



National Action Group
for LGBTI+ Traveller
and Roma Rights

Executive Summary

A peer-research project to explore and make visible the experience of exclusion of LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

There are potentially 4,000 Travellers on the island of Ireland who are LGBTI+¹. Many LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma experience social exclusion on a personal, familial and societal level,² and specific LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma supports are few and far between.³

This research, 'Unveiling Inequality – The Experiences of LGBTI+ Traveller and Roma' is commissioned by the National Action Group for LGBT+ Traveller & Roma Rights, who formed with the goal of advancing greater awareness and understanding of Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Intersex and other sexual identities (LGBTI+) Traveller and Roma and supporting their inclusion in organisations and in their communities. The study is gratefully supported by LGBT Ireland and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC). This is a peer-to-peer participatory action research project that aims to unveil the isolation experienced by LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma, with the aim of creating an Ireland which is more LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma inclusive.

The research began in early 2021 and was completed in July 2022, and we understand it to be the largest study of LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma in Ireland to date. There were 57 engagements in total - 47 through an online survey tool, and 10 through focus-group discussions. Arts-based methodologies such as Photovoice and transcript poetry were used to help participants and communities more broadly engage with the findings. Some examples of participant Photovoice and poems are included throughout the research report. The full Spoken Word Project will be launched later in 2022/early 2023 both in physical spaces and virtually, to take this research off the page and into the public forum for discussion and debate.

Research Aim

The aim of the study 'Unveiling Inequality - Experiences of LGBTI+ Travellers & Roma', was to explore, evidence and make visible the experiences of LGBTI+ Traveller and Roma. This was with the view to enabling relevant services and stakeholders to identify the actions that need to be taken to achieve inclusion.

The research report describes a community that experience racism within the mainstream Irish LGBTI+ community and services, as well as isolation due to a fear of or experience of homophobic, biphobic, transphobic discrimination and attitudes within their own ethnic communities. It also documents the considerable issues faced by LGBTI+ Traveller and Roma, such as isolation/lack of understanding from their communities, homelessness, lack of support/no support, being in heterosexual marriage (often with children), and exacerbated mental health issues. However, it also strives to capture the love and acceptance that some participating LGBTI+ Traveller and Roma describe as receiving from their families and loved ones.

Research Approach

The field research was carried out from October 2021 until July 2022 and used participative and experiential approaches that encouraged collaborative leadership and participation at all stages of the research process.

Three peer-researchers carried out four focus groups with 10 participants - 9 LGBTI+ Traveller and 1 LGBTI+ Roma. Photovoice was used as a methodology, and participants were asked to bring a photograph that

represented their experience as LGBTI+ Traveller or Roma, and that they could give consent to sharing as part of the research publication. Participants had the opportunity to discuss the research with the supporting organisations prior to taking part, and again with the researcher as part of the informed consent process.

Research participants were invited to take part through multiple methods including a Webinar, through a poster-call distributed through Traveller organisations, and finally through a survey. The survey was designed to be used as a preliminary recruitment tool, rather than as an instrument to be relied on as a central part of the research. However, it quickly revealed the fear that people had about their LGBTI+ identity being exposed and garnered more responses than the call for focus group participation.

There were 43 + 2* valid survey responses. Two of the responses were completed by family members, and these responses when referred to in the report contain an asterisk. Four responses were excluded. Three were invalid as they contained multiple conflicting answers, and one was excluded due to it being incomplete.

45 (43 + 2*) Traveller and 2 Roma took part, that included the following breakdown in terms of sexual and gender identity.

- 28 Gay male*
- 9 Gay female/lesbian
- 5 Bi-sexual
- 3 Transgender
- 2 Intersex*

It is important to note that the sample above is a non-representative sample, as the objective is to provide an important snapshot of LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma experiences. Because of this, inferential statistics have not been drawn.

Background and Context

On top of facing prejudice for being Traveller or Roma, LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma can also face homophobia within their community because of their sexual identity,⁴ and experience immense pressure to conform to the stereotypical and one-dimensional portrayals of who Traveller and Roma people are.^{5,6} Mental health issues are more prevalent for Traveller and Roma, who have been identified as high-risk in relation to suicide and poor mental health.⁷ Suicide for Traveller men, for example, is seven times higher than the general population, and most common in young Traveller men aged 15-25.⁸ Similarly, 90% of LGBTI+ youth in Ireland are also struggling with their mental health.⁹ Therefore, Roma and Traveller individuals who identify as LGBTI+ are even more susceptible to exacerbated rates of mental illness and suicide.¹⁰

The wider LGBTI+ community may have access to avenues such as 'moving away from home' or 'going to college' that can be successful mechanisms for coping with sexual identity.¹¹ However, a big aspect of the coming out process for LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma is taking into consideration the reaction not only from family members but the reaction from wider family and the Traveller and Roma community more broadly, and fear of exclusion for many can be too big a risk to take. By law, all public bodies in Ireland have responsibility to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by their policies and plans.¹² However, the reality, where high levels of racism can impede on the ability to source employment, access higher education or find accommodation,¹³ alternative options outside the family and community structure may simply not be available to LGBTI+ Traveller and Roma.¹⁴

Similarly, participants in wider LGBTI+ research have cited the LGBTI+ community as a source of strength and support,¹⁵ and LGBTI+ groups as integral in terms of offering a safe space for people to come out, as well as enabling them to form a social network of support.¹⁶ However, for LGBTI+ Traveller and Roma, there is discrimination within the wider LGBTI+ community



that includes anti-Traveller and anti-gypsy sentiment, with many citing verbal racism and exclusion from social clubs.¹⁷ In a nutshell, the consequences of exclusion from the community are more acute for LGBTI+ Traveller and Roma, who may literally have nowhere else to go.

Findings – Experience of Coming Out, Mental Health and Exclusion

Some respondents to this research had coming out experiences that ranged from feeling lonely and isolated to being threatened or endangered or made homeless as a result. A significant number of participants (39.1%; n=18) said they had experienced ‘homelessness’ as a consequence of being LGBTI+, while others described being in a state of ‘temporary homelessness’, that seemed to be a direct consequence of their being LGBTI+. On top of this, just over half of the respondents to our survey self-selected that they were married to someone of the opposite sex which helps to explain the reticence respondents expressed to attending a space which might expose them and their LGBTI+ identity.

It is clear from this research that LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma experience the same mental health issues as the general LGBTI+ population, only more so. Several gay male Focus Group Participants spoke of spending a considerable amount of time in their late teens or early twenties, isolated from family and friends and locked in their bedroom. Some of the participants in this research spoke about being in mental turmoil, in some instances for years, during this period of their lives.

Participants were asked about their experiences of harassment and violence because they are LGBTI+ Traveller or Roma. By far, the most frequently reported negative experience was being verbally hurt, and a considerable number of participants had experienced threats. Just over 40% of participants had experienced some form of physical attack due to being LGBTI+ Traveller or Roma (41.9%; n=18), attacked sexually (7%; n=3) or attacked with a weapon (20.9%; n=9).

With the exception of ‘attacked sexually’ these figures are considerably higher (in some cases double) than those reported by the main LGBTI+ community.¹⁸

Findings - Experience of Supports and Barriers to Support

The majority of research participants, 71.1% (n=32), found finding LGBTI+ friends to be a support, while only 8.9% (n=4) found support from Traveller/Roma organisations and only 6.7% (n=3) from LGBTI+ organisations, with some participants reporting feeling a lack of acceptance due to their ethnicity. People in focus groups also spoke about the support of their families being the most important source of feeling acceptance of their LGBTI+ identity, and for many, once they had the backing of their immediate families, the views and opinions of others ceased to matter.

In terms of aspects that hindered or blocked people from accessing support, almost 80% (n=35) of respondents selected negative attitudes in society towards LGBTI+, while family and friends as well as the community were seen by 72.7% (n=32) to have a negative impact. Respondents also cited ‘country people’ or ‘settled people’ and ‘anti-Traveller sentiment’ in organisations as having a negative impact on individuals’ acceptance of their LGBTI+ identity. Fear of rejection or discrimination (97.2%; n=35) were the main reasons people cited for hiding their identity and therefore not seeking support, while for others (33.3%; n=12), it was because they were in a heterosexual marriage.

Recommendations

The aim of this research was to advance greater awareness and understanding of Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Intersex and other sexual identities among (LGBTI+) Travellers and Roma and support their inclusion in organisations and in their communities. Therefore, a main focus of this research was LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma people's experience of accessing supports, and participants emphasised the following as key to raising awareness and promoting acceptance of LGBTI+ Traveller and Roma:

- Increased support from Traveller services for families of LGBTI+ Traveller and Roma
- More LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma services
- Increased LGBTI+ education for Traveller and Roma communities
- Increased LGBTI+ education for the wider settled community

This research indicates that more needs to be done by both LGBTI+ organisations and Traveller and Roma organisations to include LGBTI+ people's needs in their services. Steps to improve care for LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma could therefore include:

- Employing and retaining LGBTI+ staff
- Using inclusive language
- Implementing specialist staff training particularly with regard to anti-racism
- Initiating conversations on inclusion with boards and executives

This research also suggests the need for broader policy changes, including the need for:

- Greater representation of Traveller and Roma LGBTI+ people in public awareness and education campaigns
- Effective response to the serious mental health issues impacting LGBTI+ Travellers and Roma nationally

1 Abdalla et al. (2010). All Ireland Traveller Health Study

2 LGBT Pavee, Ireland. (2022). Reconciling Community, Culture and Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

3 Ibid

4 Warde. (2021). LGBT+ Travellers: 'A lot of the community are ignorant towards the trans issue'.

5 LGBT Ireland Submission. 2020/05. A MORE EQUITABLE IRELAND FOR LGBT+ TRAVELLERS.

6 Ibid.

7 Pavee Point. (2021). Urgent action on Traveller Health Plan needed as COVID-19 adds to Traveller mental health crisis.

8 Pavee Point. (2015). Travellers and Suicide: Facts and Figures.

9 BelongTo. (2018). <https://www.belongto.org/90-irish-lgbti-youth-struggle-mental-health/>

10 Baker & Bila. (2019). Gypsy, Roma & Traveller LGBTQI International Conference 2019 Report.

11 Higgins et al. (2016). LGBTIreland Report. p. 69.

12 The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act. (2014). Section 42.

13 Pavee Point. (2022) Roma in Ireland.

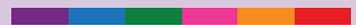
14 Barry. (2022). Harris announces €450k funding to assist Traveller and Roma students in higher education.

15 Noone et al. (2018). Far from Home: Life as an LGBT Migrant in Ireland.

16 Higgins et al., (2016). LGBT Ireland Report. p. 155.

17 Gay Project. (2022). <https://gayproject.ie/special-projects/proud-af/>

18 Higgins et al. (2016). LGBTIreland Report.



I'M A BIT FUNNY AS WELL

I'm actually very, very lucky...I have not experienced homophobia within the community... I don't know how it happened...but I was very, very lucky.

This is a photograph of myself. I was carefree. I wasn't out at the time, but everyone sort of gathered... it was an open secret that nobody spoke about.

A year after this photograph was taken... I started to see friends, peers, cousins starting to go out with members of the opposite sex. I started going out with settled girls. But once my friends, cousins, peer group started going out with other Travellers... 'right I may do the same' ...that's when it started to get serious and like 'it might lead to engagement or marriage' ...that frightened the life out of me.

I started to revert into myself... hiding myself away... watching my every move, my hand movements. I got more and more angry with myself, angry at family members. I came out of the room maybe once, twice a week for three years. I don't know how I'm not psychologically destroyed.

I came out to my brothers and sisters, on a drunken night out. I thought that was the end of it. I thought that I was going to be ostracised. I was going to be kicked out. I had my own prejudices against my own community, my own family. But...they came up to me one after the other and says, 'you're still our brother... we love you!'

I met this other gay Traveller. My mother says, 'ah you need to keep away from that fella... he's a bit funny'. But I turned around to my mother and said, 'Ma, I'm a bit funny as well!'

**Photovoice created from Focus Group Participant transcript
Photograph by Derek Speirs*







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**An Choimisiún na hÉireann um Chearta
an Duine agus Comhionannas**
Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission