



PAVEE POINT
TRAVELLERS CENTRE

Statement at Turn Off the Red Light Submission Launch

Pavee Point is the National Resource Centre for Travellers and Roma in Ireland and is committed to the attainment of human rights for Irish Travellers and Roma. The group is comprised of Travellers and Roma and members of the majority settled population working together in partnership to address the needs of Travellers and Roma as minority ethnic groups experiencing exclusion and marginalisation. The aim of Pavee Point is to contribute to improvement in the quality of life and living circumstances of Irish Travellers and Roma through working for social justice, solidarity, socio-economic development and human rights. We recognise the sexual exploitation of women as a human rights abuse and are committed to the TORL Campaign calling for legislation that will criminalise the purchase of sex in Ireland. Pavee Point has had a dedicated programme addressing Violence Against Women since 1998.

Research has shown that women in prostitution are disproportionately members of socially disadvantaged minority ethnic groups and key factors of vulnerability are poverty, sexism and racism. Given this, we would argue that Traveller and Roma women are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

There is a lack of research with regard to the involvement of Irish Traveller women in prostitution. The lack of disaggregated data based on ethnicity in terms of access to services and referrals, the overall hidden and clandestine nature of prostitution and the understandable reluctance of women to disclose information and to self-identify as a Traveller, means that there is little information on the levels of involvement of Irish Traveller women in prostitution. High levels of stigma and shame associated with sexual violence within the Irish Traveller community also ensures a blanket of silence around the issue.

Anecdotal reports are that Irish Traveller women are involved, both in Ireland and in the United Kingdom, where they often travel to after entering prostitution in this jurisdiction. Irish Traveller women must be considered an at risk group, considering the levels of structural poverty, racism, gender discrimination and social exclusion experienced. The impact of the stigmatisation of women involved in prostitution is particularly acute for Traveller women as they risk being ostracised from their family, community and culture.

Roma women are at particular risk of trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation. A report conducted by the European Roma Rights Centre and People in Need (2011) details the significant overrepresentation of Romani communities in trafficked persons and the high correlation between trafficking of Roma women and children and sexual exploitation. The factors of vulnerability identified for Roma are as those for non-Romani populations, including poverty, ethnic and gender

discrimination and social exclusion, resulting in low formal educational attainment, high rates of unemployment, growing up in state care, domestic violence and substance abuse. The report also details Roma women's experience of discrimination when involved in prostitution in the context of differential treatment in terms of accommodation, food and clothing and increased vulnerability to ill-treatment and abuse. Research undertaken by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency this year has also documented high levels of unemployment in the Roma community, few Roma having health insurance and the fact that 90% of Roma live below national poverty lines. Clearly in this context Roma women are vulnerable to exploitation. (FRA, Research in 11 EU Countries 2012).

Again no specific research or data on the trafficking and prostitution of Roma women in Ireland is available. However as Ireland is a country of destination for trafficked persons, and Roma is a group that is identified as particularly vulnerable and disproportionately represented in the numbers of people trafficked, Roma women and children in Ireland must be considered as at particular risk of prostitution.

The context in which Roma may be coming from is extremely important in understanding Roma women's vulnerability to exploitation and barriers to reporting such exploitation. Anti-Roma racism is widespread throughout Europe. In a report released this year, the former Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Thomas Hammarberg, noted a number of worrying trends, including racist speeches by elected officials, the development of right wing extremist groups, rising activity on the internet and an increase in serious cases and attacks against Roma. These have included arson attacks carried out on families while sleeping.

The last few months alone may give you a sense of what is happening. In June, in Slovakia, a gun attack by an off-duty policeman left three Roma dead and two wounded. This was followed by a surge of online support for the gunman. In May, in Romania, two young Roma men were shot dead by police officers in separate incidents. In January, in the Czech Republic a Roma woman was brutally murdered, beaten, kicked and stabbed to death. According to local residents, the attackers are known for giving Nazi salutes in the streets. Only one of the perpetrators was remanded in custody.

The overall point is that anti-Roma racism is resulting in attacks against Roma by civilians and in some cases state authorities, including police. States are failing to protect Roma against racist crime. It is not surprising that many Roma would not trust authorities and non-Roma, as this is based on real and practical experience of racism and violence.

Furthermore, in Ireland, Roma women are placed in vulnerable positions due to State policy. Current social protection policy in terms of the Habitual Residence Condition has a disproportionate impact on Roma communities, putting Roma families, and in particular Roma women and children at risk of poverty and destitution, a fundamental risk factor leading to prostitution.

As members of TORL Campaign we strongly support the call for legislation that will criminalise the purchase of sex in Ireland and decriminalises women who are prostituted, as introduced in Sweden and Norway. In our submission we also argue that:

1. The racism experienced by Travellers and Roma and how this intersects with other factors that place people at risk of trafficking and prostitution need to be acknowledged and understood.

2. The Irish State needs to address the causes of vulnerability to prostitution and change the laws and policies of the Irish state that are placing Roma and Traveller women in vulnerable positions. In particular the Habitual Residence Condition places many Roma in deep poverty and this needs to be reviewed. Along with this a comprehensive NTRIS needs to be developed and we need political leadership on this issue. Particular opportunity to do this in light of upcoming EU presidency.
3. Exit routes for women involved in prostitution should be supported and resourced. In particular Roma women need to be provided with supports and not be deported or pressured to be “voluntarily repatriated”.
4. Ireland is chairing the OSCE and therefore needs to take a lead in implementing the recommendations of the OSCE Action Plan on Trafficking which contains detailed recommendations on data collection and research and we strongly recommend that these are implemented. This would necessitate research on the specific experiences of Travellers and Roma in prostitution and trafficking.
5. There needs to be engagement with Roma women in a positive way through provision of community supports and funding for Roma initiatives, in order to build up trust with community members to access information on sensitive issues including prostitution. This will allow for provision of information on available services and supports and to gain more understanding of Roma, trafficking and prostitution in Ireland in order to address it.

Legislative Change:

- Introduce legislation that criminalises the buyer of sex and decriminalises women who are prostituted, as introduced in Sweden and Norway.
- Allocate sufficient resources to effectively implement a legislative ban on the buying of sex.
- Provisions should be introduced to erase the criminal convictions of those women who have been prostituted.
- Ireland should sign and ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence

Policy Change:

- Exit routes for women involved in prostitution should be supported and resourced. In particular Roma women need to be provided with supports and not be deported or pressured to be “voluntarily repatriated”.

- Women who are trafficked into prostitution should be viewed as victims in need of protection, as well as potential witnesses.
- There is a lack of policies to ensure the inclusion of Roma in Irish society and we need a strong, progressive National Traveller Roma Integration Strategy that will improve the lives of Travellers and Roma. The current strategy is inadequate and needs to be revised with the active participation of Travellers, Roma and wider civil society – as per the direction of the European Commission. This implementation of these strategies would address risk factors for Roma throughout Europe and Ireland needs to meet its obligations in this regard. (As future Chair of the EU we are obligated to show leadership on this).
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- As per the OSCE Action Plan there is a need to develop community policing programmes to raise levels of trust between police and the public to increase ability of victims to report offences. There is a need for understanding of the negative experiences that many Roma have had at the hands of authorities and pro-active measures taken to build up trust.
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- The OSCE Action Plan has detailed recommendations on data collection and research and we strongly recommend that these are implemented. This would necessitate research on the specific experiences of Travellers and Roma in prostitution and trafficking such research needs to be done in partnership with Traveller organisations as well as known support services who work in the area of women in crisis.
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