



**Statement by Gay McDougall, United Nations Independent Expert on Minority issues, on UK National Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month**

I warmly welcome today the beginning of the UK National Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month as a valuable example of how minorities' contributions to society can and should be discussed, celebrated and promoted. Widespread societal discrimination and anti-Gypsy, Roma and Traveller prejudice continues and must be addressed by all countries in which it remains an ugly and disturbing reality. This initiative of the UK Department of Children, Schools and Families in collaboration with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities themselves, is an important attempt to break down such prejudice and develop a greater understanding of the rich history and contributions of such communities to British society.

In my role as UN Independent Expert on minority issues, I hear frequently of the situation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in all parts of Europe and have witnessed their plight personally in the course of my work. I am appalled by the circumstances of these minority groups in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Europe. In the UK some 300,000 communities also face serious discrimination, exclusion, poverty and even violence. The equation is a simple one...the violations of the rights of members of these communities, in all walks of life, are due to the pervasive effects of racial discrimination and centuries of marginalization and exclusion that persist today. Negative and inaccurate reporting by certain sectors of the media has fuelled hostile attitudes towards Gypsies, Roma and Travellers.

I am deeply concerned by the information and statistics that I receive. The Children's society reports that nearly nine out of every ten children and young people from these communities have suffered racial abuse and nearly two thirds have also been bullied or physically attacked. The Department of Children, Schools and Families recognize that the educational achievement of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller youth is the worst in the country. The Department of Health also notes that these minorities have the worst health and lowest life expectancy in the country. In short, these children and communities are being failed by a society that rightly prides itself on a strong history of promoting diversity and inclusion and celebrating difference.

I applaud the lead taken by the Department of Children, Schools and Families to proactively protect and promote the human rights of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Urgent and focused action is required to ensure there is a comprehensive policy to redress the neglect of so many years to the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. My experience demonstrates that coordinated policies and practices across ministries, and holistic approaches are required to effectively combat racism and discrimination and to promote the rights of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. There is need for comprehensive action at the national, regional and local level to fully realize the challenges, and to actively make progress in such fields as education, health, jobs and training, accommodation and access to justice.

I believe in proactive approaches to address persistent problems and inequalities. States must promote the political participation of such communities in public affairs and in the planning and design of policies to benefit their communities. It is vital that

such communities have a voice in decisions that affect them, however, too often they do not have such a voice. Affirmative action policies and such initiatives as enhanced opportunities for adult education are needed to address the affects of centuries of discrimination and enable members of communities to access training and employment. Health promotion work within communities is also urgently required to ensure it is culturally sensitive and ensure better access to health care.

Legislation on non-discrimination alone will never be enough. Creative and educational initiatives such as this one are also required to challenge stereotypes and overcome barriers. UK National Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month is an important step on a long road towards discussing and confronting discrimination against such communities. Many small steps together amount to much bigger journeys that societies must make away from racism and discrimination and towards justice, dignity, equality and human rights for all.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gay J. McDougall". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "G".

Gay J. McDougall  
United Nations Independent Expert on minority issues