



Empowering Gypsy, Traveller and Roma Women and Girls

One Voice 4 Travellers Women and Girls Project

One Voice 4 Travellers is a well-established voluntary organisation providing support to women and girls in the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GTR) communities. Over many years it has worked with partner agencies and funders to advocate for and support travellers on a range of issues including education, employment, accommodation and health.

One Voice has many years of experience of addressing issues of domestic violence and abuse in the GTR communities, and in 2016 was awarded five years' funding from The National Lottery Community Fund's Women and Girls Initiative for a project entitled '*Empowering Gypsy, Traveller and Roma women and girls to enable change.*' This project has been supporting GTR women and girls experiencing, or at risk of, domestic violence and abuse (DVA) across the six local authority areas of Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire.



The project was set up with the following aims:

- To build greater awareness and understanding about all forms of domestic violence and abuse by empowering women and girls to feel more confident in talking about DVA and accessing support.
- To develop domestic violence champions from across the community, through women becoming DV information volunteers
- To provide culturally appropriate support to women and girls, whether they be living in houses, on sites or by the roadside, via group work and one to one support from workers and volunteers from the GTR community.
- To enable women and girls to access a safe space when needed via the provision of two 'safe caravans', providing an opportunity for women to consider their choices and develop safety plans for themselves and their children.

This briefing is intended for funders, commissioners, and partner agencies and anyone interested in how to tackle domestic violence in the GTR community. We have included some details of violence reported, not to shock, but to document what is all too often the experiences of women.

Evidence for this briefing has been drawn from One Voice's monitoring information and independently conducted interviews with six staff and volunteers, seven representatives from partner agencies and ten women who have been supported by the project. Their views are summarised in this briefing, with identifying features removed to protect anonymity.

Why is One Voice's Women and Girls project important?

There was considerable consensus among those interviewed for this briefing (whether they were staff, volunteers, partner agency representatives or women supported by the project) about why One Voice's support to women and girls is vital.

Domestic violence and abuse are serious issues in the GTR community

Nobody knows how much domestic violence occurs in the GTR community. Much DVA is unreported and remains hidden even from close family and friends. Some forms of DVA are not even recognised as abuse either by victims or the people around them. DVA occurs in most communities but those interviewed for this briefing all believed that levels of DVA among travellers were relatively high.

Examples of extreme physical and psychological violence experienced include: a woman beaten to unconsciousness by her husband who then threw water over her to bring her round in order to beat her again; or a young woman whose husband forced her to phone her mother so that she would hear him hitting her, knowing she was helpless. This young woman was terrified, not just for herself but for her family:

"She only has one brother and was petrified that if she went home to escape the abuse, her husband and his family would hurt her parents and brother too."

Some women live with abuse for many years, sometimes right up to their husband's death. One such was 'Mary' (not her real name):

Mary experienced extreme physical, financial and controlling abuse for over 40 years. Her husband not only hit her, but he controlled her completely - making her sleep on the floor, locking her outside etc. He had money stored away but kept her living in abject poverty. As he got older, he became very disabled, losing the use of his legs, but the abuse continued. Although dependant on her for his own wellbeing, such was his control over her, he would demand she stood next to his wheelchair so he could hit her, and she would comply. After he died, she used some of his hoarded money to buy herself a new trailer, but apart from that she had no idea what to do. She'd lost all confidence about how to live. The person who gradually helped Mary to change was her granddaughter who had been to one of One Voice's groups and had learned about the different kinds of domestic abuse. She encouraged her grandmother to go out and to buy herself some new clothes for the first time in years. Mary had learned to read as a young woman, but her husband couldn't, so he refused to allow her to read. She has now joined the library and buys a newspaper every day.

A history of acceptance of domestic abuse among both men and women in the community

Those interviewed for this briefing commented that DVA has been widely regarded as 'normal' in the GTR community. Older women said they would not have considered telling anyone about abuse in their marriage because it was something you didn't talk about, and if they had, the common reaction would have been 'You've made your bed, so lie in it.' Things have changed to some extent for younger women who are more likely to talk about what is happening to them and get support from family and friends – but even younger women still accept abuse to some extent.

Some of the roots of this acceptance lie in a history and culture of strict gender roles in the community. Women interviewed were clear that although some things have changed to increase women's independence (more women now go out to work and keep their jobs after marriage), it remains the case that men are in charge of all major decisions in families, and this extends not just to fathers and husbands but to brothers and sons. The pride of the family requires women and girls to be 'respectable'. This means that courtship before marriage is closely monitored (often involving brothers or male cousins in the role of chaperone) to protect the girl's reputation, and after marriage, the behaviour of women is subject to a 'cultural code' to maintain respectability:

"When you're married, he's the husband and you're his wife – almost like property. If anyone looks at her, he'll probably have their throat out."

A lack of awareness about different kinds of DVA

Within the GTR community, there is a growing recognition of physical kinds of domestic abuse and this has made it slightly easier for women to get support. Women interviewed gave several examples of women who had successfully escaped violent husbands and had been well supported by their families, although like many women in the wider community, they often lived with abuse for many years and returned to their husbands several times before finally getting away.

However, awareness of other kinds of abuse (emotional, financial and coercive control) remains low and women often don't recognise when this is happening to them. This is perhaps unsurprising – given that the control of money and major decisions is widely accepted as resting with men, it is likely to be difficult for women to judge when this 'normal control' has tipped over into being something they identify as coercive:

"Culturally, there's a history of men controlling everything and making the decisions, so a degree of domestic abuse in marriage is what women often expect."

The role of the wider family - for good and for bad

Many women in the GTR community are married young. Commonly, couples live some distance apart and after marriage the young woman goes to live with her husband which often means living alongside her in-laws. Being young, a long way from their own family and often quite isolated makes having a good relationship with their in-laws very important, and for many young women these relationships are positive and supportive. But if a young woman marries into a family where domestic abuse is common life can be very difficult. There are examples of in-laws colluding or even contributing to abuse (e.g. locking the young woman in when her husband is not there). Sometimes, the violence, or threat of violence extends to the young woman's family which makes it even more difficult to leave or get support:

"Women are frightened to say anything either because of their children or their family. They're not going to do anything in case something happens to them."

The pressures on young couples which contribute to abuse

Couples who marry young experience a dramatic change in their lives. For young women, it not only often entails leaving their family, but it also means giving up their jobs and much of the freedom they had as single girls.

For young men, it also brings huge change and pressure:

“Once a girl gets married, they can’t go out with their friends – at social events, she’ll have to sit with the other married women even if they’re much older than her. She can go have a chat with her friends but not to parties or dancing or whatever.”

“The boys often go from being financially quite well off and having lots of freedom and being looked after by their family – their mum doing everything for them. Then suddenly, he has to get money for a trailer and find somewhere to stay – that’s his responsibility... After a year or so they’re likely to have a baby and the pressures get greater. That’s often when the domestic abuse starts – money and babies – it’s often what triggers it.”

These pressures are exacerbated by the shortage of places to stay. It is estimated that there are still about 4,000 travellers who are permanently nomadic and another 3,000 or so who don’t have permanent pitches of their own. Sometimes they can double up on a pitch with their families but on most sites, this is only allowed for a few weeks and they are evicted if they stay too long. Travellers who are nomadic, either by choice or because of a lack of options, face being frequently moved on (several times a day in some cases) so tend to move between yards owned by other travellers. This precarious existence adds huge pressures to the lives of both men and women and seriously limits women’s ability to stay safe and get support if they are in abusive relationships.

Limited access to support services

If a woman from the GTR community needs support around domestic abuse, she is very unlikely to seek it from mainstream services. Prejudice and discrimination against travellers is still commonplace and all traveller women have experienced this, making them extremely reluctant to trust support services outside the community. Prejudice also has a silencing effect:

"When you are part of a community that's been demonised, you're not going to talk to outsiders about bad things that happen within that community. You don't wash your dirty laundry in public. And if you've experienced how the wider system treats travellers – for example, the criminal justice system, why would you trust them as a place to go for support?"

"The GTR community faces a lot of prejudice and abuse from outside which tends to reinforce their need to be close-knit. Talking to outsiders can be frowned upon – seen as bringing shame on the family."

If women do access a service, they're quite likely to try to keep their GTR identity secret, which makes it even less likely they'll receive support appropriate to their needs.

Even where outside agencies are trying to be non-discriminatory and welcoming to all, there are still additional barriers to support faced by GTR women. For example, using a hostel or women's refuge is hard for any woman. For many GTR women the prospect of using communal shared spaces such as kitchens and bathrooms will be an insurmountable barrier. There is also variable awareness among support services of women's experiences within the GTR community:

"Outside agencies don't always understand how it is in the community. For example, they may not fully understand why the woman is so worried about the safety of her family. If she goes for help outside the community, she'll have to explain it all. Within the community she doesn't have to do that because we just know. We understand what she's experiencing."

This understanding was one of the most important elements of One Voice's support for 'Rita':

When Rita got married, all she wanted was a family of her own, so she was devastated when she lost a baby and was then told she couldn't have children. Her relationship with her husband deteriorated and became increasingly abusive. Rita describes the mental cruelty of her situation as being far worse than any physical abuse she experienced. Rita felt she had nobody to talk to:

"You're scared to tell anyone because you never know if they're going to tell other people. Even with friends, things get taken out of context and before you know it it's all been turned into a drama. I didn't want to talk to my mum because she suffers depression and I didn't want to add to her worries. But bottling it all up meant I ended up with depression as well—it was horrible. I knew I needed some support and was trying to find it on-line when a friend suggested I talk to One Voice. Finally, with them I found someone who understood. They gave me advice – they talked to me about anything and assured me it wasn't my fault. In our community all you want is to get married and become a mum. They understood my situation and what I was going through."

Rita eventually decided to leave the cruelty behind, and One Voice helped her to find somewhere else to live and to get settled.

"One Voice were available any time day or night. I don't know what I'd have done without them. They made me realise I had other choices."

How does One Voice's project improve the lives of women and girls?

There are four main strands to One Voice's Women and Girls Project:

1. Group sessions to build women and girls' awareness and understanding about all forms of domestic violence and abuse and to empower them to feel more confident in talking about DVA and to access support.

The core group programme runs for six sessions and covers an introductory session followed by sessions on what domestic violence is, how to recognise different types of DVA and develop strategies for coping and keeping safe. All the sessions use a combination of discussion and creative approaches (e.g. artwork, use of photos and recordings) to enable women to share their personal experiences, think about how to change attitudes and develop peer support.

The groups are all facilitated by women workers and volunteers from the community and one of the benefits has been bringing together women from different parts of the community: Irish and English travellers, Gypsy and Roma women as well as both younger and older women, sharing experiences across the generations.

"In groups, you get the older women chatting with younger women – they listen and get the message that abuse is not right. They start to be able to recognise what's going on and can think through their choices and their consequences and what the options might be. Younger women today may be less likely to tolerate extreme violence but will still put up with coercive control. When they're part of groups, you see them taking it in and understanding. It's so important that they hear it from other people from the community."

"When they're on the side of the road we sometimes go collect them and bring them somewhere where we can run it. Some sites have a meeting room that can be borrowed.... We have done group sessions in the summer at the roadside."

One of the challenges of running the groups is to include women from all situations – those living in houses, on sites and staying by the roadside. For women who are by the road or who don't have a secure pitch on a site, involvement in groups can be interrupted by them moving on. One Voice has helped them stay involved by being flexible.

If continuing as part of a group is not feasible, the project will stay in touch as far as possible and reconnect with women when they're back in the area.

The groups are facilitated in a flexible and person-centred way, responding to the issues raised by group members. Gradually awareness is raised, and women are encouraged to think about what role they can play in influencing change and how they can harness the hidden power of women. Part of this includes their role as mothers supporting their daughters and shaping the attitudes of their sons.

Between the project starting in September 2016 and March 2021, 108 women and girls from the GTR community completed the 6-week programme. Many of the women involved with One Voice groups have gone on to be volunteers themselves, sharing information with others in the community.

2. Individual support to women and girls provided by One Voice workers and volunteers. Sometimes, domestic abuse is the focus from the start, but more often, requests for support begin with some practical need: for example, accommodation, a health concern, an issue with their child's school or a financial worry. The work may involve advocacy with an external agency, help with paperwork or finding information. However, beneath these practical concerns, there are often other issues at an emotional level or concerns about what is happening in their relationship. Sometimes there is a process of 'testing out' going on:

At the same time, the project recognises the importance of responding in a holistic way to the issues faced by women. For example, 'Carla' came to the project for support with a health issue:

"People will come with a practical problem as a way of finding out whether we can be trusted. If we help with the practical thing they might open up about other things."

Carla desperately wants a baby but was told by the doctors that she needed to have an operation to make it possible for her to have IVF. She didn't really understand the medical advice she was being given and at the same time she was terrified about going into hospital and having an operation. The situation was affecting her mental health and it contributed to the breakdown of her first marriage. Her current partner tried to be understanding but the advice he was getting from other men was to give her a smack to bring her to her senses. To his credit, he didn't do this and supported her in approaching One Voice for help. With a lot of support Carla has now had the operation and has recently been told that she should be able to conceive naturally without IVF.

This is just one example of a situation that could easily have become abusive, but where support reduced Carla's depression and anxiety, strengthened her marriage and built her confidence in using health services in the future.

Such holistic support has been even more important during the Covid-19 pandemic when One Voice has provided a vital source of support and information, often working to counteract confusion and misunderstanding within a community where literacy issues and suspicion of 'official' information remain high. The risk of DVA also increased during the Covid-19 lockdowns with many vulnerable women living with abuse in greater isolation. One Voice adapted their ways of working to maintain support via phone, text, email, WhatsApp and Facebook, ensuring that even at the height of the pandemic, women and girls always had somewhere to turn.

Between September 2016 and March 2021, over 560 women and girls received individual support from One Voice.

3. The provision of two safe caravans which can be used as temporary safe spaces for women to consider their choices and develop safety plans for themselves and their children.

One of the most innovative aspects of One Voice's Women and Girls' project is the provision of two caravans as temporary safe spaces. Women can use one of these caravans, taking their children with them, for two or three days to think through their options. They can use the time to talk to the children, access support from other agencies where appropriate and develop a safety plan. The caravans are sited in one of several safe places, chosen very carefully. Hosts are trained and supported to maintain confidentiality and to be unintrusive in their approach.

A key component of the success of the caravans has been attention to detail to ensure they are both safe and acceptable to the women who use them. For example, they were deliberately chosen as good quality but second-hand trailers that won't stand out or attract unwanted attention. They are equipped with everything a woman is likely to need: toiletries, baby food, a mobile phone. Careful attention is given to deep cleaning the caravans after each use so that women feel comfortable.

Since One Voice bought the caravans, they have provided many women with a safe space to pause and consider their choices. Often a woman may opt to stay in her relationship - but with some strategies in place to help her and her children to keep safer. Sometimes the caravans have been a vital stepping-stone to escape an abusive relationship, such as a young woman who used a caravan while she made the arrangements to go to her family in Ireland.

Of course, not all women will feel able to make use of the caravans – it is a big step for women in an abusive relationship to seek such support even when it comes from within the community. However, take-up has exceeded expectations with 164 women accessing the caravans in the last five years. One of these is 'Bella':

Bella suffered serious violence from her husband for a long time but was too frightened and ashamed to tell anyone. One of her friends suspected what was going on and told Bella about One Voice when they were on the site one day. Bella had a chat with them and found them easy to talk to - they didn't put her under any pressure to do anything, but they understood her situation and reassured her that they were there to help if needed. A few weeks later, matters came to a head when Bella became afraid not only for her own safety but that of her young daughter. This prompted her to call One Voice.

"I thought I'd have to wait 'til morning, but within an hour they'd helped me to get out and I was with my daughter somewhere else. They didn't tell me where I was going so I couldn't accidentally tell anyone else where I was. A volunteer stayed with me all night, then checked on me every day to make sure we were alright."

Bella stayed for three days in a safe caravan which gave her the space to think things through and decide what she wanted to do next. At first, she decided to move to another site near her family, but even that didn't feel completely safe, so she got in touch with One Voice again. Within a couple of weeks, the project had supported Bella and her daughter to move into a house. Being in a house felt weird at first but her daughter is happy, she's made friends and they both feel safe. It's been lonely though. Bella has had to cut herself off from most of her old friends to be sure that her ex-husband can't find her. The continued support from One Voice has been a lifeline.

"They're always there for me. They understand how it is and they're very easy to trust. They never talk about anyone else, so I know they won't talk about me. That's been really important. Without One Voice, I don't know where I'd be."

4. Partnership/awareness raising work with other organisations to improve services for GTR women.

One Voice aims to contribute to better services for GTR women and girls by raising awareness and working collaboratively with other organisations. This involves offering training and consultancy to other organisations, participating in strategic partnerships and contributing the perspective of the GTR community to planning processes. Wherever possible, they provide opportunities for GTR women to participate in events so that the views expressed come directly from the community.

There is frequently a lack of trust between the GTR community and other agencies, and this is often particularly the case with the police. 'Paula's story illustrates how the support of One Voice and their relationships with local police services can help overcome this mistrust and increase the safety of women:

Paula managed to leave an abusive relationship and went to live on a site near to her family. Unfortunately, her ex-partner knew where she was and had no intention of letting her go quietly. He continually harassed her and her family and became increasingly aggressive, especially after he'd been drinking. He would turn up on the site, often with some of his mates and they'd speed round their vans and shout threats. Paula's mum describes how the whole family were feeling trapped and terrorised. Eventually, she turned to One Voice for help.

"I knew about One Voice because they had helped me and my other daughter before. My husband was very ill, and they helped me with lots of things – form-filling, hand-holding, anything really. I didn't know that they could help with this situation, but we were all so scared we had to do something. They told me that next time the ex-partner turned up we should contact them, and they'd call the police. So that's what we did – and it worked. The police turned up, they took the situation seriously and it hasn't happened again. It needed someone else to come in from the outside."

Paula and her family were very nervous about getting the police involved because 'travelling people don't do that.' But the intervention gave Paula's ex-partner the warning he needed to start changing his behaviour. He's reduced his drinking and now maintains links with their children via a contact centre.

"It's completely different now and the children are so much more settled. One Voice have been absolutely brilliant."

One Voice's consistent, collaborative and honest approach has won them respect among partner agencies, as was evident from the comments made in interviews.

Collaboration between One Voice and other agencies has brought mutual benefits:

"They epitomise the principle of 'nothing about us without us'. What they do is entirely led by experts by experience. They are persistent and consistent and stick to their ethos. As a result, they're seen as trusted and safe, not only by the community but by partner agencies."

"It's helped both ways. One Voice has been incredibly valuable in giving us an in-depth understanding of the issues faced by GTR women. We also know what they can offer so we can link GTR women who come to us into One Voice. But our links with One Voice also means that their workers and volunteers can tell GTR women about us and help them feel more confident about using our service."

What has been learned about what works in addressing DVA in the GTR community?

People interviewed for this briefing were asked what they thought made the One Voice project work – the key ingredients of success. These were the common themes: The project is run by and for women in the GTR community. The importance of the project being run by women from the community, who understand the issues, have the relationships in the community and have earned the trust of both women and men cannot be over-estimated. As one interviewee put it:

“The fact that it’s run by traveller women themselves who understand the community inside out and have got really strong relationships of trust – this is why it works. In fact, I think it’s only a project run by traveller women themselves that can work.”

The project has gained the trust of both men and women

The project’s main aim is to improve the lives of women, but One Voice has approached this in ways that have maintained the support and trust of men too. The project is clear that it wishes to support, not undermine, the culture of the community, and it is not there to judge men or to break up families:

“They’re very non-judgmental - the project doesn’t set out to blame men, in fact it has been very good at involving men and gaining their trust and support. Gives women a safe space to think and make choices – very often this means women reuniting with their partners but having had time to think.”

Gaining the trust of men was recognised as critically important:

“If you don’t bring men on the side of the project, then you don’t have a project.”

Women of all ages and all groups within the community are involved

The project has been successful in involving women across the spectrum from older women to teenagers. They have also successfully engaged different GTR groups including Irish travellers, those living in houses, on sites and by the road. They also work with women who marry in to the GTR community or who marry out. Again, the fact that the support is provided by women from the community means that they can draw on their understanding of the issues and challenges all groups of women can face.

There is careful attention to detail

Working on sensitive issues within the GTR community involves thinking carefully about every aspect of the work. This includes practical attention to detail, for example, about how the safe caravans are equipped. But it also includes 'cultural' attention to detail – thinking about how women can be encouraged to take up support in ways that feel safe (e.g. doing a cookery class), how communication is tailored so that men don't feel threatened, how volunteers are supported so that they can maintain safe boundaries for themselves.

All of this not only requires careful thought, but it also requires what one interviewee described as:

"What women are often good at. It's a combination of pragmatism and diplomacy."

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Effective partnerships have been developed with other agencies

One Voice has successfully developed positive working relationships with a range of agencies, both from the women and girls' sector and others, including the police, health and local authorities. This has enabled them to access external support when needed:

Equally importantly, the work they have done with other agencies is gradually making them feel safer for women from the GTR community to use.

"They've gained the support of partner agencies who do seem to have responded well when they've been needed – it's captured their imaginations, so they want to support it."

Why One Voice needs your support

One Voice 4 Travellers Women and Girls project is unique. There are other projects which support the GTR community and there are other projects which support women affected by domestic abuse, but no other initiative provides specialist DVA support to women within the context of a fully holistic approach to women and girls within the GTR community and with an in-depth understanding of that community at its core.

Reducing violence and abuse in the GTR community and improving the practice of other agencies to increase support for GTR women and girls are extremely long-term goals. The sustainability of this work is crucially important and the reason why was summed up well by one of those interviewed for this briefing:

"Change like this doesn't happen quickly. It takes generations. So, it's no good focusing on short-term outcomes. [That's why] projects like One Voice really need to be there for the long-term."

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