

Written evidence submitted by Migrant Centre NI (MEM0019)

**Submission to the UK Parliament Northern Ireland Affairs  
Committee’s Call for Evidence on “The Experience of Minority  
Ethnic and Migrant People in Northern Ireland”**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>INTRODUCTION TO MIGRANT CENTRE NI</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>GENERAL COMMENTS</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>EXPERIENCES OF THE EU SETTLEMENT SCHEME</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>CHALLENGES FACING MIGRANT AND ETHNIC MINORITY COMMUNITIES</b>	
<b>IMMIGRATION ADVICE</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>HATE CRIME</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>COVID-19 PANDEMIC</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>LABOUR ISSUES</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>IMPACTS OF BREXIT</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>ECONOMIC OUTCOMES</b>	
<b>LACK OF WELFARE ADVICE PROVISION</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>HEALTH OUTCOMES</b>	
<b>WOMEN’S HEALTH</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>DOMESTIC ABUSE</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>IRISH TRAVELERS</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND DIVERSITY</b>	
<b>GOOD RELATIONS</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>RACIAL EQUALITY LEGISLATION</b>	<b>18</b>

## **Introduction to Migrant Centre NI**

Migrant Centre NI (MCNI) is a registered Charity (no.105750) and a limited company (no.611585). The organisation was initially established as the Belfast Migrant Centre in 2010 and officially recognised as a charity in March 2012. In 2014, to reflect the work of the organisation the name was changed to the current Migrant Centre NI. MCNI was established to protect the rights of migrant workers in NI, tackle racism, eliminate barriers against migrant workers, advance education and raise public awareness about their rights. MCNI has 3 offices across Northern Ireland, in Belfast, Lurgan, and Derry-Londonderry. Our current services include hate crime victim advocacy support, advice and support for applicants enrolling in the EU settlement scheme, financial health and wellbeing advice services, and the administration and management of the Comic Relief and National Emergencies Trust BAME COVID-19 Recovery Grant Scheme for Northern Ireland.

## **General Comments**

We welcome the inquiry by the NI Affairs Committee into the experiences of migrant and ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland, a population that is oftentimes relegated to the margins on NI society. The length and breadth of our submission is due to our position with over a decade of experience as one of Northern Ireland's foremost service providers to migrant and ethnic minority communities. Our submission is based on the experience of the clients we serve and our experience providing these services to them, as well as on pieces of research and policy documents written or commissioned by Migrant Centre NI.

Migrant and minority ethnic communities are a vibrant and important part of life in Northern Ireland and have integrated into the fabric of Northern Irish society. Ensuring that no members of our communities are left behind or forced to live with the hardship of poverty or discrimination is a net benefit for society as a whole. In particular, we wish to voice concern about the impacts of the hostile environment on migrants in Northern Ireland coupled with the austerity of government budget cuts for organisations supporting migrant and ethnic minority communities at both the national and devolved levels.

## **Experiences of the EU Settlement Scheme**

At the time of writing this submission more than 92,000 applications have been made by EEA nationals and their family members to the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) in Northern Ireland (NI). Unfortunately, many people have not found it to be a transparent, smooth, streamlined or simple digital application process.

The experiences of migrants vary significantly. Considering that Migrant Centre NI (MCNI) focuses on most vulnerable in our society, worrying patterns have emerged from the work done to support clients over the last two years of the existence of the scheme. Migrants experience technical issues with the digital applications process, issues with gathering the required residency evidence, are waiting for weeks and sometimes even months to get a decision, or simply are not able to start the application at all due to lack of digital skills and lack of awareness of the need to apply to the scheme.

One of the groups experiencing issues are women, whose periods of employment are more likely to be interrupted because of maternity and caring duties. Furthermore, women who have split up with their primary-earner partners and either never worked or did not work continuously have difficulty providing sufficient documentation. In most cases, the automated checks run as part of the application process do not pick up the NI contributions history from HMRC and DWP systems. Women are significantly more likely to lack sufficient evidence of their residence, as quite often household bills are in the name of the working partner.

Another group of vulnerable clients are members of the Roma community. They experience problems in applying as they often do not have national insurance numbers, bank accounts, or GP surgery registration. Many of our Roma clients can only apply for pre-settled status at the moment due to shorter periods of residence compared to the general EU-national population applying. Furthermore, a sizable number of the Roma community clients are illiterate in their native language(s), much less English. Roman clients are often digitally excluded which further complicates communication with the Home Office if further evidence is required, or event to inform them of the status being granted.

As the status is fully digital, many EU nationals find it difficult to navigate the online portals, one of which is to make the application and a separate one of which is needed to generate share codes to prove the status and update details relating to identification documents, addresses, and contact details. If a person loses access to phone number and email address, they need to contact the HO Resolution Centre by phone for the HO to manually change those details on their account. Unfortunately, the SRC does not provide interpreters when clients ring the helpline which can cause further issues down the line.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic meant that a sizable number of EU nationals and their family members were left with expired IDs as travel restrictions meant they could not travel to their home countries or consular services to renew documents needed to apply for their new immigration status. Northern Ireland has only one EU Consulate in Belfast, for Polish citizens. The rest of the nations need to travel to Dublin or to Consulates in England and Scotland to deal with their passport or legal matters.

Another issue was that of broken residence periods, as many families were stranded abroad due to Coronavirus pandemic and lockdown applied across the world. Many do not realise that the 2 years absence allowed under the pre-settled status might mean they will not be able to apply for settled status in the future and they are liable to lose their rights even if they are legally working in NI at the moment.

Digital Isolation and lack of digital literacy are a major issue especially for those over 50. Although clients do have email addresses or sometimes even smartphones, they are often unable to properly use those and access digital services. As the government is pushing for full digitalisation of benefits, immigration documents or other everyday services, a group of very vulnerable people remains without the support that they really need.

Applying for EUSS requires not only the ability to make the application but also to then access the services and ultimately access the status to prove the right to reside to employers, landlords, doctors etc. The support networks available currently, such as Migrant Centre NI's EUSS application support service, are short term solutions with no guarantee of being extended at any given year. All of those awarded pre-settled status will ultimately need to apply again to obtain settled status. In NI this number will be around 35,000 – 40,000 migrants. If they fail to apply they potentially could lose their right to reside and access services at the end of the 5 year period of their pre-settled status.

Another issue faced by many people applying for the EUSS status are the lengthy waiting times which meant that clients were left in a limbo. The decision waiting times vary greatly from a few hours to a few months. Clients keep asking for updates from the HO and very often the updates are very generic and usually containing information that their application was still being processed. This causes financial hardship, stress and anxiety among some clients.

Yet another difficulty reported by clients are issues faced by transgender individuals. Clients whose countries do not allow or make it very difficult to legally change the name in a passport face difficulty, where most of their UK documents are in a different name to the passport from the home country. Additionally, very little guidance has been issued

as to clients who change their identity once the application for EUSS has been completed and status granted.

Unfortunately, as support services are time limited most vulnerable EEA nationals will inevitably face difficulties upgrading their status from pre-settled to settled, generating confirmation codes and proving their rights to reside for work, benefits, duration and landlords from July 2021.

## **Challenges Facing Migrant and Ethnic Minority Communities**

### *Immigration Advice*

There is a lack of access to high-quality, free, accessible immigration advice to migrants in NI outside of the EU Settlement Scheme advice provision. The generalist advice sector lacks interpreters and in-depth specialist immigration advice services to assist migrants. Given the current lack of high-quality accessible immigration advices services in NI, additional resourcing is required for immigration advisors are able to handle cases beyond those applied for under the EU Settlement Scheme. This includes immigration advice for those applying to the Frontier Worker permit scheme and their families, advice for victims of domestic abuse applying to the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme and victims of domestic violence applying through other avenues, advice for complex cases including those with criminal records, advice regarding immigration refusals and appeals, advice for EU nationals who are now subject to immigration control, and advice for those who applied for the EU Scheme but need additional support, i.e. generating application codes for applications filed years ago. There is a dearth of these services in Northern Ireland which is severely mismatched to the level of need and it would make a tremendous impact on migrants to be able to access free, high-quality immigration advice services. These services would build capacity for the wider immigration sector and ecosystem and contribute to good practice regarding access to high-quality service provision. It would also complement current immigration advocacy and policy work being carried out, backing it up with services for vulnerable migrants.

The current immigration advice landscape in NI does not meet the needs of migrant communities. Immigration advice should ostensibly be provided by the Citizens' Advice Bureaus, but in practice the advisors based in the generalist sector do not have specialist knowledge of immigration advice and there is not interpreter provision built into these services. Specialist community law organisations are able to provide a very limited amount of services for complex cases but only take clients whose cases can potentially effect case law or serve as specific policy examples, a tiny percentage of the

total need. This leaves private solicitors are one of the only courses of action for quotidian immigration advice, but in addition to the obstacle of cost the quality of immigration advice from solicitors in NI is dangerously poor. Unlike in England, where solicitors who provide immigration advice must be qualified to do so, no such qualifications are required in NI and it is a common occurrence to meet with clients who received incorrect information from private immigration solicitors. While legal aid does exist in NI, its capacity is severely limited due to austerity and there is a limit to the time these solicitors are able to spend with clients which precludes many complex cases from being assisted adequately. Furthermore, there is inadequate infrastructure for a referral support network between services and agencies. Crucial services are lacking in an ecosystem that does not currently support quality accessible immigration advice. This can only be addressed through adequate funding and resourcing.

### *Hate Crime*

The impact of xenophobic attitudes coupled with lack of action and commitment by the NI Executive to economic justice and post-conflict investment in communities has contributed to high rates of race hate crime. Race hate crime has reached levels approaching sectarian hate crime in recent years and led to recent attacks escalating in level of violence and damaged committed - our race hate crime victim advocates have only seen their caseload increase in the past year despite the lockdowns. The most recent PSNI annual figures (2019-2020) for hate crime and hate incidents state that race hate incidents surpass the second highest category (sectarian) and are only slightly behind sectarian hate crime in terms of numbers (see Fig. 1 below). Race hate crime far exceeds all other hate crime categories against other minority groups.

**Fig. 1 - Hate Crime - PSNI Figures for 2019/2020**

Motivation	INCIDENTS		CRIMES	
	Jan 19/Jan 20	change	Jan 19/Jan 20	change
<b>Racist</b>	939	-46	627	-35
<b>Homophobic</b>	360	85	245	53
<b>Sectarian</b>	884	-34	633	-41
<b>Disability</b>	94	-3	65	-1
<b>Faith/Religion</b>	34	-3	19	-3
<b>Transphobic</b>	74	14	34	-4

Migrant Centre NI's race hate crime victim support advocates provide the sole victim support service in NI specifically for victims of race hate crime, and support victims of hate crime by providing a safe place for victims to share their experiences (listening through supporting), assisting victims to report crimes to the PSNI and navigate the criminal justice system if they choose that avenue of recourse, assist victims to prepare police statements and accompany victims to police interviews, liaise with the NI Housing Executive regarding rehousing needs, and assist victims to make complaints to the relevant Ombudsman.

Unlike in other parts of the UK, race hate crime in Northern Ireland must be contextualised within wider dynamics of paramilitary community control and understood as an issues that encompasses but also extends beyond racism. Paramilitaries target perceived "newcomer" communities on the pretext of racism and xenophobia to justify their grip and coercive control over the community as a whole. Therefore, no substantial gains will be made against the harms of race hate crime in Northern Ireland if paramilitarism is not dealt with as a systemic issue at the root of a number of community safety and wellbeing issues. The status quo of public services in Northern Ireland (i.e. social housing) is to move the victims of paramilitary intimidation and harassment to another area rather than deal with the perpetrator themselves. As long as this is the case, any assertions from the UK and NI governments that people should have a right to live in any area free of intimidation or violence based on their ethnic background is incompatible with the reality on the ground.

## *COVID-19 Pandemic*

The COVID-19 pandemic has had disproportionate impacts on BAME communities, who face higher rates of digital exclusion and unemployment. We are particularly concerned about the financial wellbeing of migrants given the ongoing COVID-19 situation given increased economic precarity and language and cultural barriers. It is important to consider the particular vulnerabilities of migrant communities due to language, cultural, and economic barriers and disenfranchisement. COVID-19 is creating a moment of crisis for much of the population at large, with large proportions of the population needing to access benefits support - migrants, often employed in non-unionised or particularly precarious work environments, are in particular need of specialised support due to language and cultural barriers along with lack of local connections. Migrant Centre NI's financial health and wellbeing advice services, including benefits advice, were re-introduced with funding from Community Foundation NI and The National Lottery People and Communities Fund as an emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the demand for this service has been so high that we have been working through our existing client wait list since its re-introduction in June 2020 without publicly advertising the standalone service.

The impacts of the lockdowns including higher reported rates of domestic abuse have troubling consequences for BAME victims specifically, who have more difficulty accessing support services and whose lack of English language, local connections, or secure immigration status may be used against them as part of the abuse and coercive control they face. Through our financial health and wellbeing service, we have supported migrants who have been victims of violence in the home and subject to financial abuse or coercive control relating to their immigration status or access to public funds as it's related to their immigration status. Financial independence and access to personal funds is the single greatest determinant of whether a victim is able to safely leave an abusive home, and migrant victims unable to speak English, without nearby family ties or social support network, and/or unfamiliar with how to navigate the benefits system are even more vulnerable. The COVID-19 epidemic has made victims trapped in abusive home situations even more vulnerable to violence. Having culturally, sensitive, bilingual support to access benefits or other services related to their financial dependence can genuinely be a matter of life and death for migrant women. Because of this, the proposed NI Executive budget which makes drastic cuts to advice provision is particularly troubling. We will expand on issues relating to gender-based violence in the 'Health Outcomes' section.

## *Labour Issues*

Migrant workers may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation and underpay by unscrupulous employers and are disproportionately represented in non-unionized and low wage occupations, making their situations even more financially precarious. These risks are especially pronounced when coupled with the impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The lack of specialist advice provision is an issue as it relates to migrant workers and labour rights advice. Migrant workers in non-unionized sectors (i.e. agri-food) do not receive union support. Accessing resources such as the Labour Relations Agency for information or signposting is restricted for many due to language barriers. Furthermore, most generalist advice services do not have a budget for interpreters and none of them provide specialised employment advice to the degree required by some migrant service users. The Equality Commission and voluntary-sector community law organisations will only take on cases they believe have the potential to change case law, excluding the vast majority of cases. Cost is prohibitive for most migrant workers to access private solicitors. Furthermore, migrant workers may be targeted by unqualified and unlicensed "interpreters" or "advisors" who claim to be able to assist them in exchange for money but do not have the adequate skills, knowledge, or intention to do so.

The need for specialist labour rights advice has been identified internally through our EUSS, Financial Health and Wellbeing, and Hate Crime Victim Support services, in which clients related that they were struggling with issues in the workplace that fall outside the remit of our current service provision. The need for these services was also identified externally through attending community events for migrant and ethnic minority populations. Examples of this include Employment Rights Workshops, in which migrant and ethnic minority attendees expressed that the catch-all information provided in such workshops was inadequate to address their specific needs given the low level of consideration to language and cultural barriers facing migrant workers to receive information and support. Specific needs include advice provision and support regarding discrimination, harassment, mistreatment, inequality, or labour law violations in the workplace. The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened financial precarity and barriers to employment and employment rights advice for migrant workers. News reports of COVID-19 outbreaks in livestock processing plants employing large numbers of migrant workers where many of our clients who have accessed our immigration advice work further highlights their vulnerability in the face of unsafe working conditions. A client described the perception of the migrant community in the workforce as such: "Even if I were to make a complaint, why would an employer take my word over the word of a person of their own ethnicity?". This is another issue related to the detrimental knock-on

effects of gutting the advice sector in Northern Ireland at a time when increased resourcing is what is actually needed, especially for specialist services. Specialist labour advice provision must be introduced so that migrant and ethnic minority workers may receive specialised and culturally competent information and advocacy so that they know their rights in the workplace and feel empowered to take action against labour violations.

### *Impacts of Brexit*

Brexit has caused issues for employment including the need for additional steps to secure residency and the right to work for those who are EU nationals, including the need to apply for EU Settled Status for workers and their families and the newly introduced Frontier Worker Scheme for cross-border workers between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We are concerned about the complete lack of funded provision by the Home Office for any support schemes for applications to the Frontier Worker Scheme and anticipate that there will be complications for frontier workers unaware of the need to apply, digitally excluded from applying, or in need of assistance with their application who will not receive the help and support they need and thus put their livelihoods and immigration status in jeopardy.

We are already seeing instances where EU Nationals with no recourse to public funds are at risk for homelessness and rough sleeping. There is no established consular referral network or established procedures in NI for dealing with EU Nationals who risk destitution or homelessness.

In addition, there have been issues with employers not being aware of the obligations on their end or the procedures necessary both to hire an EU National with EU Settled Status or to procure a sponsorship license to sponsor migrants in other immigration categories. This has created further avenues for employers to discriminate against migrants in their hiring practices because they would reject an applicant for lack of understanding their immigration status and their eligibility to work.

### **Economic Outcomes**

#### *Under-Resourced Welfare Advice Provision*

As a service provider of advice and support services for migrant and ethnic minority communities, MCNI has particular insight into the positive impacts of welfare advice services on the lives of vulnerable individuals. The Northern Ireland Department for Communities' draft budget for 2021-2022 proposes drastic, sweeping cuts to publicly

funded advice services including a £1.5million reduction in funding to the advice sector. These cuts will negatively impact the financial wellbeing of migrant and ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland if implemented. The advice sector provides support to the most vulnerable in our society, including migrant and minority ethnic communities, youth, older people, and people with disabilities. From MCNI's perspective, we maintain that these cuts will be of particular detriment to migrant and ethnic minority communities, who may need extra support in navigating the benefits system due to lack of familiarity with the system, language needs, and lack of local connections and support. Furthermore, we anticipate the cuts will cause the loss of auxiliary services necessary to support migrant and ethnic minority individuals accessing advice, including interpreter provision. Worryingly, there is potential for the vacuum created by lack of legitimate welfare advice to be filled by some unscrupulous unaccredited advisors who exploit the vulnerable position of newcomers with no language skills, charging them for assistance. Furthermore, there are concerns with the timing of the cuts with the COVID-19 crisis at a time when more people require welfare advice support and when rates of domestic abuse have skyrocketed.

The loss of legitimate welfare advice services will create a vacuum which has in the past been filled by unofficial and uncertified advisors who exploit the vulnerable status of newcomers who lack English language skills and knowledge of the system. There have been unfortunate instances in Northern Ireland of gatekeepers within certain ethnic minority communities charging exorbitant rates for assistance with filling out forms and filing for benefits. This despicable practice will only increase if there are fewer legitimate, free avenues for people to access trustworthy advice with interpreter provision. The timing for the proposed cuts could not be worse given the fact that, in light of the COVID-19 crisis, people need to access more welfare advice support - not less. This includes those who have lost their jobs, whose furlough is ending, who are going back on Universal Credit or going on Universal Credit for the first time, and those who need to appeal social security benefits decisions. The £1.5million in cuts to the advice sector amounts to abandonment of those struggling at the exact time that they need increased support.

Furthermore, the cuts to welfare advice are inexcusable when considering that domestic abuse has increased under lockdown<sup>1</sup> and those escaping domestic abuse often need assistance navigating and accessing the benefits system. This can range for a number of reasons, a common one being that Universal Credit or other benefits are in the name

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/articles/stay-home-does-not-mean-suffer-home-domestic-abuse-during-covid-19>

of the head of household, often times a male primary earner.<sup>2</sup> This can be wielded against victims of domestic abuse as part of financial abuse and coercive control. Migrant and ethnic minority victims of domestic abuse are at an even greater disadvantage in these situations, often times lacking language skills, knowledge of the system, or local support networks.

## **Health Outcomes**

### *Women's Health*

A report commissioned by Migrant Centre NI and the Black and Minority Ethnic Women's network found that a substantial minority (34.7%) of migrant women surveyed did not know or were unsure of what healthcare they were entitled to under their immigration status<sup>3</sup>. Though there is interpreter provision available through the NHS, in practice some women report that they are not always provided interpreter services even upon request, and 16.6% of BAME women surveyed report being unable to adequately express their needs to their healthcare provider. Black and African and Caribbean Women rated their experiences of healthcare among the most negative of all respondents. These women, compared demographically to the rest of the group, represented a lower proportion of English speakers, a higher proportion of refugee and asylum seekers, higher rates of unemployment, lower household income, and lower levels of educational attainment. This is illustrative of the impact of systemic racism and anti-Blackness to account for even starker levels of health inequalities for Black African and Caribbean communities. Refugee and asylum seekers reported additional health needs related to the trauma of persecution and fleeing their countries of origin which are not adequately addressed by local health providers due to lack of awareness, lack of resourcing, perceived discrimination, or the barriers outlined above. Women with no or low levels of formal education reported the highest levels of need compared to the group, particularly need for interpreter provision, being able to communicate healthcare needs, comfort with exclusively seeing a female GP, comfort expressing women's health issues, and unmet healthcare needs, in particular gynecological and sexual healthcare needs. Women who took part in the survey made specific reference to community organisations who helped them to access care including GP registration and

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<sup>2</sup>The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge? Bronagh Hinds, Published by WRDA, July 2011 <http://review.table59.co.uk/wrda/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/the-ni-economy-women-on-theedgereport.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Austin, J. (2017). Ethnic Minority Women's Access To Quality Healthcare In Northern Ireland. Migrant Centre NI and Black and Minority Ethnic Women's Network.

assistance with appointment scheduling, highlighting the importance of adequate funding and resourcing for organisations doing this work.

### *Domestic Abuse*

Migrant and ethnic minority victims of domestic abuse may be uniquely or particularly susceptible to certain forms of coercive control. They may be at particular risk of being trapped in abusive situations because of a lack of English language ability, knowledge of how to navigate local systems (benefits/housing/etc), and the fact that they may not have an available support system of family and friends due to not having local connections. In addition to lack of English language ability, cultural knowledge, and local connections, abusers frequently leverage victims' immigration status against them when it is undocumented or tenuous. This includes abuse which weaponizes immigration status including tenuous statuses (i.e. asylum seekers awaiting an asylum claim decision) or status tied to a spousal or dependents' visa. Other factors which may be leveraged by abusers include lack of financial independence and benefits being in the abusers' name, victims having No Recourse To Public Funds, fear of and lack of knowledge about police and the criminal justice system, spiritual abuse including using religious law as grounds for abuse, and perceived loss of honor or reputation.

Victims may feel that if they come forward about their abuse to NHS workers, the PSNI, or even to support organisations, they may run the risk of deportation. Immigration reporting within the NHS has a detrimental effect in deterring migrants from accessing public services. Fear of immigration reporting leads to migrants and asylum seekers avoiding services such as health screenings, antenatal care, and reporting abuse<sup>4</sup>. In the NI context, Monica McWilliams has gone in depth on the ways in which immigration status is weaponized as a form of coercive control against victims of domestic abuse<sup>5</sup>. Enforced immigration reporting by landlords, universities, employers, banks and the NHS and increased reporting from the police was introduced with the UK Immigration Act of 2016 as a follow-on to the 2014 Immigration Act. Furthermore, parallels may be drawn for immigration reporting through the PSNI where victims, including victims of domestic abuse, are deterred from reporting for fear of penalty or deportation. The Home Office should exclude requirements for immigration reporting

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<sup>4</sup> Coddington, K. (2020). Incompatible With Life: Embodied Borders, Migrant Fertility, and the UK's 'Hostile Environment'. *Politics and Space*, 0 1-14

<sup>5</sup> McWilliams, M., Yarnell, P., Churchill, M., 2015. Forced Dependency and Legal Barriers: Implications of the UK's Immigration and Social Security Policies for Minoritized Women Living in Abusive Intimate Relationships in Northern Ireland. *Oñati Socio-legal Series*, 5 (6), 1536-1556.

from statutory organisations including the NHS and police services in instances of a victim reporting domestic abuse and this should be communicated to support organisations and the public in a clear and transparent manner.

Unlike in England, Scotland, and Wales, no specialist services for migrant and minority ethnic victims of domestic or sexual violence currently exist in Northern Ireland. These have not been established due to a lack of resourcing. The Gillen Review into the law and procedures in serious sexual offenses in Northern Ireland acknowledges that a criminal justice approach to gender-based violence, when carried out in the absence of adequately resourced support organisations for victims, represents a “complete failure” on the part of the government (p. 529)<sup>6</sup>. The United Kingdom is a signatory to the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The Convention requires State Parties to “allocate appropriate financial and human resources for the adequate implementation of policies, measures, and programmes to prevent and combat all forms of violence”<sup>7</sup>. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women requires State Parties to “include in government budgets adequate resources for their activities related to the elimination of violence against women”<sup>8</sup>. As part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland therefore has a human rights obligation in keeping with international standards to fund resources and social programmes for victims of gender-based violence including domestic and sexual violence. These resources and programmes should include specialist services for migrant and ethnic minority victims of gender-based violence.

### *Irish Travellers*

Health outcomes for Traveller communities in Northern Ireland are among the worst in the country, illustrating severe disenfranchisement and systemic neglect. A report completed by Strabane Access Youth Engagement commissioned by Migrant Centre NI found that health outcomes in Traveller communities were not only lower than those in the general population but also compared to those in other socially deprived areas<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>Gillen, J. (2019). *Review Into the Law and Procedures in Serious Sexual Offenses in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Department of Justice. Available at: <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/gillen-report-may-2019.pdf>

<sup>7</sup>Council of Europe: Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/210>

<sup>8</sup>United Nations General Assembly. (1993). *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women*. [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.21\\_declaration%20elimination%20vaw.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.21_declaration%20elimination%20vaw.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Strabane Access Youth Engagement. *The Needs and Issues of the Traveller Community in Northern Ireland*. (2018). Migrant Centre NI.

33.5% of all respondents surveyed reported their health as “poor” or “very poor”. 89.5% of respondents indicated that at least one person in their household has a disability or limiting long-term illness. Irish Travellers are nearly 7 times as likely to die by suicide than the general population. From a gendered perspective, there are severe inequalities in maternal healthcare, with Traveller women experiencing significantly higher rates of miscarriage, stillbirth, neonatal deaths as well as maternal deaths during and shortly after pregnancy. A conservative estimate of life expectancy gaps between Traveller women and settled women shows that Traveller women live 12 years fewer. Barriers to healthcare include discrimination by GP surgeries to require proof of permanent address to register, inadequate or inappropriate public health outreach, awareness, and education to meet the needs of Traveller communities experiencing higher levels of illiteracy, anticipation of discrimination, and a lack of cultural awareness on the part of healthcare providers. These barriers are embedded within broader social frameworks of systemic discrimination and socio-economic disenfranchisement of Travellers.

Unfortunately, MCNI lost funding for a community development and good relations project focused in largely Traveller-occupied community (Coolcullen Meadow Estate and the surrounding Drumawill area) in Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh when the funder pulled the resourcing for programming due to the COVID-19 pandemic. MCNI was one of only a few service providers working directly on the ground in the area to provide direct support on top of good relations programming and the lack of resourcing to continue this work is one testament to the lack of investment in services for Traveller communities in NI. Needs of this community include high levels of deprivation including food and fuel insecurity, youth antisocial behaviour and violence, community coercion and control by influential gatekeepers, high levels of substance abuse, high prevalence of incarceration amongst the male population, public health issues, and illiteracy. All of these issues have resounding effects which impact families and the community as a whole. Many of these have worsened with additional hardships of the COVID-19 lockdowns. These needs are particularly pronounced for the Traveller community, who face social discrimination and prejudice for their ethnicity on top of socio-economic deprivation.

## **Cultural Exchange and Diversity**

### *Good Relations*

There are particular challenges associated with serving migrant and ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland in particular, because issues affecting these groups are often relegated to the background as less pressing compared to the legacy of the Troubles. Migrant communities are a growing, important, and vibrant part of

communities and neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland, and resources should be invested in supporting their inclusion. However, local funding opportunities often treat the issue of sectarianism between the "two communities" of settled Irish/Catholic and British/Protestant people as the top priority at the expense of an groups who fall out outside of this binary. Consultations MCNI has carried out with migrant and ethnic minority youth indicate that good relations programming is perceived as being 'only for Catholics and Protestants' and neglects the present-day reality in NI.

### **Racial Equality Legislation**

The failure to date of the Westminster Government and the Northern Ireland government to introduce a Bill of Rights is a missed opportunity to enshrine rights that protect on the basis of race, ethnicity, and nationality among other identity markers and to link together the aims of the Northern Ireland Social Inclusion Strategies. The current Racial Equality Strategy is not fit for purpose due to a lack of both implementation and resourcing and there is a lack of political will to address this within Northern Ireland. The UK government should underline the necessity of the successful implementation of both a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland as well as the necessity of Racial Equality Legislation that is well-resourced in order to meet its aims and includes within its provision and implementation ring-fenced funding for organisations which support racial and ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland. This legislation should be created in consultation with ethnic minority communities and should be developed within an intersectional framework which considers the nexus of race with gender, ability, and sexual orientation. It must address the systemic root of racism, counter to the findings of the Sewell report, and its impacts on the material conditions of racial and ethnic minorities in NI.

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