

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

18 April 2024 | Opening statement of Maureen Ward

Cathaoirleach and Senators and fellow Travellers present here today. My name is Maureen Ward, I am a proud Irish Traveller Woman,

I hold the position of Interim Co-ordinator with Minceirs Whiden. I am honoured to have been invited to address this house today on the issue of Racism and Discrimination against Irish Travellers. I'd like to begin my address by stating that as a Traveller myself, and as someone who has spent many years on the frontlines as a human Rights activist, I believe that the general attitude of Irish society towards Travellers is much better today than it was in the past, and while that is a welcome development, I think all of us here today can recognise that there is still much more to be done. We still live in a society where many Travellers feel the need to conceal their identity from employers, teachers, friends, and even spouses, because they fear the repercussions of revealing their heritage.

And this fear is certainly a legitimate fear to hold. I think we're all aware by now of the role that racist bullying played in the suicide of young Patrick McDonagh, the 12 year old Traveller boy whose heartbreaking story was the focus of a documentary on RTE1 last year. That ground-breaking documentary successfully touched the hearts of thousands of people in Ireland, granting many, perhaps for the first time, an inside look at our community's struggle against racism and discrimination. Yet the sad reality is that derogatory slurs against Travellers are still openly used by some people today, and we have even seen recent cases of businesses refusing service to Travellers. This should not be acceptable in the 21st Century. The Traveller community has long been subject to marginalization, stereotypes, and injustices.

Our unique cultural heritage, traditions, and way of life are still too often met with disdain, misunderstanding, and sometimes even outright hostility. Discrimination has historically resulted in unequal access to accommodation, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. And while progress has been made, the harsh reality is that many Irish Travellers continue to face barriers and prejudice that deny us the dignity and equality we deserve as fellow citizens of the Irish state. Nevertheless, amidst these challenges, I remain steadfast in my belief in a brighter future, where every individual, regardless of background, is afforded the respect and dignity they deserve. So, as we all gather here today in this great hall of democracy, I believe it is necessary to acknowledge that the fight against racism and discrimination is work that must be done by everyone.

It is work that requires collective effort and determination from all members of Irish society. As a proud member of the Traveller community, I would call upon **You As legislators, to uphold the foundational principles of equality that are key to the Irish state, and to enact laws that protect the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their ethnicity, culture, or social status.** But legislative measures alone are not enough. We must also work tirelessly to challenge the prejudices and stereotypes that fuel racism and discrimination in our society. This requires fostering greater understanding, empathy, and respect for the diversity of human experiences – including the rich cultural heritage and traditions of the Traveller community. It also demands meaningful engagement and partnership with Traveller organizations and community leaders, who are best placed to articulate our community's needs, aspirations, and solutions.

Before I finish, I would like to acknowledge and thank Minceirs Whiden's National Development worker John Boyle for helping me put together this statement. So, in closing let us remember that the fight against racism and discrimination is not a sprint but a marathon – one that requires courage, determination, and solidarity between Travellers and settled people. It is a journey that we must embark upon together, as individuals, as communities, and as a nation. And it is a journey that we cannot afford to abandon until every person, regardless of their background or

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identity, can live free from fear, prejudice, and discrimination. Thank you, Cathaoirleach and Senators and fellow Travellers present here today for listening so patiently to me.