

Link: A long way to go to end traveller discrimination

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The Molloy family spent Christmas 1998 on a bishop's lawn in Ennis, Co Clare. Moved on twice from their home by Ennis Urban District Council (UDC), the couple and their seven children had literally nowhere else to go. It was up to the Bishop of Killaloe, Dr Willie Walsh, to offer them a place in his grounds.

The Molloy family are an Irish Traveller family. They had nowhere to go that Christmas because a 1997 High Court order closed Ennis's only official halting site for Travellers. With no official site, anywhere the family parked, anywhere they set up their home, was illegal.

Last week *Daily Ireland* reported how Traveller groups in the South said there were "serious problems" in their relationship with the gardai, after the Morris Tribunal concluded that a guard had planted a gun at a Traveller site in Donegal. The guard denies the incident and a jury cleared him of any involvement.

But Travellers who spoke to *Daily Ireland* this week have told of widespread and long-lasting discrimination against them, not just by gardai, but by shopkeepers, publicans, café workers and many other members of the settled population. The discrimination is institutional and day-to-day, Travellers' rights groups say.

Discrimination against Travellers is seen as an acceptable form of prejudice, says Damien Peelo of the Irish Travellers' Movement (ITM).

"People who think they are liberal, and even who are liberal in every other way, don't see anything wrong with discriminating against Travellers," he says.

We heard several stories of discrimination against Travellers by both the gardai and the settled population. One Travelling woman, who does not want to be named, spoke to *Daily Ireland* about how she was refused service in a café near the hospital where her mother was dying.

"We asked if [the café] were serving dinners," she says, "and the girl behind the counter said to hang on a minute and she'd see. We waited about ten minutes and then the manager came out and said he wasn't serving us. I said about my mother dying and that we just wanted a quick bite to eat before we

went back to the hospital to see her, but he told us to leave or he'd call the guards."

After taking advice from a fellow Traveller, the woman decided to try and take the café to court. That was four years ago, and the case is still pending.

The woman's mother died shortly after the incident. She died a few months after being evicted from the site she and her family were based at, even though hospital doctors had given her a supporting letter saying she was terminally ill and that she should be allowed to remain where she was.

Another Traveller told us how she had been waiting for five years to get a place in a crèche for her three children, being told all that time that there was a waiting list. *Daily Ireland* rang the crèche in question to enquire about places and was told there "shouldn't be a problem" with three children starting in September.

In Castleisland, Co Kerry, a Traveller family currently has four complaints pending with the gardai. They told *Daily Ireland* that they have been refused service in local shops, that they were abused verbally by gardai after being refused service in a pub, and that one guard in particular has physically attacked a young member of the family. The gardai have said they are investigating the complaints.

An ITM survey found that over three-quarters of Travellers have been refused service in a pub, with most of these (70 per cent) told it was "because you're Travellers". Half have been asked to leave a shop, and a third have been asked to leave a hairdressers or had to wait as others were served before them. The young woman who has been waiting five years for a place in a local crèche says that a beauty salon in the same town claims to have a six-month waiting list when she tries to make an appointment.

Travellers make up less than 1 per cent of the population in Ireland. Their life expectancy is between ten and twelve years less than the settled population. Their infant mortality rate is three times higher and stillbirths twice the national average, according to a 1987 report from the Health Research Board. Their illiteracy rate is around 80 per cent. Hundreds of families live on roadsides, with no running water, no electricity, no sanitation. They also risk being moved on or their homes impounded if they are deemed to be "trespassing" on public land.

These are third world conditions, in a country said to be the richest in Europe. There is no Celtic Tiger here.

Heather Rosen, who works with Travellers in Co Clare, says the problem is the acceptance of institutional discrimination against the community. This in

turn leads to a tacit acceptance of discrimination in some of the settled population, she says.

Although some attempts at progress has been made by some county councils, changes or loopholes in law designed to protect Travellers mean that discrimination still continues. The 1998 Traveller Act, for example, was brought in after a task force report into the needs of Travelling people, and led to the Traveller Accommodation Act, under which county councils with a certain number of Travellers in their district are obliged to provide certain types of accommodation for them. Travellers are consulted as to whether they want to live in settled accommodation among the settled population, settled accommodation with their own families, or continue travelling.

But the programme carries what Rosen calls an “indigenous clause”, where a Traveller must be resident in a county for three years to be eligible. Since most Travellers are nomadic, perhaps being based in one county but moving somewhere else for the summer, this can be difficult to fulfill.

When accommodation is offered under the programme, it is often not suitable. It may be miles out of town without any shops nearby, or not provide provision for stabling horses, an essential part of Traveller culture. Heather Rosen says she has seen some Traveller men “broken-hearted” after their horses were impounded to Cork. Travellers must pay to get the horse back, as well as the cost of transport to Cork and back.

Another damaging factor was the amendment of the trespass laws in 2002 to make “trespassing” on public property a criminal and no longer a civil offence. This means that Travellers can be forced to move on with no time limit given and that homes can be impounded. Gardai usually give 24 hours’ notice, Rosen says, but on occasions it has been as little as half an hour.

She tells of one family with ten children who had their home impounded under the trespass law along with three others and who were homeless for ten days until they got their home back. During those ten days no bed and breakfast would take the family in, meaning that the adults had to sleep in the back of their car and the children had to be farmed out to other families.

There is provision for homeless people to be given bed and breakfast accommodation, Rosen says, which shows the inconsistency in the laws: “You have one arm of the State making these people homeless, and another arm having to pay to house them.” If someone would take them in.

There have been some successful cases. *Daily Ireland* reported last week how several Travellers were awarded compensation after being refused service in pubs in Limerick, Longford and Mullingar, with one publican told to invite back the man he had refused to serve. Some constitutional challenges have been made concerning the impounding of homes under the trespass laws.

Heather Rosen says that Clare county council have made some provision for Travellers, "more than some other counties". Some of the Travellers I spoke to also had stories of how they had been "allowed" to drink in a bar after "promising they wouldn't be any trouble". The Travelling woman refused service in a café when her mother was dying said that at the minute she and her husband are camped in a field in Connemara, where "the people have been very decent."

But, as she then said, people should not have to be grateful for being allowed to put their homes somewhere, or allowed to buy a drink in a pub. Whether institutional or everyday discrimination, there seems a long way to go yet.

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