

Travellers in Ireland: An Examination of Discrimination and Racism

*A report from the Irish National Co-Ordinating Committee
for the European Year Against Racism*

1997 European year



against racism

This report is a reminder in this European Year Against Racism of the current realities and long history of the racism experienced by Travellers in Ireland, and of the need for clear policies, procedures and legal frameworks through which it can be addressed. Quite clearly, as the report indicates, while there has been some encouraging progress, much remains to be done at all levels. The report was written by John O'Connell from Pavee Point and informed by a roundtable discussion organised by the National Committee for the European Year Against Racism as well as by ongoing discussions with National Committee members.

The report has also been compiled in preparation for the seminar on responding to the racism experienced by Roma, Gypsies, and Travellers in the European Union, Leuven, Belgium, 17-19 January 1998. The purpose of the seminar is to develop proposals and actions for EU responses to the specific forces of racism experienced by Roma, Gypsies, and Travellers throughout the EU. The seminar, supported by DGV of the European Commission as a European activity in the framework of the European Year Against Racism, was organised by the Irish National Committee for the year in conjunction with other member states. A full report on the seminar will be available and will provide the basis for ongoing EU-level work towards responding to these issues.

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January 1997

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Introduction

Travellers are widely acknowledged as one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in Irish society. Travellers fare poorly on every indicator used to measure disadvantage: unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, health status, infant mortality, life expectancy, illiteracy, education and training levels, access to decision making and political representation, gender equality, access to credit, accommodation and living conditions. It is not surprising therefore, that the Economic and Social Research Institute concluded that "*... the circumstances of the Irish Travelling people are intolerable. No humane and decent society, once made aware of such circumstances, could permit them to persist*". (ESRI, July 1986, Paper no. 131). The ESRI also stated that Irish Travellers are "*... a uniquely disadvantaged group: impoverished, under-educated, often despised and ostracised, they live on the margins of Irish society*".

While there is a broad consensus on the low status, marginalisation and disadvantage of Travellers, there is far less agreement and much dissent when the issues of discrimination and especially racism are raised. In particular, there can be strong resistance by policy makers and others to the idea of a causal relationship between discrimination/racism and the poor living circumstances of Travellers. (See, for example, McVeigh 1997 and Ryan 1996) This paper sets out to provide a framework for examining issues of discrimination and racism as well as the accuracy and relevancy of applying such terms to the situation of Travellers in Ireland. It begins by tracing the development of government policies in relation to Travellers and how these have evolved, assisted by internal and external influences. The paper will refer to the widespread tendency to deny the existence of racism despite evidence of a racialisation process in both media and political discourse. It also presents definitions and different approaches to racism, as well as examples of the specific manifestations of anti-Traveller discrimination. Finally, it will outline some possibilities and directions for tackling racism at national and European Union levels.

Development of Policies at National Level

The first phase of a clear and explicit government response to the Travellers in Ireland can be linked to the Report of the *Commission on Itinerancy* in 1963. The terms of reference of the Commission are revealing in the way the problem being addressed is conceptualised. The Commission set out "to enquire into the problem arising from the presence in the country of itinerants in considerable numbers; to examine the economic, educational, health and social problems inherent in their way of life. . . ." In order to provide a better way of life for Travellers the Commission undertook "to promote their absorption into the general community. . . ."

The starting point for the Commission was that itinerancy was a problem to be eliminated, and rehabilitation, settlement and assimilation were the means for achieving this. Travellers were viewed as a problem; the Commission Report comments on the social and ethical behaviour of Travellers and their tendency to keep aloof from the majority population. There was no explicit acknowledgement or examination of discrimination towards Travellers. In fact, critics of the Report saw the assimilationist policies it pursued as being discriminatory and racist.¹

In the subsequent two decades the Report of the Commission provided a framework for action and understanding of Traveller issues. Interventions were viewed as being 'for' rather than 'with' Travellers. Travellers were frequently referred to as being in need of charity rather than rights. In so far as there was a criticism of the majority population it was expressed in terms of failure to live out the Christian gospel (Bewley, 1974).

The second phase in government policy development with regard to Travellers is contained in the *Report of the Travelling People Review Body*, 1983. This report had the benefit of twenty years experience since the earlier report and shows a significant shift in thinking by policy makers and others involved with Travellers. The Review Body was asked to examine "the needs of Travellers who wish to continue a nomadic way of life" and how "barriers of mistrust between the settled and Travelling communities can be broken down and mutual respect for each others' way of life increased". Opposition from settled and Traveller activists to the assimilationist approach contributed to a revision of the thinking. Concepts such as absorption, settlement, assimilation and rehabilitation were no longer acceptable and were rejected in the report. The term 'itinerant', which was associated with vagrancy and deviancy, was replaced with 'traveller', which was a recognition of a distinct identity.

¹ While the settlement programme could claim some success in terms of more Travellers living in houses, and more children attending schools, there were many indications of failure: also, twenty years later there was still the same number of Travellers living on the roads in poor circumstances; many living in houses were not integrated and continued to experience social exclusion; some Travellers who settled left houses and returned to living in caravans.

Prejudice and hostility, misunderstanding, resistance, indifference and harassment towards Travellers were acknowledged as issues and integration was the goal. However, there was great reluctance to name discrimination as an issue: "*The Review Body is pleased to record that there is no evidence of discrimination against Travellers in the granting of social welfare assistance and in gaining enrolment in local primary and second level schools*". The Report does refer to "...many instances of bias against Travellers in the allocation of tenancies of local authority houses". However, the Report, in its eagerness not to be critical of official efforts, is quick to point out that "... (local) authorities deserve recognition for their accomplishments, often attained in spite of considerable local opposition".

The Review Body did consider the desirability of having special legislation to outlaw discrimination against Travellers as a minority group but concluded that: "... such legislation would be fraught with difficulties, especially in the absence of a precise legal definition of 'traveller'. Accordingly, the enactment of anti-discrimination laws is not sought".

However, the naming of Travellers in legislation, without any perceived need (on the part of the government) to define 'Traveller', took place in three pieces of legislation in Ireland, subsequent to the publication of the Report and before the Task Force Report of 1995, in effect in direct contradiction of the above:

- *The 1988 Housing Act,*
- *The 1991 Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act, and*
- *The 1993 Unfair Dismissals (Amendment) Act.*

The third phase of policy development can be associated with the publication of the *Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community* in 1995. This document devotes a full section to the issue of discrimination, which is a reflection of the fact that the key Traveller support groups had made this a priority issue for the previous ten years. It had also become a major media issue. Discrimination and access feature right through the document in relation to Traveller/settled relations, culture, accommodation, health, education and training, youth service provision, the Traveller economy, Traveller women and disabled Travellers. "*Academic debate and various international fora focus attention on the link between racism and cultural difference, particularly in scenarios of unequal power relationships. The forms of prejudice and discrimination experienced by the Traveller community equate with racism in the international context*". The

Report also refers to the need to combat discrimination with legislation and education. *"Over the past decade discrimination against Travellers has not diminished. Such a scenario requires new initiatives and new approaches. Public debate has increasingly focused attention on the need for legislative initiatives".*

In Ireland, the 1995 Task Force Report outlines the different types of discrimination experienced by Travellers at the individual or interpersonal level and at the institutional level. According to the report, this discrimination experienced by Travellers can be direct and indirect, intentional or unintentional.

International Focus on Gypsies and Travellers

The new willingness to include Travellers in legislation resulted in Traveller Support Groups, Travellers and others mobilising as advocates for Travellers' rights. It has also been facilitated to some extent by outside influences. In 1991, the European Parliament Committee of Inquiry on Racism and Xenophobia reported that, in Ireland: *"The single most discriminated against ethnic group is the Travelling People".* The Committee, referring to Ireland, recommended *"that the only Member State which has not already signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, do so as soon as possible".*

The UN Commission on Human Rights, in their report *Elimination of Racism and Racial Discrimination, 23rd November, (1994)*, deals with contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in a wide range of countries. The report states that: *"Gypsies, also called Tsiganes, Rom or Romanies, are a group which is particularly targeted by rising racism and xenophobia in Europe".* With regard to Irish Travellers the report states that: *"Travellers have experienced widespread discrimination in Ireland . . ."* and *"Travellers have also expressed the view that, where accommodation and services are provided, these do not always adequately reflect their needs".*

The Minority Rights Group International report published in 1995, entitled *Roma/Gypsies: A European Minority*, says: *"Policies towards Roma/Gypsies have always constituted, in one form or another, a negation of the people, their culture and their language. Past policies can be broadly grouped into three categories: exclusion, containment, and assimilation".*

Denial of Racism

While there is a willingness to acknowledge that there is widespread prejudice towards Travellers in Irish society and also a recognition of discrimination against Travellers there is still strong resistance among the Irish public, to calling the treatment of Travellers racist. The title of an education pack *"I'm No Racist, and What Is It Anyway?"*, (Calypso Productions, 1997), is a clever depiction of this resistance. The reasons for this denial of racism are complex and varied. First of all, Irish people are not unique in their tendency to deny the existence of racism in ourselves and in our country. Most countries have similar experiences of people seeing racism in the distance while refusing to acknowledge it at home or in themselves.² Secondly, there is a tendency to see racism only in relation to skin colour. When the issue of defining the meaning of black and white arises and is combined with the task of categorising a range of other shades of skin pigmentation the issue ceases to be so simple. Usually, this involves resorting to confused usage of such concepts as 'races', 'race relations' and nationality. For instance, it is frequently said that Travellers cannot experience racism because they are white, are not 'a different race' nor a different nationality.

This denial, confusion, as well as a tendency to blame the victim is evident in this excerpt from a written submission by an Irish MEP to the Committee of Inquiry into Racism and Xenophobia in 1990:

*"Ireland is a racially homogenous country with no ethnic minority groups. As a consequence there are no racial problems of the kind experienced in countries with such groups. Neither is there a large presence of foreigners. . . the position could alter if the influx became sustained. . . there is however a minority group of travelling people giving rise to some of the problems associated with racism."*³

Racialisation

The mistaken tendency to equate 'race' with colour has been refuted by many academics such as Charles Husband, who refers to this quote from Charles Kingsley's correspondence about his visit to Ireland in 1860:

... "I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country ... to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours".

² Eurobarometer Opinion Poll No. 47.1, *Racism and Xenophobia in Europe*, 1997.

³ Quoted in O Connell, John *Reach Out, Pavee Point*, 1994

This quotation reflects the racialisation process whereby members of a group, in this instance the (white) Irish, are identified as belonging to a 'race' category on the basis of fixed characteristics which they are assumed to possess. Central to such race-thinking are notions of superiority and inferiority, and of purity and pollution. These notions are clearly evident in the following excerpt from a debate in the House of Commons in 1953 referring to Africans: *"Let us remember that 95% of them are primitive people. One of the reasons why they are not generally accepted into hotels is because their sanitary habits are not all that could be desired ... The effect of alcohol upon an African is remarkable ... alcohol seems to bring out all the evil instincts in the African in the most astonishing way ..."* (Miles and Phizacklea, 1984)

Racism, as reflected in these references, is more than a prejudicial attitude. It involves a pattern of social relations, structures and an ideological discourse which reflects unequal power between groups. This understanding of racism will be examined and developed further below but as it is dependent on a racialisation process let us first take a look at the role of the media in this process and in the reproduction of racism towards Travellers.

The Media and Racism

The following newspaper accounts illustrate how the negative portrayal of Irish Travellers contributes to the ideological racist discourse. Under a section on crime in the Sunday Independent (28th January, 1996), was the following headline: *Time To Get Tough On Tinker Terror 'Culture'*. According to the article by Mary Ellen Synon, Gardai believe that Travellers are responsible for over 90% of attacks on the rural elderly.⁴ The writer states that Traveller culture ... *"is a life of appetite ungoverned by intellect It is a life worse than the life of beasts, for beasts at least are guided by wholesome instinct. Traveller life is without the ennobling intellect of man or the steadying instinct of animals. This tinker "culture" is without achievement, discipline, reason or intellectual ambition. It is a morass. And one of the surprising things about it is that not every individual bred in this swamp turns out bad. Some individuals among the tinkers find the will not to become evil"*. An article on Travellers by journalist Brendan O'Connor, also in the Sunday Independent (25th May, 1997) used another sensational headline: *Patience Runs Thin When Uncivilised Travellers Spill Blood to cover a piece on Traveller feuding*. The writer gave a detailed account of the feud in a cemetery and concluded that *"It just doesn't happen in a civilised society"*.

He then went on to justify his use of the term "knacker":

"Where I come from the word "knacker" doesn't mean someone of any specific socio-economic or ethnic background. It means someone who behaves in a way that society abhors. And that's what the people who desecrated a Tuam graveyard last June were, knackers and scumbags". The same

⁴ cf. Pavee Point, Policy Statement on Violence and Crime, February 1996 (unpublished).

journalist insists on using similar language in other reports, and the sub-editor used the offensive term in the headline.

"Good relations knackered"

The conflict is not between settled and Traveller. It's between decent people and 'knackers'.

(Sunday Independent 31 August 1996)

The anti-Traveller discourse features frequently in both national and especially local newspapers and radio. Very often, as in the following, local politicians are being quoted:

"They are dirty and unclean. Travelling people have no respect for themselves and their children".

(County Councillor quoted in Irish Times, 13th March, 1991)

"These people have been a constant headache for towns and cities throughout the country".

(County Councillor quoted in Cork Examiner, 13th June, 1990)

"Killarney is literally infested by these people".

(County Councillor quoted in Cork Examiner, 18th July, 1989)

"They are a constant problem, moving from one open area to another and creating problems".

(County Councillor quoted in Cork Examiner, 13th June, 1990)

"Deasy suggests birth control to limit traveller numbers"

(Headline in Irish Times, Friday, June 14, 1996.)

In the Dail Report column referring to remarks by Mr. Austin Deasy, T.D. Fine Gael, the deputy is reported as saying that the problem of Travellers would not be solved by providing more halting sites but by ensuring that Travellers' numbers be contained by birth control and assimilation into existing housing estates.

Traveller tradition not a divine right.

Brendan O'Connor applauds Councillor Ann Devitt for suggesting that Traveller culture is not sacrosanct, and that the time has come for them to change their way of life.

(Sunday Independent June 15 1997)

"The sooner the shotguns are at the ready and these travelling people are put out of our county the better. They are not our people, they aren't natives."

Remarks of a Fianna Fail Councillor at a Waterford County Council meeting.

(Sunday Independent, 14 April 1996)

These samples of media coverage of Travellers provide some indication of how Travellers are perceived and treated in Irish society. This paper argues that such coverage and the social relations associated with it constitutes a form of racism. As Helleiner demonstrates, "the powerful discourses of the press contribute to the creation of an ideological context which legitimates coercive state policies, everyday discriminatory practices, and ultimately violence against Travellers" (Helleiner, 1994).

According to Helleiner:

"While press reports of the 1960's and much of the 1970's, were explicit in their portrayal of the Travellers and the travelling way of life as problematic, during the 1980's overtly racist discourses were increasingly replaced by more sophisticated discourses of exclusion."

However, the above sample of media coverage would seem to indicate that this claim of a shift from overt to more covert racism was inaccurate and it was certainly not borne out in the 1990's coverage. MacGréil in his *Prejudice in Ireland Revisited* (1996), states that *"Irish Travellers are still seen and treated as a 'lower caste' in society. . ."* According to his research findings there has been a substantial deterioration in attitudes towards Travellers since 1972-3, leading him to conclude that *"Irish people's prejudice against Travellers is one of caste-like apartheid."* Kenny in her investigation into the interaction between Traveller ethnic identity and schooling concludes that *"dominant sedentary society and its institutions remain the instigators and maintainers of institutional and interpersonal racism and exclusion, which has pressured Travellers over a long time-span into distorted performances"* (Kenny, 1997).

Quite clearly, a racialisation process inferring the inferiority of Travellers is the outcome of media and political discourse. Let us now return to the issue of definitions and theoretical approaches.

Racism and Racial Discrimination

Racism is a specific form of discrimination usually associated with skin colour and ethnicity. It is an ideology of superiority which provides a rationalisation for

oppression. It also involves an abuse of power by one group over another group. So, while racism involves negative stereotypes and assumptions it should not be reduced simply to attitudes thereby equating it with prejudice, as pointed out earlier in this paper. The reality of unequal power combined with prejudice enables some groups to treat others in racist ways by denying them access to opportunities, resources and decision-making processes.

UNESCO, in its *Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice* (1978) provides the following definition:

"Any theory which involves the claim that racial or ethnic groups are inherently superior or inferior, thus implying that some would be entitled to dominate or eliminate others, presumed to be inferior, or which bases value judgements on racial differentiation, has no scientific foundation and is contrary to the moral and ethical principles of humanity".

The UN *International Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (1969) defines racial discrimination as follows:

"Any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life".

Approaches to Racism

While these working definitions have broad acceptance, the concept of racism is frequently contested among academics and others. There is the polarisation between those who argue that certain societies are inherently racist and those who claim that racism is a less serious issue related to the anti-social behaviour of some individuals. There are also a variety of approaches which can be categorised as follows: moral, biological, psychological, multi-cultural and structural (see table, p. 9).

The moral, psychological and cultural approaches tend to depoliticise the issue of racism by focusing almost exclusively on individual attitudes and behaviours dislocated from their social, political, economical, and historical contexts. Solutions based on the moral approach rightly draw attention to the reality that racism is a moral issue even though the treatment of Travellers is rarely presented in this way. If the Churches, for instance, speak out on Traveller issues they tend to focus on prejudice rather than

racism, thereby over-relying on attitudinal change. The psychological approach, as Kovel argues, is by no means a sufficient tool for understanding the phenomenon of racism; it is, however, a necessary one: *"Racism, far from being the simple delusion of a bigoted and ignorant minority, is a set of beliefs whose structure arises from the deepest levels of our lives - from the fabric of assumptions we make about the world, ourselves, and others, and from the patterns of our fundamental social activities."* Kovel shows how various fantasies and personality traits can coalesce into 'race' prejudice and how this sheds light on the history of racism: *'Racist psychology is a prerequisite of racial institutions, and racist institutions engender a racist psychology.'* (Kovel, 1971)

The biological approach draws attention to the objective reality of certain physical differences and the specific form of racism associated with skin colour. Anti-racism does not mean a denial of these differences but does challenge the social meanings and interpretations attributed to them. UNESCO statements have debunked the so-called scientific racism based on biological determinism. However, this theory keeps recurring in the form of socio-biology, even though most geneticists and biologists acknowledge that: *"The designation of the world's population into distinctive racial categories can no longer be considered a tenable scientific enterprise"* (Troyna and Williams, 1986).

APPROACH	ASSUMPTIONS	IMPLICATIONS
Moral	The issue of racism is viewed as an evil which results from original sin, human wickedness, or such human failing as greed, selfishness, and ignorance.	Efforts to tackle racism involve self-examination, change of attitude, aspiring to nobler moral values, and in affirming the dignity and worth of each individual.
Biological	Prejudice and racism are seen as natural and related to genetics. Biological differences such as skin colour are assumed to be associated with intellectual and/or moral capacities. Social disadvantages are portrayed as a reflection of innate inferiority. Solutions to racism are sought through segregation (apartheid) and clear boundary maintenance.	Solutions may be related to therapy, building confidence and self-esteem. Solutions are sought through exchanges and exposure; improved communication; development of familiarity to language, customs and traditions.
Psychological	Learning experiences, personality traits and psychological processes are viewed as giving rise to certain attitudes which are described as racist. Certain personalities may be viewed as resulting in transferring blame onto others.	Solutions are sought through legislation, codes of practice and affirmative action.
Multi-Cultural	Racism is understood as arising from the dynamics of cultural differences and tradition. A group may wish to retain its purity by excluding other cultural groups and by guarding its distinctive identity.	
Structural	The causes of racism are located within the main structural features and social processes of the dominant society. Structurally-created problems of poverty, unemployment, housing shortages and so on are seen as fuelling racial prejudice. Social structures (political, economic, ideological) are seen as restricting the life chances of minority ethnic groups.	

The multi-cultural approach is popular with many people because it is non-threatening, and can improve mutual appreciation and understanding between individuals and groups; it can also contribute to overcoming communication problems and misunderstanding, which may fuel racism. However this approach is criticised for diverting attention away from power differentials, structural oppression and for overestimating ignorance as the main factor in the creation of racism.

The structural approach provides a sociological framework for understanding racism in the context of changing historical, political, economic and social processes. This approach provides a mechanism for going beyond symptoms and for addressing root causes. It also exposes how routine practices and procedures result in black and minority ethnic groups having lower incomes, higher unemployment, worse health, accommodation and life chances than the majority population and less influence on the decisions which affect their lives. However, the approach has been accused of making inflated claims (see Miles, 1989) and for deterministic and doctrinaire explanations which ignore concrete situations and individual personalities. (Donald and Rattansi, 1992)

Anti-Traveller Discrimination and Racism

In light of this examination of concepts, definitions, and approaches to racism let us return to the concrete situation of Travellers in Ireland and how they experience discrimination. Individuals, when recognised as Travellers, are sometimes arbitrarily refused entry or access to public places or services such as: shops, pubs, restaurants, laundries, leisure facilities and such like. Individuals often experience verbal or physical abuse because of their identity. Individual Travellers have also reported incidents of insurance companies refusing to provide them with motor insurance cover. A number of public houses consistently refuse to serve Travellers, while others do so now and then. Travellers frequently have difficulty obtaining hotels for wedding receptions. Many policies, procedures, and practices reflect either a lack of acceptance or a total denial of Traveller identity. For many years Travellers experienced segregation in the provision of social welfare services. Travellers who wish to avail of supplementary welfare in Dublin have to accept a 'special' segregated service. Negative stereotypes and scapegoating of Travellers are commonplace. Traveller children in schools have also experienced segregation through 'special classes' although the current policy of the Department of Education is based on the promotion of integration. Nevertheless, some schools still refuse to accept Travellers using the pretext of being full or unsuitable. Travellers are also critical of a system which they feel undermines or largely

ignores their identity in the curriculum and school ethos despite the extra capitation grants provided by the government for schools with Travellers among their pupils.

There is also a clear gender dimension to the Traveller experience of racism.⁵ Many Traveller women are more easily identifiable than Traveller men, and are therefore more likely to experience discrimination. Sometimes evictions are carried out when Traveller men are away, leaving women to deal with the brunt of male verbal and physical abuse. But above all Traveller women, as mothers, home-makers and carers, have to make do with low incomes, in poor living circumstances, without basic facilities such as running water and sanitation.

Travellers with a disability have usually been cared for in institutions, where assimilation was the norm and where little or no consideration was given to cultural identity.⁶

The most public and controversial area where anti-Traveller discrimination arises is in relation to the provision of accommodation. Local authorities and resident associations are accused by Travellers and Traveller support groups of turning the accommodation issue into a political football. Elected local councillors are keenly aware that their political survival depends on the support of local residents who easily outnumber Travellers. Resident associations make their opposition to Travellers living in 'their' areas very clear. Local authorities in turn have undertaken a 'boulder policy' which involves placing large rocks along the roadsides where Travellers camped or might camp illegally. This is combined with evictions of Travellers from unofficial camping sites. Gardaí and/or private security firms are sometimes involved in the carrying out of these evictions.

The accommodation issue highlights the underlying contradiction of the 'settlement' project, which is based on a rejection of nomadism, a carrot-and-stick approach to housing; and an unwillingness by the majority population to have Travellers living near them as neighbours. Local authorities and resident associations frequently debate the idea of a Traveller quota, by discussing whether an area has taken its "fair share of Travellers". The term 'settled Traveller' carries moralistic connotations of the sedentarist thinking that goes with this. It suggests 'settling down' or conforming to what is considered the norm. In line with this thinking many people from the majority population believe that Travellers living in houses are 'settled', having thereby ceased to be Travellers. Nonetheless, such thinking does not mean social inclusion as equals. Ultimately, such thinking can be traced to the view that Travellers are vagrants or drop-outs in need of rehabilitation.

⁵ Crickley, A., *Feminism and Ethnicity*, in DTEOG File, 1992

⁶ McDonagh, Rosaleen, *Travellers with a Disability: A submission to the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities, Pavee Point, 1994*

The deplorable living circumstances of many Travellers, because of the lack of suitable accommodation, is a crucial factor in the poor health of Travellers. The life expectancy of Travellers is far below the national average, with Traveller men and Traveller women living on average ten years and twelve years less than their sedentary peers, respectively. Traveller infant mortality is more than twice that of the majority population. These realities, combined with a failure to address them comprehensively, are seen by politicised Travellers and Traveller support groups as other manifestations of institutional racism.

In recent years some Gypsies, particularly Roma from Romania and Bosnia, have come to Ireland as refugees. The negative reaction in the media to them and to other asylum-seekers indicates the possibility of a dangerous situation arising, unless steps are taken now to confront racism and xenophobia in this context.⁷

The racism toward Travellers in Ireland is similar to racism in general insofar as it involves negative stereotyping based on notions of superiority and inferiority. Likewise it builds on fantasies related to dirt, danger, deviance, and crime. In common with some other forms of racism it invokes a pariah syndrome which is used to deny or legitimate the existence of racism. These particular features have taken on their own specific meanings in relation to the treatment of Travellers in the Irish context but perhaps what marks off this form of racism from others is the sedentarist approach to nomadism. Nomadism is viewed as an atavistic aberration which has to be eliminated by modernisation or failing that, coercion.

Anti-Racist Strategies

Traveller support groups have been to the fore in drawing attention to and devising strategies against the reality of racism in Ireland. (McVeigh, 1997) While having a particular interest in Traveller issues efforts have been made to develop alliances with other minority ethnic groups. This is reflected in the setting up of the Platform Against Racism, which is a coalition of non-government organisations committed to developing ways to combat racism and to promoting interculturalism. As well as providing information on Travellers and promoting greater awareness, Traveller organisations have also contributed to putting anti-racism on the agendas of other organisations and projects e.g. the Community Development Programme, Area-based Partnership companies, youth organisations and women's organisations.

In recent years, Traveller organisations have been able to avail of various European Commission programmes in order to develop a transnational dimension to their work. In particular, links have been developed between Traveller and Gypsy organisations throughout the EU as well as with other anti-racist organisations. Traveller organisations have played an active role in other organisations such as the European Anti-Poverty network (EAPN); in events like the Social Forum; in campaigns such as that led by the Starting Line Group; in the lobbying for the inclusion of a non-discrimination clause in the Treaties during the preparations for the 1997 Intra-Governmental Conference (IGC); and in committees and events during the 1997 European Year Against Racism.

However, until recently, it has been almost impossible to seriously tackle the issue of racism at a political level within the EU because there was no legal basis for this in the Treaties. However, since the revision of the Treaties in Amsterdam, and the inclusion of a non-discrimination clause for the first time, a new situation exists. The potential for fighting racism at Community level has been created but requires time and further campaigning to maximise this potential. For instance, with sufficient political mobilisation it is now possible to introduce a directive or a number of directives to ensure that racism is tackled in each Member State.

The designation of 1997 as European Year Against Racism has highlighted the need to take the issue of racism more seriously and to combat racism in a more concerted way throughout the European Union. The establishment of a Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia in Vienna will enable Member States to collect and collate data for anti-racist actions. Likewise support by the European Commission for the setting up of a European-level mechanism for co-ordinating the work of anti-racist NGO's will build on the momentum of the year.

These developments at European level need to be matched by clear commitments at national level to tackling racism. Ireland's failure to ratify the UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the lack of domestic anti-discrimination laws are the source of major concern for anti-racist groups. Without legislation, the efforts of non-government groups is considerably weaker. Legislation in relation to non-discrimination in Employment and Equal Status are long-awaited. In addition to this legislation, Travellers and Traveller support groups are relying on the government's implementation of the key recommendations of the 1995 Task Force Report in order to make progress. The establishment of a monitoring committee for this purpose is a positive development in this regard.

Conclusion

The marginalisation of Travellers in Irish society is acknowledged by people of varying political positions and approaches. Past policies, while designed to overcome this marginalisation, have sometimes exacerbated the situation because of a failure to grasp the nature of the oppression experienced by Travellers. In particular, the denial of discrimination and racism, combined with a racialisation process, contributed to that marginalisation. In order to address this situation there is need for a comprehensive approach involving statutory and voluntary bodies. Legislation, information, and awareness-raising are needed to protect people and to overcome obstacles to equality. In the context of a growing acknowledgement of the dangers of racism throughout the European Union, there is an additional impetus and opportunity to face up to this challenge in Ireland, as well as throughout Europe.

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Appendix I

(a) Traveller Population in Ireland

Estimated total 27,000

An annual count of the number of Traveller households is the source of information on the Traveller population in Ireland. The 1994 count showed that there were 4,905 Traveller households in the country. The projected figure for the year 2000 is 4,905 households.

(b) Age Structure

The age structure of Travellers is very different from that of the general population, with relatively large numbers of children and few older people. An estimated 40% of the Traveller population is aged under 10 years, and well over 50% is aged under 15 years. Only 5% of Traveller are aged 50 and over. This age structure is consistent with a high birth rate, a high infant death rate, and a low average life expectancy.

(c) Education

Significant progress has been made in the provision of education for Traveller children in recent decades. This is evidenced in the increased participation in the education system. However there still remains a substantial number of Traveller children who do not attend primary school on a full-time, regular basis. This can be due to the living circumstances of the parents or to difficulty in gaining access to schools. A large number of Traveller children underachieve in school. The lack of statistical information on Traveller participation in education makes it difficult to evaluate the relative participation and outcomes for Traveller boys and girls in the education system.

It is estimated that only about 10% of Travellers continue on to second level and very few of these complete the full cycle. Only a handful of Traveller go on to third level.

(d) Employment

Traveller participation in the mainstream labour force is very low. This low participation is attributed to a number of factors: a preference for self-employment and work in the Traveller economy, discrimination, lack of skills and qualifications, low pay and poor

work conditions, nomadism. The vast majority of Traveller households are dependent on social welfare.

(e) Accommodation

In the context of statutory provision of social housing the local authorities provide standard houses for some Traveller households and in addition Traveller-specific accommodation as follows: group housing, permanent halting sites, and temporary halting sites. The 1995 Task Force Report drew attention to the deficiencies in this provision: 1,085 Traveller households living in trailers squatting on roadsides; 275 households in temporary sites; no provision for transient families; lack of facilities and/or culturally inappropriate facilities; lack of planning for the projected Traveller population increase; absence of a comprehensive government plan to accommodate Travellers.

The Task Force called for the provision of 3,100 units of additional accommodation by the year 2000, at a cost of £218 million.

(f) Health Status

The 1982 Black Report commissioned by the UK government identified a clear link between social inequality and ill health:

"From birth to old age those at the bottom of the social scale have much poorer health and quality of life than those at the top. Gender, area of residence and ethnic origin also have a deep impact."

It is not surprising therefore to find that the health status of Travellers is much worse than it is for the general population.

Infant mortality for Travellers in 1987 was 18.1 per 1,000 births compared to the national figure of 7.4. Traveller life expectancy is at the level it was for the general population in Ireland in the 1940's (i.e. 10 to 12 years less for Traveller men and women than for men and women from the majority population).

22 awaiting ADM

Planned
Cancelled

6201687

Martin Cowley

→ A+E have an issue

accelerating Nurse recruitment
→ issue

→ Agency / rates

50 beds closed Today

- Transitional unit
"Reopening"

Outg
3-8