Media portrayals of migrants - EOC inquiry into the contribution of migrants and trafficking

Introduction

1. Despite the importance of media portrayals of migrants, very little research is available on this topic. In order to support the Equal Opportunities Committee’s inquiry into this topic, letters were sent out from the School of the Built Environment, Heriot Watt University, to a number of voluntary organisations across Scotland inviting them to meet to discuss this on 26th May. A similar invitation was sent to key media agencies. Although two media agencies expressed some interest in being involved, it proved difficult to arrange a meeting with them. Notes taken of the meeting with community organisations are presented below.

2. Key messages:

   o Media coverage of migrant groups was perceived to be predominantly negative. Negative reporting of migrant groups and immigration could fuel fear and prejudice of migrant groups amongst the public and seriously undermine community cohesion.

   o Negative portrayals of migrant groups by the media are of particular concern in Scotland given the small size of the minority ethnic population, and the lack of opportunity for direct contact of the majority population with members of these groups. This situation is likely to be exacerbated in rural areas, where the numbers of individuals from migrant groups are small and likely to be dispersed over large areas.

   o Positive portrayal of migrant groups by the media in Scotland could include the highlighting of their contribution to the economy and public life in many respects. This could include the impact of their skills, knowledge and experience to the labour market and participation in the arts, sports and public life. Positive initiatives undertaken by migrant groups and organisations should also be reflected in the media.

   o Media agencies were perceived to lack knowledge and understanding of the position of migrant groups, in particular issues related to legal status and use of appropriate terminology. Uninformed reporting could contribute to the shaping of discriminatory attitudes among the general public.
Public figures, including leading politicians, need to be more aware of their significant role in shaping public attitudes towards migrant groups, since their comments towards these groups are often uncritically reported by the media.

There is a need for the media and individuals from migrant groups and organisations to engage with each other. Migrant involvement in the media could be facilitated by either paid employment or voluntary activity.

Public awareness-raising campaigns relating to the contribution of migrant communities play an influential role in shaping public attitudes towards these communities.

The Press Complaints Commission can play an important role in monitoring the reporting of migrant groups in the press and effectively dealing with their complaints. Their role and existence needs to be publicised more actively throughout migrant communities.

Notes of the meeting

Present:

Akin Fatunmbi   Health in Mind
Asma Kassim     Nari Kallyan Shangho
Dave Le Sage     Access Apna Ghar Housing Association
Gareth Mulvey    Scottish Refugee Council
Rohini Sharma Joshi Trust, Bield and Hanover Housing Associations
Pat Elsmie       Migrant Rights Network
Umbreen Khalid   CEMVO (Council or Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations) Scotland
Filip Sosenko    School of the Built Environment, Heriot Watt University
Elodie Lassire   School of the Built Environment, Heriot Watt University
Gina Netto       School of the Built Environment, Heriot Watt University

3. GN welcomed everyone and introduced the context and purpose of the meeting, which was to inform the EOC’s inquiry into the contribution of migrants and trafficking. She provided a brief outline of the following to help frame, and stimulate discussion:

4. Framing the topic of discussion: ‘The media’ could include the following:
   - Scottish media vs UK wide media vs international press
   - Broadsheets/tabloids vs other press
   - Digital media: TV / radio / on-line (on-line editions of newspapers, blogs, etc)

5. The media could conceivably play many roles in relation to migrant communities:
   - Shape attitudes of majority towards minority ethnic communities
   - Inform/educate the public
   - Correct misconceptions
• Create a more harmonious/equal society
• Support or counter political ideology related to migrant communities

6. GN then outlined three areas for focused discussion: portrayals of migrant communities; participation of individuals from migrant communities in the media; and possible next steps. The group agreed that the structure outlined would cover their concerns.

Portrayals of migrant communities

7. A common view expressed was that portrayals in the media were predominantly negative, with migrants frequently presented as ‘a burden to the country’, a drain on resources and placing pressure on services. Other observations noted were a tendency to represent black men and those with mental health problems as ‘dangerous’, women in veils as oppressed and recent migrants as jumping the queue for social housing. Concern was expressed that such negative reporting could incite racial harassment and Islamaphobia, and seriously threaten measures to foster community cohesion and integration. Other comments made concerned the use of pejorative labels such as ‘bogus asylum-seekers’ which undermined the position of those who were genuinely claiming asylum and the damaging tone of media reports which communicated the impression that the UK was being ‘swamped’ by migrants.

8. Negative portrayals were of particular concern in Scotland given its relatively small population of minority ethnic communities which meant that a large proportion of the majority population had little or no direct contact with these populations and were likely to be strongly influenced by such reporting. The disproportionate impact of negative reporting by local newspapers in small villages and towns on the attitudes of local people in relation to recent initiatives for migrant communities was also highlighted.

9. Concern was expressed relating to the lack or absence of reports on the positive contributions of migrants in the media, although a few positive accounts were noted. One observation was that before the current financial crisis, there had been favourable comments relating to the hardworking nature of Polish migrants, but these had largely disappeared. It was observed that the positive and significant contribution that a young growing and working migrant population could play in supporting an aging Scottish population had been recognised by the Scottish Government in the form of the Fresh Talent Initiative. However, media coverage of this initiative had been limited and there was some uncertainty about whether the initiative was ongoing. There was also some speculation about reasons for its low coverage in the media, and a view that positive initiatives in relation to migrant communities were often not picked up by the media.

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1 The SG’s 2008 review of the scheme pointed out some difficulties with evaluation and monitoring (success, outcomes etc) but migrants have reported the initiative didn’t live up to expectations. Graduates experienced significant difficulties in securing suitable posts. Many could not find work in their field, or even related fields, and had to accept employment that was not commensurate with their qualifications. This was often low-paid work.
10. The undeniable contribution of migrants in terms of knowledge, skills and experience that are useful to the Scottish economy was noted. Despite this, it was pointed out that media coverage of their contribution should not merely be viewed within these terms, since migrants could also add to the vibrancy, vitality and vigour of the nation in diverse fields, including the arts and participation in civic society.

Roles of the media

11. The positive role played by the media in publicising certain ethnic minority events or internationally reknown figures in the arts and sports field was recognised. The inclusion of a small number of programmes targeted directly at certain migrant communities in local community radio channels was also commented on.

12. However, participants noted that large sections of the media did not appear to be supportive of the presence and contribution of migrant communities. Instead, media coverage was often perceived to tap into perceived fear or prejudice of the public and to 'scapegoat' migrants for placing pressure on services. One example given of the latter was the highlighting of the costs of interpreting and translation services even though these are crucial in enabling certain sections of the migrant population to benefit from key services. Another example was the slur on the asylum-seeking population for 'not working' despite the fact that they are not legally allowed to work, and in some cases could be experiencing mental health problems due to the trauma of fleeing from war torn countries and/or being separated from their families. There was a perception that undue prominence is given to incidents of fraud or crime which involve individuals from minority ethnic communities. It was pointed out that the significant financial contribution of the international student population to higher education in the form of fees, and who are often accompanied by their families and who pay for private housing and childcare is not acknowledged.

13. The close relationship between the expressed views of politicians on immigration and the migrant population and the role of the media and its impact on shaping public attitudes was discussed at some length. It was noted that although a few leading Scottish politicians had made positive statements about migrant communities in events organised for these communities, these events or comments had not received much press coverage. Conversely, it was also noted that the lack of awareness demonstrated by certain Scottish politicians on issues relating to race equality and associated legislation in the form of pejorative terminology used towards migrant groups and inaccurate statements could play an extremely damaging role in shaping public attitudes to migrants when publicised through the media.

14. Although immigration had featured prominently in all three television debates in the run-up to the election, nuanced, balanced and considered analysis of the opportunities and challenges posed by immigration was considered to be sadly lacking. By contrast, negative comments on migrant communities or immigration by public figures were uncritically reported. Policy-makers, politicians and leading public figures such as judges were seen as playing a key role in shaping public attitudes through the media.
However, it was felt that they did not always fully appreciate the importance of this role and could unwittingly undermine efforts to strengthen community cohesion. The efforts of the actress Joanna Lumley who successfully campaigned for fair treatment of the Gurkhas involved in Britain’s war efforts was cited as a rare in two respects: i) a public figure supporting a migrant group and ii) extensive media coverage of the campaign. In addition to the influence of politicians, migrant portrayal in the media was recognised as also being shaped by the interests of owners and publishers, who have political interests.

15. In relation to different forms of media, it was acknowledged that ethnic minority media played a valuable role in publicising current affairs, information and entertainment to certain communities. However, it was noted that the influence of these media channels were limited to these communities, and did not shape the views and attitudes of the majority population. Concern was also expressed in relation to some forms of new media, including blogs which sometimes elicited libellous commentary from on-line readers. The role of the Press Complaints Commission in challenging or managing such public material was not clear.

16. Some interest was expressed in finding out what the media perceived to be their role in relation to migrant communities, and also in entering into dialogue with the media.

**Minority ethnic involvement in the media**

17. The employment patterns of minority ethnic communities which revealed concentration in certain industries and forms and levels of employment was noted as influencing their representation the media. Nonetheless, the presence of minority ethnic individuals in certain sections of the media and their valuable contribution to an ethnically diverse workforce was commented on, - whether or not they choose to work on issues specifically related to ethnicity or ‘race.’ Some interest was expressed in the efforts of one of the organisations represented in the group which successfully ‘fed’ positive news items relating to migrant groups to the media in the form of press releases and short succinct items of news to media contacts. It was pointed out that since the pool of journalists in Scotland was small and pressured in their working conditions, it was possible that they would respond positively to efforts by migrant organisations to publicise relevant items of news or new initiatives. However, some trepidation was also expressed in relation to the possible negative impact that might result from such involvement, should the media choose to not exercise its role responsibly. An example given of possible negative reporting was the creation of new build for refugees, given the shortage of appropriate housing in Glasgow in areas that were perceived to be safe from racial harassment.

18. It was also pointed out that individuals from minority ethnic communities could themselves play a more public role by engaging more fully in public life; as an example of this, one of the participants mentioned her recent positive experience of shadowing a councillor, which was going to be publicised by the media. Individuals could also write
letters to the editors of newspapers to counter negative reporting. However, it was considered that a critical mass was needed in order to successfully influence the media, and to contribute to efforts to effectively communicate the culturally diverse, international image of Scotland as a nation which was inclusive of its minority communities. In order to support this, capacity building effort and some investment of resources will be required for individuals from migrant communities to work in new media platforms, including virtual media. Given the largely rural nature of Scotland, the use of the internet was seen as particularly relevant. Increased networking was also needed, including the building of links between minority ethnic organisations and the media and the ‘mainstream’ media. One organisation represented in the discussion was already working on a three year migrant-led communication strategy to build solidarity within migrant communities and help shape public attitudes towards these communities. It was pointed out that the positive engagement of migrants and minority communities with the media in all its forms and sites is largely voluntary. This was seen as a demonstration of their strong desire to be part of society, make a contribution and be recognized for this. Some uncertainty was expressed as to whether these efforts were mirrored in the media.

19. The example of the ‘See-Me’ campaign to counter the stigma associated with mental health was cited as useful in countering discriminatory reporting. The ‘One Scotland, Many Cultures’ campaign was recognised as being well-intentioned. However, the effectiveness of media campaigns in general is difficult to evaluate, and there was some uncertainty relating to the impact of both campaigns on minority ethnic communities. It was felt that the Press Complaints Commission needed to take a more active role in countering negative portrayals of migrant communities and to be more accessible to minority ethnic communities. In order to exercise its duties effectively, the Commission needed to widely publicise its existence throughout migrant communities.

**Next steps**

20. GN brought the discussion to an end and thanked everyone for their valuable contribution to the meeting. She informed participants that she would write up the notes of the meeting and circulate them for further comment or amendment. Following this, they would be submitted to the EOC.