



# Ethnic entrepreneurs make their mark

## Immigrants are introducing valuable products and ideas to the Irish market

**I**N a society which has undergone major change in the space of five years, Irish employers are beginning to open up to the idea of embracing cultural difference.

Polish entrepreneurs selling foods sourced from Eastern Europe are beginning to thrive, EU migrants with IT and other skills are highly sought after, and many African and Brazilian immigrants are doing well.

But, with a melting pot of new cultures, misunderstandings are cropping up more frequently, and what one person judges to be inappropriate behaviour or dress for the job, another may deem to be necessary.

The decision taken by higher echelons within the gardai not to allow religious or ethnic members of the force to wear turbans, or any other head clothing which would reveal religious persuasion, has been criticised by some.

But while the controversy generated by the decision to ban wearing of the Sikh turban for gardai has created a stir, many believe that the police uniform should be the same for each individual.

"The reaction among ethnic groups living in Ireland has been varied. A lot of immigrants believe that the police should have nothing at all to do with religion," says Chinedu Onyejelem, editor of multi-cultural newspaper Metro Eireann.

"I believe that once you start giving concessions, then each immigrant group will have their own demands. There is a mixed reaction among immigrant groups to this debate."

The acceptance of new cultures and ethnic differences in many work places is beginning to happen, according to the newspaper editor, who stresses that much depends on the culture within an organisation.

There are several companies which

hold open days within the workplace. These open days are used to help immigrant employees come to terms with skills required for the job and to help boost confidence at work.

"In some companies staff are being trained in their English language skills, for example, but there are still companies out there who take advantage of immigrant workers," says Mr Onyejelem.

He stresses that a significant proportion of immigrants and EU migrants are over-qualified for the work which they are doing, and he believes non-nationals need to be encouraged to set up their own ventures.

However, the danger of a growth in the informal economy remains a threat, despite the vigilance of the Revenue Commissioners when it comes to overseeing compliance with company law and regulations.

"It needs to be recognised that some of the immigrants come here with a high level of entrepreneurial activity. Understanding the importance of complying with regulations is vital," says Mr Pat Delaney of employers group IBEC.

A number of initiatives have been set up by business groups to help non-nationals navigate a raft of business regulations in this country. The Emerge Equal programme, which was set up two years ago, has seen over 400 entrepreneurs receive training.

Problems encountered by non-na-

tional entrepreneurs range from language difficulties and social exclusion, racism, lack of funding and cultural differences. Entrepreneurs are being assisted in overcoming these obstacles.

Research has shown that most minority entrepreneurs are "push entrepreneurs," in other words they have been pushed into starting a business because of the negative experiences they have suffered in the employment of others.

Mr Delaney believes that full rights in terms of wages and all other rights need to be afforded to incoming migrants. If these workers do not receive the minimum wage then the informal economy will grow, he warns.

"One of the difficulties with immigrants stepping in to business here is that often they have no business plan.

They think it's just a case of getting a loan and setting up a shop. But approaching a bank without a good business plan is a bad idea," says Mr Onyejelem.

He is talking from experience: seven years ago when he set up his newspaper, it was impossible to get a loan from the bank.

It was a struggle financially for the Nigerian entrepreneur; however, he managed to secure a grant from an enterprise centre.

The Emerge Equal project aims to ensure that ethnic minority businesses also experience growth.

The Ethnic Entrepreneur of the Year awards ceremony received positive media attention this year, with Rita Shah, of Shabra Plastics in Monaghan taking the top award. The Kenyan-born business woman founded the company 20 years ago.

Chief executive of TSB Denis Casey said at the awards ceremony earlier this year: "Ms Shah is an excellent example of entrepreneurial spirit among the ethnic community, and is a wonderful role model for all entrepreneurs and for women in business."

All the finalists in the Ethnic Entrepreneur of the Year awards received two days mentoring with top business people, including Aidan Heavey, chief executive of Tullow Oil.

"This is the type of mentoring

which entrepreneurs need. Tips from successful business people can make a huge difference to businesses which are already showing promise," says Mr Onyejelem. He adds that issues such as dress code are bound to surface, however, he stresses the culture within organisations will dictate the pace of integration in the workplace.



**Michèle  
Horgan**



**At the launch of the 2007 Metro Eireann Media and Multicultural Awards were Denis O'Brien, chairman of the Iris O'Brien Foundation; Lucy Gaffney, chairperson, National Action Plan Against Racism and Chinedu Onyejelem, editor, Metro Ireland and founder of MAMA.** Picture: Eamonn Farrell/Photocall Ireland.