

MINORITY RIGHTS NOW!

Northern Ireland and the Roma: Challenging our Ethical and Legislative Boundaries

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Editorial

Françoise is originally from France and has been living in Northern Ireland for 14 years. She holds a Post-Master's degree in translation from the University of Lille and a PhD on Northern Irish Politics from the English Department of the University of Paris 8. She has been working with Human Rights NGOs for the past 6 years.

Peace moves in mysterious ways...

It all started when the 1998 Friday Agreement brought a relative peace to Northern Ireland, bringing hope for a better future for all. Investments flooded in, regeneration and cross-community initiatives flourished and the economic and social landscape generally changed for the better.

Unfortunately, some areas, such as the Greater Village area of Belfast, fell off the radar of the movers and shakers, leaving old and new prejudices to melt into a kaleidoscope of blind fear of the unknown.

'Them and us' was replaced by 'both of us', and a collective sigh of relief was breathed ... Shame that 'all of the others', the vulnerable minorities, were brushed under the Stormont carpet. And here we are now, aligning to the rest of Europe, albeit 50 years late, trying to get our heads around the influx of migrants benefiting from free movement across Europe and asylum seekers in need of a safe haven.

Northern Ireland is by nature a place where the notion of what really matters in life is deeply engrained. So is compassion. The Troubles have made sure that the meaning of enjoying shelter, food on the table, and freedom from fearing daily for your life and that of your loved ones will never be forgotten.

Asylum seekers and migrant workers have arrived on our shores looking for exactly that: safety, food, shelter, the absolute and fundamental right to not be attacked or threatened; the strict necessities that we now take for granted.

However, on numerous occasions our eyes have closed faced to a reality that was ours just a few decades ago. Lessons have to be learned from our past, from Europe's past, and from ourselves as actively peaceful members of a demographically evolving, diverse, vibrant community.

The June attacks on the Roma have left them fearful of potentially life-threatening media exposure. In November, a page on a social internet interface, dedicated exclusively to abusing the Roma population of Belfast, attracted nearly 400 fans before it was shut down. Trying to make a living while desperately seeking anonymity is a catch 22, which leaves the Roma population of Belfast unable to react.

Time to give the speechless a voice.
Time for reflection, action, legislation!



Françoise Barlet, Editor

New on NICEM's website

DISCOVER our brand new website! www.nicem.org
POLICY Single Equality Bill conference, September 09 – get the info, download the documents, receive the report!
HUMAN RIGHTS It's all about the Bill of Rights...

Introduction

By Patrick Yu

Patrick Yu is the Executive Director of the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities. He is actively involved in the race equality and human rights campaign in Northern Ireland, UK, Europe and UN. He was awarded an OBE for his work on Community Relations in January 2007.

Patrick argues why migrants significantly improve our chances of economic recovery.

Recent demographic changes have dramatically transformed Northern Ireland's social landscape. New migrants from the EU (Poland, Portugal, Lithuania, etc), third country and non EU nationals (Filipino and other Asians) provide the backbone of our local economy, as well as contributing to key services such as health care, IT, and other professional sectors.

This positive aspect of ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity should be perceived as an asset. Unfortunately, in our post-conflicting society, a small section in both communities cannot help considering these newcomers as a threat. Minority ethnic people (irrespective of being settled ethnic minorities, asylum seekers, refugees or economic migrants) experience low levels of intimidation and harassment on a daily basis. The upsurge of racist attacks in 2003 sent a shockwave to Northern Ireland and across the globe. These attacks clearly impacted on community stability and cohesion. Cue the same pattern in 2009, after the football riot in March, which sent another shockwave to the world. In June 2009, Roma families, including small children, became the latest victims of racist hatred.

Statistics from the then RUC and now the PSNI demonstrate the consistent rise in racially motivated hate incidents in Northern Ireland (with 98 racial incidents in 1998-1999 increasing to 990 in 2008-2009). The recorded racial incidents and crimes are only the tip of the iceberg. There are a lot of Black and Minority Ethnic people who do not report these types of incidents and crimes for various reasons (see NICEM Research Report)¹. These include poor experience in the past with the police when reporting racial incidents, perceptions that the police cannot help or that matters would not be treated seriously. Other reasons include fear of retaliation and negative perception of the police by some minority ethnic people, in particular by Irish Travellers. The first Hate Crime Report published in January 2007 by the Criminal Justice Inspectorate, confirmed concerns about under-reporting and the reasons behind it.

More shockingly, the PSNI's percentage of the clearance rate of racial offences has plummeted: 20.5% in 2005-2006, 13.4% in 2006-2007, 11.4% in 2007-2008 and 12.5% in 2008-2009. This extremely poor clearance rate raises a fundamental question: where is the justice for the victims?

¹Robbie McVeigh, "The Next Stephen Lawrence?: the experiences of victims in criminal justice system in Northern Ireland", NICEM, May 2006.

The Criminal Justice Inspectorate's Hate Crime Report portrayed the same concerns regarding low clearance rates, which are far below national comparators. If justice is not being provided to BME victims, it will have a serious impact on community confidence in the justice system and good race relations in Northern Ireland.

In February 2004, the Parliamentary Northern Ireland Committee launched an inquiry into Hate Crime in Northern Ireland against the troubling background of the 2003 events. Immediately prior to the announcement of the Inquiry, the Northern Ireland Office published its proposal for a draft Criminal Justice (NI) Order containing measures to deal with crimes based on hostility against race, sectarianism and sexual orientation. The Northern Ireland Committee published its Report: "The Challenge of Diversity: Hate Crime in Northern Ireland" in April 2005, which identified a number of areas for improvement within the administration (from the criminal justice system to education, local government, etc.) and the Government responded in its report to the Committee on 19 July 2005 with a number of measures to be introduced.

The administration had published the Framework Policy document on "Shared Future" in May 2005 and the Racial Equality Strategy 2005-2010, with the support from the BME sector, in July 2005. This policy document provides a comprehensive strategy to tackle racism in our society through the implementation of an Action Plan by each department and their next step agencies.

Unfortunately, most of the Departments show low commitment levels and lack of leadership in relation to completing the Action Plan properly, including available resources. The Assembly had their first motion debate on the Racial Equality Strategy on 3 July 2006 after the Assembly voted down the Shared Future Framework Policy Document on 4 June 2006. At the motion debate, all parties supported the Racial Equality Strategy and were very critical of the implementation of the Action Plan by each department. At last the motion was passed without opposition.

Despite this good progress, the Race Strategy has been halted, as a result of political parties disagreeing on the Shared Future Strategy Policy (the Race Strategy also links with the Shared Future Strategy) at the Assembly debate. In effect the Racial Equality Strategy has been frozen since 4 June 2006 and the new Programme "Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (under the Programme for Government 2008-2011) has not been agreed by the two main parties. The lack of progress policy-wise and the resultant vacuum gives extremists a free ride.

A NICEM day-to-day account of the Roma crisis

By Jolena Flett, Racial Harassment Advice Manager and Development Officer

Jolena is originally from Denver CO where she worked in a residential treatment centre for adolescents with mental health issues. She obtained a Bachelors of Science in Psychology from the University of Colorado. She has been living in Belfast since 2003 and holds a Masters in Criminology from Queens University. She has been working with NICEM for six years supporting victims of racist violence and harassment, conducting anti-racism training, and working with Black and Minority Ethnic groups on capacity building and quality assurance.

Jolena describes two weeks of intensive crisis-resolution work

15 June

NICEM was first made aware of the attacks on the Roma families in Belfast on 15 June, when Socialist Youth activists rang to request an interpreter for the families to speak with the press.

As our priority is safety in such a case, I went to meet the families to assess their situation and take any action required to ensure their safety.

The families were shaken and upset as they explained that their windows and doors had been smashed on the previous Saturday, which was the climax of days of irregular attacks and verbal abuse.

One of the main difficulties was gathering statements from the families and others about the circumstances of the attacks and what had happened in the days beforehand. It was difficult to differentiate between what had actually happened from what was simply assumed.

At that point in time approximately 50 people from the three houses that had been attacked had gathered together.

Families were afraid to even go down the street to a shop to buy essentials and the first priority was to ensure their safety. I contacted the PSNI Community Safety Unit to ensure that the Hate Crime Investigators were aware of the situation and that they would take the necessary steps to have the broken windows boarded up, thereby reducing the risks of further attacks.

Having ensured that the police would take action, I asked the families to prepare a list of each individual and to indicate whether they wished to stay in Northern Ireland or leave the country. At this point, many individuals declared they would rather stay and be moved to a different area of Belfast. The families agreed to re-assess the situation with the Hate Crime investigators, Social Services and myself the next day.

That night, a rally in protest against the attacks led to confrontations between the protesters and teenagers from the Village Area of Belfast, making the situation increasingly volatile.

16 June

Alarmed by the escalation in tension and the budding media interest in the attacks, 63 new people joined the Roma families in Wellesley Avenue to find safety in numbers, declaring themselves directly or indirectly linked with the families.

Accompanied by a Hate Crime investigator, I was given a list of 100 names upon arrival. Given that the situation had been aggravated by the tensions created the night before, and the large number of families involved, further police presence was requested to ensure their safety and to begin enquiries in the area.

On edge, tired and unsure who to believe about the level of danger they were in, the Roma families decided they could not separate and would not be safe in their homes, despite police assurances that they would be protected by a 24-hour patrol at each property if they stayed.

By that stage, we were trying to contain the media, now aware of the attacks and of the presence of NGOs, social services and the PSNI in Wellesley Avenue. This was to ensure the families would not be exposed in the media before their safety could be ensured.

Families became more frightened and agitated as there were so many outside organisations all trying to talk to them, some without interpreters. However, they did their best to remain calm and cooperative despite the media chaos and lack of coordination amongst the responding agencies.

As tension increased while options were being explored, the only alternative that the families felt comfortable with was moving to a different location where support agencies could talk with them on an individual basis and try to calm the fears. The families were given shelter at City Church, where the Church and Red Cross provided bedding, food and support throughout the evening.

17 June

After a short night, families, small and tired children in tow, vacated the Church and were moved to the Ozone Leisure Centre by the Belfast City Council, in the South East of the city. The Housing Executive and Social Services were there to talk to each family individually and start the process of determining needs and eligibility for support.

The Belfast City Council called a planning meeting to talk about strategy and next steps. Unfortunately, the large amount of attendees limited the amount of strategies that could be discussed or decided upon. It was determined that the best course of action would be for Social Services and the Housing Executive to take the lead and to include the NGOs parentheses (such as NICEM, the South Belfast Roundtable on Racism, and Embrace) that had been working with the families on the ground. In this way there would be consistency for the families and assurance of support throughout this time.

The families, now thoroughly exhausted and unsettled, were moved to temporary accommodation arranged by the Housing Executive.

18-21 June

After the families arrived at the temporary accommodation, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust took the operational lead on the ground to support them. This assistance covered a broad range of services, including the coordination of catering, attending to health needs and general support on a 24-hour basis. Organisations such as NICEM, Embrace and the South Belfast Roundtable on Racism and several others provided additional and much needed assistance. Clothing and food were provided through generous donations from several charities, community groups and businesses.

After days of uncertainty, fear, and media, the families felt vulnerable and afraid that their children may be injured or worse. Many families felt the safest course of action was to return to Romania with their children as no one's safety could be guaranteed. Only two brothers decided to remain in Belfast and return to work.

During this time, I was in daily contact with the Romanian Consul, who agreed to organise travel documents for those wishing to return to Romania, and NICEM's Executive Director was continuously updating OFMDFM. We were ready for the next step.

22-26 June

After much discussion and debate in the higher echelons of government and public bodies, it was agreed that funding would be provided for those with children to return to Romania. Some of the people had their own money to buy tickets to return and for those who did not qualify for the assistance from the government, single individuals and those without any children, donations from several charities and organisations were collected.

To ensure a smooth return, NICEM contacted the European Roma Rights Centre and the Open Society Institute Roma Initiative in Budapest, so they could meet the families at the airport and help them with arrange appropriate transport into Romania.

We collaborated with these Budapest-based organisations to coordinate action with Romani CRISS (Romani Center for Social Intervention and Studies), so that the families could be welcomed and given support on arrival in Romania.

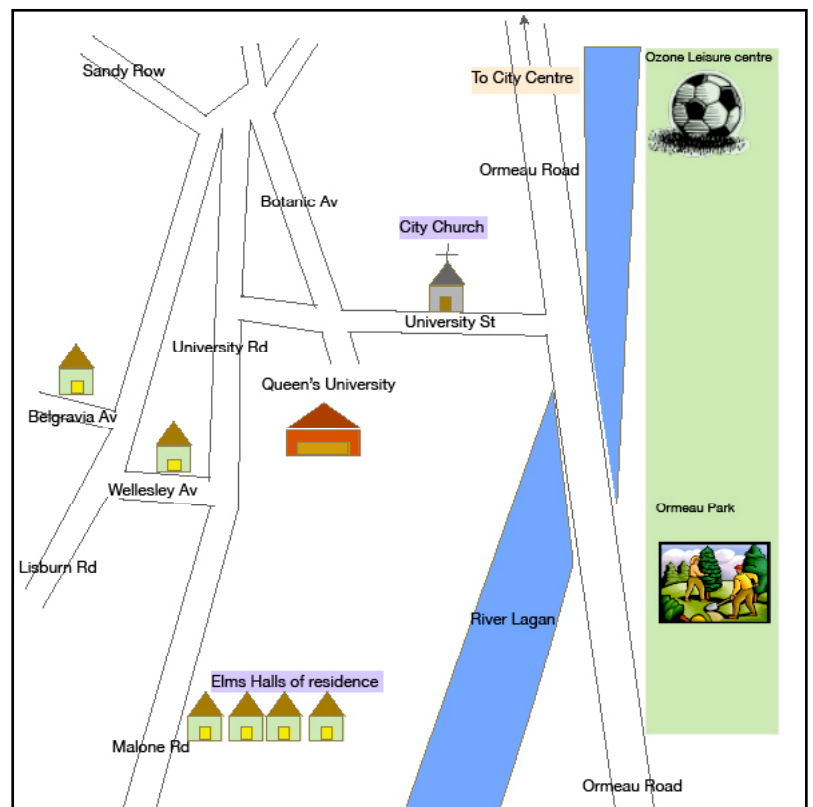
29 June onwards - lessons and aftermath

By then the attacks on the Roma families in Belfast were making headline news worldwide. Subsequently, as one of the main players involved in the crisis, NICEM received a request from the European Commission to debrief their officials on the situation.

Initially, NICEM's communication strategy focussed on damage limitation. We ensured that the correct information was provided to the media whilst ensuring that it would not harm the families' safety. Disclosing locations or names was out of the question.

NICEM disseminated two press releases and gave interviews during the period of the crisis in order to correct inaccurate information in the media and to insist on the need for strong political leadership and a governmental strategy to prevent this from happening again. In order to ensure that the tragic circumstances and consequences of the crisis are not forgotten, NICEM assisted journalists from the BBC, the Guardian/Observer, and The Times to write feature articles about the Roma's life in their hometowns. They visited the families who had returned to Romania; NICEM's partner, the European Roma Rights Centre, sensitively facilitated these meetings with the media.

This was the first time that Northern Ireland had to deal with an ethnically-based humanitarian crisis. There have been debriefing sessions since the incident at various levels of government. The purpose of these was to provide motivation for a new approach and comprehensive strategy. However, there has been little evidence of movement and we can only hope the lessons from June have not been forgotten.



The Housing Executive

By Linda Hutchinson, Race Relations Officer in the Community Cohesion Unit

NORTHERN
IRELAND
HOUSING
EXECUTIVE

The Housing Executive on the provision of emergency accommodation

The Housing Executive's key role in the multi-agency response in June was to meet the immediate emergency accommodation needs of the families and individuals involved. The Housing Executive, through the Homelessness Services Unit (HSU), is responsible for the delivery of our homelessness services in Belfast and has been involved in the provision of emergency temporary accommodation following previous crises such as following wide scale flooding or civil unrest.

As soon as Housing Executive staff became aware of the potential housing implications of the incident an emergency response was initiated. A team of staff from the South Belfast District Office and the HSU was sent to meet the people involved at the Ozone Centre to begin the process of Homeless assessments. The Housing staff set up multi agency information collection tables at which the process of recording names and individual needs was carried out. This was done in partnership with PSNI and Social Services and there was an interpreter allocated to each team. However, it was clear that many people were distressed, tired and did not have the required documentation with them to complete the necessary enquiries.

The Housing Executive was able to arrange suitable accommodation enabling all 113 people to be housed together in a safe and secure location within the South Belfast area and worked with the accommodation provider and other partners to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to have a warm meal and were then allocated accommodation to meet their immediate needs.

Over the next few days all the applicants were assessed as ineligible for housing / homelessness assistance. It was becoming increasingly clear that most people wished to return to their homeland and Embrace NI (a Christian based charity recognised for its expertise in this field of work) was engaged to assist in the practicalities of repatriation.

Prior to the crisis, the Housing Executive had been working on a multi agency approach to dealing with racist incidents and providing services for victims. The Bi-lingual Community Safety Advocacy' Scheme was developed in partnership with PSNI in South and East Belfast, the Chinese Welfare Association, Polish Association N.I, the Community Safety Partnership and Belfast City Council Good Relations Unit and was launched on 23 June 2009. At this launch Jennifer Hawthorne of the Housing Executive's Cohesion Unit said:

"People experiencing harassment, whether Housing Executive tenants or not, need to know

about our services such as help to repair property damage, the provision of temporary accommodation and advice and assistance with general housing problems. The advocacy scheme will help us address the housing needs of those who are vulnerable within our society and help us to create an environment which encourages community cohesion and racial harmony and prevents further harassment.”

The close working relationships existing between the Housing Executive and staff from Belfast City Council, PSNI, NICEM, the accommodation provider and the South Belfast Round Table on Racism in particular were invaluable in the response process and the Housing Executive is continuing to work closely with a range of agencies and groups to monitor tensions, support communities, deal with housing issues in private rented accommodation such as Houses in Multiple occupation, tackle hate crime and anti-social behaviour and promote good relations.

The European Roma Rights Centre on the repatriation process

By Victoria Vassey, Legal Consultant

Victoria Vasey is a UK barrister currently working for the European Roma Rights Centre



Victoria paints the picture of a grim return to Romania

The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), based in Budapest, is an international public interest law organisation engaging in a range of activities aimed at combating anti-Romani racism and human rights abuse of Roma. We had followed with concern events unfolding in Belfast in mid-June – an all-too familiar scene of racist violence directed towards Roma accompanied by poor government responses. It followed an 18 month period in which nine Romani men, women and children had been murdered in Hungary alone and reported incidents of violence against Roma across Europe had been on the rise.

The fact that this highly publicised episode was played out in Belfast highlighted the reality of wide-spread anti-Romani racism, defying the popular perception that such events are exclusive to the Central and Eastern European stage.

Therefore the ERRC responded readily to a request from NICEM, our European partner organisation, to meet and accompany groups of Romanian Roma as they transited through Budapest's Ferihegy Airport on their journeys from Northern Ireland to Romania. On the evenings of 25 and 26 June, ERRC staff members, together with staff from the Budapest offices of the Open Society Institute and independent activists, met groups arriving on three flights from Dublin. The mission was primarily to ensure safe passage of over 100 people through the airport to buses waiting to continue the journey to Romania; but also to document what had happened. What were the experiences of the families throughout the violence? Had they been afforded government protection from that violence? What really were the circumstances of this mass repatriation? What awaited them in Romania?

Families carrying their salvaged belongings through the airport appeared afraid and were apprehensive to speak about their experiences. They told, however, of violent attacks and of fear and of confusion over the repatriation process.

They described having no opportunity to evaluate the situation and accepting the aeroplane tickets offered in the absence of another option.

Very shortly families had boarded the buses waiting for them to be whisked away 'home' to Romania. Our representatives were not permitted by the drivers to board buses, to speak more or to continue to Romania to ensure that the uncertain situation on return was safe.

Other than our delegation, the only other people involved in the operation were the bus drivers. The process was, nonetheless, swift and eerily efficient.

Already at the airport some in the group reported a desire to return to Belfast, despite their economic hardship and threats to their lives. They intended to leave their children in safe custody in Romania and return to Belfast. Follow-up research by the ERRC in July in both Romania and Belfast confirmed the intentions expressed during the brief contact in Budapest, both about experiences in Belfast and a dogged determination to return. Indeed, only a couple of weeks after the attacks and repatriation exercise some of the Romani men were back in Belfast returning to the jobs that they had been forced to leave and trying to find accommodation secure enough to bring their families back to.

Government response in June was an inadequate quick-fix. EU citizens and victims of racist violence had simply been paid to go away.

But they are back. They want to work and they want to exercise their rights to move and reside freely within the European Union. Until the government acts to properly tackle the spectre of racist violence and to develop policies of social inclusion, which will allow Roma to live and work in decent conditions, this dismal and dangerous cycle risks repetition.

The media perspective

By Bimpe Archer

Bimpe is currently a reporter for the Irish News in Belfast. She holds a First Class BA in English and Modern History at Queen's University and a Postgraduate diploma in Newspaper Journalism from the University of Ulster. In 2007, she won CIPR Journalist of the Year and Print News Journalist of the Year.

Bimpe explains the challenges of covering a sensitive story

I think any journalist who said they saw the Roma crisis coming would be lying.

For many the first we were aware that there was a particularly severe race-hate problem in the lower Lisburn Road area of south Belfast was when we were invited along to cover an anti-racism rally.

As a journalist working in the city for the last eight years I have covered many cases involving attacks on ethnic minorities and the resulting distress they cause.

Most have been in the nearby Village area, where it is thought these latest attacks originated.

The lower Lisburn Road is just streets away from those previous attacks, its long tree-lined streets of terraced houses increasingly occupied by short term tenants, many of them migrant workers.

The changing face of the area is most visible in a well-established Polish corner shop.

Although we were later to find out details of the ongoing campaign of harassment against the Roma workers, living within streets of each other in two or three houses, the events at the protest appeared to be a sudden flare of violence.

The Irish News was one of just a few news organisations that sent staff to cover the event and the resulting photographs made it front page news.

There followed a scramble to get on top of the story.

Sympathetic residents began contacting the newsroom; their eye witness accounts were invaluable to flesh out the story.

Information from police was minimal and telephone calls to organisations helping the migrants did not yield much more.

It was frustrating as a reporter.

It was possible, perhaps even probable, that the support groups were too busy helping the residents to have time to field the deluge of calls from reporters.

However, the impression we were getting at the time was that they were not clear themselves of what was going on and were not keen to have the media involved.

We are ever mindful of the need for responsible reporting of such events, but the only way it can be achieved is by having all the available facts in order to reflect what has happened. **The process becomes much more precarious when we have to feel our way in the dark.**

Talking to the Roma proved problematic as well.

The affected families were quickly tracked down, gathered in the street outside one house. However, the language barrier proved an unyielding one and once again we found ourselves relying on concerned neighbours to talk us through the events.

It was a rolling story in a way that rarely happens in Northern Ireland any more. It seemed that no sooner had the reporter on the day shift filed their copy than nightdesk was updating or in some cases re-writing it entirely.

From the aftermath of the disrupted protest and the background to the harassment, to the Roma's emergency shelter in a nearby church and then their transfer to a leisure centre, events seemed to escalate in a very short space of time.

Before we knew it, the press were encamped in a makeshift media studio in the leisure centre's foyer, scrambling to interview a parade of politicians, police officers and statutory agencies.

Every fresh arrival of Roma saw a feeding frenzy as photographers jostled for their shot and reporters tried to get them to speak.

It wasn't as callous as it might sound. The Roma appeared in good spirits and eager to tell their stories in response to questions in halting Italian.

The flow of information became smoother, the reliable sources clearer, in the final days. As statutory agencies took control we were able to get a clearer image of what was happening, working with trusted contacts to communicate the situation to readers, without threatening the safety of the migrant workers in their new accommodation.

And just like that it was all over.

With the benefit of hindsight I would say it wasn't the story that was unusual, simply the scale.

The EU perspective

By Dr Catriona Burness

Catriona is a freelance writer, currently working on EU issues, Scandinavia, and the general question of women and politics. She worked at the European Parliament from 1999-2009, and formerly at the universities of Dundee, Durham, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews.

Catriona analyses Europe's commitment in tackling discrimination

In June Belfast made headlines around the world for all the wrong reasons. Roma families fled their homes after a series of attacks and more than 100 immigrants subsequently returned to Romania. With more than 1,000 racist incidents reported in the province within the last year, there are fears that Northern Ireland faces a race war in place of the Troubles unless racism is confronted.

Amnesty International condemned the attacks in Northern Ireland as part of a trend of growing abuses against Roma across Europe, emphasising that Roma are often victims of forced evictions, racist attacks and police ill-treatment, and are frequently denied their rights to housing, employment, healthcare and education. Amnesty has already investigated attacks across Europe in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia.

Unsurprisingly there are demands for 'Europe' to take action. In December 2007, EU leaders acknowledged for the first time that the Roma face a very specific situation and called on Member States and the Union to act. In July 2008 a Commission Communication set out a renewed commitment to non-discrimination in general and action to improve the situation of Roma in particular.

EU action has focussed on four key areas: rights, policies, financial support and awareness-raising.

In particular, Roma are fully covered by EU legislation which prohibits discrimination on grounds of ethnic origin in employment, social protection and education as well as access to goods and services, including housing.

The Commission also has a role in coordinating Member States' policies on education, employment and social inclusion.

The European Social Fund has been used for schemes such as vocational training to improve Roma job prospects. Over 2000-2006, €275 million went into Roma projects and around €one billion was spent on measures targeted at vulnerable groups, including the Roma.

A recent Commission report highlighted activities supported during 2007-2008. These included a Europe-wide information campaign 'For Diversity – Against Discrimination'; training on EU anti-discrimination law; reports and studies drafted by legal and academic experts; support for the European Roma Information Office; and events, including an Equality Summit and a Roma Summit.

Held on 16 September 2008, the first EU Roma Summit demonstrated determination to address Roma policy. Five European commissioners, representatives from member states and officials from the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the World Bank and the United Nations all took part alongside Roma representatives, including two Hungarian Roma MEPs, Lívia Járóka and Viktória Mohácsi.

However, writing in the European Voice this month (1 October 2009), Valeriu Nicolae and Bernard Rorke of the Open Society Institute asked how much had changed one year on, saying 'The rhetoric may have improved, but violence is on the rise.' The article acknowledged that the 'Commission has moved from passive somnolence to active engagement' but criticised the failure to set up a unit on Roma inclusion and a task force on anti-Gypsyism within the Commission and the lack of clarity on how the EU Roma Platform should formulate a coherent Roma policy. Commission official Belinda Pyke replied, acknowledging, 'there is a lot more to be done. But please do not give the impression that the only thing that has changed is the rhetoric. Progress has been and will be made.' (European Voice, 8 October 2009)

The increase in racist incidents this summer highlights the importance of confronting discrimination. **However, although the EU has a vital role to play, the responsibility for crucial areas such as education, employment, social inclusion lies primarily with Member States. Northern Ireland and other member states must tackle the issue of racism.**

At least the return of several of the Roma who left Belfast during the summer sends a positive message for the province.

The people's perspective

By Jim Dougal

Jim Dougal is a Broadcaster, Writer and Public Affairs adviser. He was formerly Northern Editor of RTE, Political Editor of BBC Northern Ireland and Head of the European Commission Representations in the UK.

Jim reflects on our collective role in bringing an end to racism

When Britain was attempting to come to terms with an influx of immigrants in the nineteen sixties Northern Ireland was in another world. Britain has yet to succeed in this endeavour. How many ghettos are there where the races seem to prefer to live apart or indeed are forced through racism and circumstances to live separately.

Two BBC British Asian Panorama reporters recently spent 8 weeks living and secretly filming themselves being gratuitously abused in a housing estate in Bristol.

Here in the Northern Ireland we have been too exercised by our own sectarianism to worry about people who came from foreign lands. We had our own insular battles to fight. Indeed most who did come worked in our hospitals and served the community or opened Chinese restaurants.

The fact was that people from outside and particularly from within the other countries of the European Union did not see Northern Ireland as a desirable place to settle or even visit. Why would they, given our battle-scarred history?

Meanwhile as we failed to notice the European union grew from 6 to now 27 member states of nearly 500 million people with more to come. Their peace money was welcome though. So when the uneasy peace came in the late nineties and people from within the EU decided to try us out we were not ready for such a radical development. The cancer of sectarianism we could handle as part of a daily malignant diet. Were the new people Catholic or Protestant, Unionist or Nationalist? The fact is of course they are neither in our terms. They were looking for a new life and work in an effort to give their families here or at home a better deal.

The following is an EU mantra:

'Free movement of persons is one of the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by Community law and includes the right to live and work in another Member State. The right of free movement within the Community does not only concern workers, but also other categories of people such as students, pensioners and EU citizens in general. It is perhaps the most important right under Community law for individuals, and an essential element of both the Internal Market and of European citizenship'

It is easy for some to suggest that we have exchanged our sectarianism for racism. The treatment of the Roma community here in July 2009 and the apparent racist attacks on others brings great discredit to a community which has good reason to understand the consequences of hatred for an accident of birth.

On the 18 December 2008 the UK Government announced that for the time being Bulgarians and Romanians would not get free access to the British labour market. It is interesting to note that Bulgarians and Romanians can enter the country to work on a self employed basis, in other words a Romanian or Bulgarian must have his or her own business. So much for the EU mantra!

These supposedly temporary regulations are quite popular with the indigenous populations who see 'these foreigners' as coming to take 'our jobs'. So obviously they will not change for some time.

British fears that enlargement would see an influx of Poles to the UK were unfounded. Those who came filled many jobs the indigenous population did not want to do and many returned home soon afterwards.

Northern Ireland's own sectarian problem spawned numerous organisations to combat it but it continues to exist and we continue to blame the other side when problems arise. NICEM has asked Northern Ireland politicians to focus on tackling racism rather than just condemning it. Condemnation is no substitute for practical action, as NICEM has pointed out. This is a responsibility of the Northern Ireland Executive to implement the promised programme for government to tackle sectarianism and racism.

NGOs and charities have a big role to play on the ground. They were there when the Roma community was attacked.

But it took leadership from the politicians to create a peace process. It will take similar leadership from the top again to set an example and tackle both sectarianism and racism. Quangos seem to multiply themselves by the day.

It is no doubt true that we need local stability to attract foreign investment. Do we then want to try and sell the race capital of Europe instead?

Only legislation can ensure victims' protection

By Jolena Flett, Racial Harassment Advisor, NICEM

Jolena addresses the root causes of our inability to tackle hate crime

Northern Ireland's label of 'hate crime capital of Europe' changed to 'hate crime capital of the world' when Belfast became the centre of the international media's attention. The frenzy started after a series of racially motivated attacks in June left over a hundred Roma homeless. The families were temporarily sheltered by the Housing Executive, cared for by Social Services and eventually repatriated. NICEM (Northern Ireland Council of Ethnic Minorities) became involved with the families through our Racial Harassment Support and Advocacy project the day after the attacks took place. We continued to support the families until they went back to Romania.

Although hate crime is not a new phenomenon in Northern Ireland, this case highlighted serious issues regarding support for victims, particularly those with no recourse to public funds.

The decided lack of clear leadership and strategy in response to the incidents meant there was no clarity on how to approach the families and manage the situation.

In the first instance the response of the Police Service to the families' reports of attack was inadequate. The families clearly felt that they were not being protected and were desperately afraid of remaining in their homes. Two days after the attacks and the smashed doors and windows still had not been boarded up.

There had been no referral to the Housing Executive's HIPA (Hate Incidents Practical Action) scheme, which only the police can make. There had also been no communication with the families from the police to let them know what could be done and what protection they could be provided. This allowed other activists to step in to fill the gap and use what can only be described as vigilante methods.

As a result the families became acutely aware of their vulnerability and believed that they would not be protected should the perpetrators return.

Furthermore, the confusion around statutory obligations and provision of services fostered a level of uncertainty for the families and the workers on the ground. Whereas some of the families had considered staying the confusing messages from politicians about what support and protection was available made the decision to go home the only one they could make with certainty.

The handling of the 'Roma crisis' has had a significant impact on the entire ethnic minority community in Northern Ireland. The disillusionment of these communities around the response to them as victims of hate crime is increased. Additionally, the outpouring of response to this incident while many incidents continue to fall under the radar creates resentment within a community that needs unity to have a strong voice.

While there are few who would deny the importance of implementing a robust strategy to tackle hate crime, there is still a reluctance to face the difficulty caused by EU restrictions and the vulnerability created by the immigration laws.

There is still little movement to implement the Race Equality Strategy to ensure there is a robust governmental framework to combat hate crime. Furthermore, there is still a need to review the role of employers and landlords in this situation and develop a stricter approach to holding them accountable for their actions.

Limits of the law: Section 75, the Bill of Rights and the Roma crisis

By Barry Fitzpatrick

Barry Fitzpatrick is Deputy Director of the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities. He heads up the Policy Team which is responsible for the Strategic Advocacy Programme funded by Atlantic Philanthropies.

Barry explores the legal background to the Roma crisis

The Roma crisis turned the world's spotlight on Belfast, from which it had wandered in recent years. In recent weeks, actual spotlights have been shining on various landmarks around Belfast and Northern Ireland as a film on the life of Mo Mowlam, once Secretary of State for NI, was being filmed here. But 11 years ago, a more positive spotlight was on Belfast, largely as a result of Mo Mowlam's efforts to negotiate the Belfast Agreement of Good Friday 1998.

At the heart of the Belfast Agreement lies respect for human rights and equality. One product of this central focus of the Agreement is section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, which places a duty on a wide range of public authorities to take equality of opportunity into account in their policy-making. One unfulfilled objective of the Belfast Agreement is a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

We sometimes call section 75 a 'mainstreaming' duty in that it is supposed to make equality central to the work of public authorities. More generally, we talk of 'mainstreaming' equality and human rights issues into every aspect of life in Northern Ireland. So it is interesting to consider how the wide range of human and equality rights have coped with the Roma Crisis. Section 75 involves public authorities, using their equality schemes, which have been approved by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, to consider their policies and proposed policies to see if they can have any negative effects, or 'adverse impact', across 9 grounds including racial and ethnic origin. A major problem for NICEM is that there is no policy at all to allow for a 'joined-up' approach across a range of public bodies to deal with situations such as the Roma crisis.

The key policy at issue in the Roma Crisis was the NI Housing Executive's emergency housing policy. This policy has been subject to section 75 processes, known as an equality impact assessment (EQIA). However, in what appears to be a UK-wide development, section 7A(1) (a) of the Housing Order (NI) 1998, introduced by the Housing Order (NI) 2003, provides that "A person is not eligible for assistance under this Part ... if he is a person from abroad who is subject to immigration control and is ineligible for such assistance by virtue of section 119 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999". Special rules apply to nationals of the EU Member States which joined the EU in 2004 (the A8 States) and in 2007 (the A2 States), including Romania. After a period of investigation, the Roma families were deemed ineligible for housing assistance and it was at that stage that funds were found to allow them to return to Romania.

According to the NIHE's 2008 Progress Report to the ECNI, the NIHE did consider its 'Eligibility of Bulgarian and Romanian Nationals for Housing and Homelessness Assistance' policy in 2008 but appear not to have conducted an EQIA on it. But since any such assistance is restricted by the 2003 Order, which in turn is governed by the 1999 Immigration Act, there was not much point in doing so.

Effectively, section 75 has been largely avoided here as what is supposed to be a 'devolved matter' for the NI Assembly and Department of Social Development has been taken over by UK wide immigration laws, which were not subject to section 75.¹

In relation to the Bill of Rights, NICEM has been proactively involved in the processes whereby the NI Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) gave advice to the Secretary of State on a proposed Bill of Rights for NI in 2008, including the intensive processes of the Bill of Rights Forum in 2006-07.

The NI Office has now produced deeply disappointing proposals for a Bill of Rights,² which attempt to exclude any economic and social rights from the NI Bill. It is therefore impossible to have a Bill of Rights in place before the next General Election in the Spring of 2010. If the Commission's advice had been followed, the Bill of Rights would have included a provision, as follows:-

"3. Everyone has the right to appropriate emergency accommodation."

This standard, as discussed and applied in the NIHRC's report, 'No Home From Home' (2009), reflects international human rights standards at both the UN and European levels.³ It is arguable that the Housing Order would have had to be amended to remove the exclusion from emergency housing of those under immigration control. But difficult issues would have remained over the extent to which UK-wide legislation, in this case, the 1999 Immigration Act, could be subject to the Bill of Rights. However, without a Bill of Rights, lobbying groups such as NICEM have to rely on international human rights standards without them being properly recognised in NI.

Both in relation to section 75 and the Bill of Rights, we can see that NI's equality and human rights system still suffers from many inadequacies. First, it can be seen that UK-wide legislation can circumvent section 75 and might also have obstructed the operation of a Bill of Rights. Secondly, we need greater respect for human rights both in NI⁴ and across the UK so that international human rights standards can be applied, particularly in emergency situations such as the Roma crisis, when respect for them is most needed.

¹Or the equivalent race public sector duty in Great Britain, which did not come into effect until after the 1999 Immigration Act was introduced.

²NIO, Consultation Paper: A Bill Of Rights For Northern Ireland: Next Steps, http://www.nio.gov.uk/consultation_paper__a_bill_of_rights_for_northern_ireland__next_steps.pdf (November 2009).

³See Chapter 2 of the NIHRC Report.

⁴See Chapters 3-5 of the NIHRC Report.

By Patrick Yu, Nicem's Executive Director

Patrick explains why wider public participation is the only way forward to achieve equality

Racism is a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Racial violence and harassment is an extreme form but increasingly a common norm of racism in Northern Ireland. The 1994 ceasefire marked the start of a growing spiral of violence against ethnic minorities, who have become the new victims in Northern Ireland's post-conflict society. Is this the peace dividend for ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland?

Sandra Fredman¹ argued four dimensions of racism in our society, namely: 1. denigratory stereotyping, hatred and violence; 2. a cycle of disadvantage; and 3. the negation and even obliteration of culture, religion or language; 4. exclude, expel or repatriate.

Denigratory stereotyping, hatred and violence

It is not about objective characteristics, but about relationships of domination and subordination.

To put it into the local political context it is the territorial issue. It is the hatred of the "Other" in defence of "Self".

It was perpetrated and legitimated through images of the "Other" as inferior, abhorrent, even sub-human. The "Yellow Invasion" leaflet distributed in Donegall Pass in 2004 is a good example. I quote the followings from the leaflet:

"These immigrants occupy a vast amount of our houses stopping any Protestant families moving in that would be more beneficial for the betterment of our community in all aspects of community life. The overwhelming mass of Chinese immigrants in Donegall Pass are driving our youth to move out of the area where they were reared, because they see no future for them in the Chinatown/ Donegall Pass. The Chinese only take from our community and provide nothing for it. These foreign immigrants have no sense of Christian values or decency and have no respect at all for our community.

I firmly believe that it is our duty to defend our community and our Protestant way of life within it.

The influx of the yellow people into Donegall Pass has done more damage than 35 years of the IRA's recent campaign of republican propaganda and violence waged against the Protestant community of Donegall Pass....."

¹ Sandra Fredman (ed), 'Discrimination and Human Rights: The Case of Racism (OUP 2001)'

This view is not just the view of the loyalist paramilitaries who designed and distributed the leaflets. It is also shared by a majority of the local community, based on false information. In 2004, a White Nationalist Party leaflet described asylum seekers as bogus; in 2009, the Ulster British Nationalist Party distributed leaflets demanding “British Jobs for British Workers”, a vision also shared by the local majority.

Another good example is the recent arrival of migrant workers from the A8 and A2 member states, as well as from Portugal, the Philippines and the Indian sub-continent, who have found employment in the sectors of health care, IT, fishing and engineering, etc. The fear of these migrant outsiders taking insiders’ jobs means that the local people feel the need to defend not only their jobs, but also their cultures and identities. As a result, petrol bombs and pipe bombs have been thrown at migrants’ homes, and racist attacks have been widely reported in the areas where they are working and living.

Interestingly, since 9/11 not only have attacks against Muslims increased (local people tend to not distinguish between Sikhs and Muslims who wear turbans), but the international conflict between Palestine and Israel has impacted onto local sectarian politics. Therefore, it is no surprise that the loyalist areas display the Israeli flag and the republican areas display the Palestinian flag in a show of support.

In order to address racism, we need to shift the focus from non-discrimination to human rights protection and the equality principles under human rights laws. It is about mainstreaming race into government policy and practice and the positive duty of the state to ensure that fundamental rights are guaranteed without discrimination and distinction. Only affirmative action can redress the inequalities of the past and those still existing in social institutions, as well as the disadvantaged position of ethnic minorities in our society.

In a nutshell, it is all about the recognition, acceptance and accommodating of social and cultural differences of minority ethnic people in our society.

Firstly, we need to break the cycle of disadvantage affecting ethnic minorities.

The process should focus on the equality of results, rather than the usual equality of opportunity.

Also of essential importance is the equalising of the abilities of minority ethnic people in order to increase their power of influence in society and to address the issue of equitable redistribution of resources.

Secondly, we need to promote dignity and worth for all. Dignity means equal recognition as human beings in the eye of the law. The concepts of superiority and inferiority are obsolete and plain... wrong. It is about dignity and worth for all, and it will never be acceptable to denigrate the dignity of any individual. Dignity is not an abstract concept attached to an isolated,

sovereign individual; on the contrary it is a very concrete element that governs a relationship between an individual and a community. It is a relationship that resolves conflicts within the community and to the wider extent within society. Dignity also addresses the inequality of power and status in our social institutions. Reverse/positive discrimination does not infringe dignity, but creates the necessary social environment to achieve dignity for all.

Thirdly, the affirmation of community identity is vital in order to promote wider diversity in our society. There is no abstract and universal individual. Independently of our community background, each of us belongs and fits into a group, which maximises positive consequences on social capital, namely mutual support, cooperation, trust and institutional effectiveness. It also minimises negative manifestations of sectarianism, ethnocentrism and corruption. A group's rights approach can, and should solve racism and conflicts in our society in a much more creative way.

Last but not least, we need to facilitate full participation in society. This is the only meaningful means to compensate for the absence of political power or the democratic deficit in our society. Participation, therefore, is an indicator in the achievement of equality. Or to put it into another way: the equality principle aims at promoting wider participation for those disadvantaged groups in our society.

News from the Hill

Meet the All Party Assembly Group on Black and Minority Ethnic Communities!

The All Party Assembly Group on Ethnic Minority Communities has developed to provide an effective and crucial forum for dialogue between Political Parties and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups to work together towards the following vision:

“A society in which racial diversity is supported, understood, valued and respected, where racism in any of its forms is not tolerated and where we live together as a society and enjoy equality of opportunity and equal protection” (Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland, 2005-2010)

This vision forms the parameters of the work of the All Party Assembly Group and the principles by which it operates.

The All Party Assembly Group:

- On the basis of key priorities identified by the group, monitor and support the implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland (RES) and the ‘Shared Future’ policy as it relates to Race Equality;
- Consider, identify and take forward actions that Political Parties can take, individually, collectively and internally, in pursuance of the vision outlined above;
- Consider, identify and take forward recommendations for action by Government in pursuance of the vision outlined above;
- Have as a primary focus devolved (transferred) matters, however the group will consider reserved and excepted matters when it considers that they are a priority; Consider methods for liaison with the work of the Racial Equality Forum, established as part of the RES.

The All Party Assembly Group on Ethnic Minority Communities became an officially constituted group of the Assembly in June 2008.

We are delighted that membership of the All Party Assembly Group comes from a number of Political Parties and representatives of BME communities.

The political parties currently represented on the All Party Assembly Group are DUP, Sinn Fein, UUP, SDLP, Alliance Party, Green Party and PUP.

There are four positions of office bearer in the APAG on Ethnic Minority Communities: Chair, Deputy-chair, Treasurer and Secretary. These positions are held by political representatives and are rotated on a six-monthly basis.

Chair Danny Kennedy UUP	Vice Chair Declan O'Loan SDLP
Secretary Anna Lo Alliance Party	Treasurer Dawn Purvis PUP

Key areas of the work of the APAG

- The APAG has discussed crucial issues for the BME sector such as the future of the Racial Equality Strategy and the new Community, Sharing and Integration strategy, racist attacks in Northern Ireland and funding for the community groups.
- Arising from discussions during APAG meetings a seminar on the topic of human trafficking was held in June 2009 at the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings to raise awareness and provide more information on this significant issue.
- The APAG has worked together effectively to initiate a joint motion on the review of the Race Relations Order that was debated in the Northern Ireland Assembly on Tuesday 26 May this year. This motion was proposed by APAG members Anna Lo, Dawn Purvis and Jennifer McCann and supported by all parties during the debate. This demonstrates how the APAG can work to help ensure the rights of minorities are protected.

NICEM is delighted that BME issues are now discussed at government level via a structured and cohesive group. We will be inviting political contributions for each issue of Minority Rights Now!

We thank Steven Agnew for starting the ball rolling...

A Green Party Response to the Roma Crisis

By Steven Agnew, Equality Spokesperson, Green Party

Steven Agnew is currently researcher for Green Party MLA Brian Wilson. He is also the Party spokesperson on Equality, Children & Young People, and Animal Rights. He was the Party's candidate in the recent European Elections receiving 15,674 votes, the single biggest vote the Party has received in Northern Ireland.

Steven argues why the lack of governmental action failed us all ...

As someone who lived in South Belfast for 10 years and who enjoyed the diversity of the area I was appalled to hear of the forced evacuation of the Roma families.

South Belfast is certainly not a racist area. It is one of the most multi cultural areas in Northern Ireland, although the minority racist contingent cannot be ignored.

Simply condemning the attacks and demonising those responsible is not in itself productive. We must look at the root cause of these problems.

There are significant social inequalities that exist within the South Belfast area. Those who targeted the Roma families are believed to have come from the Village area which is in the Blackstaff Ward. The Blackstaff ward is ranked 28th in Multiple Deprivation Level out of 582 wards, 1st being the most deprived. Compare this to the neighbouring Malone Ward which is ranked 558th¹. Research shows that the lowest outcomes in both health and education exist where inequalities are at their highest, not necessarily where incomes are lowest as many assume. Looking at these statistics social tensions are inevitable, though valuable work is being done by community and voluntary groups in the area to mitigate against this.

The circumstances faced by Romanian families who come to live in Northern Ireland are also far from ideal. Romanian nationals have the right to reside here as European citizens however they are restricted from many areas of work and there is significant bureaucracy from entering those areas of work which are open to them. Many are also denied access to basic welfare rights as we saw earlier this year when Romanian children were denied access to free school meals.^{2/3}

This is all as a consequence of UK immigration policy which discriminates against those from the A2 states of Bulgaria and Romania and denies them the basic rights that afforded to everyone else in our society. We have universal human needs but universal human rights are still some way off.

¹<http://www.ninis.nisra.gov.uk/>

²<http://www.cpag.org.uk/cro/wrb/wrb196/A2%20nationals.htm>

³http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/7814352.stm

Then there is the leadership shown by our local politicians, or indeed, the lack of it. The Northern Ireland Executive has failed to agree on a draft Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy. This was intended to replace the Shared Future Strategy and the Racial Equality Strategy, but as we have no agreement we are instead left with a sizeable vacuum.

Added to this we have had statements from our Finance Minister Sammy Wilson encouraging employers to favour 'local people' when recruiting ⁴. He has since followed this with an attack on organisations such as NICEM, who are working to tackle racism, claiming that they exaggerated the problem to justify their funding ⁵.

This crisis highlighted the case of two sets of victims of failed government policy. On one hand the indigenous community and on the other we have the Roma families who have been denied the basic rights that are afforded to the rest of our society.

Those who carried out the attacks on the Roma families have given those in power a useful scapegoat. However we cannot let them wash their hands of these problems. If we do not tackle the root causes the symptoms will persist. At a national level we must insist that our immigration policies are given a humanitarian focus and the forthcoming Westminster elections give us an opportunity to do this. But we must also get our own house in order. That means we must have an agreed draft Cohesion, Integration and Sharing Strategy as a priority.

⁴http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/7849840.stm

⁵http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/8186978.stm

Myth Busters

Pavee Point

By Sara Russell, coordinator

Roma Programme

Pavee Point is a partnership of Irish Travellers and settled people. Based in Dublin, Pavee Point works improving the lives of Irish Travellers. Pavee Point has a dedicated desk dealing with Roma issues.

Sara answers questions you have never dared ask...

Are Roma nomadic?

Not all Roma are Nomadic. Historically nomadism was prohibited and many Roma were forced to settle. Many members of the Roma community have now settled in both rural and urban areas. Those who lead a nomadic lifestyle do so with a purpose, that is to practice their trades and skills. This has traditionally been as craftsmen and craftswomen, entertainers, musicians, dancers and the owners or operators of carnivals.

Why do Roma beg? Are they willing to work?

Many Roma people work. In Ireland they work mainly in food processing and factories. Many more Roma would take any work that would earn them a living, however discrimination against Roma exists in Ireland and some employers are not willing to hire Roma people.

Roma have traditionally been excluded from residing and working in many countries across Europe. This may be a lifestyle they have grown accustomed to due to a history of exclusion from employment.

In Ireland, the Roma who came to seek asylum were not allowed to work during this time. Roma who are nationals of Romania or Bulgaria are not allowed to work without a permit or to access education. These restrictions may have resulted in begging as the only source of income.

Begging is not part of Roma culture but a serious shortage of money to live on and to provide for children often leaves members of the Roma community with no other choice but to beg.

Roma have much poorer formal education experience than most migrants, but most Roma would like their children to be educated. They feel this will give them a better life and this is one of the reasons some want to make a life in Ireland.

Many Roma children attend school, but not all of them. This is a consequence of lack of sufficient support and encouragement and the negative experiences of Roma parents due to discriminatory practices in education in their countries of origin. Examples of this were in the systematic streaming of Romani children to schools for children with special needs, segregating

Roma in schools and forbidding Roma children to speak the Roma language at school. (http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/0703-CEECIS_ROMA_en.pdf)

Many Roma are unable to read or write in any language. Parents therefore cannot assist their children with their homework or communicate with teachers and are unaware of the day-to-day workings of a school.

Little or no proficiency in English is also a barrier to engaging with the education system. Cultural barriers such as the prohibition of traditional dress in schools are also a factor for concern. The curriculum also inhibits engagement with the Roma community as Roma history and identity is not included.

This does not mean, that the Roma do not wish to be educated. Education is traditionally held in high esteem within the Roma community, but it is acquired and demonstrated differently than in the majority culture.

Grandparents, parents, siblings and extended families are instrumental in educating young Roma people. Knowledge among the Roma is transferred orally, through narration of the experiences of the elders in the form of stories, fables, myths, proverbs, anecdotes, and riddles. There is strong evidence of willingness to engage in literacy and language classes where provision is delivered in appropriate way.

What about Roma health?

The Roma Community generally have lower than average life expectancy, higher infant mortality and higher levels of poor nutritional related illnesses etc than the majority population. Sub-standard living conditions, high levels of poverty and limited access to health care have resulted in a number of health-related problems among the Roma.

To address the issues of poverty, and access to health care and education as the problem rather than blaming the Roma themselves for poor health, would do much to alleviate the issue of ill health.

Why do many Roma wear gold teeth?

It is important to note that the wearing of gold teeth is not common among all Roma communities.

The Roma community has suffered significantly under many governing authorities across Europe. An example of this is the confiscation of material wealth from Roma by state police forces.

The consequence of this is a deep distrust of the authorities. Coupled with illiteracy and language issues, this has resulted in Roma refraining from using common methods of currency exchange and protection such as banks. Roma therefore resort to wearing their wealth.

Jewellery and plated teeth are thus not a reflection of hidden wealth, but most likely the

entirety of what the person may own.

Why do some Roma live in large groups?

There are many reasons for this. Roma families tend to be bigger than average so families of six and seven children would not be unusual for a Roma family. The Roma community also tends to live with extended family. It is quite usual for 3 or 4 generations of the same family to live together.

For the Roma community, the family and family responsibilities are most important. Roma families often take in older/ vulnerable or infirmed relatives and members of the extended family who are going through financial troubles. It is Roma culture that you must take in your family if they are homeless, feed them if they are hungry and clothe them if they are cold. Charity and sharing are central to Roma culture.

This situation often causes conflict with neighbours or landlords who are unaware of these traditions and are suspicious if large numbers of people are living in the one house or apartment

Groups of the month

By Muhammad Al-Qaryooti, Director

The Belfast Islamic Centre

The Belfast Islamic Centre was established in 1977 by a group of Muslims from the local community. Today, the Centre acts as a place of worship, a community centre, a social-cultural centre, a resource centre, an advice centre and a day centre. It is a hub for spiritual, political and cultural reflection.

The Belfast Islamic Centre has estimated the current number of Muslims living in Northern Ireland at approximately 10,000. This figure covers 43 nationalities coming from Western Europe all the way through to the Far East, and a floating population of students.

Overall, the community feels content and happy to live in Northern Ireland and contribute to its economical and cultural growth, and to strive for peace and acceptance of diversity.

However, racially motivated incidents, mainly targeting vulnerable women, have been of particular concern to us.

Islamophobia, worsened by 9/11 and 7/7, has translated into violence and hostility, as well as direct and indirect discrimination, against Muslims.

The Belfast Islamic Centre is determined to break down racist and religious prejudices and widely promote the true meaning of Islam, a peaceful and all-embracing religion.

To help reduce the feeling of isolation experienced by a substantial number of Muslims in Northern Ireland, the Belfast Islamic Centre works with all Muslims in need of practical or spiritual support, and specifically with women and young people (The Belfast Islamic Centre runs a Women's Group as well as a Youth Group). This extends to providing social welfare services to the various groups in the community, in the form of humanitarian aid and support at all levels of society.

To further promote a sense of belonging within the Muslim community, the Belfast Islamic Centre runs the Mosque, which holds a daily prayer, Friday congregation prayers, funeral services, marriage services, and cultural visits.

Integration programmes are also run to help Muslims to actively participate in Northern Ireland's multi-cultural society as Muslims and as good citizens.

Indeed, education is key to the development of social and cultural services in order to preserve our identity and to create social and cultural awareness amongst Muslims and the wider society.

To do so, the Belfast Islamic Centre provides education to all sections of the community, and specifically runs a guidance and resource service, aimed particularly at educational institutions, hospitals and prisons, and generally at all communities, irrespective of their religion.

The Centre holds GCSE programmes and English classes. We also provide a one-day training programme called 'Islam for Service Providers', which has been delivered to more than 500 service providers from 40 different organisations.

Adults are offered courses on topics like management and child minding. Children have the option to attend Arabic language, religious study and cultural education classes. Young People are invited to attend youth development activities through lectures, seminars and youth activities (including sports and health activities).

To complete our programme of education for all, we manage a Community Library, produce resources and research papers for students and community groups, and provide guidance services for all visitors and institutions.

We also organise cultural programmes, Exhibitions of Muslim Culture and Heritage, and provide translation services.

We encourage all members of the public to visit our website for further information on our activities and will give a warm welcome to all visitors to the Belfast Islamic Centre.

By Petia Fleming, Chair

The Bulgarian Association of Northern Ireland

The Bulgarian Association NI (BANI) was established in March 2008. The main aim of the association is to provide a confidential free support service to families and individuals, whilst preserving their own language and identity in an attempt to further the positive integration of the community in Northern Ireland. The Bulgarian Association NI is focusing on catering for the daily needs of new comers, in particular in the context of the legislation related to E2 countries, by providing information and help in relation to employment, housing, health, training and education, parenting etc.

One of the goals of BANI is to help the public understand the Bulgarian culture, and to provide education programmes to the Bulgarian community to support language needs and improve employability. The association aims to raise awareness of all aspects of discrimination in society on the basis of race or ethnic minority status via publications, public advocacy and other means of communication.

BANI works towards encouraging cultural awareness and racial harmony and social inclusion, and promotes cultural events and community activities.

We also advise members of the Bulgarian community about choices, rights and responsibilities, so that they can make informed and appropriate decisions. We signpost those we cannot help to the appropriate services in the locality.

In order to meet and accurately cater for the ongoing needs of the Bulgarian community in terms of education, culture, social and health needs, the Bulgarian Association NI has established and maintained a close network of relationships with external public organisations and statutory agencies, such as NICEM, The Welcome House, The Law Centre, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, CM Works etc.

The Bulgarian Association NI has set up a club for parents and children with the help of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Armagh. The club has been running successfully for a year. Bulgarian children of different ages are able to learn both Bulgarian and English languages, and discover the literature, history, geography, music, arts and crafts specific to both cultures.

During the past year and we held six events. We were able to celebrate the Bulgarian Education and Culture and Slavonic Literature day, Women's International Day and Christmas 2008. We had a Health Day, an information session on rights in the UK (employability, registration with the Home Office) as well as a smoking prevention event. We are now preparing the celebration of Christmas of 2009.

The main difficulties and issues affecting the Bulgarian community in Northern Ireland are employability (restrictions on work in the UK), low income (people being paid below the minimum wage), the language barrier, differences in the health system and lack of funding

The Bulgarian Association NI continues to work in a positive, ambitious and strenuous manner to increase the uptake of services by users, so that problems may be resolved. The Association strives to provide the necessary help and support to all members of the Bulgarian community for improving the quality of their life and also for their positive integration within the wider community.

By Aleksandra Lojek - Magdziarz, Bilingual Community Safety Advocate



The Polish Association of Northern Ireland

Nobody really knows how many Polish people currently live in Northern Ireland. There are various estimations, oscillating between 25 and 35 thousands. Their number is constantly changing as some Poles, hit by the recession, decide to return to Poland. However, many of them will stay. Northern Ireland has become their second home.

As we like to stress, there is a plethora of similarities between the locals and Poles (troubled history, psychological traits), which substantiate this choice to put down roots in Northern Ireland.

The Polish Association of Northern Ireland was constituted in 2006. Its aim was simple: to smooth the way for the new arrivals to settle in Northern Ireland. It started off as a gathering of a few Poles who noticed that there was a substantial need for practical advice and help. The support needed covered all the basic aspects of immigrants' life - how to get registered with Home Office, how to pay taxes, apply for a job, etc.

As time went by, it became obvious that the Polish Association had turned not only into a major information point but also a place for cultural exchange.

When moving to a new country, at first practicalities need to be addressed, and then further needs come to the fore. Polish people, while actively integrating with the local communities, still want to celebrate their own culture and share it with others. This is how the 'Polish Picnic' came to life, a major event in Polish immigrants' calendar in Belfast.

Moreover, every month meetings called 'Seven O'clocks' are organised in the Golden Thread Gallery, modelled upon an old Polish tradition from monarchical times, when King Stanislaw August Poniatowski, on Thursdays, invited intellectuals and philosophers for lavish dinners filled with discussions. Modern Seven O'clocks, however, are much more modest and guests are usually asked to bring their own wine, but the event still attracts many Poles and locals.

The Polish Association cooperates with many organisations and institutions. It also supports local projects. In June a new project in partnership with the Chinese Welfare Association "Bilingual Advocacy Scheme" funded by PSNI, Housing Executive and Belfast City Council was launched – it aims at improving communication between government services and reduce the fear of crime among Polish, Chinese and other ethnic minorities.

The Polish Association has strong links with various local and ethnic communities and sits in many community forums and is a member group of NICEM. It organises English classes and soon Polish classes for locals. Its website has had 3000 visitors, exchanging information on aspects of life in Northern Ireland, facilities available for immigrants, etc.

Asked about Polish people's reaction to the recession, the Director of the Association, Maciek Bator, explained that many Polish people residing in Northern Ireland have decided to wait for better times. So, PANI has become a part of the local landscape.



Next Time on Minority Rights Now!

Dear Reader,

We hope you have enjoyed this first edition of Minority Rights Now!

It was inspired by its ancestor Mainstreaming, which was published by NICEM in 1998 and paved the way for informing large audiences on Northern Ireland's policy issues with particular regards to Black and Ethnic Minorities. NICEM has since become the largest umbrella organisation for Black and minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland.

Thanks to our main funder, the Atlantic Philanthropies, we have been able to resurrect our policy review to adapt it to today's current political, economical and social situation.

Published quarterly, Minority Rights Now! will bring you up to date with Human Rights and equality policy issues and elaborate on NICEM's findings and recommendations to the government (central and local), the EU, the Council of Europe and the UN. We will strive for this review to become the vehicle for healthy debates and for the mainstreaming of human rights and racial equality within governmental departments and agencies.

By encouraging our readers to use the magazine as a strategic unifying tool to strengthen their voice as a strong, united one, together we will push for the implementation of much needed equality reforms!

As all first editions, this announces a work in progress and we very much welcome submissions of articles for the next issue, to be published in the Spring of 2010. We will be focusing on issues related to flexible workers from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds in Northern Ireland.

If you are interested in submitting a piece, please contact us at:

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Thank you for your support...
Till the next time...

Announcements

NICEM is pleased to announce
our 12th Annual Human Rights and Equality Conference
on Friday 12 February 2010
in the Wellington Park Hotel, Belfast

This year, our focus will be on the Secretary of State's proposals on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and the response of Civic Society to them. We will also have our Judicial Review of the Year and updates on Equality and Immigration law.

Programme summary

- Section 1: Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: the current proposal from the Secretary of State
 - Section 2: The impact of the economic downturn on economic and social rights
 - Section 3: Judicial Review of the Year
 - Section 4: Equality and immigration Law update
- Please go to our website for further details.

Following our successful Single Equality Bill Conference in September 2009, NICEM is pleased to announce the first in a series of NICEM Policy Papers

“The Equality Bill for Great Britain:
Implications for Northern Ireland”

This Policy paper will be published in mid-January.

Please go to our website for further details.





Promoting racial Equality and Human Rights in Northern Ireland
www.nicem.org.uk

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