

Report on the Presentation by Niall Crowley of the Equality Authority to the Irish Traveller Movement AGM 25/3/00

The Equality Authority was opened in October 1999 to coincide with the passing of the Employment Equality Act, which gave the Equality Authority its mandate to combat discrimination and to promote equality.

The Equality authority mandate covers the nine grounds of age, disability, race gender, family status, marital status, sexual orientation, religion, and membership of the Traveller community. Travellers have their own ground and are also present in all other grounds.

At present the Equality Authority is waiting to get its full staff complement and for the passing of the Equal Status Act. After many years of waiting for Equality Legislation, Niall highlighted the fact that we are now seeing movement in this area and it is likely that the act will be enacted before the summer.

Rights can only be as strong as the institutions which are behind them and it is therefore important that the Equality Authority and its work are given increased strength through cooperation with Traveller organisations and other NGO's working to meet equality objectives.

Over the past five months the Equality Authority has received over 3,000 queries. The gender ground has been dominant where women are experiencing discrimination in the workplace. This is despite the existence of legislation to protect women at work for the last twenty years. Queries in relation to this issue have related to discrimination related to pregnancy discrimination, working conditions, equal pay and sexual harassment. Of the new grounds the ones that are emerging fastest are those of disability, race, age and sexual orientation.

Few queries have been brought to the Equality Authority on the Traveller ground. Niall highlighted the fact that Traveller groups have over the years led the campaign for and critique of, equality legislation. Now that the legislation is passed it is very important to see the legislation as worthwhile. If Travellers experience discrimination they must be encouraged to have confidence in the legislation and to contact the Equality Authority for advice. Two institutions have been established on the basis of this legislation. These are, the Equality Authority and the office of the Director of the Equality Investigations. The Equality Authority is involved in the provision of information and advice, assisting in the carrying out of equality reviews and the development of action plans in organisations, the preparation of codes of practise for submission to the Minister, the undertaking of research which should develop new thinking regarding equality, and the undertaking of demonstration projects. The Equality Authority can also provide free legal representation as appropriate.

The office of the Director of Equality Investigations is where the Equality officers are located who will hear cases and make judgement on these.

There is now a central challenge to Traveller groups to be advocates for the rights established under the legislation so Travellers are aware of them and have confidence in asserting them.

Three further key challenges were presented including:

Mainstreaming Equality – which will involve ensuring all policy and practice, contributes to the promotion of equality, checking decisions for their impact, and promoting innovation. Ensuring mainstream provision realises outcomes for Travellers is a challenge. Equally there is a challenge to identify what characteristics of Travellers need to be taken into account when checking decisions for their impact on Travellers.

Targeting Resources – The rationale for targeting Travellers should be to take account of cultural diversity, the history of inequality experienced by some groups and to create the conditions for mainstreaming. In this area of ensuring that targeting does not become segregation is crucial. The question of when targeting should finish and mainstream provision begin also needs to be monitored.

Participation – Participation by groups and communities experiencing inequality in policy formation as well as in the implementation of policy is of vital importance.

Niall concluded his presentation by stressing the commitment of the Equality Authority to being accessible, to producing relevant materials, to working in partnership, to being free of discrimination and to ensuring the inclusion of Travellers in its work.

Some questions posed from the floor include:

1) Do we have to wait until the passing of the Equal Status Bill to get information and advice on cases of discrimination in pubs etc.?

Yes because only incidences of discrimination, which occur after the bill is passed, can be looked at.

2) When will the bill be passed?

The bill should come before the Dáil and the Seanad before Easter at which time regulations will be developed. The bill should then be enacted in the summer.

3) How does the Equality Authority decide which organisations to review?

The Equality Authority relies on people to bring issues forward. The Equality Reviews commercial organisations. The Equality Authority is currently drawing up a template for these reviews. The carrying out of equality reviews is seen as a developmental role by the Equality Authority.

4) What plans are there to work with the Equality institutions in the north?

The Equality commission for Northern Ireland and the Equality Authority have agreed a joint text to guide their cooperation and have set-up a joint working group to develop and implement joint work.