The Struggle for Cultural Recognition and Women's Human Rights: Lessons from the Experience of Irish Traveller Women

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The 1990s global campaign for women's human rights is most associated with achieving international recognition of violence against women as a human rights issue. However, the campaign has mostly 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. This false dichotomy obscures the complex ways in which women's human rights claims and cultural rights claims are often interrelated, especially in advocacy efforts to secure the human rights of marginalized minorities. One example of this interrelation is found in the Irish Travellers movement where cultural rights and women's rights are treated as inseparable aspects of the same struggle.

TRAVELLERS IN IRELAND

A particular Traveller culture distinguishes Travellers from the majority population of Ireland, or 'settled people'. There are about 24,000 Travellers in a national population of four million. Traveller identity is constituted by a shared history, common values, an oral tradition, a unique language (called Cant, Gammon, or Shelta), and a nomadic way of life.[1] Historically, Irish Travellers were 'commercial nomads' who engaged in tin-smithing, seasonal farm work and providing entertainment. The modernisation of the Irish economy has significantly eroded the economic niche filled by Travellers, but nomadism continues to be a deeply valued expression of Traveller culture.[2] As one Traveller has put it, "Travellers remain Travellers even when they are not travelling." [3]

Despite living in one of the wealthiest European nations, Irish Travellers currently 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 a low life expectancy: over 40 percent of Travellers are under 15, while only 5 percent are aged 50 or more. More than one-fifth of Traveller families live on temporary roadside sites where survival without basic services and facilities is a constant struggle. [4]

THE IRISH TRAVELLER MOVEMENT

In the early 1980s an Irish Travellers' movement emerged that explicitly framed Travellers' rights as human rights. The Travellers' rights group Pavee Point played a major role in shaping this movement. A fundamental cornerstone of Pavee Point's platform is that "Travellers...have *a right to assert and celebrate their distinct ethnic identity"*. This cultural right is tied to the human right of Travellers to "access 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".[5] In this way the struggle for culturally appropriate provision of accommodation, education, training and so on relies upon acceptance of the claim that Travellers are a minority group with culturally specific needs that ought to be met. In this context, 'culturally appropriate' accommodation 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 assumptions about parental literacy need to be examined.

Despite the fact that progress has been made by the Irish Traveller movement in contesting anti-Traveller discrimination over the past decade, there is little positive recognition of Travellers' cultural identity in Irish society today. Indeed, the limited gains made by Irish Travellers in securing cultural recognition as an ethnic minority have recently been contested by the state. Specifically, in the state's first report under the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2003, the Irish government asserts that "Irish Travellers do not constitute a distinct group...in terms of race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin."

TRAVELLER WOMEN

According to Ronnie Faye, director of Pavee Point, there are "no Travellers' rights without Traveller women's rights." Further, she argues, 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, for example…" [6] Recently, a newspaper columnist 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." Another columnist in the same paper previously described Travellers as following "a life of appetite ungoverned by intellect....worse than the life of beasts…" In another instance a member of the Irish parliament publicly advocated that the number of Travellers should be limited through the use of birth control. [7]

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".[8] Catherine Joyce, a Traveller and community worker with Pavee Point and an active member of the National Traveller Women's Forum, elaborates on what it means to negotiate life at the intersection of sexist and anti-Traveller discrimination, especially for Traveller 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 impacts [on 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...[9]

Joyce also draws attention to the particular pressures that Traveller women experience in their roles at the 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… [10]

Joyce's account underlines the imperative of recognising the cultural rights of Travellers as an ethnic group in building the case for culturally appropriate service provision and easing the specific hardships faced by Traveller women. This is also vital in ameliorating the widespread hostility and discrimination against Traveller women in their daily lives. Traveller women also engage with wider the feminist movement and challenge sexism in their lives. Pavee Point's "Traveller Women and Domestic Violence" project is a good example. A collaboration between Traveller women, a health board and women's groups, the project's purpose is to develop culturally appropriate responses to violence against women in the Traveller Community. [11]

CONCLUSION

Advocacy with and by Irish Traveller women to define and secure their human rights offers an important example of how the struggle for cultural rights and recognition is inextricably linked to the struggle for women's human rights. Traveller women's intersectional analysis of the discrimination they face as "as women, as Travellers, and as Traveller women" underlines their multifaceted struggle and the need for a multifaceted response. From this perspective, the protection and promotion of Traveller women's human rights demands in equal measure -- cultural rights and recognition as members of an ethnic minority, freedom from anti-Traveller discrimination, and freedom from sexist discrimination inside and outside their community.

NOTES

1. "Traveller and Roma Community," National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (http://www.nccri.ie/cdsu-travellers.html)
2. "Travellers: Nomads of Ireland - an introduction to the Traveller way of life", Pavee Point, Dublin, nd. (http://www.paveepoint.ie/nomadsof.html)
3. Michael McDonagh "Nomadism in Irish Traveller Identity" in McCann, O'Siocháin, and Ruane (eds) *Irish Travellers: Culture and Ethnicity* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queens University 1996)
4. "Travellers in Ireland: An Examination of Discrimination and Racism" Report of the Irish National Co-ordinating Committee for the European Year Against Racism, 1997 (www.nccri.ie/travellr.html)
5. "About Us", Pavee Point, Dublin nd. (http://www.paveepoint.ie/pav_values_a.html)
6. Interview with Ronnie Fay, May 2004.
7. See Gwen Halley "Better to Dump the Romantic Notion of Nomadism than the Usual Rubbish" (The Sunday Independent July 4, 2004); Mary Ellen Synon "Time To Get Tough On Tinker Terror 'Culture'" (Sunday Independent 28th January, 1996); and

"Deasy suggests birth control to limit traveller numbers" (Irish Times, June 14, 1996.)
8. "Political Discrimination and Persecution," by Catherine Joyce in Women's Rights as Human Rights: Local and Global Perspectives, edited by Niamh Reilly, Irish Council for Civil Liberties, Dublin, March 1997.
9. ibid
10. NTWF Brochure (1995)
11. Traveller Women, Fact Sheet, Pavee Point, Dublin n/d.