

Presentation from Irish Delegation at 6th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty 2007

Presentation made by Rajat Bhatnagar on behalf of the Delegation

Good morning / afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is Rajat Bhatnagar and I am here as a part of the Irish Delegation to say a few words on the problems and issues concerning people experiencing and tackling poverty and social exclusion in Ireland.

In order to be able to explain ourselves more clearly, we have tried to explain the subject under 6 main headings which are presented here as six sides of this cube.

1. €19.10 Allowance to adult asylum seekers
2. Exploitation and restricted mobility.
3. Racism
4. Non-recognition of foreign qualifications
5. Undocumented Migrants
6. Family Reunification

1. €19.10 Allowance to adult asylum seekers

Lets first talk about the £19.10 allowance which is given to adult asylum seekers every Friday, that too if they are lucky enough, coz at times the money somehow hadn't reach the post office, that is from where they get the money from.

I would here draw your attention to the plight of a mother, who is living in a hostel with her children earning just £19.10 per week. She is expected to nourish her children with that amount of money for the whole week. This is poverty. € 19.10 might not be enough to fulfil the basic daily needs for her family like clothes, toothpaste, calling cards to call home, good food etc.

I talk of food coz the food provided in the canteen is not what they are used to eat. This is reflected in the number of people who actually go to the canteen to eat food which is very low.

To add to their misery they r not allowed to work at all. So even if they want to help themselves and not take support from the government, their hands are tied by laws. Their children allowance is half of what they receive. Unlike Irish children who receive much more from the government.

All this and much more leaves them in such a state where their mindset becomes so narrows that the only thing they are thinking most of the time is £19.10 and when are they going to receive it. Even asylum seekers are good, dignified people who want to be respected in the society like everybody else. But what happens is exactly the opposite. The social stature of them as well as their children is at the bottommost level.

2. Exploitation and restricted mobility.

Secondly let's focus on the exploitation and restrictions on mobility faced by migrant workers in Ireland . I am a migrant worker myself and have personally suffered exploitation at the hands of the employer. The main reason for this I would say, is the restrictions placed on migrant workers in relation to work permits. Let's see the case of ethnic restaurants which are a plenty in Ireland. The employers try to source their chefs from their home country and always try to get people who they themselves

know personally or through somebody coz it makes easier for the employers to exploit them.

I personally know of a few people who have even paid huge amounts of money to the employer so that they can come to Ireland to work. Once here the employers starts exploiting them coz he is fully aware that the work permit issued to them has tied them up to the employer. They are not allowed to move freely between employers even within the same economic sector.

They are paid the minimum hourly rate of pay and in some cases even lower. But they have to survive in that coz they have families back home who are dependent on them. And let me tell u that its not the case that they are not qualified to get a better job or that they might not have enough professional experience, it's the work permits and the restrictions on mobility that make it so.

As a result they feel differentiated from the society as a whole and hesitation to become a part of it settles in them permanently and is in some cases passed on to their children, which gives us a second generation of people experiencing social exclusion.

3. Racism

Let's now talk about racism experienced by people like myself who are in the country as migrants. It is not very uncommon for migrants to hear phrases like 'go back to your country', 'why are you here', 'you are a burden on us' and many more to be thrown at them in very ordinary circumstances sometimes just like walking down the street. I will tell you of one of my own personal experience. One Saturday night I was standing outside an ethnic restaurant where I used to work. Two people who were quite drunk came up to me and started saying 'you people are ruining our country, go back to your own country, why are you people allowed in the country anyway'. I replied them back in an appropriate way and they went their way after that without saying a word. But not everybody is like that.

Incidents like these would always leave their trails on people's minds leaving them feeling unwelcome and socially excluded. Its human nature that if someone feels differentiated to the general lot, they would also retract from getting included, thus giving rise to social exclusion.

4. Non-recognition of foreign qualifications

Fourthly I'd like to shed some light on the fact that in many cases the qualifications held by a foreign national that he/she attained in their home country are not recognised in Ireland.

I work in the hospitality sector and it is not something new for me to see a doctor or an engineer or any other qualified professional coming up asking for a job so that he can support himself in the country while he is completing studies. Studies which he/she may have already completed in his home country and was a fully qualified professional but has to do again coz the organisations in Ireland do not recognise them.

This kind of non-recognition and in a way discrimination, leaves them doing jobs which they would never otherwise do and would be very low paid. This gives rise to poverty which I would say is forced upon them coz they are capable of doing better jobs and integrate in the society in a better way but the circumstances created around them do not allow them to do so.

5. Undocumented Migrants

Fifthly, I would like to discuss the case of undocumented migrants. There would be two kinds of undocumented migrants, ones who were totally aware of the situation and ended up undocumented and others who have ended up undocumented through no fault of their own like if the employers cheated them, didn't renew work permit or they were being exploited etc.

In the latter case, undocumented migrants are reduce to such a state where they live in fear and poverty. Poverty because in such a situation they are manipulated more easily by other employers who make false promises to do all the legal work and the susceptible migrant easily falls in their trap coz all he wants at that stage is legal permission to reside and work in the state. They often end up being paid less than average and live in poor condition and poverty.

The mental stress that is caused in such cases would be unimaginable. They deliberately exclude themselves from the society because of the fear of being caught and deported back coz that's the last thing they want.

I've myself seen and met a few undocumented migrants who wouldn't even leave their home at all. They would go to work and straight back home. Everyday they would do the same coz of the fear that has set in their minds. They never try to integrate in the society and left more or less alone.

6. Family Reunification

Lastly, let's talk about the effect that family reunification has on social exclusion. Being with their family, I think would be something every person wants. Being with ones wife or husband and seeing the kids grow up is something that all of us or were most of us, would love to do.

When a migrant comes to Ireland, may be as an asylum seeker or on a work permit etc they do not have the immediate right to family re-unification. At times they could even have to work for years before their application to grant permission for family re-unification would be successful.

This gives way to social exclusion coz one half of the person is away with his family. When they look at the other people in the society with their families, they feel disintegrated and excluded.

To conclude it all I would just like to say that, we have tried to highlight some of the major problems and issues for the migrants in the Irish society and jurisdiction. And we would like to urge the need for the government and the European Union as a whole to take these into account while formulating policies and if possible try to include some members of the migrant community in the process so that they could have a first hand account of the problems and some possible solutions.

And to end it all on a good note, I would like to give the floor to my colleague who would tell you about a good practice in Ireland

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Thank You