



'They are hungry and desperate. We are here to help:' Muslim Sisters of Éire feed the poor

As demand for their food aid surges, and in the aftermath of one of their 'hardest' nights, ALISON O'REILLY spent an evening on the streets of Dublin with the Muslim Sisters of Éire



Muslim Sisters of Éire chairwoman Lorraine O'Connor on the corner of Prince's St and O'Connell St in Dublin where the group offers free food to those in need on Friday evenings. On the left is a man tying the laces of the shoes the charity bought him after his own were stolen. Picture: Moya Nolan

SAT, 24 JUN, 2023 - 02:05

ALISON O'REILLY

They've become a fixture on Dublin's O'Connell St every Friday evening where they stand for hours handing out hot meals to struggling clients.

But, a fortnight ago, the Muslim Sisters of Éire **had to shut their street café for the first time ever**, as an agitated crowd became desperate there would not be enough food to go around. While it was only a 10-minute delay to their busy evening, the unusual move by one of the most high-





The organisation's chairwoman, Lorraine O'Connor, said she had to put her volunteers' safety first because of the "hostile environment".

"We have never done that before. I put a tweet out to let people know what was happening. But look around you — this is not easy, this is only part of what we do. You are standing in a hostile environment, and you need to know how to deal with it. We were up and running years before we ever opened the street café.

Muslim Sisters of Eire 

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Over the years, we've had a lot of hard nights, but tonight, was one of the hardest. We were forced to shut down the table to try and take control of the situation. We even contemplated shutting down the soup run altogether for the safety of our team and for everybody else.

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"This takes a lot of planning.





were delaying everyone and getting agitated, that feeling rippled into the crowd and it became hostile.

“I said, ‘that is it, close up’. So, we did. It was for 10 minutes only to allow the crowd to settle and cool down and it worked.”

Lorraine said the demand was high before covid, but the numbers are rising all the time.



Nikki Joyce and Lorraine O'Connor of the Muslim Sisters of Éire. 'This is not all we do,' says Lorraine of the group's food aid, pointing out the group's other activities including advocacy and running a helpline, a youth club, and school summer schemes. Picture: Moya Nolan

“Before covid, we were giving out 250 meals. Now it’s between 500 and 600. It’s not just about food, there are tents and sleeping bags to be handed out, all of which have gone up in cost. It is a lot of work.

“This café starts on a Tuesday in the office. We have to have enough of everything. It’s all donations and restaurants helping but I have to make sure we are not short of food.”

Homelessness made visible





accommodation at the end of April. That figure is a new record, with those numbers expected to rise since the lifting of the eviction ban on March 31.

The statistics include 1,733 families and 3,594 children. Across the country, there are 8,665 adults in emergency accommodation, of which two-thirds (5,816) are single.

In March, just before the eviction ban was lifted, there were 11,988 people in homeless accommodation.

The vast majority of homeless people are invisible to the public eye — but not outside the cafe.



Muslim Sisters of Éire volunteers setting up their 'street cafe' outside the GPO in Dublin to offer free food to those in need. Picture: Moya Nolan

The queue last Friday started forming at 4pm along the outside walls of the GPO. By opening time at around 6.30pm the crowds had stretched back as far as Henry St.

Around 6pm, a large white van pulled up on a nearby street where the volunteers emerged and immediately got to work.

Several tables were erected side by side while dozens of baskets of food and large insulated portable boxes were unloaded and stacked.





“Everyone gets one of each,” said Nikki Joyce, one of the members of the Muslim Sisters of Éire.

“They will try and say ‘I need more for my friend over there’ but we would say to bring your friend over and let them ask for it. We have to be fair to everyone.”

The entire area around the volunteers was cordoned off with ropes and traffic cones while up to five security staff managed the queue.

'Someone stole my shoes..'

As we approached the white van, Lorraine was on the ground beside a man with a bag beside her.





'There you go, put them on you!' One Dubliner lending a helping hand to another as Lorraine O'Connor of Muslim Sisters of Éire bought shoes, socks, and trousers for this man whose shoes were stolen. Picture: Moya Nolan

“There you go, put them on you,” we could hear her say. The man dressed himself in new runners and tracksuit bottoms. There was a look of relief on his face as he slipped on his new footwear.

“His shoes were robbed,” said one of the male volunteers. “Lorraine went off to get him those. Look at his feet, God love him, they are covered in welts.”

It's not often one would stop to think about how lucky we are to have a pair of shoes on our feet, but this was one of those moments.





"They're desperate I suppose, we all are, so I can't really be angry, but I was walking around for five days with no shoes.

"My feet — they were real sore, you've no idea.

“

But I just am glad now, when you feel your foot in the shoe, the comfort, and the soft feeling, it's like walking on clouds especially when you have had no shoes for as long as that, five days, then it's like you're in this cotton wool.

"Mind your shoes because you never know who is going to rob them. That's my advice and that's the way it is now. It's desperation".



'When you feel your foot in the shoe, the comfort, and the soft feeling — it's like walking on clouds,' the man told the 'Irish Examiner' after Lorraine O'Connor got him new shoes and clothes. Picture: Moya Nolan

A little further away, the street café was beginning to open after Lorraine gave the all-clear.





Lorraine founded the Muslim Sisters of Éire in 2010 and opened the café seven years ago.

'This is us: You can see empowerment here'

"There are many misconceptions about Muslim women, that they are beaten by their husbands, and repressed. But religion has nothing to do with **domestic violence**," Lorraine said.

"A Muslim woman is also stereotyped, but this whole organisation is run by the women. We have male security to help but it's about empowering women. This is us: You can see empowerment here.

"This is not all we do. We have a helpline Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. We do court support. We do advocacy. We have 12 events every year — we have the school summer projects, a registered girls youth club — there's loads. We are now in the school curriculum too.

"I am from Coolock and reared in Kilbarrack in north **Dublin**. I became a Muslim in 2005. I knew about Islam, and I came into it in 1987. It was a 19-year journey for me.

"It had to be for me. Everyone thinks you become a Muslim for your husband — I didn't.

"I met my first husband who was from Libya, and he was Muslim, but we are divorced. My second husband is from India. But no one asked me to be Muslim: I was Muslim before I met them.





Danas Balnys joining the queue for the Muslim Sisters of Éire's street cafe: 'If I did not have this service, I would be dead. I would not survive.' Picture: Moya Nolan

"I studied it and looked into it. I love the oneness of it, you don't pray to statues, nothing like that, it's just between you and God. That's the connection.

"There is a demand for what we do and Muslim women all over the country have asked us to come to their area."

That call for support has led to Lorraine opening a branch in **Limerick** recently, but she said the street café won't happen there for several years.

"It is the last thing we will do," she said. "We have just set up a team and there is a lot of work to do.

"But the café takes years. You have to be able to deal with people in all sorts of addictions and issues and poverty. It won't happen overnight."

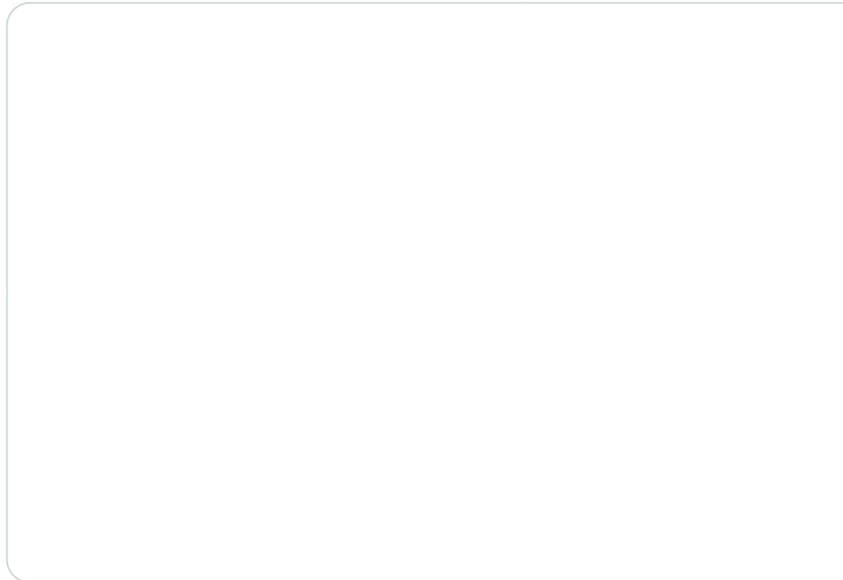




What an amazing weekend.. Saturday we celebrated a new branch in Limerick our yearly Teddy's Bear Picnic for the youngster's and there little Teddy's.

The children had a ball as did there mothers while forming the bounds of new friendship .

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“Muslim women experience the same challenges as any other woman — poverty, abuse, single parents: There is nothing different about them. But we are here to empower them and that’s the difference. We turn no one away and everyone is welcome.

“You can see the difference now than pre-covid. People in the hospitality sector in particular lost their jobs and all joined us here on a Friday. There are more and more people every week, it’s not getting any easier”.

As the crowd moved along slowly to receive their meals, I spoke to several people in the queue about the reasons





to Ireland five months ago with her daughter who is nearly five. She waited patiently in the queue for the café with her child in a buggy.



Kuburat Adebisi and Mojisola Quadri Mabogaje, Balbriggan, are Muslim Sisters of Éire volunteers who cook food and bring it to the GPO on O'Connell St, Dublin, on Fridays. Picture: Moya Nolan

“I am here since 4pm to get the food,” she said. “I come here for food, and to make my life better. I have small kids; I think about their life and education and future. I don’t want to spend my life struggling.

“In Romania, it is an expensive life, I am here five months, I am not working but in Romania I make €200 per month. It is nothing. It is better to come here and start a new life.

“I know it is hard, I can’t be in my country. In the future it is better for them, the kids, for me to be here. I have a six-





she is in school now. I have no income, no jobseeker, no income, no nothing, I am waiting to be processed for one-parent family [payment]. I came here in 2018 for the first time, then I go home, it was too hard. I come back five months ago and am starting again. I am a single parent.

“I am stronger now than before. I am living in a hostel in the city with my daughter. I pay every night. I come here to the sisters and get the food. I have no clothes or shoes just what I have now. I have nothing but this helps me with the food. I am here just for food.

“I am hoping to start a job and for life to get a bit better. I am here from 4pm and I get the food and then I go back to my house and sleep, but I know my life will get better here there are better opportunities.”

Three students from India who are in their 20s and studying English use the street café to help them “make ends meet” while they are struggling with the cost of living.



Students Anas Koranath, Shahir Abdul Khadar, and Sandeep Damodaran from India are eking out their budget by availing of food from the Muslim Sisters of Éire.

Picture: Moya Nolan

Anas Koranath, 25, said: “The price here is very expensive, I come here and rent a room. I meet some other friends



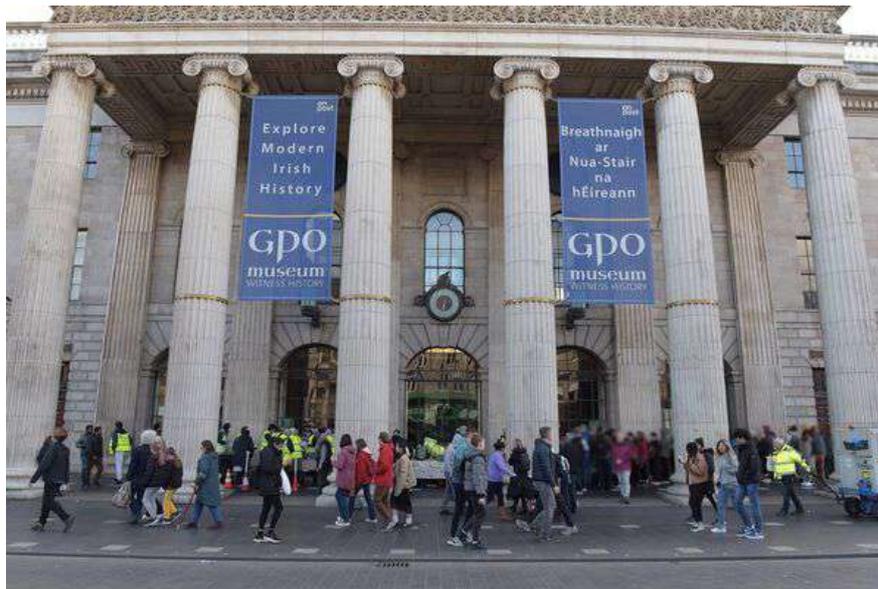


“I have to be able to have the life here, so the rent and the bills is very high, then if we get the meals then life is easier, so we come here for some help.”

His friend Shahir Abdul Khadar, who is 22, is also from India.

“We all live in different places and with the rent, phone, college, electricity, this food helps us. I got my PPS number too and I am looking for a part-time job. This will make life easier.

“I am also studying English and I will get through this... It is good to have met the friends. Then we come here, and we are not embarrassed to ask for the help. It all works out in the end, so we have to do it and we come together as friends.



By the time the Muslim Sisters of Éire cafe gets going outside the GPO in Dublin at around 6.30pm, the queue stretches as far back as Henry St. Picture: Moya Nolan

“Look around, there are so many people here. We are all in the same situation, some worse than others. We cannot judge them”.

Sandeep Damodaran, 24, said he heard about the cafe in college.





have this. The food is very nice and healthy.

“I am 24 years old, and we are all helping each other out. We hear about the café in college because our friends told us that the food was nice, and it would help us. There are people here from Deliveroo doing the work and then getting the food.

“There are single parents, people who have lost their jobs, all sorts of people all looking for help.”

Danas Balnys is 39 and originally from Lithuania, he has been living in Ireland 14 years: “If I did not have this service, I would be dead. I would not survive. I am here for food, that is the only reason I am here, because I am hungry.

“I sleep on the streets, and this helps me. I have an addiction to alcohol, and I have no supports. It is one word — food. I am here for food. When I finish here, I walk around and I have a good safe place. Sometimes I am in a hostel. I am not so much on the street anymore.

“It is very difficult. But this is the life for me now. I am used to it. I am hungry though.

“I do not have any social welfare, they said they will pay for me to go home if I want but I am not going home. This is good service. I can't go home.

“Life is better here [than] in Lithuania, but [it] is much more expensive.”

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