POLICY PAPER

COMBATTING CORROSIVE NARRATIVES ABOUT REFUGEES

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THE COMPARATIVE NETWORK ON REFUGEE EXTERNALISATION POLICIES

This Policy Report has been produced for the Comparative Network on the Externalisation of Refugee Policies (CONREP). CONREP researches the impact and effects of the externalisation of refugee policies in two regions: Australia's activities in Southeast Asia and the Pacific; and the European Union and its member states' activities in the Meditterean and North Africa. These policies exploit power asymmetries to transfer state and regional obligations and responsibility for asylums seekers and refugees to neighbouring states. At their most destructive, externalisation policies can prevent refugees from reaching safety, and breach their human rights.

As has been extensively demonstrated, externalisation policies reshape the boundaries of sovereignty and blur the lines of responsibility among states. By avoiding their legal and political responsibility, many states violate their legal obligations. Externalisation deflects responsibility, transforming the governance of refugee protection and border control. Regional cooperation for refugee protection is weakened, and human rights protections are undermined. At a global level, migration pathways are disrupted and refugees are often trapped in transit, placing them at risk. Nationally, some governments gain electoral advantage by being 'tough' on border protection, often using dehumanising language and misrepresenting refugees. The accelerating phenomenon of externalisation characterising these 'tough' border protection policies requires a comprehensive analysis by researchers, civil society actors, refugees and policy makers. This includes an analysis of the harmful narratives that circulate in the media and in public debate about those seeking refuge: this report examines the way that refugee movement and those seeking refuge, are represented, often with damaging effects and in ways that also serve to justify and enable externalisation practices.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report calls for a fresh approach to the debates and policy about refugees and asylum seekers. It calls upon governments and the media to ensure that the way they present policy and analysis about people seeking refugee protection is transparent, principled and accurate. It makes the case that governments, political parties and the media should refuse to engage in harmful narratives and practices. Such narratives – most often negative stereotypes - are fostered by political debates and media reporting that often fail to comprehend asylum. In many instances, they intentionally inflame the debates about refugee movement. They also often fail to communicate directly with people seeking refuge. There is considerable evidence (e.g. Pierigh, 2017; Oxfam, 2007; UNESCO, n.d.) that the voices of those seeking refuge are often unheard, deliberately silenced or have been manipulated in ways that diminish their personhood (Szorenyi, 2009). When they are heard, they are, at best, mediated by others – including by those who support them - who listen and observe from a distance (Pierigh, 2017). In many instances refugees remain neither seen, nor heard, at all. This is not to say that the voices of refugees are always absent: rather, there is failure to *listen* with care in politics and the media. Yet listening to the voices of others is critical, in order to fully resist injustices enacted at the border (see for example, de Souza, 2020; Vasefi, 2018). In contrast, their stories are distorted or even erased by media and by political debates that frame them *either* as vulnerable victims or as undeserving criminals. Such inaccurate depictions or even bifurcations lead to the erosion of human rights (Vukov, 2009, 348) and to the legitimation of violence.

This report also cautions against those humanitarian narratives that may, however unintentionally, homogenise the experiences of people seeking refuge, and that may mask the specificity of each person's experience. We are attentive to the danger of emotive language that reduces those seeking refuge to the figure of the 'victim'. Asylum seekers have often reflected on the harm that is done by such narratives, as we illustrate in this report: by constructing people as little more than a victim, there is a tendency to engage in pity, a position that draws on a public imaginary of the 'benevolent' state as a 'saviour' (Silverstein, 2020). At the same time, constructing refugees as a threat is equally harmful and produces securitised discourses that are dehumanising.

The purpose of this report is two-fold. It aims to provide the context and rationale for fostering a humane and sincere approach to narratives about people seeking asylum and refugees. Secondly, it outlines a series of recommendations to support a shift away from corrosive narratives, and in so doing, to challenge harsh policies that are enabled by harmful and often untruthful representations of refugees.

In sustaining the border as a site that can only be crossed by those deemed worthy to do so, some sections of the media participate in – or fail to challenge – inaccurate depictions by governments of refugees, thereby contributing to the dilution of responsibility by governments and the European Union (EU) under the Refugee Convention, as well as to the reinforcement and militarisation of the border.

We challenge the myths underlying corrosive narratives. In failing to hold governments to account, some media organisations and individulas also accept, without adequate questioning – or indeed any questioning at all – the rhetoric of governments, and their mistruths. In many cases, some in the media have circulated negative, and misleading, narratives with minimal or no effort devoted to fact-checking and to verifying the truth of statements made to them. In this respect, the media's historical role as the 'Fourth Estate' – as providing independent oversight of government – has not only been diminished, but has been degraded. Despite this, some within the media persist in seeking to report on the hardship experienced by those seeking refuge. Yet, as we illustrate in this report, when such members of the media have sought access to information, such as within Australia's offshore detention centres and within detention centres in Libya that are financed by the European Union (EU), they have often been denied that access, with considerable restrictions placed on them by states that are signatories to the Refugee Convention.

The issues

The issues driving this policy report on narratives are the following:

1. Which narratives are corrosive against refugees? What examples are evident in Australia and Europe?

2. In what ways are negative narratives and representations of refugees and asylum-seekers dangerous and damaging?

3. In what way are refugee voices silenced, and how might this be contested?

4. How and why does language and other forms of representation, matter?

5. How might negative discourses on refugee movement and refugees best be disrupted and contested?

6. How can narrative remain a point of, and for, resistance, to harmful discourses, as well as an intervention in negative perceptions of refugees?

7. How does the media assist in promoting or, alternatively, in changing , this rhetoric?

This policy paper seeks to achieve three key objectives. Firstly, it examines corrosive narratives that result in harm for people seeking refuge. Secondly, it presents a critique of these narratives, drawing on academic; media; think tank; civil society and refugee analysis and through the findings from two public events convened by the Comparative Network on Refugee Externalisation Policies (CONREP) and from CONREP publications. In so doing, it is inspired by the power of words and images in 'refugee narratives' to reflect on who has controlled (and who should control) these narratives. It asserts that the representation and presentation of voice and image *for*, and *by* refugees remain crucial. Thirdly, it presents a set of recommendations for more humane narratives and policies - which ensure that the voices of those impacted by harsh border protection and other refugee externalisation policies are heard on their own terms.

This policy report provides the opportunity for policymakers, politicians, the media and civil society to reflect on the need for states and regional bodies (such as the EU) to counter corrosive narratives *and* policies. The voices of those seeking refuge are paramount here. The policy report therefore provides the opportunity for refugees and those examining narratives to present their voices directly.

We examine damaging narratives regarding refugees by both governments and media. Some in the media report incorrectly and do not question politicians and their narratives. They may even give them oxygen. But it is politicians who enact policies, make legislation that is harmful and that present corrosive narratives and tropes to the public, the media, parliaments and to refugees themselves. The responsibility lies with governments - and the EU - to recast policy and enact more humane approaches to refugees.

The first stage in all discussions of policymakers, advocates and scholars is the acknowledgement that the voices of those seeking refuge should always come first. The media, and political leaders must also resist casting white voices as more authoritative than other voices. Key stakeholders involved at all levels of policy making must ensure that the voices of those seeking refuge are actively sought and are clearly reflected in the development of policy responses and actions.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 Recommendations regarding Narratives

1. Measures should be put in place with the objectives of providing a platform for refugees to speak, and to provide their own accounts. It is neither sufficient nor ethical to speak on their behalf. Listening is essential, but this must be open-ended and without ulterior motives by those who are 'listening'. To this end, we recommend that governments; politicians; NGOs; universities and other institutions whose work in peak and advocacy organisations speaks about - and on behalf of - refugees, ensure that:

   • those with a refugee background are appropriately represented and accorded priority within their organization, and that they are remunerated for their time.

   • the views of those with a refugee background are sought as standard practice.

   • those with a refugee background are afforded leadership roles within peak organisations; educational establishments; policy communities and civil society.

   • diversity is respected, that is, there is recognition of the need for all refugees to have the opportunity to speak out, irrespective of their age; gender; sexual orientation; education; and linguisitic ability, and that there is acknowledgement of intersectional identities.

   • the views of advocacy organisations and others working directly with refugee communities are actively sought at all levels of government.

2. We recommend that governments and the European Union commit to:

   • providing mechanisms for full and transparent accountability for all service providers.

   • removing all restrictions placed on the media in places of detention and on refugee policy in general.

   • providing access to independent observers, including international bodies and civil society groups, to places of detention and establish independent monitoring, under the terms, for example, of the National Reporting Mechanisms of the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

   • providing regular reports on the protection of human rights in places of detention, including

access to right of movement; health care; food and clean water; oversight of all staff, and details of the processing of refugee claims.

   • the provision of detailed reports on women's experiences in places of detention, in relation to sexual/gender based violence and the protection of their rights .

3. Groups and individuals who provide humanitarian assistance to asylum seekers and refugees, and who speak out about refugee detention and their experiences, should not be criminalized for doing so. We recommend:

   • repeal of laws and policies that effectively criminalise those seeking asylum, including through terminology such as 'illegals' or 'unlawful'.

   • repeal of laws that criminalise those providing humanitarian assistance to those seeking asylum.

   • repeal of laws that criminalise those who speak out about the harmful experiences and conditions experienced by those seeking asylum.

   • implementing greater protections in law, for those who speak out about the harms of border protection policies and other refugee policies, and for those who offer assistance to those exposed to these harms.

4. A new political recalibration is important. There is a need for politicians to transform the language that they use towards asylum seekers and refugees. We recommend that:

   • Governments take a leadership role in countering negative rhetoric about those seeking refuge and establish processes to develop bipartisan and cross-party support for those seeking refuge.

   • programmes be enacted by political parties in consultation with refugees, which demonstrate a shift away from harmful representations about refugees and people seeking asylum, especially in policy development. This should include countering hate speech and confronting the risks associated with the proliferation of negative stereotypes.

   • those working with the public services and other bureaucratic settings ensure that policies and laws are enforced in ways that uphold the human rights of asylum seekers and refugees.

5. Media, politicians and supporters of refugees are encouraged to challenge the specific false narratives that dominate much of public debate: that refugees pose a risk to national security; that they are a drain on the economies of asylum states; and that they are

incapable of settling into the cultures of their host countries. They are encouraged to provide evidence that people seeking refuge can be a benefit and not a drain on domestic resources. On the contrary, many refugees have a positive impact in terms of demography; the contribution to the economy; payment of taxes; innovation and investment in business; and contribution to a richer culture and diversity. At the same time, we also reject the notion that a person needs to provide their economic, cultural or social value in order to be granted refuge, and stress that a person's worth is not to be measured on this basis.

6. Government and media are urged to avoid narratives which rely on the production of stereotypes, and which homogenise the experiences of those seeking refuge.

7. The media has the capacity to take a leadership role in actively contributing to a shift in this rhetoric. We recommend that leading media organisations and representatives, as well as relevant media associations/institutes direct research and funding into:

   • addressing how media reporting on those seeking refuge, and on refugee policy generally, can be conducted ethically, with a strong focus on making visible the experiences and realities of what it means to flee from persecution.

   • provision of training on how to interview asylum seekers and refugees in a trauma-informed manner.

   • exploring avenues for contesting and challenging hate speech, racism and the proliferation of harmful and untruthful narratives about refugee movement, especially through social media and other online platforms.

   • training and policy measures that avoid sensationalism in reporting, for example in referring to a 'refugee crisis' or 'influx' or 'hordes'. It is recommended that training courses, guidelines and codes of conduct accord a priority to refugee voices and refugee journalists.

8. The media is called upon to exercise empathetic reporting, and to consult with refugees, in order to foster greater understanding of the circumstances experienced by those seeking refuge, rather than simply adopt a 'sympathetic' stance, which can lead to an emphasis on victimhood, over agency.

9. More research is needed into what constitutes 'best practice' in ethical reporting. To this end, we recommend:

   • funding a handbook and library of best practice models and repository of truthful reporting. A handbook for journalists who are navigating this issue could include materials ranging from definitions of refugee/asylum seeker/internally displaced person, for example, to statistical, historical and comparative information, in order to better equip journalists with important context and background knowledge that is critical to accurate and informed reporting.

   • the development of an ethical code of conduct for journalists and other media representatives, which has a specific focus on reporting and representation of matters concerning border control, and on refugee movement, experiences and voices. This should incorporate participation from those with a refugee background, as well as representatives from alternative and mainstream media, policy makers, bureaucrats, NGOs and researchers.

1.2 Recommendations regarding Policymaking

Damaging and misleading perspectives that are generated by corrosive narratives and lack of accurate information both leads to, and reflects, harmful policy. We therefore recommend a humane, reflective approach to policy making. We recommend comprehensive, transparent oversight of all aspects of the securitisation and militarisation of offshore processing. Accordingly,

1. This report urges that all countries become signatories to the Optional Protocol on the Convention Against Torture, and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and that they designate immigration detention as a site that is subject to national monitoring mechansims applying under the terms of the Optional Protocol.

2. Policymakers, whether politicians or government officials, are urged to establish a national (and EU) expert panel (of refugees; experts; lawyers; advocates) to regularly report on truth, transparency and accountability in policy, rhetoric and narratives to the public, including though an annual debate in national parliaments and the European Parliament.

3. A handbook be developed to guide best practice in ethical policymaking for politicians. This would support policy making relating to: accurate definitions of refugee and asylum seeker and internally displaced person and statistical, historical and comparative information, in order to better equip politicians with important context and background knowledge that is critical to accurate and informed policymaking.

4. Governments must undertake to discontinue disengenous media and other campaigns that seek to deter people seeking asylum from coming to their territory, and must desist from the use of threatening language in this regard.

5. We draw attention to the important Kaldor Centre Report, entitled *Principles for Australian Refugee Policy* (2022) that sets out a set of principles to ensure that the Australian Government complies with international human rights obligations, these principles are ones which could also be used by other states, which we support:

   • comply with international legal commitments and ensure that people are not sent back to a real risk of persecution or other serious harm;

   • provide humane, fair reception conditions;

   • give people a fair hearing;

   • keep families together and safeguard the best interests of children;

   • create additional safe, lawful pathways to protection;

   • become a global and regional leader on protection once again;

   • invest in refugees for long-term success.

2. CONTEXT[1]

Corrosive narratives about people seeking asylum are evident in Europe and Australia. In Australia, successive governments have sought to suppress the publication of images of refugees seeking protection, whether at sea, or in offshore processing and immigration detention (Lydon, 2016; Marr and Wilkinson, 2003: 195). In 2013, Australia's then Immigration Minister, Scott Morrison, 'instructed departmental and detention centre staff to publicly refer to asylum seekers as ''illegal'' arrivals and as ''detainees'', rather than as clients', manifesting a decisive shift in the use of terminology calculated to dehumanise people (Hall, 2013). These acts acknowledge the power of images and words to generate public support and empathy or to refuse them. Such measures have evoked public suspicion and even odium towards refugees. In Europe, toxic language has, for many years, similarly permeated much of the narratives about people seeking asylum, as we explore below.

Despite the evidence that images and individual stories can deliver powerful interventions into debates that seek to demonise those seeking asylum (UNHCR, n.d.), they can also reinforce binary stereotypes of the 'good', deserving refugee, in contrast with the threatening, risky 'other'. Both constructions diminishes a person's identity and undermines their agency and their personhood (Loughnan, 2020; Silverstein, 2020; Szorenyi, 2009).

There have been occasions when images have generated widespread public sympathy. For example, the photo of young Alan Kurdi, a three-year old Syrian refugee who, with some of his family, was drowned in the attempt to reach Europe and protection, provoked global outrage. Similarly, the images of refugees drowning off the coast of Christmas Island resulted in outpourings of sorrow in Australia and emotion as the Australia government negotiated legal changes in response to deaths at seas (Neuman, 2012). However, this incident was, in due course, ultimately used by the then Australian government to undermine its ethical obligations to refugees, illustrating the way that 'humanitarian' narratives are manipulated in order to avoid protection obligations (Moreno-Lax and Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019; Silverstein, 2020). This form of rhetoric has also been utilised by the European Union (European Council/Council of the European Union, 2022; Musaró, 2019).

Yet such images are possibly powerful because, in these cases, the refugee is portrayed as the victim. This raises the important question: what happens when refugees are not regarded as worthy human rights subjects, but rather as a threat, and not a victim? Who gets to tell these stories? And on what or whose terms are these stories told? Further, who controls the narrative in these instances? These concerns reveal an ethical challenge at the heart of agency, research and advocacy – as well as media reporting - relating to the rights of people seeking refugee protection. Importantly, we call for greater inclusion and recognition of the voices of those seeking refuge.

However, not all refugees wish to recount their story. Accordingly, it has been remarked that 'the expectation of sharing one's story can transform into an obligation' (Tammas, 2019). That is, non-refugee audiences sometimes may expect refugees to retrace their traumatic experiences, without regard for the refugees' desire to share or *not share* their stories (Szorenyi,2021). When media and researchers seek out such stories, there can be 'an implicit narrative logic to the questions: 'tragedy' to 'success', 'hell' to 'paradise'(Tammas, 2019). When heavily curated, such reporting can tend to 'marginalise or oversimplify the complex context' of individual stories.' Sometimes, speaking is a burden and requires witnessing and testifying to trauma all over again, by those who have been traumatised. Once resettled, some would prefer simply to get on with their lives (Tammas, 2019). Some of these issues have been recognised by journalist groups in Europe, as we illustrate below.

It is clear that language matters in determining public and political debate and in influencing policies and societal responses (Pierigh, 2017:6). We examine the impact of these narratives on refugees; on society; and on human rights. We explore how the media assists in promoting or, alternatively, in changing this rhetoric, and how political leaders respond to, shape or resist these narratives.

Since the Convention Relating to the Status and Protection of Refugees was first ratified, the number of people seeking protection and resettlement has increased at a dramatic rate, often exponentially. In 1951, there was an estimate of one million people seeking refuge (UNHCR Fact Sheet 20: 1), who were registered under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In its most recent Global Trends Report, the UNHCR (2021) reported that there were 89.3 million persons who were forcibly displaced, whether due to conflict, human rights violations, persecution or other forms of social upheaval impacting adversely on communities. This included 27.3 million refugees. Refugee protection is a persistent, and growing, concern with global reach and implications. In recent decades, responses to this issue have, in many instances, fuelled negative reactions and resistance by governments to the humanitarian values that were at the heart of the Convention when it was first ratified.

2.1 Reporting trends

The organisation *Refugee Reporting* (Pierigh, 2017), found that reporting about pressing global issues, such as those relating to refugee movement and asylum claims, only include stories about individual experiences in approximately one in five media reports (Pierigh, 2017: 5). As Pierigh (2017: 5) notes, this:

> points to a pattern of invisibility that creates a clear divide between the policies being discussed at the political level, and the effects of those policies on people.

Moreover, particular groups are 'disproportionately' more likely to be absent in news and media reporting, notably if you are a woman, or if you are from particular communities. For example, Afghans comprise one of the largest groups seeking asylum, and yet their representation in the media does not reflect this. A similar pattern noted in the report was in relation to migrant communities from West Africa, whose representation in the media does not reflect the scale of movement from their region (Pierigh 2017: 6) Media reporting on experiences of these refugee communities in general appear far less frequently than others (Pierigh, 2017, 5).

However, even when those seeking refuge *are* represented, caution is required, in order to avoid reducing such experiences to an identity which amounts to no more nor less than that of 'refugee' status. As we explain in this report, we call upon politicians and the media to exercise greater care in how people seeking refuge are represented and spoken about, to avoid merging individual lives into one moniker: that of the 'refugee'. We follow calls made for empathetic reporting, which fosters greater understanding of the circumstances experienced by those seeking refuge, rather than simply a 'sympathetic' stance which can place disproportionate stress on victimhood (Pierigh, 2017:6). In short, we call for greater awareness of those seeking refuge as individuals who had lives before seeking refuge, and hope to have lives afterwards, and demand recognition which exceeds their status in law (regardless of their legality or 'illegality') under the Refugee Convention, or under national and regional legal instruments. We call on governments and the EU to recast policies, based on a humane commitment to understanding, and recognition of refugee rights.

2.2 Nationalist movements and anti-refugee narratives

Governments in Australia and in many states in Europe have utilised increasingly populist narratives of threat-perception and societal security for at least two decades (Huysmans, 2006; Longo and Murray, 2015; Murray, 2023; Murray and Longo, 2018). Populist anti-refugee rhetoric has tended to centre on three false narratives: that refugees pose a risk to national security; that they are a drain on the economies of asylum states; and that they are incapable of assimilating into the cultures of their host countries. Relatedly, such representations depict those seeking refuge as potentially being a drain on domestic resources, described as the 'burden' narrative. The predominance of narratives privileging national – or European Union (EU) – security over a values-based humanitarian approach undermines the foundations of a refugee protection system and limits the possibilities for achieving just solutions to people seeking protection (Cook, 2012; Murray, 2023). An additional narrative, which has influenced public debate over many decades, draws on the rhetoric of 'scarcity', that is, that refugees take away resources from society, rather than potentially contributing to it.

Across Europe, political leaders have, for some years, resorted to the use of terms such as 'floods' and 'tsunami' and the framing of refugees as a security threat, terms that are echoed and expanded by some media (Ferreira, 2018), referring to 'human tsunami' (Italian Prime MInister Berlusconi) and UK Prime Minister David Cameron's use of the term 'swarm'. This use of corrosive and dehumanising language, over some decades, has also been accompanied by harmful references in the media to refugees and asylum-seekers. In the Australian context, similar terminology dominates negative framings of those seeking refuge, with labelling such as 'queue jumpers', 'illegals', 'criminals' and 'terrorists' commonly used.

Accompanying many of these labelling practices is the deployment of the language of securitisation (Ferreira, 2018). Yet some EU institutions, such as the European Commission and the European External Action Service, refer to their border polices using the language both of military operations *and* civilian missions. At the same time, within these EU documents and pronouncements regarding such operations, the words 'refugee' and 'asylum' are often simply not mentioned (European Council/Council of the EU, 2022a).

We challenge the myths underlying many of the narratives (Simon, 2018) especially in the context of 'threat' and 'risk'. Through the focus on refugees as security concerns, the nationalist rhetoric of far-right political parties is enabled and endorsed. As Ferri (2019) has pointed out, in the case of

Italy, 'almost 60% of Italians supported Salvini's decision to close national ports to NGO vessels' (Ferri, 2019).

Many of these narratives of migration as 'threat' have emerged as rallying cries for right wing social movements and political parties in the UK, the US, and Australia, including UKIP and its variations; the British National Party; the One Nation Party; the Tea Party Patriots, and the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps (Hogan and Haltinner, 2015). Such political movements rely heavily on 'incendiary language and the most dehumanising, essentialising and hostile imagery is seen in discussions of immigration and the threat of terrorism' (Hogan and Haltinner, 2015: 529 -531). Negative representations include claims that those seeking refuge, and immigration generally, will take the jobs of citizens, will have a downward effect on the economy, increase the burden on the state, lead to more crime, and threaten domestic cohesion (Hogan and Haltinner, 2015: 533; See also Ekman, 2019).

2.3 Appropriation of humanitarian language for cruel policies

Although there is a need to contest securitised narratives, we stress that the language of 'humanitarianism' and 'care' has also served to diminish the visibility and rights of those seeking refuge. This is evident in the way that governments defend their actions as devoted to saving lives at sea, by breaking the business model of people smugglers. This framing has been used by governments in both Australia and Europe and by the institutions of the EU. Such narratives are misleadingly presented by states that are signatory to the Convention through generating the appearance of caring – saving lives at sea – coupled with a tough response to people smugglers. The claim is made that this protects asylum seekers from exploitation by criminal individuals and smuggling syndicates. This duplicitous representation of harsh polices as an exercise in humanitarianism points to an underlying hypocrisy on the part of signatory states (Lavenex, 2018) since the dangerous crossings made by those seeking asylum could easily be averted by adopting a more humane, coordinated and regional response to forced mobility. Where more scrutiny is needed is about how:

> states attempt the symbolic control of unwanted migrants, the use of extraterritorial subjugation as a practice of preemptive border security and how governments implement border externalizations through extraterritorially acting upon people's perceptions of migration, including depicting irregular migration in a negative light (Musarò, 2019: 632).

For Musarò and Hirsch (2019) in Australia, as in Italy, 'leaders and media use humanitarian language to justify harsh policies as a way to prevent exploitation of migrants by people-smugglers, and end drowning deaths at sea'. There has been extensive criticism by scholars of such rhetorical devices used by states regarding rescue missions, including in the Mediterranean, for example. Cusumano (2019) describes such practices by states as an illustration of *organised* hypocrisy– following Sandra Lavenex's important coinage of this term (Lavenex, 2018) – that is, as evidence of a 'mismatch between rhetoric and behaviour'. This mismatch is clearly evidenced by EU asylum reform policy, which refers to an EU resettlement framework that aims to: 'provide for legal and safe pathways to the EU and reduce the risk of massive irregular arrivals in the long term; provide common rules for resettlement and humanitarian admission; contribute to global resettlement and humanitarian admission initiatives and support third countries hosting many persons in need of international protection' (European Council/Council of the EU, 2022b). Such aims are undercut by narratives that effectively endorse a punitive, rather than a humanitarian, response at the border.

Yet states continue to claim that they are acting in pursuit of humanitarian ends, through campaigns like '*Aware Migrants*' in Italy, and '*No Boat, No Way*' in Austraila. These campaigns ostensibly seek to protect the lives of those seeking asylum, by preventing the risk to which they might be exposed by using the services of people smugglers and arriving by boat. This not only reflects the invisibility of refugees (Gozdecka, 2020), but the use of language about military and security operations, in which those seeking refuge are framed as a security threat, also lies in contradistinction to that of humanitarian principles. The *Aware Migrants* campaigns that were initated in Europe were directed at communicating the risks to those seeking to use the services of 'people smugglers'. As Musarò (2019: 630) states, this campaign was not conducted in the service of asylum seekers or 'illegal migrants,' but in the pursuit of a retreat from obligations to refugees, by signatory states. This was supported by focusing on the 'criminal' nature of people smuggling through appeals to, for example, the terms of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

Similarly, in the Australian case, Silverstein (2020: 728) has shown how the narrative that 'we must stop the boats of asylum seekers so the children don't drown' draws from, and exploits, humanitarian discourses . She shows how these discourses of 'care' are located 'within a history of settler-colonial projects that work to create an image of Australia as a nation of 'white saviours', policy-makers as 'good caring humanitarians', and non-white children as requiring the 'benevolent care' of white governments.' Such narratives also position the state as the 'we' who 'knows

best' and frames asylum seeker children and their families and communities as 'irresponsible' (Silverstein, 2020: 729, 739 - 740). As she observes, this narrative creates an imaginary of the caring state, but in this process, the story becomes a story that is not about refugee children, but becomes focused on government and the stories it tells us about itself, as a caring institution (Silverstein, 2020: 739, 741).

For Musarò (2019: 638), these so-called 'humanitarian' narratives also produce stereotypes of the villain and victim, which prevent observers from 'examining smugglers dispassionately for what they are: service providers in an era of unprecedented demand. It is certainly true that smugglers profit from the desperation of others, but it is also true that in many cases smugglers save lives, create possibilities and redress global inequalities.' The effect is to drive a stronger wedge between 'us' as the citizens' and 'them', the outsider (Musarò, 2019: 630). In effect, the border extends beyond physical territory: it is *narrated* through these campaigns (Chouliaraki and Musarò, 2017).

Accordingly, and paradoxically, governments - and the EU - justify harsh measures using the language of 'humanitarianism' (Moreno-Lax and Pedersen 2020; Silverstein, 2020), in order to mask the underlying cruelty of their policies. It is clear that words matter, and the language used in the media and by political leaders has an impact on how those seeking refuge are perceived. The framing of refugee movement as a 'security' concern is central to this, and harnesses terminology which presents those seeking refuge as a threat, and even as criminal, deviant, or potential terrorists. Much of this framing is intensely racialised (Hogan and Haltinner, 2015; Parmar, 2020).

The use of corrosive narratives by many politicians across the political spectrum, in Australia and in Europe, often appears intentional, in order to satisfy electoral fears about global migration. As noted above, this is typically achieved by amplifying domestic security concerns over the rights of those seeking refuge. But such narratives are also fuelled by myths about refugee movement, and reveal a lack of understanding and knowledge about the rights of refugees, and the circumstances they endure in order to flee persecution. These narratives form part of a rhetoric that hardens borders so that they function as sites where access is denied rather than granted, in particular for those deemed as 'risk' or 'threat' on the racalised terms described above (Moreno-Lax, Ghezelbash, and Klein, 2019; Triandafyllidou and Dimitriadi, 2013; Murray, 2019).

The repetition of damaging narratives and messages by politicians lends legitimacy to harsh border control measures, especially when it is framed as necessary to address 'threat' or 'risk' from those seeking protection. This is evident not only in the rhetoric of political parties. It is

evident also through the mediatisation of the language of securitisation language and statements that portray people seeking protection as potential or actual security threats (McCulloch, 2004). Such statements, especially prominent after the 9/11 terror attacks in the US, included inferences that those seeking asylum were terrorists, but without necessarily explicitly naming them in this way. As McCulloch (2004) observes, the use of language by political leaders in 2001 referred instead to those arriving on Australian shores without prior 'authorisation' as 'illegals' or 'those kind of people' - 'even though they committed no crime in travelling to Australia and seeking asylum.'

These narratives are both agenda-setting and agenda-responsive (Murray, 2023), as illustrated by the claim that the security of domestic society demands such responses. Political leaders have drawn on inferential links being established between those seeking asylum and gang related crime, terrorism and violence, with the events of 9/11 in the Australian context providing a:

> basis for a rhetorical and popularly imagined connection between the military repulsion of asylum seekers and the (then) soon to be announced 'war on terrorism'. Howard and his colleagues took advantage of the timing to present the asylum seekers as a potential terrorist threat. That there was no evidence or logic to back this representation did not detract from its political marketability (McCulloch, 2004).

3. MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF REFUGEES

Official narratives of exclusion influence how the media frames refugees (Murray, 2023). Hyndman and Mountz (2008, 258) refer to this as 'the discursive space between nationalist 'us' and foreign 'them', deploying images that 'racialize and criminalize migrants in relation to the nation-state and saturate the media'. Langdon (2018), in citing examples in Europe, canvases the language used by the media which fuel negative images of refugees. Examples of headlines and media descriptions include: 'Calais was a 'war zone' or 'gauntlet'; 'swarms' of people were trying to 'storm' the UK'…, or risk their children's lives in precarious border crossings, or to unknown traffickers.'

As noted above, in the Australian case, governments have deployed a range of campaigns to deter people from crossing into Australian waters to seek asylum. In one of these campaigns, the image of the boat dominates: those seeking refuge simply do not appear, so this campaign is directed both at a domestic audience and at as refugee populations. As Gozdecka (2020: 10) remarks, in relation to Australia's NO WAY Campaign, this campaign 'carefully

balances the elements of visibility and invisibility' through the use of a poster that 'removes the refugee from the frame' focusing instead on the image of the boat. For Wenwen He (2020) the 'mainstream representation of the refugees and asylum seekers falls somewhere between humanitarian victimisation and security criminalisation', with an evident 'dehumanisation in media representations' that 'makes asylum seekers even more vulnerable since as a group they are reduced to numbers and statistics and marginalised through abstraction as an undesired population'.

The media holds a responsibility to report accurately and avoid simply repeating dangerous tropes and aggressive stances. Aidan White, the Director of the Ethical Journalism Network, has noted that the 'media have been manipulated by political leaders, too often accepting their outrageous statements' (UNESCO, n.d).

The *Ethical Journalism Network* in Europe has produced a set of guidelines for journalists for reporting on refugees and migration. Its *Checklist for reporting on refugees* (Ethical Journalism Network, 2019a) sets out a number of questions for journalists, including:

- Have I presented the facts necessary for a comprehensive and balanced presentation of my topic?
- Have I checked to see if my coverage/my choice of words/my choice of photos reinforces prejudices?
- Have I checked whether I can leave out information that might fuel prejudice without altering the meaning and truthfulness of the story or interfering with the reader's understanding?
- Am I aware of the intentions of my whistleblower/research sources?
- Am I sure that I have no extra-journalistic reasons to pick up this topic?

It notes that '[t]he tendency towards "negative" reporting on migrants is linked to the fact that reporting does not include the voices of migrants (Ethical Journalism Network, 2019).

This Ethical Journalism Network has produced a set of tools that we recommend could be adopted and adapted internationally for media reporting. The online e-Media Toolkit that it has created with the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, European Broadcasting Union and European Federation of Journalists 'provides first-hand assistance to media professionals with learning resources, training courses, and opportunities to share and interact in three sections:

1. Learning: allows users to take courses in which journalists or editors of leading media outlets share their real-life newsroom dilemmas of reporting on migration.

2. Training: provides material for media trainers to design their own courses.

3. Sharing: ethical journalism principles. allows users to interact with other users through forum discussions on fundamental rights'

This toolkit comprehends 'treating people fairly and with dignity, balancing accuracy, impartiality and humanity as well as the importance of context in providing balanced, impartial coverage' (Ethical Journalism Network, 2019).

This is an important initiative. It is noted that it provides courses by the media for the media. It is recommended that future courses, guidelines and codes of conduct for journalists accord a priority to refugee voices and refugee journalists.

The National Council of the Journalists, Italy and the Italian National Press Federation (2008) adopted the *Charter of Rome. Code of Conduct Regarding Asylum Seekers, Refugees, Victims of Trafficking and Migrants* and this could constitute a very useful reference point, or even potential template, for media reporting. The Charter invites journalists to, *inter alia*:

1. Adopt an appropriate terminology

2. Avoid spreading inaccurate, simplified or distorted information

3. Safeguard those asylum seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking and migrants who choose to speak with the media by adopting solutions as regards their identity and image to ensure that they are not identifiable should they wish to remain anonymous.

4. Whenever possible, consult experts and organisations with a specific expertise on the subject.

The Charter of Rome group provides excellent resources and reports for the media on its website https://www.cartadiroma.org/. The Charter of Rome Group has also produced a set of questions for ethical reporting by journalists on refugees, including:

- Get to know anti-discrimination legislation.
- Use a dialogue-oriented approach.
- Use a broader network of expert sources.
- Provide background information.
- Put facts in context.
- Investigate documents in the public domain (archives, libraries, local offices).
- Interview people with knowledge.
- Portray people as human beings instead of representatives of religious or ethnic groups.
- Avoid negative labels.

- Separate facts from opinion but treat opinion as relevant (Rome Charter, 2008, 23).

Some journalists come from a refugee background and seek to promote best practice in the media representation of refugee and asylum issues. An excellent example of this is the Exiled Journalists Network (www.ejn.org.uk), in the UK. They endorse the view that the best people to talk about refugee issues are asylum seekers and refugees themselves. Accordingly, we recommend that a specific code of ethics on reporting on refugees be established. This could be incorporated into existing guides for the media, or serve as a separate resource. In this vein, a guide for journalists, entitled *Fair Play Refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland*, was produced by Oxfam (2007), with Amnesty International Scotland, Scottish Refugee Council and the National Union of Journalists. In the Australian context, a code of conduct on reporting on refugee policy could complement the Journalist Code of Ethics, Australia, of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (2022) which commits its members to 'Honesty Fairness, Independence, Respect for the rights of others', as well as the National Union of Journalists (2022) *Code of Conduct*.

3.1 Threat, fear and criminalisation

A prominent claim made for some decades is that national identity, however construed, is under threat from migration and refugee movement, with a perceived threat to societal security (Waever et al. 1993, 23). Related to this is the claim that certain people do not belong and so must be excluded because of the way that they arrived in their pursuit of asylum. They are no longer regarded as people seeking asylum or deserving of protection. They are discursively constituted as a threat, deflecting from the legal obligations of signatory states to provide support and protection.

The dominant narratives and representations of refugees that result in a diminished understanding of their lives and needs, with a particular focus on those narratives are dangerous and damaging. Those narratives that frame those seeking refuge as people to be pitied are also damaging. We are thus centrally concerned about reporting and debates that foster negative perceptions of those seeking refuge, with a range of examples from Australia and Europe. However we are also mindful of the risks of framing those seeking refuge as the 'victim', lacking agency.

Many official government and EU narratives focus on threat perception, relating to a form of national security that is in need of protection through border protection and externalisation policies. Politicians and often the media

are more likely to frame refugees as a security risk, as a societal risk and a terrorist threat (Barker, 2017, Weber and McCulloch, 2019). Little is said of risk to the asylum seeker. Little or no attention is accorded to the voice and experience of the asylum seeker. The underlying message is that the state and society are rendered more secure by denying access to people seeking asylum (Campesi, 2020). Such narratives lend weight to the framing of those seeking refuge as 'illegals' and by implication as 'criminals'. For example, 'when the word illegality appears', it erases all other identities and experiences and produces an image of a migrant, as a 'fraudulent criminal who can be targeted with the greatest severity of the law' (Gozdecka, 2020: 200).

This is intensified when such terms appear in law, with an apparent dynamic at work in which legal terms and harmful refugee narratives both produce and reinforce each other. Although there are many cases of politicians using narratives suggesting that asylum-seekers do not merit consideration for protection (Mathew, 2002), when this translates into legal terms, they acquire greater power and the negative impact of their use is enhanced. Using legal categories, such as 'unlawful' and 'illegal', produce identities in which the authority of law is seen as producing a 'truth' about the other as deviant, 'irregular', or criminal.

Refugees who arrive by boat are often then, constructed not as victim or as courageous, but as illegal, deviant and indeed criminal, and so undeserving of rights (Pickering, 2001). Regarded as manipulators who seek to take advantage of Australia's 'generosity' by 'jumping' the refugee queue, they are contrasted with those who wait in the refugee queue, who are perceived as morally superior and therefore as deserving of protection. In practical terms, human rights protections can be deferred or withheld from those who are classified or narrated as deviant or criminal**.** Through the discursive construction of refugees as deviant or criminal, the issue shifts from being a concern about those in need of protection to those that society needs protection from**,** as a problem posed by refugees as deviant.

3.2 Hate speech and social media

It is clear that it these negative portrayals are underpinned by xenophobic sentiments and the intensification of ultra-conservative, nationalist objectives based on the priviledging of 'securitisation' over humanitarianism. This has generated widespread examples of hate speech directed against refugees (Ozduzen et al. 2021). Social media and online spaces have also amplified the potential for the circulation of harmful portrayals of those seeking refuge (Ekman, 2019). The capacity for comments to be posted online, including anonymously, has led to the circulation of increasingly visceral, emotive debates about migration and refugee movement. Hostile, aggressive attacks in online forums are an indicator of how '[t]he digital space serves as a ventriloquist for the obscene that cannot be said in person' (Ozduzen et al. 2021: 3350). Many of these debates are extremely racialised and target groups that fall into the frame of 'the other'. In such a climate, refugees become a convenient focal point for nationalist hostilities. These trends raise issues that are beyond the scope of this policy report, as they require a robust examination of the role of social media platforms and the companies that host them. The misuse and abuse of online spaces in this way will however require careful examination and accountability mechanisms for those engaging in these fora. For political leaders, contesting such narratives in these settings will require robust engagement and commitment, in order for change to be possible.

4. THE DENIAL OF VOICE, REPRESENTATION AND AGENCY

The voices of refugees are ignored in almost all narratives, in media and in public and political debate. In a 2017 report on media representation of refugees in Europe, it was noted that '[l]ess than a quarter of all news articles on migration or refugee issues mention a refugee or migrant, and far fewer directly quote them' (Pierigh, 2017, 4). Similarly, as Behrouz Boochani (2020) has reflected in relation to the project 'Writing Through Fences', initiated by Janet Galbraith:

> refugees tell us they are not voiceless. They want to project their own voices. They are not passive. They want to make change.

Yet there is another dimension to this, which is that those who seek refuge resist being reduced to the category of the 'refugee', a figure which is alternately abstract, or perceived as either the suffering victim, or as threat. As Mammad Aidani (2010) shows, in his use of a statement by an Iranian man seeking refugee in Ausralia:

> I consider myself a stranger and foreigner, yet the meaning that I attach to the noun 'refugee' is very different to what they do [government institutions]. So please, if it is possible don't use the word 'refugee' when you ask me your questions. I had to tell you this because I do not identify with this word at all. I know people here find it enigmatic and interesting, but I don't feel that I'm a 'refugee' the way these bureaucrats, politicians and many people use it. (Reza)

As Aidani (2010: 122) goes on to reflect:

> Studies on refugees often neglect to examine and discuss how the marker 'refugee' is experienced in the realm of everyday life … [yet the] 'refugee' is not only an abstract legal entity but rather is also a marker that contains social and cultural values that many refugees, from diverse cultural contexts, find as being incongruent with their experiences.

The damaging narratives created by those who have no experience of what it like to flee from persecution, and those who oppose the rights of refugees (Leroy, 2022) are challenged by many of those seeking refuge who have increasingly used social media, writing, and artistic mediums to communicate their own experiences. This has been undertaken as an act both of resistance, against those claiming to 'represent' them, and an affirmation of their own personhood. Examples in the Australian setting include Behrouz Boochani and Arash Sarvestani's 2017 film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* and the poetry of Hani Abdile as well as through artistic interventions such as *I will Rise, Nauru Narratives,* and *Writing Through Fences* (see for example, Abdile et al, 2022).

There is a growing recognition – in scholarly analysis and among advocates - of the problems associated with the representation, appropriation, and consumption of refugee voices (Aidani 2010; Szorenyi, 2009). Indeed, the term 'refugee' in itself risk risks reducing a person's identity to their experiences of seeking refuge , and often little more (Aidani, 2010; Malkki, 1995, 1996). As Aidani (2010: 126) observes:

> There is a tendency to essentialise the category refugee, of people pieced together because they are clustered under specific bureaucratic and legal categories. These bureaucratic and legal categories homogenise the cultural characteristics of refugee populations, that are invariably diverse, and who are created by different social, political and historical processes.

Resistance to harmful narratives must be accompanied by attention to, and respect for, the unique personhood of people seeking refuge.

4.1 Gender and the invisibility of women

There are many ways that refugee voices are silenced. It is important to address the question of 'who speaks for whom', and to be cognisant of those whose voices tend not to be heard. We note that there is also a gendered issue here, of women whose voices are often unheard. The voices of men are typically dominant in this space (Vasefi. 2019). Women and some other groups of people are disproportionately absent from the news on refugees and migrants. Of the 21% of articles that mentioned a refugee or migrant in a report in 2017, only about one-quarter (27%) of those reports, was that person a woman (Pierigh, 2017, 4).

For scholar and poet Saba Vasefi (2019) the voices of women are relatively absent not only in media reporting, but within refugee advocacy communities, which tend to be dominated by the voice of male refugees. Yet women may endure violences that are also more complex, including sexual assault and abuse within immigration detention settings, in Australia and in Europe (see for example, Canning, 2016; Esposito et al 2020; Gerlach, 2022). As Vasefi notes in her reporting of the case of a woman held in long term detention in Australia who reported rape within detention:"I have been left like a worthless object in a corner of a prison among paedophile men who have a history of abusing women and children. Every day, I sink deeper into the swamp of fear and despair. But no one hears me," Ellie said' (Vasefi, 2019).

The undermining of women who have suffered sexual violence has also emanated from the government minister responsible for refugees in Australia. Peter Dutton, when he was Home Affairs Minister, made these startling comments:

> Some people are trying it on," he said. "Let's be serious about this. There are people who have claimed that they've been raped and came to Australia to seek an abortion because they couldn't get an abortion on Nauru (Davidson, 2019).

To date, there has been no detailed research or government investigation into the experiences of women in detention centres in the Australian context, and in particular, in relation to sexual assault. The absence of women's voices from 'refugee narratives' reflects, suggests Vasefi (2019), 'unequal power relations' even within refugee communities, as well as within refugee advocacy organisations. In many

cases, she remarks, commentary on the stories of women in immigration detention centres in Australia was also often dominated by 'white lawyers', with the direct experiences and accounts of women seeking refuge, being sidelined. As a result, the 'experiences of deprivation' amongst these women tend to be 'largely unknown and invisible'. Where they are represented, they appear as figures who are 'terrified, poor, displaced' and in need of rescue (Vasefi, 2016). These stereotypes do not accord with their reality, in which they seek to assert their agency and are becoming 'politically astute' she remarks. In a recent issue of *Southerly,* the editors dedicate the work to the often unheard voices of women in detention, through the important work of poet Janet Galbraith in *Writing Through Fences,* a collaboration with refugee women in offshore processing centres. (Abdile et al, 2022).

5. THE RACE TO THE BOTTOM: COMPETITIVE AND PARALLEL CRUELTY OF GOVERNMENTS AND THE EU

The harshness of contemporary border protection is also enabled by the way that states frame their policies in manipulative ways. This comprises a narrative of competitive cruelty (see e.g. Bhatia, 2020) that has led to Australia effectively opting out of governance for refugee protection for several decades and it has set the – very low - benchmark for other signatory states to follow, including in Europe, the UK and the US. The most recent example of this has been the decision by the British government to send refugees to Rwanda for processing. This new arrangement is modelled on Australia's offshore processing policy. In Denmark, the government has also attempted to change the 'asylum system and to establish 'one or more reception centers outside the EU and thereby removing the migrants' incentive to cross the Mediterranean' (Wallis 2020). These practices constitute a form of competitive cruelty. Aside from practices between states, most political parties within Australia – the Greens are an exception – have also competed as to which can be most harsh. Boochani (2021) referred to this as 'a competition on cruelty' between these parties, where, he said, 'refugees are used as political scapegoats to garner public support prior to an election". There is not only competitive cruelty - as the case of the UK's Memorandum of Understanding with Rwanda in May 2022 illustrates – but parallels of cruelty in the actual experiences undergone by refugees, with mutual influence and norm-adaptation evident in similar approaches to offshore detention and processing of asylum claims (Murray et al,

2022), and through ongoing bilateral UK-Australia dialogue on these issues.

5.1 Secrecy and lack of transparency

In Australia, as in many parts of Europe, there has been very little access to information on asylum policies and border control and externalisation practices. Immigration detention sites in particular in the Australian case have 'been designed to achieve a high degree of secrecy' (Nethery, 2019). Secrecy 'creates environments that are harmful' and Nethery (2019) points to the substantial international evidence that 'shows that secretive sites of incarceration are places in which human rights abuses will – inevitably – occur'. She illustrates that secrecy is established in five ways: securitisation and militarisation of offshore processing; the lack of accountability for service providers; restrictions placed on the media; access blocked to independent observers and the fact that a democratic deficit on Nauru benefits secrecy (Nethery 2019). Under *Operation Sovereign Borders,* those speaking out about the conditions in immigration detention in Australia, and in offshore processing locations, are – and have been - liable to criminal prosecution. Likewise, in Europe and North Africa, as Sara Creta has found (see discussion below) the media are prevented from entering sites where refugees endure harm.

Laws also proposed under the previous Australian government to 'seize the phones of detainees, on the pretext that they might access pornographic websites', threatened to 'remove vital sources of information—information that is critical in the absence of effective scrutiny and transparency' (Ferdinand et al, 2020).

Australia's asylum policies, and particularly those supporting immigration detention, have been designed with a high degree of secrecy. This hollows out the claims made by supposedly democratic states. Secrecy creates environments that are harmful and facilitates the potential for violence: substantial international evidence shows that secretive sites of incarceration are places in which human rights abuses will – inevitably – occur (Nethery, 2019; Nethery and Holman, 2016).

Secrecy is also closely linked to a lack of accountability and responsibility in refugee externalisation policies. The report concurs with the Refugee Law Initiative (2022) that:

> States and other entities engaged in externalisation practices are legally accountable for their actions, including any breach of international law standards, before international, regional and domestic judicial

and other enforcement mechanisms. Neither the extraterritorial nature of any externalisation measures nor any attempts to delegate such measures allow States to escape their obligations under international law and legal accountability for any breaches of those standards.

Silencing and withholding of information on extraterritorial detention and the placing of obligations on third states are tools that have been utilised in the case of Australia, in particular.

In many instances, those refugees who are in a particularly desperate situation will refrain from speaking due to fear of harsh repercussions. This anxiety about speaking out, of expressing themselves, is very real for these individuals, due to fears about potential consequences for their families. Accordingly, there is an obligation upon advocates and others supporting them, to do so when they can, on their behalf. This is especially important for those who are familiar with how to navigate the challenging system of government regulations and support. Although those working closely with refugees will not have the lived insights into refugee life, they do have tangible support and advocacy to offer, and can often assist in advancing the cause of refugees, where they might express fear, or be unable to do so.

6. PUBLIC SEMINARS ON NARRATIVES CONVENED BY THE COMPARATIVE NETWORK ON REFUGEE EXTERNALISATION POLICIES

In two panels, the first convened in 2021, and the second in 2022, CONREP brought together those with lived experience of seeking refuge; media experts and journalists; members of civil society; and researchers to examine the impact of negative refugee narratives, and ways of resisting, and contesting, these narratives.

6.1 Who is the audience, and who is telling the story?

At the first event, held in May 2021, the panel included: Behrouz Boochani, Kurdish Iranian scholar, filmmaker and writer, Associate Professor, University of New South Wales, and Honorary Fellow, University of Melbourne[2]; Arash Sarvestani, Iranian filmmaker and co-director of *Chauka, Please Tell us the Time* (with Boochani); Jordy Silverstein, Senior Research Fellow, Peter McMullin Statelessness Centre

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2   Boochani also holds honorary positions at the Birkbeck Law School, University of London and had held a senior adjunct research position at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand.

and Anna Szorenyi, Lecturer, Gender Studies, University of Adelaide. It was convened online. The recording of the event and the report on it are available at https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/school-of-social-and-political-sciences/our-research/comparative-network-on-refugee-externalisation-policies/news-and-events/who-is-telling-the-story. The aim of this event was to encourage participants to reflect on these questions:

- How might negative discourses on refugee movement and refugees best be disrupted?

- What are the ethical and practical challenges of doing so?

- Who is really telling the story?

- What are the risks of curating a 'refugee narrative'?

- Who is more likely to be heard and seen in these debates?

- How can narrative remain a point of and for resistance, and an intervention in negative perceptions of refugees?

It was evident from the panel discussion that addressing negative representations of those seeking refuge requires commitment, and care in reflecting on the impact of such representations, as well as on the dangers of sympathetic narratives that are reductionist, and obscure the complex identities of those seeking refuge. Four key themes emerged:

1. There is a need to use a different genre or language to contest these harmful narratives.

2. It is important to acknowledge the unrepresentability of some stories

3. Essentialising narratives, which homogenise the experiences of those seeking refuge, must be avoided.

4. There is a clear responsibility held by media, especially independent media, in covering these stories.

The panellists considered the way that 'Australia likes to think of itself and narrate itself as humanitarian and caring' while enacting policies that 'inadvertently produces cruelty and harm' (Silverstein). 'On the other hand, telling individual stories doesn't necessarily lead us to more just outcomes, to greater justice and freedom at the border, and within people's lives', noted Silverstein. Even those stories that present a positive representation of the lives of people seeking refuge, risk becoming stories that, as Szorenyi reflected, 'cover over myriad histories, politics, and identities, turning them all into a single homogenous identity story. They're packaged, translated, and mediated stories.' For Boochani, the making of the film *Chauka Please Tell us The Time,* was an attempt to resist conventional

narratives, one that also avoided the spectacle of violence which reduces those in detention to merely being the victim. For his co-director, Sarvestani, the film avoided the presentation of violent scenes:

> Our main focus was to show the real life of refugees there. We didn't want to show the violence, we wanted to have it invisible in the film, which is more powerful.

In resisting reliance on the power of suffering as spectacle, the film, for both Boochani and Sarvestani, offered possibilities for metaphor and for more careful engagement with the stories and lives of those seeking refuge. As Boochani observed, there is a need to avoid presenting refugees as victims, since when this happens:

> We are denying their identity as a human being. We show them, we picture them [as] less. Actually, we are helping the system which is designed to dehumanise the refugees, and when we victimise the refugees [this aids] the process of dehumanisation… But actually, the refugees are not passive in that context. Everywhere, even inside the worst detention, the worst prison camps in Australia, even among the detention centres in Australia, refugees are resisting and they are fighting…

All panellists called for 'new ways of telling stories' (Silverstein) through alternative modes of expression (Boochani and Sarvestani). However, as Szorenyi observed 'we have to be careful not to simply swap poles in the dichotomy, demanding that asylum seekers and refugees become artists before we respond to them, because not everyone can be articulate' in this way, since 'structures of violence do render people voiceless, even speechless, not all experience can be easily spoken'. This view reflects Silverstein's (2020) analysis that a 'vision of helplessness is vitally linked to the constitution of speechlessness among refugees: helpless victims need protection, need someone to speak for them'. Policymakers take on this role, and tend to speak *for* refugees, on the basis that they know best what is good for those seeking refuge, rather than leave open a space for their own voices to be spoken and heard (Silverstein, 2020). This is also an attempt at silencing of the voices of refugees, which is a manifestation of power relations. As Szorenyi (2021) has observed, these power relations are often [though not always] inevitable, in which:

> the stories at stake are told from a position of being stateless, homeless or without citizenship, without easy access to a legitimate global platform through which to share stories of their own. So many questions arise in relation to 'refugee stories', including: whose story is this? Who decided that it should be told? Who decided on its shape and form? In what way should this story be seen as 'representative', and in what ways is it unique?

Is this how the person represented here would like to be represented?

6.2 Perceptions and Narratives of Refugees

At the second event, convened online in May 2022, the panellists included: Alagie Jinkang, Research Fellow at the Department of Psychology at the University of Bologna; Sara Creta, a photojournalist and documentary filmmaker, and Mostafa Azimitabar, a Kurdish artist with a refugee background who fled prosecution in Iran, and Ben Doherty, international affairs correspondent for the *Guardian* newspaper. It was convened online. Details and recording are available at: https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/ school-of-social-and-political-sciences/our-research/ comparative-network-on-refugee-externalisation-policies/ news-and-events/public-forum-perceptions-and-narratives-of-refugees-the-media-and-beyond.

Amongst key concerns conveyed were the way that governments and the mainstream media frame border protection and asylum seeking through a securitised lens. From this perspective, asylum seeking is   predominantly 'framed as this matter of border protection that Australia needs to be protected from threats to national security' (Doherty). For Jinkang, more research is needed, both within academic circles, and in the policy context, to 'create toolkits and innovative missions to react or contract some of these threats or problems'. Referring to a number of new search engines and policy platforms, Jinkang spoke about how these might prove useful in the categorisation and organisation of materials depicting how those seeking refuge are framed, and the alternative narratives that can be used, including through the establishment of a library of 'best practice' to use in information campaigns. This policy report recommends the creation of a library of best practice.

All panellists reflected that the way that refugee issues are reported, and who *does* the reporting, raises serious concerns about representation. For Sara Creta, it is critical that those seeking refuge are those conveying the message. Importantly, she also drew attention to the censorship and control exercised over independent reporting, by governments around the world, resulting in the voices of those seeking refuge being actively silenced:

> when I was filming with the Libyan coast guard where I was entering these spaces that are spaces where journalists are normally not allowed, where cameras cannot film, cannot enter because again when we talk about these policies of externalisation, they are ultimately policies that are creating black holes

where journalists in the society, activists and migrants themselves are silenced. So the first challenge that we face as journalists is literally to enter in these spaces of control where a political or politics of control is embedded ,because the ultimate goal of these policies is exactly this: that no journalists should be allowed to speak to, or to be allowed to see, how these policies in practice are being designed. And there is exactly this hegemonic apparatus of power that not only controls bodies of refugees in detention, or in spaces where journalists are not allowed; boats or other vessels where migrants are detained or contained.

Creta called for greater attention to the limitations of journalism in these spaces, in creating knowledge. She remarked that many stories are now coming from refugees themselves, through social media apps and new digital applications such as WhatsApp, which are offering a mode of resistance:

> some of the most powerful testimonies of the atrocity that were committed inside these places were collected by refugees themselves that had the courage to document the violation: the fact that they were obliged to fight with the militia on the front line, also the fact that weapons were hidden inside these detention places.

These forms of media are creating a space for the disruption of traditional power relations in public discourse. For Mostafa Azimitabar, recounting the personal harms he experienced as an effect of externalisation of refugee policy, delivered a powerful reminder that harmful narratives, and the policies enable by them, are not abstract: they are experienced in profound and long lasting ways by those subjected to them. At the same time, he resisted being framed as little more than a victim. He asserted that:

> I don't want anyone to use my image as a victim. I am a fighter, and I am allowed, and I am able to fight for myself and other refugees.

7. COMBATTING THESE NARRATIVES: A DISCUSSION

It is clear that combatting negative narratives, that harm those seeking refugee, will best be achieved through a variety of approaches. Artistic, creative activities and protest can 'serve as an alternative, transformative communication tool in the contemporary urban environment for refugees and asylum seekers to explain the complexity of their lives' (He, 2020). As Wewen He (2020) reflects 'multimedia public artworks create a novel experience for the audience to be more engaged with the new media technology and provide a new platform for refugees and asylum seekers to speak for themselves instead of being represented by others.'

Art has the capacity to disrupt the representation of refugees as 'silent actors, victims or criminals. The eyes of the speakers face the audience directly in the attempt to reduce the divisive space between the participants and the public by creating a face-to-face conversation' (He, 2020). If any testimony, any representation, is to work, then it has to be a two-way process. It has to put into question not only the refugee, but the audience. It has to open the question of who each of them is and might become. We need to problematise the idea that the audience to refugee stories is made up of privileged, impervious and insulated people, who have to be opened up and made to care. There are usually real and very unequal power relations involved, and that has to be taken into account (Szorenyi, 2021).

For Musarò, (2019) media construct a binarization of those deemed 'desirable' or 'undesirable', through the narration of the mediatized border. Thus, the border is thus actualised through a combination of digitised technology and affect, in portrayals that draw paradoxically on both fear and empathy. Returning to Wewen He, the bordering is given effect through images and narratives in the media, 'that generate an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, in turn contributing to further securitisation, enforcement and externalisation of the European border'. This is an 'imaginary border' that serves to sustain harmful policies of externalisation and to legitimise demonisation of those seeking refuge (He, 2020).

We draw attention to the way that narratives that are constructed about refugee movement form part of the 'bordering process' in that they function symbolically to produce the border. As Musarò (2019: 633) has commented:

> To capture the symbolic and affective role of digital media in managing human mobility, we need to investigate the border not as a place, rather as a process, a socially constructed and shifting structure

of practices and discourses that produce norms of difference and exclusion across bodies and voices of would-be migrants, with a view to sustaining projects of geo-political sovereignty.

Artistic and creative fora can help to disrupt negative narratives. As Szorenyi (2021) has remarked:

> These are stories that don't deny suffering – but they show it in ways that break the distancing colonial frame. …They reconfigure the narrative, stopping at violence, instead of rescue, and show us perpetrators, instead of rescuers, and often those perpetrators look quite a bit like ourselves. …They resist closure: they are often immediate, broken texts, but are also poetic, poignant, political.

More research is required about what kind of messages and communications about refugees are effective in generating supportive responses from policy makers, journalists and adults who vote for those political parties with hostile policies towards refugees. Many recommendations have been made, over some years, that identify how to avoid harmful narratives, drawing on negative impacts of past media amplification of narratives that have been used by politicians to justify and generate support for hostile policies towards refugees. Yet it is important to assess how messages and communications will be effective in generating supportive responses from politicians, the media and the public. Further research is required on the projection of the message to politicians, the media and the public and the way they respond to the message.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our recommendations are set out at the beginning of this policy report. We call upon governments, political parties, government officials and the media to avoid negative language and to challenge language and actions, including by rejecting terminology such as: 'illegal'; queue-jumpers'; economic migrants. It is imperative that governments and politicians be reminded that it is not illegal to seek asylum. There is no crime being committed in seeking refugee protection, regardless of how a person arrives in the territory of a signatory state (article 33, Refugee Convention). There are two key sets of recommendations provided in this report. One relates to the main theme of this policy report, namely narratives. The second set of recommendations deals with refugee policy, in order to ensure a fair and just context for people to seek asylum, seek protection and to participate in society and to ensure that states adhere to their obligations.

It is not only corrosive narratives that must be combatted, including through alternative narratives. It is equally

important that policies change in order to ensure a just and humane approach to people seeking asylum and refugee protection. We have recommended that policies include respect for refugees as to whether they share their experience: this should include payment to refugees for sharing their story and respect for those who wish to remain silent. Policies must include protection for those refugees who cannot be contributors to society, in an economic sense, and to avoid measuring a person's worth on this basis (Peake, 2016).

Research is critical in this context:

> Academic research provides the foundations for data-driven policy decision-making and narrative-shaping. Through objective data collection and analysis, academics provide increased transparency – a necessary component of accountability in asylum governance. Data and research findings also provide legitimacy to framing and narrative-shaping, especially concerning public opinion. Increased visibility and approachable dissemination of research findings contribute to shaping public narratives Re-framing the narrative to focus on the individual may therefore facilitate increased public support for more humanitarian refugee policies. There is also a need to re-frame this narrative in terms of a "decent society" and show how refugee issues can fit within the idea of making a decent society on an individual level (Soderstrom and O'Sullivan, 2020).

At the same time, creative avenues for reflecting the voices of those seeking refuge should be supported as they offer new and effective ways of contesting harmful narratives that ultimately result in breaches of human rights. We need a new language (Abil, 2021) to challenge these conventional narratives.

However, we warn against the duplicitous production of creative media that is directed at manipulating and discouraging those seeking refuge to apply for protection, through government-funded film and other forums. Governments and the media also have a responsibility to focus on, and acknowledge that, the power of control over the border that is enabled by negative narratives, is also 'built through agreement, through contracts between states and private contractors' (Creta, 2022).

It is important to enact approaches that create or enhance the agency exercised by refugees in decision making and policy that affects them. And it is essential that respect is accorded to refugees, whether they wish to share their experience or not, and to respect those who wish to remain silent. Additionally, not all refugees will make a material or economic contribution to society. Narratives must therefore embody protections for those refugees who cannot be

visible economic contributors to society. They must refuse to measure a person's worth on these terms. Narratives are required about not only those refugees who are regarded as 'successful', but also the right to be in a society regardless of special needs for example. It is important to ensure that everyone is entitled to a humane approach (Peake, 2016).

Simplistic and reductionist rhetoric is adopted by parties across the political spectrum in Australia and many other countries. The challenge remains for refugees; academics; advocates and civil society to present a compelling counter-argument, as many political parties are currently winning the battle in the circulation of harmful narratives. But there is also an obligation to ensure that the voices of those who are – or have been - detained, and who have suffered under harsh externalisation policies, are heard on their own terms. It is also important to recognise the dangers of speaking out. In the Australian context, those who have been detained have often been subjected to punitive measures for speaking out, or engaging in forms of protest against their indefinite detention (Middleton, 2020). Accordingly, we recommend the implementation of measures that will protect those who speak out about the violence of immigration detention, including through the revocation of the 'Gag Orders' implemented in Australias *Migration Act,* as part of its policy 'Operation Sovereign Borders'. Measures must be put in place to ensure that those speaking out about violence are not punished for doing so, since this undermines fundamental rights to freedom of speech.

Many of our recommendations relate to creating or enhancing refugee agency in decision making and policy that affects them. By ensuring that refugee voices are central in conversations about them, and in policy that impacts on them, we hope that pejorative language, harmful tropes and narratives, and stereotypes that homogenise the experience of fleeing persecution might be less likely to emerge.

The purpose of this report has been to provide the context and rationale for fostering a humane and authentic approach to narratives about people seeking asylum and refugees. It outlined a series of recommendations to support a shift away from corrosive narratives, and in so doing, to challenge harsh policies that are enabled by harmful and often untruthful representations of refugees.

It is important that refuges voices are front and centre of these debates, and that politicians and society provided solidarity, advocacy, and hosting of people seeking support. Speaking and listening are essential. Support for a just life and settlement are essential. The representation and presentation of voice and image for, and *by,* refugees remain crucial.

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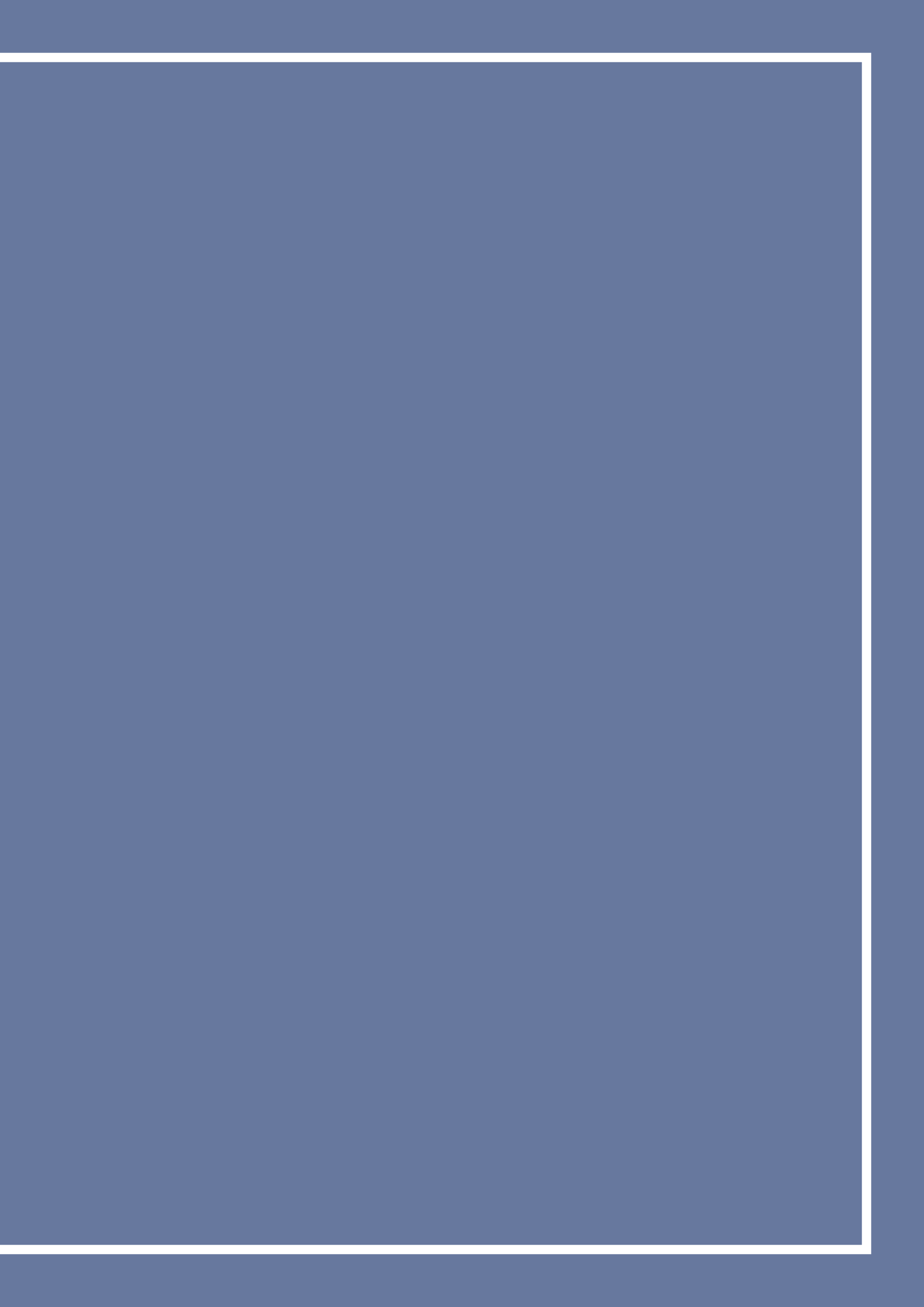
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