

Women's Rights as Cultural Rights: The Case of the Irish Travellers

Niamh Reilly

Traveller women in Ireland are at the forefront of efforts to promote the cultural rights of their people.



Access to a Traveller community is blocked as a result of the "Anti-Trespass" legislation passed by the Irish government in 2002.

In a nation of approximately four million, Irish Travellers are an ethnic minority of some 24,000 people. Their ethnic distinction is socio-cultural, based upon a shared history, an oral tradition, a unique language (variously referred to as Cant, Gammon, or Shelta), and most notably a nomadic way of life. Historically, Irish Travellers were commercial nomads who engaged in tin-smithing, seasonal farm work, and providing entertainment such as singing and fortune-telling. The modernization of the Irish economy significantly eroded the economic niche once filled by Travellers, but nomadism continues to be a deeply valued expression of

Traveller culture even today. In his account of Irish Traveller culture, Traveller activist Michael McDonagh cites one Traveller who put it this way, "Travellers remain Travellers even when they are not travelling."

Travellers are marginalized in Irish society and subjected to discrimination within the majority population. Demographic statistics attest to the second-class status of the group. Despite living in one of the wealthiest European nations, most Travellers live in extreme poverty, suffer poor health, and experience many obstacles in accessing appropriate accommodation, education, training, and employment. They have high

birth and infant mortality rates and low life expectancy: Over 40 percent of Travellers are under 15, while only 5 percent are aged 50 or more. More than a fifth of Traveller families live on temporary roadside sites, where dangerous and unsanitary conditions mean that survival is a constant struggle.

In the early 1980s an Irish Travellers' movement emerged that explicitly framed Travellers' rights as human rights. Founded by the Travellers' rights group Pavee Point, a fundamental claim of the movement is that "Travellers...have a right to assert and celebrate their distinct ethnic identity." Importantly, Pavee Point ties these cultural rights to the group's human right to "resources which enable them to meet basic human needs, to reach a socially acceptable standard of living, and to live with dignity in society." In other words, the struggle for basic needs is built upon the claim that Travellers are a minority group with culturally specific needs, which must be met if Travellers are to survive as a culturally distinct group. Culturally appropriate accommodation for Travellers means providing adequate, safe, and properly serviced halting sites around the country as well as giving Travellers the choice of living in permanent houses. Culturally appropriate education would acknowledge that Traveller children may have particular difficulties attending settled schools, where most students live in one place and where parental literacy is assumed.

The rights of Traveller women in particular are at stake. In a May 2004 interview, Ronnie Fay, director of Pavee Point, explained that there are "no Travellers' rights without Traveller

Photo courtesy of the Traveller Visibility Group

women's rights." Fay pointed out that Traveller women face "triple discrimination—as Travellers, as women, and as Traveller women." While Traveller women "experience patriarchy in the ways that all women do...they also experience particular forms of abuse as Traveller women, when they are brutalised by descriptions in the media."

In July 2004 a newspaper columnist for *The Sunday Independent* used the words "cunning" and "devious" to describe a Traveller woman who regularly visited her mother's home seeking assistance. The journalist asserted that, "Travellers have no self-control and no civic responsibility because their disrespect for civil society has been indulged...as an element of their 'special' identity." Back in 1996 a column appearing in the same paper described Travellers as following "a life of appetite ungoverned by intellect...worse than the life of beasts...." Around that time a member of the Irish parliament had publicly advocated that the number of Travellers should be limited through the use of birth control.

In the face of such hostility, the National Traveller Women's Forum was founded in 1995 with the aim of advancing "Traveller women's rights [as] human rights, equality, cultural recognition, solidarity, liberation, collective action, anti-sexism, anti-racism [and] self-determination." In 1997 Catherine Joyce, then a community worker with Pavee Point and an active member of the National Traveller Women's Forum, addressed in writing what it means for Traveller women to negotiate life for their families who have no choice but to live on temporary, unserviced road-side sites:

We have the responsibility of the home...and children.... [I]f there is no water and no toilets it [affects women and men differently].... We are the ones...making sure [children] attend school and do their homework and that they are clean.... If Travellers are evicted children may miss school or hospital appointments and the settled people blame the mothers....

Joyce also drew attention to the particular pressures on Traveller women as they

must interface between the settled population and their own community:

The women are also the ones most in contact with settled people.... [We] are often the ones who face racism directly and who must broker on behalf of our families.... [But if we] say anything that seems to go against the community...[we] can be blamed by other Travellers....

Joyce's account underscores the imperative of recognizing the cultural rights of Travellers as an ethnic group in building the case for culturally appropriate service provision and easing the hardships Traveller women face. Recognition of Traveller cultural identity is also vital to reducing the widespread hostility toward Traveller women in their daily lives.

Over the past decade the Irish Traveller's movement has achieved some success in contesting anti-Traveller discrimination and in gaining cultural recognition as an ethnic minority. Yet the Travellers' struggle is ongoing. In fact, the Irish Government struck a blow to years of Traveller activism by contesting their official minority status in its first report under the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

(2003). The report asserted that "Irish Travellers do not constitute a distinct group...in terms of race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin," thereby undermining Travellers' claims to cultural distinctness and related measures to protect Travellers' human rights.

The 1990s global campaign for women's human rights is most closely associated with achieving international recognition of violence against women as a human rights issue. The campaign has generally side-stepped the issue of cultural rights, except to sound a note of caution that cultural rights are often invoked at the expense of women's human rights. The efforts of Irish Traveller women to define and secure their human rights offers an important counter-example that underscores the complex ways in which cultural rights claims and women's human rights claims often intersect. Their plight "as Travellers, as women, and as Traveller women" calls attention to the multifaceted nature of their struggle and the need for a multifaceted response. ■

For more on women's rights as human rights see the "Violence against Women" issue and the "Women's Rights" issue of *Human Rights Dialogue*, available online at <http://www.carnegiecouncil.org>.



A Traveller woman is evicted from her home.