



THE FACELESS ‘BOAT PEOPLE’

BY BRITTNEY RIGBY

What kind of person are you? A ‘people person’, a ‘sports person’, a ‘black person’, a ‘gay person’? Our individual attributes, whether they be physical, emotional or intellectual, which often reflect only minor parts of our lives, serve as the fuel for generalisation and categorisation. No longer are we a unique person who merely happens to be ‘white’, but instead we have become somebody stripped of individuality and classified under a homogenous group of ‘white people’. Whilst these labels dehumanise and desensitise, we perceive such labels as ‘normal’. Rarely can a female wear a short skirt without being called a ‘slut’ and a male wear pink and take pride in his appearance without people assuming he is ‘gay’. The ‘individual’ ceases to exist and in their place emerges a uniform assembly of faceless persons. Sadly, the ‘boat people’ construct reflects this trend in labelling.

Media outlets rarely provide a glimpse into the lives of individuals seeking asylum. News stories are presented to us, often unwittingly, in the form of *selected* video footage for the purpose of a ‘better story’ or to champion a specific political party’s ideals. Seldom are the plights of real people conveyed – and if they are, all we see is a glimpse. We never hear a news report about a little girl who

has arrived in Australia because her parents want her safe from the tragedy of conflict. We never see a news story explaining that fellow humans have exercised their *right* to asylum and have migrated to a country in the false belief that it will provide a safe haven; a new home. Instead, we are exposed only to the ‘boat people crisis’ the media forces down our throats. A ‘crisis’ far removed from the realities of the war-torn countries ravaged by torture, terror and death that the asylum seekers were (through no fault of their own) living in and desperately trying to escape. In our Australian society we unjustifiably exploit the tragedy suffered by those who journey to this country on boats. It is only from within the polished walls of Parliament and safe confines of our respective homes where we have the audacity to condemn the ‘boat people’ to lives of misery.

We are compressed by social conditions that amplify differences and generate a fear of the unknown. How can we amend the asylum seeker issue and change the discourse surrounding it when governments are indifferent towards human life because they are more concerned with their re-election than the rights of humans to have life and liberty?

We need to communicate to our politicians what we want. We want Australia to support human rights. We want our politicians to abide by international law and human rights standards. We want an effective and humane way of processing these desperate people who want to live peacefully and often wish to work to contribute to the Australian economy; to humanely process those who do not deserve to be treated in a sub-human way in detention centres. We want to say no to offshore processing where children are imprisoned, families suffer and men would rather attempt suicide than live another moment in a place they thought would be safe and different from the country they fled. We need to think about how desperate these people must have been to board a boat with their children, often without ever previously sailing, in the hope of a better life. We want to rid asylum seekers of the stigma of being identified as 'boat people'. We do not want them to remain faceless.

We persecute asylum seekers, simply because they are seeking their right to asylum. It is never their fault for being born into a country of atrocity. What would you do and hope for if you were in their position? 7,500 innocent people are currently imprisoned in Australian detention centres. Over 1,200 of these are children whose detainment can last months or even years. The fates of these 'boat people' are decided by our democratically-elected leaders; leaders who do not know each individual story; leaders who treat all of the individual asylum seekers as one homogenous 'boat people' category. Our Prime Minister should be visiting the people detained, both on the Australian mainland and offshore. Our politicians should be less concerned with political power and more concerned with human rights. Our current handling of asylum seekers and 'solutions' to the 'problem' are unjust and circular. It is up to us to push for effective reform. It is up to us to strive for justice.

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The plight of asylum seekers deserves open discussion in our homes, our workplaces, amongst friends, family and colleagues. It has to become an issue we are all actively engaged in, rather than passively exposed to through mediums that only publish the limited information the government purposefully feeds us. Media are currently banned from entering detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru. How can we expect to be informed of the realities of these offshore processing centres when our government restricts access to reporters and subsequently the public at large? We deserve to know what is happening and how refugees are being treated. We ought to be reminded of the humanity of these people the media has made faceless. In essence, our awareness has been imprisoned by our government. We have had a tall wall built around us; a wall of sturdy and cold sheath which strengthens with time. A wall which keeps separate the relational being

of those outside the wall- those who have sought asylum- from the awareness of those Australian citizens inside the wall. This wall has obstructed our view from the realities of the so-called 'boat people'; a wall only conquerable by those passionate enough to climb it. It is only after climbing this wall when we can empathise with asylum seekers and become vessels for change.

We need to change. We need to change how we think about asylum seekers. We need to change Australia's political views about asylum seekers. We need to change the stigma attached to 'boat people'; a label only exacerbating political propaganda and unwarranted fear. Offshore processing has dehumanised and criminalised these innocent people who are only trying to protect their families. Asylum seekers are not toys, but human beings entitled to freedom. Seeking asylum is not illegal. 'Boat people' are human.

