

All Party Oireachtas Committee on Constitution- Family Definition
Presentation From AkiDwA By Nobuhle Nduka

I thank the joint committee for the opportunity to make a presentation on ethnic minority families. I emphasise that Ireland's definition of the family has many implications for ethnic minority communities. Our definition of "family" is the extended family, like the Traveller community in Ireland. Speaking from a woman's perspective, most of the women who came here were asylum seekers, some of whom are now refugees. They are single parents, mothers with children. Some have been granted leave to remain because of their Irish-born child. However, they face many problems.

While the decision to give families the right to remain is very welcome, if a mother and her child are allowed to remain but her partner is not allowed to come here, what implications does this have for the child? For children to develop well and fully, they need both parents - their mother and father. If the father is not there, how does the family function? Women need such support if the family is to function.

Some children face racism when they go to school and there is pressure on mothers to help them with the issues they face there. If a woman wants to work or even study, how does she do this when she has children? She does not have the support of the extended family and there is nothing in place to facilitate the process of development.

I have seen and spoken to women who have been sick and hospitalised. They have, perhaps, three children. If they need to go into hospital, what do they do with their children? Perhaps they have friends who will welcome the children but that is not best for them. They are stressed also. Their mother is sick and going into hospital and they do not know what is going to happen. They are being divided and the partner is not there to support them or their mother. It may be suggested that they should go into care but is this best option for children when their mother is sick?

Another issue is that of asylum seekers receiving direct provision services. Between four and six women stay in one big room and all have children. The place is congested. The children fight and there is a lot of tension. The women also do not get along because of being put in one place with nothing to do all day except sit and look after their children. The conditions of direct provision do not facilitate family life.

AKiDwA, the organisation I represent, saw the problems being faced by families and tried to come up with ideas to help families to function properly. It has been in existence for four years. We know what to do to help the women but there is no funding available to facilitate them in integrating in Ireland. They want to move on. If we received funding to set up a child care facility subsidised by the Government, they could work and contribute to Irish society instead of sitting at home.

African women are not used to sitting down and waiting to be given lunch, breakfast and dinner. It is very destructive of a person's mind. We are not used to this. We are used to working and contributing to society. The system puts us in a difficult position with Irish people who believe ethnic minorities are being sponsored by the Government. There is even a perception that we are given welfare funds when we are not. If people were allowed to work, they could contribute to society. The policies should be revised. If people come here, look at

their needs and help the mothers and children. If you are serving the interests of the child, why would you rob a child of the opportunity of growing up with the mother? From my point of view, it does not make any sense to say that the mother can stay but the father cannot come. For those who have been granted residency status, the process of reunification may take about two or three years and sometimes the application is turned down. Whose interests are being served? Not the interests of the child.

The mother is staying here at her own expense. She is taking the children to school and sitting at home. She is not developing. Some people have been asylum seekers for about five years. They are not allowed to do anything which might open doors for them and create opportunities. They can only do courses which give them a certificate of attendance. Some stay in that condition for five years. What does that do to the brain? These people are being given food every day and are not actively involved in anything. Their brain goes dead. If you go to school you do something which, according to your standards, is not worth it.

It would be advantageous for Irish society and for ethnic minorities if this policy on families were to be revised, especially since the definition of family has many implications. You cannot give a mother and child the right to stay and rob the father of the right to stay with the family. That is dividing the family in two and it is not helpful. From what I have seen in Ireland, most children who have had a brush with the law come from a dysfunctional family background. The mother and father may have been divorced three or four years earlier. Putting it plainly and simply, this policy is creating dysfunctional families. If the mother is present and the father is not, what influence does that have on the child? The child is likely to get into local problems. The mother has many issues to worry about. There is the worry about papers and about going to school. At the same time the kids suffer from racism and discrimination. How does a single woman deal with all those things? The child is not being helped in any way. I wonder if it makes any sense to let the mother and child stay while the partner cannot come.

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