



National Traveller Women's Forum
4-5 Eustace Street, Dublin 2
info@ntwf.net
01-7383874

Women in Leadership: Citizens Assembly September 2020 – Maria Joyce

Introduction:

The National Traveller Women's Forum is the National Network of Traveller women and Traveller women's organisations from throughout Ireland. We recognise the particular oppression of Traveller women in Irish society - working from a human rights perspective

Traveller women experience the inequality that all women experience, in addition we deal with the inequalities that Travellers experience. In many cases it is the latter inequality, which is forced to prominence as it fundamentally affects our ability to live our lives and provide for our families. Our focus today is on leadership but I must acknowledge first before I move on the huge challenges we face as women and Traveller women.

Input:

Traveller women have made a significant contribution to the state through our participation on local and national social policy committees where we represent the issues of our community. Traveller women have a wealth of experience in consultation, policy development, negotiation, collaboration and compromise, sometimes in hostile environments. In fact, I couldn't think of a group more suited to politics and public life

Traveller women have not always been treated with the respect that they should be afforded in these consultative spaces and the reality is that given the nature of the structures which have limited decision making powers we have often seen little return for our work despite the contribution and time we have invested.

Traveller women views/opinions are rarely sought in the formulation of policy development other than with regard to Traveller specific issues. Our participation in political and public life must go beyond this. We want to contribute to wider policy discussion and decision making in the same way that women from the majority population have important contributions to make beyond women's issues. This will require not just our access to spaces where decisions are made but also to roles where we can have influence and help develop innovative thinking required more than ever in these challenging times.

The benefits of more diverse and representative decision making bodies for increasing accountability to and improving outcomes for the public is now well established. However, there are particular barriers that Traveller women face in becoming involved in politics and the biggest one is the racism that we often encounter in daily life that is magnified when we look to be involved in public life. Racism compounds the

barriers that we already face when we seek leadership roles. Racism and gender inequality work together to exclude Traveller women from the networks and resources that can pave the path to a public role. Politicians and political parties have a particular responsibility to call out racism and promote diversity and inclusion in public life including supporting Traveller women as candidates for political office. Travellers have run in national and local elections, with some successes but it is not a level playing field and it is a daunting task. I admire the courage and strength of all Travellers who have put themselves forward in elections in this country.

Regardless of the recommendations made by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities,¹ CERD,² and former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights,³ the State has not adopted positive action measures to improve on the underrepresentation of Travellers in political institutions and public affairs.

Senator Eileen Flynn's nomination to the Seanad as the first ever Traveller woman to take a seat in any of the houses of the Oireachtas was a very historic and proud day for very many Travellers. We have been too long waiting for this and I hope that in 10/20 years time we will be able to reflect back on and recognise that this wasn't a once off event but an important step along the way for real acknowledgement of the role Traveller women have played and will play in public life.

We have things to say and we want to contribute to political and public life. That phrase that is so often used in the wider gender debate "if you can't see it you can't be it" - is of even more relevance for young Traveller women who have the vision, ambition and capability but not the opportunities. Our daughters and granddaughters want and need to see Traveller women in public life and in decision making structures at all levels.

Recommendation:

To paraphrase Ruth Bader Ginsburg (may she rest in power) "Traveller women belong in all places where decisions are being made."

- We want to see Traveller women take an active role in formal political structures - in the Dail, Seanad, Citizens' Assemblies and local councils (across all parties and none). We want our participation strengthened in local and national government and community engagement structures. Not forgetting state boards that have achieved 40% participation for women but unfortunately there is no visibility of Traveller or other marginalised women.
- This is not going to happen just by saying it needs to happen. It will require intent, effort and resources. Targeted training, mentoring, initiatives to combat racism and measures such as designated seats in the Oireachtas have a role to play in supporting Traveller women's participation in political and other state decision making structures.

¹ Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2012.

² CERD, 2005 and 2011.

³ Council of Europe, *Report by the Commissioner for Human Rights Mr. Thomas Hammarberg on His Visit to Ireland, Strasbourg, 2008*, https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?p=&id=1283555&Site=CommDH&BackColorInternet=FEC65B&BackColorIntranet=FEC65B&BackColorLogged=FFC679&direct=true#P402_100717&direct=true.