

EMBRACE NI Experiences of migrant people Feb 2019

A recurrent theme in migrant experience here is one of contrast. Elsewhere on this site we describe migrants' problems. Sometimes even the very people who have experienced difficulties also find it a friendly place and many people come here because they have been told of the good experiences of others. They often comment on how easy it was when they were given assistance when they were trying to settle in.

Much of the published evidence dates to the early years following the enlargement of the European Union when there was a sudden increase in inward migration. For example, research interviews undertaken on behalf of the Department of Employment and Learning in 2009 drew the following conclusion:

'Northern Ireland was seen by many of the respondents as a friendly place, providing a good quality of life and welcoming atmosphere. Generally, local people were described in very positive terms, and were seen as polite, helpful and welcoming. Unfortunately, the research also recorded instances of discrimination in daily life in Northern Ireland, with verbal attacks being the most prevalent form.'

John Bell, Anne Caughey, Ulf Hansson, Agnieszka Martynowicz and Maura Scully, *"...Easy Life, Great People, Bad Weather" A Report on the Experiences of Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland, Belfast, 2009.*

<https://www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Experiences.pdf>

Migrants echo this themselves.

'As a community interpreter working for the NHS I get to know many Polish migrants and hear about their stories. In the waiting area of a hospital or a surgery, people often open up and tell me about how they came to live/work in Northern Ireland. Some people had it easier, some had to struggle and went through hell. ...

Justyna Pers from Poland, speaking as part of the British Council's Ordinary Lives project

So, on the one hand we hear of language problems and rejection:

'There is a language barrier and barrier to understanding the system, even if you have decent English. You aren't able to understand the letters posted to you or what to do about it.' *Easy Life*

'The nurse came to explain what was wrong ... so I asked for an interpreter because my English is ok but I want to be sure I understand the medical terms. The nurse was very grumpy with me. When my daughter-in-law came back, the nurse told her to tell me that there is no interpreter and to go back to my country. *Easy life*

'One time a rental agent made a negative comment about Eastern Europeans do this or that. [...] It's humiliating when someone says something like that to you.' *Easy Life*

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Many people, however, comment on more pleasant experiences.

'I think was expecting it to be more difficult but then I realized so many things are pretty much the same as in my country. It was actually a surprise. ... It was hard for me at the beginning, but now it's good.'

Easy Life

Some begin, quite quickly, to regard this as their home.

'I feel here at home, I like this country's people. It's different the people here and in England, people here are more like Lithuanian people. In England, people are more closed. People and neighbours are very friendly here, people say hello, hello, it's so nice.'

Easy Life

'I feel very welcome and at home, very friendly and helpful people, I feel very safe and secure here, more than my country. I don't miss much my country, maybe because my family is here. If I go home for two weeks it's too long, I feel at home here.'

Easy life

I'm not sure about staying, but I'm not sure about going home. When I come home after a holiday, it feels like Ballymena is home. ... Now when I go back to Romania, I have only my family. At Christmas, I didn't see any of my old friends, after six years it is a long time. If I went back, it would be hard to start again with no contacts.

Easy life

Second generation or long-term migrants comment on helpful new developments such as the celebration of festivals and specialist shops. Abby whose father came from Cape Verde was asked about changes she had seen and commented about the increased cultural diversity:

'I'm glad to see it because there are things like the multicultural shops and music and I feel that it just makes the place so much richer culturally.'

In spite of 'a year and a half of absolute hell' because of bullying and racism when she came here as a child, she wants to live here for good.

'People have been so friendly here. And the landscape I just absolutely love all of the landscapes... love it. I've met a lot of brilliant people and the talent of people is exciting and for me many people are creative and that really feeds myself.'

Voices from the Global South

Rose, from the Chinese community, came here 30 years ago. She welcomes the cultural developments and the role of support organisations.

'... definitely now there is much more atmosphere when there is a festival coming up, and we know more about it. It's good, and another great thing is here at the Sai-Pak [Chinese community project in Derry] now they have an interpreting service. Before if I had to go to the doctors or something like that I had to go and find anyone that would be able to help me make the arrangements.'

Voices from the Global South

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A more recent migrant, Justyna from Poland, says

‘Life in a foreign country is easier for migrants when some parts of its reality relate to their own culture. That’s why there are a growing number of shops selling Polish food. Tesco and Dunne’s Stores have a range of Polish products. Almost every Polish family has access to Polish TV, people have a chance to go to a Polish mass at least once a month, there are Polish nights at some bars, Polish welfare associations are increasing in number.’

Justyna Pers from the British Council Ordinary Lives Project

Researchers agree

‘It was found that local conditions greatly affect the way in which migrants are welcomed into a community. Although there has been little experience of migration to Northern Ireland, it is evident that local organisations, mostly from within civil society, provide an important point of support for recent newcomers. This includes offering basic advice on accessing services; identifying employment opportunities; completing paperwork (such as work permits); providing access to social networks and delivering English language classes. The latter have in particular provided a mechanism for assisting migrants’ integration and typically form a gateway to other types of social participation.’

Dr Ruth McAreavey, *Life as a Stranger: The Personal Stories of Migrants to Northern Ireland*

Sources

Centre for Global Education, *Voices from the Global South; A Research Report on Migration*, Belfast, 2010.

Dr Ruth McAreavey, *Life as a Stranger: The Personal Stories of Migrants to Northern Ireland*, Belfast, September 2010

John Bell, Anne Caughey, Ulf Hansson. Agnieszka Martynowicz and Maura Scully, “...Easy Life, Great People, Bad Weather” *A Report on the Experiences of Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland*, Belfast, 2009.

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