

# National Human Rights Consultation Submission

AGWW-7R3VBC

**Name:** Angeline Ferdinand

**Submission Text:**

I am writing to express my concern over the language used in mainstream media which serves to conflate 'illegal immigrants' with asylum seekers.

It is well known that language shapes the thoughts and attitudes of society. Through the use of emotive, biased language news media coverage can stigmatise affected populations<sup>1</sup>. With this in mind, mainstream media and politicians' use of 'illegal immigration' to describe people migrating to Australia with the intent to seek asylum is worrisome. As I'm sure you know, under the UN Refugee Convention, to which Australia is a signatory, anyone has the right to seek asylum and to enter a country with or without identifying documents, by plane or boat, and with or without prior notification. The use of the term 'illegal immigrants' to refer to asylum seekers is, therefore, incorrect.

Moreover, the use of these terms paint this already vulnerable population as criminals, 'queue jumpers,' and people worthy of scorn and unworthy of being accepted into mainstream Australian society. This exacerbates the attitudes of intolerance and distrust towards asylum seekers and refugees in Australia. Associated racism has been linked with worse health outcomes and poorer access to the resources to improve economic participation, health and well being.<sup>1-4</sup> Almost all approaches to understanding racialised discourse suggest that collective representations are central to the transmission and legitimisation of racist behaviours, attitudes and policies.<sup>5</sup>

As we can see, the language used in the media has a significant place in creating an atmosphere of apathy and indifference, if not outright hostility to the humane and just treatment of asylum seekers. I therefore urge the creation and enforcement of journalistic guidelines to ensure unbiased, undistorted reporting of asylum seeker issues.

I am enclosing here some recent examples of this phenomenon:

Here, The Age explicitly ties together 'illegal immigrants' and 'asylum seekers':

Residents have claimed the boat, carrying 45 people of Middle Eastern appearance, sailed about 500 metres shy of a naval vessel packed with asylum seekers picked up off Ashmore Island less than a week ago.

Wednesday's 4am arrival on the island brought to 160 the number of suspected illegal immigrants detained by authorities in the past week alone.

<http://news.theage.com.au/breaking-news-national/asylum-seekers-sailed-past-navy-boat-20090408-a0cm.html>

From the Brisbane Times:

<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/boatload-of-illegal-immigrants-arrives-unchallenged-on-christmas-island-20090408-a0fc.html>

The boat arrived while an Australian navy vessel was off Christmas Island with 63 suspected illegal immigrants aboard who had been picked up off Ashmore Island after being detected last Thursday.

Here, The Australian uses the even more dehumanising term "Illegals" to

refer to migrants—particularly horrifying when one considers the tragedy that was being reported:

Hundreds feared dead after illegals' boats sink

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25273265-2703,00.html>

Yours sincerely,  
Angeline Ferdinand MPH

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5. Quillian L. New Approaches to understanding racial prejudice and discrimination *Annual Review of Sociology* 2006;32:299-328.