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## **Opening Statement on Traveller Accommodation - Meeting of the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community 1st of June 2021.**

The National Traveller Women's Forum is a national network of Traveller women and Traveller organisations throughout Ireland. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

As minority ethnic women, Traveller women and girls are among the most marginalised and excluded individuals and groups in Ireland experiencing: poorer health and educational outcomes; extreme poverty; inadequate housing; high levels of unemployment; discrimination and racism; and lack of access to mainstream services.

Housing has a particular effect on Traveller women as they spend more time in the home and are the primary carers so they bear the brunt of having to cope with the most basic conditions such as lack of clean running water, lack of adequate refuse collection, poor sanitation and unsafe areas for children to play.

There are also huge shortcomings in provision for Traveller women experiencing violence against women. Refuges provided in Ireland, which doesn't meet the Istanbul Convention standards of one family place per 10,000 population. It has also highlighted the lack of gendered analysis of homelessness, which means women and children fleeing domestic violence are not categorised as homeless, nor are they integrated into strategies dealing with housing and homelessness. This has meant that refuges struggle to access resources and referral pathways for women when it comes to accessing safe and secure accommodation and housing.

As one of the key determinants of health, accommodation has also contributed to Traveller children being 3.6 times more vulnerable to not surviving the first year of their life, and to 50% not expected to live beyond the age of 40. The recent report by the Children's Ombudsman Office 'No end in Site' presents a very chilling insight into the lives of children living on a site where there has been 30 years of failure by a Local Authority.

The 2019 Department of Housing, Planning and Local Governments own annual count reports that over one in ten Travellers are effectively homeless (13.5%). In reality these statistics obscure the reality of homelessness and accommodation conditions within the Traveller community.

We currently have a Traveller accommodation crisis and a wider housing crisis in Ireland, and the long-term lack of accommodation provision has pushed many Travellers into sharing accommodation and overcrowding, unauthorised sites. These families are not reflected

in Government statistics on homelessness, and we know the situation is deteriorating. 504 Travellers were in emergency accommodation in the Dublin area in 2019 and 23% of homeless families in Kerry are Traveller families. Anecdotally we also know that 50% of families in homeless services in Galway city are Travellers.

Living in overcrowded conditions has prevented Traveller women self-isolating when contracting Covid-19. The lack of access to running water makes it difficult to comply with guidelines on hand hygiene and social distancing in an effort to stop the spread of the virus.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on Travellers, as well as having a particular impact on women and girls. Issues that Traveller women face in terms of housing and homelessness have been greatly exacerbated, especially for those most vulnerable in the communities. While the Traveller Accommodation Unit (TAU) in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage issued a Circular for Local Authorities advising them to take all necessary measures to ensure safety of Traveller families there was still issues in the roll out of COVID 19 measures at local level in some local authorities. In these instances, funding and guidance was not a barrier at national level.

The implementation of the recommendations of the Housing Traveller Accommodation Act Expert Review in full is crucial to ensure adequate supply and standard of culturally appropriate accommodation for Travellers. Clear timelines, a budget for implementation and tangible targets with corresponding accountability measures along with strong Traveller engagement at all levels will be essential for delivery.

Government must commit to including clear actions, targets, indicators, outcomes, timeframes and adequate resources in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) and National Strategy for Women and Girls to address the accommodation and homeless crisis experienced by Traveller women and girls

Women and children being accommodated in emergency refuge accommodation must be represented in homeless statistics, and additional funding is needed to ensure women living in violent situations are fast tracked to access secure and affordable long-term housing options.

**Bridget Kelly – Community Development Worker with the NTWF**