migrants' rights network

Migrants' Rights Network

WORDS MATTER

COMPILATION

DISINFORMATION

MiGRaNTs' RiGhTs NETWoRK

Migrants' Rights Network

We want to create a world where everyone is **free to move and no one is forced to move.**

The Migrants' Rights Network (MRN) is a UK campaigning charity that stands in solidarity with migrants in their fights for rights and justice. We co-curate campaigns using anti-oppression practices to create transformational change, extending beyond the individual impact on migrants' lives, to tackle oppression at its source.

We build relationships with grassroots, migrant-led organisations to understand the issues that are important to them and how we can work together to achieve immediate and **transformational change**.

We particularly focus on issues that are less notable or publicly palatable, and can be overlooked. We do this to ensure that all migrant groups and communities that are seldom heard have access to platforms, support and resources to advocate for themselves and achieve change.

We believe it is **not enough to reform** structures and systems which are foundationally discriminatory. We are calling for a **complete overhaul**, and for people with lived experience to lead that change.

CONTENTS

WORDS MATTER

Words Matter began in 2022 as a campaign to change the narrative around migration: from explainers, to a pledge calling on politicians and charities to actively tackle harmful language, and delivering workshops. With 30 explainers looking at phrases and dehumanising words, and over 20 workshops to trade unions, charities, companies and funders; and a toolkit to rebut the anti-migrant rhetoric during the General Election; we know this still isn't enough.

- **Divisive rhetoric** has become the norm
- Simple narrative change **isn't enough** anymore
- **Disinformation** is rampant
- The **far-right** are mobilised
- We need to **shift our approach**

In summer 2024, the devastating repercussions of disinformation crystalised in the explosion of racist riots across the UK. Riots fuelled by social media posts which incorrectly claimed the individual responsible for the murder of three children in Southport was Muslim and had come to the UK to seek asylum. This was the spark that lit a fuse built on years of racist anti-migrant narratives.

Almost a year later, divisive and harmful rhetoric continues to be weaponised for political gain.

1

TERMINOLOGY

For a long time, we used the term '**migrants and refugees**'. Through reflection, we have decided to shift our language to '**migrants, including refugees**'. This is because the term migrant is a general umbrella term, which encompasses refugees, asylum seekers, and many other migrant groups. Placing an '**and**' in between "migrants" and "refugees" incorrectly implies that refugees are not a subgroup of migrants, and also begins to reinforce divisive narratives.

'Migrants' and 'refugees' are constructed by politicians and the media as separate unrelated groups. This is deliberate. Generally, refugees are constructed as 'deserving' and 'genuine', with a 'legitimate" claim to protection. This is in contrast with those who are constructed to be 'simply migrants', who are generally constructed to be 'undeserving', 'ungenuine', and with an 'illegitimate' claim to protection. This separation is a key element of divide and rule.

We also use the language of '**migratised**' because even though the children and grandchildren of migrants sometimes consider themselves to be second or third generation migrants, many do not identify with this. And so the term 'migratised' shows us how people are constructed as migrants, and treated as 'Other', without having been on the move themselves.

2

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

The word 'illegal' to describe an undocumented migrant is dehumanising and contributes to the demonisation of migrant communities. The term also insinuates that they are undeserving of rights.

Legal status is arbitrary and constantly shifting according to ever-changing Government policies. Instead of using language that scapegoats migrants who are forced into unsafe routes or precarious situations, the focus should be directed towards the Government's failures to consistently provide routes to safety.

The language of 'undocumented', 'irregular' or 'without permission' sheds light on the struggle that migrants face as they navigate the violence of border regimes. This language thus allows for a focus on the structures that force migrants into unsafe routes. However, we are currently reflecting on these terms particularly as the Home Office have started to adopt them whilst enforcing increasingly cruel immigration policies.

Migration is a natural part of the human experience. We need to shift the narrative away from 'illegal immigration' and express solidarity to those who are targeted by borders. In doing so, we can also shift the blame onto the structures that harm the most marginalised communities. No human being is illegal.

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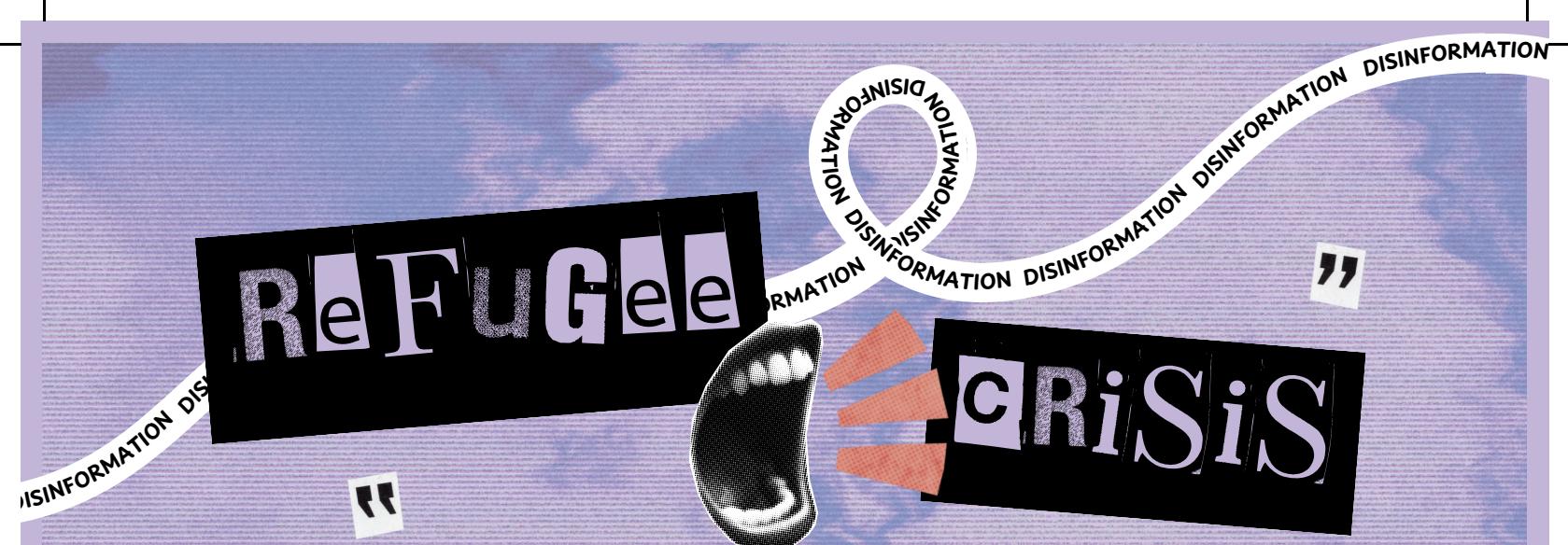
ReFuGee CRiSiS

Why do we oppose the term 'refugee crisis'?

This kind of language blames those who migrate across borders in order to flee horrific conditions, instead of questioning why they are having to make those dangerous journeys in the first place.

The Global South has suffered from the violent effects of colonialism, imperialism and foreign intervention, which creates conditions of ecological instability, economic insecurity and political collapse in the Global South. A lot of migration today occurs from the Global South to the Global North, by people fleeing dangerous conflict or climate emergencies. Migrants travelling to the Global North often face added violence, hostility and suspicion, both at and inside of Europe's borders.

We are currently experiencing is the impact of colonialism and racist policies that forces people to move. It's not a 'refugee crisis'. Instead of blaming migrants, let's blame the colonial and imperial interventions that force people to flee their homes.

JUST LIKE US

Ukrainian refugees are painted as being 'civilised', 'just like us' and as deserving of protection simply because they are White. Whilst racialised refugees are deemed to be 'uncivilised', 'threat' and not worthy of protection.

The language of 'civility' is a proxy for Whiteness, and is underscored by racist and colonial narratives.

The language of civility can be traced back to the Enlightenment era, where Europe justified its genocide of Indigenous people and enslavement of Black people by constructing them as 'primitive', 'uncivilised', 'savage' 'subhuman' and in need of enlightenment. Seeing this language being deployed to distinguish White refugees from Global Majority refugees is a harrowing reminder that anti-Blackness and racial hierarchies are deeply embedded within our social fabric.

Whilst it commits unspeakable violence, it then deems the citizens of the Global South nations it has pillaged as a 'threat'. The violence begins abroad, and then follows migratised and racialised communities to our shores- assuming they survive the route.

5

iNTeGRaTiON aND aSSiMiLaTiON

Liberation not integration.

We are actively pushing back against the language of 'integration', 'assimilation' and 'community cohesion'. This is because it is underpinned by racial and religious undertones, and feeds into 'respectability politics'. It also justifies the increased profiling and surveillance of the migratised communities that are deemed to be unassimilable.

Because of systems of oppression like racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia, migrants are often told to integrate and assimilate. But community is only threatened when different groups of marginalised people are pitted against each other by the Government and the media. For example, migrants are blamed for poverty and unemployment, when in reality, this is a result of Government policies.

Whilst the use of this language is sometimes well-intentioned, we are concerned that its use unwittingly feeds into respectability politics: the idea that migratised groups have to give up important and personal elements of their identity in order to be accepted.

Solidarity with migrant communities requires unconditional acceptance. We will not integrate into a system designed to oppress us.

hARd-WoRKiNG

So often, we hear politicians and the media talk about workers needing more 'graft'. This is a long-standing view that some do not 'work hard' and that's why they remain in poverty. This includes migrants and racialised communities. Some migrant communities now also emphasise they are 'hard-working', wanting to distinguish themselves from others. **But all this does is pit one group as more worthy against others.**

All migrants are and have to be 'hard-working'. Particularly when the systems are, by nature, rigged against them. The 'hard work' for many migrants is to stay out of destitution and extreme poverty. With no recourse to public funds policies (NRPF), migrants can only rely on their wages to keep them afloat.

Stereotypes around race and class are used heavily in immigration debates: the idea that migrants are **'lazy'**, **'scroungers'** or a drain on the State. Some migrant communities now also emphasise they are 'hard-working', wanting to distinguish themselves from others. But all this does is pit one group as more worthy against others.

We must overhaul the narratives that divide people into **'deserving' or 'undeserving'.** By calling ourselves 'hard-working', we are just repeating these narratives, not contesting them.

INVASION INFLUX SWARM THREAT

DISINFORMATION

The language of **invasion, swarm** and **influx** is strongly linked to the dangerous construction of migrants as a 'threat'. It evokes ideas of a battle or war, insidiously creating the idea of a common enemy, and conjures imagery of insects, animals and sometimes monsters.

By placing the blame on people seeking safety and minimising their trauma or suffering, it also gives the false impression that the host country would be 'overwhelmed' by the presence of migrant communities. This narrative falls into old, established forms of underline scapegoating which aims to detract from the real problems affecting the State, including economic turmoil, poor state infrastructure or even corruption.

We cannot ignore the fact that the idea of a 'swarm' or 'invasion' is often used in conjunction with **images of People of Colour or Muslims**. It conjures the 'clash of civilisations' arguments and draws on the mythology of what or who can be British, in order to justify the exclusion of those characterised as 'Other'.

The blame should not be on migrant communities. The blame should be shifted onto the factors that cause people to flee, and onto the inherently flawed asylum and immigration systems across Fortress Europe.

WhY aM i bEiNG ToLeRaTeD?
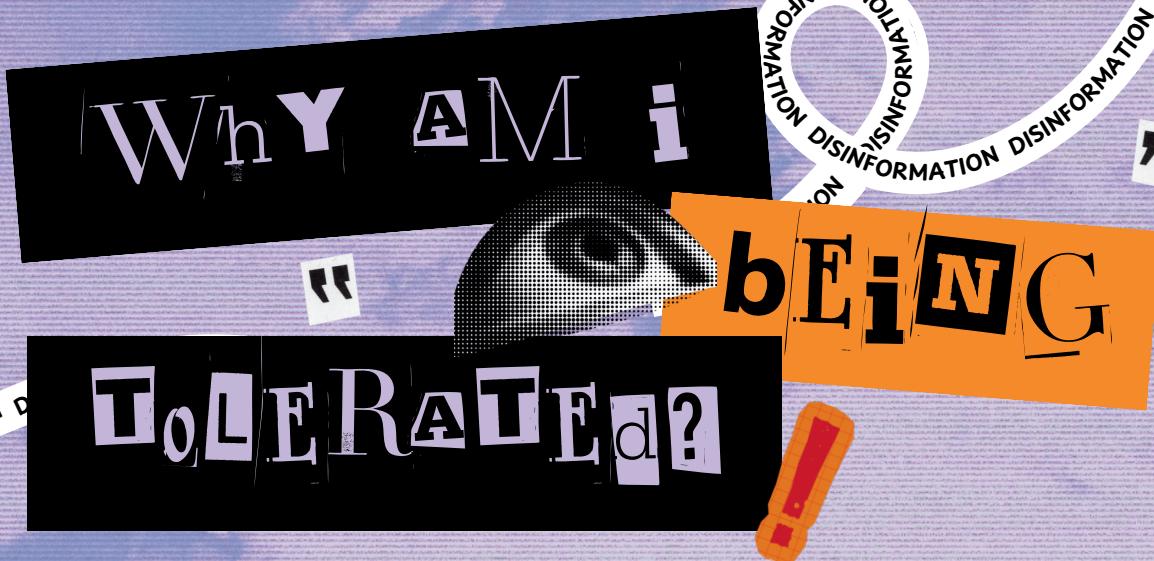
As migratised and racialised people ourselves, **we don't just want to be 'put up' with or merely 'tolerated'**: the fullness of our humanity must be respected.

Merely being 'tolerated' suggests migrants, including refugees, are not worthy of acceptance or respect. The term comes from a place of self-assumed superiority, and embeds the idea that is justifiable to reluctantly and begrudgingly 'put-up' with new communities.

This language leaves any underlying hostility towards newcomers unchallenged, and reinforces the notion that they're being **'tolerated'** because they can fulfil an economic or political purpose. Migratised and racialised groups already have to prove that they are 'worthy' through their **'contributions'**, and their ability to **'integrate'**. Always having to prove your worth is dehumanising and condescending.

The term tolerance is not acceptable: our acceptance of migrants must be unconditional.

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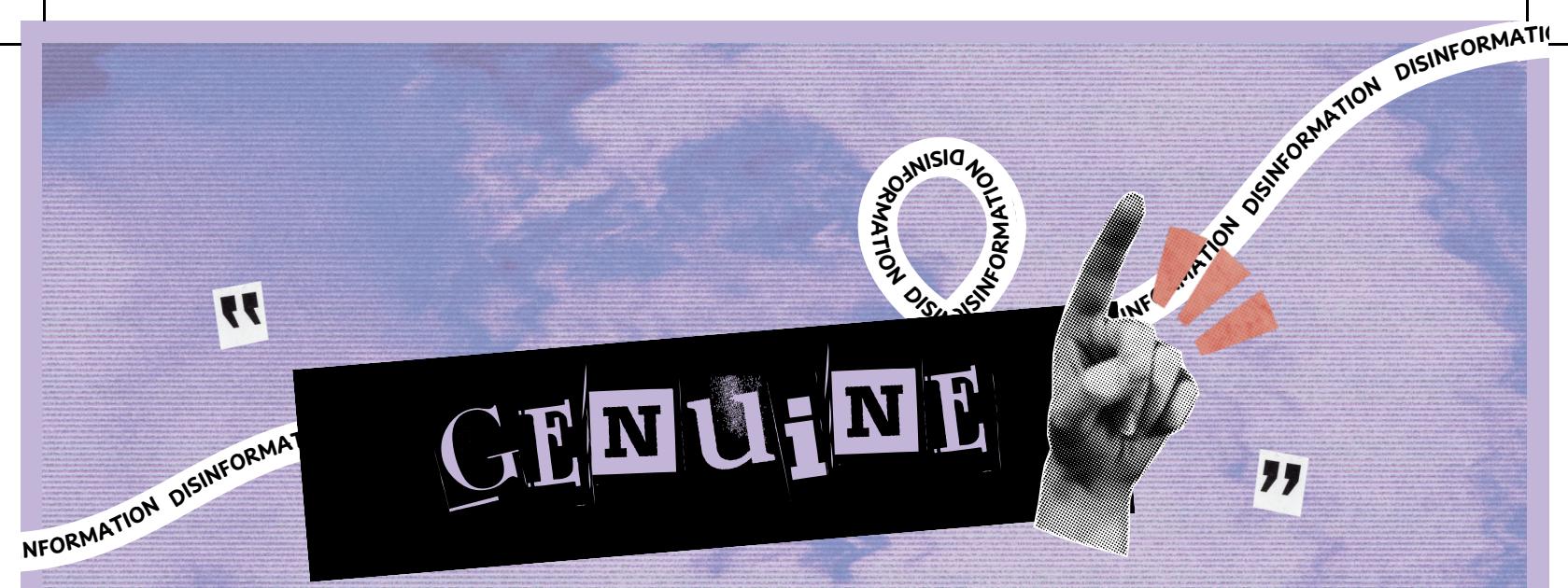
GENUINE

Through the label of **'genuine'**, the legitimacy of an asylum claim is undermined before it has even been submitted.

It is yet another damaging generalisation that prevents them from being seen as individuals with their own experiences, and instead as <u>one homogenous group</u> who are perceived as being innately dishonest.

This term has become so common because the Government has failed to create safe routes so, they incite feelings of suspicion towards those seeking refuge and protection. By discrediting people seeking asylum, they **divert attention from the failures of their policies and systems,** and lay the blame on people seeking safety instead.

It also ignores the extremely high threshold the UK Government sets for someone to prove they are deserving of protection and refugee status. This burden of proof has left many people in detention, abandoned or condemned to die because their reasons for sanctuary have been dismissed as not being "genuine".

We also have to analyse when and with whom these claims are used in conjunction with, which is often young single men of Colour.

SAFE ROUTES
SAFE COUNTRY
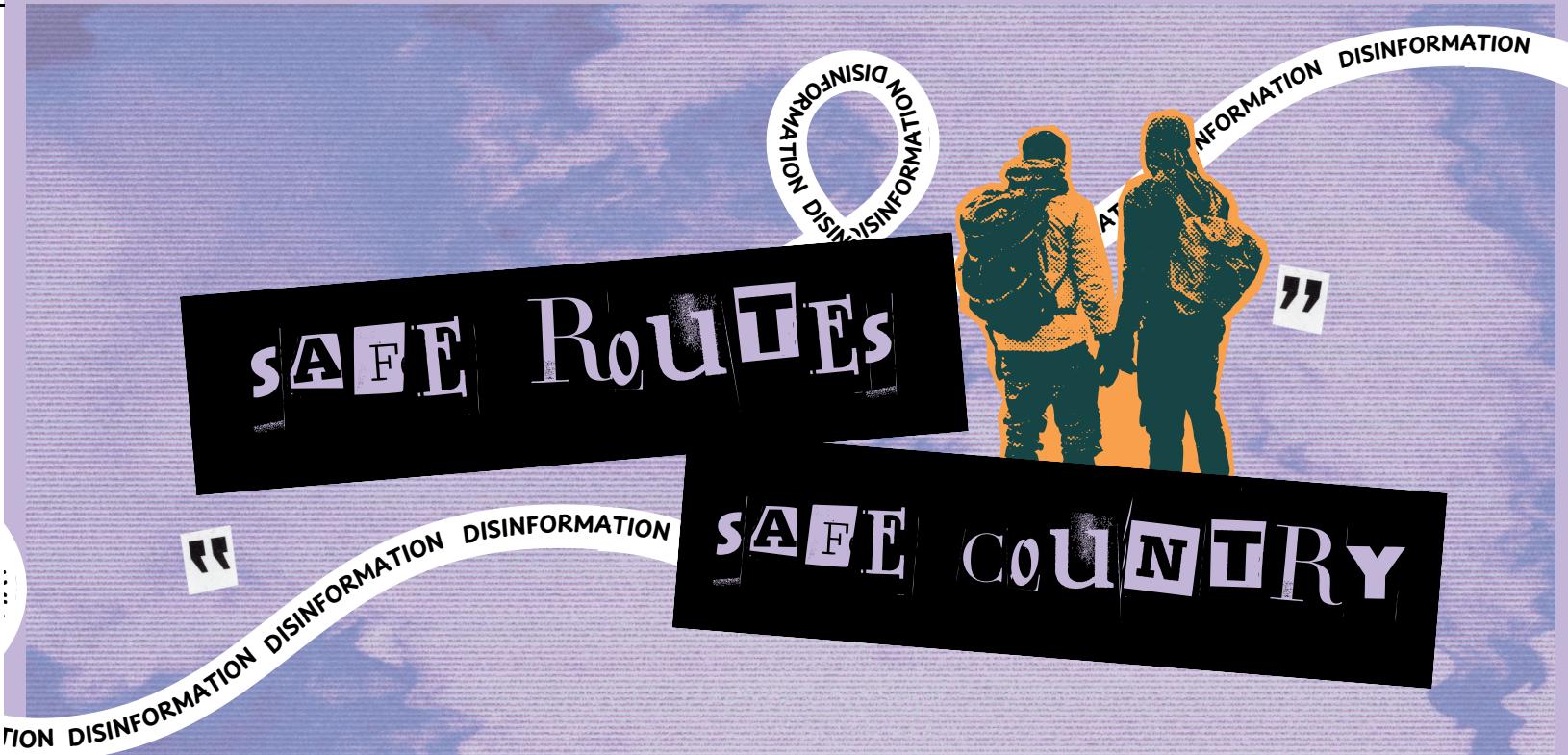
What does 'safe' actually mean?

Safe routes are incredibly limited, and for some nationalities virtually non-existent. Rather than questioning why so few routes are available, criticism is aimed at those forced into dangerous situations in the hope of seeking safety. It is governments that create unsafe routes and force migrants into them.

The notion that people must remain in the first **'safe country'** they enter is legally untrue, and obscures the reason why many would choose to make the UK their home: familial connections or legacies of colonialism. We must also ask: **What constitutes a safe country, and who is it safe for?** In the absence of adequate psychological support systems, how can a place truly be safe? The UK is unsafe for those navigating racist oppressive systems. Safety is not just the absence of conflict or war: it is the absence of structures of oppression anywhere you call home.

Nowhere is truly safe: it's all relative.

11

WhERE aRE YoU ACTUALLY FRoM?

Intention is instrumental in weighing up why this question is so problematic. Following the initial question by asking them 'where are you actually from' insinuates that their first answer wasn't good enough. Interrogations of this nature stem from socially ingrained ideas of what it is to be British, usually equating to Whiteness. It doesn't acknowledge the fact that migration is an integral part of this island's history. It singles someone out as the Other, regardless of where they were born.

If this conversation takes place between two racialised people, as long as these power dynamics are recognised with sensitivity and humility, arguably asking someone where they are from can be a very beautiful source of solidarity.

However, power dynamics can become unbalanced if the person asking the question holds more social power than the other person. This can apply where one person is White, and the other is a Person of Colour.

Defensive reactions can be incredibly frustrating and upsetting for the migratised person. Becoming defensive when someone expresses hurt or doesn't give the answer you wanted is a form of gaslighting.
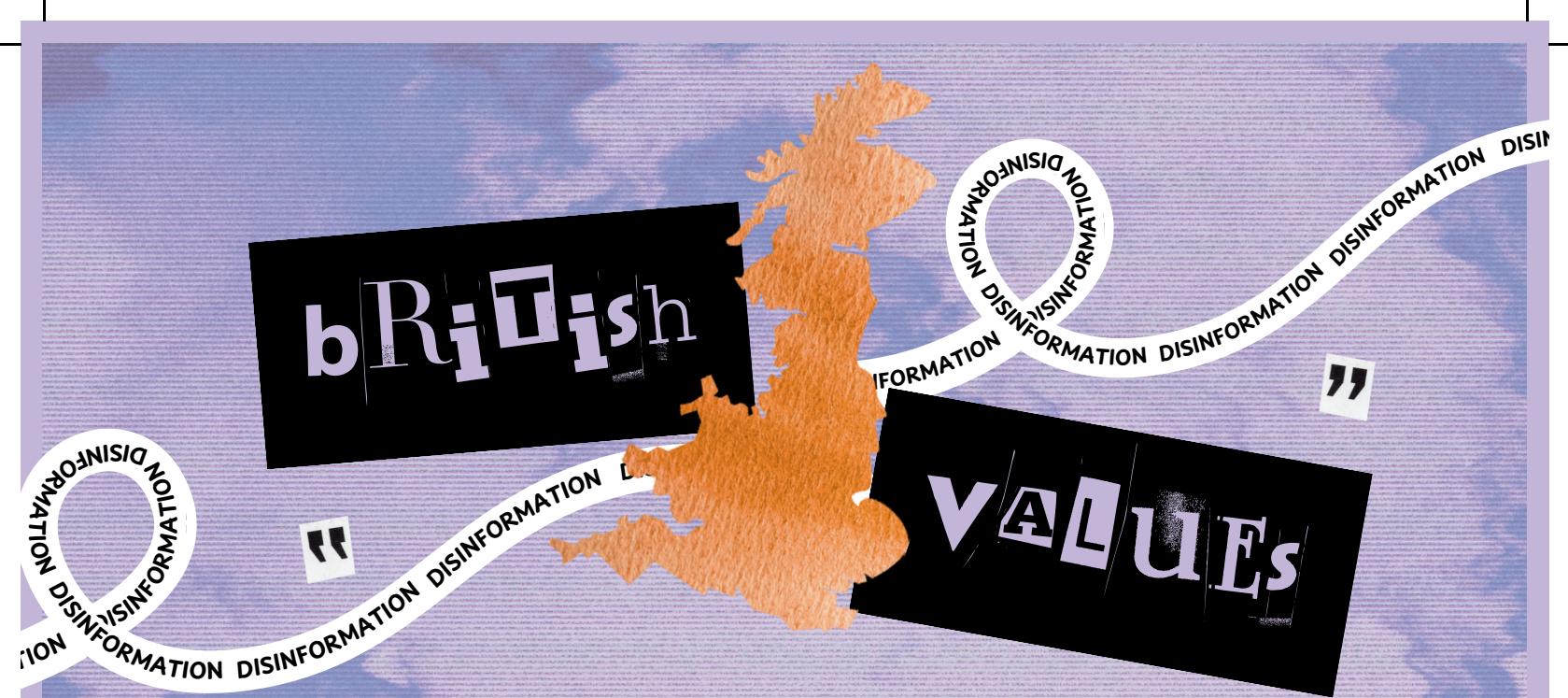
bRiTiSh VALUES

Why are these values assumed to be 'British' in nature?

'Democracy', 'the rule of law', 'respect and tolerance', and 'individual liberty'. But it's bizarre that the UK would claim ownership over these values, especially given its violent colonial history. There was no respect shown towards all the people the UK enslaved, murdered and colonised, who were also denied their individual liberties.

The present moment also shows the UK's failure in living up to these values. The UK Government shows no respect to migratised, Muslim, racialised or queer people, who are consistently scapegoated and vilified. Border violence and deportations are also the opposite of individual liberty.

Clampdowns on the right to protest are clearly not in line with the notion of democracy, whilst Home Office deportation deals clearly fly in the face of the rule of law. Colonial legacies continue to deprive migratised, racialised and queer people of respect and liberty.

It is also a deeply Islamophobic trope that is used to implement harmful surveillance policies like the Prevent duty.

MIGRANTS ARE NOT A BURDEN

The stereotype of migrants being a 'burden' or a 'drain' exists in order to justify oppression against them: to deny them entry or to deny them access to the welfare system that they may need. It is important to note that those who fall under the label of 'burden' are not just migrants. Migrants bear the brunt of this label, but so do non-migrant homeless and low income people, and non-migrant people who rely on benefits of any kind. Migrants and non-migrant homeless people are often pitted against each other, to garner sympathy for one group at the expense of another.

People often say, "let's take care of our own first", as if migrants are the reason we have so many people in poverty or experiencing homelessness. The Government often uses the narrative of scarcity: that there is not enough money or resources to go around.

But scarcity is a state-peddled myth: there is more than enough to go around. The reason migrants are poor is the same reason that non-migrants are poor: capitalism, and the Government austerity policies that come under it.

CONTRIBUTION

We know that migrants make a positive economic and cultural contribution to society. **But they shouldn't need to "contribute" in order to be respected.**

There are many people who cannot "contribute", such as those who are disabled or experience trauma. By basing our willingness to protect others on their ability to "contribute", we insinuate that certain people are simply not worthy of protection.

Perhaps the solution lies in rethinking what kind of society we want to live in. **Should we live in a society that views people who cannot 'contribute' as less deserving?** Or should we live in a society where those less able are provided for and cared for? What is our role in society? Do we have duties to those we are in community with? This is what it comes down to. We live in a hyper-individualistic world, but we don't have to.

We need to rethink the way we are in community with each other. We have to have each other's back. We have responsibilities to those who cannot <u>'contribute'</u>, who require support, simply because they are human. If we couldn't 'contribute' for any reason, then we would deserve the same.
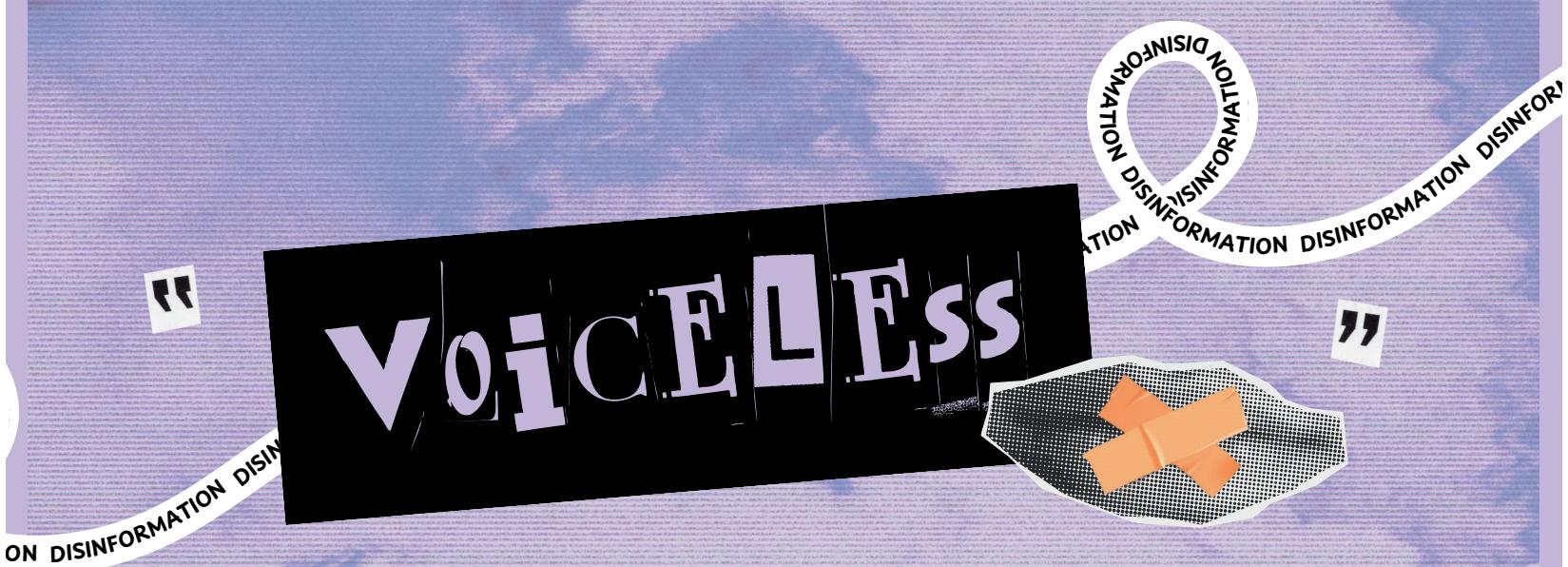
VOICELESS

"There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard". - Arundhati Roy

The insinuation that migrants are 'voiceless' is reductive and denies migrant communities of their agency. It detracts from the systems that force the migrant voice to be silenced and deny them a platform.

This language is also symptomatic of White saviourism, and the expectation White people have of being applauded for 'giving' migrants a voice. Society's racist power structures, which are also upheld in the charity sector, leave racialised migrants spoken on behalf of by White members of civil society. Civil society does not allow racialised migrants the resources or space especially when they 'speak truth to power' but will gaslight them by describing them as 'voiceless'.

Migrants are not 'voiceless'. Their voices are just not being listened to, especially if they are racialised.

LIVED EXPERIENCE

The term **'lived experience'** is used a lot, particularly in policy research or amongst social justice organisations. It has become part of the everyday jargon of our sector. However, have we reached a point where the term has become oversaturated and has lost its importance and meaning?

Uncritically accepting someone's problematic values or behaviours simply on account of their marginalised identity is wrong. 'Lived experience' does not exempt an organisation or individual from constructive criticism.

We must ensure that we do not use one person's **'lived experience'** in order to shut down or diminish someone else's. We must not pit the struggles of oppressed people against each other.

At Migrants' Rights Network, we describe ourselves as 'lived experience and values-led', since liberation goes beyond representation. We believe that those with 'lived experience', whose values of compassion are directly informed by their personal lives, are best placed to transform our society for the better.

VIOLENCE
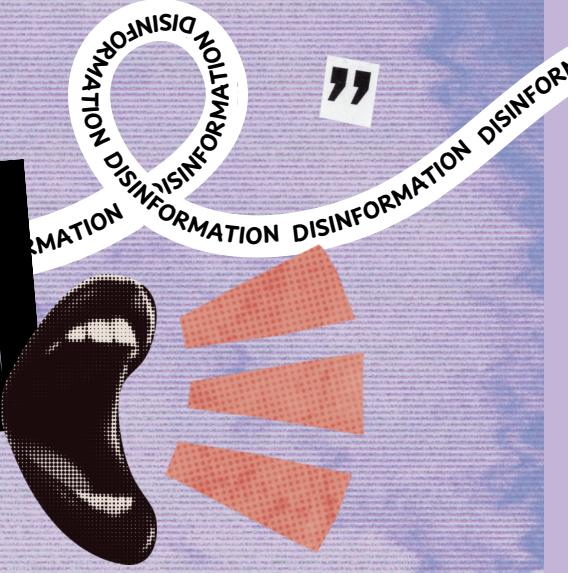
Violence is not just physical but can refer to border regimes and immigration systems.

Symbolic violence refers to how concepts become unchallengeable/ taken for granted. We can see this with how society demonises migrants, and sees the violence committed against them as being justified.

Systemic violence refers to violence that is inherent to a system and the institutions that make up that system. For instance, the immigration system is violent, since it uses racist and colonial-era tactics of control.

Epistemic violence is the celebration of White ways of knowing (philosophy, politics, culture) as being 'civilised' and scientifically true, and the simultaneous dismissal of Black, Brown and Indigenous ways of knowing as 'uncivilised' and irrational.

All these types of violence are normalised against non-White, queer, disabled and working-class people.

COLONIALISM

Colonialism causes displacement. Colonialism refers to European nations' histories of invading, settling in and exploiting vast areas of the Global South via the occupation of land, the extraction of resources, and the destruction of indigenous cultures. European nations still have colonies today. Colonialism deemed White people 'superior' to colonised populations, who were dismissed as 'uncivilised' and 'savage'. **These same labels are applied to racialised and colonised migrant communities today.**

Colonialism often involves '<u>divide and rule</u>' tactics, where colonisers turn local groups against each other along racial, ethnic or religious lines. It often involves the 'racialisation' of religious identities, and the internalisation of colonial identity labels, which in turn has led to conflict, displacing hundreds of thousands.

Colonialism (and imperialism) leaves formerly colonised countries under-resourced, dispossessed and in conditions of economic and political instability, which in turn **causes the displacement of entire communities.**

dEcoLoNisATioN

'Decolonisation' has become a **buzzword** in the West in recent years. It has increasingly and mistakenly been co-opted by EDI to mean greater representation for representation's sake, which merely upholds the status quo. **Decolonisation** is the process of undoing colonisation. It requires returning land stolen from Indigenous peoples, and reparations for looted wealth and deliberate underdevelopment.

Decolonisation also involves the revival of Indigenous knowledge systems and cultures, including oral traditions and languages, and overhauling so-called 'universal' truths which actually only reflect a narrow view of history from the perspective of colonisers. <u>The end goal of decolonisation is not about representation within Global North institutions</u>, but a redistribution of power away from the Global North. It is about removing the power to control and destroy colonised communities and their ways of life.

Decolonisation is not 'diversity'. Since borders are a colonial invention, decolonisation must involve a world where colonial systems and borders are no more: **where people are free to move but also free to stay.**

FAiRNEss

The Government weaponises the language of 'fairness' to penalise those it deems to be 'ungenuine', under the guise of 'fairness' for so-called 'genuine asylum seekers'.

The idea of 'fairness' also allows oppressive systems to persist. This is because at the centre of 'fairness' is the idea of 'equal treatment'. Yet some people have a different starting point or are more disadvantaged than others, and so require a greater boost.

In contrast, 'equity' recognises unequal starting points and obstacle levels. It provides unequal levels of support in order to ensure everyone has the same starting point. Yet the barrier is still in place: this means that support is provided to try to mitigate the problem, but the cause of the problem- oppression- remains unaddressed.

Instead of thinking about what is 'fair' or 'equitable', which merely alleviates the effects of barriers, we should be looking to remove the barrier. We should be striving for liberation: tackling oppression at its root by ending borders and the harmful ideologies, like White supremacy, that uphold them.

VULNERABILITY
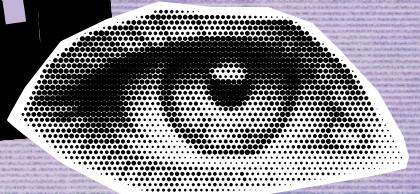
Co-authored with the National Survivor User Network (NSUN)

Migrants are not inherently vulnerable. They are made vulnerable by oppressive systems.

While the concept of vulnerability is commonly referred to in conversations around migration, it is often incredibly malleable and poorly defined.

Migrants, including refugees, are given the blanket label of 'vulnerable'. While it's sometimes important to 'prove' vulnerability so that migrants who have been made vulnerable can access support services, such as mental health services or gender-affirming care for trans+ migrants, the term 'vulnerability' has become something of a buzzword.

'Vulnerability' manifests in very different ways depending on the group or person in question, and we must apply an intersectional approach when exploring how vulnerability is created. Under oppressive systems, gender, sexuality, disability, race, ethnicity, religion or age can all intersect, which defines how vulnerability is constructed , and who has access to the support they need.

22

EXPENSIVE
UNWORKABLE

Co-authored with People's Economy

The main criticism of harmful immigration policies is that they are 'too expensive.' **The Rwanda plan was bad not because it is 'expensive' or 'unworkable', but because it is inhumane.** The Bibby Stockholm or inhumane asylum accommodation are bad because they are immoral and harm migrants.

The outsourcing of asylum accommodation or border policing to private companies, or forced offshoring of racialised people for a fee, clearly demonstrates how people from the Global South are still dehumanised as merchandise.

By focusing the argument on cost, liberals merely continue to reinforce this colonial, racist argument that reduces People of Colour from the Global South as a 'problem' to be managed or as 'goods' to be exchanged. We have to reframe our arguments.

Cost is not the issue. Unworkability is not the issue. Inhumanity is.

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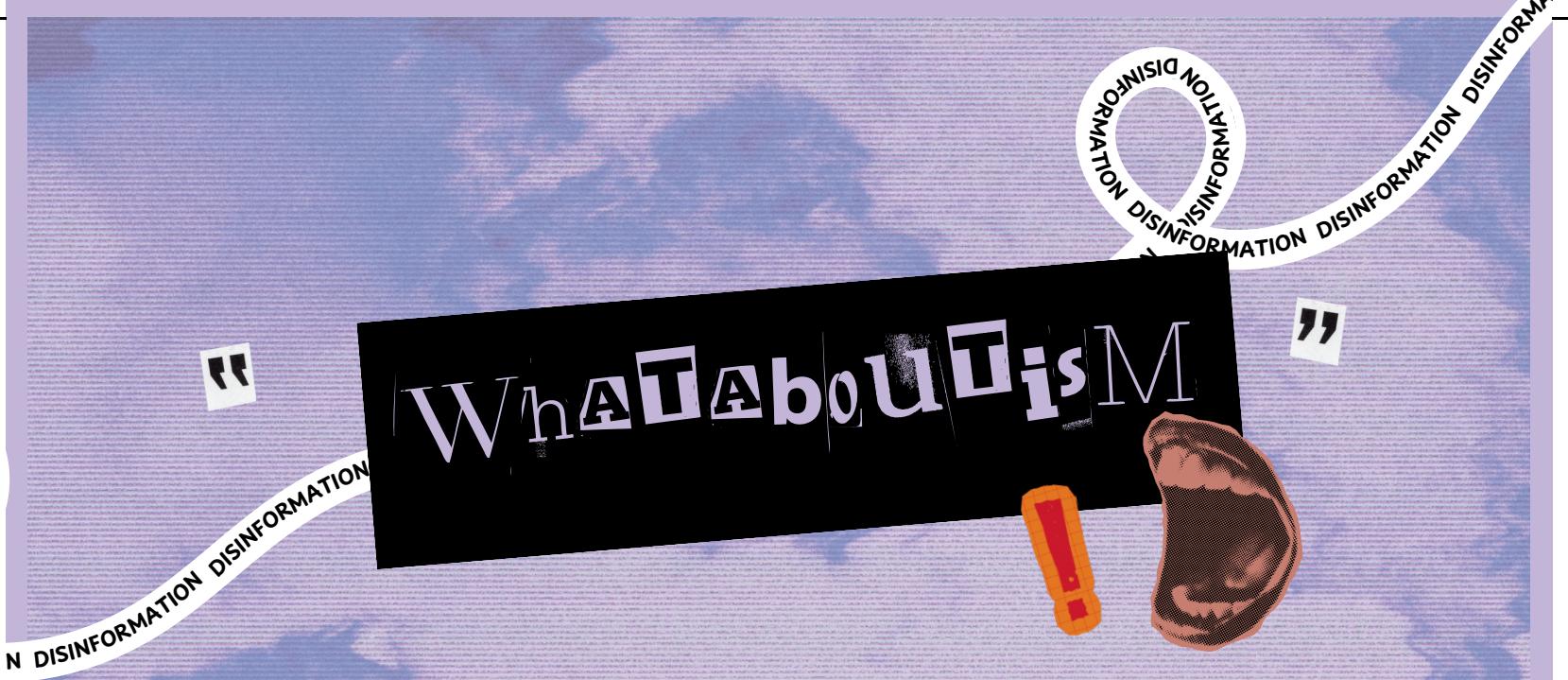
WHaTaboUTisM

Retorts of "what about X?" divide us by pitting marginalised groups against each other.

Whataboutism is when one issue is weaponised and brought up to detract or minimise the struggle of another group. For instance, houselessness is never brought up by detractors in its own right, because detractors simply do not care about it. They only bring it up to dismiss the first issue: migrant justice.

Whataboutism is a technique used to scapegoat migrants and blame them for the cost of living crisis, poverty and houselessness. But we have to remember, it is not migrants who are oppressing houseless people, low income people, veterans, or other groups. Rather, it is the Government that oppresses all these groups, by scapegoating migrants to distract from its own austerity policies, which are responsible for UK-wide poverty.

'Whataboutism' or 'what-about-ism' basically aims to deflect from actually helping either group.

LEGITIMATE CONCERNS

Legitimate concerns about migration are just thinly veiled racism.

Justifying anti-immigration sentiments as being 'legitimate' or 'genuine' happens across the political spectrum. It seems to be the ultimate caveat to a lot of political debates on migration and often is used interchangeably with the narrative of "it's okay to be worried about migration."

Anti-migrant violence and Islamophobia have been separated from racism. When these forms of oppression are not seen as racist, it allows them to become normalised. Migrants are being blamed for the Government's austerity policies, amongst other claims that migrants are "stealing your job" or "invading your country".

Wealthy politicians and powerful people are responsible for originally espousing this racist rhetoric, and normalising it on a national scale. This language of "legitimate concerns" of the 'average Brit', using an imagined White working class figure, allows politicians to distance themselves from the racist violence, despite the mobs using rhetoric and slogans of the current and former governments. Those in power position racist violence as community-led, rather than originating from the top.

TERRORISM

Co-authored with CAGE
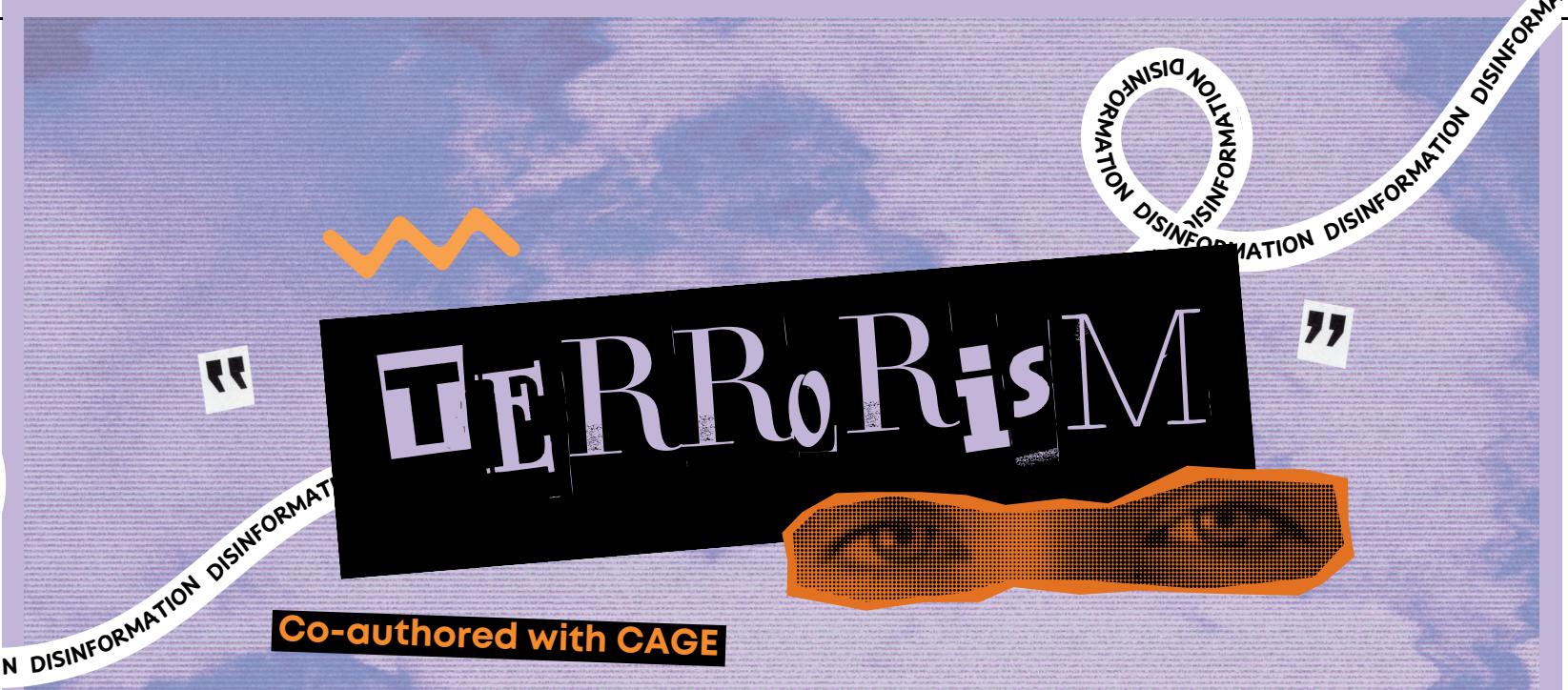
"Terrorism" **is a politically constructed category with no fixed definition. In the context of the immigration system, "terrorism" is often used to position migrants – primarily** **Muslim, racialised migrants** **– as a foreign threat.**

Terrorism powers have already been integrated into migration legislation to result in greater powers to detain and arrest people at ports of entry. Bringing counter-terror and immigration powers together is a process that started during the 'War on Terror.' Muslim, racialised populations from Africa, West Asia and South Asia became framed as possible terror threats, which led to their migration to and movement through borders in the West being policed through counter-terror frameworks.

Today this looks like the introduction or expansion of **counter-terror tactics within immigration policy**, **such as the Border Security Command, the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill and compulsory Prevent reporting.**

INTERMEDIARIES NOT "SMUGGLING GANGS"

The language of **"smuggling gangs"** is used by the Government to create a **"national security crisis"** around migration, to divert focus away from its role in causing anti-migrant harm, and to justify passing harsher legislation under the guise of "safeguarding".

The language of "smuggling gangs" is also racialised: Black and Brown people seeking sanctuary are labelled as "smugglers" and criminalised, such as in the case of Ibrahim Bah. Bah, a survivor of a collapsing dinghy, was convicted of manslaughter for the deaths of fellow passengers, despite his heroic efforts in steering the dinghy and saving lives.

We should be using the language of **intermediaries** instead. This puts emphasis on the policy decisions that force migrants to turn intermediaries in the first place: the criminalisation of safer routes. Even if some intermediaries may be immoral or money-driven, many migrants who are fleeing for their lives view them as life savers. They value intermediaries for helping them to flee danger and reach safety.

Migrants' Rights Network

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