

Barriers to realising economic, social and cultural rights for migrants in Scotland

This report provides an overview of the significant hurdles faced by migrants in Scotland in relation to housing, education and employment rights.

The findings underscore a complex interplay of systemic, financial, informational, and discriminatory issues that profoundly impact the well-being of migrants and hinder the realisation of their full potential. The report highlights interconnected challenges and includes proposals for integrated solutions that will foster a more equitable and supportive environment for migrants in Scotland. It describes how systemic pressures accumulate across sectors, shaping migrants' opportunities, well-being, and capacity to thrive.

The report is intended to strengthen understanding of these interconnected issues and support the development of coordinated equitable solutions. It calls for systemic change that not only addresses immediate barriers but also upholds the agency of affected communities and creates a more inclusive and supportive environment for all.

The report includes proposals for integrated solutions that will foster a more equitable and supportive environment for migrants in Scotland

Use of terminology

This report addresses multiple communities whose experiences intersect with borders, movement, and settlement and uses the term *migrant* as an inclusive collective descriptor. This term encompasses refugees, asylum seekers, Traveller communities, and others who move across regions or who find themselves subject to immigration systems. However, use of the term *migrant* is not intended to erase the unique circumstances, legal statuses, or cultural identities within these groups. Rather, it provides language for discussing common structural challenges across education, employment, and housing.

Language itself is an important theme in HRCS's work with migrant communities. Terminology surrounding migration, identity, ethnicity, and mobility is constantly shifting, both across geography and over time. A word that holds one meaning in a particular region or policy context may carry a different connotation elsewhere. Language does not merely describe social realities; it also shapes them. The words used by institutions, policymakers, and service-providers influence public perceptions, determine access to rights, and frame whose experiences are considered legitimate or visible.

Crucially, many communities addressed in this report have long been subjected to externally imposed labels that often fail to reflect their lived experiences. In response, they continue to assert their political agency by actively reclaiming or redefining the terms that describe them. The process of naming is therefore inherently political.

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When communities choose their own terminology, they resist narratives rooted in stigma, bureaucracy, or discrimination and instead affirm identities grounded in dignity, autonomy, and self-determination. Recognising and respecting this agency is essential for any meaningful discussion of vulnerability, inclusion, or systemic reform.

Methodology

HRCS held an event in June 2025 that brought together 45 people from 14 different countries, all of whom had experience of migration. During the event we shared information on the Concluding Observations of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights¹ (CESCR), published in March 2025, and the group agreed three areas to focus on:

- Educational barriers
- Employment challenges
- Housing challenges

I. Overview of key challenges

Educational barriers

Significant obstacles impede access to and progression within Scotland's education system:

Inadequate support and individualisation. The educational system often lacks individual-based support and fails to account for crucial individual differences, leading to a sense of purposelessness among students from migrant communities. Concerns were also expressed regarding teachers not adequately engaging with students,

We then organised and facilitated workshops with community members, researchers and policy makers in which each focus area was discussed in detail. The challenges highlighted below emerged from these discussions, along with ongoing dialogue with our advisory group.

with some reporting, "Teachers didn't talk to me".

Financial and funding issues.

Scholarships are very limited, and there is a general lack of funding for university education. Adult learners face difficulties securing places and funding, and this is complicated by residency issues. A critical barrier for asylum seekers is being charged international fees. Housing for students is often unavailable, and funding for non-university college courses is also a concern.

Systemic and information gaps.

There is a pronounced lack of information and availability of resources for refugees. Feedback on educational

¹ [Analysis of the concluding observations of the 7th periodic review of the UK by the UN CESCR \(2025\) | Just Fair](#)

processes and systems is often not provided for, and parents find it hard to understand the Scottish education system. Clarity on individual rights is lacking, and the system was criticised for “ignoring what has happened before,” with universities sometimes not recognising prior admission discussions.

Discrimination and exclusion.

Discrimination is reported on the grounds of disability, while Roma children face profound shame, judgment, and discrimination, often avoiding asking for help. While international students are welcomed, refugees and asylum seekers perceive they are “not welcomed by universities”. Bullying is worse in non-diverse areas, and neurodiverse individuals feel schools cannot adequately support them.

Specific vulnerable groups.

Significant educational barriers exist for Gypsy/Roma, disabled people, and other migrants. Roma young people are often overlooked, receiving no support, with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) sometimes used inadequately. There is perceived “competition between refugee and asylum seekers”.

Parental engagement. Parents find it difficult to communicate with schools and teachers and often require ESOL support themselves. Many parents from migrant communities feel “not represented in parent council” and “not integrated”. The cumulative impact of these barriers profoundly affects mental health and well-being.

Employment barriers

Migrants, despite having a strong desire to use their existing skills and qualifications, face numerous barriers to suitable employment.

Visa and qualification recognition. A primary concern is visa status and the significant difficulty in establishing and recognising past skills and qualifications within the UK system. Many highly qualified professionals feel under-appreciated due to the degradation of their qualifications.

Employer attitudes and “overqualification”. Employers frequently perceive refugees, including lawyers, doctors, and IT professionals, as “overqualified,” leading to rejection despite their skills.

Access to learning and skills development. Access to new skills development opportunities is problematic due to issues with times, childcare, and subject availability.

Navigating the job market. Many migrants do not know where to begin searching for employment, struggle with accessing job advertisements,

and receiving CV help. Inappropriate vacancies are often offered.

Systemic and policy hurdles.

The employment system for migrants (permission to work, recruitment, retention, lack of anti-racist practice) presents huge barriers, especially for asylum seekers who are seeking employment, except in specific roles like health and social care. Delayed visa processing compounds these difficulties.

Shortcomings of Job Centre support.

The Job Centre is frequently cited as a source of negative impact, often providing general CV checks instead of person-centred, tailored guidance, which contrasts sharply with the desire for individual matching to employers. The continuous struggle for recognition and relevant work significantly impacts mental health and well-being.

Housing barriers

Severe housing issues affect individuals and families, impacting health, well-being, and dignity.

Deteriorating housing conditions.

Poor conditions severely impact health and well-being, with pervasive issues like damp and mould leading to respiratory conditions and financial strain from the need for constant heating. Properties are reported to be infested with insects, even in emergency accommodation. Some flats lack sufficient light, and individuals with mobility-related disabilities have been placed in inaccessible accommodation.

Severe overcrowding. Properties are often inadequate for the number of residents, with examples including six people being accommodated in a two-bedroom property or seven people in

a two-room temporary B&B with no cooking facilities.

Emergency accommodation issues.

Emergency accommodation, particularly following relationship breakdowns, is described as a very low standard, including being infested with insects and lacking accessibility for buggies. Strict rules in some accommodation settings prevent children's visits, forcing parents to meet in public.

Systemic and policy failures. Issues include inconsistent status updates by the Home Office, a lack of response from health and social services when supporting evidence is needed, and housing associations refusing repairs or not considering medical reports effectively. Individuals may be deemed "intentionally homeless" if they leave unsafe council accommodation or resort to "sofa surfing". Mixed-status households with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) may not have their full housing needs considered. Lengthy waiting lists result from new applications.

A lack of monitoring of publicly funded housing by the Scottish Government in Glasgow, along with a complex bidding

process for those with language or digital skill barriers, are exacerbating the crisis.

II. Systemic and interconnected issues

A common thread across education, employment, and housing is the pervasive nature of systemic and policy failures, compounded by a lack of trust and individual recognition. Individuals consistently face:

Discrimination and lack of welcome.

Whether due to disability, ethnicity (e.g. Roma children), or visa status (e.g. asylum seekers in universities), discrimination and a sense of not being welcome are prevalent.

Information and navigation gaps.

From understanding educational pathways and rights to finding jobs and navigating complex housing bidding processes, a significant lack of clear, accessible, and multilingual information is a recurring barrier.

Financial disparities and funding

shortfalls. Limited scholarships, international fees for asylum seekers, lack of university funding, and the financial strain of poor housing conditions highlight severe economic disadvantages.

Unresponsive and inflexible services.

Housing associations refusing repairs, Job Centres providing generic advice instead of tailored support, and social services being unresponsive demonstrate a system that often

fails to adapt to individual needs.

Policy rigidities, such as “intentionally homeless” designations and inflexible allocation policies, push individuals further into vulnerability.

Impact on mental health and well-being.

The continuous struggle across many domains including experiences of shame, judgment and discrimination; difficulty finding meaningful work; and living in poor conditions – has significant negative effects on mental health and overall well-being.

Language, terminology and identity.

Across education, employment, and housing systems, individuals frequently encounter language and terminology that do not align with their identities, lived experiences, or cultural contexts. This includes labels applied to migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, Roma and Traveller communities, and disabled people. These labels often emerge from policy frameworks, legacy bureaucratic systems, or outdated public discourse rather than from the communities themselves. Because terminology shapes not only perception but also access to rights and services, the use of imprecise, imposed, or insensitive language can create significant practical and emotional barriers.

III. Recommendations and pathways for improvement

Addressing these multifaceted and interconnected barriers requires a concerted, integrated effort across all sectors.

Fostering trust and inclusivity.

Actively building trust, creating “sanctuary models,” and setting inclusive goals are crucial. This includes promoting equal treatment in housing regardless of ethnicity or religion.

Enhancing support structures and personalisation.

There is a paramount need for increased care and support, promoting peer support, nurture groups, and community-based support.² This extends to holistic, person-centred, step-by-step guidance, including individual matching to employers for migrants. Organisations like the Refugee Support Service and community/migrant organisations should be empowered with more funding to deliver crucial information and support.

Addressing financial disparities and funding.

Policies should aim to address limited scholarships, the burden of international fees for asylum seekers, and increase university funding, including for PhD students.

Improving information, guidance, and empowerment.

Providing comprehensive, multilingual information and resources for migrants is essential in education and employment. Career advisors in schools play a vital role, and guidance should be provided on policies and how to access relevant jobs. Individuals must be given choice and agency over their educational and career paths, with a clear imperative to “not decide for people” and to understand individual community needs. Confidence-building and empowerment are crucial for all learners.

² <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/what-we-do/safeguard-human-rights/public-health/mental-health-and-psychosocial-support>

Systemic and policy reform

Education

Invest in teacher professional development focused on culturally responsive and inclusive practices and ensure appropriate remuneration to attract and retain educators who are equipped to support the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of migrant communities.

Employment

Collaboration between workers, employers, and the government is crucial, with clarity on intermediary roles and alignment with frameworks like the Fair Work Convention.

Housing

Housing allocation policies need to be more flexible to prevent people from accepting unsuitable properties out of fear of losing their place on waiting lists. There is a need for transparency about empty properties. The bidding process for housing needs to be simplified, especially for those with language barriers or limited digital skills.

Accountability and monitoring.

Publicly funded housing should be properly monitored by the Scottish Government to ensure quality and address other issues. Working more closely with Members of the Scottish Parliament can bring community concerns into the political sphere.

Flexibility in addressing language and terminology.

This is a core component of equity, dignity, and inclusion. Ensuring that terminology is respectful, up-to-date, and co-developed with communities is essential to reducing barriers and fostering a sense of recognition and belonging across all systems.

Conclusion

The collective findings of this report point toward an urgent imperative: Scotland's education, employment, and housing systems must do much more to ensure human rights realisation, accessibility and equality for migrants. Migrants continue to face entrenched inequities that require not only targeted support, but structural reform. This report reflects a pressing need for fundamental change within Scotland's education, employment, and housing sectors to ensure migrants' rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.

The challenges urgently require a shift towards individualised support, increased and equitable funding, systemic transparency, and a proactive effort to combat discrimination and build trust.

Prioritising care, choice, and control for learners and employees, alongside community-based initiatives and robust governmental oversight, is essential for cultivating an inclusive landscape where all individuals can truly thrive and realise their full potential, ultimately benefiting both individual well-being and the wider community. Without these integrated interventions, the severe human cost of current challenges will continue to escalate. In line with HRCS' manifesto³, we call for the following:

1. Human rights-based policy

We demand that Scotland embed the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in domestic law. This would ensure the enforceability of rights such as education, adequate housing, social security, and non-discrimination for all, including non-nationals. The joint civil society submission to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) highlighted persistent gaps in respect for these rights.

2. Inclusive and community-led language reform

Public institutions must commit to co-developing terminology – in partnership with migrant and minoritised communities – that reflects lived experiences and respects self-identification. These practices should be enshrined in policy and accountability frameworks to affirm dignity and agency.

3. Accessible pathways to permanent residency

We oppose the proposed changes to Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) that would extend the qualifying period and impose merit-based contribution tests. While the White Paper proposes extending ILR from 5 to 10 years, with stricter English-language and civic

[3 Our Rights. Your Move. Manifesto Briefing Document](#)

integration tests, we call instead for fair, rights-respecting routes that honour long-term residents.

4. Language, trust, and participation in service delivery

Support services in education, employment, and housing must be linguistically inclusive, culturally responsive, and accountable. We ask for increased funding for interpretation, peer-led support, and community navigators to bridge trust gaps and enhance engagement.

5. Robust monitoring and accountability

Establish independent monitoring mechanisms that track ICESCR implementation, discrimination, and well-being outcomes, especially for migrant

Definitions for clarity and political framing

Migrant. While “migrant” does not have a single binding legal definition under international law, the United Nations generally describes an international migrant as someone who changes their country of usual residence, regardless of legal status or reason for moving.

Refugee. According to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, a refugee is someone who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution (because of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or

communities. This should include regular engagement with the UN CESCR process and transparent public reporting.

Recent changes to the UK immigration rule (effective from September 2025) introduce a “points-based” *earned settlement* model for ILR, extending the baseline residency requirement and placing greater emphasis on language, work, and civic contribution. These developments risk undermining long-established contributions and stability for many who have built lives in Scotland. Given the ICESCR’s non-discrimination obligations, which explicitly protect *everyone*, including migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, regardless of documentation status, these policy shifts must be scrutinised not only for their legal fairness but also for human rights compliance.

membership in a particular social group), is outside their country of origin and is unable or unwilling to claim its protection.

Asylum seeker. This is a person who has made an application for international protection, such as refugee status, but whose claim is still under consideration. Not every asylum seeker will be recognised as a refugee, but international law requires that their claim be fairly examined.

A call to action

UK Government and Parliament

Reconsider the ILR reform proposals to ensure they are compatible with international human rights standards and reflect the contributions of long-term residents.

Scottish Government

Continue to focus on and prioritise the delivery and implementation of the New Scots Strategy⁴ and related activity as outline in the recently published ICESCR High Level Action Plan to ensure improvement across public services⁵.

Local authorities and public services

Embed inclusive practices in service design and delivery, from multilingual outreach to participatory accountability bodies, to ensure the inclusion of migrants in line with Scottish Government action plans.

Community organisations

Continue to mobilise and amplify voices in migrant and minoritised communities to co-create language frameworks and policy asks.

Human Rights Consortium Scotland

Develop a new 'welcome resource' in partnership with migrant communities focussing on culture, rights and legality.

Ultimately, by aligning our domestic legislation with international human rights norms and standards, ensuring inclusive and accessible public services and empowering communities through language, and resisting regressive leave-to-remain reforms, HRCS believes we can drive systemic change, enabling a Scotland that genuinely affords dignity, recognition and security to all who live here.

⁴ [New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: 2024](#)

⁵ [Scottish Government high level action plan in response to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)

Support and guidance

[British Red Cross](#). Offers emergency support, family reunion assistance, casework, and guidance for people seeking safety.

[Central Scotland Regional Equality Council](#). Promotes equality and tackles discrimination across central Scotland through advice, advocacy, and community support.

[Citizen Advice Scotland](#). Provides free, confidential advice on rights, housing, welfare, employment, and navigating public services, with tailored support for people new to Scotland.

[Citizens Rights Project](#). Delivers information sessions, legal rights workshops, and specialist support to help EU citizens understand and secure their rights in Scotland.

[Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights](#). Works to promote racial equality and human rights across Scotland, offering policy guidance, advocacy, and community-focused anti-racism resources.

[Govan Community Project](#). Delivers anti-destitution support, food programmes, advocacy, and community-building activities for asylum seekers and refugees.

[Grampian Regional Equality Council](#). Supports individuals facing discrimination in the Grampian region through casework, community engagement, and equality-driven advocacy.

[Maryhill Integration Network](#). A local community hub in Glasgow providing practical assistance, language support, social connection, and integration activities for migrant and refugee communities.

[MILK Glasgow](#). A grassroots organisation supporting migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers through community connection, well-being projects, and culturally sensitive support.

[JustRight Scotland](#). A leading human rights and legal charity offering free legal advice and representation to refugees, migrants, survivors of trafficking, and people facing exploitation or insecure immigration status.

Refugee Sanctuary Scotland. Provides emergency financial support, travel grants, and practical assistance to asylum seekers and refugees facing hardship.

Scottish Refugee Council. Offers specialist guidance for refugees, including integration support, casework, community development, and access to key services.

The Welcoming (Edinburgh). Provides ESOL classes, employability training, climate action programmes, and community activities for migrants settling in Edinburgh.

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