

The impact of the far-right riots on migrants and where we go next

Summary of safe space meetings Migrant Voice held in August

On 15 and 29 August, Migrant Voice held online safe spaces in for migrants in the West Midlands and London and the South East respective, to discuss the ramifications of the recent far-right violent riots which transpired in the UK in the summer. The individuals who joined the meetings shared concerns, experiences and action points relevant for migrant communities who have been targeted by violence. These discussions highlighted the deep anxiety and sense of insecurity felt by our communities over the past few weeks and emphasised the urgent need for meaningful actions to address them.

What did participants say?

One of the main concerns that participants reported was about their safety and that of their family and loved ones.

"I raised my kids in this country, I never thought they would see this. How do I explain to them what is happening?"

One person mentioned being worried about their wife who wears the hijab and their children. *"How long do you need to be here to be British?"*, another parent asked.

"A lot of family members are on the receiving end despite feeling belonging in this country as much as everyone else."

"Some of the family are visibly Muslim, and now still avoid going out at certain times."

The riots also affected residents' plans and activities not just in the areas where they took place, as people did not feel safe to even leave their homes. Many had indeed stayed home and avoided going out.

"Black and brown friends were checking in on each other. The day after there were football games on and I was shaking hearing the chants going on."

"I had three friends being attacked. One was attacked in a supermarket with a trolley and had racist abuse shouted at them."

"I didn't go out during the riots. I have been living in the UK for 20 years and I was avoiding going out. And I am in London. Then how is it for people in places that are not migrant friendly?"

“It’s the emboldening of people [that concerns me]. They don’t attack men, they will go for the easy targets, the weakest link and use the most depraved tactics.”

One person mentioned that they had begun to carry objects for self-defence like a rape alarm and were asking their friends to do this.

Beyond feeling unsafe, several participants reported they sense of lack of response from authorities, saying that *“if I am attacked, no one will protect me/us”*. Even if an incident is reported, one participant said, *“it does not go anywhere”*, which was corroborated by statements of similar sentiment.

One person said: *“I am affected by the intersection between disability and immigration. London is my home, I came when I was 17. What I have experienced prior to the riots is that kind of double effect calling my disability fake and that I am taking advantage of the system. I can’t run. I carry a pepper spray. This fear is present.”*

“People started asking me ‘are you ok’. Then I started to understand what was happening. I used to go to a choir and one of the days fell on the day they were doing the protests. I was scared to leave the house. I heard that they were even attacking people in their hotel, in their home. Lots of events are cancelled. When I was on the street I was looking all around me. For now I am trying to come back to my normal self.”

One participant said that: *“many of us came here to feel safe and we didn’t expect this.”*

Ultimately, attendees recognise that the riots do not exist in a vacuum but are a product of decades-long divisive rhetoric from government officials and media.

“People felt emboldened and feel they can attack those they see anywhere.”

“After 38 years and experiencing a lot of racism over the years I am so sad that it is still happening now and these people are living and walking among us.”

In both meetings there was a recognition of the roles politicians and the media played in framing migrants and migration as an issue.

Participants pointed out that successive governments have often reduced complex national conversations to simplistic and polarising debates on immigration. This rhetoric, which instils fear and mistrust of migrants, ultimately leads to the violence we see today.

“There was too much attempt to say it was legitimate concerns.”

“I didn’t see the government de-escalating the situation. The fire seemed to be fuelled. I am worried that if the authorities are not going to take a better stand, it will just happen again. We need to learn from it and de-escalate. It fits certain agendas to have all these images going out and entrenching people in their already extremist views. Greater polarisation is not going to help anyone at the end.”

“What concerns me is where we go next. Yes, there is the blatant recent violence of the far right, but there is insidious racism that was there before too. We don’t just want that to get shoved under the carpet. How do we address this, and how do we address the root causes in the rhetoric about migrants and migration as a ‘serious problem’. Where is the political will for change as opposed to just saying it is legitimate concerns and tightening the immigration rules, which is the wrong respond. It just legitimises what just happened.”

Where do we go next?

There was an emphasis on wanting to change the rhetoric of the political and national debate.

“We need to change the narrative, we need to raise our voice.”

“We need to insist that the government don’t legitimise this and that they speak better about migration.”

“There is almost a memory loss. Already no one wants to talk about it now. Even the people who have been going through it are scared to even voice it. The ones who are talking are the ones who feel safe. Others don’t even have an outlet.”

“Organisations should have not just anti-racist policies but statements on how to engage with migrants and to be fair to migrants.”

“We should take action, and the action is to educate”: at every level, authorities need to raise migrant voices in debates about immigration: in local government, materials being produced, policy design, community events, etc.”

“We are all human beings and should be treated as such”

“We need to change the narrative. Migration has been problematised long enough, we continue to be scapegoated as migrants. We need to insist that the narrative must change. Migration is normal, it has always happened. We’re just normal people, we can’t be vilified just for crossing borders- these arbitrary lines. All over the world they are focusing on pandering to those concerned about migration in order to gain votes. We need to insist that migration is normal.”