



Migrant Voice's submission to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission inquiry:

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Equalities and Human Rights

October 2020

About Migrant Voice

Migrant Voice is a national, migrant-led organisation working with migrants regardless of their status and country of origin, including refugees and asylum seekers. We develop their skills and confidence, empowering them to speak for themselves about their own lives and issues that affect their communities. Whether speaking out in the media or on public or political platforms, the aim is to create positive change for migrants – countering xenophobia, discrimination and unjust policies, strengthening communities, and bringing social justice – change which benefits the whole of UK society. We have networks in Glasgow, the West Midlands and London.

Introduction

Since the start of the lockdown, we have been collecting evidence from our members (who are mainly migrants, asylum seekers and refugees) across the UK on the impact of Covid-19 on their lives.

In July, Migrant Voice hosted an online meeting, inviting speakers, representatives and members from various migrant/refugee communities to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on them. The meeting was addressed by nine speakers, most of them migrants themselves and representing community organisations or groups of migrants/refugees who have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19.

The speakers were:

- Ako Zada, campaigner with End Hotel Detention who spoke about the experiences of asylum seekers
- A campaigner for LGBT rights (who wished to remain anonymous in this briefing)
- Marzanna Antoniak, Community Connector at Govanhill Community Development Trust, who spoke about the experiences of European citizens
- Miro Cuba, a member of and campaigner with the Roma community
- An international student in Glasgow (who wished to remain anonymous in this briefing)

- Elizabeth Hutchin-Bellur and Susana Garcia Medrano from Feministas Hispanohablantes Glasgow, who spoke about the experiences of Ibero-American women.
- Graham Campbell, Glasgow Councillor and Project Leader with Flag Up Scotland Jamaica
- Sofi Taylor, Founder of the Overseas Nurses Network and Migrant Voice Trustee

The information in this submission is based on what was shared with us at that meeting and what has been shared with us by our Glasgow members since March this year. It focuses on each of the groups represented at the meeting, while also drawing out similarities in the experiences between the groups. It ends with recommendations that have come directly from members and representatives of these communities, which they feel would have the greatest positive impact on the immediate and longer-term situation of individuals within those communities.

Asylum seekers

As has been widely reported, during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic there was a drastic change in the housing arrangements for many asylum seekers in Glasgow. Hundreds of asylum seekers found themselves moved from their housing or temporary accommodation into hotels in a project implemented by the Home Office and the Home Office's sub-contractor for social housing, the Mears Group.

One reason given publicly for this upheaval was for the safety of the asylum seekers themselves, but as Ako Zada pointed out at our meeting, this reasoning is unjustifiable:

“We do not believe that it is justifiable to say that the move was for people’s safety when all this has done is increase people’s anxiety, stress and depression during the lockdown, simply by locking them away with no means to self-care, such as cooking for themselves, or access the cash support that is usually available.”

For those who still received the Government cash allowance provided to asylum seekers to provide essentials for themselves, which sits at around £37 per week (with an increase of £1.85 per week announced in June), access to that money was limited. Many found themselves with limited or no access at all to GPs, physical and mental health services, and even contact with their own friends or family, due to lack of internet access. These were also significant concerns for the campaigner for LGBT rights and for Elizabeth Hutchin-Bellur and Susana Garcia Medrano from Feministas Hispanohablantes Glasgow, whose work includes supporting Ibero-American women in the UK asylum system. In the view of the LGBT rights campaigner, the Mears Group has neglected the needs of the vulnerable people put in their care.

At a time when the impact of Covid-19 has led to many groups in Scotland being given the ability to access additional funds and support – and to do so more easily – only the opposite can be said for asylum seekers, who have been marginalised even further. In Zada’s view, this highlights how asylum seekers are still at many levels seen as less than human, as if they were viewed as equal members of society, they would have received the same extra support, not less.

Glasgow Councillor Graham Campbell also raised serious concerns about the Mears Group and their decision to move asylum seekers into hotels, which he believes had little to do with safety and was driven instead by a desire to save money. He rejects the common argument that the asylum seekers should be happy as they have a roof over their head and three meals a day:

“People are given three meals a day in jail as well, but this is not meant to be a jail; it’s not legal to tell people that they can’t go out. This is their home while they’re in this hotel – respect the fact that they have human dignity.”

Councillor Campbell sees the Covid-related problems as part of a much bigger issue with asylum accommodation and support in Scotland, caused by the fact that, over the last decade, these services have been sub-contracted to “*a series of private housing supporters who are only interested in one thing, and that’s profit*”. Alongside others, he is campaigning for the contract to be removed from Mears and returned to Glasgow City Council, which had this responsibility in the past and has the relevant support structures (social services, education, housing etc.) already in place.

Serious concerns were also raised regarding the two tragic incidents in Glasgow that resulted partly from the changes to the living and financial arrangements for asylum seekers. In May, Adnan Olbeh, a Syrian asylum seeker suffering from the mental health impacts outlined above, took his own life. According to those at the meeting, his friends and family had raised their concerns about his wellbeing with the Home Office, Glasgow City Council and the Mears Group, but he was not provided with the right help and support.

Councillor Campbell confirmed that Mears had been told about the deteriorating mental health among some asylum seekers in their care for weeks prior to Olbeh’s death. He criticised the group for not conducting mental health assessments of all of those asylum seekers whom they planned to relocate, prior to doing so. He reminded us all that these are people who have experienced trauma in their country of origin, trauma on their journey to the UK, and trauma within the UK asylum system, and have then been locked up in a hotel for three months: “*anyone would suffer after this*”.

Following Olbeh’s death, there were numerous calls for immediate action to provide access to emergency services and support for asylum seekers in hotel accommodation, as it was clear that this was not an isolated case, that many were suffering from the change in their situations, and that any further similar incidents could be prevented with the right support in place.

However, very little was done to improve the situation, and we soon saw a second tragic incident at the Park Inn Hotel. Again, we had a vulnerable individual with serious and known mental health problems not receiving the correct or adequate support. If this had been different, an incident where one person lost their life and others were injured could have been prevented. Zada is concerned about the continued lack of action, even after this second incident:

“It’s not the end of the story. Two people have lost their lives, and this has had a big impact on individuals in the community and individuals in the city. There are a lot of people still in the hotels who need support – emotional support, cash support, mental and physical health support. But little has been done. We don’t need any more sad news; we need action and we need emergency support to improve the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland.”

We learned that one organisation that supports LGBT refugees and asylum seekers has also been looking at the Park Inn incident and seeking answers on why Badreddin Abadlla Adam was shot dead. Their understanding is that officers are trained to avoid such an outcome as far as possible and they believe questions still remain to be answered. They are also concerned that Adam’s death means that we can never have a clear picture of what led to the incident and how such a situation could be prevented in the future.

We have since seen a third tragic death of an asylum seeker in Glasgow, with the passing of Mercy Baguma. One of our members wrote an article about her death, including the following:

“Something has gone seriously wrong here. In a developed country like the UK, surely no one should die in these circumstances.”

EU migrant communities

Marzanna Antoniak brought our focus to the area of Govanhill in Glasgow. Govanhill is the most ethnically diverse area of Scotland and [a recent survey showed that there were over 88 languages spoken there.](#)

The start of the pandemic and lockdown resulted in a lot of panic, stress and anxiety within the myriad of communities in Govanhill. This stemmed from a lot of disinformation circulating and from conflicting news of the pandemic from their home countries and in the UK. Some of this confusion stemmed from language and literacy barriers, but for those who could compare the news and Government approaches between their own country and their host one, many were concerned that the UK Government might not be taking the situation seriously enough and implementing the right measures. This was particularly the case among Romanian and Slovak Roma communities. Marzanna Antoniak said:

“Many people wanted to leave Scotland as they were not feeling safe here, mainly from the difference in approach in their home countries. Governments in their own countries were more strict in their approach to the pandemic, and the lockdown, and mask wearing.”

Deaths from Covid-19 were experienced throughout the communities and there was further confusion and disinformation surrounding procedures and access to health services, morgues and repatriation of bodies to home countries. This disinformation put a lot of strain on support workers within these communities, as they bore the burden of communicating information to the huge numbers of people coming to them with questions. Miro Cuba, representative of the Roma community, confirmed that this group has faced similar problems relating to disinformation and access to health services. Many Roma simply didn't know where to find reliable information, Cuba said.

Covid-19 deaths within the Roma community caused fear among families living in Glasgow, many of whom felt that the services available were unable to help them. Many fled Glasgow, although there are reports of some people now starting to return. Stories have also surfaced of EU migrants who had returned home having their UK properties broken into, which further fuelled the anxiety and stress they were experiencing.

Some community groups have responded to the lack of information by setting up support structures, in Govanhill for example. There are now helplines in community languages, including Romanian, Slovakian and Czech, where people can call and ask for help in their own languages. There's also now a printed directory of local services that is largely pictorial to help those with language or literacy barriers. But in areas where these support networks are not so strong or organised as in Govanhill, individuals and communities will continue to feel isolated and be vulnerable to disinformation.

The impact of the lockdown was also felt economically across varying levels for EU migrants. Many found themselves on reduced incomes lost their jobs entirely due to the closure of industries. Others who had chosen at the start to go back home found themselves either stuck in their home countries or subject to quarantine regulations if they were able to travel back. This resulted in many using up their entire holiday allowance for the year and in some cases with no pay at all.

Miro Cuba emphasised the economic impact of the lockdown on the Roma community, especially as many work in low-paid jobs where it was impossible to work from home:

“Roma people cover lot of low skilled jobs, such as cleaners and hospitality workers, but lots of these jobs are gone, some people have been furloughed and some were not.”

For a majority of this community, the pandemic has left them living in a state of confusion and uncertainty. Many questions still remain regarding their status in the UK after Brexit, and many people are very concerned about a possible second wave of Covid-19 and job security in the future.

Many EU migrants, especially women, have found that the lockdown has impacted their education. Those who were improving their literacy and English language skills have had this paused and a lot of their pre-lockdown progress is being lost.

Lots of services have gone online, whether it be education, health or mental health services and even registering a child. However, many people across different communities, including Scottish communities, have found themselves digitally excluded as they do not have the devices or means to access the Internet, putting them at a further disadvantage.

International students

A forgotten group, often not even considered as a migrant community, is international students. They are assumed to have full funding and scholarships and therefore no need for support, but as an international student in Glasgow pointed out, this is often not the case:

“Often the Government and everyone else forgets that a lot of us come from low to middle income countries to try to improve our experience and our academics, to try and improve our job opportunities.”

A lot of international students receive only part funding or are fully self-funding. Some who come to the UK to study also bring their families with them and support and care for them whilst studying here. International students are hugely reliant on part-time jobs to support themselves but with the shutdown of the economy there are many who have now been left with little or no money in the bank. Students are now being told they must pay the full fees for this academic year in advance, which is impossible for many due to lost income. Those who came to the UK sponsored by a business or organisation are also struggling as many of these sponsors have also lost income or even shut down and are unable to continue funding them.

Over the last few months, many universities have tried to step in and offer some support, but there's not enough for everyone who needs it and many students find themselves waiting months for decisions to be made and months further for financial support to come through. Even with this help from universities there are many within this community that find this support is not enough to cover all of their needs, leaving them in uncertain and precarious situations.

Ibero-American women

Lack of information was again presented as a significant issue for many Ibero-American women, represented at this meeting by Elizabeth Hutchin-Bellur and Susana Garcia Medrano from Feministas Hispanohablantes Glasgow. A key issue for many women in this group was simply not knowing if certain support services (mental and physical healthcare, housing advice etc.) were available to them, and even where services were available in the Spanish language or with Spanish translation, these were often not promoted in this language, so many women remained unaware. Hutchin-Bellur said that there is a real and urgent need to get information about available services to community influencers who can share it with their broader communities.

She also raised the concern that the pandemic has meant the sudden closure of many services for newcomers to Glasgow, including migrant workers and asylum seekers:

“It meant the end to the possibility of getting a job, securing any English classes, creating any stability for themselves, searching for membership in community networks, accommodation, the process of securing familial reunions and/or any other legal or immigration processes that might be on their plate.”

This lack of information and support, along with the stress of being far away from and concerned about the health of families back home, has put severe strain on the mental health and well-being of many Ibero-American women. According to Susana Garcia Medrano, there is a real need for safe spaces where these women can share their experiences and their fears, as well as for professional psychotherapy and emotional support in their own languages. Medrano said that it is always difficult to find translators who speak these languages, but that Covid-19 has exacerbated this problem.

Migrants working in health and social care

Sofi Taylor, Founder of the Overseas Nurses Network, spoke about the issues faced by those working on the frontline of the public health response to Covid-19, many of whom are migrants. Many are terrified of going to work, she told us, due to the lack of available PPE. While PPE supplies may be reasonable in larger hospitals, she has been made aware that in smaller hospitals, where the patients are largely older people, the stock of PPE is very poor – little beyond a mask, gloves and plastic apron, even when staff are working directly with Covid-19 patients. Some migrants who work as cleaners have told Taylor that they have sometimes been given no protection at all, even when going into spaces where there were Covid-19 patients, or asked to clean out the bins where PPE had been discarded.

Taylor also raised concerns about what happens when these workers contract Covid-19, or think they may have. They are often disbelieved or told there's nothing wrong with them. Alternatively, they may be believed but not tested, or brought back to work before the recommended isolation period was up:

“I have two friends who both contracted Covid-19. One of them was really very ill, she was so frightened she wouldn't go to a hospital. When she phoned up, the doctor told her, 'you probably have Covid-19' – and when she tried to get a test, she was told, 'forget it, if you've had it, you've had it'. So people like that are not always recorded as testing positive. The other lady I know worked in a private care home and she tested positive. After five days, she was told to come back to work. The reason was because they were short-staffed. So these are the kinds of dilemmas that a lot of the healthcare workers are facing.”

The mental health impact on these workers is enormous. Taylor knows a number of migrant healthcare workers who have PTSD because of working so closely with Covid-19 patients and not always with the right protection: *“They live in fear,”* Taylor said.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made by participants at the meeting:

- There needs to be a systematic change in how asylum seekers in Glasgow are accommodated and their concerns addressed. The contract should be returned to Glasgow City Council.
- Groups working closely with asylum seekers in Glasgow should be adequately resourced to provide holistic support, including around well-being and mental health, to address the particular needs arising from the pandemic.
- Universities should allow international students already in the UK to postpone fee payments and pay these in instalments and should ensure all financial and other support is available to international as well as home students.

- The UK Government should show flexibility to international students renewing their visas and accept evidence that shows students can pay their fees in instalments, not refusing visa applications on the basis that a student cannot pay their full fees upfront.
- Both the Scottish and UK Governments must ensure that the support services offered during and after the pandemic – including emergency support and financial aid - are equally available and accessible to all residents.
- The media should recognise its responsibility to ensure events are properly reported and investigated, and that all parts of society are equally and truthfully represented. This is even more important during a pandemic, when social inequalities are exacerbated.
- Regularly updated information about Scottish and UK Government guidelines, physical and mental healthcare services, and financial and other support should be made available in community languages and funding provided to grassroots community organisations to help get this information out.
- Adequate PPE must be made available to all those working in frontline services, and unscrupulous employers who force staff to work in unsafe conditions should be held to account.
- Scottish politicians should use their position to be a stronger voice calling on the UK Government for greater equality and support for migrant communities during and after the pandemic, not using arguments surrounding devolved powers as an excuse for inaction.
- Scottish communities should continue to come together and support each other, because they also have an important role to play at this time. But this does not relieve local authorities or the Scottish/UK Governments of their responsibility to ensure all members of the community are safe and have equal access to support, information and their rights.