

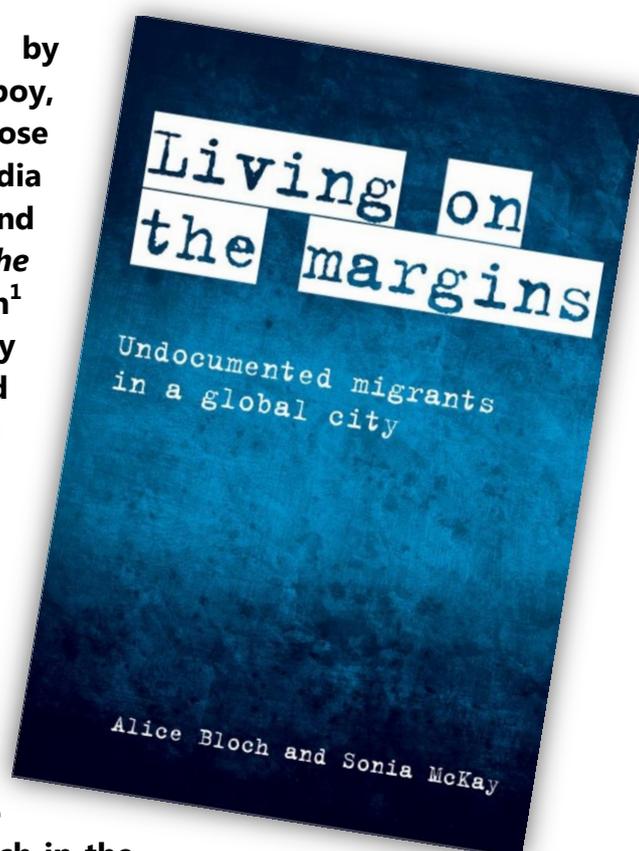


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With rare exceptions, such as the death by drowning on 2 September 2015 of the young boy, Alan Kurdi whose family had fled Syria, those fleeing war and famine are presented in the media as persons without names, identities and seemingly no stories. In our book, *Living on the margins*, published January 2016, Alice Bloch¹ and I aimed for a different perspective, by focusing on the everyday lives of undocumented migrants living and working in London. We had been fortunate in securing funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for a two-year research project: *Undocumented Migrants, Ethnic Enclaves and Networks: Opportunities, traps or class-based constructs* (UndocNet) which ran from 2011 to 2013 and which focused on three communities of migrants in London: those from Bangladesh, China and Turkey (including North Cyprus). We knew that we would be carrying out the research in the context of economic downturn, increasingly restrictive immigration controls, raids on businesses suspected of employing undocumented migrants and rising numbers of deportations and in this hostile environment we wanted to understand how those without documents survived and what use they made of social and family networks. We also wanted to explore the additional dimensions of disadvantage, based on gender, ethnicity or imbalanced power relationships.



Our aim also was to identify the reasons for undocumented migration, looking at the economic, structural and migration systems that we believe have become its drivers. We were privileged that 55 undocumented migrants in London were willing to communicate their stories to the UndocNet research team, detailing the circumstances of their migration journeys, the situation they found on arrival in London and how they had managed to survive in a system that was increasingly hostile to them and where their undocumented status meant that they were people without 'the right to have rights' (Arendt, 2014).

¹ Alice Bloch is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester



They spoke of why or how they had become undocumented and what this had meant to them, in terms of the types of jobs they could find, their constrained family and social lives and the fear they permanently lived under, with the constant risk of detection and deportation. We scrutinised why government policy operated in a seemingly contradictory fashion, sanctioning those who employed undocumented migrants while taking no steps to regularise the status of migrants, leaving individuals in an even more vulnerable situation where the risks that employers took in employing them were passed on, through lower wages and ever worsening work conditions. Thus sanctions made their lives more precarious, but did not deter those who had no other alternatives but to accept what they were offered. The doors were permanently closed to them for any chance of taking a place alongside the rest of society, working legally and exercising their right to have rights. They constantly assessed the risks they might face or encounter, keeping out of areas of the city where police presence was greater, indeed staying close to the areas where they lived and worked; always making sure that they had ready exit points from their place of work should there be a raid, and trusting very few people with the truth about their legal status.

The undocumented migrants whom we interviewed had utilised and created networks of support in the UK but these networks, usually considered as an acquisition of social capital, did not generally advantage them in the sense that social capital theorists suggest and we describe these networks as 'networks without influence' (at p.178). Many interviewees described their almost relentless pursuit of contacts, with few believing that they could make their way without them, but managing at most to stay still, only rarely to improve their work position, sometimes even after years in the UK. The networks they constructed were not usually malign (indeed they could be emotionally supportive) but they were poor in terms of the economic resources that they held. As the networks generally consisted of people in the same situation, they found themselves trapped in marginalised positions and work and few had been able to move out from the narrow constraints of the undocumented space they occupied. Those who had managed this had done so by shunning the building of co-ethnic networks, having chosen to distance themselves from the social groups they had encountered on arrival. Network building was also sometimes hampered by reluctance, within the established migrant communities, to engage with the more recently arrived, particularly where the latter were labelled as 'risky' due to their undocumented status. From the perceptions of undocumented, established communities relatively quickly distanced themselves, making it clear that any support they might have offered on arrival was time limited. Class and power differences also intervened and, as between migrant workers and employers, a community of language and cultural heritage was insufficient to overcome the differences that were the result of class and power. Thus minority ethnic employers

remained first and foremost employers, they did not transform into supportive networks merely because they shared a country of origin.

At the same time we wanted to grasp what it was that had encouraged some employers to ignore the risk of sanctions and to employ those without documents. We interviewed 24 minority ethnic employers from the three target communities, Bangladeshi, Chinese and Turkish/Kurdish, the majority of whom had, at some stage, employed undocumented migrants. It was clear that one thing that undocumented migration had not overcome was the existing gender segregation in the UK labour market. We found that notions of 'male' and 'female' jobs were dominant in the discourse of employers, who attributed characteristics to gender, asserting that certain jobs could only be done by one sex. They equally attributed characteristics to ethnicity, generally asserting that workers from their own country of origin had superior characteristics, either on account of their willingness to work hard or their cultural knowledge, which was highlighted as important, in some sectors, for example food and restaurants.

Employers who were interviewed were aware that were taking risks in employing those without documents and certainly they were more cautious, than they had been in the past, given that the risk of fines was of £10,000 per worker found. However, regardless of the risks there were circumstances when they would still give work to people without documents, particularly where family or close friends were involved; where they had themselves experienced discrimination or had known what it was like to be without legal status; or simply where immigration controls meant that they could not source workers with work permits. Like the undocumented migrants we interviewed, employers also tried to manage risks, rather than avoiding them; employing only a few undocumented workers at any one time, perhaps offering work for a few weeks at a time, or offering work for times of the day when they believed that immigration and police raids were less likely. Of course there were employers who also exploited the vulnerability of those without documents, but what we uncovered was a much more complex picture of motives from that presented by government, where it is argued that undocumented migration is driven either by 'rogue' employers or traffickers.

What we learnt strengthened our view that government policies 'threaten community well-being' and 'tear communities apart by highlighting divisions, increasing racism and intolerance' (Bloch and McKay, 2015). Our research also concludes that the outcomes of government policies are not accidental but are part of a wider agenda, so that while its outward focus is on placing increased controls on immigration, its real intent is that undocumented migrants 'continue to be paraded as scapegoats for the economic crisis that they did not cause' and that they have become 'the excuse for further attacks on welfare'

(Bloch and McKay, 2016: 190). The current immigration system offers gains to the state, which can claim that the lack of jobs is not a consequence of a crisis of capitalism but due to there being too many migrants and migrants 'willing' to work for less than the going rate and under conditions which indigenous workers will not accept. Indeed the Conservative government at the moment takes this to the extreme by even claiming that it is targeting abuse (for the benefit of the most vulnerable) by heightening the number of raids and deportations! The system also offers gains to employers and not just to those who are employing the undocumented. We argue that it offers gains to all employers because pushing down further those at the bottom causes falls in the rest of the labour market. Low wages for the undocumented, at the end of the day, translate into lower wages all round, fear of being undercut drives workers with rights into work where rights are not respected (Massey and Gentsch, 2014).

About the authors

Sonia McKay is a Visiting Professor at the University of West of England attached to CESR, and Professor Alice Bloch is a sociologist at The University of Manchester,

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