

Akina Dada wa Africa- (AkiDwA)

and

Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland - (ICCI) Women's Project

SUBMISSION

**ON THE
NATIONAL ACTION PLAN AGAINST RACISM IN IRELAND**

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1. Introduction / Consultation process

This submission to the National Action Plan against Racism in Ireland is presented through the initiative of two organisations of minority ethnic women, Akina Dada wa Africa (AkiDwA), and the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland (ICCI) Women's Project.

AkiDwA is a voluntary organisation, which aims to provide a culturally appropriate service to African women living in Ireland irrespective of national or ethnic background, religious traditions or socio-economic status. AkiDwA also works with other national organisation in Ireland to influence national policy.

ICCI Women's project is dedicated to working on issues that relate to and affect the well being of Muslim women living in Ireland and promote the positive contribution made to Ireland by the Islamic faith and its women.

The submission arose out of the absence of a full, independent consultation process with African and Islamic women, not conducted through the male leaders of their respective communities, and the wish of women from both groups to speak for themselves and not have others – either men from their own communities, or members of the majority Irish community, be they NGOs or government bodies – speak for them. Moreover, it arose out of the realisation that definitions of racism as 'a specific form of discrimination and exclusion faced by minority ethnic groups' (*Towards a National Action Plan Against Racism in Ireland*, 2002: p. 14) tend to ignore not only the effects of Apartheid and colonialism, but also women's specific experiences of racism, which this submission aims to record and have acknowledged.

The submission recognises the link between Irish and European immigration policies and racism. It also acknowledges the enriching contribution made by increasing cultural diversity, which we believe should be celebrated. Furthermore, the submission stresses the need for state funding for organisations representing migrant and minority ethnic women so as to continue and consolidate our activities.

The submission is presented in the hope that minority ethnic women will henceforward be involved in all forums discussing action against racism, and have their experiences acknowledged and included in all definitions, recommendations and practical steps taken.

This submission is the result of a consultation workshop organised by the two groups and held on 15th August 2002, 10.30 – 16.00, at the Islamic Cultural Centre, Clonskeagh, Dublin 14. In attendance were 47 women members of the African and Islamic communities and their allies. The order of the day included (a) inputs on the overview of the National Action Plan Against Racism, (b) the effects of racism based on gender (c) testimonies of African women and Muslim women's experiences of racism from the floor; (d) four workshops to address policies, citizenship, status and human rights issues, cultural issues, and practical steps against racism; (e) workshop feedback, and (f) summary. All participants noted the empowering nature of the consultation day, and the spirit of cooperation between the African, Muslim and other women present. We envisage that the cooperation between AkiDwA and the Muslim Women's Cultural Group will continue beyond this workshop and resulting submission.

Crucially, the submission arises out of the specific experiences of racism by women migrants and women from ethnic minorities as shared during the consultation workshop. We wish to record and acknowledge these experiences in order to anchor the submission in the lived realities of women from ethnic minorities in today's Ireland. The following six testimonies were given by individuals at the conference. The individual women are from various countries; religious sects and have differing legal status to permit them reside in Ireland –

“A student coming from abroad was allocated residency with a family. When arriving at the home she was refused entry because they identified her as a Muslim Terrorist”

“Why should men want our whole female genitals to be mutilated whereas theirs stay in tact – Why? This is what our husbands and boyfriends feel that they can do to us”

“We are presently aware of some Muslim Children being sent to non-Muslim homes. Even though a member of our community strived to prevent this from happening, she was met with blank refusals from the Social Workers”

“Some of the people that we term ‘economic migrants’ are coming here for social economic needs – it is a basic need Everybody wants the right to be able to afford food, shelter and clothing”

“A Muslim girl wearing the hijab was threatened with a lit cigarette to her face while verbally abused to ‘go home’ while she was waiting for a bus at a public place”

“Oftentimes you go the emigration unit to renew your pass and they say ‘oh your husband has to come with you”

2. Gender and racism

In her presentation, the Chairwoman of AkiDwA linked the specific effects of racism on women to global development and aid processes.

- There has been an increase in the number of ethnic minority and migrant people from Southern countries living in Ireland and Europe, resulting in much resentment
- Migrants tend to move to European countries because of political and economic reasons; their movement could have been predicted given the post-colonial increase in population movement
- The west had an opportunity of creating the necessary investment for the development of southern countries, but hitherto, the UN recommendation of transferring 0.7% of GNP to southern countries has been generally ignored by the west
- Development aid sent to southern countries has largely been useless due to the conditions imposed, aimed to protect western interests – by not targeting the poorest countries, tying aid to loans and goods purchases from the donor countries, granting military rather than development aid, supporting the lifestyle of expatriate workers while attributing corruption to local workers
- Structural adjustment programmes and globalisation trends tend to encourage the **free movement of capital and goods, not labour**
- Remittances resulting from the work of migrant workers contributes more to the development of their original countries than does international aid.
- The exploitation of women in southern countries is created and reproduced through the domains of reproduction, care giving and sexuality.
- Different women experience oppression in different ways, but women of colour tend to be doubly jeopardised

- Women shoulder the responsibilities of home, family and children
- Being a migrant or an internally displaced person impacts on women in different ways to men, particularly those women who parent alone (when their men fight, die in war or are taken prisoner)
- Ireland performs poorly on the UNDP index of gender-related development (17th in terms of human development, 27th in terms of gender development)
- Women from ethnic minorities are highly visible in Ireland, due to dress code, colour, motherhood
- The majority of migrant women and women from ethnic minorities in Ireland are living in absolute poverty, although some may have acquired survival strategies which may be disempowering (such as having to resort to sex work)
- The failure to recognise the specific needs of migrant women and women from ethnic minorities in Ireland is in itself a form of racist and sexist discrimination which needs to be challenged
- Representative bodies of ‘non nationals’ in Ireland tend to comprise mostly of men and the representations they make to government, local authorities, health boards and other public bodies tend therefore to be done from a male perspective, which often does not reflect the experiences and needs of women
- Migrant women often carry with them the effects of violence, rape, sexual harassment, FGM (female genital mutilation), and other forms of physical and physiological trauma (including being separated from their husbands or from other members of their families); this vulnerability often causes them to hide their experiences. This needs to be specifically acknowledged in service provision, particularly, but not exclusively in relation to culturally appropriate counselling and support

- Specifically, the experiences of migrant women in terms of asylum/refugee decisions often go unacknowledged and are often dealt with by people who are not familiar with the applicants' circumstances
- Despite the belief that 85% of asylum applications are 'bogus', independent studies show that the number of women who experience violence is high and that there are fewer women than men claiming asylum in Ireland (unlike other countries, where the trend is a higher number of women asylum seekers than men)
- Like all 'non-nationals', migrant women are victims of negative media representations (e.g. they are represented as becoming pregnant in order to be allowed to remain, as living off the welfare system, as having more entitlements than Irish women etc). The 1989 Incitement to hatred Act has been ineffective in preventing such representations
- There is a tendency to tokenise the participation of women on boards and panels, even in bodies fighting racism – the participation of one or two minority ethnic or migrant women in such bodies is not the answer, as they need to articulate their own needs on their own terms
- Women from ethnic minorities have been largely excluded from national planning processes in Ireland and their organisations tend to be marginalized and grossly under-funded
- There has been no acknowledgement of the positive contributions by migrant women and women from ethnic minorities to Irish society, culture and economy
- As migrant women and women from ethnic minorities we demand to be allowed to speak for ourselves and urge the government to include us at all levels of decision making.

3. Policies

- Women migrants and women from ethnic minorities should be considered as legally independent human beings, not dependent on husbands, fathers, or brothers.
- The 1989 Incitement to Hatred Act should be strengthened to include recourse to challenge racism, particularly in relation to the media.

Immigration policies:

- Include gender specific grounds – such as rape, FGM, sexual violence, as explicit grounds for seeking asylum
- The Irish government should increase the number of asylum seekers entitled to remain on humanitarian grounds to 25%, the EU average

Health policies:

- Women should have the right to choose to be seen by a female practitioner
- Include in the National Health Strategy a provision for all hospitals to have a patient-centred and culturally appropriate and sensitive policy
- Patients from ethnic minorities should be given access to their representative groups to assist them in negotiating with hospitals and other health service providers
- Access to dental and other services should offer low income migrant and ethnic minority women greater choice

Direct provision policies:

- Asylum seekers should have the right to work and/or receive the same social welfare and housing entitlements as Irish citizens
- Refugee hostels and other direct provision accommodation should provide halal food as a matter of course

Education policies:

- Schools should receive state funding based on equal access to at pupils, regardless of their legal status or ethnicity
- All schools should adopt a culturally sensitive ethos applicable to teachers and students alike (including an explicit permission to adopt Islamic dress code if desired by students and/or teachers)
- The Government to establish a body that could assess previous qualification of women from ethnic minority to enable them get proper jobs

Employment policies:

- A proactive policy should be adopted so as to increase the awareness of the Employment Equality and Equal Status Acts
- The equality legislation should provide for class action as well as individual redress
- Migrant women should be allowed to enter employment and yet hold on to some of their welfare rights (such as rent allowance). However, women should be encouraged to work, and not forced to work because of welfare or rent allowances.
- An independent assessments body should be established to verify and accredit the qualifications of non nationals (women and men) in order to facilitate them to compete equally for higher grade employment

4. Citizenship, status and human rights issues

- Arising from the link between immigration and citizenship policies, women should be treated as independent legal beings, not dependent on husbands, fathers, or brothers.
- Ireland's immigration policies should be gender proofed
- Manifestations of gender specific oppression such as female genital mutilation (FGM), rape, sexual violence, forced marriages, or sexual harassment should be explicit grounds for seeking asylum.
- We highlight the need for fuller and more easily accessible information on citizenship issues. Such information should be made available in several languages (primarily French, Arabic, Lingala, Swahili, Yoruba, and other languages spoken by migrant and minority ethnic women residing in the state in relation to women from eastern Europe). Information should be made accessible to organisations representing migrant and ethnic minority women to dispense and explain to women who are not politically active and/or illiterate.
- Information in relation to citizenship entitlements is specifically needed:
 - In relation to the asylum process
 - In cases of marital separation or divorce
 - In cases of ethnic minority women residing in the state for a limited period
- All children born in the island of Ireland should be given automatic citizenship (in accordance with the amendment to the Constitution following the Belfast Agreement). Citizenship to children born in this jurisdiction should not depend, as it does now, on both parents' signatures (since the father is often missing, or a refugee). Children should be treated as independent legal entities.
- The rights of non-Irish citizens living in Ireland should be recognised (for instance, in relation to various services such as banking, mobile phones etc)
- The UN Protocol on Trafficking of Women and Girls for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation should be proactively implemented by the Irish

government. Trafficked women should be offered physical police protection in relation to traffickers.

- The government should commit itself to responding to the specific needs of migrant women by providing culturally appropriate services and support in relation, for example, to:
 - Female genital mutilation
 - Sexual abuse
 - Domestic violence (including the creation of refuges for ethnic minority and migrant women)
 - Forced marriages
- The Irish government should legislate against female genital mutilation – as FGM is legally forbidden in Britain, workshop participants suspect it is being carried out in Ireland. Testimonies from African women in Ireland, some of whom are seeking asylum in this country because they or their daughters are fleeing FGM, confirm our firm opposition to FGM.
- A multicultural, independent women's body should be resourced to monitor and deal with women's experiences of racism and racist incitement. Furthermore, resources should be provided to establish a drop in centre for women to present their experiences of racism and receive independent advice of the appropriate steps to be taken. An independent ombudswoman should be appointed to deal with women's experiences of racism and racial harassment

5. Cultural issues

Recognising that culture is neither static nor homogeneous, it is imperative that cultural diversity be recognised as enriching, rather than threatening Irish society.

Through education, mutual respect, integration, and understanding cultural difference, the specific needs of migrant and ethnic minority women can be more efficiently met. Migrant women are prepared to help the government and various service providers to provide culturally specific services – services are often available, and migrant and minority ethnic women need to become aware of what exists already.

The culturally specific needs of migrant and minority ethnic women include:

- Taking gender into account in the asylum process, by providing women interviewers and women interpreters. As women asylum seekers are often unable to share intimate experiences with men, or even with women from the ‘wrong’ ethnic group, this should be provided for sensitively
- Recognising gender specific oppression (rape, sexual violence, FGM) as a ground for seeking asylum
- Mutual respect in cases of the death of a child, naming of babies (Nigerians tend to name their babies on the ninth day – this should be respected), calling older people by their first names (inappropriate for most African people), requests to retain the placenta after the birth of a child, moral/immoral behaviours (smoking is often not seen as acceptable by some migrant communities by comparison with Ireland), male circumcision (which is done as a matter of course by some ethnic groups), and dress code (specifically applicable to Muslim women)
- The need for awareness education of Irish people to get to know African and other minority cultures – such awareness education should be organised through seminars, and by inviting migrant and minority women to contribute

- The need to employ migrant and ethnic minority women in posts where they can fully contribute and be visible
- Service providers, including health practitioners, should be educated about the culturally specific needs of migrant and ethnic minority women
- Migrants and ethnic minority people should not use the excuse of culture to behave in a socially unacceptable way (such as loud music late at night etc)
- Stress the similarities of 'Irish' and 'non Irish' cultures, rather than the differences
- Migrant and ethnic minority women should work in and be represented on local community groups and national agencies from the grassroots upwards.

6. Practical measures

- Focus awareness raising on the richness of diversity as opposed to difference and threat
- Approach the electronic media to highlight the real situation of minority women and project positive images of minority women from the south, for example in popular soaps like *Fair City*
- The government should take responsibility for promoting equal development and commit itself to addressing poverty among women – this includes addressing poverty issues among ‘Irish’ women
- Southern women have a role in sustaining Irish people. Education programmes should be promoted to show the interdependence between Ireland and the rest of the world and the role women from the South play in the production of commodities such as coffee, which sustain Irish people
- We recommend the appointment of an independent ombudswoman to whom women can report racism and racial discrimination complaints where mainstream bodies such as the Garda Síochána and the Equality Authority have been ineffective
- The Department of JELR and The DSCFA/ Department of Health and Children should set up an investigation into allegations that some Social Welfare Officers are applying clandestine policies in relation to refugees and asylum seekers, sometimes causing children to go without food; they should also investigate allegations that some female Social Welfare Officers are mistreating female refugee/ asylum seekers under their care, especially in hostels
- The government to run or fund the running of workshops that educate women about their human rights.
- Women and women’s groups should continually challenge and lobby for women’s right as human rights

- The establishment of a non partisan independent monitoring team involving NGOs, such as AkiDwA and ICCI, to monitor the implementation of the NAPAR
- The department of Health and Children should monitor the outbreak of infectious diseases in refugee hostels and provide doctors to visit the hostels regularly as some refugees/asylum seekers are not able to bring their children to the doctors for various reasons
- The government should adopt a holistic approach (spirit, mind and body) in dealing with and responding to the needs of migrant and minority ethnic women.
- Promote women-to-women experience sharing, especially between ‘non-national’ women and Irish women as a strategy for integration and combating racism and racial discrimination
- The responsible government departments should make funds available to women organizations/groups with a remit to work with non-national women like AkiDwA to promote integration and promote women-to-women experience sharing
- Education awareness on the plight of migrant and ethnic minority women should target schools of journalism, newspaper editors and electronic media producers with the aim of curbing the negative image portrayed by the media of these women and produce journalists who empathise with our situation
- The government to allocate funding to buying space in the national newspapers to highlight the plight of women in Ireland and especially migrant and ethnic minority women.