

WORDS MATTER MANIFESTO

FIVE WAYS TO DEFY THE NARRATIVE ON MIGRATION

“ILLEGAL”

“COHESION”

“CONTRIBUTION”

“INTEGRATION”

“ASSIMILATION”

“REFUGEE CRISIS”

“JUST LIKE US”

“MASS MIGRATION”

“GENUINE”

“INFLUX”

“BURDEN”

“VOICELESS”

“THREAT”

“INVASION”

Migrants'
Rights
Network

FOREWORD BY THE CEO

Harmful and divisive narratives surrounding migration are used as a justification for increasingly hostile and more violent immigration policies. Meanwhile, some of the general public remain apathetic towards the plight of migrants, including refugees, which leads to ignorance and indifference. **This enables outright hatred and racism.**



The scapegoating of migrants is not a new phenomenon. We have seen how often it occurs in times of crisis. However, we are witnessing an extremely intense environment of hostility, racism and anti-migrant hatred. This has emboldened the UK Government to pass successive measures to make the lives of people seeking safety and a new life increasingly difficult, from the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 to the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, and 'Illegal Migration' Act. These have relied heavily on sowing division in order to be framed as justifiable measures. We must ask how the UK has arrived at a point where the language of 'invasion' can be uttered by a Government official without any repercussions or shame, or how the constant vilification of migrants, including refugees, has become so embedded in the mainstream.

While some will make disparaging comments about migrants, including refugees, others will inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or narratives of 'deservingness' based on the idea of the 'model' migrant. Many others will place the blame on migrants, including refugees, by stating the current issues are a 'migrant crisis' or 'refugee crisis', instead of placing the focus on the inadequate response to the need for, or root causes of migration. Most of the narratives and analysis of the language is devoid of an intersectional approach, and rarely speaks to the root causes of migration, such as legacies of colonialism, capitalism, and geo-political factors.

In spite of these aspects, there are positives. **The majority are tired of this rhetoric.** Migrants including refugees, and those from migratised or racialised communities want to defy the existing narratives, stereotypes and set the tone of the language and conversations that discuss their futures.

At the Migrants' Rights Network, understanding the role that intersecting systems of oppression play in shaping refugee and migration policies is central to our campaigning work. We must understand and be honest about which communities these policies are aimed at targeting, and why. We cannot remain indifferent to the negative and divisive rhetoric any longer because being apathetic or indifferent indirectly enables anti-migrant and refugee narratives. That's what we are doing through the Words Matter campaign. It's a space where we can collectively explore the ramifications of certain narratives but importantly offer alternatives which affirm the dignity and humanity of migrants, including refugees.

WORDS MATTER

We launched our Words Matter campaign, and Who is Welcome event series in the wake of the UK Government's Nationality and Borders Act, and its response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The stark contrast in how the West responded to Ukrainians seeking safety in comparison to those fleeing countries like Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan made us reflect on how narrative framing and identity play a part in shaping immigration policies, and who is deemed worthy of protection.

Migrant advocacy often looks at migration as a siloed issue. It rarely looks at the construction of migrants through an intersectional lens or how racism shapes our idea of who is welcome in the West. While racial equality organisations have worked hard to expose the racist undertones of the language of 'contribution', 'assimilation' and 'integration', these narratives are regularly reinforced by the migrant rights sector.

At the Migrants' Rights Network, understanding the role intersections of identity play in shaping refugee and migration policies is central to our campaigning work. We must understand and be honest about who these policies are aimed at, and why. That's what makes the Words Matter campaign unique: we know we cannot effectively tackle divisive language unless we expose the root of migration rhetoric.

But we can't do this alone. Real change can only happen if we stand in solidarity with migrants and make conscious commitments to defy divisive rhetoric. Our Words Matter Manifesto aims to highlight the five key steps we must take to tackle hostile narratives around people seeking safety or a new life in the UK.



How a small migrants' rights charity is using their lived experience to tackle division

NO ONE IS ILLEGAL ★



Ben & Jerry's UK
@benandjerrysUK

Every word we hear has an impact on the way we think and perceive everything and everyone around us. That's why we've joined up with @Migrants_Rights to share their Words Matter campaign. Find out more about the importance of language via the link. benjerry.co.uk/whats-new/2023...



FIVE WAYS TO DEFY THE NARRATIVE ON MIGRATION

1 HOLD THE POWERFUL TO ACCOUNT

Media and policymakers hold the resources and power to shape and define the way we see marginalised groups. As the General Election approaches, and cross-party debates on immigration intensify, now is the time to defy the narrative and hold representatives to account. We want to work with politicians to give them the tools and language they need to tackle the divisive hatred sewn by the Government and media.

We all have the power to help shape meaningful change. No matter who you are, commit to persuading everyone across the UK to call out harmful rhetoric where and when they see it.

2 CHAMPION NEW, COMPASSIONATE LANGUAGE

The dehumanising way we talk about people on the move is at odds with the respect that should be afforded to any of us. We want to shift the way we talk about migrants, including refugees.

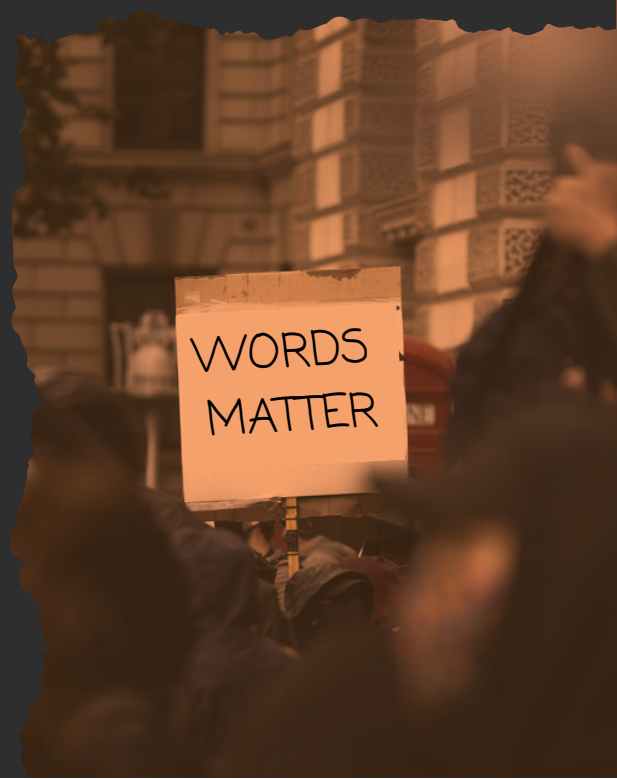
This means moving from both a dehumanising and conditional framing of migrants and their place in the UK. It's time to move away from the divisive language that frames migrants as a threat such as invasion or illegal but we also want everyone to reflect on the ingrained expectations that migrants must 'contribute' or 'integrate'. No one should be expected to give up fundamental aspects of who they are such as their culture to be accepted or deemed worthy of rights.

Pledge to educate yourself: be open to evolving your language and be willing to stand up against hostile language.

3 EXPOSE PREJUDICE AND DIVISION

Promoting new, compassionate language is only effective if we expose the systems of oppression and the hateful ideologies that form the foundation of anti-migrant rhetoric and immigration policies. We must challenge the language rooted in racism that shapes the way migrants are spoken about.

We cannot allow this to persist or to be complicit. We ask you to commit to call out hate and division directed at migrants and other marginalised communities.



4 POWER TO THE MIGRANTS

People are not voiceless, but they are denied the resources and platforms to make their voice heard. It's time we dismantle the obstacles that render these voices unheard. It's time we listen and be humble.

We must increase the democratic participation and political knowledge of migrant communities. Real change can only happen when migrants, including refugees, lead the change they want to see. We must use our platforms and resources to amplify the voices of those whose sense of belonging is affected by divisive narratives that divide communities along class or racial lines.

It's time to give migrants the power. Dedicate your time and resources to migrant communities so they can create the change they want to see.

5 START MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS FOR CHANGE

Creating the society we want to see won't happen unless we start having conversations. Particularly conversations about how racism shapes immigration systems. We can only create safe, constructive spaces for marginalised and minoritised people if we are willing to identify our privileges, recognise our ignorance, accept silenced histories, and acknowledge the persistence of racism and other systems of oppression in the here and now.

That's why it's time to get comfortable with uncomfortable, but necessary, conversations. Conversations that allow you to reckon with your privilege and power, and to use it in the service of equity and redistribution. Bringing Words Matter to your communities, homes and schools can help facilitate deep understandings of systems of oppression, and embed radical representation: representation not for representation's sake, but representation for those with their community's interest and anti-oppression principles at heart.



WORDS MATTER TOOLKIT

As an elected official, listen to the voices of your constituents with different intersecting identities and experiences, and learn how you can elevate migrant and migratised communities to help them create the change they want to see.

Educate yourself, mobilise your community and get comfortable with uncomfortable conversations. A good place to start is reading our Words Matter explainers.

As part of our Words Matter campaign, we analyse and seek to tackle common narratives and words around migration. We have put together this helpful toolkit which unpacks some of these narratives and explains how to defy them.

Don't forget to make your **Words Matter Pledge** and call out hate against migrants, including refugees, and other marginalised groups.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

No human being is illegal.

The term 'illegal' to define people moving across borders has been condemned by both the United Nations and the European Union.

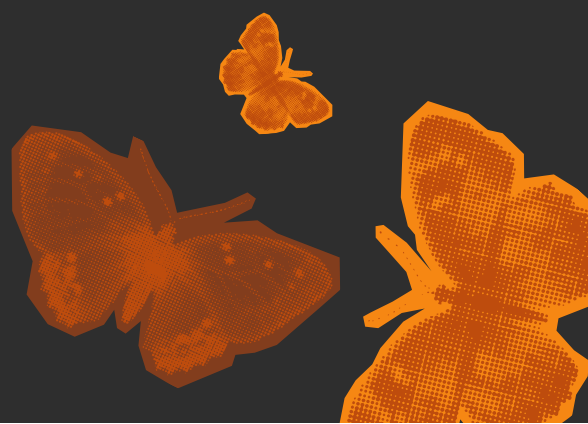
The term 'illegal' is inaccurate as being undocumented does not constitute a crime in most countries. According to the UNHCR, being undocumented "is not an offence against persons, property or national security, it belongs to the realm of administrative law." However, even in countries where violations of immigration law are considered criminal offences, committing a criminal offence does not make you an 'illegal' person.

Use the term 'undocumented' or 'irregular' migrant instead.

REFUGEE CRISIS

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

It is not a refugee crisis, it is a policy crisis. Instead of blaming migrants, including refugees, we should look at what has caused them to flee in the first place.



INVASION, SWARM, INFLUX, THREAT

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 destination country would be “overwhelmed” by the presence of migrant communities. This narrative falls into old, established forms of 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.

CONTRIBUTION

We know that migrants make a positive economic and cultural contribution to society. It's true that migration boosts the economy and enriches our society culturally. But they shouldn't need to “contribute” in order to be respected and protected. Our acceptance of migrants should not be conditional on their economic productivity.

There are many people who cannot “contribute”, such as those who are disabled. By basing our willingness to protect others on their ability to “contribute”, we also insinuate that disabled people are not worthy of protection. The language of contribution also plays into racist narratives of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ migrants: it implies that those who do not “contribute” are “undeserving” of respect.

How do we determine what a ‘contribution’ is? What if someone isn't able to contribute? Do we only accept someone if they can boost our economy? Instead of living in a society that views people who cannot “contribute” as less deserving, we can create a world where those less able are provided for and cared for.

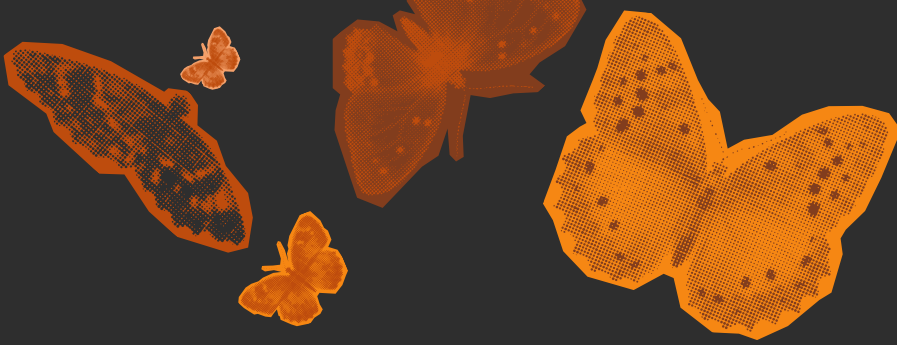
BURDEN

The stereotype of migrants being a “burden” or a “drain” exists in order to justify harsh measures against them.

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.

Calling migrants a “burden” or a “drain on resources” reveals the complete disregard with which we view those who are in less fortunate situations.





HARD WORKING

The demonisation of the working class has been prevalent in the UK for a long time. The revered ideals of the ‘deserving’ and ‘hard working’ individual that “contributes” to Britain’s culture and economy have been weaponised and used to sow suspicion and discontent within poorer communities. This includes migrant and migratised communities. Everyone is hard working: but not everyone gets rewarded for their hard work. And this often plays out in racist ways.

“I work hard, but this other group from this country don’t work as hard as me.”

This narrative means many aim to exceptionalise themselves and seek to portray themselves as the ‘model migrant’ whilst dismissing newly arrived individuals, or other groups who are struggling to survive.

Low income families, including migrant and racialised communities, have to be hard working especially when the systems are rigged against them. In fact, the hard work is staying out of destitution and extreme poverty for many migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), who can only rely on their wages to keep them afloat.

ASSIMILATION, INTEGRATION, COHESION

Migrants are often told to assimilate or integrate. This language is often well-intentioned, but 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.

Instead of wondering how we can ensure migrants “integrate” into society, what we should be asking is how we can cultivate a society in which migratised communities feel safe and respected.

BRITISH VALUES

British values are the set of values said to underpin society in the UK. These consist of democracy, the rule of law, respect and tolerance, and individual liberty.

But why are these values assumed to be inherently British in nature?

Increasingly harsh immigration policies, Britain’s violent colonial history, the detention state and the existence of systemic racism, queerphobia, transphobia, antisemitism or Islamophobia explicitly contradict these ‘British values’.

MAKE YOUR WORDS MATTER PLEDGE

We ask you to pledge your support to challenge harmful and divisive language.

This starts with you pledging:

- to call out the use of words that alienate and demean migrants, including refugees.

Or, we ask you to pledge that you will:

- stand up and challenge language which encourages division and harms migrants, including refugees.



MIGRANTS' RIGHTS NETWORK

Migrants' Rights Network is a UK charity that works alongside 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 are a values-led organisation with an intersectional approach to enhance our understanding on issues that intersect with migration including racism, queerness and many other issues or identities. Through shared learning, we can offer a more holistic way of striving for systems change.

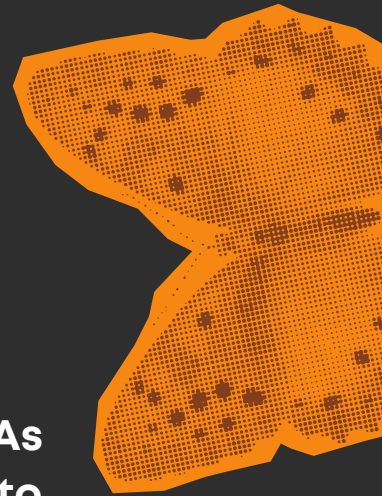
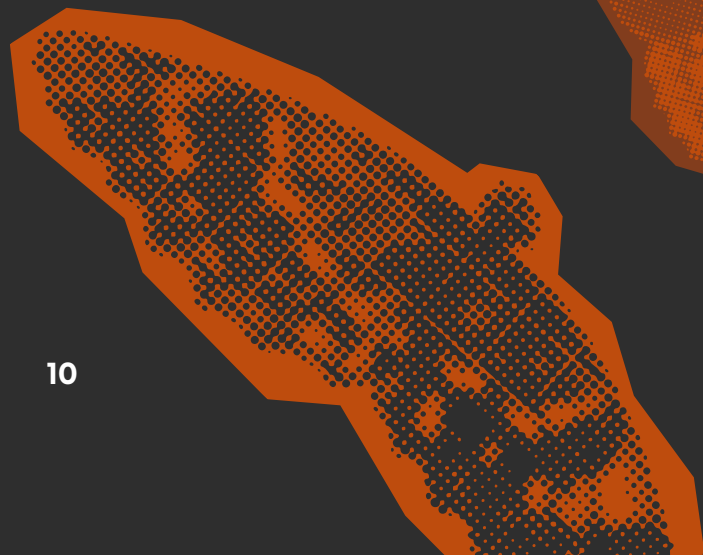
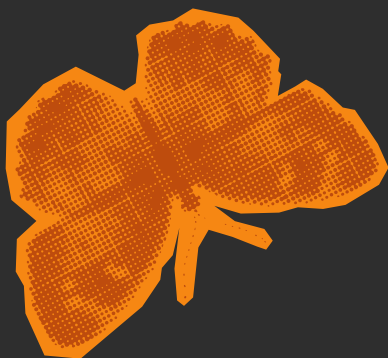
Our work is led by a diverse team majority led by migratised people and People of Colour, essentially first and second generation migrants, who also have numerous other intersecting identities, including religion, nationality, age, gender, sexuality and those with disabilities. These wide ranging identities and experiences inform our work, and particularly our work on language and how we challenge policies, established norms and narratives.

**Migrants'
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BUTTERFLIES ARE A RECURRING THEME IN THE WORDS MATTER CAMPAIGN.

Butterflies represent the search for home and sanctuary which is a foundation of life for all living beings. The butterfly is reflective of the migratory patterns across the animal kingdom. As humans, we move not simply to survive but also to thrive. So, the butterfly also represents the unwavering hope for a better life, and the pursuit of happiness.

The journey of the butterfly, from caterpillar to cocoon and beyond, represents the beauty of resilience, and the inevitability of transformation. Transformation is a key element of solidarity: pushing ourselves out of our comfort and privilege in order to be a better ally to others. We are not perfect, and will continue to make mistakes, but we are committed to facing our mistakes with humility and grace, and understanding that every mistake is an opportunity for radical transformation. May we all commit to changing and transforming ourselves for the betterment of our world.



**Migrants'
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www.migrantsrights.org.uk



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