

Case Study Sinead - Irish Traveller Women and Domestic Violence Oct 2009

Sinead came to Solas Anois in September 2005, she was fleeing violence from family members as her father wanted her to marry a man she had never met and who lived in Ireland.

As a young traveller woman Sinead was never allowed out alone, if she went to the shop for groceries she was escorted by a male member of the family. This is common practice. Sinead was not allowed to talk to another male outside of her own community.

When she first arrived she stayed for one week as she found it difficult to adapt to life in a refuge and she missed her family. She went back to her family and a week later she returned to Solas Anois as the violence increased upon her return and promises were made to her that were not kept.

Sinead stayed at Solas Anois for a year and in that time she grew in confidence, she was able to think independently and do things for herself. She was making decisions about her life for the first time with help and support from staff.

Sinead was unable to read or write or send texts but as time went on she developed a great deal and attended literacy and numeracy classes learning basic skills that she didn't have the opportunity to develop whilst growing up. The family had travelled a lot around the UK and back and forth to Ireland.

At Solas Anois we also provided domestic violence workshops over a six week period where women like Sinead can talk in a safe place and come to terms with the experiences they have endured. Sinead also accessed the counselling service at Solace Women's Aid and spent some time in a local nursery volunteering with the pre-school age group.

Young travelling women always help around the house and with younger siblings from an early age. Sinead had helped rear her sister's children. She made friends with other young women in the refuge and learned many things about other cultures and began to travel away to other parts of London – on buses and trains. She learned to manage a budget for the first time and began making her own appointments for the local GP surgery, housing and dental appointments. In many cultures attending to daily issues is a matter of course for adults, even young ones but these were all firsts for Sinead as she had no control over her own life and was not allowed to make simple daily decisions.

As the time came to discuss housing options it was discussed with Sinead where she would like to live and where would she feel safe. This was a stressful time for her on many levels especially as she would be living on her own for the first time in her life. Again she was given plenty of support from staff at the refuge and eventually made her choice.

Part of the service we provide to all service users is resettlement which is invaluable to Irish Travelling Women who are learning to live in a new environment and setting themselves up as an independent adult.

Sinead learned to cope with the various pressures very well and has spent three years living safely and happily in her flat. She attends college three days a week, she is free from violence and threats, has travelled abroad alone and has made many new friends. Sinead has had to leave her family, her community and her culture behind in order to remain safe and has needed continuing support to rebuild her life, recover from the violence she experienced and start afresh.

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Best Practice Points:

1. Sinead stayed at the refuge for a full year and it's important to understand that women from the Irish Travelling Community are given this time for many reasons. Typically when living in the Travelling Community Sinead was not allowed to socialise with men, only women, and could not cope financially as she had never been given any money or been allowed to make any decisions about her life or her future. It was an enormous adjustment for Sinead and she needed time and support to make these changes.

2. Resettlement has also been crucial in this case so that Sinead did not feel abandoned once she left the refuge. As with all survivors leaving a refuge it was important to develop a safety plan should she be tracked down and a plan to minimize any feelings of panic when dealing with daily pressures with limited life skills and literacy and numeracy skills.

Contact: info@solacewomensaid.org for further information or call 0207 428 7656.