



Housing and shelter insufficient for undocumented migrants in Europe

BRUSSELS, 28 June, 2013 – On the occasion of its annual international conference in Brussels, the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) joined together with the European Federation of National Organisations working with the homeless (FEANTSA) and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) to call on policymakers and local authorities in Europe to strengthen efforts to enforce the right to housing for undocumented migrants, despite economic constraints.

The conference, entitled “Housing and Homelessness of Undocumented Migrants in Europe: Building Alliances and Developing Strategies,” analyzed the restrictions and discrimination undocumented migrants face when trying to access housing on the private market as well as within homeless shelters. Ann-Charlotte Nygard of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights emphasized the negative consequences when the rental of housing is tied to law enforcement measures to apprehend irregular migrants:

“Adequate housing is not to be interpreted as simply a roof over one’s head but rather as the right to a shelter which provides sufficient privacy, space and security. The close relationship between immigration control and enforcement measures and the protection of fundamental rights of the persons affected cannot be neglected. Evicting migrants in an irregular situation from their homes means leaving them on the streets with no shelter and risking to violate the right to housing. A large number of EU countries prohibit renting to irregular migrants. If landlords are punished for renting to irregular migrants, it might leave irregular migrants in exploitative housing conditions or they may even become homeless.”

The majority of undocumented migrants work and contribute to essential sectors of the economy such as domestic work and the agricultural sector, yet at the same time live in poor conditions at the margins of society. Edgar, who was undocumented for 15 years, gave a testimony highlighting the need to be treated with dignity:

“As human beings and as workers, we contribute to the development in our host country, therefore we consider ourselves as part of the society. It is within this vision that we reclaim our human rights as promised in article 25 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in article 8 in the European Charter of the Human Rights, to acquire and sustain a secure home and community in which we live in peace and dignity. We are workers and we deserve a house that is our home.”

With income that is often below the minimum wage, undocumented migrants are relegated to the lower end of the private rental market, have to sub-let rooms from others in over-crowded and unsafe housing or even spend nights rough-sleeping or staying in squats. Similar experiences were shared amongst participants and speakers of situations in which landlords take advantage of undocumented migrants’ insecure residence situation to exploit them, charge them well over the market rates for sub-standard conditions and threaten or even physically abuse them.

Participants identified a substantial gap in most European countries between legal entitlements and actual policies in practice to ensure access to adequate housing and shelter for undocumented migrants. In some countries, shelters refuse to take undocumented migrants fearing a responsibility to report them or that the costs would not be covered through state funds. This is particularly severe in the case of undocumented women escaping violence who are in need of emergency women shelters.

Speakers argued in favor of improving the ways to access justice for undocumented migrants who become victims of exploitation and called for strengthening tenants' associations and better informing local authorities which struggle with providing services at times of budget cuts.

Service providers, anti-poverty organisations, migrants' organisations and representatives of local authorities from across Europe also demanded that undocumented migrants should be included in anti-poverty agendas and strategies to fight homelessness on both the EU and national levels.

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About PICUM

PICUM - the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants, is a non-governmental international organisation (NGO) that promotes respect for the human rights of undocumented migrants within Europe. PICUM provides a direct link between the grassroots level, where undocumented migrants' experience is most visible, and the European level, where policies relating to them are deliberated. PICUM provides regular recommendations and expertise to policy makers and institutions of the United Nations, the Council of Europe and at EU level. In 2009, PICUM was awarded participatory status with the Council of Europe.

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