

(Intro music)

Roz: Hello, I'm Roz, part of the Media and Communications team at Solace. Solace is a leading specialist charity in the UK supporting women and children experiencing domestic abuse and sexual violence. Today we're meeting with Yvonne MacNamara, the CEO of The Traveller Movement. The Traveller Movement is an award winning leading national charity committed to the fulfilment of human rights for ethnic minority Gypsy Roma and Traveller people. They have particular expertise in tackling local issues and shaping national policies. I'm so proud to work in partnership with The Traveller Movement to identify women in the hard-to-reach Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities, and respond to the emergency and long term needs of vulnerable women and children. And today we're going to find out more, so let's get to it. Let's meet Yvonne.

Roz: Yvonne, do you want to tell me who you are and what you do?

Yvonne: Hi, I'm Yvonne MacNamara, and I'm the CEO of The Traveller Movement. What that is in a nutshell is chief bottle washer. I've been with The Traveller Movement, probably about, I think, going on maybe since 2008. I came in as the CEO, but I've been involved prior, I was a wee little development officer, in another organisation. And at the heart of the work that I was involved in was the setting up of an organization called The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain. So, you know, we kind of gallop a few years on, and I eventually ended up working directly for what is now known as The Traveller Movement.

Roz: Okay, and that's where we are today, in The Traveller Movement, who are based in Stockwell. And is this your main centre?

Yvonne: This is our main office, we were in Islington for many, many years, and we have recently moved to Lambeth, last year, actually, in the height of the pandemic, which was a real achievement.

Roz: Congratulations. And what is it that The Traveller Movement does, then? I mean, you can explain as widely or as succinctly as you like.

Yvonne: Okay, well, we are a policy and vice organisation, first and foremost, and we very much have a human rights-based approach. So within the organisation itself, we have kind of three teams. So clearly operations, which is all the internal stuff. And then we have policy campaigning and research. And that's very much about influencing and working across lots of different issues, lots of different social indicators. So for example, we do a lot of work currently on criminal justice. We do a lot of work around education, we're doing quite a bit of work around social care, and mental health at the moment. So there the focus is primarily on our campaigning and influencing work within our partnerships team. And this is where our lovely partnership with Solace Women's Aid, which has been, I think, in existence going on maybe eight, nine years now at this stage. And that particular team, where it's more front facing, that's where we do a lot of our service delivery. So within that team, we have what we call our Equality and Social Justice Unit. And our Equality and Social Justice Unit is possibly a bit of casework, and the casework tends to be around education, and discrimination, access to goods, facilities and services. So that can take up a whole wide raft of issues. Clearly the Solace Women's Aid project sits within the partnerships team as well. And what we have been doing over the years is really kind of building our women's strategy.

So, we do a lot of work on gender equality, and clearly there's a lot of crossover with the policy team. But we've done quite a bit of work on gender equality, so one of the last campaigns we have run is with the community around internal shaming, and that is very much around some of the kind of issues that are difficult for Gypsy Roma Travellers to kind of, maybe deal with and reflect, no different to any other community, but what we want to do is shine a bit of a spotlight on this. And all of these pieces of work

and campaigns we do are totally co-produced, clearly in terms of the domestic abuse work. We have done an incredible amount of work down the years on that and we produced a really good play, which was co-written by travelling women, with a wonderful drama company, and the wonderful late Jennie Buckman. And that story tells the story of 18 Traveller women whose lives were touched in some way by domestic abuse. So, we're a very broad brush, really, we're a very, very broad brush. So we don't kind of specialise in one thing, because the issues are so vast. But I think the uniqueness of The Traveller Movement is our policy is very, very much informed by grassroots, and the community are driving that, the community are shaping it, they're co-producing it. And that's what really makes us unique, it is lived experience all the way through. And every indicator, every aspect of the work we do.

Roz: Do you find that people think they have a perception or an understanding of what The Travellers Movement is or what kind of like Gypsy Roma Traveller communities are?

Yvonne: I think people are very confused who Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities are, and often they get clumped together, but they are different communities, they are very specific communities. There are clearly similarities, but there are lots of differences. And you often hear the acronym GRT, which kind of does a disservice really, because that GRT acronym clumps everybody together, including cultural Travellers who are not ethnic Travellers. Now, of course, there are issues for cultural Travellers as well, in terms of access to education, housing, all of those issues are there. But as an organisation, we're primarily set up and focus to work with the ethnic Gypsy and Travellers, and the Roma community, but our engagement with Roma tends to be more around policy rather than direct service provision, simply because of the kind of cultural barriers that are there. So yeah, people come in with very preconceived ideas. Do they think every Gypsy Roma and Traveller live in a house? Absolutely not. The majority Gypsy and Travellers, so close to 90% of them, are in bricks and mortar, and they're your neighbours. They're your neighbours. Yeah, they very few are actually nomadic. Quite a few of that percentage then will live on local charity sites or private sites. So there's lots of preconceived ideas about who they are, a lot of misinformation, a lot of misinformation. So a lot of what we do, is that kind of myth busting. Yeah, it's the myth busting and just giving people that platform to speak to people from the community. And often, they just, you know, they have the same dreams and desires and issues and all of that as everybody else. But because of their ethnicity, they're often excluded. And they're not part of the racialised community families.

Roz: Yes. So could you easily explain to me the difference between ethnic Travellers and cultural Travellers?

Yvonne: Okay. To be an ethnic Traveller, is it's, they're born into their heritage. So you're born an Irish Traveller, you're born a Romani Gypsy, you're born Roma. It's your heritage, going right back. Cultural Travellers tend to be, for example, new Travellers. Now that can be second third generation, but they're not protected under race relations. That's the difference. I'm not for one moment saying that there is no need there. Of course, there is need there. But they don't have protective characteristics in the same way as ethnic Gypsy Roma Travellers, and a lot of the kind of Travellers that we tend to work with, and so the kids that tend to get excluded from school tend to be ethnic Gypsy, Roma, Travellers. A lot of the kind of work we would do in the criminal justice system and looking at disproportionality and over representation, again, they tend to be ethnic Gypsy Roma and Travellers, health inequality, okay, again, so that's the difference. But that's not to take from cultural Travellers. But there is a difference, I think, a lot of services often don't understand that.

Roz: I have another question for you, how did you come to be in this role? You've explained a little bit about your sort of job history. But what kind of drew you to wanting to work with The Traveller Movement?

Yvonne: Well, I think it's because I've kind of been around since conception. And I'm just really, really interested in the issues. And I am passionate about people's rights and entitlements. I'm passionate about equality for people. And I think you just see the injustice people continuously face from Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities, and, and, you know, incredible bigotry and racism. And I think for me, it was very much kind of really knowing the community, understanding the community, and just always kind of being around the community. I am not specifically from the community myself, but I have spent my whole life around Gypsy Roma Traveller people and have a lot of very, very close friends and you just see the injustice. And for me, it was you can't really walk away from that, you can't really walk away, and you know, you have a moral duty. And if you, you know, and I feel I have certain skills in certain areas and I think, okay, well, I can apply these skills here. And once or twice I might have tried to walk away, but didn't happen, it didn't happen. You're always drawn back.

Roz: And do you think that... When I was thinking about, you know, Gypsies and Roma Travellers and coming down, I was thinking it's one of those groups, different groups, that on some levels are sometimes romanticized, and in other times, like really kind of marginalized and pushed against.

Yvonne: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, sometimes people will have the kind of image of the Vardo, which is the lovely wagon, garlands around their neck, lovely horses...

Roz: And the freedom of the life.

Yvonne: You know, trotting along the highways and byways, that's a very romanticized image of who Gypsy Roma Traveller people are. The other side of that romantic image is then the incredible prejudice that yet they actually have, you know, all you've got to do is look at some of the media portrayals who Gypsy Roma Traveller people are, and they're absolutely appalling. There is a stereotype that, you know, that.. *(sighs)* there's just so many stereotypes, it's kind of hard to kind of just pick one. But a lot of the stereotypes tend to kind of make out that they don't have any ambition, they don't work, they don't pay taxes, they live in the dark ages, it couldn't be farther from the truth. As we're recording this podcast today, we have roughly about 15 to 20 women from the community, in the next room participating in the development of an awareness raising programme on self-harm and suicide. They are engaged, and they are not, you know, they're not this hard-to-reach community, as we often hear. It's about professionals reaching out. So there are an incredible amount of stereotypes out there. But you have a lot of Gypsy Roma Traveller people that are actually out there, and you may not even know, that are professionals. I can absolutely guarantee you, even within Solace, you will have a lot of people that have Gypsy Roma and Traveller heritage, that are working with you. So they are contributing, they're working, they're people that live on sites, pay their taxes, if it's socially provided, they will be paying the exact same, and sometimes more, than people on social housing. So you know, there are an incredible amount of stereotypes there, and we just kind of need to level the playing field here, and make people realize that a lot of this is just rubbish that the media portray a lot of the time.

Roz: And yeah, I think it'll probably come up in the podcast quite a lot, but what you're talking about, I think, is that these people are your neighbours, they're your friends, they're your work colleagues. And somehow, people can have a tendency to want to 'other' people, and kind of say those people are like this, and these people are like this.

Yvonne: Absolutely, I remember years ago going into Holloway Prison, when the women's prison was there. And there were a number of service providers there and somebody said to me, "what are you doing here?" And I went, "oh, well, I mean, we're going to be meeting with some of the Gypsy Roma and Traveller women." She goes, "oh my god, are Gypsy Roma Traveller people here? Can you point some out?" You know, I was absolutely appalled. You know, and my quick answer to her was "they

haven't got green heads!" You know? They're no different, no different, and you know, and the reality was some of the services that she was providing were to Gypsy Roma Traveller women, which she just didn't know.

Roz: The next question we have for you is what are the highs and lows of the work that you do?

Yvonne: I'll start with the lows.

Roz: It's nice to end on a high.

Yvonne: Yeah. There's a lot of doors closed, in terms of policy. Gypsy Roma and Traveller people are often an add on, they're excluded a lot of a time. Now, things are slowly changing. But you continue to have to argue, even within the sector, the voluntary and community sector, within that, whether you want to talk about racialized communities or BAME or whatever the current terminology is that we're using, the Gypsy Roma and Travellers are part of that terminology and categorization. They are not BAME *and*, or racialized communities *and*, and the *and* is a problem. So, when it comes to kind of developing policy, when it comes to kind of influencing policy, a lot of the time, they're not part of the policy review. They're not part of the thinking and strategizing. So, their voice isn't often at the table, they're often excluded. Because people just don't think they are part of, you know, that racialized agenda.

Roz: I hear. And so yes, it's sort of an afterthought. So you're here to kind of try and amplify that voice or bring that voice, then it can be amplified.

Yvonne: Yeah, and that is why it's so important that you have organizations like The Traveller Movement, and there are some others out there doing sterling work as well. But that that fight is at those tables, and that you are beating that drum and making sure that the issues for these particular communities are being included. And what is going well is, you know, it's wonderful to see the community engaged and you know, they're gregarious, they're bright, they're engaging, they're very family orientated. Really really strong family ties, they look after one another. That's wonderful. In terms of the work we're actually doing, there is incredible engagement, and it's wonderful to see people moving upwards and onwards, and getting their voices heard, and that these voices are their voices. They're now the people sitting at these tables, *visibly* sitting at these tables. And I'm not saying that they weren't some people there, but they were more *invisible*. As for now, they're really becoming a strong, vibrant, visible community, taking their place at the table, and making their decisions, and becoming the decision makers. So it's really, really positive to see that. For example, we recently partook in a select committee on educational outcomes. And it was just wonderful to see strong Irish Traveller women at that table. We very much kind of consulted and participated in the development of the domestic violence bit. It was wonderful to see very strong Irish Traveller and Gypsy women, as advocates, and working on that domestic violence bit, and participating in the development of these pieces of legislation. That is the difference. And for us, that is absolutely the joy, and the successes.

Roz: And that's definitely something you've seen a big change in over the last decade or so.

Yvonne: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And I see that right across, in all areas. There's definitely a stronger voice out there, right across and that's nationally. A stronger voice.

Roz: Oh, here's a good question. What's your most memorable working day?

Yvonne: Oh, god, my most memorable working day? That's kind of a hard one.

Roz: You can pass.

Yvonne: I don't know that I have one. I would have lots. I would have lots of memorable days. Most of them would be very simple things, they wouldn't be kind of any big highfalutin fancy stuff, it would be very, very simple things, it might just seeing somebody, something really come into place for somebody. Yeah. Particularly our women. Yeah, the women. Simple little things fall into place and life moves forward. I think, for me, somebody we work with for many years, and to see her journey and her to come out the other side, and the happiness, and where her life is now and what she's doing. And be very privileged to be part of that journey, but to see how the relationship with The Traveller Movement has helped that individual growth. And that's wonderful. That's wonderful. So there isn't one day I can identify. I think there's just so many and it's very much a journey.

Roz: Okay, that sounds that sounds lovely, though. I think always, in any job or in any workplace, there's a lot of pushing and pushing and pushing isn't there? And often it doesn't come to anything. And then when things actually do and you see that something that you've been part of has had a positive result for someone else, I think it's always a good day. Yeah. If you could change the world, what would you do first? Or where would you start?

Yvonne: Well, I'm not going to say world peace or anything like that.

Roz: Okay, we don't want that.

Yvonne: If I could change the world, I think it would be something very simple, just about being kinder to one another. I think it's really important to listen and to be kind, and not to be so judgmental. I think we're getting angry, as a society. And we've a lot to be angry about. But we've also an incredible amount of things to be happy about. And, you know, for me, it's very much about looking at, you know, where we all are in our lives and just kind of looking at those that are maybe not as fortunate as the rest of us. So, I think just a little bit more kindness, a little bit more empathy, a little bit more understanding. And listening more, I think we need to kind of slow down. I think we need to, you know, even though we're doing podcasts, you know, and I've started listening to podcasts only recently, myself, but I think sometimes we need to kind of get off the social media. Because, you know, nowadays, people seem to want to be validated by likes, and that's their value. And that's kind of sad. So if I could change things, I'm going to sound like a bit of an antique now, I'd kind of roll that back a bit. And I'm not quite sure how you can because, you know, we do need to move forward into the age of technology and whatever. But I think we're losing something there. So I'd really kind of look at something there, if I could. I think one of the other things I would do, and this is something that's happened as a result of COVID, and that is the kind of remote working, and I think that's absolutely a huge positive situation, but I think we are losing a lot. We're losing a lot by not coming into the office and engaging and meeting, because so many people need that interaction, they need those kinds of social things, work is about a lot more than just turning up and doing your few hours. It's learning about the organisation and the culture of the organisation and whatever. But it's also about the friendships you make, the kind of networking, what you're getting from that, getting up and putting on a bit of lippy, you know, instead of putting your tracksuit on, you know, taking pride in your appearance, and you're kind of getting out and that's so important for people's mental health. That is something I would roll back.

Roz: Okay. When you're in charge of the world, you can roll things back. But I think there's something in that, I think when I first started having face to face meetings with people again, I found them almost too intimate. Like I had eye contact with an actual person, not a screen. And that was it was an odd observation because, a year and a half ago, I would have just been having a chat with someone, but after such a long time being over screens with people, it's almost too much, which is a shame because we need human interaction.

Yvonne: We totally need human interaction. Yeah, totally need it and you just get so much from it. Because we feed from energies as well. We feed from one another's energy. So you know, if everything is on a zoom, you lose that, you absolutely lose it. There's so many benefits as well, but there are big disadvantages, societal disadvantages, for the development of our young people as well.

Roz: Yeah. Final question, unless we decide there's other things we want to talk about. But um, is there something, somewhere or someone, that inspires you? Like, where's your happy place or your restorative place? Where do you go when you need to bring back the happy?

Yvonne: I think there's a few people that inspire me. I think the top of the list I would have to say is my mother. My mum lives in rural Ireland. She's very much a rural Irish woman. Spent her young years in London, but you know, way back when she got married, but she's a very strong woman, very different from her era. Brought us up completely by default in a Montessori fashion. Completely by default. But she's very, very strong, very measured, very reflective, and just very, very intuitive. And she's in her 80s. And, you know, we lost, she lost my dad or her husband in 2018. And the resilience in the woman is just amazing. She has what we call her studio, it's a shed, basically. But she is down there 24/7 with a different project. She, you know, she went and she wanted a potbellied stove. So she found online, this old stove and she repaired it lovingly, and now she's had it installed, and that's her heat now. She's always moving on to the next project is always looking for something and, and has a wonderful zest for life. And I kind of look at her sometimes and think, oh, my God, she has more energy than I have. And she does put me to shame a lot. So I kind of look at her and think, yeah, okay, you know, can I look at the woman and see who she is? And what she's doing and the energy and zest she has for life? I find that very inspiring. There are lots of others, there's another woman that really inspires me, and she's a woman I've worked with for many years, from the Irish Traveller community. And her journey is incredible, her journey is incredible. And what she's overcome has been astounding. But she always has a laugh, and a joke and a smile on her face, and is one of the kindest people I've ever met. In actual fact, she popped into the office today with some lovely cupcakes. You know, she I find absolutely amazing and very, very inspiring, for just so many reasons. So, yeah, people I find I get my inspiration from, tend to be kind of the ordinary, everyday people. Yeah, you know I like to like some Michelle Obama and all that, for kind of the obvious reasons, they're strong women out there doing what they're doing, but I kind of get my inspiration from ordinary people.

Roz: Yeah. I think I've read something about that, kind people are usually kind because they've been through quite a lot of hardship themselves. So they know not to lay it onto other people, because they've had it done to them. And I always think, oh, yeah, there's probably something in that, in that it's kind of like they understand exactly what it feels like.

Yvonne: Absolutely. There's an energy and that's what I'm saying. And they read, they read into it, and they pick up on that energy, and that's really, really important.

Roz: Yeah, absolutely. So that's the end of this podcast. But is there anything that you think people should know, that you would have liked to have mentioned?

Yvonne: I suppose other than, you know, we're always interested in kind of reaching out and working in partnership with people. We like to work collaboratively, we like to share our knowledge, and I think that's really, really important that we share our knowledge. And I think it's just, you know, for people to know that The Traveller Movement is there. The Traveller movement is there as an organisation that wants to reach out and support. And where we can, we will reach out and work with anybody, anybody. So our door is always open.

Roz: Fantastic. And we will make sure that we leave how people can get in touch, email addresses, phone numbers and things like that at the end of this. Thank you so much. It's been a revelation, and lovely.

Yvonne: Yeah, brilliant.

Roz: To find out more about The Traveller Movement, visit the website on [www.travellermovement.org.uk](http://www.travellermovement.org.uk) or they're on social media, on twitter, facebook and linkedin, or you can call them on 020 760 72002.

Solace is a leading specialist charity in the UK supporting women and children experiencing domestic abuse and sexual violence. Whatever form violence comes in, from rape, to trafficking, to relationships based, psychological or financial control, we work to end it. We know that escaping the effects of violence can be the hardest thing to ever do, and that's why the lifesaving support that Solace provides 30,000 women, children and young people each year, is so important. To find out more you can visit our website at [www.solacewomensaid.org](http://www.solacewomensaid.org), or you can follow us on twitter @solacewomensaid, facebook @solacewomensaid, or Instagram @solacewomensaid.

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