

# Social Work Online Team Training (SWOTT) toolkit:

# **FACILITATOR NOTES -**

# **MARIA & GEJZA**

## Understanding automatic prejudice: Working Together to Safeguard Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children

### THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR IS:

- To encourage the social workers to share their thoughts about the case study.
- To facilitate discussion to identify the opportunities and challenges of this scenario.

### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR THE FACILITATOR TO ASK THE GROUP:

**Question:** What do we know about automatic prejudice, and how might pathologising and culturally relativist reactions determine the way that the Section 47 assessment is carried out?

**Answer:** Whilst assessments in child protection should include careful consideration of the child's best interests, emerging evidence suggests that decisions about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children do not always achieve this aim. Instead, automatic prejudice suggests that Section 47 assessments can be carried out in one of two ways:

First, decisions made during an assessment with Maria and Gejza could be determined by pathologising reactions. In this example, concerns over Maria and Gejza's welfare and current situation might be blamed on the family's Roma culture. Stereotypes about Roma people suggest that sexual exploitation, human trafficking, child abduction and child maltreatment is common. If these stereotypes are believed, but not verified, the pathologising reaction will be to remove the child from their Roma culture, but what equal action would this decision have on the option to facilitate a Family Group Conference or care planning process where the legal duty is to consider friends and family care?

Second, decisions made during an assessment with Maria and Gejza can be determined by cultural relativist reactions. In this example, concerns over the welfare of Maria and Gejza are normalised in the context of the family's 'culture'. Here stereotypes over child marriage, low expectations of parental capacity mean that any instances of risk may be different if Maria and Gejza were not Roma.

**Question:** Maria, Gejza and their parents know that you are visiting their home to conduct an assessment. Reflecting on your knowledge of Roma people, and the oppression that they have endured, what might they be thinking and feeling about your involvement?

**Answer:** It is important to recognise that Roma groups would not have survived centuries of oppression without maintaining a stoic and tenacious pride in their Gypsy, Roma or Traveller culture. More often than not, this is evidenced in the felt need to fight against and resist various projects of social control and enforced assimilation.



Generally, Roma communities tend to share a central belief in the importance of family and community. For many, there is a mutual reliance on extended family, for both practical and emotional support. There is also a commitment to family across the generations, with Roma communities expecting to care for children who are unable to live with their birth parents. The need to maintain the survival of relatively small ethnic or cultural population is usually driven by an ideology that also excludes aspects of the majority society which can be perceived as a threat to tradition and culture.

In light of the generations of persecution and marginalisation that Roma communities have suffered at the hand of state sponsored organisation, some community members view agents of the state with a deep sense of mistrust. The sense of mistrust towards agents of the state has been compounded recently in relation to Roma families in the UK, with numerous children being wrongly removed from their families as part of police antitrafficking operations; and in high profile cases of fair skinned Roma children being removed from their families in Greece and the Republic of Ireland based upon suspicions of child abduction.

Rather than as a system for effective and safe child care, Roma communities feel that care proceedings are being used to take their children into care at a disproportionate rate for no other reason than that they are Gypsies, Roma or Travellers.

**Question:** In preparation for the assessment, what can you do to ensure that Maria, Gejza and their parents are able to contribute in the best way possible?

**Answer:** It has to be understood that Roma children and families, like many others who experience social work involvement, are unlikely to understand the various child protection processes. They should, therefore, be provided with accessible information about their rights including sources of independent support and the relevant complaints procedures. If any assessment is being undertaken, it is crucial that families are enabled to understand what this entails, what is being judged, and what changes are necessary to reduce concerns. Most importantly the family will need to understand how the child protection system works in order to prepare and participate to the best of their ability.

Given these factors, you might do well to make a particular effort to work in partnership with families, being respectful and sensitive to a community psychology that reflects their multidimensional and trans-generational experiences of hostility and racism, trying to gain a shared understanding of the situation and the reason for your involvement. To achieve this, think about what you need to do to be seen as an empathic and active communicator who genuinely values the opportunities that the Roma culture can offer. Here a model of reflection before practice could be useful.

Case example – this example has been adapted from an anonymised Serious Case Review, No: 2018/C7043. Published by the NSPCC on behalf of an unnamed local safeguarding children board. [A full text file of the SCR is here.](#)