Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality

Introduction

1.   This submission is prepared by Dr Pauline Cullen (Associate Professor) and Shane Gough (Research Assistant) at the Department of Sociology in Maynooth University. We were privileged to work with the National Traveller Women's Forum and AkiDwA (the national network of African and migrant women) on an Irish Research Council and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Gender Equality Unit) funded research project *Different Paths, Shared Experiences* which offers the first account of how Traveller, Roma and other ethnic minority and migrant women understand, assess, and experience local politics in Ireland. Our research will aid the Committee in its consideration of the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly (CA) on Gender Equality to be addressed in Committee Workstream E – Leadership in Politics, Public Life and the Workplace. The full report will be launched and made available to the Committee on 31 March 2022.

2.   The Chair of the CA Dr Catherine Day and the independent report assessing the CA have drawn attention to the need for diversity and inclusiveness in future Assemblies especially regarding the inclusion of Traveller, migrant and other ethnic minority residents and citizen's. The aim of this research aligns with this call to centre minoritised women in broader debates on women and politics and gender equality in Irish society.

Minoritised women as local political actors

3.   In the research we use the term minoritised[1] to refer to the diversity of women participants and their experiences of intersectional discrimination. Minoritised women organise to demand their rights, change cultural attitudes, reform laws and policies, and provide vital social services to women in need. This involves invisible yet essential political work that is often not recognised as political leadership by political parties and broader society. In our approach we cover as many stages as possible in the process of running for office, from initial consideration and potential recruitment, to standing for selection, being selected, and running a campaign. Data was gathered between March and September 2021.[2] We offer a composite account of women from different communities communicated through their own words and analysis. Our approach was attentive to the prevalence of ethnicised, gendered and racialised (sexist and racist) discourse at the local and national level as a factor that can suppress the interest and motivation of ethnic and racial minority women to become involved in local politics. Minoritised women operate forms of *collective and careful leadership* in support of their communities. They do not innately have less confidence or less ambition. Rather, they respond rationally to actual and perceived constraints. This submission provides a summary of the research and accompanying recommendations.

Context: Past and Present

4.   We acknowledge progress made in women's access to politics in Ireland (Buckley 2020; Galligan and Buckley 2021). However, we note the legacy of Ireland's gender regime and patriarchal constitutional settlement that set the terms for a political culture and institutional system that has perpetuated male overrepresentation in politics. This includes assessments of how political parties have responded to gender quotas in ways that have limited the advancement of women candidates (Marani et al 2021; Buckley 2020).

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[1] The term "minoritised" (Gunaratnum 2003) provides a social constructionist approach to understanding that people are actively minoritised by others rather than naturally existing as a minority, as the terms "racial minorities" or "ethnic minorities" imply. The term "racially minoritised" or "ethnically minoritised" confirms that minoritisation is a social process shaped by power. Although we support the use of "minoritised", we are cautious not to dismiss the use of racial and ethnic categories with which people identify, such as Traveller, Roma, Black, Asian, Indigenous, Migrant and mixed race etc. The term "ethnic-indigenous" is also used by Traveller women as is the term "Mincéir". The concept of ethno-racial identity is also used widely to refer to ethnic and racial groups. Other scholars use the broad term "Women of Colour" to include ethnic-identified women who experience racialisation (Emejulu and Bassel 2021). The idea here is not to create a hierarchy of oppression but to acknowledge the complex ways in which these forms of discrimination intersect in the lived experience of the women participants and their communities.

[2] It comprised 43 online interviews with racialised, ethnic minoritised and migrant women community leaders, and those with an interest in (aspirants) and who have run for (candidates: successful and unsuccessful) political office; as well as with stakeholders, advocacy organisations and political parties. Ethical approval was granted by Maynooth University.

Any assessment of minoritised women's access to politics in Ireland must recognise the historic and current racialisation, racism and discrimination experienced by Traveller women (FRA 2020; Oireachtas 2021b) and the racism and social exclusion that shape many racial and/or ethnic minority and migrant women's lives (McGinnity et al 2017). We also note the extreme experiences of marginalisation endured by Roma women in Ireland (Pavee Point and National Traveller Women's Forum 2017).

5.   In this submission we adopt the definition and understanding of racism used by the *Anti-Racism Committee* in its 2021 National Action Plan Against Racism (NAPAR) interim report.[3] This definition of racism includes "the power dynamics present in those structural and institutional arrangements, practices, policies and cultural norms, which have the effect of excluding or discriminating against individuals or groups, based on their identity" (p. 5). This affirms the structural and systemic aspects of racism and draws on Article 1 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Notably, this is a dynamic and living approach that acknowledges the intersectionality between racism and all other forms of oppression, including oppression experienced by people based on gender, sexuality, gender identity, disability and socio-economic circumstances.[4]

6.   Analysis of racism and discrimination in Irish society has confirmed the persistence of discriminatory behaviours and attitudes (McGinnity et al 2020; Joseph 2021; Pavee Point and National Traveller Women's Forum 2017). A reluctance to confront white supremacy and privilege maintains existing racial and ethnic hierarchies that are reinforced by generalised ambivalence regarding the benefits that "whiteness" bestows from unearned public and private power (Joseph 2019; Michael and Joseph 2021).

National policy context

7.   While the Irish Government's recognition of Travellers as an ethnic minority and the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021* were significant developments, research shows that Travellers continue to experience significant barriers to healthcare, adequate and culturally appropriate housing, education, and meaningful work. Furthermore, the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic minority and indigenous peoples has no legislative underpinning, provides no new legal rights to Travellers and places no new legal responsibilities on the State. The *Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2020* includes commitments to equality and integration yet migrants in Ireland continue to experience exclusion (Michael 2020). Migrant women also suffer due to ineffective and gender-blind asylum and migration policies, which leave them at risk of economic and social exclusion (MRCI 2008). A cross-cutting priority issue for the NAPAR (p. 16) is Equal Participation in Decision Making, summed up in the statement. Other national plans, such as the Programme for Government, include commitments to promoting the inclusion and integration of minorities[5] and progress on gender parity in representation at national and local level. The National Strategy for Women and Girls also includes commitments to address the underrepresentation of women in politics.

International policy context

8.   The low participation levels of minoritised women in politics across Europe is now widely acknowledged as an issue that requires a systematic approach.[6] Outcomes of recent examinations of Ireland by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (January 2020), the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (June 2019) and the UN Committee on the Elimination

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[3] The interim report offers an important compendium of the current if limited data on racial, ethnic and migrant populations in Ireland as well as the legal protections against racism (Government of Ireland 2020).

[4] In line with this we also acknowledge that racialisation (the process of being defined as a racial group) is a gendered process that applies to ethnic-indigenous women, black women and migrant women (Bell and Borelli 2021).

[5] The Programme for Government (2020) Mission on Reforming and Reimagining our Public Life includes commitments to "[e]mpower local authorities to encourage improved gender and ethnic mix in local elections" and to "[c]onsider the recommendations of the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) report on *Women beyond the Dáil, More Women in Local Government*".

[6] Fawcett (the UK-based women's organisation), the Equality and Human Rights Commissions in Scotland and England, the European Network of Migrant Women, the Council of Europe (Roma taskforce), recommendations made by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and a former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, have all recommended the need for positive actions to address the factors that inhibit minoritised women's participation in public life.

of Discrimination Against Women (March 2017) all underline the importance of political inclusion. The 2020-2025 EU Gender Equality Strategy includes a recognition of the importance of taking a cross-cutting intersectional approach when it comes to the inclusion of women. The EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020-2025, in turn, notes the importance of local community integration initiatives as having significant potential to create more racially tolerant and inclusive communities. The EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027) includes recommendations on gender mainstreaming and anti-discrimination supporting representation and inclusion especially at the local level. The EU Roma strategic framework 2020-2030 in turn emphasises political participation and inclusion.[7]

Local politics and high energy democracy

9.   An erosion of women's rights, and the racism and xenophobia evident in the influence of far-right organisations (Lombardo et al 2021; ISD 2021), underlines the necessity of political and institutional support for diverse representation. Local government reform (Lloyd 2016) and changes to how the State resources civil society organisations, have also altered the terms under which minoritised women engage with local structures (Bennett 2021) and the conditions of local councillors working to support their communities (AILG 2021; Moorhead 2019). Strong and representative local governance is in turn understood as a prerequisite for the high-energy democracy required to secure equal and sustainable societies (Murphy 2019).

Compartmentalisation and Fragmentation:

10.   Minoritised women are located at *the intersection of policies and strategies* that may aim to address gender inequality and racism, promote integration and/or support Traveller and Roma inclusion. Yet diversity and gender equality policies, are often practised along parallel lines and coupled with the absence of disaggregated data (IHREC 2021b), have made it difficult to articulate and advocate for the intersectional interests of minoritised women and their communities.[8] Minoritised women have also been disproportionately negatively affected by the multiplicative and overlapping effects of the economic and Covid-19 crises (Hennessy 2021; Joseph 2021). Understanding minoritised women's political experiences, opportunities and priorities requires a focus on the interaction then on a variety of factors that shape their access, presence, power and influence at the local level.

Politics, Diversity and Responsiveness

11.   Where minoritised women, are unrepresented in decision-making there is a lack of responsiveness of politics to their interests (Crowder-Meyer 2021). Such imbalance affects how minoritised women feel about democracy and perceptions that politics is not for them are made real. Moreover, politics is experienced as something that is done to and not with them (Celis and Childs 2020). In short, the weak representational power of minoritised women means that their specific perspectives and forms of expertise remain marginal to policy debates. Even as candidates, minoritised women disrupt societal expectations about leadership. In other contexts, the election of minoritised women has contributed to breaking down racial, ethnic and gender barriers in electoral politics (Brown 2014). Minoritised women can serve as role models and mentors, helping other minoritised women run for office (Sanbonmatsu 2015) and they can improve the substantive representation of other underrepresented groups, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of democracy.

12.   Calls to reform the conditions of office-holding for all women (Moorhead 2020; AILG 2021b; Oireachtas 2021a; Women for Election 2021; NWC 2021) and recent resourcing of diversity initiatives at local level indicate an impetus to diversify politics. This is aligned with a greater awareness of how sexism and racism in everyday life and social media deter women and especially minoritised women from entering public roles (Michael 2020; Felle et al 2020; NWC 2021; AILG-CMG 2021). The report builds on these analyses and initiatives while drawing attentio*n to the specific and persistent barriers faced by racialised*

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[7] Outcomes of recent examinations of Ireland by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (December 2019), the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (June 2019), and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (June 2019) all underline the importance of political inclusion.

[8] As McGinnity argues: "Information on ethnicity must be collected separately from nationality or country of birth because people in ethnic minorities may be Irish nationals (McGinnity et al., 2018), and/or may be born in Ireland (second-generation). The fact is we know relatively little about differences between ethnic groups because ethnicity is very rarely collected from survey or administrative data (Fahey et al., 2019a; IHREC, 2019). Changing this situation is now more urgent than ever" (2020, 102).

ethnic and migrant women in public life.

Summary of Findings

13.   Life-long experiences of racism and sexism are motivating factors for many minoritised women in considering a political role, however, anticipation of racist and sexist abuse especially during candidacy, can also act to suppress some minoritised women's interest in political office. For Traveller, Roma and Black women racialised identities carry specific penalties although all migrant women experience forms of sexualised and racist abuse. This is most evident in social media but also in the general representation of minorities in traditional media. Experiences of abuse ranged significantly from racism and sexism on and offline, to sustained in person racist and sexist harassment, abuse and intimidation. Recommendations 24, 28, 31 and 38 of the CA on Gender Equality include requests to eradicate sexist discourse in the media and in society. In our recommendations, we request that the specific forms of sexist and racist abuse that minoritised women are subject to be addressed within any consideration of such measures.

14.   All women interviewed as part of the study were deeply involved in community organisations. For Traveller and some black women community activism was more likely to be in service of their own communities with less involvement in majority community organisations. This work is often overlooked by political parties when seeking candidates and votes. Recommendation 20 of the CA requests positive actions by parties to increase women's representation. In our recommendations, we request that positive actions are directed to incentivise parties to look beyond usual candidate pools to address the specific barriers to political candidacy faced by minoritised women. This includes encouraging parties to value the political work that minoritised women do as leadership.

15.   Where some migrant women reported being sought by parties "looking to connect to my community" this was not the case for Travellers confirming weak demand for their votes and candidacy from political parties. In Recommendation 22 the CA requested that public funding to organisations be contingent upon measures to advance gender equality. In our recommendations we request that this be extended to include minoritised women and be applicable to political parties both in terms of membership and candidacy.

16.   The state and governmental departments play key roles in supporting and scaffolding minoritised women's access to public life. To date compartmentalisation, in particular a tendency to separate gender equality from diversity initiatives has left minoritised women subjects of specific interventions without a comprehensive approach to their addressing their political exclusion. The CA requests in several recommendations for a cabinet ministry to coordinate and be responsible for delivering gender equality. In our recommendations we request that such a position should take an intersectional approach to this task and considers the intersectional realities of minoritised women's lives.

17.   Increasing the number of minoritised women in local politics requires confronting the sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination including the normative whiteness of public life that combine to discount minoritised women's political imagination and diminish their political agency. Combating the underrepresentation of minoritised women in politics then demands specific and targeted measures that may include achieving gender-balanced electoral lists through gender and ethnic quotas; inclusive training and mentoring programmes; zero-tolerance to sexism and racism (and other forms of discrimination) with clear channels to report sexual and racial harassment or hate speech and targeted funding for minoritised women candidates, minoritised women's associations and networks. We request that the Committee in their work considering the recommendations of the CA in Workstream E – Leadership in Politics, Public Life and the Workplace, address the specific barriers that minoritised women experience in accessing candidacy and influencing politics in Ireland.

18.   We encourage members of the Committee to invite organisations that represent minoritised women's interests, including the National Travellers Women's Forum and AkiDwA to make oral submissions. For the purposes of this submission, we emphasise in the following where our research findings and recommendations can support the elaboration and implementation of those of the Citizens' Assembly:

Recommendations

State	Relevant CA Recommendation
Legislate for local gender quota incorporating a nested ethnic quota	20a
Reserved seats for Travellers at the local level	20a
Within existing State funding to parties include a requirement to diversify their membership and candidate lists (Electoral Act 1997 s 18)	20b
Multiannual funding directed at minoritised women's community and voluntary organisations directed towards building political knowledge within these communities	20
Require political parties to collect and publish diversity data on membership and candidates (both nominated and selected candidates) including funding of candidates disaggregated by gender and ethnicity	43
Provide and fund equality, diversity and inclusion training for elected members, selectorate and staff for political parties, local authorities, councils and the Oireachtas	20
Multiannual funding for training programmes targeted at minoritised women including high intensity mentoring, English language training, childcare support, and stipend for attendance	20
Provision of a basic wage for minoritised female candidates for duration of election campaign and allow campaign funding to be used for childcare	8 and 15
Fund a dedicated officer located in the respective minoritised women's representative organisations to liaise between Traveller, Roma and Migrant women, and political parties and to act as a "conduit" between parties and prospective minoritised women candidates	20
Introduce compulsory Codes of Practice with zero tolerance on sexism and racism with sanctions for breaches for political parties and local authorities and clear channels for victims to report incidences of sexism and racism both within political parties and political institutions (Oireachtas, Local Authorities etc)	24
Strengthen and provide legislation for Media Codes of Practice (including the Press Council and BAI) on anti-racist and anti-sexist reporting (including media fund to support positive representations of Traveller, Roma, and other ethnic minority cultures)	24, 31
Implement hate crime/speech legislation (on and offline) and create specific offences of: • hate speech (including racist and sexist abuse) against politicians; and • using hate speech against any group while holding elected office	24
Introduce legislation that addresses gender-based political violence	38
Facilitate family friendly work practices including provision of childcare facilities, the continuance of remote meetings of Councils and establish mechanisms for remote voting and implement the recommendations of the Family Friendly Parliament Report with respect to minoritised women	9
Establish programmes at all levels of education promoting political participation of minoritised women and girls	26, 27
Seanad Reform to include diversity panel with gender parity (including Traveller representation)	20
National Strategies (NTRIS; MIS; NSWG etc) to be integrated and intersectional approach adopted to minoritised women with a specific focus on political participation (recommendation on coordination of gender equality policies)	37
Electoral Commission	
Remove any barriers, in particular the requirement to attend a Garda station, to voter registration for Traveller, Roma and other ethnic minorities (eg nomadic Travellers – address; identity documents)	20
Comprehensive voter registration and awareness campaign to increase the numbers of minorities registered to vote	20
Research the development of a dedicated Traveller Special Electoral District	20

Collect and monitor gender disaggregated data with ethnic identifier on all political party candidate applicants throughout the selection process, including unsuccessful applicants, candidates and members after the next LE with official election results	43
Collect and publish high level data on violence against women in Irish politics	43