

Fifth Meeting

15 September 2016, the Dun Library, Royal College of Physicians

Minutes: Thematic discussion on experience of conflict-affected migrant and refugee women in Ireland

Presentation by Linda Keating, Reception and Integration Agency (RIA), Department of Justice and Equality

Ms Keating gave a detailed presentation of the functions of RIA, which include: the sourcing and provision of accommodation for protection applicants in the Direct Provision system; co-ordination of the provision of services to protection applicants; provision of initial accommodation to the Resettlement Programme; and accommodation of suspected victims of human trafficking. RIA has no role in processing the applications of migrants and refugees. The 'Integration' function of RIA was removed in 2007. There are 37 'centres' around the country, the majority of which are privately owned. RIA utilises a multi-agency structure including secondees from Department of Education, Tusla and other relevant bodies. Specifically on conflict-affected women, appropriate screenings and health checks are done on all women, and they are all assessed by GPs on arrival to the centres. Since 2015 the RIA has a policy and structure in place to safeguard women and girls from domestic, and sexual and gender-based violence in the centres, with all staff trained. Further provisions include the refitting of a centre as female-only, and awareness raising material printed in numerous languages.

Presentation by Martina Glennon, Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration, Department of Justice and Equality

Ms Glennon works on the Irish Resettlement Programme in the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration. Under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) a certain number of migrants and refugees are selected each year to resettle in Ireland with the status of "programme refugees". These "programme refugees" differ from asylum seekers who arrive in Ireland because they are granted a status before coming to Ireland, are given more rights, and are resettled more quickly. Programme refugees have been resettled in 32 communities across 23 counties. Under the EU resettlement deal, Ireland has agreed to take 4,000 refugees – 2,622 refugees from within the EU, specifically those in Greece and Italy, and the rest from outside the EU, from places like Jordan. 622 people have been resettled in Ireland over the past five years, with just over half of all programme refugees being children. At a local level, resettlement is organised by local-level inter-agency working groups. The overall objective of the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration is to help the programme refugees adjust into Irish society, and to support both the refugees and their host communities as much as possible in the transition period.

Questions and Answers session with the representatives from the Department of Justice and Equality

Following the presentations both Ms Keating and Ms Glennon engaged in a Q&A discussion on their respective roles and agencies. Questions were asked about the difficulties faced by successful asylum seekers in transitioning out of the Direct Provision system. Difficulty in finding work and housing, along with the risk of having become institutionalised from years of being in Direct Provision, mean that many successful asylum seekers remain in Direct Provision centres for months after receiving status. There were questions from the floor over the availability of support for them

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from relevant agencies. The RIA has no role in the transition period, and lacks the capacity to provide the same degree of support to the thousands of people in, or transitioning out of, Direct Provision as is provided to programme refugees.

It was explained that programme refugees generally need much more support when they arrive, e.g. language classes, than most asylum seekers who may have spent a significant amount of time in Ireland and have developed some support networks and contacts. Ms Keating further clarified that if resources were available RIA would wish to provide more support to asylum seekers in transitioning out of Direct Provision, but that it is not necessarily the same kind of support required by programme refugees.

A question was raised over whether Irish service providers to refugees and migrants are equipped with the skills to handle the unique traumas suffered by them, for example in the provision of care for victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, or torture, in terms of physical and psychiatric. Both Department of Justice representatives said that capacity-building was on-going for health service providers in unique areas of care. As resettled migrants avail of services in the same way as the broader population, there is a need for awareness to be raised across board. There was a discussion on the extent to which the provision of counselling for trauma at reception centres is appropriate, with the Department of Justice citing expert advice to the effect that such counselling is generally not necessary or helpful on arrival and can be more usefully provided at a later stage; however urgent cases are offered treatment or support as soon as identified. It was noted that both agencies are working within refugee communities and host communities on developing anti-racism programmes, with for example, a "Friends of the Centre" group as recommended in the McMahon Report. On a final note on the topic, the Chair suggested that the Oversight Group itself should highlight the resource gaps that exist in provision of services to migrants and refugees to the relevant authorities.

Presentation by Diane Nurse, Social Inclusion Unit, Health Service Executive

Oversight Group member Diane Nurse provided a presentation on the work the HSE does with migrant and refugees women, specifically through its Social Inclusion Unit. The objective of the Social Inclusion Unit is to enhance the access of vulnerable groups, and to work strategically with partners in the voluntary sector to gain access to these vulnerable groups and to deliver the provision of services. The HSE works with partners such as Spirasi, Cairde, AkiDwa and the IFPA to provide these services. The Social Inclusion Unit works on strategies across government, and sits on numerous boards and committees dealing with cross-cutting issues. Specifically on providing services to women affected by conflict and violence, the Social Inclusion forms part of the Taskforce on migrants and refugees headed up by the Tánaiste. Much of the Unit's work with these women is concentrated on integration and empowerment. The Unit operates with limited resources and received no core funding in 2016, relying on grant funding. Contracted NGOs provide a number of important services, including outreach and provision of information to migrant women. Following the presentation a number of questions were raised on the provision of services by the HSE and its partners. The difficulties over standardisation of quality across interpreters arose as a recurring problem throughout the Q&A session. Another recurrent question was on the uniformity of services across the various centres. It was noted by Ms Nurse that the types of services differ from centre to centre due to location and demand, and that refugees and asylum seekers with particular needs are assigned to those centres best equipped to cater for them.

Panel discussion on the difficulties faced by migrant and refugee women accessing services and integrating into Irish society

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Following the presentations a panel discussion took place with four panellists: Tonya Miles from Cairde, Sinead Smith from Cultur, Irina Maria Chayee, a Liberian woman living in Ireland and Siobhan O'Brien Green, an academic active in the area of migrant and refugee women in Ireland. The session was chaired by Nora Owen.

Ms Chayee opened the discussion, speaking about her experience coming through the Direct Provision system, and the difficulties migrant women face in the job market, no matter their level of education. Ms Chayee further discussed the difficulties she has faced since coming to Ireland, including instances of racism and sexual harassment. While she has also had many positive experiences and opportunities in Ireland, she said it is time for Ireland to move on from the Direct Provision to a more humane, modern system for asylum seekers.

Ms Miles spoke about her experience as a migrant woman herself, and her work with Cairde, an NGO that challenges migrant health inequalities. Ms Miles spoke about some of the significant challenges facing migrants, including finding accommodation, mental health, access to services including counselling in migrants' languages of origin, access to sexual and reproductive rights including abortion, and other barriers for women to accessing services, including economic, cultural and mistrust of state.

Ms O'Brien Green spoke about her experience as a researcher and academic in the area of domestic, gender and sexual-based violence. Ms O'Brien Green has looked at SGBV in reception centres across the EU, as well as the complexity of issues facing women who present as refugees. Violence against migrant and refugee women doesn't stop when they leave their home country, and for many it continues on through their migration and in their host country. It was noted that maternal death rates are much higher for migrant women.

Ms Smith concluded the panel opening, talking about her work at a local level in and around the Meath area with Cultur. Many of the problems faced by migrant women at a local level in Meath can be transposed to migrant women around the country. Ms Smith reinforced the point about the difficulties migrant women have in securing employment in Ireland, no matter their level of education. There is a lack of integration between migrant women, who are often isolated due to their roles as carers, and local women's group around Ireland, such as the ICA. Many migrant women face the further problem of becoming institutionalised while in Direct Provision, and face many issues trying to transition out of it. Cultur tries to tackle these problems by creating migrant women only spaces to allow them to a forum to express themselves, as well as creating links between migrant women and local women's groups. Ms Smith emphasised the need for greater resources for service providers and local community groups.

A Q&A followed, with a wide-ranging discussion between the Oversight Group and the panellists. Resourcing was identified as one of the key issues facing groups working with migrants, both at a local and national level. Interpretation in languages of origin, and difficulties with standardisation, was further identified as a key problem. It was suggested that the well-established interpretation services in Northern Ireland could provide an opportunity for cross-border support. It was noted by a Department of Justice representative that a new tender has issued for an interpretation framework. Concerns were raised over level of awareness of available services of some residents in Direct Provision, and the idea of safe spaces and involvement of refugees and asylum seekers in decision-making in Direct Provision centres was discussed.

On the topic of domestic violence in Direct Provision centres, it was noted that RIA's approach is explained in its document 'Policy and Practice on Domestic Violence', available online, and that all staff are appropriately trained. It was highlighted from the floor that the National Strategy for

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Women is up for review, and there may be an opportunity for the Oversight Group to input on WPS issues in the new Strategy. Ireland's CEDAW report will be issued shortly, and it was suggested this report should inform us on where we can do better for migrant women, particularly in areas where special measures beyond access to general services may be required to address their needs. It was noted from the floor that there is a gap between implementation and perception of policies and practice for migrant and refugee women. The fact that most Direct Provision centres are privately managed means that the government should enforce stringent criteria during the procurement stage.

In the wrap up of the panel discussion, many of the panellists expressed a view that the Direct Provision system is inhumane to the people in it, and that more needs to be done to empower people, and specifically women, in the system. The issue of undocumented migrant women was highlighted, and their inability to access even basic services, particularly health and education. Education was seen as the key to empowerment of migrants, and all should be encouraged to avail of the Irish education system where and when possible. It was noted by Ms O'Brien Green that SGBV is preventable, and more must be done to prevent and protect women and girls in Direct Provision centres from these crimes. On a final note, more openness between NGOs, service providers and the government on Direct Provision was encouraged, saying that more honesty would lead to better working relationships.

Upon the closing of the day the Chair proposed to write as appropriate to the relevant Ministers to raise the key points from the day's discussion.

Secretariat to the Oversight Group to the 2nd National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

20th September 2016