

Day of Action, Curtin University October 17, 2018.

We rarely hear the voices of women and children incarcerated offshore and today we begin by focusing on those voices. One of the most eloquent documents that has emerged from Australia's offshore prisons is a painting by a 33 year old woman, an architect, held on Nauru since 2013.

We are going to read from her accompanying artist statement, titled '19th July. The worst day of my life'. As many of you know 19 July 2013 is the date the policy of offshore detention was declared by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. All the prime ministers and governments since then remain adamant in their commitment to this policy.

19th July: The worst day of my life

As an architecture graduate, I look at art in geometric forms, with volume, colors and visual elements harmoniously combined...I usually draw portraits with aspects of the person's life, textured, hidden and incorporated into their personal story. Their dreams, sadness, loves, hope, happiness flow throughout the drawing.

I've painted '19th July' to show my own story about trying to seek asylum in Australia and instead of finding safety, I am faced with ... no hope in limbo, told "You will never make Australia home".

In this painting the only thing which is in realism is ocean. Because everything that I've seen during my travelling is based on lies, but the ocean was real and true. The words 19 July [are] tattooed on the top of the canvas same as in my mind.

The fences on both sides of the ocean show a woman is stuck behind the bars, watching the ocean. The sun is brightening in her eyes and in front of her lips. [But] The anchor has broken her heart, because she is stopped at a wrong place.

With fire behind the fences, the spiral gets closer to itself, getting more alone and cloistered, until he sets himself on fire.

There are thoughts of making fire in the woman's mind, but also some brightness of sun that shows that some hopes still remain and stop her from making fire. In front of her face is an angry man who made the 19 July policy. His bruise face and his compressed teeth shows how he hates the woman because she is an asylum seeker.

The 19 July is the worst day of many people's lives.

The artwork and the statement speak powerfully of elemental forces: depths of ocean, scorching sun and fire, and a face filled with hate. These forces determine the lives of those who have been, in the artist's unforgettable words, stopped in a wrong place, anchored by the iron will of governments, while the twin deaths of drowning and burning seem to border their lives. Anchor, a word that we often use to signify security and safety, here suggests the immovability of the policies that we are protesting today. Policies encrusted, silted over, with fear, prejudice and yes, hatred.

Yet, the statement tells us, hands reach out across the ocean, faint hopes that stop people from making fire, from burning, to reach out and tell us of their broken hearts, on which are branded the indelible date July 19, 2013. The date they were stopped at a wrong place.

Nazanin, aged 23, from Iran, was stopped at a wrong place. She was raped by three men, subjected to months of disbelief and harassment on Nauru, and twice attempted to take her life. On her second attempt her kidneys were severely damaged and she was airlifted to Australia on the point of organ failure. Her mother and brother, separated from Nazanin, both attempted suicide. Omid, aged 20, began filling his stomach with stones.

Abhayan, aged 30, from Somalia, was stopped at a wrong place, made pregnant by rape. She was brought to Australia for an abortion then returned abruptly by charter flight before the procedure when she sought counseling first. It took legal intervention before she was allowed an abortion weeks later.

Another pregnant Somali refugee aged 30 was stopped at a wrong place. She was a subject of infibulation, or female genital mutilation, and her desire to have an abortion in Australia was refused, with government lawyers arguing over the size of her vaginal opening as they sought to send her to Taiwan for an abortion, where there are no doctors with experience of treating women in her condition. At the last minute a federal court judge ordered her to be brought to Australia.

Many children held on Nauru are stopped in a wrong place. Some of them have been born in this prison. Others are on the point of reaching maturity, and perhaps having children of their own. We are at risk of having generations of asylum seekers, without a future, incarcerated on Nauru.

Expelled from Nauru a few days ago MSF reported recording 79 suicide attempts there, including one by a boy as young as 9 years old.

A twelve year old Iranian boy, a refugee, is stopped in a wrong place, kept alive intravenously after refusing food and fluids for days, suffering from what is known as resignation syndrome, or the loss of the will to live.

An eight year-old autistic boy stopped has never been to school. His mother is in a catatonic state. They are both stopped in a wrong place.

Nima and Ashkan, a gay refugee couple on Nauru, are stopped in a wrong place, where homosexuality, though decriminalised, is widely abhorred. After three years of beatings and harassment from the local population and from other refugees, Nima is in a critical condition, bedridden with severe depression and trauma. Ashkan is himself ill and unable to look care for his partner. Repeated interventions for the couple have been met with refusal by the responsible Minister, Peter Dutton.

Omid, Ahmed, Farhad, Karim and several others are gay men stopped in a wrong place in Manus Island, where homosexuality is illegal. They live lives of suppression and violence, including being forced into sexual relationships and subjected to threats of rape.

Earlier this week, a 14 year-old girl, a refugee from Iran, stopped in a wrong place, doused herself in petrol and attempted to set herself on fire, tearing out her hair when her parents tried to stop her. After first refusing the recommendation to remove her from Nauru, the Australian government has now given permission after lawyers commenced a court appeal.

We could go on ...

But we want to end by calling out the names of 9 people we know to have died as a result of their incarceration in a wrong place, on Manus Island or Nauru. After each name, we ask you to repeat the name of these casualties of off-shore detention, and the phrase 'His life matters'. We ask you to picture someone you know, someone close to you, the same age as these dead, as you say their names.

1. Reza Barati, a 23 year old Kurdish architecture student was beaten to death inside the Manus Island camp on February 17, 2014.
Reza Barati. His life matters
2. Hamid Khazaei, a 24 year-old man from Iran, died of sepsis in Brisbane on September 5, 2014, after being airlifted too late. The Coroner's report on his death makes plain the responsibility of the Australian government for this preventable death.

Hamid Khazaei. His life matters.

3. Omid Masoumali, a 23 year-old Iranian man, died by immolation, attempting to alert a UN delegation to the desperation of those incarcerated on Nauru.

Omid Masoumali. His life matters.

4. Rakib Khan, a 26 year-old refugee from Bangla Desh died in a hospital on Nauru on 11 May 2016. The circumstances in which a 26 year old came to suffer a heart attack remain unknown. No inquests are held for detainees who die outside the Australian mainland.

Rakib Khan. His life matters

5. Faysal Ishak Ahmed, a 27 year-old Sudanese man collapsed and fell down the stairs as a result of seizure on 23 December 2016. As many as 13 prior pleas for treatment of his condition had been denied by IHMS.

Faysal Ishak Ahmed. His life matters.

6. Hamed Shamshiripour, a 31-year old Iranian man, died by hanging in August 2017. He suffered from a mental breakdown for at least seven months prior to his death, but received no meaningful treatment.

Hamed Shamshiripour. His life matters.

7. Rajeev Rajendran, a 32 year-old Tamil man was found dead in a similar manner less than two months later. He too had previously sought mental health treatment to no avail.

Rajeev Rajendran. His life matters.

8. Salim Kyawning, a Rohingya refugee in his early 50s died in May 2018. He was an epileptic who had previously been sent to Australia for treatment, but was then returned to Manus prison where there were no facilities for his ongoing care. He is believed to have died by suicide.

Salim Kyawning. His life matters.

9. Fariborz Karami, a 26 year-old Kurdish man from Iran, imprisoned on Nauru with his mother and 12 year-old brother, died by suicide on June 15, 2018. Both his mother and brother repeatedly pleaded for help for Fariborz who suffered deeply from his experiences of trauma in Iran. His mother and brother remain at risk.

Fariborz Karami. His life matters.

We also remember those who have not been publicly named and acknowledge that people have also died under the system of mandatory detention closer to where we stand today. We call the names of the men who have died at the Yongah Hill Immigration Detention Centre - Mohammad Nasim Najafi, whose coronial inquest is scheduled to be held in Perth next month, Ali Jaffari whose coronial inquest was held last week and Saruuan Aljhelie, who died as recently as last month. His family will likely have to wait 3 years for the Inquest into his death. Their lives matter.

We also acknowledge that tomorrow marks the 3 year anniversary of Khodayar Amini's immolation in Dandenong. Before his death he stated 'the water give me chance, the Australian government does not give me chance'. Khodayar Amini. His life matters.

We end with the words of another young woman, Mina Taherkhani held on Nauru. Recently she was recently accepted into the U.S as part of the refugee swap deal. In 2016 she wrote:

I was yearning for justice in a country which claims to uphold women's rights but all I have experienced is terror and panic. Systemic violence keeps us in Nauru and it seems our pain has become very good business....The government has enough tools to suffocate us. If you would like to support us, please, please take off your hands from our mouth.'

This day of action is one where we as Australians in universities across the country stand and 'take off our hands from our mouths'. And we take off our hands from the mouths of those stopped in a wrong place, by repeating their words. We know that many of us have been doing so in many ways for five long years since July 19, 2013. Now, at last it seems there is some grounds for hope as the government's own MPs broke ranks yesterday on this lethal policy One thing is certain: we can't stop taking our hands off our mouths until we succeed in making our government hear us.

