



PAVEE POINT
TRAVELLER AND ROMA CENTRE

Opening Statement: Give Travellers the Floor (Roma) April 2024

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre ('Pavee Point') have been working to challenge racism and promote Traveller and Roma inclusion in Ireland since 1985. The organisation works from a community development perspective and promotes the realisation of human rights and equality for Travellers and Roma in Ireland. The organisation is comprised of Travellers, Roma and members of the majority population, who work together in partnership to address the needs of Travellers and Roma as minority ethnic groups experiencing exclusion, marginalisation and racism. Working for social justice, solidarity and human rights, the central aim of Pavee Point is to contribute to improvement in the quality of life and living circumstances of Irish Travellers and Roma.

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I am Gabi Muntean and I am a Roma woman and Community Development Worker with Pavee Point Traveller & Roma Centre. I am delighted to get this chance to speak in the Seanad today and to be joined by Traveller colleagues from around the country. I want to also acknowledge the work of Senator Eileen Flynn who has stood in solidarity with the Roma community and other marginalised and minority ethnic groups, particularly when it hasn't been popular.

It is important from the beginning to note that the term Roma at a European level is an umbrella term which includes a number of diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale and Travellers. As Europe's largest minority, there is an estimated 10 to 12 million Roma living in Europe.

In Ireland while we acknowledge the shared history of nomadism, racism and discrimination amongst Travellers and Roma, we also recognise the distinct situation, identity, and experiences of both communities.

Roma are a small minority in Ireland with approximately 16,000 Roma living in the country according to the last Census. Roma have been living in Ireland since the 1990s and are living in every part of the country. The Roma community in Ireland is diverse- with a range of nationalities including Polish, Czech, French, German and Romanian Roma. There are also many second generation Roma in Ireland – who are born and raised here, who have Irish nationality and are proud to Irish and Roma.

Today I hope to give you some insight into issues affecting our community.

Although we are a small minority, Roma are often targeted for significant amount of discrimination and racism. For example, Roma were one of the groups targeted by the far right on social media after the riots in Dublin City in November 2023 to stir up hatred and racism. This was a difficult time for Roma in Dublin and elsewhere, especially Roma women – many of whom were afraid to go out on the streets for weeks after those frightening events.

Roma are also often the target of racist online hate speech. Hate speech against Roma can be extreme with death threats against Roma, references to extermination and shocking verbal abuse. This is why we are very concerned that the current Hate Crime Hate Speech Bill completes its course through the Seanad as soon as possible. Our community should not have to suffer fear because of our ethnic group. We need to say, as a society, that extreme hate speech is wrong and people need to be held account for this. This year we will commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Roma Genocide where over half a million Roma and Sinti were murdered at the hands of the Nazis. And this is something we can never forget – and in the current climate – a stark reminder of the dangers of racism.

While we welcome the government's recent Action Plan on Racism, implementation of this plan is key. There is no point in having well written plans if there isn't follow through – that means resources need to be identified and invested and that there are targets and monitoring framework. The State also needs to make sure that Traveller organisations and groups working with Roma are directly involved in the implementation of the Plan.

The Roma Needs Assessment in 2018 highlighted some of the key issues impacting on Roma in Ireland. It was found that some Roma are also unable to access social protection, including Child Benefit payments, even after having lived in the country for several years. A key barrier to this is the Habitual Residence Condition. In this day in age, we should not have Roma families not being able to access the most basic social protection payments. And payments to parents for all children in the State should be the most basic starting point.

We recommend adoption of special measures for Roma families living in the State, to progress the rights of Travellers and Roma. This is a humanitarian issue on our own doorstep.

The Roma Needs Assessment carried out in 2018 showed the high levels of discrimination in accommodation. I was part of this study and I was also shocked at some of the living conditions of Roma.

- Twelve per cent had no kitchens and 13 per cent had no fridge.
- Homelessness & overcrowding is an issue – with a quarter of households with 8 or more people and under half saying they did not have enough beds in their accommodation.

Health is another area impacted by discrimination with many Roma not able to access a GP or have a medical card. Maternal health is another area where work needs to be done with 24% of Roma households saying that women had not accessed a doctor or hospital while pregnant.

While we acknowledge some positive work in this area by the HSE, including resourcing of posts for Roma health, there is a need for a nationally co-ordinated approach to this work with additional investment in a Roma infrastructure underpinned by community work.

The Roma Needs Assessment found Roma unemployment at a shocking 83%. To find work Roma are being forced into low level precarious work situations. This is what Pavee Point found in its Roma employment study in 2023. For many Roma who are working there is fear of discrimination so they hide their identity. We need increased employment, training and apprenticeship opportunities for Roma.

Roma are active participants in their own communities and in the wider society. Roma children are engaging in education and going on to 3rd level education and this is really positive however many are hiding their identity because of fear of discrimination.

We welcome the recent developments on Traveller & Roma Education Strategy and hope that this work will conclude and that a Strategy will be in place, with resources and structures required for implementation. The Strategy will not be a magic wand but we hope that it will work towards bringing about changes that have positive outcomes for Travellers and Roma.

Roma have also been engaging with the State in relation to the National Traveller & Roma Inclusion Strategy. The new Strategy being developed is now long overdue. Implementation of this Strategy is key. While there were 145 worthwhile actions in the last plan – implementation was poor. We need to see Roma involved in the implementation of this strategy and in the design and delivery of actions. It also needs to be resourced and have a strong monitoring framework.

COVID brought together agencies to address the public health issues impacting on Roma during COVID. This was a step forward and we began to see some real progress. However, this momentum was not kept up following COVID. We need the new NTRIS to deliver on a whole of government approach that can bring about real change on the ground.

In the meantime Roma in Ireland continue to celebrate and share our ethnicity and cultural identity. Many Roma are involved in music and dance and we are proud of our different languages spoken across the community. We stand in solidarity with Travellers and celebrate International Traveller and Roma Day on the 8th of April – sharing the diversity and resilience and continuing to push forward for a better future for our communities.