dublin March 2017.
- ⁴ Pavee Point (2010) *Our Geels. All Ireland Traveller Health Study*.
- ⁵ Dept. Justice and Equality (2017) *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy*.
- ⁶ Pavee Point & Traveller Women's Forum (2017) *Irish Traveller and Roma Women Joint Shadow Report: A Response to Ireland's Consolidated Sixth & Seventh Periodic Report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women*.
<http://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Pavee-Point-NTWF-2017-Joint-Shadow-Report-to-CEDAW-Committee-19012017.pdf>
- ⁷ National Traveller Health Action Plan Discussion Paper (2018)
- ⁸ UCD (2010) *Our Geels, All Ireland Traveller Health Study*.
- ⁹ UCD (2010) *Our Geels, All Ireland Traveller Health Study*.
- ¹⁰ UCD (2010) *Our Geels, All Ireland Traveller Health Study*.