

# Australia's Refugee Challenge

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### **A Critical Analysis of the Need to Include and Integrate Refugees and Asylum Seekers into Australia**

Globally, the increase in conflict has displaced millions of people – men, women, and children. In particular, Australia has experienced an increase in the number of vulnerable individuals seeking asylum. Consequently, Australia must reform their current policies in order to increase the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees in society. To do so, it is first important to briefly discuss the different experiences that asylum seekers and refugees have with Australian policies and the current arguments which deter policymakers from including these groups. The current negative discourse will then be challenged by critically analysing why asylum seekers and refugees do not cause harm and, in fact, benefits society. It will also be highlighted that Australia has an obligation to be create inclusive policies for asylum seekers and refugees due to their claim to legal rights, under the Refugee Convention, and human rights. Finally, policymakers should create policies which are inclusive of asylum seekers and refugees as current policies are rooted in discrimination – another human rights violation.

It is important to distinguish between 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees' and their experiences with Australian policies. Asylum seekers are those who have fled their countries and cannot or are fearful of returning home due to threats placed against them for their nationality, religion, race, or social and political opinion (Grove & Zwi, 2006; Bloom, & Udahemuka, 2014). Once their claim to protection has been approved, they are 'refugees' and are entitled to the rights provided by the Refugee Convention (Bloom & Udahemuka, 2014). Australia, in particular, has received heavy criticism for their inhumane treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. It is the only country where every single asylum seeker is immediately detained and can spend up to seven years in detention centres (McLoughlin & Warin, 2008; Coffey, Kaplan, Sampson & Tucci, 2010). In these centres, asylum seekers have high mental illness rates due to their intense social isolation and horrific treatment (Silove, Austin & Steel, 2007; Coffey et al., 2010). While in Australia, refugees face barriers to health services and support programmes like housing assistance, live in poverty, and, as a result, have greater health issues (Vasey & Manderson, 2012). It is clearly evident that Australian policymakers are uninclusive of refugees and asylum seekers.

Refugees and asylum seekers are excluded from Western countries, such as Australia, on the basis of preserving the host country's culture (Humpage, 2004). For example, there are concerns that integrating these groups into society, in particular those who are Muslim and Middle Eastern, will result in the growth of terrorism, a disruption of moral values, and a decrease in social cohesion (Humpage, 2004). This discourse is also present in academia as studies have been produced which suggest that diversity is detrimental to society (Mikulyuk, 2014). Consequently, theories have been generated to explain such findings. Mikulyuk (2014) discusses that diverse groups, due to their differences, may be unable to relate to each other as opposed to those with similar characteristics, leading to the exclusion of dissimilar groups. Overall, attempts to increase diversity could contribute to a decline in trust and cooperation within society (Stolle, Soroka, & Johnston, 2008). Also, residents suggest that increasing diversity will intensify the competition for resources, such as health resources and employment opportunities, leading to groups feeling threatened and unsafe (Vasey & Manderson, 2012). These arguments have deterred policymakers from creating policies which integrate refugees and asylum seekers into society.

Policymakers should not be discouraged from increasing societal diversity as refugees and asylum seekers are not harmful to a society's culture. The proposed consequences associated with these groups are unsupported by

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empirical evidence and are only socially constructed threats (Are et al., 2013). The generation of these negative social constructions are instead due to the specific language and photographs used by the media. For example, the terms commonly used when writing about asylum seekers and refugees are aliens, criminals, bogus, exploitation, and terrorism (Pickering, 2001; Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005). Also in the photographs used in newspapers globally, asylum seekers and refugees remain unidentified, non individualised, and non personified (Banks, 2012). Together the language and photos combine to depict asylum seekers and refugees as 'folk devils' which are groups that are considered to be situated outside the normal societal boundaries and are often targets for blame (Bogan & Marlowe, 2015). These negative portrayals continue as minority groups have a limited ability to shift media discourse as many mainstream news outlets systematically shun the positive contributions of minority groups because they are not considered 'newsworthy' (Dreher, 2010). It can be seen that policy makers should not be concerned about the claim that increasing diversity is culturally damaging and, therefore, must start integrating vulnerable groups like refugees and asylum seekers into society.

Including refugees and asylum seekers into society does not cause harm, in fact, it benefits society's culture. The academic studies which suggest diversity in society is detrimental are flawed as only the population characteristics of areas, such as a diverse ethnic composition, were examined (Mikulyuk, 2014). There was no analysis of the societal impacts of high level interactions between diverse groups in society. In areas where there is a culture of acceptance and an inclusion of diverse groups, there are better societal outcomes. According to contact theory, a high level of interaction between diverse people creates enjoyable experiences which replace the negative messages sent by the media (Sturgis, Brunton-Smith, Kuha, & Jackson, 2014; Stolle et al., 2008) When a person develops a strong connection with an individual who has different characteristics to themselves, these positive feelings are then generalized to the entire ethnic group (Sturgis et al., 2014). Social bonds that are then developed between dissimilar groups, in comparison to bonds that are created between similar groups, are more easily transferable to many different people in society (Stafford, De Silva, Stansfeld, & Marmot, 2008; Ferlander, 2007; Sturgis et al., 2014) As a result, ties between dissimilar groups are more beneficial to society as they increase people's overall perceptions of social cohesion (Stolle et al., 2008; Anthias, 2007). These positive impacts are also more likely to occur when institutions are also inclusive of diversity (Sturgis et al., 2014). Therefore, policymakers should make an active effort to increase diversity by integrating refugees and asylum seekers into society.

Improvements in society's culture, derived from the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers, can positively affect societal health outcomes. In communities where there is high social cohesion between diverse groups, there is also a greater diffusion of health information and health promoting norms (Beaudoin, 2009). This increased diffusion will be particularly important for reducing unjust and costly health inequalities. For example, a constraining factor for the improvement of health outcomes in deprived areas, where refugees are concentrated in, are the local norms which encourage unhealthy habits, such as smoking (Stead, MacAskill, MacKintosh, Reece, & Eadie, 2001; Vasey & Manderson, 2012). These unhealthy norms remain strong, despite the general societal shift towards healthier lifestyles, as deprived groups are socially isolated from society (Stead et al., 2001; Thompson, Pearce, & Barnett, 2007). If positive interactions between diverse groups increase, then perhaps, unhealthy behaviours in deprived areas will be less normalised due to the social control exerted by other groups and the increased access to health services and information from their broader social networks (Poortinga, 2006). This process, the uptake of new healthy behaviours, is also more successful when people trust the members of their community (Campbell, 2000). High community trust can also improve health by creating a sense of community and belonging as people can depend on their neighbours to care and look after them (Altschuler, Somkin, Adler, 2004; Carpiano, 2006). This leads to a reduction in stress, anxiety, and an improvement in mental health outcomes for everyone (Altschuler et al., 2004; Abbot & Freeth, 2008). Thus, policymakers should support the inclusion of diverse groups as a society with a culture which accepts, welcomes, and embraces diversity is more likely to thrive.

The inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers, can also improve society's health outcomes through other pathways. Currently, they are commonly viewed as a large economic burden, however, if they are given the opportunity to be equitably integrated into society, all groups will benefit (Connell & Duffy-Jones, 2014). For example, societies which are inclusive of diverse groups develop cultural qualities like openness, tolerance, and respect (Bodirsky, 2012). These qualities are important for everyone's well-being but are also valuable as they are attractive to both investors and tourists, resulting in an increase in employment opportunities and wealth (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Bodirsky, 2012).

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Creativity, another economically valuable characteristic, can also be cultivated in societies which are inclusive of diversity (Pratt, 2010). This occurs as groups, such as refugees and asylum seekers, can contribute to the cross-fertilization of ideas and knowledge due to their unique life experiences, skills, and qualifications (Mikulyuk, 2014; The Asylum Seeker Resource Center, 2010; Jacobsen, 2002). Even simply interacting with different groups has the ability to broaden people's minds, leading to the generation of innovative ideas (Wood & Landry, 2008). Therefore, refugees and asylum seekers are not burdens, in fact, they are capable of being successful and contributing members of a society. Thus, policy-makers should be inclusive of groups, such as refugees and asylum seekers, as a society that is rich in diversity is more likely to benefit everyone.

Refugees and asylum seekers should not *only* be included based on their valuable contributions to society's culture, health, and economy. They must also be equitably integrated into society due to their entitlement to legal and human rights. Under the Refugee Convention, Australia has breached the legal international obligation to not penalise 'illegal' refugees if they have fled their previous country due to threats placed against their life and freedom through their use of detention centres (Esmaeili, & Wells, 2000; Panjabi, 2010). Additionally, there is a global duty to provide refugees and asylum seekers with an equal access to social, economic, and cultural human rights, such as, work, health, community participation, and security (Dacyl, 1996). Every single individual is entitled to these rights, however, Australia has failed to fulfill these obligations by the apparent inequalities refugees face and the deportation of asylum seekers to dehumanising detention centers (Coffey et al., 2010). Instead, Australia claims their national right to sovereignty allows them to exclude asylum seekers and refugees in order to 'protect' the rights of Australian citizens (Devetak, 2004; Fiske, 2006; Vasey & Manderson, 2009). Despite this, Australia must actively include and integrate refugees and asylum seekers as human rights transcends the political right to sovereignty (Kleist, 2013). Human lives receive higher priority as they are intrinsically valuable, whereas, state sovereignty is only instrumentally valuable (Fiske, 2006). Even members of the Australian community have drawn attention to this rights-based discourse as they held marches, during the 2007 election, in order to highlight the mistreatment of these groups and their valuable societal contributions (Kleist, 2013). Policymakers should also follow suit as refugees and asylum seekers have the right to be included into society.

Policymakers must also include refugees and asylum seekers as Australia's current policies are rooted in discrimination – another human rights violation. The Australian government's discriminatory attitude is evident as white asylum seekers, in comparison with non-white asylum seekers, have been more likely to be treated with dignity and granted refugee status. For example, Australia's response to the Bosnian (white) asylum seekers, during the Bosnian war, was to increase the refugee quota (Colic-Peisker, 2005). Whereas, restrictive policies were enforced in the Afghan crisis as highlighted by the 'Tampa Incident' when a boat with 438 Afghani (non-white) asylum seekers was rejected and later sank near Christmas Island (Colic-Peisker, 2005; Gelber, 2003). Similarly, asylum seekers today (who are mainly from Middle eastern and Muslim majority countries) face strict policies (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014). This discrimination is also present in historical policies, such as the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, which was created to prevent Asian immigration and preserve the 'pure' white population (Welch, 2014; Devetak, 2004). This ongoing racism is due to the knowledge that Australian lands do not belong to the white populations and, instead, rightfully belong to the Indigenous people (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, 2002). The white government, as a result, tries to legitimize itself as rightful land owners by constructing non-white refugees and asylum seekers as 'others' and denying them entry into Australia (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, 2002). The government, however, denies that current policies are discriminatory and highlight that discussions surrounding the acceptance of asylum seekers in parliament are unrelated to ethnicity (Every & Augoustinos, 2007). This is simply a tactic which is employed as the government is aware that explicit racism will generate further controversy. Therefore, the government attempts to legitimize its current policies by stating that Australia needs protection from 'bogus' and 'queue jumping' asylum seekers (Every & Augoustinos, 2007). Australia's exclusionary policies are clearly a violation of human rights which must be addressed by including and equitably integrating refugees and asylum seekers into society.

Currently, Australian policies exclude asylum seekers and refugees, as those who seek asylum are placed in mandatory detention, while refugees struggle to gain equal access to societal resources. This exclusion occurs due to the fear that these groups will cause cultural fragmentation. However, policymakers should not be concerned about this claim as it is unsupported by empirical evidence and well conducted studies. The proposed negative

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consequences associated with the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers, are only socially constructed by the media. In fact, according to contact theory, the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers will benefit everyone by enhancing the level of social cohesion in society. Gains in social cohesion also improve society's overall health status by increasing the diffusion of health information/norms and reducing access barriers to health services. The integration of refugees and asylum seekers can also improve society's overall health outcomes as communities which are inclusive of diverse groups develop cultural qualities like respect. These characteristics benefit the mental well-being of all groups and are associated with thriving economies. In totality, the inclusion of diverse groups is beneficial to everyone in society.

Policies which are inclusive of diversity should not be *solely* created due to asylum seekers and refugees' ability to improve society's culture, health outcomes, and economy. These groups should also be included due to their claim to legal rights and human rights like access to health and security. Currently, Australia justifies their treatment of asylum seekers and refugees by stating their right to national sovereignty. Despite this right, Australia must create policies which are inclusive of asylum seekers and refugees as human lives, due to their intrinsic value, transcend sovereign rights. To further support this rights based argument, policymakers must also be inclusive of asylum seekers and refugees as Australia's current policies are informed by racist ideologies. The government denies that current policies are rooted in racism, however, this is merely a tactic used by the government in order to decrease controversy. These human rights violations cannot continue, Australia has an obligation to create a peaceful culture by creating policies which are inclusive of asylum seekers and refugees.

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