

‘Child protection’ Debacle Damaging Trust in Authorities

Concerns about widening trust gap between minorities and State agencies

Wednesday 24th October 2013

Doras Luimní today called on the Government, the Gardaí and the HSE to demonstrate their commitment to equality and anti-racism through legal reforms and implementing policy recommendations.

Responding to the controversial cases in which two children were taken into HSE care during investigations into their parentage, Doras CEO Karen McHugh remarked on the seriousness of the cases both for those directly involved, as well as the wider implications in terms of public relations and public trust in institutions of the State. Ms McHugh commented: “These cases are quite shocking and alarming. Speaking as a qualified Social Worker, children are seldom removed from family circumstances even where there is very substantial evidence that they should be. Given that context, it is very unusual for the authorities to intervene when and how they did. A lot of questions have been raised about how these families were treated that need to be thoroughly investigated.”

Allegations of racial profiling have been made against the authorities in light of the fact that the two families involved were from the Roma community and a focus on the physical characteristics of the children and their parents. Racial profiling is the use of racial or ethnic identifiers to inform decision-making around law enforcement.

Ms McHugh stated: “The issue of possible racial profiling has to be addressed head on by the agencies involved. We need to know if this was a factor and what will be done about it in this instance and in future.”

Doras Luimní Integration Policy Officer Dr Matt Cannon commented: “In our work with people from migrant and ethnic minority communities we are greatly concerned about the consequences of a lack of trust in the authorities, and sometimes even fear of the authorities. Yesterday we published research showing that the majority of people who experience racism and discrimination are reluctant to turn to the authorities for assistance. Our study found that 80% of those who were victims of or witnessed racist incidents did not report it. Reasons for this included a lack of faith that their reports would be taken seriously or responded to adequately. In some cases the discrimination or racism was experienced in the course of accessing public services such as health, education, social welfare or at Garda stations.

Dr Cannon continued: “Whether people have directly experienced inadequate or inappropriate treatment by the authorities, or their peers have, the effect is the same – disenchantment and disengagement. Even a tiny minority of instances has a disproportionate impact on public perceptions, especially amongst minority communities. Unfortunately, cases like this will fuel and reinforce such perceptions. The result is a greater distance between the authorities and those who they are supposed to serve and protect. That gap creates a space where distrust and fear can grow.”

Ms McHugh added: “We are very conscious that there is excellent work done by those working in front-line services on a daily basis. As statutory services, paid for through public taxes and mandated to protect and serve all of us the onus is on institutions like the Gardaí and the HSE to create and maintain the public trust. It is absolutely essential that where that trust breaks down or is damaged the authorities must make every effort to repair and rebuild it. This is no easy task – it must happen through concerted and coordinated efforts involving a whole-organisation approach. Strong leadership is needed by government and managers,

with specific policies and procedures put in place and actually implemented on the ground. We provide support to these agencies in terms of training and policy development and working together on collaborative integration initiatives. We see the work that is being done but there is a long way to go. The equality and human rights infrastructure in this country has been decimated. We hope that the public outcry surrounding these cases will be a wake-up call that puts human rights back on the political agenda. The Government must commit to human rights, anti-racism and equality with sincerity, energy and real resources, not empty words or token gestures.”

ENDS

Editor Notes

Doras Luimní is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation based in Limerick. Our mission is to promote and uphold the human rights and wellbeing of migrants through personal advocacy, integration development and collaborative advocacy campaigns at the local and national level. Doras Luimní is a member organisation of the European Network Against Racism Ireland (ENAR).

Doras Luimní's latest research report, *Treated Differently? Evidence of racism and discrimination from a local perspective*, details a set of recommendations to tackle racism through law reform and policy development. The full report is available online at www.dorasluimni.org.

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