

## **Migrant Rights Centre Ireland's Opening Remarks to Oireachtas Sub-Committee on Mental Health - Thursday 29th April**

Good morning. My name is Edel McGinley - Director with the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI). We would like to thank you for inviting us here today to highlight the concerns of MRCI in providing responses and support to migrant workers in vulnerable situations.

For almost two decades, MRCI has been working with migrant workers in precarious and low wage work, across agri-food, fisheries, childcare and homecare, hotel and catering, with undocumented migrants and with people who have been trafficked for forced labor. MRCI's combines frontline services, policy and advocacy with a community work process which supports migrants to challenge the root causes of poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

MRCI is concerned with the social determinates of health and mental health and the risk factors associated with precarious immigration status, low pay, dangerous and difficult work, poor housing, and the long term impact these have on peoples' health, wellbeing and mental health. We therefore present our work through this lens.

From MRCI's perspective Covid-19 has amplified inequality and social exclusion, accentuated anxiety and isolation for many migrants. It has shone a light on the lack rights for undocumented migrants, embedded exploitation in the experience of migrant workers, resulted in job losses for many, leading to precarious housing situations and putting people at risk of poverty and destitution.

Since the beginning of the pandemic MRCI has been highly responsive and dynamic in the delivery of our work. We moved all our services and programs online. We provided vital information and supports on COVID payments, health and safety, housing, and employment rights, lay-offs and redundancies, access to social housing and homeless accommodation, delays with immigration permissions and renewals. MRCI worked to link essential case work with evidence and data to influence policy change.

Our Drop in Centre in 2020 saw a 50% increase in demand for our services. We provided in-depth case supports on 2,749 cases, and additional supports through our National help-line to 693 people, across 125 nationalities. The top 10 nationalities were Brazilian, Pakistani, Filipino, Indian, Mauritian, Chinese, Latvian, Nigerian, Ukrainian and Lithuanian. The following statistics give an overview of the work in this period;

- 27% of queries came from undocumented migrants
- 10% of queries form international students
- 13% from stamp 4 holders (spouses and relatives of EU and Irish citizens)
- 11% from EU citizens
- 39% of queries related to citizenship and residency matters
- 20% cases on social welfare matters related Covid-19 payments
- 10% of service users were unemployed
- 60% of all cases were successfully closed
- Six cases involved victims of domestic violence. It is important to note that people whose immigration status is based on their partner are pushed into precarious immigration, financial and emotional situations. Further, many victims are undocumented, and as a result face complex barriers in accessing basic services, such as health services, refuges or accessing and independent immigration status.
- 18 cases related to potential cases of trafficking for labour exploitation. It is important to note that being a victim of trafficking for labour exploitation impacts a person's mental health. As more people are at risk of exploitation due to the pandemic, there is a greater likelihood that trafficking will increase, and thus mental health decline for people in that position.

In this period, there was also a sharp focus on migrant workers in meat factories, one of the hardest hit sectors under COVID-19. More and more meat factory workers contacted us. They were worried, frightened and angry about their conditions, how they are being treated. MRCI provided outreach to meat factories workers generating new data showing a staggering 60% injury rate at work, and that 90% of workers had no occupational sick pay schemes, with significant bullying and harassment rates all of which impacts on workers mental health and wellbeing.

The experience of domestic workers and live in homecare workers to negotiate better terms and conditions of employment, including access to PPE was also exacerbated throughout Covid-19. Many are undocumented which further impacts their vulnerability. For those who were cocooning with older people, there was no additional pay, days off or provision for relief. MRCI continues to support people to leave employment and/or to negotiate better terms and conditions of employment. Many people felt their work was invisible and not recognised by the state.

Undocumented migrants also did not fare well during the initial stages of the pandemic. Many lost their jobs and MRCI sought access to social welfare and COVID payments for undocumented people. We secured a “Firewall” between, Department of Justice and Equality and the Department of Social Protection and Employment, which meant that no data was shared when accessing a payment that could result in a deportation order; the first of such a firewall in the EU. This has been extended to the Department of Health as it relates to people accessing vaccines. This needs to be retained.

During this period undocumented children and young people continued to carry the burden and weight of their situation which affects their mental health. The level of anxiety, chronic stress and living in a constant state of fear affects the development of young children and impacts on families.

To give you a sense of the anguish of being undocumented having very little work in this period, a mother said to us by the middle of the pandemic *“[I]t’s a very hard job to be a mother while keeping all the time smile on your face and pretending everything is fine to your kids no matter how much broken you are from inside, there are so many questions they started to ask .... our life is full of fear I don’t know how long I would hold myself[,] I can’t bear this stress and so many thoughts[,] I can’t stop my tears and I am afraid if something happened to me what will happen to my kids.*

MRCI, along with Justice for Undocumented, rolled out a rapid response campaign which secured a commitment to the regularisation of long term undocumented migrants in Ireland’s Programme for Government. A welcome consultation process was launched last Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> April by the Minister for Justice. A scheme will be introduced in Q4 of 2020. This is a hugely positive and welcome step, but work remains to make this as broad and inclusive as possible to lift anxiety, fear and depression for this group of people

Young people also did not fare well and this period has exacerbated isolation and impacted on young people living in both previous accommodation and in difficult family environments. Youth work and youth services are essential, delivering on the front line and in many cases, often the only places that are safe for young people to go and engage. Throughout the COVID19 pandemic, the closure of face-to-face youth service provision and places for young people to drop in (like MRCI) and get support has had a huge impact on some young people’s mental health. This is exacerbated by the lack of available culturally specific interventions for vulnerable people, including access to counselling and early interventions.

Finally, while MRCI is in receipt of some state and EU funding, this is not consistent and EU funds often have a huge administrative burden attached. Funding needs to be consistent, it should have a multi-annual dimension and make provision for core funding and be available for the delivery of services, outreach, community development and youth work approaches, which aim to empower people to take action on issues that affect their lives. Funding needs to be made available beyond once-off and pilot funds to deliver work consistently. The lack of continuity in funds has also been a huge problem to cover the delivery of very basic information, support and advocacy.

MRCI like other NGOs struggle to know where their income will come from year to year. Nurturing and developing an independent and autonomous civil society working to address poverty and social exclusion and address structures which impact on people's mental health needs to be recognised formally by the State. While we welcome some new initiatives in funding there is simply not enough. Without additional investment MRCI will not be able to deliver the range of services and programmes needed to respond to the issues highlighted.

Early intervention, with a long term focus is the only solution for meaningful health and well-being across our society. Ireland has had a pattern of inward migration for the past 25 years and people have put down roots, brought their families, started families and will need access to vital services to participate fully in society. This includes a mental health system that is fit for purpose, one that recognises and addresses the social determinates of mental health and the risk factors associated with poverty, inequality and social exclusion, the impact of migration and poorly regulated sectors of the labour market has on workers and their families in the long run.

Thank you and we welcome your questions.

**ENDS**