

Precarious Migrants - Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Marie Mallet-Garcia, Rob McNeil, Jacqui Broadhead, Shams Asadi, Wanjiku Ngotho-Mbugua

Rob McNeil 00:00

Hello, and welcome to another episode of The Migration Oxford Podcast. I'm Rob McNeil.

Jacqui Broadhead 00:05

And I'm Jacqui Broadhead.

Rob McNeil 00:06

So, Jacqui, today we're going to be talking about precarious migrants. Can you firstly just explain what we mean by a precarious migrant?

Jacqui Broadhead 00:15

Thanks, Rob. We spend a lot of time in migration talking about regular and irregular migration or legal and illegal migration. But that is a really kind of binary way of thinking about it, it ends up meaning that people are either one or the other. When from research, we know that the reality is that people often move in between, they spend a lot of time waiting for decisions to be made. And that's what we mean by precarious migrants. We also mean the consequences of that insecurity. So how does being precarious affect your ability to kind of get on and live your life?

Rob McNeil 00:52

Okay, and so what then made you decide that we should be talking about this now?

Jacqui Broadhead 00:56

A couple of reasons, we've been doing some research in COMPAS looking at how this idea of precarity affects migrants access to services in cities, we'll be looking at Cardiff, Frankfurt, and Vienna. But also, it feels very timely given that the government at the moment in the UK has this illegal migration bill, where it's very focused on the way that people arrived into the country. So, it really wants to say, there's a different route for you if you arrived through a legal or regular means rather than illegal or irregular means. And that sort of contrasted with their responsibilities, for example, for local government, the way that they might think about the people that are present in their area, regardless of their immigration

status, or sometimes taking into account their immigration status, but still recognising the reality of people who are present, who they might need to provide services for. So, example, in relation to health. We had a really good example of that during the pandemic, where in the UK, and also in other European countries, you have the example of approaches to homelessness. So, we have the 'everyone in' approach in the UK, about saying, regardless of immigration status, we want to provide housing, because the pandemic is kind of more important at this point. And the reaction to the pandemic. And something similar also happened with vaccines. So, it was about access to vaccines for everybody, your immigration status isn't necessarily the most important thing about you.

Rob McNeil 02:31

Thinking a little bit about this 'in quote', illegal immigration bill, which is going through Parliament at the moment. I mean, one of the weird things about this is that one tends to think about this in terms of the impacts that precarity would have on the migrants themselves. But it's also something which potentially creates problems for government as well. I mean, one of the things that we've seen that we're still trying to get our heads around in the bill is that they've introduced policy, which would mean that they cannot process anybody's asylum claim, if they come in small boats, they have to be processed in a third country. But that actually means they can't potentially remove people, people who've got straightforward asylum cases, which they would be refused on the basis of, they can't be returned to their home countries, they have to be processed in third country, and that actually hamstring the government in terms of removing people with straightforward cases where they would fail in their asylum applications, which is a very strange scenario and does create a scenario particularly because we don't actually have those third countries to remove people to at the moment, with the exception of the Rwanda scheme, which isn't currently operational. So, what's going to happen to these people who've arrived in this way?

Jacqui Broadhead 03:33

I'm joined by Dr. Marie Mallet-Garcia, Senior Researcher here at COMPAS at the University of Oxford, Shams Asadi, the Head of Human Rights and Human Rights Commissioner for the city of Vienna. And Wanjiku Ngotho-Mbugua, the acting CEO of Bawso. Marie, we often hear about regular and irregular migrants, or even legal and illegal migrants. But today we're talking about precarious migrants. What do we mean when we talk about precariousness in relation to migration status?

Marie Mallet-Garcia 04:06

So, the term precarious when it's used in a context of migration really describes how individuals so migrants may lack regular legal status, or perhaps also vulnerable to the loss of their legal status. And so, because of this, they are deprived of, or maybe they run the risk of losing some of the most basic social rights. So, for example, this category may include individuals who have overstayed their visa, people who have been denied asylum or people who are working and living in a country without the authorization. So, the term precarious migrant really draws attention to the impact fact that a particular legal status can have on someone's life.

Jacqui Broadhead 05:04

Why do you think it's helpful to use the term precarious, rather than simply irregular or illegal?

Marie Mallet-Garcia 05:12

A legal status is fluid, there's fluidity. And sometimes people can come in and out of that particular status. So, they can enter a country with a visa, and then lose the right to stay because they might overstay their visa. So, we're trying to capture this fluidity in terms of legal statuses.

Jacqui Broadhead 05:35

That's really interesting, because people so often think of migration status as a binary, rather than something that's fluid, as you say, and how does this sort of fluidity and this precarity impact on local access to services for precarious migrants? And, why does this matter?

Marie Mallet-Garcia 05:54

Well, it really matters because the lack of legal status usually leads to exclusion from various services due to restrictions on eligibility, or sometimes even concerns about the potential consequences of providing services to this group of migrants. So, this exclusion can be very acute in context where, for example, immigration enforcement is, you know, a high priority, or where there's political pressure to restrict access to services, and so it can exacerbate the vulnerabilities and the inequalities that these people these migrants experienced. If they don't have access to basic services, they cannot meet their basic needs, for example, obtaining medical treatment or enrolling their children in school, etc.

Jacqui Broadhead 06:47

Thanks so much, Marie. And Shams, Vienna is a human rights city. What does this mean for the city's approach to support for precarious migrants and, and how has this changed as your role is developed?

Shams Asadi 07:01

Vienna is, we are very happy that, it's not the only Human Rights City in the world, because it is across the globe, local authorities are putting human rights in the map. And then they introduce very innovative and creative initiatives. And of course, fundamental rights and human rights for a Human Rights City to full promotion and fulfilment of human rights is the most important point. You spoke about inclusion; inclusion is the key word for the Human Rights Cities. And Vienna is not an exception here. And we work from the side of the city administration for all that the old people that they live in Vienna, no matter from where they come, no matter what kind of residence status they have, or which language they speak and which sex, or sexual orientation they have. So, it's two points that they are, it's very important for human rights city, the most important is inclusion and the second important point is preventing from vulnerability. And the term vulnerability changing in the city. Sometimes they are the elderly people, sometimes they are children, sometimes in context of violence, they are women, and most of the time, they are the people that they are in precarious situation. And the aim and target of the Human Rights City and Vienna is to just prevent the precarity for people and how it can happen. It happens through providing of information, access to information, and of course, preventing of exploitation. Exploitation is a very important subject in the context of precarious migration. And of course, human trafficking plays a huge role here. And we as a Human Rights City, we took the people that affected from the human trafficking in our social welfare system.

Jacqui Broadhead 09:43

Shams, the COVID-19 pandemic changed some aspects of support for precarious migrants, for example, in relation to housing, health care, in particular around vaccinations. How did this change to impact Vienna, and are there lessons that you've taken from the support that was provided at that time, or some of the challenges that you're taking with you post pandemic?

Shams Asadi 10:08

During pandemic, we noticed that two subjects gain more importance: prevention from homelessness and health, access to health. And then the city of Vienna (I started in this time) we do have a winter package from October until April. And then we extended this time in the last three years, and then everybody that they were in Vienna, and they hadn't the access to housing or they were just homeless, they came during this time to the support of the city of Vienna, and we increased the capacity of our housing for homeless people by more than 40%, and nobody at that time was assessed at the street. We are thinking about extending the winter package for the whole year. And after April, we are going to have discussions in our city administration, to look at the people, who they are, from the from where they come, if we could help them to just to be settled in Vienna. And the second part was, or a still is health. During the pandemic time, the city of Vienna helped people to have their tests. And it was very easy. And it was just very, just for using of the test process, it was quite easy and opened, like sport areas, schools and everything open for 24 hours and for everybody to be tested. And after vaccination, was a question in the society after some months or after the year of the pandemic, vaccination was also free of charge for everybody in the city. And what happened that just in the last months, city of Vienna, I started with providing Caritas and bringing the health service of the city of Vienna to the Caritas infrastructure and had just some kind of health test for everybody open. And we noticed that it was a pilot project, it was, really it functioned very well. And then we just expanded in some different places that people they live there that they don't have just legal status. So, from pilot project, and after our project LoReMi, it's a quite new step the city of Vienna took. We are so happy that at least we are going to have, or we started with three or four centres, very just a low threshold centres for people to access and to be tested and to be just if they have even it's a kind of prevention in health system and not a very just emergency position just for preventing of being sick.

Jacqui Broadhead 13:22

Thanks, so much Shams. And Marie, I think it's really interesting what Shams talked about this, like inclusionary principle, that often when we talk about irregular migrants, we talk about the things that they're excluded from, whereas this feels like it's framing things slightly differently in terms of precariousness, but also in terms of the type of inclusion that can be offered. And Shams mentioned the LoReMi project that Vienna, Frankfurt and Cardiff participated in. I wondered if you could talk a little bit about that project, but also about the importance of framing the issue with precarious migrants and what that means for access to services at the local level?

Marie Mallet-Garcia 14:07

I think the strength of this project was that we were comparing three different cities that called themselves differently, so Welcoming City, you know, Human Rights City, Sanctuary City, and so on. So, we looked at whether the cities delivered what they were supposed to based on that, that particular framing. So, I thought this was one of the most interesting part of the of the LoReMi project.

Jacqui Broadhead 14:39

Wanjiku, your organization Bawso supports people in Wales who are affected by domestic and other forms of abuse. Marie spoke about the importance of access to services for, for women with precarious status, how does that status impact on their ability to access support? And how does it affect the support provided by government and local NGOs, like yourself?

Wanjiku Ngotho-Mbugua 15:05

A lot has been said about the migrants with precarious status across the world and across European cities. In Wales, it's not very different, in that a lot of migrants in the precarious status are not seen as full human beings, if I can use the word. Really, they are seen as if the aliens and when things happen to them when bad things happen to them, and they need help, they're not treated as the local residents. The women and men, families to support who have been victims of domestic abuse, have been victims of exploitation, and modern slavery, human trafficking. The first question that is asked of them is what's the Migration Status? Nobody looks to say: so, you've suffered domestic abuse? What has happened to you? How can we help you? The first question that is asked to anybody that speaks with an accent that is not English, that is not a white colour, that is looked to be somebody from somewhere else. The first question is always, what is immigration status? And that will determine whether this person will be supported or not? In most cases, the impact of this is that the support is delayed, or somebody's support, supposed to be supported, as soon as they ask for help. As soon as you call into a local authority office and said, I've suffered abuse. As soon as you've gone into the police station to say, my partner is abusing me and my life is in danger, you're supposed to receive that support immediately be placed in a place of safety. This is not what happens to these migrants. We had a case about three years ago, where two women, two older women were taken in by social services because they'd been found in really dire situations living in dilapidated house abused and exploited. The two women, there was one local Welsh woman, and there was one black African lady. The local Welsh woman was second straightaway to a nursing home, she was cared for, and her healing began immediately. The black African lady was asked to produce her papers to show who she was, where she was, or whether she has the right to be in Wales. Which is really painful, because at that point, she is as human as other lady and all that she needed was to be rescued from the situation that she was in. And luckily for us, the social worker got her to Bawso, and were able to take her on. And that's the difference that Bawso makes in that we do not look at people's ethnicity or colour or the right to they have the benefits they are entitled to. We support everybody that comes our way, and especially those that are set to have no recourse to public funds. How do we do this? We campaign, we lobby, we raise the issue, we raised this issue over and over again, with the policymakers with the government and not just in Wales, but across the world. Just to say that these people need to be supported just like any other people. Just because somebody hasn't got the right benefits doesn't mean that they're not victims of domestic abuse doesn't mean that they haven't suffered the exploitation like the other person who has the right to benefit. So, we lobby, we will campaign and I'm very pleased to say that, in the last few years, we've seen fruition to this, we've seen success, good things have come out. The home office has for the last two years funded us on a pilot that that looked to support victims of domestic abuse from migrant communities. They've given us funding for the last two years. And I'm pleased to say that this last week, the Welsh government has written to Bawso to say that they're going to afford us some money starting from the next financial year in April, where they're giving some funds to support women with no recourse to public funds, who are victims of domestic abuse. So, I'm very, we fighting all the time.

Normally you'd expect when you're looking for a service to be put in place for our community. It is going and saying: oh, we really need this because the people who supported need ABCD. But, no, it's not the same for the precarious migrants. You're fighting, you're fighting against people who are saying these people don't deserve it. And just saying yes, they do because they're human beings too.

Jacqui Broadhead 19:21

Thanks so much Wanjiku, that's such a powerful example of the differential treatment between the two people, who both are members of the local community, but treated very differently due to their status. Shams give us an example of the work that had been happening during the COVID pandemic around different ways of thinking about this group. So, I'm thinking around the 'everyone in' policy and the way that all of the assumptions around housing, and around exclusion of precarious migrants from homelessness assistance, was turned on its head during the pandemic, because of their public health need. Was that something that you saw? And are there lessons from the pandemic response that you'd like to see taken and built upon?

Wanjiku Ngotho-Mbugua 20:11

Yes, yes. The example that you've given of where, during COVID, everyone was entitled to housing, everybody was entitled to some kind of help if they found themselves in the situation where they were homeless during COVID. This was brought in Wales and in England, and we thought that this money came from public health. This was really helpful, we found it really easy to support people that came our way, that had no recourse to public funds, because no one was turned away. And these funds were not just funds that were available to these people, they were available within the local authority contact centres. If a social worker came across a victim that was going to be homeless, they were able to refer them to this project, they were able to refer them to this programme. And everybody was helped. This is something would like to see going on forward. The fact that public health Wales and other health bodies were able to raise this 10 million in Wales, for example, it just shows that there's money somewhere that can be used, not just for emergencies, like COVID, but ongoing because the numbers that we're talking of precarious migrants are not that many. And we're not just talking about everybody who has no recourse to public funds, we're talking about people that are vulnerable. People are finding themselves in in places of difficulties because of domestic abuse, because of exploitation, such as modern slavery, because they've run out of work, because they are ill, they've fallen ill, and they cannot work to their work permit. So, if this money was made available to these people, and other members of the society in the UK, as we saw during COVID, this would be very helpful, and nobody will be turned away. And nobody would say that because of their precarious migrant status, they have missed out on the support that they would have needed at the time when they needed it.

Jacqui Broadhead 22:08

Shams, I want to come back to you. We've heard from you about the inclusionary instincts of Vienna. But often, cities can be quite scared to talk about this topic. They're fearful of a backlash. How does Vienna talk about its policies around the inclusion of precarious migrants? And why is it important to have a clear strategy about how cities talk about including precarious migrants?

Shams Asadi 22:40

Cities are very concerned about the polarisation in societies. But being a Human Rights City or taking human rights on the agenda, if even a city is not a Human Rights City, it helps to speak about human rights because human rights they are universal. They are everybody's rights and people they are born with these rights. But speaking about human rights helps a lot to bring the society together.

Jacqui Broadhead 23:11

To finish up I wondered, looking forwards for each of you, if there's one thing that you would like to see happen to better support precarious migrants access to services in cities. What would that be? Marie, I might start with you.

Marie Mallet-Garcia 23:30

Based on the research that we have conducted as part of the LoReMi project, we saw that perhaps the creation or the development of 'one-stop-shops', for example, can have a really positive impact. You're providing a sort of centralised location where precarious migrants can have access to a range of services. And support is usually essential for them because they have complex needs. And you know, having this one place where they can go for help can help provide a pathway to regularisation, for example. So, they really need the access to information and legal advice. We know that the law is complex. We know that they need guidance to understand their rights under the law, but also how to access different services, these basic services that we've mentioned earlier, employment, health, family reunification, etc. So, they need to be provided this guidance to try and lift them up from poverty, exclusion, social exclusion and also prevent exploitation.

Wanjiku Ngotho-Mbugua 24:48

The idea of a 'one-stop-shop' that Marie has talked about is really good. One place where somebody the precarious migrant status can go in and seek the support that they need. This really would be the first step in supporting these people fully. How do these people get to know about this support? How do they know that it's available? Where is it available? We would have to raise awareness with a lot of people, and especially people that come into contact with a lot of people. People who work in the healthcare sector, people work in hospitals or the doctor surgeries. We need to be talking to social workers, we need to be talking to civil servants in contact centres, we need to be talking to third sector voluntary organisations, we need to be talking to churches, mosques, places of worship, where most of these people attend, and just raise awareness and let people know that this is available. One thing that I would also say that it's very important to let the local people know what's available, because sometimes it's takes the local person to direct the precarious migrant to where they can seek help. In the recent days, I know there's been support for Ukraine, refugees, for example. And they're in certain places of support. They are in places where they're being given support. And sometimes these places cannot be made public for their own safety. But they're people that know where they are, and they know how to contact these people. So, such a system, such support, if that was available in every city, where most of the people with precarious migrant status live, it will be very helpful. The government allowing for that would be a big step towards eradicating the exploitation that comes from people not knowing what's available to them, it would eradicate the pain and abuse that a lot of these people will go through in their lifetime. So, a 'one-stop-shop', that would really be a good idea. But it has to be followed with a lot of raising awareness just to ensure everybody where they can seek that support.

Shams Asadi 27:00

For me also access to information is very important. But the next step is if people are informed, what is going to happen? If there is affordable housing for people to get in if they have access to just education, or access to labour market or, for their children, if there's childcare available. All of the just possibilities in the society, it was very important. And cities or local levels, they are in the position that they have to just provide. But financing of all of these services is also a quite big question, who is going to finance? And if there is some just cooperation for financing of all of these services, it is between the national level and local level or if it's from European level. The legal status is very important. We have to have from the European level, just very clear strategy for migrants that they come to Europe. If they are three years or five years or whatever, that we have to speak about that at European level. Afterwards, to bring it in a legal status that, if they are in Europe, they became citizens in our countries and get the whole benefits.

Jacqui Broadhead 28:33

Thanks so much. It's been wonderful to have such an important discussion on such a vital topic from the perspectives of research policymaking and practitioners.

Rob McNeil 28:46

You've been listening to The Migration Oxford Podcast. I'm Rob McNeil.

Jacqui Broadhead 28:50

And I'm Jacqui Broadhead.