The Experience of Discrimination in Ireland

Analysis of the QNHS Equality Module

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FOREWORD

This is the first report arising from the ‘Research Programme on Equality and Discrimination’ which is being carried out by The Economic and Social Research Institute on behalf of The Equality Authority. This study draws on the first national survey of experiences of discrimination carried out by the Central Statistics Office in 2004.

The Central Statistics Office survey revealed significant levels of reported discrimination. Overall 12.5 per cent of the Irish population aged 18 years and over said that they had been discriminated against in the preceding two years. This survey provided a valuable benchmark against which to assess progress in combating discrimination. It provided information that raised questions in relation to the adequacy of the current equality legislation and of the level of investment in the existing equality infrastructure to eliminate this reported discrimination. It is important, therefore, that this data be further examined to increase our understanding of this reported discrimination.

Helen Russell, Emma Quinn, Rebecca King O’Riain and Frances McGinnity have applied expertise and insight in their examination of this data. They have provided us with new information on the social characteristics of those at risk of discrimination in different social contexts, on Work-related discrimination by sector and occupation, and on the impact of this discrimination and the responses of those experiencing this discrimination. We are grateful to the authors for their work on this report. We are also grateful to Laurence Bond, Head of Research with the Equality Authority, for his support to this research project.

This report has policy and practice implications that must now be a focus for attention from the relevant authorities and organisations. The unemployed are not covered by the equality legislation but they emerge from this report as particularly vulnerable to exploitation. This suggests the need to review and broaden the grounds covered by the equality legislation. The report highlights that the social groups who report the highest levels of discrimination are the least likely to take action. This suggests the need for increased proactive third party interventions such as information campaigns, advocacy and legal supports. The report also suggests the need for new practice to eliminate discrimination particularly in financial services and accommodation as well as in workplace recruitment.

Niall Crowley
Chief Executive Officer
The Equality Authority
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Discrimination undermines equality in society. Discrimination may also exacerbate social cleavages and weaken social solidarity, and in the context of employment, can undermine labour standards and lead to an inefficient use of skills. The importance of eliminating discrimination is reflected in Irish law which prohibits discrimination in a variety of settings and on a range of grounds. Yet discrimination is often difficult to detect and measure, as discriminatory behaviour is rarely observed directly. This study relies on the self-reported experiences of discrimination among the general population.

We draw on the first national survey of experiences of discrimination in Ireland carried out by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in 2004 (CSO, 2005a). The survey asked individuals whether they had experienced discrimination in a number of domains over the previous two years. This survey of approximately 24,600 people provides important baseline information on a number of key issues:

- the level of discrimination (subjectively defined),
- the contexts in which reported discrimination occurs,
- the perceived grounds of discrimination,
- the social characteristics of those who report discrimination,
- the impact of subjective discrimination,
- the responses taken by those who experience discrimination.

Drawing on the nine grounds covered by Irish Equality legislation, discrimination was defined as follows to those participating in the survey:

Discrimination takes place when one person or a group of persons are treated less favourably than others because of their gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, ‘race’ – skin colour or ethnic group, sexual orientation, religious belief, and/or membership of the Traveller community.

Discrimination can occur in situations such as where a person or persons is/are refused access to a service, to a job, or is/are treated less favourably at work. In other words, discrimination means treating people differently, negatively or adversely because they are, for instance, Asian, Muslim, over 50 years of age, a single parent, and/or homosexual.

If the reason you may have been treated less favourably than someone else is due to another reason (such as your qualifications, being over an income limit or because you are further back in a queue for something) this does not constitute discrimination.

The advantage of this survey approach is that it is comprehensive and nationally representative. It provides information about a range of social contexts in which discrimination can happen (for example, in the workplace and accessing services such as shops, pubs, health services), and reports discrimination towards a wide range of groups. It provides us with data on forms of discrimination not asked about before, some of which is very difficult to detect using other methods. The main limitation of this approach is that the judgement of whether discrimination has occurred is subjective. Two respondents who have experienced the same treatment could interpret it differently, with one attributing it to discrimination, while another does not. This subjective element may lead to an under-reporting or over-reporting of discrimination. Efforts were made by the CSO to minimise such error by providing respondents with a clear definition of discrimination, delimiting the contexts and time frame that are examined and asking a representative sample of the whole population.
rather than just disadvantaged or minority groups. This is in line with international best practice.

**Level of Reported Discrimination**

Overall 12.5 per cent of the Irish population aged 18 years and over said that they had been discriminated against in the preceding two years (Table A). Of the eligible population, 9 per cent of respondents reported discrimination accessing services and 7 per cent reported Work-related discrimination. In 71 per cent of cases discrimination was experienced on more than one occasion.

**Table A: Incidence and Rates of Discrimination**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experienced discrimination</th>
<th>Experienced Discrimination (000s)</th>
<th>Eligible Population (000s)</th>
<th>Rate %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Any discrimination</td>
<td>381.6</td>
<td>3,061.1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Service related discrimination</td>
<td>276.7</td>
<td>3,061.1</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Work related discrimination</td>
<td>156.9</td>
<td>2,157.4</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Social Context of Discrimination**

The study examines experiences of discrimination across nine contexts or domains detailed in Table B. The highest rate of discrimination occurred in the two employment domains – with between 5 and 6 per cent of the eligible population reporting discrimination. In absolute numbers, banks and financial institutions proved the most common site for perceived discrimination.

**Table B: Incidence and Rates of Discrimination Across Domains**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experienced discrimination</th>
<th>Experienced Discrimination (000s)</th>
<th>Eligible Population (000s)</th>
<th>Rate %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>While looking for work</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>1,275.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the workplace</td>
<td>100.6</td>
<td>2,076.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtaining housing or accommodation</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>1,097.3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using services of banks, insurance etc</td>
<td>112.5</td>
<td>3,061.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In shops, pubs or restaurants</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>3,061.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing health services</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>2,903.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In relation to education</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>1,321.4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing other public services</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>3,061.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using transport services</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>3,061.1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Perceived Grounds of Discrimination**

The CSO survey also collected information on the grounds on which respondents felt they were discriminated against. As this question required respondents to interpret the motivation of other actors, the results should be understood as perceived grounds of discrimination. Of the nine grounds covered by equality legislation, age-related discrimination was the most commonly reported (19 per cent) followed by race/ethnicity/nationality (16 per cent) and sex (12 per cent) (Table C).
Table C: Grounds of Discrimination as a Percentage of All Reported Grounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ground</th>
<th>% of All Reported Grounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/skin colour/ethnic group/nationality</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family status</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership of the Traveller community</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost one-third of the respondents felt unequally treated on ‘other’ unspecified grounds, not covered by law. The model constructed to analyse the ‘other’ ground did not yield a clear picture of who is being missed by the existing equality grounds. Closer examination of three grounds not currently covered by equality legislation (Trade Union membership, education and economic status) showed that Trade Union members, respondents educated to primary and lower secondary level and the unemployed were more likely to use the ‘other’ ground. However, we cannot rule out some misclassification and the substantial number of respondents who ticked the ‘other’ ground is a weakness of the survey, given that the definition supplied is strongly linked to the nine grounds.

Social Characteristics of Those at Risk of Discrimination

The survey also includes information on the social characteristics (such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, disability, education etc.) of those who report experiencing discrimination, allowing comparisons between different sub-groups – men/women, Irish national/non-Irish national and so on – in the population. While these characteristics cover many of the grounds on which discrimination is legally prohibited in Ireland, there are two important omissions, namely sexual orientation, which was not asked in the survey, and membership of the Traveller community where the number of respondents was too small to analyse separately.

In addition to directly comparing the experience of different groups, we use statistical modelling to identify whether a particular group characteristic – such as gender or nationality – is a predictor of discrimination risk when the differential effect of other characteristics is controlled.

Women and Men

While there is no difference in the proportion of women and men reporting discrimination overall, women were much more likely to report discrimination on marital and family status grounds and, to a lesser extent, on the gender ground. Forty-five per cent of reports of gender based discrimination came from men, predominantly in relation to financial services. Age, nationality/ethnicity and disability were more commonly cited by men as the perceived grounds of discrimination.

Statistical modelling shows that gender is a risk factor in a number of specific domains, independently of other factors such as family status or age. In Work-related discrimination, men are more likely to report experiencing discrimination looking for work, while women are more likely to report experiencing discrimination in the workplace. In services, women were more likely to say they had been discriminated
against in accessing health services while men were more likely to say they experienced discrimination accessing financial services such as banking and insurance. In other situations or domains men and women do not differ.

Age Groups: Older/Younger

Claims of discrimination more commonly came from respondents aged less than 25 years than those aged 65 years or over. Young people are particularly likely to report having experienced discrimination while using services such as pubs/clubs/restaurants/shops, banks/insurance and housing, but are no more likely than other age groups to report Work-related discrimination. The finding that being 65 years or older is not a risk factor in any domain is striking and may reflect reluctance among older people to interpret unequal treatment as discriminatory.

Family Status: Lone Parents

Lone parents have one of the highest probabilities of reporting discrimination over the preceding two years. Their risk of discrimination is found to be particularly concentrated within the services domain, with housing/accommodation, transport and other public services standing out as contexts in which lone parents are most likely to experience discrimination.

Non-Irish Nationals/ Minority Ethnic Groups

There is considerable policy interest in the extent to which non-Irish nationals and minority ethnic groups are subject to discrimination in Ireland. Some 24 per cent of non-Irish nationals feel they have been discriminated against over the preceding two years, just over twice the rate for Irish nationals. The higher likelihood of reported discrimination among non-Irish nationals persists in both of the work and four of the service domains (housing, shops/pubs/restaurants, financial services and transport), but is particularly pronounced in relation to job search.

Respondents of Black ethnicity have the highest “raw” risk of discrimination among the four ethnic categories – White, Black, Asian or ‘Other’ – identified in the survey, with 40 per cent of those surveyed reporting experience of discrimination. This compares to 12 per cent of the White respondents and 25 per cent of the Asian group. Ethnicity is more strongly associated with discrimination in services than work. The survey also shows that Black respondents were particularly at risk of discrimination in shops/pubs/restaurants, financial services, housing and transport, the ‘Other’ group were at risk in shops/pubs/restaurants and housing and the Asian group in transport. It was also found that Black respondents were more vulnerable to repeat discrimination than White respondents.

People with Disabilities

Our analyses show that disability is one of the strongest predictors of discrimination risk. People with disabilities were at higher risk across all domains except education. Disability has the strongest effect in the health domain and in transport services, where disabled respondents are over five times more likely to report problems of discrimination. People with disabilities also report a greater incidence of repeat discrimination, with 77 per cent of those who experienced discrimination saying it occurred more than once. Furthermore, of respondents with a disability who reported having experienced discrimination, 35 per cent said the experience had a serious impact on their lives.
The Unemployed

The unemployed are not currently covered by equality legislation but they emerge clearly from the current study as a group particularly vulnerable to discrimination: 29 per cent of the unemployed in the survey reported having experienced some form of discrimination in the last two years. Unsurprisingly, the responses of the unemployed indicate particular vulnerability to discrimination while looking for work. Job seekers in this group are 8.7 times more likely to report experience of discrimination in the preceding two years than those currently employed, and the unemployed are also more likely to have experienced discrimination in the workplace.

Work-related Discrimination by Sector and Occupation

We analyse Work-related discrimination by sector and occupation for those employed at the time of the survey. Statistical modelling revealed that only individuals working in the education and transport sectors have significantly higher reports of discrimination in the workplace, when occupation and the personal characteristics of workers are taken into account. Sector does not emerge as significant in the context of looking for work, apart from the fact that respondents working in financial services are less likely to report discrimination. In terms of occupation, plant and machine operatives report higher rates of discrimination in the workplace than individuals in other occupations, when we account for other factors using statistical modelling. Occupation had a greater impact on the experience of discrimination when looking for work: clerical and secretarial workers, associate professional and technical and personal and protective services emerged as more vulnerable to discrimination in the ‘looking for work’ model. Overall, the results suggest that it is the composition of the workforce, or the personal characteristics of those who sought work, rather than the sector or occupation in which they work, that is likely to be associated with a higher rate of discrimination.

The Impact of Discrimination and Taking Action

Of those who report discrimination in the last two years, some 26 per cent say that it had a serious or very serious effect on their lives. The results presented in this report highlight how the impact of reported discrimination varies across certain groups, and how the impact varies depending on the context. Discrimination in the workplace, obtaining accommodation and in ‘accessing other public services’ is seen to have a more serious impact by those who experience it. The finding that discrimination experienced in the workplace and in relation to housing/accommodation is associated with the most severe impact is unsurprising given that these are two dominant spheres in most people’s lives.

Only 40 per cent of respondents take any action (formal or informal) in response to perceived discrimination. The most common form of action taken was verbal, with 26 per cent saying they had taken such action. A further 4 per cent made a written response, with only 6 per cent making a formal response by making an official complaint or taking a legal action. This result suggests that the cases that make it to the Equality Tribunal represent a very small fraction of all cases of discrimination.

Regarding taking action, our analysis shows that in many cases, the social groups who report experiencing the highest levels of discrimination are the least likely to take action. Responding to discrimination requires a range of resources such as language skills, confidence and knowledge of one’s rights and entitlements. It appears that more marginalised groups who are subject to higher levels of discrimination may also lack some of these resources.
Policy Implications

The results of this study suggest that accessing financial services and housing, along with recruitment and the workplace, are areas that may require particular monitoring for discriminatory practices. In relation to work, the response of the unemployed and the economically inactive, non-Irish nationals and people with disabilities suggest that these groups are particularly at risk. In relation to services, disabled people, non-Irish nationals and minority ethnic groups reported greater likelihood of consistently experiencing discrimination. The findings regarding reported discrimination in the workplace and in service domains suggest that these groups need particular supports. Employers and service providers need to be aware of situations in which reports of discrimination are high and should be conscious of the groups vulnerable to discrimination. The finding that the most highly discriminated against groups are the least likely to take action indicates the potential benefit of proactive third party interventions such as information campaigns, advocacy and legal supports, along with initiatives by employers and service providers to implement good practice.