

Travellers and the Irish education system

Irish Travellers are a minority ethnic group that has been part of Irish society for centuries. They have a value system, language, customs and traditions, which make them an identifiable group both to themselves and to others. Their distinctive lifestyle and culture, based on a nomadic tradition, sets them apart from the general population.

One of the key issues of concern for Traveller organisations - The denial of Ethnic status to Travellers by the Irish government we believe represents a contemporary form of isolationism and racism, this was identified by the former UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, ***“the most significant manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance include the rejection of diversity”***

The National Traveller Health Study conducted in 2008¹ states the Irish Traveller is 36,224 in the Republic of Ireland.

The population profile of Travellers is similar to that of developing countries with a high birth rate and a young population coupled with high mortality rates and a life expectancy much lower than that in the general population. For example, 62% of the Traveller population is aged less than 25 years compared with the national figure of 35.3% while 2.6% of the Traveller population is over 65 years of age compared to 11% nationally. Only 25 Travellers were over 85 years of age when the field work was conducted in 2008.

Traveller women have a life expectancy of approximately 71 years, which is 11.5 years less than women in the general population, and is equivalent to the life expectancy of the general population of Ireland in the early 1960s.

The study also found that over 55.1% of Travellers who were interviewed felt they had been discriminated against in getting work on one or more occasion. Also over 62% of Travellers felt they had been discriminated against in school on one or more than one occasion.

Traveller women's experience of inequality and discrimination differs to that of the majority population, as is their experience of racism and discrimination is different to Traveller men. The needs of Traveller women may not be met by responses and strategies designed to confront and tackle gender inequality or ethnic discrimination alone, i.e. without an examination of the interaction of ethnic disadvantage/discrimination. Acknowledging and addressing this experience is central to outcomes for Traveller women, as the experience of a Traveller woman will sometimes be distinctive because she is a woman, sometimes because she is a Traveller, and sometimes because she is both.

An important mechanism for assessing and monitoring the situation for Traveller women is and will be through effective and up to date data collection

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All-Ireland Traveller Health Study, 'Our Geels' (2010), Dept. of Health

and proofing mechanisms. And while certain progress has been made in data collection particularly by the Central Statistics Office. And the All Ireland Traveller Health Study has been an important baseline document in relation to monitoring progress in the area of health for Travellers. However there have been little positive developments in data collection in any other important policy areas such as education. This almost complete lack of data makes monitoring of the situation of Travellers and Traveller women virtually impossible and significantly impacts on the ability of the state to equality proof any policies or programmes, which affect Travellers. Where data is available, it is not gender disaggregated, making a clear analysis of the position of Traveller women in Ireland, the development of specific provisions for them and monitoring progress extremely difficult. This is particularly problematic given the dramatic economic changes that Ireland is currently experiencing.

Travellers and the Irish education system

The history of provision of education to many Travellers in Ireland can be characterised by segregation. With so called special classes (Traveller only) were established, these classes became part of mainstream provision and effectively served as a mechanism for segregation, and while these segregated classes have ceased there has long existed a system of withdrawal of Traveller children from mainstream classes by Traveller resource teachers based on identity and not need. Alongside of this there were a number of Traveller only schools and the introduction of Training Centres over 30 years ago ensured there was also substandard segregated provision for Traveller children of secondary school age and adult Traveller learners. Refer to the number of Traveller women in TC over the yrs – repeatedly for yrs – no accountability re no progress

Currently – Traveller only schools, all but one remains (this last remaining one will also be phased out) Also Traveller only training centres are being phased out.

Traveller Education Strategy

Historically, Travellers was overlooked in education policy and practice in Ireland. It was only with the establishment of a joint working group by the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 2003, that we say Travellers participating in the formulation of policy in regard to education. The membership of this joint working group comprised of officials from the department of education and science, officials from the social inclusion unit of the (DES) teachers unions, education disadvantage committee, the advisory committee on Traveller education and Traveller representatives from the National Traveller Women's Forum, Irish Traveller Movement and Pavee Point among others.

Traveller women played an important role on the joint working group and in the development of the strategy of the 6 reps from the 3 national Traveller organisation 3 were Traveller women, this is reflective of the huge role Traveller women have played in the development of Traveller organisations,

campaigning for Travellers, the project work and on the boards of management of these Traveller organisations/groups.

The remit of the Joint working group was to develop a Traveller Education Strategy for the DES and it is fair to say afforded the first real opportunity to Travellers to influence and shape the policy, design and delivery of education. In 2006 Towards a Traveller Education Strategy was published by the DES at its core is the principle of an inclusive mainstream education provision. The main objective of the strategy is to ensure equality of access, participation and outcomes for Travellers in the education

Also during the development of the Traveller education strategy the three national Traveller organisations facilitated a consultation process which was carried out around the country in 2004 with over 400 Traveller learners and parents participating the findings of the consultation of which there was 49 recommendations covering a number of concerns such as access to education and outcomes from education, involvement of parents, recognition of Traveller culture, ethos of schools and segregation in the provision of education to Travellers.

Critical issues to addressed for Travellers in the education system:

- Access continues to pose challenges re Traveller accessing schools – give examples of a couple of high profile such as Equality Tribunal ruling and subsequent circuit court ruling in clonmel.
- Equality of attainment for Travellers in the education system remains to be addressed.
- Retention in the education. According to a recent DES presentation on Traveller education e currently have 8,300 Traveller pupils in primary school which equates virtually to 100% enrolment. Yet there is only 70 Traveller children (39 are Traveller girls) in there final year of Post Primary for the 2010/2011 academic year. There is a total of 448 Traveller children in first year of post primary for 2010/2011 - Retention in secondary school and transfer to third level does continue to be of major concern
- We need high expectations and the negative experiences of Traveller children within the education system:
- Visibility of Travellers in the education curriculum

Again I would just like to stress desegregation of data is a critical issue if we are to accurately monitor the participation and achievements of Traveller women in the education system.

- Data in relation to Traveller women in third level is difficult to ascertain but according to the Mature Student Ireland in 2010 8 Travellers were participating in their institutions as mature students – they did not have a gender breakdown of this figure.

Also the 2006 Irish census shows that there are only 19 Traveller women who have obtained a third level qualification at degree or higher level it also shows some other stark inequalities for Travellers in general

Do I need to include these?

- 52.7% of all Travellers aged 15+ years have obtained primary education only with no formal education as their highest educational attainment compared to 15.4% the national population are in the same category
- With only 3.4% of the Traveller population over the age of 15 years having attained upper secondary education; compared with 48.2% for national population.
- Only 0.57 of Travellers over the age of 15 years had completed their education at third level.²

From Education to Employment opportunities – as I highlighted earlier over 55% of Travellers felt they had been discriminated against -

2009 and 2010 has seen major cuts in the education service to Travellers and other cuts to training opportunities for Traveller women will have a hugely negative impact on Traveller children's access to, participation of and outcomes from education and it will further limit opportunities to Traveller women to engage in meaningful training. This is primarily an economic exercise while we are

Just for notes

Access to education there an Equality Tribunal decision in December 2010 reflected that Travellers continue to experience challenges in accessing schools. Despite the fact that the Traveller family won their case their son has not been offered a place in the school. The school appealed the decision of the Equality Tribunal and a Judge in the circuit court in Clonmel in May 2011 ruled that the Traveller boy did not have a right to attend a local secondary school, based on the school's admission criteria which includes parent as a past student or sibling. (for Travellers that is a key issue with only this generation at secondary school level)

Participation in education by women from minorities