

Confronting the legacy of the Covid-19 crisis for migrant-background communities in Manchester: A cross-sector workshop.

Migration and Interdisciplinary Global Studies (MIGS) Research Group,
Department of Sociology, Manchester Metropolitan University

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Overview

Migration and Interdisciplinary Global Studies (MIGS) is a new research group based in the Department of Sociology at Manchester Metropolitan University. We hosted our online launch event on 22 June 2021: *Confronting the legacy of the Covid-19 crisis for migrant-background communities in Manchester – a cross-sector workshop*.

The event brought together 40 people from Greater Manchester's universities, charities, public sector, and the general public to consider the impact of Covid-19 on migrant-background communities in Manchester, discuss existing responses, and catalyse opportunities for collaboration.

The event was in two parts. First, five organisations working with migrant-background communities in Greater Manchester gave short presentations on their work with the communities they serve before attendees joined small group discussions on specific themes.

The workshop drew attention to the diverse experiences of migrant-background communities in Greater Manchester and the significant challenges facing both these communities and the organisations and local authorities that serve them. At the same time, it also highlighted the excellent work that is being done in the region and underlined the value of collaboration within and across sectors.

Attendees provided the following feedback on the event:

"[I liked] the openness and generosity of people to share their research and experience. The content was rich and moving, and great this work is being done. Wish to see more support for this work."

"Extremely insightful presentations from a variety of speakers with whom I would like to collaborate further... the same goes for the discussion group in which I took part"

"Great range of people connected and informed about the issue! I got a lot out of the small discussion group which felt really fruitful."

Going forward, we hope that MIGS can serve as an information and networking hub for researchers, practitioners and community members working on migration-related issues in Greater Manchester. We are eager to foster partnerships across research and practice, with a particular focus on migrant-led initiatives, to support transformative change.

Contact us at migs@mmu.ac.uk to connect with us and be notified about future events.

Summary

Presentations

Manchester City Council Safeguarding Lead for Education and Skills, Jenny Patterson

Jenny Patterson discussed Manchester City Council's role in supporting newly-arrived migrant families to access education during Covid-19.

- Manchester City Council faced a range of obstacles in securing newly-arrived migrant children places at school during the pandemic, which had a significant impact on children and their families/carers.
- Throughout 2022, Manchester City Council will celebrate the [Year of the Child](#), a 'year of opportunity' for all children and young people.

Manchester City Council Migrant Children's Team Lead, Kate Williams

Kate Williams discussed the experiences of separated/unaccompanied young people seeking asylum, who are under the care of the Migrant Children's Team.

- Manchester City Council supports the second-highest number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the North West (103 under 18 years old, and 168 aged 18-21 at the time of the workshop.)
- Aside from the material, schooling and health challenges they face, these children and young people feel like they have been 'living in prison,' having missed out on vital opportunities to integrate, make friends, improve their English, and have fun.

Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, Policy Officer, Rivka Shaw

Rivka Shaw presented [GMIAU's 2021 Report: Covid-19 and the Hostile Environment in the North West of England](#).

- GMIAU set up a phone advice line in March 2020 (closed in December 2020). The advice line received 3097 calls, from 103 nationalities, and 1,271 people received one-off immigration advice.
- The government has demonstrated a lack of urgency in dealing with the backlog in the immigration system and has failed to appreciate the impact delays have on people's lives.

Europia, Research and Information Officer, Joe Meredith

Joe Meredith focused on the impact of Covid-19 on European migrants (EU and Central and Eastern European nationals).

- The Covid-19 crisis coincides with some of the changes caused by the UK leaving the European Union (Brexit). In Greater Manchester alone, there are over 200,000 applications for EU Settled Status.

- In addition to the challenges of Brexit, some groups such as EU Roma migrants have faced particular challenges during the pandemic. Accessing information and health services were two of the most significant challenges.
- Europa's research found that over 40% of their service users said that they would not have the Covid-19 vaccine; 37% had not found official information translated into their native languages; and nearly 30% did not know where their local Covid testing site was.

Safety4Sisters, Co-Director, Vicky Marsh

Vicky Marsh's talk, *'Locked into Abuse, Locked out of Safety,'* summarised the experiences of migrant women experiencing domestic abuse during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).

- Domestic abuse rates drastically increased during national lockdowns; but there was no women-centred response and above all, no response for migrant women.
- The Domestic Abuse Bill excludes migrant women from its provisions, instead proposing a pilot scheme to support migrant women, which does not go far enough to ensure their safety.
- Safety4Sisters have now opened a refuge for migrant women with No Recourse to Public Funds. This refuge is a concrete symbol that women with No Recourse to Public Funds have a right to safety.

Discussion of Presentations

The main challenges raised were:

- the need for more funding;
- bureaucracy, which can prevent meaningful partnerships with local authorities;
- migration as a barrier to the human rights of women;
- the politicisation of migration.

Opportunities discussed included:

- the strong political backing for migrants within Manchester City Council;
- Increased collaboration across organisations and local authorities.

Children's Perspectives: the Micreate Project

During the tea break, Shoba Arun and Farwa Batool shared images produced by children as part of the [Micreate project](#). The images represented children's perceptions of their lives and their feelings of belonging and displacement. The images also showcased the children's journeys from their home countries to the UK, and their lives in between this process.

Micreate is an EU Horizon 2020-funded project that aims to support the inclusion and integration of migrant children through adopting a child centred perspective.

Group Discussions

1. Schools, migrant pupils, and communities

Issues

- *For teachers*
 - Increased demands of adapting to new system and pandemic
 - Lack of student engagement (perhaps due to digital exclusion)
 - Difficulties compensating for the lack of face-to-face teaching, particularly for students with language barriers
- *For pupils*
 - Unfamiliarity with the school system
 - Online bullying
 - Digital exclusion from the learning space – key challenge
 - Lack of opportunities to practice language skills
- *For parents*
 - Their own language learning disrupted by home-schooling
 - Highly important to parents that resources are translated
 - Struggling to engage their children with education
- *For everyone*
 - Deteriorating mental health due to lack of social interaction
 - Lack of structured time
 - Lack of access to resources

Current Actions

- Bi/multilingual school staff supporting migrant pupils and their parents
- Schools and local authorities working together to put in place help for free school meals through food banks and home visits

Future Possibilities

- Sharing best practice

2. Life in the UK: the intersection of health and social challenges

Issues

- The pandemic has impacted people's everyday lives, including health and wellbeing, housing and social care, and social inclusion/exclusion
- The hostile environment's impact on access to health and dental services has continued, compounded by the pandemic
- Some migrants experiencing multiple forms of waiting: for status; for the pandemic to ease
- Delays and difficulties finding interpreters – affecting access to essential services such as housing, health, and legal advice.
- There are issues with poor translations of COVID information that do not recognise cultural difference
- Young people have been unable to have fun, which is really important!
- The digital divide is a critical issue, especially for those with English language barriers

Current Actions

- Hot meals and food parcels have been provided to asylum seekers since the beginning of the pandemic

- The Lowry are running an [Arts for Social Change programme](#), using arts to support young people's health and wellbeing, which includes a project supporting youth at risk of homelessness
- [Equal Education Chances](#) serve youth and families, and signpost to other services, including domestic abuse, education, NRPF support
- People with lived experience and deep community knowledge play a critical role in migrant-focused provision

Future Possibilities

- Arts as a mode of communication and sharing
- Academics need to work with organisations embedded in communities, where there is existing trust and respect
- Need to attend to different groups of migrants – risks of homogenising diverse experiences

3. Covid-19, Brexit and the Hostile Environment

Issues

- We need to separate the effects of the pandemic and the effects of the hostile environment
- Brexit exacerbates the situation, particularly regarding issues of citizenship and EU migrants' right to live and work in the UK
- The EU Settlement Scheme puts the onus on migrants to prove that they are allowed to work. Not being registered will have long-term effects on some communities of EU migrants
- There is little support for families and individuals with NRPF, and despite the pandemic, some cannot ask for help for fear of deportation. Over time, these people become susceptible to abuse
- Precarious employment for migrants with NRPF or without official status, is a danger to well-being

Current Actions

- Informal solidarities have emerged among communities to support each other
- The Children's Society have started a [youth-led campaign for all children who arrive in the UK alone to be given a legal guardian](#)
- Digital resources enable connections with local leaders and organisations

Future Possibilities

- Funding to invest in organisations and communities that work with local groups and understand the importance of co-production

Thank you to everyone who attended and shared their experiences of the Covid-19 crisis in Greater Manchester. We look forward to seeing you again soon.

Benedicte Brahic, Shoba Arun, Caitlin Nunn (MIGS Co-Convenors)

This report was compiled by Ruth Lowe.

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