

Traditional Gender Roles, Cultural Attitudes and Taboos

Introduction

This information sheet provides an overview of traditional gender roles, cultural attitudes, and taboos within Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller communities. In this context, traditional refers to long-standing customs, values, and practices that have been passed down through generations. While these traditions remain important for many people, they do not reflect the experiences of everyone.

It is also important to recognise that these communities are not homogeneous. Experiences vary widely between individuals, families, and communities, and practices may also be influenced by factors such as religion, region, country of origin, and changing social norms.

The information presented here is not intended to stereotype or generalise, but to help build understanding of the cultural contexts in which some Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller people live. Many traditions are evolving, particularly among younger generations, and there is diversity in how these roles and attitudes are interpreted today. This resource aims to support respectful, informed engagement, while acknowledging both the richness of tradition and the realities of change.

Traditional Gender Roles

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities often abide by traditional gender roles and/or expectations such as:

- The roles of men and women tend to be quite defined (super masculinity and femininity)
- Women and men tend to marry young i.e. late teens-early 20s
- Traditionally, women would be expected to marry and live within their husband's extended family network
- Marriage is extremely important, and divorce is often frowned upon
- Women tend to work within the home and raise children
- Attitudes to relationship and sex education from parents are generally strict and protective of daughters
- Traditionally, Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller boys would be viewed as men from as young as 13/14 and be expected to go to work with their fathers
- Men and boys may often be under pressure to be the breadwinners
- Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller men and boys may feel pressure to protect the honour of their family, fight on behalf of others in the family and to not refuse a fight
- Talking about sex and/or reproductive health in front of the opposite gender is generally frowned upon

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Irish Travellers

Below are some cultural attitudes and beliefs that may be held by Irish Travellers specifically:

- Women tend to not drink alcohol before marriage and oftentimes have a cousin or friend chaperone them to their dates
- Some women and girls run away to get married but, if there is not a marriage, this can impact their reputation
- Words like 'sex'/'sexual' can be viewed as disrespectful or embarrassing
- Religion may influence traditional gender roles. Many Irish Travellers practice Catholicism.
- Men and boys can receive scandal by being seen as weak, LGBT+ or lacking career prospects and finances
- Lie detectors are becoming very common and can be used to prove virginity or "cleanliness", although lie detectors are used for a range of other issues too (i.e. infidelity)

Romani (Gypsies)

Below are some cultural attitudes and beliefs that may be held by Romani (Gypsies) specifically:

- Women are expected to be good and strong mothers (children are a reflection on the mother's parenting)
- Religion may influence traditional gender roles. An increasing number of Romani (Gypsies) are converting to Pentecostalism (specifically the Romani-led Light and Life Church) from the Church of England
- Women may be allowed to drink alcohol before marriage
- Romani (Gypsy) boys ask the girls' family to court their daughters whereas Irish Traveller boys only come to the family when they need permission to marry
- Some Romani (Gypsies) may find the word 'pregnant' uncomfortable.

Roma

Below are some cultural attitudes and beliefs that may be held by Roma people specifically:

- The gender roles, expectations and religion may depend on the individual's country of origin/heritage
- Even within one country, there are different Roma communities who will follow different norms

Cultural Attitudes and Taboos

- Often considered taboo to talk about LGBTQ+ issues
- It may be taboo to discuss sex and/or use medically accurate names for gendered body parts/issues relating to reproductive health
- Practicing alternative religions or being an atheist may be considered a taboo
- Wearing alternative clothing can also be seen as a taboo