

# Perspectives on ageing in Gypsy families

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Aunt Annie

*There are some things that are good about getting old. You know a bit about yourself and you have knowledge and experience and there is a lot of pleasure in seeing your grandchildren every day. We all live together and see each other every day and that really makes a difference.*

**(Aunt Annie, Gypsy elder)**

This paper explores the views and experiences of older Gypsies, offering a glimpse into the past and reflecting on how the non-Gypsy community have influenced the Gypsy way of life.

# Introduction

In this paper, we offer a glimpse into the life of older Gypsies as they reflect on their past and on how the non-Gypsy community have impacted on their lives. Traditionally, Gypsies have been nomadic, but successive governments have legislated against Gypsy life. Many Gypsies have now been forced to abandon their traditional ways and live on permanent sites. Consequently, many Gypsy elders look back on their nomadic life with great affection and a sense of loss, not only for themselves but also for young Gypsy families who will be denied the opportunity to follow these traditions.

Despite these experiences of marginalisation and discrimination, Gypsy culture is alive and well. We hope that sharing some of the experiences of Gypsy elders will lead to a recognition of the strength of Gypsy culture and a celebration of how Gypsy families support and care for their elders.

## Note

The term 'gypsy' is often used as a blanket term to cover a large number of nomadic peoples, including Romany, Irish, Welsh, and Scottish. Gypsy (with a capital G) should only be applied to Romany Gypsies.

Romany Gypsies and Scots Gypsy Travellers, along with Irish Travellers, are all recognised as ethnic minorities and are protected under the Race Relations Act 1976. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, which was introduced in response to the identification of 'institutional racism' in the Stephen Lawrence Report, gives public bodies a statutory duty to promote race equality. However, although Gypsies have been recognised in law as an ethnic group, their corresponding rights are often not respected and many continue to face harassment, discrimination and abuse.

All of the elders in our interviews are Romany Gypsies and like many other ethnic groups, they are recognised in law as they have their own history, language, culture and traditions.

### **About the authors**

Three of us – Pauline Lane, Siobhan Spencer and Muzelley McCready – have worked together on this project. Siobhan is the Coordinator of Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group (DGLG). Much of her day-to-day work involves advising and supporting fellow Gypsies who are often facing eviction. Siobhan has worked on many regional and national projects for Gypsies. Although traditionally Gypsy voices are not heard in government circles, Siobhan has often acted as a government advisor on Gypsy issues. In 2009, she received an MBE in recognition of her work in community relations.

Muzelley is also a Romany Gypsy and she works with DGLG. She has worked as a community development worker for many years, and has also conducted research aiming to improve health outcomes for Gypsy and Traveller people. Muzelley has recently been elected to the European Roma and Traveller Forum.

Pauline is not a Gypsy but works as a researcher in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at Anglia Ruskin University. She has worked on minority health issues for over ten years and she is passionate about social equality. We all met about three years ago, when we worked together on another project for minority elders. We have kept in touch over the years and we are now making plans to develop a new European initiative to improve the health of Gypsy/Roma people.

### **Participants**

Siobhan and Muzelley contacted lots of elders in their community to see if anyone wanted to talk to us about their life and about getting older. Pauline and Muzelley then visited the elders in their trailers to have a chat. Gypsy life is very sociable and family members would pop in and out of the trailer (caravan) while we talked and they often joined in. You will notice that we have used the terms ‘Aunt’ or ‘Uncle’ as titles, as a sign of respect.

### **Gypsy life**

Most of the elders we spoke to live in trailers on permanent sites. Gypsy homes are kept with great pride and any visitor in a Gypsy trailer cannot help but be struck by the cleanliness of the home. Most Gypsies will use separate bowls for washing dishes, clothes, food preparation and washing themselves. This is important for health professionals to remember when treating a Gypsy elder in their home or in hospital. Traditionally, all of the cooking, washing and body cleansing takes place outside of the home. This tradition is maintained on permanent sites, where the shower, toilet and kitchen are all separate and away from the main trailer. These external facilities may create some challenges for older people, but are a normal part of Gypsy life.

Most Gypsies have a cultural aversion to bricks and mortar and, although most of the elders live in a trailer on a permanent site, the notion of being mobile or nomadic remains an important part of their identity.

### **Family**

The family is at the heart of Gypsy life and most Gypsies continue to live in extended family groups. Most Gypsy families maintain traditional gender roles, with the women being responsible for the home, the cooking and cleaning and the family.

Traveller men and women have a different life. Men have wonderful lives, they come and go as they please and they have food handed to them. Men meet in the open air; when they meet at the fair they don't have to know one another because you always know someone's breed [family].

*(Aunt Linda, Gypsy elder)*

The men tend to be associated with outdoor life where they work and meet friends and family. Several of the women we interviewed thought that women's lives were harder than the men's.

I think that Gypsy women have a lot harder life than men.

My husband had five sisters and he could not even cut himself a piece of bread. But it was different in my family, my brothers could cook anything.

Women used to do house cleaning, hawking [selling goods door to door] and all the washing by hand with a lot of soap and using a dolly tub, as well as looking after and feeding the family.

*(Aunt Annie, Gypsy elder)*

For Gypsies, family life is very important and many people still live with their extended family. Gypsy families have always had very strict moral codes and values and this continues into the present day. Young people are expected to take on adult responsibilities at about 16 years old.

Our moral standards are different as well, our young people are not allowed to watch anything risky and we don't talk about anything like that and men never talk about women's problems.

*(Aunt Julie, Gypsy elder)*

What has been striking from listening to the elders is how valued elders are in Gypsy culture and how they are supported by their families. However, that is not to say that they do not need the support of public sector services. Due to poor health, many of the elders we visited did

need ramps and rails fitted to their facilities, as well as access to local health services. However, overall, Gypsy families may have something to teach us all about caring for our elders.

### **Childhood memories**

Most people do not know a lot about Gypsies. Yet they have been part of British culture for over 500 years, so they are not strangers in the landscape. Gypsies have always adapted to the changing world around them and they are an important part of our society. Many of the elders we interviewed spent their childhood living with family and friends in traditional horse drawn wagons.

When I was a boy we had a horse and wagon. As a boy I had to make the fire and put the horses out to graze and at dusk it was our job to bring the horses back close to the wagon. My dad bought a bus and he sold the horses. I stood and cried. I was a big lad. I was twelve. It was not the same; you could not smell the horse. Dad said we could travel for a week and a day but we wanted the horses.

*(Uncle Sam, Gypsy elder)*

In this example, Sam's father was trying to placate him by saying that they could now travel for a week and a day, as the car would never get tired, compared to a maximum of a day's travel (15 miles) with a horse.

However, as the years have gone by and with the introduction of motorised vehicles, many families have changed to using a modern trailer (caravan) that is towed by a car or van. But horses are clearly still very pervasive in the memories of the elders and they continue to play an important role in Gypsy culture. The annual horse fairs (such as Appleby, Kenilworth and Stow) are testament to this and many Gypsies continue to breed horses.

My dad had a couple of wagons and I was born in a wagon and we had wagon and horses in those days, they were the good days. When we moved around we would take the horses to water and put the [cooking] pot on outside, we had good food cooked in a black pot, we did not eat that tinned stuff.

*(Aunt Anna, Gypsy elder)*

### **Education**

Many older Gypsies have not traditionally participated in formal education and therefore most elders are not literate. This is important for service providers to remember, as most elders will not be able to read information such as appointment letters, pharmacy instructions, or health promotion materials.

While some Gypsies did not choose to send their children to school at all, for others, their education was interrupted by continually being moved on. For example, Muzelley (one of the authors of this paper) remembers coming home from school and finding the family trailer gone but the family washing still on the line. Her parents had been moved on so forcibly by the police that they did not have time to pick up their children or the washing (Muzelley's dad came back quickly to pick up both!).

Some Gypsy families found it difficult to access schools because of their nomadic life. Others did not want their children to go to school and learn gaje (non-Gypsy) values and morals. Even today, many Gypsy children do not attend school, or do not go on to secondary education. This is often because of bullying, discrimination and prejudice and the fact that schools rarely acknowledge Gypsy culture within the curriculum; this makes Gypsy children feel as if their culture is invisible (UNICEF, 2011; Save the Children, 2001).

I would have learnt to read but I can't. I went to school but I never clicked on to what they were saying, but we have made sure that the grandkids go to school.

*(Aunt Linda, Gypsy elder)*

We were forced to go to school. School has no attraction to Gypsy children at all. No child would want to swap their lives in the open air to stay in school. My husband was very well-educated; his dad was in the army so he had to go to school. When we were travelling, sometimes a man would come in [to teach], so I did learn to read and write but in Gypsy life you want freedom. But we do expect our young people to be a man or a woman aged 14 to 16 and then they do manly or womanly things.

*(Aunt Julie, Gypsy elder)*

I went to school sometimes but I did not learn to read and write there and I am self taught.

*(Uncle Sam, Gypsy elder)*

### **Life on the road**

Gypsies have always had to be enterprising and adapt to the changing world around them. Traditionally, they have been involved in low-wage and irregular/seasonal work and Gypsies continue to play an important part in our society.

When I was young, after the war, we made paper flowers and we would sell them around the pit houses. Some times the miners' wives would invite us in and offer us a bit of dinner but you could not go around knocking on doors now.

*(Aunt Mary, Gypsy elder)*

I hawked you know, we made flowers and I was a duckerer [a fortune- teller].

*(Aunt Joanne, Gypsy elder)*

In the summer sometimes we spent time in Wisbech [Cambridgeshire] so that Dad could pick fruit. But the men did not seem to work much when

I was young. They were the pot-watchers [laughter] and the women were the main getters, but Dad did go hedgehogging and rabbiting. Life in a wagon was hard times but I could say that, for me, it was good times ... We taught ours [children] how to make a living and that is how we live, how to earn their daily bread. I took my son scissor-sharpening and scrap dealing, we used to sell logs, cut trees, clear land and I showed my daughter how to take a bag [go hawking].

*(Aunt Julie, Gypsy elder)*

### ***Discrimination and conflict with non-Gypsies***

Nomadic life has often brought Gypsies into conflict with the settled community. The ideology of land ownership and control has often built up tensions between the Gypsy and non-Gypsy communities and this frames Gypsy life, even today. By the 1960s, the right to stop on common land was withdrawn and this created still more pressure for Gypsy communities.

Travelling is not so good now as our young days because we get harassed on the road and anyway, there are not enough legal sites, but sites owned and run by Gypsies are the best.

*(Aunt Julie, Gypsy elder)*

The best time of my life was when I was married. I got married at 27. I have six brothers and I was worse than the boys, but my dad would do as I say and my brothers would do as I say! Even though we did not have a lot, we still had a good life. I loved to be travelling around but in those days it was easy, now people are shooting at you and the police keep moving you on. When we stopped years ago it was common land but now everywhere there are supermarkets and factories. Even at Appleby [fair] we need to stop for the horses but the police keep moving you on.

*(Aunt Annie, Gypsy elder)*

In the 1960s, you could go out, but these days you can't because people come and take your things and sometimes they even take your trailer, your home. It is because there is nowhere to go. It is just not safe to stop. They think we have no rights and they think we don't know about rights. When you talk to different people they seem shocked that we know that we have rights.

*(Aunt Mary, Gypsy elder)*

When I was young I wanted a nice home, we did buy a piece of land down at London and we tried to get it passed [to have planning permission to keep their trailer on their own land] – we tried for 17 years, we did everything they asked but they would not let us stay on our own land. If I'd have had a mobile on there then I would have been happy.

*(Aunt Linda, Gypsy elder)*

While the 1968 Caravan Sites Act created a duty on local authorities to create sites for Travellers, this duty was later withdrawn under the Criminal Justice Act 1994. From 1994, local councils were supposed to support Gypsies to locate and buy land for them to self-provide their own trailer sites. However, many Gypsies who did buy land were then refused permission to live on it.

It has been suggested that over 90 per cent of planning applications are refused to Gypsies, as opposed to 20 per cent of non-traveller applications (Cemlyn et al., 2009). As a result of planning laws, many Gypsies are now forced to live on permanent sites (either council or

The gaje [non-Gypsies] have not always treated us well; sometimes they throw stones and bricks and sometimes when you are travelling it is hard to find somewhere you feel safe. If there was trouble, the police would not turn up to support us. We've had to learn to be very resilient – we've got our freedom and they are very frightened of it.

*(Aunt Julie's daughter, Gypsy woman)*

It is not always easy being a Gypsy; we have times when we have had to barricade to protect ourselves. I remember once they came with a bulldozer and dogs but we managed to stop them because we were living there legally.

*(Uncle Sam, Gypsy elder)*

It has not always been easy. Years ago the police treated us like pigs but they will not do that now because we know our rights. But when you are travelling there is nowhere they will let you pull up. They won't let you stop and keep moving you on; they push you all the time.

*(Aunt Nelly, Gypsy elder)*

Gypsy owned). Nowadays, there are very few legal places for Gypsies to pull up and park their trailers. As a result, they are often forced to resort to pulling up on the roadside or other unsuitable places. This is not good for family life and it often results in prosecution and sometimes persecution by local communities. These roadside stopping places offer no facilities and the continued instability and trauma can often become part

of the way of life. A report by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2010) suggests that many Gypsies face a cycle of evictions, typically linked to violent and threatening behaviour from private bailiff companies. It is also worth noting that without planning permission, it is impossible for Gypsy elders to access any community care services.

Successive governments have failed to deliver adequate sites for Gypsies and Travellers. In spite of the fact that Gypsies have been recognised as a distinct ethnic group under the Race Relations Act, the current legal system makes it nearly impossible for many of them to maintain their traditional nomadic life, although many of them work hard to keep their culture and values alive. As the Gypsy poet Blue Boy Jones stated, 'It is the end of racism we are seeking, not the end of Gypsy life'. The need for Gypsies to

When I was a little girl it was before the NHS and we used lots of old remedies. We would always go to the elders if we needed to know something. In those days there was not treatment from a doctor, it was too expensive.

*(Aunt Julie, Gypsy elder)*

There were lots of children in the family and people would always come to us if they were hurt or sick. In the old times if you were sick, you could not call the doctor, because you had to pay and we were on the move, so a doctor was not at hand but sometimes the doctor would not come on site, even if you did have the money to pay. But the doctors now are good, they treat you well.

*(Aunt Joanne, Gypsy elder)*

continue to be nomadic cannot be expressed strongly enough – it is more than simply a way of life, it is Gypsy life.

## The health and social care needs of older Gypsies

A number of research studies have shown that Gypsies and Travellers experience the poorest health relative to other minority ethnic groups in the UK and they are the most 'at risk' health group in the UK, with the lowest life expectancy (Parry et al., 2004). Listening to the elders, it is clear that the main reason that they did not see a doctor when they were young was because of shortage of money and the attitude of some health professionals.

We would all travel to use the same nurse when it came time to have a baby. Nurse Simmons she was, often in the lanes we did have water, so we would try and pull up to have a baby near Nurse Simmons. It was good with all your own people around. In the old days the doctor would not come out, even if you begged him and you had to pay then. They are alright now.

*(Aunt Nelly, Gypsy elder)*

Most of the elders were very positive about the service they now get from their local GPs and their treatment in hospital. However, nearly all of those we spoke to were struggling with some health problems in older age.

Many of the elders had rails and ramps fitted to their trailers. This is especially important as toilet and kitchen facilities require them to walk outside.

It was notable that only one of the elders we talked to accessed day care services and this was Aunt Tilly (she was unable to talk to us because of her dementia and she lives with



My health has let me down. My children are really committed to me and have unconditional love for me. I don't think the gaujo [non- Gypsies] get looked after like me. After my stroke they wanted to put me into another hospital [to convalesce] but my boys said that, "There is nothing that we can't do", they said, "We can look after her". But I can look after myself. The girls wash the clothes and my daughter does the private things, family are here if I need them and there are always people around.

*(Aunt Annie, Gypsy elder)*

I was a busy person and I want to do things but it is my heart – they say they can't do any more. I have tried to cut my fats down and I don't eat sweets. I can only go to the shop once a week because of my heart; I am a bit worse-for-wear and lately I seem to have got worse and worse. Sometimes you can't catch your breath; you want to, but you can't. Doctors and staff in the hospital have always treated me right but I want to feel better and I want to see my grandkids grow up.

*(Aunt Linda, Gypsy elder)*

I still have my two daughters at home and everything is done for me because now I am disabled. Being a Gypsy man for me is about freedom; it is going where we want to go and to have a choice to do what we want.

*(Uncle Sam, Gypsy elder)*

her sister Aunt Joanna). Their niece Keeta lives with the aunts and she helps to look after them, although other family members are also around to give support. Aunt Tilly attends a day centre four days a week and Aunt Joanna explained that she just goes there 'to have her hair and nails done', but clearly this also gives Keeta a little respite.

The family is very important for most Gypsies and, if an elder is taken into hospital, then the extended family will come to visit and offer support.

Yeah, when you were in hospital, 16 families came in and out of hospital to see you and look after you. When you were there, sometimes there were people with not a soul to visit. So we would go around and sit and have a chat with them. We won't just leave people in hospital, we feel sorry for some people because they are left alone, [smiling at Aunt Annie] she knows that if she just waves at the window then we all come running.

*(Aunt Annie's daughter-in-law, Gypsy woman)*

This leads us on to the positive experience of ageing in a Gypsy family.

## The pleasures of ageing in a Gypsy family

As mentioned previously, the extended family continues to play an important role in Gypsy life.

I still like living in a trailer; you look out the window, go to the gate and see lots of kids playing and my daughter and granddaughter are nearby. Family is always around to give you help if you need it, we don't have much from outside but we look after ourselves.

*(Aunt Mary, Gypsy elder)*

As a result, Gypsy elders are highly respected and well supported within Gypsy families, although it is often unmarried daughters who take on the main caring role. Gypsy elders still play an important part in the family and they are never left alone too much, as family members, grandchildren and friends continually come to visit and offer a helping hand. As Aunt Linda told us, 'If a Traveller would not help an old person then they are not a real Traveller!'

Gypsy elders are supported not out of a sense of duty, but because they are valued members of the family. They are not seen as separate from other family members; they are people who have a role in the family and supporting elders is a natural part of Gypsy family life.

I've had seven children and I have 28 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren. They come and see their granny and my daughter looks after me real fine. It's good with your own people around. I don't feel old, I feel middle aged.

*(Aunt Nelly, Gypsy elder)*

There are some things that are good about getting old. You know a bit about yourself and you have knowledge and experience and there is a lot of pleasure in seeing your grandchildren every day. We all live together and see each other every day and that really makes a difference. I want to live for my children and grandchildren. I know I can't live forever but I'd like to live a bit longer.

*(Aunt Annie, Gypsy elder)*

## Reflections on ageing in a Gypsy community

It has been a privilege hearing the stories of the Gypsy elders. It seems that while their childhood may have been without material comforts, it was their families, friends and nomadic culture that made their life rich.

My sister is 73 and she is still dealing in scrap as they do not draw a pension. My sister, all her family is grown up and she looks forward to going out to work every day, she has a chat when she collects scrap and she sees other Gypsies as she is going around. She looks forward to it ... I have poor health now but even if I did not have any family, our people would always be there to support me ... I never met no Gypsy that was lonely; all I can say is that it is a lovely life. I have not known one gaje who has come to live with the Gypsies and then gone back to the gaje life.

*(Aunt Julie, Gypsy elder)*

With the advent of cars and trailers, life did change for many Gypsies, but the biggest changes have come from the outside, in land and caravan laws. Essentially, many of the elders have now been forced to settle on permanent sites. On the positive side, they have their extended family around to support them and they also have access to health services, as well as clean water and electricity. But it is important not to over-romanticise their lives. Many publicly provided sites have been of poor quality, often built on contaminated land, close to motorways, adjoining sewage works or under electricity pylons (Richardson, 2007).

### Implications for policy and practice

We hope that our interviews with Gypsy elders will bring greater understanding of Gypsy culture and the lives of Gypsy elders. Their words and stories also highlight the following issues that have relevance for policy and practice:

- Gypsies continue to face ongoing discrimination and marginalisation in their daily lives, as identified by a number of agencies including the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2010). The new 'EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies' requires each of the EU's 27 countries to set out how they intend to improve the situation of the most vulnerable Roma/Gypsy communities living on their territory. This potentially offers an opportunity for UK Gypsies, although the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has stated that it does not expect the new National Roma Integration Strategies 'to change the Government's existing policies and approaches to identifying and reducing inequalities' (House of Commons Select Committee on European Scrutiny, 2011), so we are not optimistic for change.
- Trailer/caravan living is an integral part of ethnic Gypsy life, whether travelling or static – the inspiration to travel is at the heart of Gypsy culture. Keeping the 1/06 Circular 'Planning for Gypsy and Traveller sites', instead of replacing this with 'light touch guidance' as the DCLG intends, would make a positive difference to the lives of all Gypsies.
- Although Gypsies have been recognised as an ethnic group under the Race Relations Act, 2011 was the first time that Gypsies had ever been identified in a national census. However, at a local level, local authorities, the NHS and other public bodies should review their ethnic monitoring systems to include Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller as separate categories and use the resulting data for better planning and commissioning.
- There is a need to raise awareness of the cultural needs of Gypsy and Traveller communities among health and other social care service providers as well as the police. These stories have highlighted specific cultural requirements, for example the use of different bowls for different washing activities, the need for ramps and rails to allow disabled elders to go outdoors, and the importance of visitors to those in hospital. It is useful to work with local Gypsy organisations as they have a wealth of expertise and can often offer training.
- As many Gypsy people are not literate, information and communications need to be provided in an accessible format and with appropriate content. Ideally, Gypsy communities should be commissioned to develop materials for their own communities.

## Final word

In many ways, the endurance of Gypsy life and culture is a tribute to the resilience of the Gypsy people. One of the most striking things to come out of these interviews is the way that the elders are cared for within Gypsy families. Family interdependence has probably grown out of nomadic life; however, given that so many Gypsies have been forced to live on permanent sites, it is admirable how Gypsy elders continue to be cared for. Certainly, loneliness and isolation are not features of old age in Gypsy culture, which actively values and enjoys the company of elders. There may be lessons here for the wider community.

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## About this project

This paper forms part of a series of *Perspectives* commissioned to support the five-year research programme, A Better Life. This programme investigates what will improve quality of life for some of the most marginalised, and least heard, people in the UK – older people with high support needs.

A microsite based on these *Perspectives* will launch in January 2012. It will provide a unique digital platform to showcase the voices of older people with high support needs and features photos of people who contributed their perspectives and a poem by Sir Andrew Motion. To find out more visit [www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/better-life](http://www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/better-life)

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