

Exploring barriers and facilitators to breastfeeding infants among Gypsies and Travellers in Wales

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Introduction



- **Sarah Parry** (sarah.parry12@wales.nhs.uk)
Specialist Community Public Health Nurse (SCPHN)/Health Visitor with CTMUHB
- Research conducted as part of Masters in Public Health degree
- Since 2010, worked with a community of Gypsies and Travellers



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Background

- 71,440 people in UK recorded as Gypsy or Traveller (0.12% of population) ¹
- 3,630 live in Wales ¹
- Recognised ethnicity, includes English & Welsh Gypsies, and Irish & Scottish Travellers
- Report poorer health in all ages and both sexes ¹
- Reduced life expectancy of 10-25 years ¹
- Low rates of breastfeeding



1. ONS (2023) *Gypsy or Irish Traveller populations, England and Wales: Census 2021*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/gypsyririshtravellerpopulationsenglandandwales/census2021>

Breastfeeding rates

- Breastfeeding data collected by Midwives and Health Visitors, at birth, 10 days, 6 weeks and 6 months

Breastfeeding initiation rates:-

- UK population: 80% ²
- Welsh population 63% ³
- Gypsy and Traveller community - just 3% ⁴
- In the community that I visit, in the last ten years only 1 Traveller infant from 28 born, has been breastfed. ⁵



² DHSC (2023) *Infant feeding survey 2023*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/infant-feeding-survey-2023#overview>

³ Welsh Government (2021) *Maternity and birth statistics: 2020*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/maternity-and-birth-statistics-2020-html>

⁴ Pinkney, K. (2012) 'The practice and attitudes of gypsy and traveller women towards early infant feeding', *Community practitioner : the journal of the Community Practitioners' & Health Visitors' Association*, 85(7), pp. 26–29

⁵ PHW (2021) *Healthy Child Wales Programme: 2020*. Available at: <https://gov.wales/healthy-child-wales-programme-2020-html>



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Literature Review

- Less than 30 pieces of empirical research in the field, all over 10 years old
- Galactosemia: 1:450 in Irish Travellers, compared with 1:30,000 to 1:100,000 of non-Travellers
- Reduced skills to breastfeed
- Believing formula to be as healthy as breastmilk
- Reduced access to healthcare services
- Reluctance to breastfeed in front of others



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Research question, aims and objectives

Question

- “What are the barriers and facilitators to breastfeeding infants, perceived and experienced by Gypsies and Travellers in Wales?”

Aims

- To gather information which will facilitate the development of a health promotion initiative

Objectives

1. Identify the main barriers and facilitators
2. Analyse whether culture provides opportunity to breastfeed
3. Recommend strategy needed from healthcare to increase motivation to breastfeed



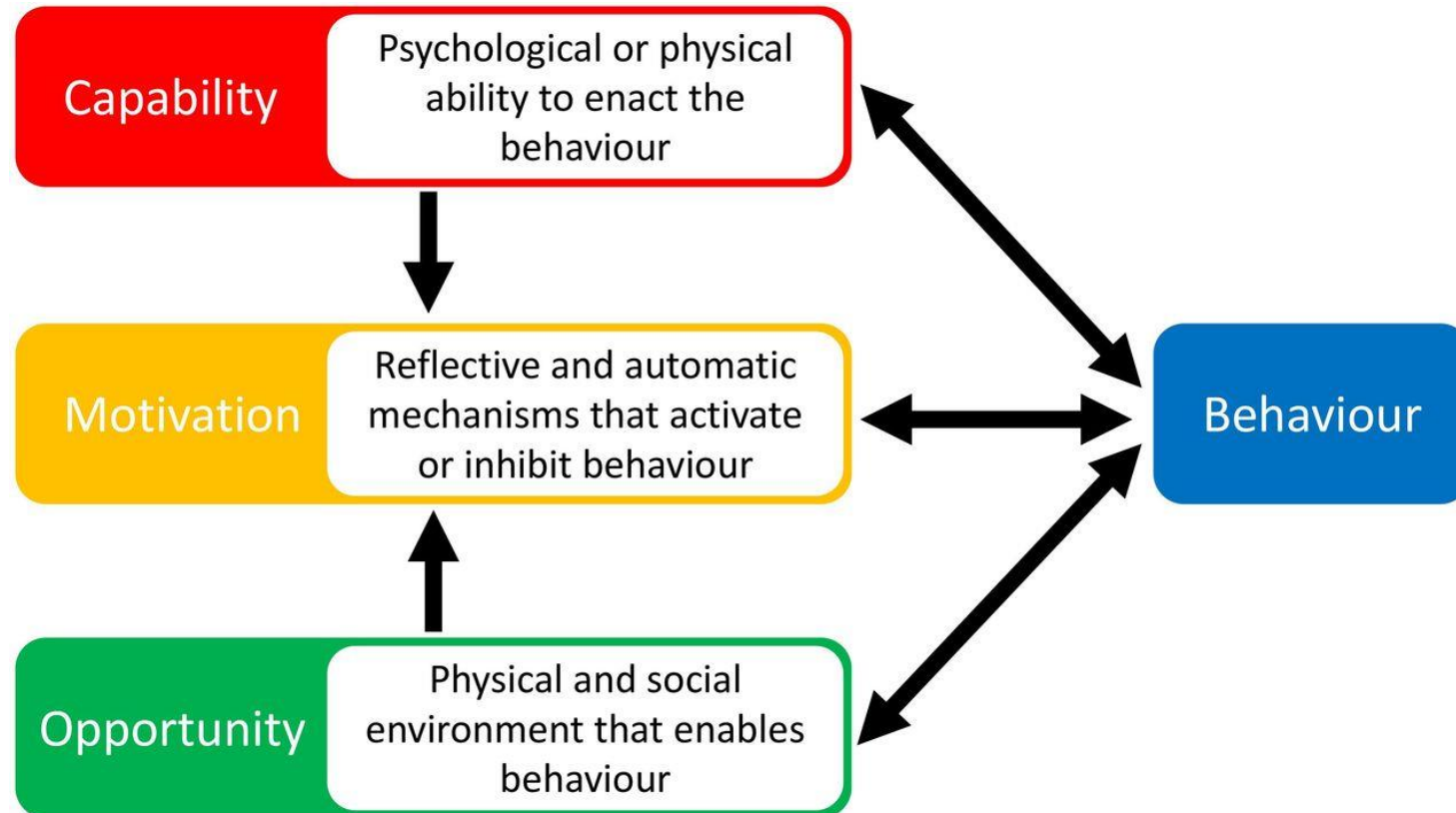
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Theoretical framework

COM-B model of behavior change



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Research methods

Research strategy

- Qualitative research using grounded theory
- Semi-structured interviews using a topic guide
- Thematic analysis of the data

Inclusion criteria

- 18 or over, with capacity to provide informed consent
- Have Gypsy or Traveller ethnicity
- Female (as Gypsy/Traveller women maybe reluctant to talk about breastfeeding in presence of males)
- Be mother or childless

Exclusion criteria

- Mothers on researcher's caseload



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Ethical approval

- **Ethical approval granted:**
- 3rd June - Wolverhampton University
- 24th June - NHS proportionate review



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Participant Demographics

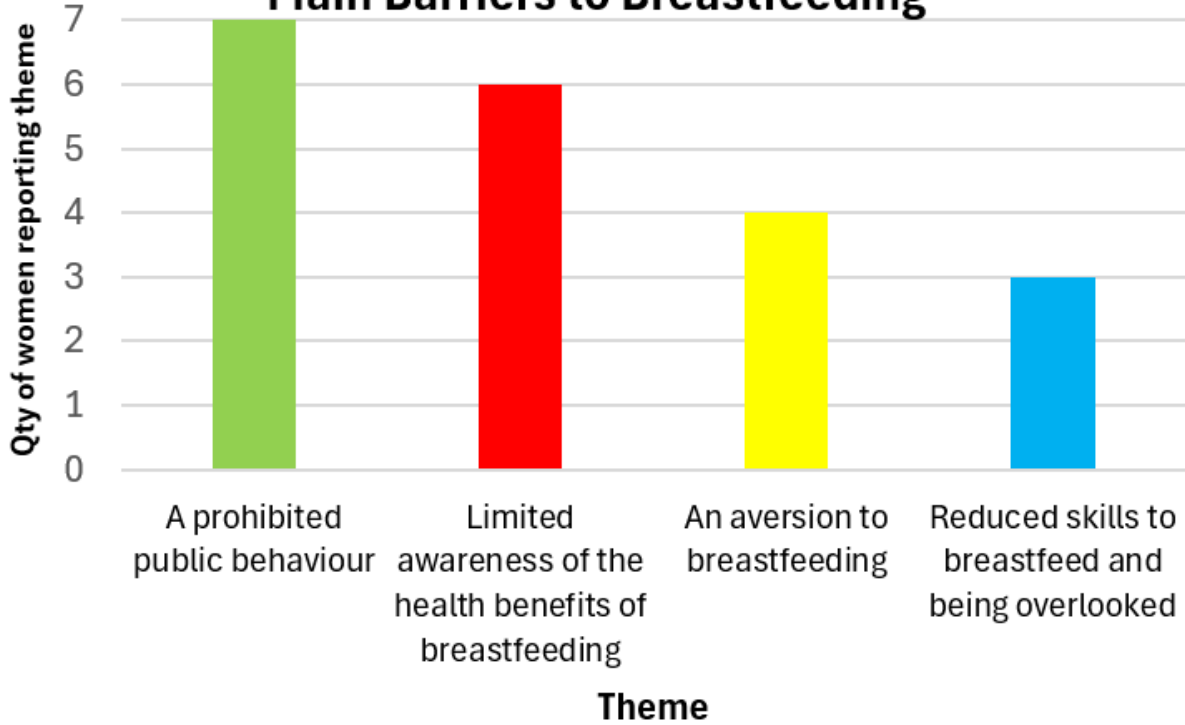
- One out of six women with Gypsy ethnicity agreed to participate
- Six out of six women with Traveller ethnicity agreed to participate

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	No. of Children	Choice of infant feeding
Donna	Traveler	9	Expressed milk for 1 child
Suzannah	Traveler	4	Formula
Grace	Traveler	3	Partially breastfed for 10 days
Amy	Traveler	Pregnant with 1 st	
Emma	Traveler	5	Formula
Anna	Gypsy	5	Formula
Charlotte	Traveler	4	Breastfed 1 child for 3 months

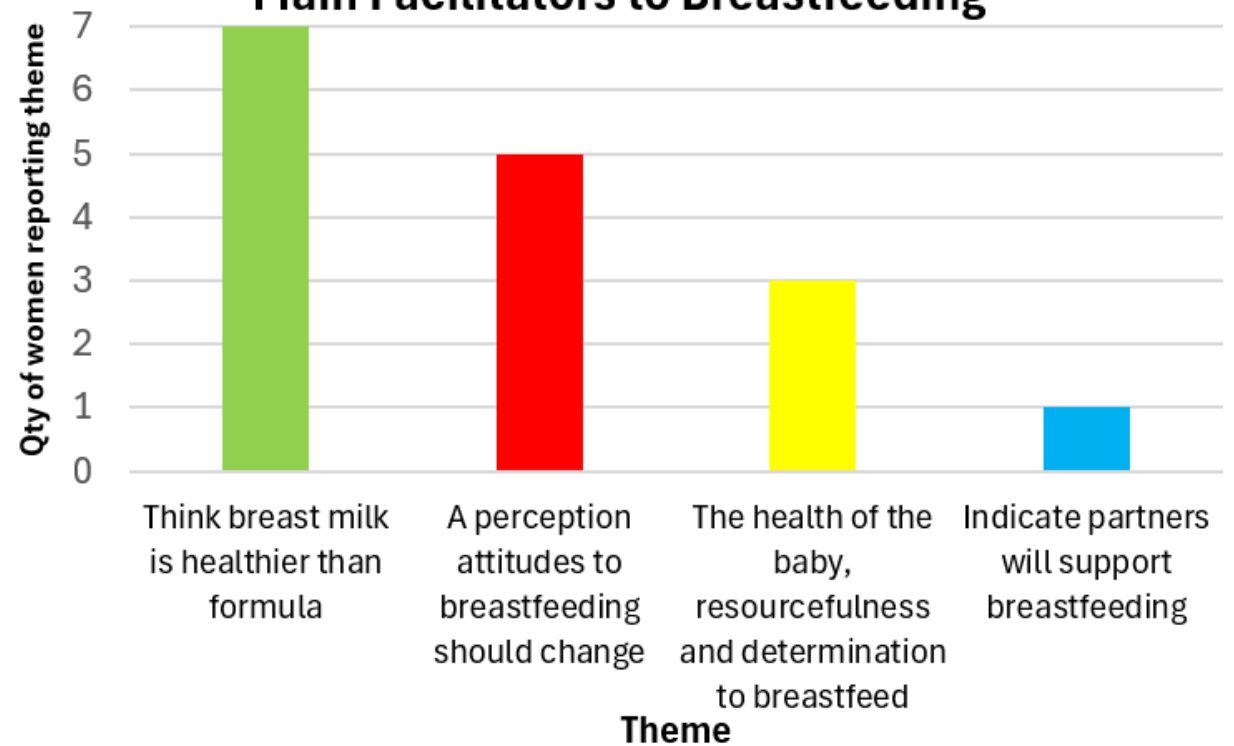


Results

Main Barriers to Breastfeeding



Main Facilitators to Breastfeeding



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Theme 1: A prohibited public behavior (barrier)

"It's seen as shameful. Everyone would talk about you. It's a thing we don't do."

Anna

"If you saw it, we would walk away. Shelter the children."

Anna

"When I had the first one, I could do it as I didn't have another child looking at me."

Charlotte

"If I knew that conversation was in the men's chat it would be like, oh my God what am I going to do."

Charlotte

"We never speak of anything like periods, laying together, if we asked, we were told, what you wanna know that for?"

Emma



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Theme 2: A perception attitudes to breastfeeding in public should change

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"I know this may sound weird to you, but that's just the way it is."

Anna

"It's the old-fashioned ways are still in our culture."

Charlotte

"Nice."

"Courageous."

"Personal choice."



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Theme 3: An aversion to breastfeeding (barrier)

"It's weird."

"It's disgusting."

"It's not for me."

"The afterbirth was stuck, and I was asked to put him to the breast as it may help, but it went through me, it didn't feel natural. I would rather go to theatre."

Anna



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Themes 4 & 5: Think breastmilk is healthier (facilitator) but limited awareness of the known benefits (barrier)

"Natural."

"Immunity."

"It's a personal, private moment between a mother and a child. A bonding moment."

Emma

"Explaining it more about the benefits the baby could get from it in the travelling community, I think that would help them more."

Charlotte



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Theme 6: Reduced skills to breastfeed and being overlooked (barrier)

"I think when you're a Traveller, they know you are going to bottle feed, so don't give you much support to breastfeed."

Grace



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Theme 7: The health of the baby, determination and resourcefulness (facilitator)

"The doctor was blunt and told me you've got to do it, and I'm like right, I'll do it. I've got to breastfeed her, she was in an incubator, she was in intensive care, there, I didn't care if they took my whole body just to save her, I need her to survive. So, I thought I don't care what happens in my culture, I don't care if my marriage ends."

Charlotte



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Theme 8: The partners support (facilitator)

"The previous research has suggested that women wouldn't talk about breastfeeding in front of men. Do you think health professionals should involve partners and ask them if they want to hear about it?"

Researcher

"That was a fake thing to say, like, don't talk about it in front of the men, because with their husbands and their partners they will, like, you can say what you want in front of them, but it's gotta be kept private like. I don't think the husband would have any objection about it, if it was done behind closed doors."

Charlotte



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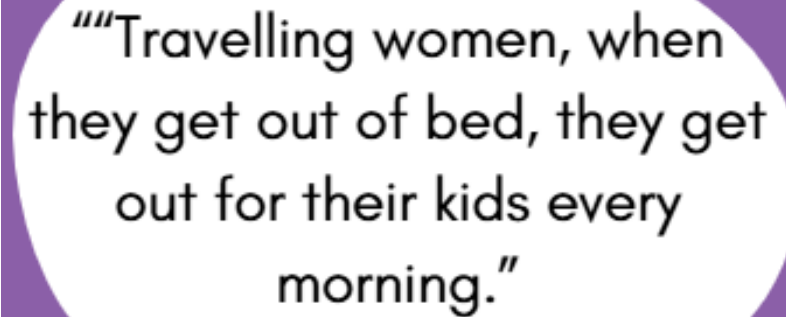
Conclusion

Most significant barriers

- Perception breastfeeding is an immodest act and should not be seen by others, has led to the other barriers
- Assumptions of health professionals

Facilitators

- Children's health
- Feel breastmilk is healthier
- Perception cultural attitude should change
- Desire to learn expressing



“Travelling women, when they get out of bed, they get out for their kids every morning.”

Charlotte



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Recommendations for practice

Education

- Offer antenatal contact with midwife and health visitor at 30 & 36 weeks to discuss breastfeeding, including the health benefits, how to express & store milk as well as breastfeed.
- Videos of breastfeeding and expressing, possibly using Gypsy and Traveller role models.
- Involve partners.

Training

- Make Every Contact Count (MECC)



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Recommendations for policy

- Include ethnicity when collecting statistics on breastfeeding
- Collaboration with Gypsy Traveller advocacy services: campaign for private, breastfeeding facilities to be incorporated into design of Gypsy, Traveller sites
- Campaign for provision of breast pumps for all breastfeeding mothers

Recommendations for research

- Qualitative research using ethnography
- Include male Gypsy and Traveller participants
- Quantitative research to obtain accurate breastfeeding rates



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Strengths and limitations



Strengths

- Present opportunity for further research in the community
- Triangulation (results presented to each participant)



Limitation

- Time
- Only one participant with Gypsy ethnicity



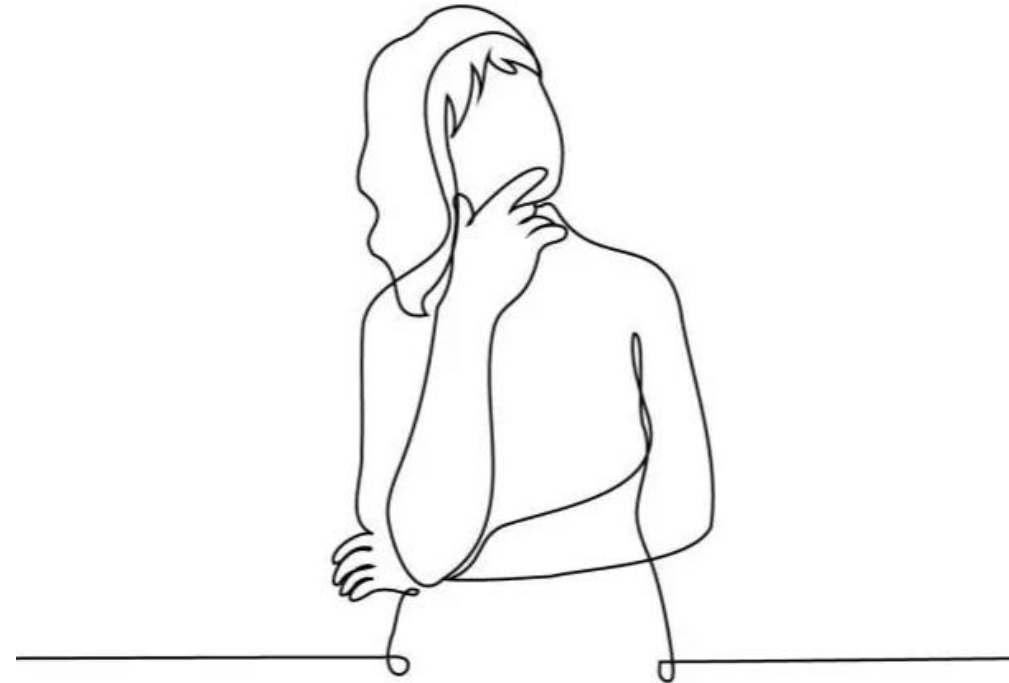
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Personal reflection

- First time researcher, who throughout the process has learnt to listen more and have more patience.
- Experience of research has emphasised its importance.
- The findings from this research has been shared and may enable the process of increasing the breastfeeding rates in the Gypsy and Traveller community to be realised.



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Thank you for listening!



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