

## **Meeting of the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community**

18 April 2024 | Opening statement of Maria Joyce

### **Introduction**

Good morning, all. My name is Maria Joyce, and I am the coordinator of the National Traveller Women's Forum. It is great to be here with you all today. I'd like to thank Senator Eileen Flynn and the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community for their ongoing commitment.

It's close to two and a half years now since the publication of the final report of the previous Joint Committee, which contained 84 recommendations across Health, Education, Employment and Accommodation. It would be interesting to run the rule over those 84 recommendations to assess progress in implementation. There might be a few areas showing some signs of promise, but there would be no honour grades handed out. Two and a half years will not seem like a long time for policy-makers but it is a very long time when you are living in homeless accommodation, it's a long time when you are trying to keep your child in school and they are crying every evening that they can't stick the bullying and the othering. It's a very long time when you are living in poverty and trying to support your family and you can't get work because of your surname or your address. Two and a half years feels like a lifetime when you are mourning the loss of a loved one through suicide, which too many Travellers so often are with suicide rates for Travellers six and seven times the national average.

### **Education**

With regard to Education, there continues to be a stark inequality of access to, participation in and outcomes from education for Travellers. Just 13.3% of Traveller women and girls are educated to Leaving Certificate or above, compared with 69.1% of the general population. Less than 1% of Travellers are in third-level education, with only 167 adult Travellers with a third-level qualification.<sup>1</sup>

School closures caused by the recent COVID-19 pandemic posed a challenging disruption for Traveller learners and deepened their educational disadvantage, with the move to remote learning relying entirely on having IT equipment, stable Wi-Fi, a quiet place to work: things many Traveller families simply do not have access to.

Currently, we have the ongoing development of the National Traveller and Roma Education Strategy, the Cinealtas Action plan on Bullying launched in 2022, the National Access Plan which sets targets for Travellers in Higher Education, and the NCCA 2023 Traveller History and Culture research report.

The forthcoming National Traveller and Roma Education Strategy must include a robust implementation and monitoring framework and resources to address the systemic

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<sup>1</sup> Census of Population 2016 – Profile 8 Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion.

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disadvantage of Travellers at all educational levels, and the work begun on the use of ethnic data in education must be built upon.

Consultation with the Traveller and Roma community is underway for the new Strategy. We have attended a number of the sessions, and listening to the contributions from Traveller parents has been a stark reminder if one was needed of the racism and bullying still experienced by Traveller children in Irish schools and underlines the urgent need for schools to rethink how they support diversity and cater to the needs of all young people in their school community.

### **Justice**

Although Travellers account for 0.6 % of the Irish population, Travellers account for 22% of the female prison population and 15% of the male prison population'.<sup>2</sup> At times, up to a fifth of young people in custody in Oberstown Detention Campus have been Travellers.<sup>3</sup> In 2017, the CEDAW Committee recommended that the State address the root causes of the overrepresentation of Traveller women in places of deprivation of liberty, and address prison condition standards. That is seven years ago now.

The State must address the factors contributing to Travellers' overrepresentation in prison, particularly Traveller women, and introduce alternative community-based responses for those who have committed nonviolent poverty-related offences. A key contributing factor is the level of racism and racial profiling across the criminal justice system, including policing, probation and the courts system. Systemic, cultural and attitudinal changes are needed to address this. Although access to justice is a fundamental human right, Travellers are frequently denied it. This has to change: Travellers' voices must be heard, their rights exercised, and decision-makers held accountable in the justice process.

### **Employment**

Given that we are gathered here in the Seanad today, I want to use this opportunity to speak about the lack of representation of Traveller and Roma women in Irish politics. Few communities in Ireland have been as negatively affected by political decisions and indecision as the Traveller community, and yet we remain largely invisible within the political establishment. This cuts across all areas of policy: be it health, mental health, accommodation, education and employment.

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<sup>2</sup> IPS 2017

<sup>3</sup> In the first three months of '2019 the campus housed 72 individuals, of these 14 (19 per cent) were Travellers or from a Traveller background. There was a similar rate in 2018 and 2017', Irish Prison Service, 2019.

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Traveller women have a strong history of leadership and advocacy in community development spaces and their engagement in public and political life stretches back many decades, the most significant development coming in recent years with the appointment of Senator Eileen Flynn in 2020, the first and to date, only Traveller to serve in either House of the Oireachtas.

In 2022, the NTWF commissioned Professor Pauline Cullen and Shane Gough of Maynooth University to prepare an account of how Traveller, Roma, and other ethnic minority and migrant women engage with and experience local politics in Ireland.

We wanted to provide an evidence base for the systemic changes that are required to be taken by political parties, local authorities, the Electoral Commission and by the State, if Traveller and other ethnic minority women are to access political office in Ireland in a meaningful way.

The asks are not rocket science and this is not the first time some of them have been identified:

- the creation of a nationwide special electoral district for national representation, and county-wide special electoral districts for local representation of Travellers (with gender parity).
- the incorporation of a nested ethnic quota into existing gender quotas specifically naming Traveller women for political candidates at national level and introduce a similar quota system at local level.
- the creation of a Seanad panel for minoritised communities (including Travellers and Roma) with gender parity.
- establish reserved seats in the Seanad and the Dail for Travellers and other ethnic groups.
- targeted actions to support Traveller women who are interested in running for election.

I want to finish by emphasising the lack of implementation across all Traveller policy is the issue hiding in plain sight. Bureaucratic delays and Government inaction must come to an end if there are to be any changes in Traveller lives.