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**‘Caravan Wives’ and ‘Decent Girls’’: Gypsy-Traveller  
Women’s Perceptions of Gender, Culture and Morality in  
the North of England**

**Abstract:** This paper examines the beliefs and practices that constitute gender among Gypsy-Traveller women and then attempts to discern the consequences that flow from these beliefs and practices. It analyses gender ideology and expectations among these women and the shared investment in the moral identity attached to being a good Gypsy-Traveller wife. The paper argues that 'Gypsy-Traveller woman' cannot be understood as an identity that stands apart from gender and racial oppression. It is within this context that the tension between change and permanence in gender relations is played out. It argues that the maintenance of cultural taboos embodied and symbolised in the surveillance of womens' bodies is an important issue which problematises the construction of Gypsy-Traveller women. It posits that the appeal to morality may represent as much an avoidance of anxiety as a defence of marked gendered divisions within Gypsy-Traveller society. The paper suggests that the demands of cultural survival play a significant role in framing the degree to which women are willing or able to challenge the status quo.

**Keywords:** femininities, gender, Gypsy-Traveller women, morality, decency

**Word count:** 7, 642

## Introduction

There is a growing academic and policy interest in Gypsy-Travellers<sup>1</sup> in Britain (Ryan, 2008; Vanderbeck, 2005; Shubin, 2010). Gypsy-Travellers, as 'exotic outsiders' however, have exercised the popular imagination for well over one hundred years. They are seen by the settled community as living on the fringes of civilisation largely untouched by modernity (Okely, 1983; Richardson, 2006). Negative stereotypes of Gypsies fuelled by the media depict them as refusing to conform with the settled community's societal norms and problematise their way of life and culture. Media images invariably focus on site evictions, the alleged 'cost and mess' associated with Gypsy-Traveller sites and anti-social behaviour (Richardson, 2007). Some contemporary images of Gypsy-Travellers, informed by the popular television programme '*My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*' among others, while superficially more sympathetic, presents an equally inaccurate, unrepresentative and highly stylised depiction of their lives. As observed by Taylor, the horse-drawn wagons, elaborate wedding dresses and extravagant wedding rituals appear to encapsulate how Gypsy-Travellers remain the 'Other' of British society (Taylor, 2011). This 'othering' in Young's (2007) terms can be conceptualised as the ascribing of 'essential' negative characteristics to Gypsy-Travellers, a setting apart from the settled community, which has simultaneously led to the demonization of Gypsy-Travellers and the reinforcement of mainstream values in the process.

The construction of Gypsy-Travellers as 'outsiders' has provided the ideological justification for their persecution over the centuries and the sustained discrimination and racism they experience is well documented (Mayall, 1995; Cemlyn and Briskman, 2002; Vanderbeck, 2005)). This has resulted in a range of negative outcomes including health inequalities,

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<sup>1</sup> The research upon which this paper is based was carried out with Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers, referred to collectively as 'Gypsy-Travellers'. While acknowledging that Gypsies and Travellers are distinct ethnic groups the paper draws attention to the relative ethnic homogeneity between them. They have aspects of a shared culture, often live side by side and are stigmatised as one group. In addition, gender relations across both groups are characterised by power differentials and patriarchy (Powell, 2013). If the term 'Gypsies' is used this refers solely to Romany Gypsies. Likewise, when the term 'Irish Traveller' is used this refers solely to Irish Travellers. Another term used in the paper is 'settled community'. Whilst it is recognised that 'settled community' is rather generalised it does denote non-Gypsy-Travellers.

discrimination in employment, access to housing and poverty<sup>2</sup> (Cemyln and Briskman, 2002). Racism and discrimination are also very much a part of Gypsies and Travellers lives across Europe, an issue that has been highlighted by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2002; Brearly, 2001).

Many of the inequalities faced by Gypsy-Travellers are shared by both men and women. However, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the qualitative experiences of men and women vary significantly and women may bear an especially heavy burden in many aspects of their lives (Cemlyn, *et al*, 2009). Despite this mainstream theorisations have been slow to incorporate the relevance of gender issues. Until recently, Gypsy-Traveller women have been ignored or subsumed into accounts of Gypsies and Travellers more generally and the difficulties they face regarding a wide range of issues. Consequently, Gypsy-Traveller men have been constructed as active economic agents (albeit operating within significant structural and social constraints) while women have been contained within domestic and familial roles. These dichotomous constructions not only simplify women's roles but also obscure underlying gender inequality processes in Gypsy-Traveller society. For example, a recent book by Richardson and Ryder (2012) on Gypsies and Travellers' empowerment and inclusion in British society makes only a passing reference to gender inequalities. The 'resounding silence' (Lennon, *et al*, 1988, p.11) surrounding Gypsy-Traveller women suggests that gender equality issues are neglected in both academic and policy discourses with some notable exceptions (Cemyln, *et al*, 2009, Powell, 2010).

Powell's (2010) study touches upon welfare professionals' views on the role of women within Gypsy-Traveller culture. It illuminates how this relatively powerful group of welfare workers (made up of site wardens, gypsy education officers and council officers) construct Gypsy-Traveller resistance to dominant social processes, the gendered division of labour as a case in point, and lack of integration into sedentary society as something to be overcome.

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<sup>2</sup> Despite economic resilience through flexible self-employment many Gypsy-Travellers live in poverty and have difficulties claiming welfare benefits (Cemyln and Briskman (2002).

However, there is much more to be explored about the gender relations that shape Gypsy-Traveller women's interaction with wider society and the paper attempts to address the significant gap in our knowledge of this group of women.

The paper aims to contribute to an understanding of gender within Gypsy-Traveller society through a careful and rigorous analysis of the voices of Gypsy-Traveller women themselves. It asks how do Gypsy-Traveller women construct their femininity and their culture? What values and beliefs do they hold that allows them to see themselves and be seen by others as Gypsy-Traveller women? Firstly, it analyses how gender roles and gender inequality are perceived and experienced by Gypsy-Traveller women in Yorkshire and by the welfare professionals with whom they come into contact. Drawing on rich qualitative data based on 23 in-depth interviews with Gypsy-Traveller women and 18 interviews with welfare professionals it explores the 'triple burden' (i.e. race, class and gender) of being a Gypsy-Traveller and a woman within the context of their everyday social relations and experiences. Secondly, I argue that in order to gain a broad understanding of Gypsy-Traveller women we need to consider their lived experiences in relation to both their own families and communities and the wider social structures which impact on their lives. I suggest that as primary actors responsible for managing the household, and the socialisation of children, women have a pivotal role to play in the formation and continuance of cultural practices in Gypsy-Traveller society.

Thirdly, I aim to challenge the 'gender-blindness' of much contemporary Gypsy and Traveller literature. Recent research on gender processes in the reproduction of inequality has complicated how inequalities are created and reproduced in concrete settings (Schwalbe, 2000). Thus, the simultaneous effects of gender, class and race within minority ethnic communities has come to the fore (West and Fenstermaker, 1995). Nonetheless, there remains the tendency to underplay the effects of gender in the reproduction of racial inequality within Gypsy-Traveller communities in academic discourse. I interrogate the

femininities and gendered behaviours and attitudes of these 23 Gypsy-Traveller women. Analytical insight into their content and direction of change could provide us with a better understanding of other aspects of Gypsy and Traveller social life within which hegemonic gender roles have been formulated and practiced.

### **Theorising Gender and Femininity in Gypsy-Traveller Society**

Before proceeding it is necessary to clarify the meaning of gender. Contemporary theory emphasises how gender is a socially constructed phenomenon rather than a bundle of innate and fixed attributes of men and women. Hence, the traditional essentialist conception of male and female as ascribed individual traits has been superseded by a turn towards the notion of gender as social practice (Poggio, 2006; Jones, 2008; de Carteret, 2005). It focuses on gender in relation to how it manifests itself in social interaction, a perspective which informs the theoretical underpinning for the paper. Following a constructivist paradigm the analysis will centre on gender as a socially constructed phenomenon and a process embodying cultural meanings of masculinity and femininity. For Lucal (1999, p.784) the cultural components are conceptualised as gender displays which are 'culturally established sets of behaviours, appearances, mannerisms, and other cues that we have learned to associate with members of a particular gender'. Further, gender is a constitutive element of social structure inextricably related to other elements of social structures, and specifically in this case to class and race (Fox and McBride Murry, 2000).

Although there has been a proliferation of literature using the social constructionist approach in relation to gender (Lorber, 1994) little empirical work has been carried out that integrates the doing of gender with the study of race (Pyke and Johnson, 2003, p. 33) to which this paper is a direct response. Gender is bound up with race in the privileging of white middle class groups and the subordination of the racialized, ethnic 'Other'. In this conceptualisation gender not only expresses cultural values, but as do class and race, provides the basis for

the social distribution of societal resources (Fox and McBride Murry, 2000, p. 1164). It will interrogate how gender is constantly renegotiated and refined in every day practices through which individuals interact (Poggio, 2006). In this view attention is drawn to how men and women 'do' gender and how gender is interwoven with race to produce gender identities within Gypsy-Traveller society. Gender is also inextricably linked with images and ideals of femininity which provides a useful starting point for an interrogation of femininities within Gypsy-Traveller culture. Femininity is always in opposition to the 'other' i.e. masculinity however.

All forms of femininity are socially constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men (Schiffers, 2007). Hegemonic masculinity is centred on men's global domination over women. As there is no configuration of femininity organised around women's domination of men the idea of a hegemonic femininity is deemed inappropriate. Instead there is what Connell terms *emphasised femininity* that is based on women's 'compliance' with their subordination to men (cited in Schippers, 2007, p.87):

*'One form [of femininity] is defined around compliance with this subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men. I will call this 'emphasized femininity'. Others are defined centrally by strategies of resistance or forms of non-compliance. Others again are defined by complex strategic combinations of compliance, resistance and co-operation'.*

However, this does not take into account how other axes of domination such as race and class can be brought to bear and which extol the virtues of the dominant westernised femininities, constructing some women as superior over others thereby privileging white upper-class women.

Bev Skeggs (2005) argues that femininity as an entity is inherently ambiguous, indeterminate, contradictory and unstable. Certain groups of women, for example black,



working class women cannot inhabit the category of femininity because of the dominant which is always filtered through classed and racialised judgements. In the context of the individualisation thesis women are seen to have undergone profound changes in relation to their position vis a vis the market place and family relations (Powell, 2010). In post-modernity [White] women are invariably extolled as being 'monolithically self-confident, independent, assertive and successful' (Schiffers, 2007, p.88). Skeggs (2005:974) suggests a characteristic of this compulsory individuality is the innate capacity of the individual to exercise 'free choice'. It is against this idealised 'other', i.e. that all other femininities are scrutinised. As Pyke and Johnson (2003) astutely point out to conceptualise some forms of femininities as 'problematic' and outdated it is necessary to have an oppositional category of femininity that is dominant and 'normal'. This is especially significant in the contested area of mothering and child care in women's lives. For white middle class women these activities are seen to be constitutive of oppression as they reify women's "essential" nature as care-givers and are used to discredit their participation in other areas such as employment in the labour market (West and Fenstermaker, 1995). The empirical material presented in the remainder of the paper is informed by the idea of an emphasised femininity in Gypsy-Traveller culture within the context of a hegemonic westernised perspective on what women 'should' do and want.

## **Methodology and methods**

The data are part of a study which investigated the accommodation needs of Gypsy-Travellers in the North of England carried out over a 6 month period in 2007-2008 (see Powell, Brown and Casey, *et al*, 2008). 23 in-depth interviews were carried out with women Gypsies and Travellers and 18 in-depth stakeholder interviews with welfare professionals. Interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 2 hours and were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Key stakeholders were recruited through initial contacts with the relevant local authorities in the region and Gypsy and Traveller organisations and through them, key individuals involved in delivering services to Gypsy-Travellers including schools and education liaison officers and health workers. Gypsy-Travellers women were invited to participate through a combination of snow ball sampling from an initial pool of interested parties and through professionals with direct contact with them such as site wardens and Gypsy-Traveller representatives. Participants were given a written leaflet detailing the research and the researchers also took great care to explain the research in some detail before informed consent was given prior to the interviews taking place. The anonymity of the participants was also guaranteed.

The data analysis strategies used in this study are qualitative and inductive. I was concerned that the analysis of the data, insofar as was possible, should not begin with pre-defined sociological categories but with a critical eye on women's actual lived experiences (Kleinman, 2007). Hence, in approaching the analysis I do not emphasise coercion or the exercise of male power (although these come into play), rather I am more concerned with the complex ways women themselves are drawn into participation in prevailing relations of inequality (De Vault, 1991). I attempted to apply the method of analytic induction to the interview data in the initial and repeated readings of the interview transcripts. (Lofland, 1995). However, this procedure was pragmatically semi-inductive as I had identified some of the relevant phenomena as those having to do with the creation or reproduction of gender inequality.

### **Women's gendered experiences and domestic practices**

Being a Gypsy-Traveller *and* a woman from a poor socio-economic background constitutes a 'triple burden' of gender, class and race which informs every aspect of these women's daily experiences and practices. Strictly differentiated hierarchical gender roles exist in Gypsy-

Traveller communities with men ordinarily being the sole wage earner, often working away from early morning to nightfall, as well as working away for long periods, and this was the case for the majority in this study. Women, as wives and daughters, are expected to dedicate themselves to their family (Okely, 1983) and this subordination was largely unchallenged by the women. Consistent with Gypsy-Travellers elsewhere (Sandford, 1973) the family is a considerable source of pride and these Gypsy-Traveller women have the main responsibility for maintaining family closeness and kinship networks; ensuring elderly parents are cared for, and keeping in touch with siblings and a wider circle of close relations. The construction of their Gypsy-Traveller cultural identity also involves added responsibilities for planning social gatherings through which their ethnic culture is kept alive: the annual Appleby Horse Fair and dances at Easter and Valentine's Day to name but a few.

The complexity of their responsibilities is encapsulated in their 'thick' descriptions of their daily activities (Herron and Skinner, 2012) which were related to the *home*, such as cleaning, cooking and childcare; the *residential site*, such as up-keep of the outdoor units and liaising with the site warden and *public places* such as accompanying children to school, shopping and being the main point of contact between their families and professionals (for example, GP's and school attendance officers) . On a day-to-day basis they spend a considerable part of their day on site in their trailers without their husbands and endure all the privations attached to living in encampments that are in some instances inaccessible and poorly secured. Hence, they shoulder the major responsibility for ensuring the security of their homes and belongings, and were always on their guard and alert to any signs of strangers approaching. Mary<sup>3</sup>, who lives on one such site near a food processing plant on the outskirts of a town highlighted the sense of isolation and fear that was a feature of her daily existence:

*'I mean a lot of people say they won't come on this site because it's stuck in the middle of nowhere, we had no lights for God knows how long and it's pitch black dark...so I mean you've got no security Chris [husband] sometimes goes away, I*

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<sup>3</sup> All names have been changed to protect participants' anonymity

*seen me being sat on 'ere by meself.... I've got a woman's imagination, it just run's wild and there's a load of trouble 'uns in Scarborough and if they come 'ere they'll just take over it [the site]' (Mary, Irish Traveller)*

Those families living on official sites had security of tenure but not security from the constant background threat of unwelcome visitors such as local people who were intent in some cases on intimidating and frightening them. When on unauthorised encampments<sup>4</sup> and facing eviction these women carry the worry and responsibility for being the only adult present during the day to deal with the police, bailiffs or any other officials. The temporary and contested nature of their unauthorised encampments has a significant and detrimental impact on their physical and emotional health. Sadie, a Gypsy who (unusually) is also a community volunteer describes the health effects of this stress in graphic terms:

*"It does horrendous stress, horrendous stress, and relentless stress, and it affects your health so much more, the mortality rate of Gypsies, particularly women, is a lot higher than the majority counterpart, the men's is higher but the women's is particularly high, because a fella will go out all day earning his bit of bread money and he's not sat with the worry, but women will sit thinking 'I wonder what we're going to do, I wonder where we're going to go, I wonder if it's going to be safe, I wonder if it's going to be all right' so it's like a relentless stress (Sadie, Gypsy woman)*

Women and girls perform the full range of domestic duties from caring for children and elderly parents to feeding the family and organising the household, and this highly gendered allocation of responsibilities was very much accepted as 'the way things were' (Bourdieu, 1984). Most participants spoke of the daily routines which punctuated their lives, and from which they rarely deviated. Getting the children ready for school; bringing the children to school, shopping, cleaning, preparing the dinner, collecting the children, cooking the dinner,

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<sup>4</sup> 'Unauthorised encampments refer to instances where Gypsy-Travellers set up camp temporarily, often on the roadside and often contravening planning regulations. These encampments often generate a great deal of hostility from local communities, businesses and local authorities.

eating, washing up, watching television, putting the children to bed for between 8 and 9pm (except on school holiday) and then going to bed herself was a typical day for most women. Joan gives an insight into the content, mundanity and repetitive nature of these domestic duties:

*'Clean up, well normally get the kids ready for school, then take the kids to school then I come back, do me housework then makes me dinner and then...I just stays in, does me housework and then it's time to pick the kids up from school, makes us tea and then watches a bit of telly, Coronation Street and Eastenders and then and then later on on the night have the time for myself, it's good really. And then it's time to go to bed. It's just the same routine every day...[with] me housework because one day I'll have the day outside, doing housework outside like, cleaning outside and then I'll have day of cleaning inside, then I'll have a day of doing the units outside, the combinations outside' (Joan, Gypsy woman)*

Very few of the women went off-site to socialise hence there was little to provide light relief or distraction from the day-to-day routines of childcare and domestic chores. This constrained domestic existence was presumed to be a source of boredom and depression among women and at odds with modern society by site wardens and other professionals they came into contact with as expressed by one health worker:

*'All that cleaning...makes you think it must be quite depressing' (Community Health Worker)*

It was also seen as a means of subordinating women and a source of gender inequality and the idea that it could be a valued activity within the particular cultural context was largely absent.

However, Gypsy-Traveller women have an altogether more nuanced view of their domestic role. Rather than viewing it as merely the daily grind of domesticity (that punctuates many non-Gypsy women's lives also) participants typically conveyed a real sense that looking after

the family, cooking and cleaning is a highly conscious and ritual act on their part and an integral part of their cultural identity (Okely, 1983). Hence, it is closely tied to their beliefs about the importance of maintaining Gypsy-Traveller 'ways' (Acton and Mundy, 1997). Of all these activities cleaning occupied a large proportion of a woman's time and in keeping with Gypsy culture was a source of great pride. The trailers and all the contents were thoroughly cleaned and polished every day, both inside and outside in order to observe the complex rituals associated with pollution taboos. For example, Gypsies make a distinction between washing objects for the inner body and the washing of the outer body. This manifests itself in the need to have several different washing up bowls. Food, eating utensils and the tea towels for drying them must never be washed in a bowl used for washing the hands, the rest of the body or clothing (for a more detailed discussion of pollution beliefs see Okely, 1983, pp.80-90). These taboos are important as they highlight the specific context and pressures of domesticity faced by Gypsy-Traveller women in comparison to their non-Gypsy-Traveller counterparts in the settled community. Stakeholders attested to the central importance of these domestic chores to a Gypsy-Traveller way of life and custom while simultaneously associating it with a way of life (i.e. domestic drudgery) that was a thing of the past for non-Gypsy women. This point of view of course ignores the gender inequalities that pertain in the settled community and the 'second shift' which working women carry out in the home (Hochschild and Machung, 2003).

Social interaction at nodal sites between majority society and Gypsy-Traveller women such as local shops provide an important arena for understanding how race and gender impact on their everyday lives. Their domestic responsibilities included daily shopping, which was one of the main activities in which they encountered frequent racism. We also know that women are more easily identifiable than Gypsy-Traveller men (Cemyln et al, 2009) hence carry a disproportionate burden of discrimination and racism when off-site.

When shopping, women were often subjected to the scrutiny of security guards and store managers who frequently treated them as prospective shop-lifters rather than legitimate

customers (see also Skeggs, 2005 for a related discussion of white working class women). This was particularly likely to occur (although not exclusively) when they were passing through an area and racist judgements were made purely on the basis they were Gypsy-Travellers:

*'Everywhere you pull, if you're on roadside they look at you like you're scum, no matter where you pull, no matter what you've done, they just look at you like you're nothing.... like if you pull near a shop, if you pull near a supermarket or something when you go to that supermarket you just get looked down at because they know that, once they know that you're from the caravans,... I've never pinched anything in me life, I never would. And it is... it aggravates you to death when they walk up and down behind you like you're a big criminal (Irish Traveller woman)*

The women also perform a key role in engaging with institutions and structures such as the educational system and health service on behalf of their families. This is a clear deviation from the constrained domestic role that more usually characterises their day-to-day existence but it is not one that challenges in any significant way the patriarchal power structure of Gypsy-Traveller communities. Particularly regarding education, men make the final decisions as to the length of schooling appropriate for their sons, and to a lesser extent, their daughters.

For Gypsy-Traveller society gendered norms and practices are critical to the maintenance of moral standards in their communities and upon which the survival of their culture depends. Hence, femininity as morally infused culturally acceptable forms of behaviours and attitudes (Lucal, 1999) in Gypsy-Traveller society is explored below.

### **The role of women in enforcing gender codes**

In this section I outline the ways in which Gypsy-Traveller mothers, under the imperative of 'cultural preservation' (Espiritu, 2001, p.428) police their daughters' behaviours in order to stand guard over their sexual innocence and virginity. These practices effectively control sexual behaviour and mores *within* Gypsy-Traveller communities as well as boundary maintenance *between* Gypsy-Travellers and gaujes<sup>5</sup> and place significant restrictions over the movements and choices of young women. Girls' social lives were strictly monitored and controlled by their mothers and any socialising between Gypsy girls and non-Gypsy girls were forbidden after the age of 11 (the age at which menstruation was most likely to begin):

*'At 11 they learn to be respectable, they can't do a lot of things, they're not allowed to go out at night, they're not allowed to go round boys, they help their mams and with the babies, I don't mean job or work or anything, they still got a childhood but they got to be respectable to their self... when she starts her period she's got to keep herself clean, stay away from boys..... [ if ] my girls start going at that age of 11 or 12, start hanging around corner shops and smoking and drinking, she wouldn't be classed as a Gypsy. She'd be indecent and she wouldn't get in a family' (Interview 20, Gypsy woman).*

'Decent' and 'respectable' Gypsy-Traveller young women stayed at home with their mothers, looking after their younger siblings and being socialised into how to be a good Gypsy-Traveller wife (Gmelch, 1975; Kenrick,D, 1994).

Young girls usually were allowed to start seeing boys and 'courting' when they were about 16 and the expectation was they would meet their future husband at Appleby Horse Fair or at one of the dances organised throughout the year specifically for socialising and matchmaking purposes. Wealthy Gypsy-Traveller individuals within the community hired the

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<sup>5</sup> "Gauje" is the term commonly used by Gypsies to refer to non-Gypsies. There is no widely accepted spelling of the word and it sometimes appears as "gorger" (which closest reflects its pronunciation), "gorgio", "gaje" or "gaujo" (Powell, 2008, p.107)



venues for Gypsy-Traveller-only dances hence the whole occasion was conducted within Gypsy-Traveller codes of conduct and etiquette. Gypsy-Traveller girls went to these dances in groups with siblings and cousins so they were under the watchful eye of extended family at all times. While they were expected to marry within their own communities there was little evidence of arranged marriages and many of the women spoke about the importance of their daughters being able to choose a husband, albeit hopefully one from their own community. Diana, a Gypsy, however was more open to the idea that her daughter would marry a non-Gypsy:

*'If she loved someone out the family who wasn't Gypsy well if he'd be good to her I'd give 'em my respect, it's who she wants to get married to, it's not me marrying, it's me daughter so as long as she's happy and they was gonna be good to each other, as long as she's happy' (Interview 19, Gypsy woman).*

When young women did embark on a relationship with a boy prescribed courting rituals were strictly adhered to involving unspoken rules about where they could go on a date and how long they could spend together un-chaperoned. Bridget, a Traveller mother, recounted how her daughter, Eileen, was allowed to meet her boyfriend only once a week, usually on a Sunday to go to 'the pictures'. Going to see a film was considered to be a 'safe' social contact where there would be an opportunity for a 'little kiss and a cuddle' but not much else. Although this Gypsy-Traveller boy was approved by her mother as a prospective husband cultural mores dictated that he was not allowed on to the encampment at any stage during the courtship and was not to make any form of social contact with Bridget or any of her family. The fact that this young man was a second cousin of Bridget's makes the taboo on making any social contact with her even more marked and highlights the emphasis on respect for elders which frames all social interaction between the generations.

More significantly the moral taboo on sex before marriage was strictly enforced. Hence, gendered social control (Pyke and Johnson, 2003) was rigorously carried out which meant

that the marriage of young women to men from within their own communities was in effect almost guaranteed. Marrying within the community was seen as a way of preserving their unique culture and to maintain boundaries with not only the settled community but between Gypsy and Irish Traveller groups also. Intermarriages between Gypsies and Travellers were not on the whole approved and were perceived to provide less chance of securing a life-long wife or husband, the ultimate goal in a society where divorce and separation was also disapproved of.

There were occasional transgressions from the moral code of not having sex before marriage or a child out of wedlock however. The women who broke these moral codes were described as being 'indecent'. Indecent women were effectively cut off from their communities by a combination of being ostracised and socially excluded. No 'decent girl' would be allowed to have any social contact with them and they would in turn be made to feel not wanted. The term 'cast out' was widely used to describe what would happen to any Gypsy woman who broke the rules in this way:

*'She's cast out....She don't come where Gypsies is, she knows that she's not wanted and she knows that she'd feel indecent around them cos they'd treat her as if she were indecent' (Interview 20, Gypsy woman)*

The repercussions of being cast out and effectively becoming an 'outsider' and estranged from one's own community resonates with the point made by Elias and Scotson (2004) and further Powell's (2008) application of the concept to Gypsy-Travellers: internal group opinion maintains taboos on social contact and where this is broken, the results can be harsh. The data also shows how these women's efforts in sustaining the moral superiority of Gypsy-Traveller culture draw upon and reinforce an essentialist ideology of patriarchy (Espiritu, 2001). However, it was also a way of re-affirming their self-worth in the face of sustained subordination from within their communities and racial discrimination from sedentary society.

The proliferation of moral themes in the maintenance of Gypsy-Traveller difference also clearly points to the centrality of morality in the reproduction of racial and gender inequality (Lamont, 1997; McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2000). However, this is not to suggest that Gypsy-Traveller culture is static or impervious to broader social change. The following section will explore the strategies that a minority of women use to adapt to or resist gendered norms within and outwith Gypsy-Traveller society.

### **Adaptations to the ties that bind**

Subordinates' compliance and adaptations to inequality play an essential part in its reproduction (Schwalbe *et al*, 2000). While strict adherence to the gendered beliefs and practices of Gypsy-Traveller culture dominated the majority of our 23 Gypsy-Traveller interviews an important part of the analysis was to conduct an active search for where there may be any deviation from the prescribed gender roles as already discussed (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). A small minority of Gypsy-Traveller women (3 out of 23) were 'doing' Gypsy-Traveller femininity differently in relation to their marital status and employment (Pyke and Johnson, 2003). While continuing to accept the broad tenets of Gypsy-Traveller culture these women were single parents and were going out to work. Although divorce or separation is taboo in this culture two of the married women in the study were living alone, one divorced and the other separated. It was impossible to discern the reasons why this was the case but they were both living alone and fully supported in doing so by their own community. Helen, a mother of 5 had separated from her husband and received no financial or parenting support from him. She was adamant that she really valued her independence and although living not far from her parents and brother was intent on taking full responsibility for herself and her children:

*'Yeah I like to be independent, it's not a bad thing being independent because Gypsies, they do like their independence... to show their mam and dads that they*

*can do it, cos it was my choice to have me five kids so it's my responsibility to bring them up' (Interview 18, Gypsy woman).*

Those who did chose to challenge gender norms by getting a job faced significant barriers. Carol, a grandmother of three living on an official site had to overcome considerable prejudice in her efforts to get and sustain a job. Based on previous experience of discrimination in applying for work she lied about her address and was successful in getting a job at a local off-licence. She managed to hold down her job despite having to take several days off work after their trailer had been broken into (there was not a warden attached to this site) to be a presence on site. After several weeks working there her manager found out she was in fact a Gypsy living on a local site and his attitude towards her changed from being a 'normal boss' and not bothering her much to shouting at her and being generally intimidating. Having handed in her notice she was persuaded by the support of her fellow employees and the shop supervisor to come back to work. Nonetheless we can discern from Carol's position the tensions that are an integral part of adapting to challenging gender norms within Gypsy-Traveller culture *and* coping with racial discrimination and prejudice from the settled community.

Lal, a young Gypsy widow had a more positive experience of working. This mother of two was gainfully self-employed as a scrap metal dealer at the time of the study and had also been employed 'tree-topping' in the past. She was living as a single parent and had only occasional help from her family. She preferred to travel by trailer separately from her mother if they were going to the same encampment because she did not want to be slowed up by the pace of her mother's horse drawn wagon:

*'cos my mum's horse drawn wagons so we can't[ go fast] or very far, it's like right slow progress, it is a bit slow and cos I'm younger I sometimes like to jet up and down the A1, you know I find a little bit plodding down country lanes a bit boring*

*sometimes. So I like to shimmy up and down the country (Interview 11, Gypsy woman).*

The excerpt depicts her as the independent and assertive Gypsy woman she is and confounds the stereotype of Gypsy women as being solely reliant on their husbands or other male family members.

*It is important to note that even as these women desired a measure of greater freedom for themselves and their daughters this was within the context of an accommodation with, rather than a challenge to, strict gendered roles within Gypsy-Traveller culture. This is in keeping with Espiritu's (2002, p.435) findings on the bounded aspirations of Filipino women for their children.*

## **Conclusions**

The literature on gender clearly demonstrates the interrelatedness of gender to race and ethnicity (Lennon *et al*, 1988; Beoku-Betts, 1995). In recent years the social construction of racialised and gendered identities has been studied in more depth thereby revealing their complexities and relationships to wider social structures (Shubin, 2010; West and Fenstermaker, 1995). The growing body of research focusing on a racialised examination of gender in relation to minority ethnic groups in particular has revealed the varied ways that women reinforce, collude with, or resist gender hierarchal arrangements in their everyday lives (DeVault, 1991, Gagne, 1992).

Drawing particularly here on the work of Schiffers (2007) and Pyke and Johnson (2003) among others the paper contributes to theorisations of gender in Gypsy-Traveller society in three ways. Firstly, it set out the position of Gypsy-Traveller women within the Traveller community and points to the wider social relations (Schwalbe, 2000) which shape that, arguing that women's gendered position is related to the need for cultural continuity. Mechanisms used to construct appropriate behaviours and 'decency' regarding marriage, family and the care of children rest in part on narrow definitions of Gypsy-Traveller women

that emphasise gender subordination, echoing Pyke and Johnson's observations of ethnic Asian women (2003). Following Espiritu (2001), the moral superiority of [Gypsy-Traveller] culture is asserted as a strategy of resistance by Gypsy-Traveller women, which often leads to a patriarchal call for the maintenance of traditional 'ways'. This imperative to maintain Gypsy-Traveller culture, embodied and powerfully symbolised in the policing of women's bodies (and their choice of husband, for example) points to the complex ways personal behaviours are linked to wider social structures and the maintenance of boundaries between Gypsy-Travellers and the settled community.

In doing so this work raises questions about the gender-blindness that characterises much of the research regarding Gypsy-Travellers. By ignoring or underestimating gender factors there is a tendency to give primacy to race and discrimination issues which on their own fail to reveal the added 'gender burden' which pertains to Gypsy-Travellers, in particular women. As this paper illustrates gender inequalities have a disproportionate impact on women and negative consequences for Gypsy-Traveller communities. The tensions and emotional burden involved in running the home while being exposed to hostility and casual racism on a daily basis, and from which there was little escape, loomed large in the narratives featured herein. It is clear that women have to carry the impact of society's racism as well as the responsibility of negotiating between sedentary and community cultural expectations. A failure to recognise this added burden may mean that the racism and discrimination experienced by Gypsy-Traveller communities as a whole could be reinforced by inappropriate strategies in relation to gender issues (Cemyln *et al*, 2009).

Secondly, my research challenges the popular and theoretical positioning of Gypsy-Traveller women as passive and docile subjects of male subordination. Returning to the questions posed in the beginning (p.3) about how femininity is constructed the women embody a range of behaviours and attitudes associated with how to 'do' and be a 'decent' Gypsy-Traveller wife and mother. However, it is naive to suggest this is wholly oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men (Schippers, 2007). As asserted by Herron and Skinner

(2012) we must depart from the simplistic victimisation of women as exploited carers. Gypsy-Traveller women expressed not only their sense of obligation but also their pride in maintaining traditional ways with regard to caring for their families and community. In this regard many of the findings in my study are in keeping with some of the points made by Espiritu (2001) in her aforementioned study of Filipino migrants to the United States. These findings nuance our understandings of the important and proactive role that women play in maintaining the gendered cultural heritage of Gypsy-Travellers. This socialisation into femininity equips and conditions women to create meaning and satisfaction from activities that pose no threat to the gender order (DeVault, 1991) and women are compliant in the process. Clearly, without cultural and structural acceptance of men's domination over women the forms of gender codes and emphasised femininity presented in this article would have been less effective. However, women participate in unequal practices not only because of social coercion but because of deeply held beliefs about their responsibilities to not only their own families but to Gypsy-Traveller culture more broadly. Individual narratives point to how values such as 'decency' which informs the knowing of self (Skeggs, 2005) are ultimately linked with a shared goal of ensuring cultural survival in the face of widespread hostility and discrimination.

Further, I argue while traditional gender roles are prevalent in the majority of families there are discernible differences between and within individual families and communities. These findings signal the need to be alert to this heterogeneity in attitudes (Powell, 2010; Vanderbeck, 2005). Some Gypsy-Traveller women are showing increasing signs of incremental change in their attitudes to the education of their children but they seem less willing to compromise their feelings on moral issues and traditions regarding marriage, family and the care of children. This would suggest that the possibility of change is predicated on their ability to assert the only power at their disposal, the moral authority to police social mores and practices perceived to be fundamental to the survival of Gypsy-Traveller communities.

Finally, adherence to Gypsy-Traveller mores should not be read as a 'culture-lag' nor as a passive reflection of the settled community (Okely, 1983). For some, appeals to Gypsy-Traveller 'ways' represent a resistance to change, a retreat to a moral code by which to organise behaviours and relationships that invite neither reflection nor alternative ways of being or 'doing' gender within their tightly knit community(ies). However, it can also be viewed as an active resistance to the erosion of Gypsy and traveller culture in the face of increasing pressures to assimilate.

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