

## Introduction

Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority who have been part of Irish society for centuries. Travellers have a long shared history, cultural values, language, customs and traditions making them a self-defined group, and one which is recognisable and distinct. Their culture and way of life distinguishes them from the majority population (Kelleher et al., 2010).

The situation of Traveller women in Ireland remains one of extreme marginalisation. They experience poorer outcomes regarding health, education, accommodation, employment and discrimination, leading to deprivation, marginalisation and exclusion (Kelleher et al., 2010).

There is limited research that focuses specifically on Traveller women's mental health in the Republic of Ireland. From this research, it suggests that there are significant mental health difficulties among the female Traveller population; higher than average rates of self-reported poor mental health and a reluctance to engage with mental health services and that mental health is a taboo or stigmatised topic within the Traveller community (Kelleher et al., 2010). Poor mental health can be a significant issue in the lives of Traveller women in prison (Doyle, 2017). More recently, research on drug use with the community identifies that Traveller women are engaged in prescription medication abuse, overuse and misusing drugs such as sedatives, tranquillisers and antidepressants (National Advisory Committee on Drugs, 2006; Van Hout, 2009).

## Research Objectives

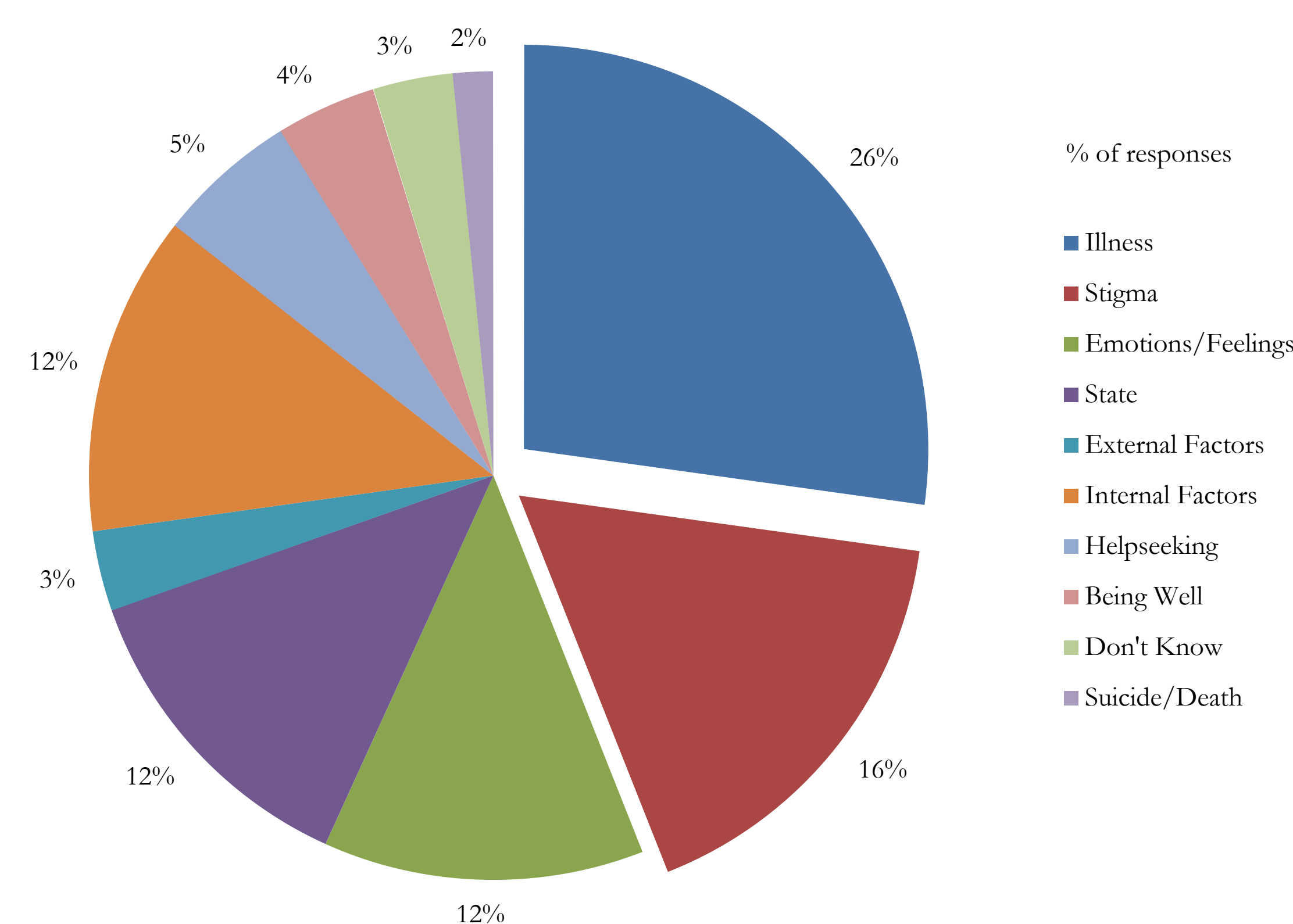
1. Investigate Traveller women's understanding of mental health
2. Identify the factors that impact Traveller women's mental health
3. Identify the factors that supports Traveller women's mental health
4. Discover where Traveller women access information, advice or support in relation to mental health
5. Research Traveller women's use or misuse of medication in relation to mental health

## Method

The aim of this research was to identify and discover Traveller women's perspective on mental health. A qualitative research approach was used in the form of focus groups at local and regional levels. Seven focus group interview questions were formulated based on the aims and objectives of the research in order to further explore identified gaps. Participants were recruited through local Traveller organisations, women's groups and family groupings. Participants were Traveller women over the age of 18. A total of fifty-five Traveller women participated, ranging from 20 years to 67 years old. Focus group was facilitated by the sponsoring organisations. Eight focus groups took place between November 2016 and February 2017 in Cork, Dublin (x 2), Laois, Meath, Offaly, Roscommon, Westmeath. All research data was transcribed into Microsoft Excel and responses were organised under their respective question. Data was analysed thematically.

## Preliminary Results

### Question 1: What is Mental Health?



## Preliminary Results (contd.)

### Question 2: What Impacts on Traveller Women's Mental Health?

Factors	Examples
Discrimination/Racism	"Ashamed for who you are" "A lesser person" "The shadow that walks with you"
Role of a Traveller Women	"It's us women that try to access services, schools for our family...all the associated work - legal and lobbying - exhausting and huge stress"
Family Issues	Homeless, Domestic Violence, Illness in family
Living Conditions	Poor accommodation/Accommodation Type
Death, Suicide and Grief	"Death and suicide affects Travellers more, you are expecting it to come to your family"
Financial Insecurity	"Poverty" "Tradition jobs are gone, no-one will hire us"

### Question 3: What Helps Traveller Women's Mental Health?

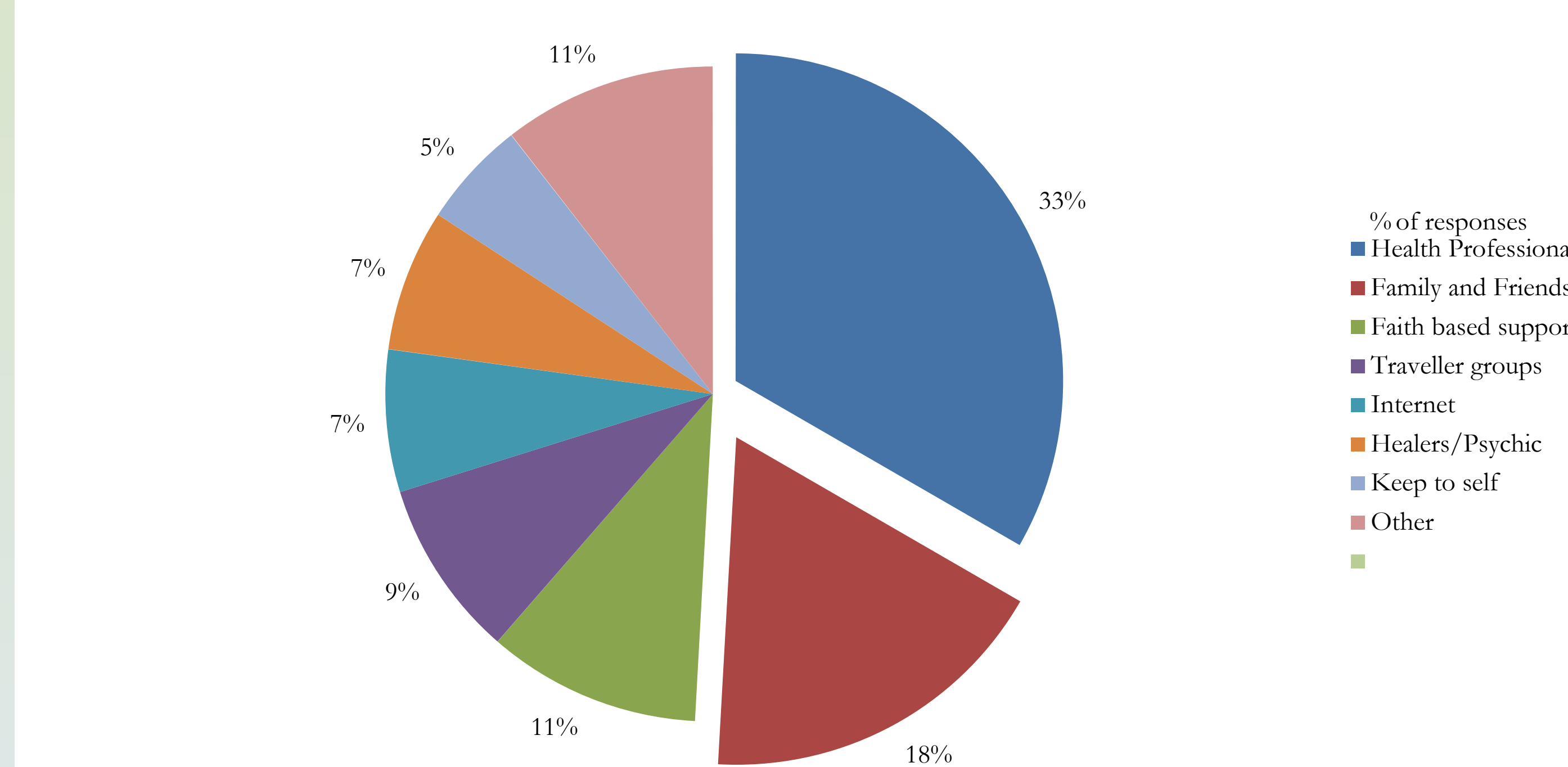
Targeted Responses/Cultural appropriate accessible mental health services  
Largest percentage of responses (37%) related to targeted initiatives for Traveller women. The participants spoke about wanting targeted responses that were understanding and respectful of their life and ethnicity. The groups spoke about having a chance to talk about what affects them, in a safe environment and to feel listened to. The participants spoke about wanting to be able to break the stigma and the need for the community to talk more openly about mental health.

Personal Wellbeing  
Seventeen per cent of responses were in relation to Traveller women and self care /"Me" time and to be able to go out and socialise. These suggestions were seen as aspirational to some due to the discrimination they would face

*"But we wouldn't be allowed in anywhere"* *"They wouldn't let us in their club"*  
and also due to their responsibility  
*"If I was to go for a walk, I'd have to take them all with me"*

Valuing Traveller Women  
Eleven per cent believed that if they were valued more, it would help their mental health.  
*"There's a strength and resilience to Traveller women"*  
*"Position of Traveller women in family - not recognised, knowledge and support not tapped into by services when supporting a family member"*

### Question 4: Where do Traveller women access information, advice or support in relation to mental health?



Participants mentioned mainly doctors/G.P. as the health professional. In discussion around service access, participants spoke about how

*"it's the only place to go and you might be lucky and get a doctor who gives you the time rather than a 'script for some pills'."*

## Preliminary Results (contd.)

### Question Five: What sort of treatments are Traveller women aware of and use?

*"Swapping of medication is very common and regular"*  
Medication was identified as the most commonly offered and used treatment for mental health. Participants suggested that medication is prescribed to the Traveller women by G.P.'s too quickly, that it is the easiest option. Focus groups suggested that Travellers can't question the doctor for fear of reprisal.

*"You're lucky if you have a doctor"*  
Participants also reported that tablets such as sleeping pills and anti-depressants may be bought or got from family or friends. Participants worried that some Traveller women might not know what they are taking, how medications work or the side effects. Participants felt that medication does not solve the root problem and many mentioned that medication can not help you with housing, discrimination or worries for your children.

## Discussion

This research suggests that Traveller women understand mental health from an illness perspective and as a stigmatised topic. It provides further evidence that discrimination and inequality are key factors that affect Traveller women's mental health negatively. It identifies that G.P.'s are the primary point of contact for mental health support for Traveller women and it names medication as the most commonly offered and used treatment for mental health. Further investigation would be required to determine if there is any relationship or correlation between these factors and exploration is required to understand how positive change could be implemented. As the participants of this research suggested targeted initiatives and education is the key to informing and empowering Traveller women in the area of mental health. The findings indicate that the mental health needs of Traveller women may not be met by responses and strategies designed to confront and tackle mental health issues alone but require the responses to confront and tackle gender inequality or ethnic discrimination as well. Acknowledging and addressing this experience is central to outcomes for Traveller women, as the experience of a Traveller woman will sometimes be distinctive because she is a woman, sometimes because she is a Traveller, and sometimes because she is both.

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## References

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5. Van Hout, M. (2009) 'Irish travellers and drug use — an exploratory study', *Ethnicity and Inequalities in Health and Social Care*, 2(1), pp. 42–49.