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# TOOLS TO GAIN ACCESS TO FAMILIES IN IRELAND

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## **IMPRINT**

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against children, young people and women and to  
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# **Methodologies for Social Service Provision for Travellers affected by Domestic Violence**

## **Tools to gain access to Families**



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## Domestic Violence – Introduction

Violence within families is a worldwide social problem. Besides children, women in particular are victims and the deeds go mostly unpunished. Estimates suggest that more women worldwide die within their own homes than as a result of war and civil war. Domestic violence is one of the most common human rights violations and is a result of structural power asymmetries within intimate relationships and families.

Violence hinders development: such traumatic experiences have a serious negative influence on the self-esteem of affected women and undermine their ability to be strong members of a strong civil society, who stand up for their rights. Furthermore, the damages caused by violence affect health, education and working ability. Therefore it contributes to poverty in affected families. (*Basics and Source: "Bread for the World"(Editor): Overcoming of domestic violence – A global challenge, Stuttgart 2007*)

### Objectives of the tools

The tools are meant to offer social workers additional instrument to work with Traveller families affected by domestic violence within the framework of social service provision.

The tools concentrate on methods of awareness raising, self-awareness and of acceptance of the presence of domestic violence within families. The tools can be applied to support families in developing internal instruments to prevent domestic violence by understanding the reason of the problem and by understanding how domestic violence has been developing and has been dealt with within the family structure.

The tools help family members to better understand their role within the family-power-relations, to reflect upon the function of their position within the family and to learn how to find ways to overcome domestic violence.

If an exercise asks participants to write notes, self-reflective stories or other forms of written expression, these elements may also be replaced by oral stories or the social worker taking written notes on a flip chart. This method is suitable when working with illiterate participants.

**NOTE:** *The tools are for social workers. The tools are not intended for use in psychotherapy-settings, for individual with psychological disorders due to severe trauma experience and are not intended for confrontational therapy settings between victims and perpetrators.*

### Required equipment for the different tools

Flipchart	Pens
Flipchart pens	Pins
Paper	Toys
Name tags	Evaluation sheets
Video camera and player	

### Duration

Each session will probably take 45 to 60 minutes, in some cases 90 minutes – depending on the size of group.

## **Tools to reach out to Traveller families**

Often social workers find it extremely hard to reach out to Traveller women. In many cases social workers know that these women are victims of domestic violence. But the women are too shy, too afraid and too intimidated to step out and to search of help. They never learnt to do so, they are afraid of punishment and of ruining the image of their families. Thus, these women are “silent sufferers”.

Cultural barriers and traditions can play an important role in limiting access to Traveller families.

The following information and instruments are suggested to increase understanding of the situations involved in Domestic Violence. The Tools will offer a chance to reach out to Traveller families with the aim of providing support within social service provision.

## Tool 1:

***In order to reach potential participants, the social environment must be taken into consideration. Knowledge of cultural and family backgrounds facilitates access and interaction.***

### Irish Travellers

Irish Travellers are a small indigenous minority group that has been part of Irish society for centuries. They have a value system, language, customs and traditions, which make them an identifiable group both to themselves and to others. Their distinctive lifestyle and culture, based on a nomadic tradition, sets them apart from the general population (Our Geels, 2010).

They differ from the general Irish population in many respects including their lifestyles, their culture and their treatment by society. According to the 2006 census (Central Statistics Office) there were just over 22,000 Travellers living in the Republic of Ireland (Central Statistics Office) and 1,770 in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2002) cites 2001 Census figures for NI). There are also an estimated 15,000 Irish Travellers in England, Scotland and Wales and 7,000 in the U.S.A.

Domestic Violence, poverty, racism, discrimination, poor accommodation, ill health and lack of education are the greatest issues affecting the Traveller community. Traveller women only make up 0.5% of the Irish population but represent 15% of all domestic violence services.

Irish Travellers are a very small minority group in Ireland, constituting less than 1% of the population.

The Equal Status Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) defines the Traveller Community as follows:

*‘Traveller community means the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions, including historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland’.*

Traveller separateness, partly by choice, enables them to retain their identity as an ethnic group, often in the face of opposition and pressure to conform to general societal norms (Ní Shuinear, 1994). Their experience of low social status and exclusion, which can prevent them from participating as equals in society, is often aggravated by hostility and misconceptions of people towards them (Helleiner, 2000). Yet there are many positive aspects to Traveller life, not generally appreciated by the wider population (Our Geels, 2010).

There are numerous theories surrounding the origins of this minority group, that Travellers are the direct descendants of the Irish nobility, descendants of peasants from the time of the Great Famine of the 1840s, or that they are dropouts of society. There is a lack of research regarding the origins of the Traveller community (Ni Shuinear 2004). What is known is that they have been part of Irish society for centuries (Ni Shuinear 1994:54-77, Okely, 1983:13-15).

Throughout the twentieth century, Travellers have often been viewed as a problem in Irish society. This is evident in The Commission on Itinerancy Report of 1963 which talks about a “final solution” to the Traveller problem (Mc Veigh 2007). Assimilation into settled culture has been considered in policies and legislation as a way of “solving the problem” of Travellers in Ireland (Mc Veigh 2007). The concept of assimilation implies that a culture is to be phased out and that members of the group are absorbed into the majority populations’ way of life. The concept is discriminatory and does not value diversity in society.

In Ireland, policy and legislation have evolved since The Commission on Itinerancy Report of 1963. Literature written in the area of Irish Travellers focuses largely on mistakes that have been made in Irish policies in the past. There have been reviews of government policies and reports. Recommendations have been made to improve the situation of the Irish Travellers. However, on the ground, things appear to have remained the same in the case of Irish Travellers.

*“Travellers are widely acknowledged as one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in Irish society. Travellers fare poorly on almost every indicator used to measure disadvantage: unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, health status, infant mortality, life expectancy, illiteracy, education and training levels, access to decision-making and political representation, gender equality, access to credit, accommodation and living conditions (O’Connell 2002:49).*

Irish Travellers have lower life expectancy than their settled counterparts. Below are two population pyramids taken from the Census 2006. Figure one is the Irish population pyramid by age and sex in 2006. This pyramid is what you would expect to see of a developed Western country, high birth rates and high life expectancy. Figure two shows the Traveller population by age and sex in 2006. There are high birth rates and a low life expectancy. Figure two is more common of a developing country. Likewise, in Britain, Travellers suffer poorer health and lower life expectancy than that of the settled community (Niner, 2002).

Travellers’ living standards in comparison to members of the majority settled population are extremely poor. In 2000, one in four Traveller families lived in caravans on unofficial encampments without access to running water, toilets or refuse collection, and this substandard accommodation has been identified as one of the principal causes of their poorer health status and lower life expectancy compared to the majority “settled” population (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2000), (Department of Health and Children, 2002).

Irish Travellers have a distinctive approach to religion and the vast majority is Roman Catholics as are most other Irish people. Most are baptized, married, and buried in the church, although few attend mass regularly. Irish Travellers have no unique religious beliefs and lack specialized religious practitioners of their own. Travellers believe in various omens that portend good or bad luck or some specific event.

They have been known to follow a strict ethos called 'The Travellers Code' that dictates their moral beliefs and can influence their actions. Family is of particular importance, with a strong sense of family loyalty and duty.

## Tool 2:

### ***Cultural-specific factors must be taken into consideration when it comes to engaging with Traveller communities***

‘the discrimination faced by Travellers from Irish society has the effect that to disclose domestic violence in the community can be perceived as disloyal and reinforcing settled society’s negative attitudes’.  
*(The Women’s Health Council, 2009; Donnelly, 2002)*

‘the effects of violence against women in the Traveller community can be very traumatic as it is often compounded by the cumulative effect of poverty, social exclusion and poor living conditions’.  
*(The Task Force on Violence Against Women, 1997)*

a fear of social work procedures and the emphasis they place on the women’s behaviour rather than the partner’s abuse, discourages women from disclosing domestic violence or contacting a refuge. There is fear that disclosure will lead to children being taken into care  
*(The Women’s Health Council, 2009)*

‘for some Traveller women experiencing domestic violence their negative experience with some members of the Gardaí increase their reluctance to seek help. Traveller women and many agencies have experienced an inconsistent and often discriminatory Garda response’  
*(Allen and Forster, 2007)*

‘the strong emphasis on family, marital stability and the woman’s traditional child-caring role within the home, places additional barriers on Traveller women leaving a violent relationship’  
*(Allen and Forster, 2007; Morton, 1998; Kelleher et al 1995)*

‘an area of concern is the lack of sufficient refuge accommodation, and a lack of appropriate emergency and long term accommodation for Traveller women. Discrimination by private landlords, long public and social housing waiting lists, and the lack of Traveller specific accommodation can make the idea of leaving the abuser and the community a daunting task’  
*(Allen and Forster, 2007)*

“Traveller women show tremendous resilience surviving violent relationships. Important support factors highlighted are religious beliefs, their love of children and the support from family and friends.”

*(The Women’s Health Council, 2009)*

### **Tool 3:**

#### ***How Social Workers can encourage participation in social provision services for Traveller communities***

- The social service should be held within the participants' residential area and should be reachable on foot or by public transport

The building in which the services are provided should be in a central location and easily reachable by public transport. For the first session, the participants should be greeted at the entrance by a representative of the organisation. This will help keep concerns and anxiety towards the new experience as low as possible.

- The social service provision should be scheduled during morning or early afternoon hours.

At this time older children are still in school. If necessary (and / or possible) the women should be allowed to bring their babies or toddlers to the sessions.

- It should be pointed out to the participants that the social services are offered especially for them and caters to their interests.
- Based on experience it is necessary to repeatedly invite the women to each and every meeting in person. Positive experiences are usually not enough for the women to attend regularly without a personal assurance that they are truly expected.
- The participants should be assured that they can withdraw from the services at any time.
- It should be pointed out to the participants that the social service provisions also serve as a meeting place, where they can talk freely about many things.

Stress that despite the difficult topic, there will also be some fun and some time for personal relaxation and quietness

- It should be explained that the programme does not require reading or writing skills, but that everything can be learned by imitation, participation and talking.
- All details of the programme / service should be made clear to the participants in advance

These might include the following:

- Time of programme
- Duration of programme, including
  - Hours
  - Number of weeks run
- Location of programme – including room in the building
- How to get there
- Who will be leading the programme
- Will any other service provider be there
- Who will be participating – numbers
- Who they should contact if they have any queries in the meantime
- How they should contact them – e.g. phone numbers
- Do they need to bring anything with them
- Will there be coffee/cigarette break

All the above can be important to reassure potential participants that these things have been thought through, and that they will be looked after.

- It should be explained to the participants that the first meeting with a social worker or a group is intended as orientation event with lots of information regarding many different aspects of life.
- In the second session, agreements between the social worker and the participants should be agreed / signed

## **Tool 4:**

### ***Logistical factors must be taken into consideration when it comes to delivering group services to Traveller communities regarding Domestic Violence***

#### **Attendance:**

- Setting a meeting time about 30 minutes before the start time can be helpful. Providing tea/coffee in this half hour may encourage participants to arrive.

It will minimise the meeting being interrupted by inevitable late arrivals

It can provide a relaxed time for participants to gather before the meeting starts

It can provide an opportunity for participants to socialize in an informal environment

#### **Room setup:**

- Bright, but not glaring light, maybe with a dimmer for relaxation periods
- Good acoustics so that the explanations of trainers/interpreters can easily be understood
- Bathroom / toilet close by

#### **Setting the Atmosphere:**

The psycho-emotional wellbeing and feeling of safety within a group are important aspects when working with the Traveller groups:

- Social workers should therefore always be generous with praise and thanks
- Social workers should try to re-create the experience of a “friendly house that welcomes guests”
- Water available in the room
- Tissues available in the room
- Breaks to be taken. Taking small breaks will help in supporting concentration of participants. They can add energy to the group and can help diffuse high emotional atmospheres – as appropriate.  
Taking a longer break (20 – 30 minutes) is advisable as this will provide the opportunity for participants to move freely, to chat or to use the bathroom. During this break, the social worker may answer individual questions or simply engage in small talk with the group
- The instructional pace should be slow. During the first couple of sessions, it is better to demand too little of the participants than too much; the exertion can be increased to some extent later

on. Social workers must respect the participants' abilities at all times.

### **Ground Rules:**

#### ✓ Attendance:

Attendance is voluntary, but it is important to emphasise the benefits for the individual and the group, of consistent attendance

#### ✓ Leaving early / arriving late:

It might be inevitable that participants will at time arrive late / need to leave early. If possible, ask that you be informed of this in advance – so that you can let the group know – and minimize disruption.

If a participant arrives late and the group has already started, it is important to acknowledge their arrival; give them a few minutes to get themselves together, and then gently recap on what they might have missed.

Do not ask them a question the minute they walk into the room / group

#### ✓ Respect:

Group rules such as respect can be discussed at the first session. Get the group to give examples of what respect means in practice.

Examples might include – not laughing at someone's opinion; not insisting that everyone has to speak if they don't feel able to; not trying to convince someone if they have different ideas / experience from others, etc.

Turn-taking in talking is an important aspect of showing respect in group discussions.

#### ✓ Confidentiality:

Confidentiality will be discussed at the beginning of sessions. There will be a formal aspect to this, in relation to the limitations and boundaries that the Social Worker must ethically adhere to.

There is also a more informal aspect, in what the group may decide is appropriate between themselves. For example should they discuss what comes up during the break? Should they discuss what comes up with each other out of the room? What do they do/say if someone else – not in the group asks what goes on in the programme?

A general rule is that what comes up in the room stays in the room. Discussions should not take place with anyone that involves personal details. A general explanation of what the programme is about can be given to others.

#### ✓ Under the influence:

It is important to state under what conditions a participant might be barred from attending the group (usually – using organization policies for guidance)

## Tool 5:

### ***Specific factors to be taken into consideration when working with issues of Domestic Violence and Travellers***

it is important to acknowledge the individual beliefs and experiences of each Traveller.

By opening up a discussion of these individual beliefs and experiences at the first session, you can help participants to integrate these new materials with some of their current knowledge.

Encourage participants to discuss their own beliefs and experiences throughout. Do not get into arguments or allow heated arguments to persist. Acknowledge that there are different understandings.

Domestic violence is an extremely difficult topic for some participants

Do not try to provide individual counseling to anyone during group sessions. If a person is in crisis, or has an urgent need to talk to someone about domestic violence that is currently going on in their relationship, speak to them privately and ensure that they are linked into the appropriate support worker. Follow up if appropriate.

An understanding of the interpersonal barriers that make it difficult for Travellers (and others) to discuss / disclose issues of domestic violence is essential to providing a culturally specific service.

These interpersonal barriers might include all / any of the following:

- Fear of isolation from family/community
- Fear of intimidation from his/her family
- Fear of violence from his/her family
- Fear for personal safety
- Lack of privacy
- Partner/children/family members always with her
- Fear that the children will be removed into care
- Blaming self for abuse
- Shame/embarrassment
- Feeling they will not be taken seriously
- Fear that things will be taken out of their control
- Fear that partner may be arrested
- Previous negative experiences of disclosure
- Low self efficacy
- Addiction





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