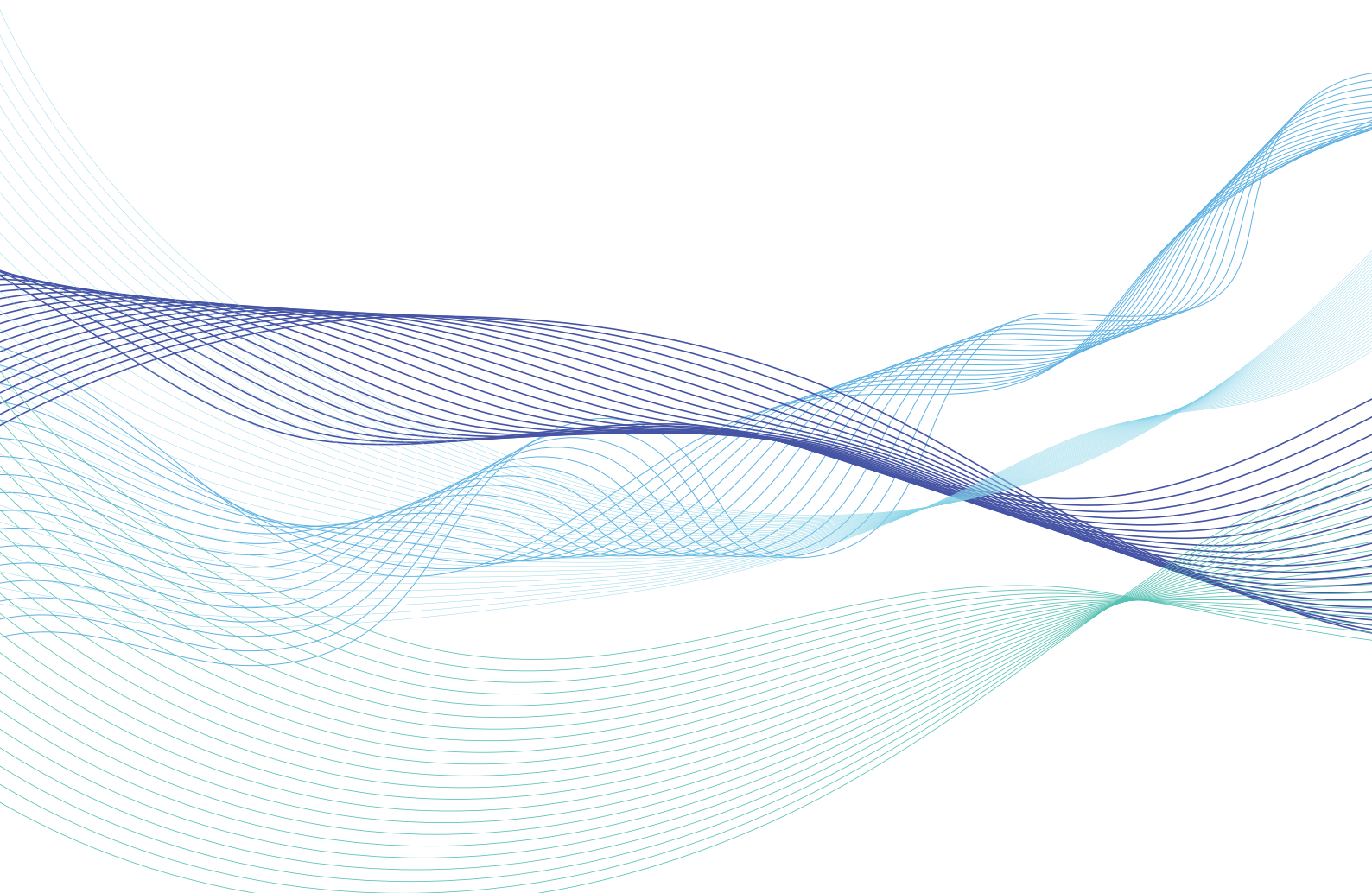


# Domestic Abuse & Equality

## Gypsy + Traveller Women



SOUTH EAST WALES  
WOMEN'S AID  
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♀

+○ Very little information is available on Gypsy-Travellers in Wales. This is partly due to the general ‘invisibility’ of Gypsy-Travellers in the United Kingdom. Neither the national census\* nor many ethnic monitoring schemes identify Gypsies and/or Travellers.

\*The 2011 Census will have a new ethnicity question which includes a new response category for ‘Gypsy or Irish Traveller’ within the White category.

+○ The information that is available suggests that there are at least 2,000 Gypsy-Travellers in Wales, generally concentrated around the main transport routes in South and North Wales<sup>1</sup>. Figures 1 & 2 (pages 9-10) show the results from the latest Caravan Count in Wales. It is worth noting that only 15 local authorities provided data for the count, and that it only counts caravans, not the number of people living in them. The Caravan Count also does not take into account Gypsy-Travellers living in settled accommodation.

**“Gypsy-Travellers are one of the most socially excluded groups in Britain with greater probability of ill health, poor educational attainment (by settled community measures) and poverty”**<sup>2</sup>

+○ It is important to recognise the diversity of Gypsy-Traveller communities. In Wales, it is likely that all the groups found in Britain will be present, including in particular Welsh and English Gypsies, Scottish and Irish Travellers, Occupational Travellers, including Showpeople, and New Travellers.

+○ Both male and female Gypsies and Travellers experience inequality in many areas such as health, education and employment. However, women bear an especially heavy burden across many areas of their lives.

+○ The roles of men and women in Gypsy and Traveller communities tend to remain very separate and both men and women are expected to behave in a way that places the family and home at the centre of their value system<sup>3</sup>.

+○ Men are expected to take responsibility for supporting the family financially while women take responsibility for the home and children. Women are expected to be, or appear to be, subservient to men:

**“Coming from a travelling family, the man is always considered the head of the family and you look to them for permission to do a lot of things”**<sup>4</sup>

+○ A consequence of these separate gender roles is that men are more visible, moving between the home and the outside world, while women tend to remain home-based, and have limited opportunities to socialise outside of their peers.

+○ Gypsy and Traveller women generally marry between the ages of 16 and 19 and become mothers soon after<sup>5</sup>. Marriage is important to Gypsies and Travellers and is governed by a strong set of values:

**“Sex before marriage, contraception, abortion, adultery and divorce are often frowned upon and may be taboo to discuss”**<sup>6</sup>

+○ Ethnic Gypsy and Traveller women have a much higher average birth rate (between 3.5 and 5.9 children) than the national average (1.95 children in 2009<sup>7</sup>).

+○ Little time away from caring roles means that women have limited access to education or employment and thus access to information about the services available to them.

+○ Due to the expectation that young women will marry and have children at an early age, many girls’ education ends at the age of 13 or 14<sup>8</sup>.

+○ Traditional male roles within Gypsy and Traveller communities revolve around finances, land purchases and other practical issues.

+○ Researchers have found that Gypsy men can become defensive about their traditional masculinities in the face of outside pressures with behaviour becoming more violent when their masculine behaviour was challenged<sup>9</sup>.

+○ No reliable statistics are available regarding prevalence of domestic abuse in Gypsy + Traveller communities, however a 2007 study in Wrexham found that 61% of married English Gypsy women and 81% of married Irish Traveller women interviewed had experienced direct domestic abuse<sup>10</sup>.

+○ While many incidents of domestic abuse are perpetrated by husbands and intimate partners, other family members may be perpetrators of domestic abuse<sup>11</sup>.

+○ Domestic abuse is accepted as normal for many women. A pilot project in Leeds found that many women from the Gypsy and Traveller community who accessed their training were surprised to learn that many behaviours they took for granted were actually forms of domestic abuse.

+○ Research suggests that domestic violence may first commence in some incidents when a family moves into a house and tensions arise as they experience isolation, discrimination, financial hardship and depression<sup>12</sup>.

+○ Anecdotal evidence suggests that domestic abuse occurs particularly when women become more economically or politically active outside of the home while traditional male roles are less easy to sustain<sup>13</sup> thus challenging traditional gender roles.

+○ There is a strong belief within the Gypsy and Traveller community that marriage is for life. Divorce is rarely acceptable and women who do leave their husband often experience shame and discrimination, or have to leave the community entirely:

**“If a woman leaves her husband, she may have to leave her whole community, which can mean leaving her culture and way of life and facing the prejudice of the settled population alone”**

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+○ Anecdotal information suggests that insecurely accommodated or nomadic women experiencing violence will often put their family first, prioritising the need to maintain a home over their own health and well-being.

+○ A lack of awareness about domestic abuse and the services available to help victims means that women often feel that leaving an abusive relationship is not an option.



- +○ While the close-knit nature of Gypsy and Traveller communities is supportive, it can also act as a barrier to seeking help if a woman is unable to access services privately or is concerned that a member of the community may tell the perpetrator.
- +○ Further accessibility issues such as problematic access to telephones and difficulty reading correspondence; make contacting services difficult for women.
- +○ Low literacy levels and frequent movement are likely to have an impact on victim's knowledge of the services available.
- +○ Cultural and social taboos exist amongst all Travelling groups against involving the police when violence occurs.
- +○ Experiences of inequality and racism discourage many women from accessing mainstream services:

**“Gypsy and Traveller women are less likely than other women to ask support services or the police for help because they worry that they will not be treated with respect or may face racism and prejudice. Some worry about the racial abuse a perpetrator might receive from the police and courts”**

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- +○ Frontline services which may be able to identify cases of domestic abuse such as GPs are not always accessible to Gypsy and Traveller Women. Research has found evidence of large numbers of GPs who will not accept Travellers onto their practice lists<sup>16</sup>.
- +○ Due to these barriers which make seeking help even more difficult for women from Gypsy + Travelling backgrounds,

**“A Gypsy or Traveller woman who reports domestic violence will often have experienced more severe violence than is seen amongst the majority of refuge users, and the violence will often have occurred over a considerably longer period of time”**

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- +○ Once services are accessed, further issues can prove difficult for women from Gypsy and Traveller communities.
- +○ If refuge is sought, difficulties may arise due to prejudices of other residents and difficulties in maintaining the traditional standards of hygiene, modesty and cleanliness<sup>18</sup>.
- +○ Travellers may have large families which refuges don't have room to accommodate. Nationally, refuge rooms are typically only licensed to hold one woman and two or three children.
- +○ UK refuge staff have reported that Gypsy and Traveller women are often strongly resistant to speaking to other services such as the police and social workers<sup>19</sup>.
- +○ SolasAnois and Southend Women's Aid are examples of specialist refuges for Gypsy and Traveller women which provide cultural training to staff and other residents. However, services such as this are rare.
- +○ Women who are re-housed in fixed housing, frequently report significant distress over loss of community and having to learn to deal with complex bureaucracies and financial issues without appropriate emotional or practical support.

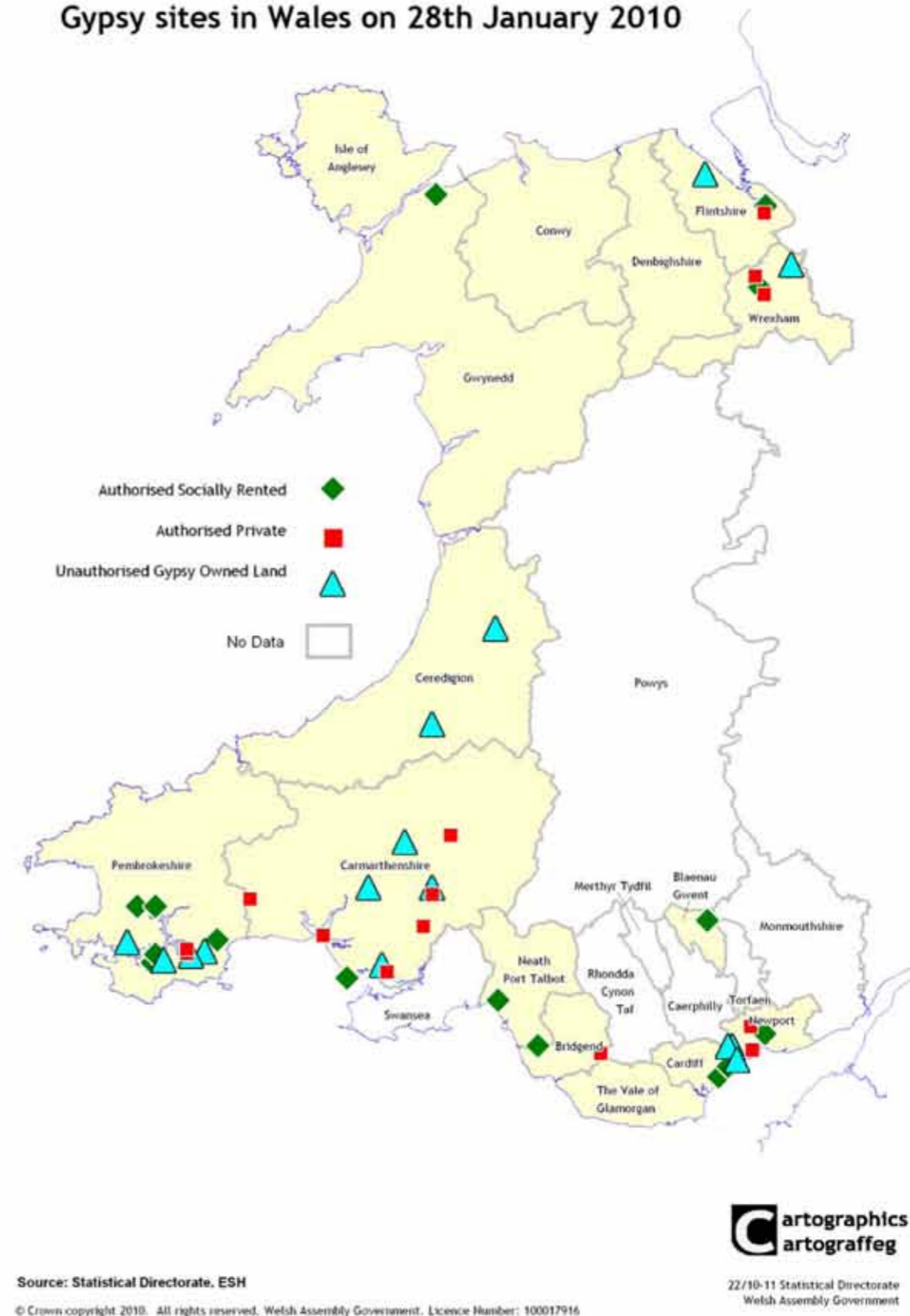
**“Young women are particularly vulnerable to isolation in houses. They are likely to stay at home all day, leading them to feel cooped up, bored, cut off from their social and support networks and exposed to racism from their settled neighbours”**

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- +○ Commonly reported problems connected to being re-housed in fixed housing include: having to negotiate unfamiliar finances such as monthly bills, coping with tenancy agreement regulations, applying for council tax and housing benefits, and low levels of literacy to understand correspondence<sup>21</sup>.
- +○ Even where support is available to negotiate difficulties, concerns about racism or discrimination if assistance is sought means that women often struggle to cope alone while supporting their families. Shelter reports that many tenancies are lost or given up because the paperwork and rules associated with them felt too daunting<sup>22</sup>.

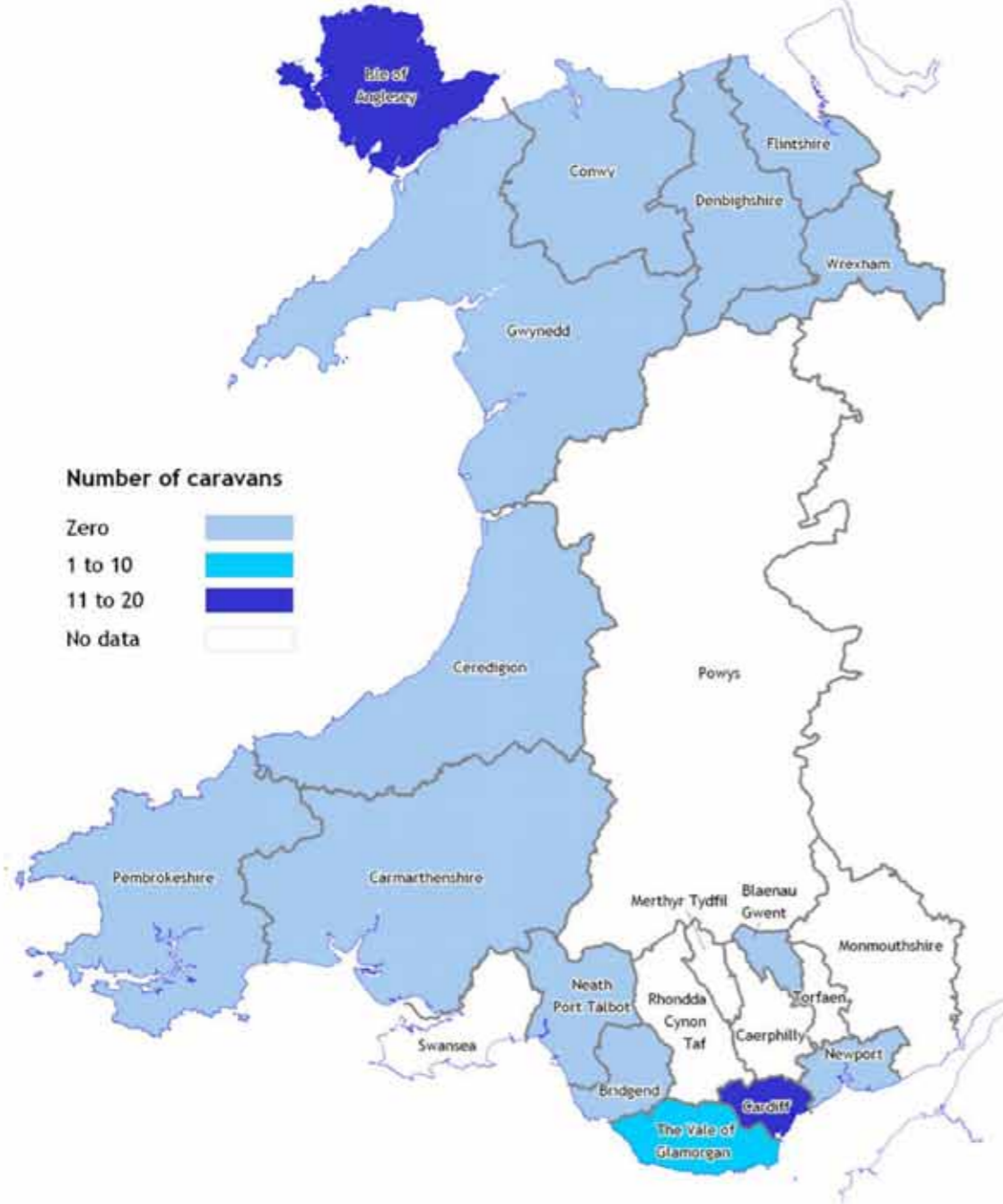
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Gypsy sites in Wales on 28th January 2010

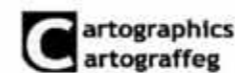




Number of caravans on unauthorised encampments on land not owned by Gypsies on 28th January 2010



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Ref 22/10-11  
Welsh Assembly Government

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01685 729210

- **Cardiff Gypsy and Traveller Project**  
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Roath, Cardiff,  
CF24 1LW  
029 2021 4411

- **Travellers Aid Trust**  
– small grants for Gypsies & Travellers  
experiencing exceptional hardship  
<http://www.travellersaidtrust.org/>

- **Friends, Families and Travellers**  
- advice, information and training  
organisation for all Travellers in the UK,  
01273 234 777,  
[fft@gypsy-traveller.org](mailto:fft@gypsy-traveller.org)

- **Travellers Advice Team**  
- provides legal advice to Gypsies and  
Travellers,  
0845 120 2980

- **Cardiff Traveller Education Service**  
029 2079 0211,  
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This briefing was produced by the  
South East Wales Regional Women's Aid Consortium  
and funded by the  
Equality and Human Rights Commission



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