

Cultural participation, cultural practices, and cultural rights of refugees

A submission to inform the development of a new National Cultural Policy

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About Us

We are an informal collective of Australian academics living and working on Jagera, Turrbal, Bedegal, and Gadigal lands. Our individual and collaborative work aims to advance the cultural rights and practices of people of refugee background—people forced to flee their homes due to conflict or persecution. We do this through our research, policy, teaching, and advocacy contributions.¹ Our work in this area is aligned and affiliated with the *Global Universities Alliance for Cultural Rights*, an international coalition of universities and academics with a shared commitment to cultural rights as essential to human dignity, social cohesion, peacebuilding and sustainable development.²

We wish to acknowledge the value and importance of First Nations cultures and languages, and the imperative of *First Nations First* in a national cultural policy. We strongly endorse the existence of a national cultural policy, and are grateful for this opportunity to inform the new policy.

Focus of Submission

Our submission centres on the **cultural participation, cultural practices, and cultural rights of refugees**.

Refugee cultural rights and needs are often overlooked in national policy and public discourse. When the needs of refugees are addressed, priority is usually given to

¹ Our research in the area includes Al Shallah (2023, 2025); Grant (2025); Istvandity (2019), Lenette, Maror, & Manwaring (2019); Lixinski (2018); Vrdoljak (2026), and a current project, funded by Worldwide Universities Network, which seeks to inform research, policy, and practice in this area (Grant, Gibson, Istvandity, Lenette, Vrdoljak, et. al., 2026). Regarding policy, for example, Lixinski and Al Shallah are currently commissioned by UNHCR to develop the study that will underpin new guidance on the cultural rights and cultural heritage of refugees. Our teaching addresses matters of refugee culture in courses relating to international cultural policy and law, migration law, refugee studies, mental health, social work, performing arts, and intangible cultural heritage. Our advocacy work spans institutional, community, and public spheres.

² Global Universities Alliance for Cultural Rights (2026).

materialistic needs, which are commonly seen as more urgent concerns than cultural participation and cultural rights. In addition, because refugees are politically disenfranchised, they have little influence over the political decisions that shape cultural policy,³ leading to their further marginalisation in policy.

Refugees are not explicitly mentioned in *Revive*, despite being integral to **Pillar 2, A Place for Every Story**. This pillar aims to reflect in cultural policy the full breadth and diversity of Australian lives and cultural expressions. We concur with *Revive*'s Review Panel: "We need to ensure that every person has access to their cultural rights and creative entitlement, not just those that we view as the majority" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 38).

The scope of our submission spans the following individuals and groups:

- people seeking asylum, regardless of their mode of arrival in Australia;
- people residing in Australia whose request for asylum has been denied;
- people who have been granted refugee status under Australian law;
- people residing in Australia who are stateless; and
- other people in Australia in refugee-like situations, regardless of visa type or status, including children born to parents of refugee background.

Although the scope of our submission does not extend to those individuals or groups who are, or have been, forcibly displaced within Australia's borders,⁴ we acknowledge the massive cultural impacts of internal displacement—including on First Nations people displaced by racist removal and land dispossession policies, and on people displaced by climate disasters.

The Challenges and Needs

Ambitions of cultural inclusion in *Revive* have not yet translated into strong positive cultural change for refugee individuals or communities. **Refugee stories and cultural practices remain largely absent** from mainstream public life, media, and policy discourse, where refugees are often represented as security problems rather than as cultural and social participants. The invisibility of refugee stories and cultural practices may stem from perceptions that refugee matters in general are politically fraught, risky, or uncomfortable; such perceptions are reinforced by decades of securitising and fear-based rhetoric.⁵

When refugee cultural practices *are* made publicly visible—for example, at multicultural festivals and events—they are often presented without opportunities for wider society to genuinely learn or engage; these events therefore risk being (or being perceived as) 'tick-box' diversity displays that exoticise and essentialise refugee cultures. (Refugee-background academic, artist, youth advocate and submission co-author Mas Ghavamjoo asks: "Are we actually listening? Or are we just showcasing?"⁶) At other times, refugee lives, stories, and cultures are publicly presented as those of vulnerability and strife, rather than

³ Lixinski (2018, p. 10).

⁴ In line with the UN Refugee Agency's definition of refugees as persons in need of international protection outside their country of origin (UNHCR, 2001–2026b).

⁵ Ratnam (2019).

⁶ Ghavamjoo (2026).

as positively contributing to Australian society.⁷ These dynamics reflect the **limited policy attention** given to **how broader Australian society can safely, respectfully, and meaningfully receive and interpret refugee stories and cultures.**

Multiple barriers constrain cultural participation for refugees. These include the limited development and availability of culturally safe opportunities to participate, the absence of familiar cultural spaces, challenges with digital access, social exclusion, and a range of potentially challenging personal circumstances—such as uncertain or unstable visa processes, concern for family members overseas, financial pressures, language limitations, and the demands of settlement and daily life. Refugee cultural participation does not occur only in and via formal institutions, but also in homes, parks, and community spaces—contexts that are especially significant for refugee communities, yet are often overlooked in cultural planning. Cultural policy messaging is sometimes unintentionally exclusionary too: for example, when cultural programs and funding schemes offer support for “the arts” or “creativity” but fail to explicitly welcome refugee engagement, they risk excluding refugee cultural practitioners who do not necessarily conceive of what they do in these terms. Barriers like these require targeted responses to enable refugees to participate fully in cultural life. At the same time, refugee experience is highly diverse, and individuals have the right to disengage from heritage practices, or any other form of cultural participation, where they so choose.⁸

Refugee cultural practices face distinct pressures. Unlike many migrant cultural practices, refugee cultural practices may be under threat in their places of origin due to war, conflict, or persecution. In fact, persecuting states often specifically target the culture of certain groups, and the destruction of that culture is specific and direct grounds for members of those groups to leave their countries and seek refuge elsewhere.⁹ The precarious situation of some cultural practices is exacerbated by the fact that their associated language—a crucial vehicle of culture—exists only or primarily in spoken form, sometimes due to illiteracy resulting directly from war or the systemic exclusion of girls and women from education.¹⁰ With the global displacement of those communities, and the inevitable disruption to usual processes of intergenerational cultural transmission, their oral and performance traditions and cultural histories are at an even higher risk of disappearing—unless those cultural practices are strongly and specifically supported by receiving states. At times then, **the very survival of these cultural practices may depend on displaced groups, including younger generations, being supported to maintain them elsewhere.** Targeted measures that support refugee cultural practices and participation can mean the difference between the complete disappearance of those cultural practices and their survival for future generations.¹¹

⁷ Lippi, McKay & McKenzie (2020).

⁸ Lenette, Maror, & Manwaring (2019).

⁹ Submission co-author Ghavamjoo writes: “For my Hazara Afghan communities, for example, participation in cultural practices and artistry has been profoundly disrupted by decades of war, and further compounded by the systematic restrictions enforced by the Taliban. This includes the deliberate destruction of poetry and rich literary traditions, the devaluing of art as a form of expression, and the targeting performance of music, poetry during *Nowruz* (Afghan cultural New Year’s Celebration)” (19 May, 2026).

¹⁰ Including those of the Rohingya, Hazaragi, and Ezidi Kurdish Karamanji people, as examples.

¹¹ UNESCO (2003).

The curtailment or erasure of their cultural expressions and identities is not a new experience, then, for many refugee individuals and communities: such suppression often began long before resettlement. As such, **marginalising refugee stories and cultural practices in Australian policy and practice perpetuates and reinforces a vicious cycle of subjugation**. When individuals or communities arrive in Australia having already had their identities diminished, then find those same identities rendered tokenistic, marginalised, or invisible in their new home, the impact on their autonomy, sense of belonging, and mental health is often, understandably, profound. Further to preservation, then, supporting refugee cultural participation and maintenance is often about restoring dignity and autonomy to individuals and communities whose cultural identities have been deliberately oppressed.

Potential Benefits

Significant social, cultural, economic and health benefits arise when refugees are able to participate in cultural life and share their cultural practices and identities with broader society. Refugee cultural participation can take the form of participating in the cultural life of the receiving country—but very often, the more meaningful form of cultural participation is maintaining cultural practices from the country of origin (or place of affinity), sharing those practices with the community of the receiving country to mutual benefit, and enhancing refugees’ sense of belonging via their own culture. Broadly, cultural participation supports health and wellbeing, strengthens a sense of belonging, reduces social exclusion and isolation, reduces negative stereotyping, fosters intercultural understanding, and shapes more positive public perceptions of refugees.¹² Arts projects developed with refugees have been shown to build social connections, trust, and mutual understanding between newcomers and established residents.¹³ Economically, arts programs help refugees build confidence, gain practical skills, and develop networks that support education and labour-market participation, potentially easing pressure on health and social services.¹⁴ Beyond their measurable outcomes, cultural inclusion opportunities allow refugees to be seen as productive social contributors rather than “problems” or “victims”—which benefits not only them, but broader Australian society too, reducing prejudice, strengthening the nation’s multicultural fabric, and demonstrating to other nations that genuine inclusion is achievable.

Refugee enjoyment of and access to cultural life, and the protection and safeguarding of refugee cultural heritage, is interlinked with **human rights protection, human dignity and identity**.¹⁵ The safeguarding of refugee cultural heritage and protection of refugee cultural rights is enshrined in individual foundational rights around the freedom of expression; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; the right to education; and economic rights.¹⁶ If we Australians commit to humanising refugees and fostering their sense of belonging in this country—as we emphatically should—then Australian cultural policy must protect refugee cultural rights and refugee rights to cultural heritage, across the full diversity of

¹² WHO (World Health Organization) (2022).

¹³ Edmonds & Roberts (2021); Nikolenko et al (2024).

¹⁴ Clini, Thomson & Chatterjee (2019).

¹⁵ Human Rights Council (2016); Vrdoljak (2026).

¹⁶ Al Shallah (2026).

refugee backgrounds and experiences. In this way, cultural policy will contribute to positive overall national policy outcomes.

Ensuring opportunities for refugees to maintain, transmit, practise, share, and celebrate cultural practices is therefore important not only for refugee communities themselves, but for a diverse and resilient Australian cultural ecosystem. An explicit commitment within the National Cultural Policy to support and celebrate refugee arts and cultural practices will ensure Australia aligns with international standards, norms, and instruments — both as regards safeguarding, protecting, and promoting diverse cultural practices¹⁷ and refugee rights.¹⁸ But more than meeting obligations, it promises to advance social cohesion and advance positive relationships across cultural differences in Australia.

Recommendations

In the context of the above remarks, we make the following recommendations:

1. **Strengthen opportunities for cultural-sector refugee leadership and agency** in culturally safe ways. This will ensure that refugee individuals and communities are positioned as cultural leaders as well as participants, and that cultural policies are informed by lived experience. In this way, Australian cultural life will develop the potential to be enriched not only by the cultural practices of refugees, but also by diverse refugee and resettlement experiences.
2. **Refer explicitly to refugee culture in the National Cultural Policy and in arts and culture-related forums, programs, and platforms**, from funding schemes (including those of Creative Australia and other leading cultural agencies), to educational programs, to festival and touring opportunities. Explicitly and consistently referring to, and inviting, refugee stories and cultures will begin to redress their marginalisation in public life and institutions, over time making them more visible and valued. Besides, refugees who (wish to) practise, maintain, share, and celebrate their cultural practices may not always identify as ‘artists’ or ‘creative practitioners’; explicit inclusive messaging will welcome and foster refugee participation in such programs and forums.
3. **Expand investment in programs and initiatives that enable and promote the cultural participation and inclusion of refugees.** This includes investing in initiatives that aim to overcome the structural barriers constraining cultural participation for refugees, like social isolation, racism, financial hardship, and digital access challenges. Grassroots, community-led, and civil-sector organisations already working closely with refugee communities are well positioned to develop and deliver such programs (with refugee leadership), but require adequate funding and resourcing to do so. Cultural institutions, including galleries, archives, libraries, and museums at all levels from the local to the national, can validate refugee cultural practices and enhance their value to both refugee and host societies;¹⁹ educational institutions like schools and universities play important roles in meaningfully

¹⁷ e.g. UNESCO (2003, 2005).

¹⁸ e.g. OHCHR (1966), UNHCR (1951, 1967).

¹⁹ Lixinski (2018, p.11).

including refugee stories and culture in their curricula; and initiatives in community settings (such as homes, parks, and community centres) are likewise important enablers of cultural participation and inclusion, bringing refugee communities together with each other, and with wider Australian society, to build understanding and connection. All such programs require targeted investment and support.

4. **Improve the mechanisms that support wider society to receive, engage with, understand, and respond to refugee stories and cultures.** This entails carefully considering how such stories are encountered and framed in public and community settings, to allow for deep engagement and understanding—thereby avoiding marginalisation or stereotyping. Further, as Ghavamjoo urges, “inclusion should not come at the cost of exploitation”²⁰: refugees should be acknowledged and duly recompensed, including monetarily where appropriate, for their public and community cultural contributions.
5. **Develop targeted cultural support for refugee cultural practices that are at risk in their countries or places of origin.** In addition to the various human rights gains and wellbeing benefits for refugees—and the cultural, social, and economic benefits to Australia—specifically supporting these cultural practices advances the safeguarding of global cultural diversity for future generations. This recommendation aligns with international frameworks including the UNESCO 2003 *Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*²¹ and related human rights instruments—particularly the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*,²² which has been binding upon Australia since 1975.
6. **Embed stronger recognition of the cultural rights of refugees within relevant legislative and policy frameworks, and endorse international instruments and standards that support refugee cultural heritage.** These include UNESCO’s 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, which the Federal Parliament Inquiry into the Juukan Gorge destruction recommended that Australia ratify,²³ and which *Revive* refers to as being under Australian government consideration for ratification,²⁴ but which remains unratified.

Taken together, these actions would enable the National Cultural Policy to advance an Australia where the cultural participation, practices, and rights of refugees are duly acknowledged, recognised, and supported as foundational to a vibrant, rich, and meaningfully inclusive cultural sector.

Gen-AI Declaration

Microsoft CoPilot was used in preparing this submission to improve clarity and readability. The authors retain full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the content.

²⁰ Ghavamjoo (2026).

²¹ UNESCO (2003).

²² OHCHR (1966).

²³ Commonwealth of Australia (2021).

²⁴ Commonwealth of Australia (2023, p. 35).

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