

# Understanding Racism



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*know the facts*

Many people suffer racism in Bray and Ireland. As more people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds come to live here, new and existing forms of racism become more evident. There is a need for education and awareness to address the complex reasons for the impact of racism. This leaflet aims to:

- Provide you with relevant information, definitions and concepts
- Help you understand Ireland's responsibilities to asylum seekers and refugees
- Dispel some of the myths about asylum seekers, refugees and Travellers

## > WHAT IS RACISM?

In reality there is no such thing as "race", we are all human beings. "Racism" occurs when an individual combines his/her prejudice with power and discriminates against a person because of their ethnic origin, colour of their skin, place of birth, nationality, membership of the Traveller community, etc.

The UNESCO declaration 1978 states that Racism is "any theory involving the claim that racial or ethnic groups are inherently superior or inferior, thus implying that some would be entitled to dominate or eliminate others who would be inferior; or which places a value judgement on racial differentiation, has no scientific foundation and is contrary to the moral and ethical principles of humanity."

**Interculturalism** is the belief that we become richer people by knowing and experiencing other cultures. It is about accepting, respecting and valuing difference. People who are committed to interculturalism accept they can learn and profit from meeting other cultures. Interculturalism is also about

developing policies to promote interaction between people of different cultures, ethnicity or religion living in the same country.

**Equality** means that no person counts more than another. It is about everyone having the same rights, opportunities and quality of life. Equality is not about treating people the same because different groups of people have different needs. Different groups experience discrimination in different areas and different ways. The Equal Status Act 2000 makes discrimination illegal on nine grounds: Gender; Marital Status, Family Status; Membership of Traveller community; Sexual Orientation; Race; Age; Religious Belief and Disability.

## > WHO EXPERIENCES RACISM IN IRELAND?

- Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.
- Travellers based on their distinct culture and nomadic identity.
- Minority ethnic groups based on the colour of their skin, their ethnicity, nationality, legal status or citizenship.

## > REFUGEES, ASYLUM SEEKERS AND MIGRANTS

### *Who is a Refugee?*

A refugee is defined in the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees as a person "who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality and is unable owing to such fear, unwilling to avail of the protection of that country."

According to the Irish Government, a refugee is someone who has had to leave their own country because of the fear of persecution, has applied to the Irish Government and has been successfully granted legal refugee status. This gives them the same rights as an Irish citizen to employment, social welfare, education, housing and health care.

### *Who is an Asylum Seeker?*

An **asylum seeker** is someone who has applied to be officially accepted as a refugee by the Irish Government.

### *Obligation of the Irish Government*

Ireland signed the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees in 1956, and is obliged under international law to offer protection from refoulement, i.e. to ensure that the person is not sent back to a country where he/she might face serious human rights violations.

### *How do Refugees Apply for Asylum in Ireland?*

Programme Refugees have been invited here by the Irish Government

under the United Nations programme. In Ireland the majority have come from Hungary (1950s), Chile and Vietnam (1970s), Bosnia and Kosovo (1990s).

Refugees, sometimes known as Convention Refugees, arrive independently and apply for asylum once in Ireland.

### *Who becomes a Refugee?*

All types of people can become Refugees, rich or poor, of all ethnic origins, men, women, and religions. The one thing that they have in common is a fear of PERSECUTION in their home country.

Often refugees do not have the chance to make plans for their departure, to pack their belongings, organise passports or to say farewell to their friends and families.

Refugees often have little idea about where they are going. They are running AWAY, not running TO. Those who come to Ireland often have scant understanding about the country and the nature of the society here. They have had no opportunity to prepare themselves physically or psychologically for their new life in Ireland. According to a recent survey a significant proportion of asylum seekers



that have arrived in Ireland have been subject to ill treatment or intimidation in their home country.

#### *Myths about Refugees/Asylum Seekers*

**MYTH:** "All Asylum Seekers Arrive Illegally"

**FACT:** Under the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, to which Ireland is a signatory, anyone arriving in Ireland can legally ask for asylum and legally reside in the country until his/her application is decided on by procedures set up by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. THUS all asylum seekers are LEGAL.

**MYTH:** "Ireland is Being Flooded by Asylum Seekers and Refugees"

**FACT:** Statistics show that worldwide there are approximately 21 million refugees. According to the United Nations almost 70% of refugees worldwide are hosted by Africa and Asia with Europe receiving less than a quarter of the total. Refugees residing in Ireland amount to less than 0.05% of the Irish population.

**MYTH:** "Asylum Seekers are Sponging Illegally off the State"

**FACT:** Asylum seekers in the majority are not allowed to work until their application for refugee status has been accepted. If accepted they have the same responsibilities and opportunities as Irish citizens (however their qualifications are generally not recognised in Ireland). While waiting for their application to be determined, those arriving since April 1, 2000 have no choice but to stay in areas of the country and in hostels that are

allocated to them, where they are supplied with accommodation and food directly and a small weekly allowance of €19 per adult and €9.52 per child. The vast majority of asylum seekers would prefer to be allowed to work and are deeply uncomfortable about accepting social welfare. People want to have the freedom to make their own decisions about their families' needs.

**MYTH:** "Asylum Seekers are Being Treated Better than our own Homeless and Travellers"

**FACT:** The number of homeless people sleeping on our streets and the poor condition of services provided to the Traveller community is totally inadequate, but it is not the fault of asylum seekers. The Government is obliged to provide adequate services for all these groupings in society.

**MYTH:** "Refugees have No Right to Come Here and Expect Us to Help Them"

**FACT:** Given the fact that the Irish Government has signed the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees 1951 we are obliged under international law to offer support and protection to people who are fleeing from their country of origin because of fear of persecution.

**Never forget** - millions of Irish people have found refuge in other countries because of famine, poverty and political oppression.

**MYTH:** "Asylum Seekers are a Major Threat to the Health of the Irish Public"

**FACT:** Every year in Ireland we welcome millions of foreign tourists and

thousands of business people, students and other overseas visitors. Asylum seekers represent only 25% of the total number of immigrants to Ireland (10,900 out of 42,000 immigrants in the year 2000). To stigmatise asylum seekers as a major threat to public health is an obvious distortion of reality.

#### **> TRAVELLERS**

Travellers are a small indigenous minority, documented as being part of Irish society for centuries. Travellers have a long shared history and value system which make them a distinct group. They have their own language, customs and traditions.

The distinctive Traveller lifestyle and culture, based on a nomadic tradition, sets Travellers apart from the sedentary population or "settled people".

It is estimated that in the year 2000 there were approximately 25,000 Travellers in Ireland or 0.7% of the total population.

Traveller life expectancy is equivalent to that of settled people in the 1940s. Given the high birth rate and low life expectancy there are a relatively large number of infants and children and few older persons.

In 1995, the Task Force Report on Travellers recommended that 3,100 units of accommodation be provided for Travellers by the year 2000. Only 127 new units were provided in that time. As a result many Travellers still live in appalling conditions without access to the most basic services including - water, toilets and electricity. Many other Travellers live in official

accommodation that is poorly serviced and maintained and often situated in unhealthy or dangerous locations.

As well as the obvious direct negative effect this has on quality of life, it also has a negative effect on how Travellers can access healthcare, education, social welfare and other services.

#### *Myths about Travellers*

**MYTH:** "Travellers Choose to Live on the Side of the Road with no Services"

**FACT:** While a small percentage of Travellers may choose to live on the side of the road the vast majority wish to have decent serviced accommodation. This does not mean however that they want to shed their identity and be settled people. Nomads tend to view all accommodation as temporary, whether it is a house or a caravan. While settled society might see a Traveller moving into a house as progress it might well be viewed by the Traveller as the opposite. Travellers sometimes leave accommodation that has been provided because they may not be compatible with other families in the area.



**MYTH:** "Travellers are Dirty, Lazy and Aggressive."

**FACT:** This is a common stereotype of minorities who experience racism. While there are some Travellers who fit this stereotype the vast majority do not. Travellers experience multiple forms of disadvantage and many live in extremely poor living circumstances, characterised by lack of basic services, including cleansing services, toilets, water and electricity as well as lack of income resulting from unemployment and discrimination. However there are an increasing number of good, well-kept official sites around the country. The common denominator seems to be that Travellers have been involved in their design, thus giving a sense of ownership to the people using the service. Pilot projects in estate management are also of interest to Travellers to enhance the sense of ownership.

**MYTH:** "Travellers are not Entitled to Services because they don't Pay Taxes."

**FACT:** A high percentage of the overall tax take of the state is collected indirectly through VAT (almost 27% in 1998). All Travellers, like all settled people, pay taxes in this way.

Hard figures on levels of Traveller employment/unemployment do not exist. The next census should go some way to correcting this lack of data as it will include a question on membership of the Traveller community for the first time. We know from anecdotal evidence that many Travellers are employed and pay taxes through the PAYE system. Others are self-employed and make their own tax returns as do self-employed settled people.

However there is a very high level of unemployment in the Traveller community for complex reasons including: poor access to and outcomes from the formal education service; lack of investment in the development of the Traveller economy; the effective criminalisation of nomadism; lack of accommodation or restrictions placed on the use of accommodation and discrimination by some employers. As a result many Travellers are dependent on the social welfare system. This system was created to act as a safety net for those who could not access an adequate income or employment. The vast majority of people benefiting from social welfare are settled people. Abuses of this system are investigated in a multi-agency approach.

**MYTH:** "Travellers are Criminals"

**FACT:** Figures from An Garda Síochána show lower levels of indictable crimes committed by Travellers than committed by settled people per head of population. However in popular discourse, Travellers are often blamed for crimes when there is no hard evidence to link them to it. This is compounded by some elements of the media. When a Traveller commits a crime the headline may read "Traveller charged with robbery" but it will never read "Settled person charged with robbery."

Travellers are also vulnerable to being charged with many lesser offenses, such as parking offenses, disorderly behaviour, driving without tax or insurance. While not justifying these offenses they have to be understood in a context of discrimination by some publicans, insurance companies, etc.

**MYTH:** "Most Travellers are wealthy"

**FACT:** There are rich and poor Travellers just as there are rich and poor settled people. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a minority of Travellers earn a significant income from business. The majority however are dependent on both the social welfare system and local authorities for social housing and accommodation.

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