



Submission to the Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life

The Irish Traveller Movement welcome the opportunity to submit to The Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life, on the impact of abuse, including online abuse, and harassment, of members of the Traveller community who engage in political life.

Founded in 1990, the Irish Traveller Movement is the national advocacy and membership platform which brings together Travellers and representative organisations to develop collective solutions on issues faced by the community to achieve greater equality for Travellers. We represent Traveller interests in national governmental, international and human rights settings. We challenge racism- individual, cultural and structural which Travellers face and promote integration and equality. We are led by our grass roots community membership, deliver expertise in shaping organisations locally and promote community leadership ensuring Traveller's voices are to the forefront of all discussions.

Summary Recommendations

☐ Standards in Public Office Commission

1. Review complaints process to ensure adequate recourse for violations of offence and harm against Travellers and other minoritised groups.
2. Strengthen to expand oversight and investigative powers underpinned by the Code of ethics for public officials and parties to redress violations of discrimination and racism.

☐ Electoral Reform Commission.

1. Ensure the EFC is mandated to include provisions on the prohibition of racist hate speech in the context of elections broadly and synergised with the forthcoming Criminal Justice (Incitement to Violence or Hatred and Hate Offences) Act, to effectively investigate, act to prosecute acts of hate speech committed by politicians during election campaigns, and in carrying out political roles.
2. Make anti-racism protocols mandatory of all standing candidates, parties and groups, and recommend penalties of expulsion where contravened.
3. Give authority to the Electoral Reform Commission to implement recommendations of the Report of a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament

☐ Hatred and Hate Offences Progress the Criminal Justice (Incitement to Violence or Hatred and Hate Offences) Bill 2022 as a matter of urgency

☐ National Action Plan against Racism Expedite the political related actions of the National Action Plan Against Racism

☐ Online Safety and Media Regulation Act

1. Ensure safeguarding in the digital space by naming Travellers in new 'media service codes' and include grounds of 'harm and offence' as a strengthened safeguard.

2. Expedite digital codes for media content providers beyond monetary sanction to widest protective measures, against harm, offensive and abuse, and beyond 'regular' monitoring of content, as planned.
- ☐ **Physical safeguards** Ensure access to physical safeguards for public officials with additional security on entry and exist to Leinster House and its buildings, and events.
 - ☐ **Assign a safety chief and resource an office** for elected representatives and standing candidates to support and assist those who are subjected to hate and harassment, via quick access to investigation and to remedy, and introduce a linked unit with An Garda Síochána
 - ☐ **Undertake regular safety and risk assessments** with public officials and introduce a centralised political data collection system and report on outcomes.
 - ☐ **Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life** Review the composition of the Task Force and involve Oireachtas members from minorities and diverse communities in any future work and incorporate a related mechanism in local authority settings.

Context

Travellers are one of the most excluded and discriminated groups in Ireland. High unemployment, poor educational outcomes, chronic disproportionate ill-health, social exclusion and racism is widespread.

Many Travellers experience intersectional prejudice and discrimination due to their identity as being Traveller and perhaps living with a disability, being LGBT+ and commonly on socio economic grounds. 67% of Travellers said the community had to change or modify behaviours to 'fit in more' ⁽¹⁾. Widespread discrimination against Travellers on social media where ethnic identity is continuously attached to negative reinforcement, is rife. In 2019 65% of Travellers in Ireland said they had experienced identity-based discrimination, the second highest finding of 6 European countries researched.

Hate Crimes. Improvements in hate crime reporting are noted, so too a new third party (witness to) element, but largely Travellers have been underreported and are underreporting to racist monitoring, which is influenced by historic discrimination and racial profiling by Gardaí. In 2022 ⁽²⁾ the ITAJ research found 59% of Travellers believed they were stopped by a Garda because they were a Traveller. In 2022 there was also a 29% increase in Garda Síochána recorded hate crimes ⁽³⁾ and hate-related (non-crime) incidents. However, AGS recognised itself these crimes are underreported and the lack of ethnic data including Travellers, is notable.

- ☐ Travellers in elections to date
- ☐ Summary of experiences
- ☐ Participation in democracy
- ☐ Offence and harm within politics
- ☐ Contesting elections

The Irish Traveller Movement welcomes recent Government undertakings such as the Media and Digital Acts, the establishment of the Media Commission and the forthcoming Criminal Justice (Incitement to Violence or Hatred and Hate Offences) Act, where some matters related to the harm and offence experienced in political life, might be dealt with. Also, notable is the National Action Plan Against Racism, and recommendations of the Report on a Family Friendly Parliament also gave confidence. However, the pace to progress these legislations and action plans is slow.

The existing governance of the Standards in Public Office Commission is weak and 'standards of conduct for public officials, elected and appointed' is devoid of any mechanism to address racism and discrimination where it is perpetuated online, in person and in electioneering, with numerous examples of offence caused to Travellers

over many decades. The key underpinning legislation, the Ethics Acts are geared to anti-corruption and compliance under finance rules, elections and conflicts of interest, and little on matters related to 'conduct in public office' in the context of values, equality and anti-discrimination while in or running for office, and in public discourse. A review of the current complaint procedure which is notably onerous for parties offended, is needed

Travellers Contesting elections

Firsts included

- In 1982 Nan Joyce was the first Traveller candidate to stand in an Irish general election
- In 1994 Ellen Mongan the first to be elected to public office, as Town Councillor in Tuam.
- In 2002 and again in 2007 Rosaleen McDonagh was the first Traveller to stand in a Seanad election
- In 2016 Annemarie Roche was the first Traveller to contest a general election via a party nomination.
- In 2020 Senator Eileen Flynn was the first Traveller to become a member of the Oireachtas, and to the Seanad

Others elected and ran

- 1999 to 2010 Martin Ward was twice elected as Mayor of Tuam and Town Councillor
- In 2019 5 Traveller candidates ran in the Local Elections, Tuam, Longford, Galway and Cork. (2 males (1 Independent, 1 Party) and 3 females (1 Independent and 2 Party) (Martin Ward, TJ Hogan, Julia O'Leary, Annemarie Roche and Catherine Coffey)
- In 2020 One Traveller contested the General Election in Cork (Male Independent) TJ Hogan
- In 2020 Two people ran in the Seanad elections. (1 male and 1 female) (TJ Hogan and Eileen Flynn)

To assess the impact of abuse, including online abuse, and harassment for Travellers engaged in political life, this submission has been informed by the experiences of some of those candidates.

Summary of experiences

Contesting recent elections was characterised by fielding abuse, online and in person, and defending anti-Traveller rhetoric and hate, with a lens on devaluing and undermining the candidate's right to run for and or, be elected. Most notable was the requirement of 'exceptional or abnormal resilience' to surmount the exhausting obstacles, with hate as its basis. Overcoming institutional, systemic and societal discrimination is evident across the experiences of those who took part in recent elections.

Commons themes experienced:

- a) Traveller identity-based hate and abuse
- b) Intersectional abuse of gender and of socio-economic status, to identity
- c) A stoical acceptance of the absence of safeguarding overall, or confidence in policing and security
- d) An expectation of being treated less favourably in the digital space, and no safeguarding to rely on
- e) The exhaustive demands of managing and reporting complaints, complicated by the need to be in digital spaces for discourse on important campaigning topics and to maintain a political profile

Online Examples

- a) Dedicated social media bots to look like real accounts and titled under stereotyping names- then linked to the candidate
- b) A candidate's family targeted, and young child named in hateful and threatening posts
- c) Bare knuckle boxing and 'call out' videos posted online overplayed with the candidate's campaign details, and derogatory commentary about the value of the candidate's standing
- d) Statements regularly used 'uneducated knacker', offensive / insulting and sexist commentary about candidate's wife and child, and racist abuse, for example saying 'Travellers at a local site should be 'bombed out of it'
- e) One female candidate was constantly bombarded online with derogatory sexist slurs including, being labelled a 'whore', 'prostitute', 'knacker', 'drug addict', and regularly depicted with porn imagery.
- f) When the person's child was visible in photos, this fuelled additional hatred, for example with comments such as 'one more to add to the social welfare list'.
- g) In commenting publicly on matters related to identity-based racism and equality issues, levels of hate spike, and create a 'pile on' for trolls.
- h) Over 200 reports were made by one person to social media companies of threatening and or abusive posts and comments, and on online new sites.
- i) One person closed professional social media accounts, due to targeted hate and assistant deals with the online aspect of their work

In person canvassing

- a) Candidates constantly being compared to other people in the community involved in anti-social behaviour and being asked to account for that.
- b) Being told at the door, 'get away from here you knacker'.
- c) Derogatory and baseless comments made to candidates directly quoted from Peter Casey's campaigning narrative.

In carrying out political duties

- a) A person spoke of a fatalistic likelihood of being physically assaulted, especially for taking positions on racism, integration and women's issues.
- b) Other examples include a person being screamed at in public, had a car pull up beside them and verbally abused by 2 men, subjected to abusive hateful commentary with words such as 'scumbag', 'you're just a pikey – you won't get in again', 'scruffy knacker', 'you shouldn't be in politics'
- c) Following debates held in a public session, debasing commentary regularly follows including, demeaning slurs referenced to the person's body image / dress / dialect / intellect.

Campaigning by another candidate

- a) Evidence of one candidate campaigning against the Traveller candidate, in opposition to a local Traveller site. The scaremongering led to hostile doorstep encounters, which included being harassed and threatened and caused the Traveller candidate to stop canvassing in that area.

Media

- a) Local radio station facilitated single narrative on Travellers locally by the other running candidate, and rather than being given time on campaign topics, the Traveller candidate was invited to defend the actions of Travellers in one area, arising from the narrative created.

The relentless challenges included

- a) Getting posts taken down and onerous burden of proof where false accounts created in the candidate's name, required additional evidence to be submitted to social media companies, passport and driver licences
- b) Investigating the trolls and faceless bots, and making Garda complaints, but which could not be upheld due to difficulty tracing people, and worsened where mistrust of the Gardaí, as well documented, the candidates could not be confident of their support.
- c) Counter defeating hate speech and correcting narrative created online about the candidate, necessitating negotiation with traditional media, but interviews were then predicated on defending those same positions.
- d) Two candidates spoke of concealing their identity during campaigns to overcome residual bias in services associated with 'pursuing political office'.

Participation in democracy

Representation in political decision-making has been recognised by the UN CERD in 2005, 2011, 2016 and 2019, with a recommendation for the 'State party (to) take effective measures, including special measures, to improve the representation of ethnic minority groups in political and public life'. Travellers encounter many obstacles from participating equally in political democracy such as

- o structural obstacles related to population size
- o exclusion from traditional pathways to politics, such as through social, recreational and cultural arenas
- o in contesting elections - competing in an environment of anti-Traveller sentiment with increased likelihood of discrimination and racism
- o getting onto a ballot paper is arduous, which also includes overcoming bias in nominations by most political parties and groups.

These are also worsened by a legacy of marginalisation by the political system as a duty bearer, which has underserved Traveller need, and thus has impacted on lower voter participation and political awareness.

Offence and harm within politics

Recognition of Traveller ethnicity in the main definitions in the forthcoming Hate Crime legislation, provides reassurance. Relatedly, the UN CERD⁽⁴⁾ raised concerns 'about the frequent incidents of racist hate speech made by politicians, especially during election campaigns' in Ireland and recommended the State;

1. 'Effectively investigate and, as appropriate, prosecute and punish acts of hate speech, including those committed by politicians during election campaigns' and
2. 'Ensure that the mandate of the Electoral Commission, once established, includes provisions on the prohibition of racist hate speech in the context of elections.'

Travellers have no protection from harmful discourse within politics and are reliant on the higher authority of parties and groups, to act to protect their interests where racism and offense has been caused by a member of their party.

Example of need to redress: In 2022 a Galway based Councillor, expressed anti-Traveller rhetoric in a radio broadcast, which caused grave offence in the community and beyond. The Irish Traveller Movement, the Galway Traveller Movement and civil society groups raised complaints both to the Fianna Fáil party, and to the Standards in Public Office about his comments which concluded; Traveller culture was "not conducive" to living with most settled communities, saying the city council should not go ahead with plans to accommodate Travellers in a house it bought. We contended the Councillor should be suspended having breached several of the key principles of the Code of Conduct for Councillors; who should;

- Act with integrity to uphold public service values;
- Act in a way that enhances public trust and confidence;

- Serve their local authority and its citizens honestly, conscientiously and impartially;
- Promote equality and avoid bias;

Despite intervention by the Party leadership to induce an apology, which was subsequently made, the Councillor remained in office without sanction.

Example 2 In 2022 the Claire Byrne live show RTE, broadcast a Traveller themed programme where ITM and others contended, an elected official with a public record of opposing housing for Travellers articulated stereotypical discrimination about Travellers and who singled them out as being more "anti-social" than non-Travellers. Complaints were made to RTE which followed with refusal to accept the basis of the complaint by them. The Councillor was also not called to account for his actions. One Traveller candidate interviewed for this submission reported at that time they received abusive comments online on RTE's own twitter account and said; *"The vitriol shared online since (CBLive) has been draining. Raw hatred & racism comfortably shared on social media platforms.* Another academic noted in reply; *'The hatred proclaimed so blatantly last night by people during the show was shocking'*, and many others agreed. There are numerous examples of broadcast media and politics converging under the banner of 'public concerns about Travellers', which has fuelled anti-Travellerism, without proper oversight and remedy.

Several Traveller candidates interviewed told of having to defend, on the doorstep, derogatory and baseless comments made directly by Presidential candidate Peter Casey during his campaign, and it's a poor reflection of political standards, that currently serving Ministers and Oireachtas Members have canvassed on anti-Traveller themes during elections, without party sanction.

The absence of guardianship of Travellers from racism expressed publicly, and in the practice of decision making by public officials, locally and nationally, has cultivated a culture of bias against Travellers as constituents and potential political candidates, and conveys of politics that

- ☐ it operates to protect its own interests and is above reproach
- ☐ permits top down racism, sometimes by Government parties, which contradicts national policy objectives
- ☐ it undermines racism and discrimination as needing regulatory safeguards in political spaces and by public officials
- ☐ undermines candidacy by Travellers to political office, without those safeguards
- ☐ undermines Ireland being a signatory to UN and EU treaties, where related recommendations are long fingered or dormant

Contesting elections

Contesting and participating in politics as a minority person impacts at multi levels and is especially onerous within an intersectional identity. For example, being Traveller and female results in a specific type of harassment. The Council of Europe identifies three types of online and technology-facilitated violence against women, including online sexual harassment, online stalking and psychological violence.

Maynooth University research 2021 ⁽⁵⁾ a first account of how Traveller, Roma and other ethnic minority and migrant women understand, assess, and experience local politics in Ireland, showed that 'All minorities female candidates that did not succeed in their campaigns, experienced sexist and racist abuse'. This was expressed by a candidate saying, 'we stay invisible to stay safe so if we are made visible it has to be in a way that we control'. The report found, 'From this perspective, candidacy of Traveller-identified women is a high-risk venture'.

Female candidates interviewed for this submission, report very specific gendered hate exemplified as *'I posted a message of endorsement from a well-known Irish commentator on my professional FB page and received comments such as, 'a pikey running', 'she's a 'knacker', 'prostitute and whore'.*

Sexism bias for Traveller men culminated too in very specific violent and aggressive threats with one man's family being targeted in online posts, his young daughter demeaned in vile hateful and threatening language. He said *'It was a very specific 'macho' type of abuse, stereotyping Traveller men to be able to handle it'*

Another candidate commented *' , A woman was making discriminatory comments/false statements about Travellers under an article on a campaign I was a part of, when I challenged her, she made statements such as "Travellers are being housed for free" "They all drive transit vans " Travellers do not work and are bleeding the system". This person could not see any wrong doing on her behalf.'*

Recommendations to be considered from the National Action Plan Against Racism and the Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament

The Irish Traveller Movement welcomed Action 3.6 of the National Action Plan Against Racism to

- 1) establish public office mentoring programmes and introduce positive measures to support the selection of minority ethnic candidates
- 2) to increase the numbers of women in politics and have committed recommendations to the process reviewed
- 3) to expand the Electoral Commission: -to develop a more detailed regulatory framework for electoral advertising with the aim of ensuring that equality and non-discrimination standards in political discourse during election and referendum campaigns are upheld
- 4) research barriers to minority ethnic electoral participation;
- 5) promote the Council of Europe Convention on political participation by minority ethnic groups and to promote voting by minority ethnic groups.

The Irish Traveller Movement also submitted to and welcomed the report and valuable work undertaken by the Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament, and recommendations of note include;

- 1) to allow for an ethnic minority quota, and at the next General Election (parties) will set targets for ethnic minority women within their "gender quota"
- 2) to establish quotas for Traveller and Roma women in formal political structures with specific seats reserved in the Dáil, Seanad, Constitutional Convention and on Local Councils.
- 3) training and mentoring to be provided for women who face the greatest barriers to participation in elections, including Traveller and Roma women.

The Report could provide for replication across political parties authorised under the Electoral Commission, whose provisions should make way for broader engagement of Travellers, minority and underrepresented groups. However, clarity of how this will happen is needed, given Travellers are not named for special protection in the Electoral Reform Act 2022.

1. National Traveller Survey 2017 <https://itmtrav.ie/key-reports/>
2. The Irish Travellers' Access to Justice (ITAJ) report by the research team at University of Limerick
3. <https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/press-releases/2023/march/an-garda-siochana-2022-hate-crime-data-and-related-discriminatory-motives.html>
4. https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/IRL/INT_CERD_COC_IRL_40806_E.pdf
5. https://www.ntwf.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/15754_NTWF_Report_V8.pdf

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