

Tackling the health gap

Funding Traveller women as primary health care workers was a resounding success, but budget restrictions may see the system collapse

Ronnie Fay is a founding member of Pavee Point Travellers' Centre, a non-governmental organisation committed to human rights, where she has worked as a community development worker for the past 30 years. This project was about training Traveller women as primary health care workers with funding from the NOW Community initiative.

"Travellers are the most marginalised group in Irish society. It's a very young population, with 42% aged under 15, and only 2% over 65. The health statistics show that infant mortality rates are four times higher than in the general population. Life expectancy for men is 15 years lower than the national average, for women 11 years lower and suicide rates are six times higher. Two-thirds of Travellers leave school before the age of 15.

"A recent report documenting the impact of austerity cuts shows that the government has slashed the Traveller education budget by 86%, doing away with visiting teachers, resource teachers, school transport and much else. Accommodation was slashed by 85%. The state often uses nomadism as an excuse for the lack of provision of services to Travellers. The reality is that over 70% live sedentary lives, as since 2002, nomadism has been criminalised in Ireland. Travellers would find it hard if they were on the move to access benefits because they need a fixed address.

"As part of this project to empower women, we trained 16 Traveller women as primary health care workers. Many Travellers experience discrimination in health services and poor quality health care. As well as training the women, our objective was to establish a model of Traveller participation in the delivery of health services, and to raise awareness among health professionals of the specific needs of the Traveller community. The idea was to reduce the huge health gap between Travellers and the rest of the population. We also taught them about social determinants, political analysis and how to handle the media.

"After they qualified we approached the health board for funding to employ Travellers as primary health care workers. The model was then replicated across Ireland and at one time, we had 40 traveller health care projects across the country. Since the economic crisis, the embargo on spending has meant that even people with training can't find employment. It's a terrible shame because it was a highly effective programme. As a result of it, Travellers have a higher rate of uptake in terms of vaccinations, smear tests and cancer screening than the rest of the population.

"Ireland also has Romanian, Slovakian, Bulgarian and Hungarian Roma. We at Pavee Point have a project to help their integration in our society. They are subject to the Habitual Residence Condition, which restricts access to social welfare and means that if they aren't self-sufficient, they may be forced into begging and prostitution in order to survive. The government refuses to recognise the problem."



Traveller women explain the benefits of better health care to members of the community

New Employment Opportunities for Women (NOW)

This European Structural Funds initiative was set up to tackle the imbalance between women and men in the labour market. The Irish project was called Primary Health Care Programme for Traveller Women.