I-CLA!M

Improving the Living
and Labour Conditions
of Irregularised Migrant
Households in Europe

Country report

The narrative construction of migrant irregularity in the United Kingdom

Representation and narratives in media, politics, and civil society

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Executive Summary

This I-CLAIM report examines the narrative construction of migrant irregularity in the UK across three key domains: media, politics, and civil society. Through an in-depth analysis of texts published between 2019 and 2023, it explores how different stakeholders frame and influence public discourse on irregular migration. The study highlights the intersections of legal, economic, and moral narratives, shedding light on how irregularised migrants are portrayed within the broader migration debate.

Key Findings

- *Media Coverage Paradox*

  Media discourse, including liberal and left-leaning outlets, largely reinforces Conservative Party's narratives on irregular migration. This trend underscores the role of media in amplifying government rhetoric.

- *Legality vs. Illegality Dichotomy*

  Political discourse strategically constructs 'illegal migrants' as a counter-image to 'legal' and 'skilled' migrants. Together with the creation of ministerial roles explicitly focused on countering illegal migration, this framing enables the government to justify restrictive migration policies for all.

- *Economic vs. Humanitarian Arguments*

  Civil society employs a dual narrative strategy, advocating for irregular migrants largely through economic contributions and humanitarian concerns. However, this framing remains limited and reactive rather than transformative, as dominant public narratives limit the space for broader discussions on migrant rights and social inclusion. It also ultimately reinforces a state-centred neoliberal logic of 'deservingness' that privileges certain categories of migrants over others.

- *The Role of Quantification*

  Migration discourse in media and politics heavily relies on quantification, particularly concerning small boat crossings and asylum applications. This numeric framing creates a spectacle of control while overshadowing the complexities of how migrants become irregular (e.g., visa overstays, bureaucratic obstacles).

- *Deserving vs. Undesirable Migrants*

  The discourse surrounding migrant workers contrasts 'desirable' skilled workers with 'undesirable' irregular migrants. This distinction is used to justify policies that restrict rights and limit access to resources for irregular migrants, while simultaneously presenting legal migrants as essential contributors to the economy.

A shift towards a more nuanced discussion of migration is needed – one that moves beyond transactional justifications and recognises migration as a natural and historical phenomenon, and migrants as an integral part of society, rather than a crisis to be managed, is essential to fostering more humane and informed migration debate.

1. Introduction

This report examines how migrant irregularity is narratively constructed across three key domains of UK public discourse: media, politics, and civil society. Through a comprehensive analysis of texts published between 2019 and 2023, the report investigates how different stakeholders frame and discuss irregular migration, contributing to shape perceptions and actions around migration more broadly. The report particularly focusses on the relationship between the social and legal construction of 'irregularity' and employment, using an intersectional lens that spotlights gendered, racialised, and family-related representations in this construction.

The report is structured in seven main sections. It begins by explaining the methodology for collecting and analysing the selected texts, which combines quantitative and qualitative approaches (section 2). For each corpus, we then present a detailed analysis of data samples, highlighting the most significant findings through examination of word frequencies, semantic patterns, and narrative structures (sections 3, 4 and 5). Next, we provide a comparative analysis of media, politics, and civil society discourses, showing how these corpora frame irregular migration differently and influence each other's narratives (section 6). We conclude by summarising key findings, discussing implications for public understanding of irregular migration, and identifying potential areas for future action (section 7).

2. Methodology

Our methodology for analysing the dominant narratives in the media, politics, and civil society corpora involved several steps. First, we compiled the three corpora by collecting written texts from relevant stakeholders using specific sampling criteria and tools, which are detailed in the following sections. Second, we used AntConc, an open-source corpus analysis software, to determine word frequency distributions and identify high-frequency words in each corpus, defined as those occurring more than 0.08 times per 1,000 words. Third, for each corpus we categorised these frequent terms into seven broad categories of meanings called 'semantic domains'. [1] To provide a more granular analysis of discourse, words in these domains were further divided into 25 'semantic families', comprising terms with strongly related meanings, and a changing variety of 'semantic groups' consisting of words that share highly similar meanings or represent variations of the same lexical item. This word clustering served two purposes: it provided a methodological tool for organising the vast landscape of words in our corpora by theme while also serving as an initial form of analysis that revealed patterns and relationships between terms. Fourth, we further used discourse analysis software to calculate cumulative frequencies for semantic clusters and determine word associations. This approach identified dominant 'semantic preoccupations' within each corpus and laid the groundwork for qualitative analysis. Finally, we identified salient high-frequency terms aligned with the I-CLAIM thematic focuses (e.g.

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[1] 'Politics and governance' includes terms related to politics and governance, such as socio-political and institutional actors, processes, measures, and political terminology. 'Migration and mobility' encompasses terminology that broadly relates to migration, including descriptors of mobility, administrative procedures, bordering practices, and immigration status. 'Geographic places and scales' include both proper location names of cities, regions, and countries, as well as common terms for general places and territorial boundaries. 'Quantities' collects words related to measurement, assessment, and changes in amounts which are potentially (yet not exclusively) linked to migrant individuals and communities. 'Rights and social protection' encompasses terminology related to rights, welfare services, and other forms of social support. It also includes broader terms describing social attitudes that enable the enforcement or denial of these rights and measures. 'Subjective dimensions' covers physical, relational, experiential, emotional, and identity aspects of life. 'Labour and economy' includes words linked to the actors, processes, sectors, and conditions of the labour market, as well as terms that refer to the economic and financial landscape.

migrants, workers, families) and used them to construct proto-narratives. These preliminary narrative structures then guided our selection of texts for qualitative analysis of dominant narratives in each domain

Our analysis covers 2019-2023, a period marked by major events shaping migration policies in the UK and worldwide. Globally, these included the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the end of the Trump presidency. In the UK, this period saw significant economic challenges (inflation, rising energy prices, widespread strikes) and rapid leadership changes in Conservative governments. Key domestic policy developments that particularly influenced migration narratives include the end of the Brexit transition period (2020), the introduction of the New Plan for Immigration and a new Points-Based System (2021), the establishment of the so-called Rwanda Asylum Plan (2022), and the passage of the Nationality and Borders Act (2022) and Illegal Migration Act (2023).

3. The discursive construction of irregularity in the media

3.1. Data sample

To compile the media corpus, we selected four widely-read UK newspapers with diverse readerships: The Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday, a right-wing tabloid with the highest UK readership, known for sensationalist reporting on migration; The Daily Mirror/Sunday Mirror, a left-leaning tabloid targeting working- and lower-middle-class readers, using emotive language; The Times/Sunday Times, a centre-right publication appealing to educated middle- and upper-class readers; The Guardian/Observer, a centre-left liberal broadsheet known for factual, in-depth coverage, attracting educated, socially conscious readers.

We used the Lexis Nexis database to filter articles using a complex search code with over 80 expressions that combined variations of the word 'irregular' (prefix) with migrant-related (root 1), migration-related (root 2), or work-related terms (root 3). For inclusion in the corpus, an article needed to contain just one of these combinations (e.g. "irregular migrants" or "illegal work"). Each search expression revealed content that others would not have captured, thus contributing to a mosaic that delineates the discursive landscape of migrant irregularity in the UK. After manual refinement, this search yielded 5,987 articles, comprising 94,319 words and 11,259,475 tokens, representing the total count of individual words.

Prefix: 'irregular'	Root 1: 'migrants'	Root 2: 'migration'	Root 3: 'work'
irregular*	migrant*	migration	work*
illegal*	immigrant*	immigration	employment
illicit*	foreigner*	small boat*	employee
overstay*	alien*	entry	delivery rider*
unwanted	individual*	entries	rider*
clandestine	people*	arrival*	cleaner*
unauthorised	minor*	crossing*	domestic worker*
undocumented	child*	entering	
without authorisation	young	stay*	
in breach of visa conditions	youth*	living	
	woman / women		
	man / men		

The distribution of articles resulting from the search code was as follows: The Guardian: 2,962 articles (50%); The Times: 1,526 articles (25%); The Daily Mail: 1,185 articles (20%); and The Daily Mirror: 314 articles (5%). Though this uneven distribution does not represent the political slant of the overall public discourse on irregular migration, it reveals how extensively major UK newspapers cover the topic. For instance, The Guardian's higher article count, followed by The Times, reflects the broader international reporting of these publications it offers insight into the extent to which major UK newspapers cover the topic.

3.2. Quantitative analysis

The analysis of the media corpus begins with an examination of the quantitative distribution and associations within its lexical landscape. First, we discuss the distribution of high-frequency words (frequency ≥ 0.08‰) to uncover dominant lexical patterns. Next, we explore the main semantic themes and their hierarchical relationships to each other. Finally, we analyse the 'collocations' for salient words (e.g. *migrants*, *families*, *workers*) to understand the dominant meanings associated with them.

3.2.1. Lexical patterns

The frequency of word usage is a significant indicator of how particular issues are framed, characterised, and represented in discourse. The linguistic choices made by media outlets, political entities, and civil society organisations when describing identical phenomena can substantially influence the perceptions and understanding of readers and voters. In this section, we examine and compare high-frequency words pertinent to the construction of media narratives surrounding irregular migration, focussing on four key areas: (1) the portrayal of migration as both an abstract and an actor-centred phenomenon; (2) the terminology employed to describe migrants with no legal status; (3) the gendered and family-oriented dimensions of migration discourse; (4) the role of labour within these narratives. We apply this analytical lens consistently in high-frequency word analysis across the corpora.

Framing migration

Frequency analysis reveals several key patterns in the portrayal of 'migration' and 'migrants'. Media discourse employs a dual framing approach, using *migrants* (and not *immigrants*) when referring to individuals, which centres on the actors themselves, while *immigration* (and not *migration*) is used to describe the broader phenomenon, reflecting a more state-centric and directional perspective. Interestingly, the plural forms of these terms (*migrants*, *immigrants*) dominate the narrative, portraying migration as a collective rather than an individual experience. This collective framing is further emphasised by the fact that references to migrants outweigh mentions of the phenomenon itself by a significant 20%, effectively spotlighting the figure of the migrant, whether in a positive or negative light, over the wider socio-political context of migration. Furthermore, the analysis reveals how maritime arrival terms such as *boats*, *crossings*, and *arrivals* (presenting a cumulative frequency of 1.6‰) significantly outweigh staying/overstaying terms (0.3‰). This disparity in terminology frames irregular migration primarily through the lens of small-boat arrivals, potentially skewing public perception of the diverse ways in which migrants become irregular.

Framing irregularity

The discourse surrounding legal status is dominated by the concept of 'illegality'. The terms *illegal*, *illegally*, and *illegality* appear very frequently (0.9 ‰) while *undocumented* emerges as a distant second (0.2‰) while

irregular and its derivates occur infrequently (0.06‰). The scarcity of terms denoting loss of residence rights, such as *overstaying* and *breach*, further underscores how media narratives, focused on small boat arrivals, tend to obscure the procedural and administrative nature of irregularity.

Framing households

The corpus reveals a rich vocabulary of household relationships, unmatched in other analysed corpora. While the terms *family* and *families* appear relatively seldom, the cumulative frequency value of related terms (such as *parents, father, mother, son,* and *wife*) places the family dimension (1.62‰) at the forefront of media narratives on irregular migration. Regarding the representation of demographic groups, references to *children* (0.60‰) appear about twice as often as *women* (0.38‰) and *men* (0.28‰), suggesting enhanced media coverage of childhood. However, grouping family-related lexical items (e.g. *female, daughters, sons*) into gender-specific semantic groups reveals a rather balanced representation of children, women and men.

Framing labour

Media narratives show a notable marginalisation of the labour dimension. This is manifested in a limited and very generic vocabulary associated with work-related themes, with most lexical items occupying lower frequency strata within the corpus (frequency ≤ 0.2 ‰). Variations of the abstract term 'work' (e.g. *working, jobs, labour*) dominate in both absolute numbers and frequency (1.9‰), overshadowing references to *workers* themselves (0.5‰). While infrequent, the more specific references to work-related issues largely pertain to working conditions (0.65‰), primarily wages and their negotiations (e.g. *pay, income, strike*) and, notably, *slavery*.

3.2.2. *Semantic preoccupations*

Semantic preoccupations describe the dominant themes and their hierarchical relationships that emerge when analysing the cumulative frequencies of words grouped into semantic domains. The thematic clustering of high-frequency words in the media corpus shows a pronounced focus on institutional, political, and geopolitical aspects, indicating that media discourse frames irregular migration primarily as an issue of political reporting. This framing reinforces a state-centric lens and overshadows other important dimensions such as human rights or labour-related factors (fig.1).

The 'politics and governance' domain dominates media narratives on irregular migration (fig. 1), comprising 36% of the lexicon (375 out of 1,044 terms) with a cumulative frequency of 75‰. This domain focuses on political actors' actions and viewpoints, covering issues of governance (e.g. *decision, statement, agenda*), negotiations (e.g. *deal, agree, promise*), and decision-making (e.g. *launched, actions, target*). It emphasises government entities (e.g. *Home Office, White House, prime minister*), political parties (e.g. *Labour, Conservative*), and key political figures (e.g. *Donald Trump, Joe Biden,* and *Rishi Sunak*). Overall, this domain reinforces and propagates a top-down perspective on migration governance that highlights the decisive role of the executive power and individual political figures.

The 'quantities' semantic domain, while smaller in size (55 words, sum frequency 15‰), with the most frequently used quantity markers indicating circumvention (*all*) and vagueness (*some*), prioritises language that emphasises quantification and numerical analysis and can be interpreted as reinforcing the dominance of state-centric perspective on irregular migration.

Figure 1: frequency by semantic domain
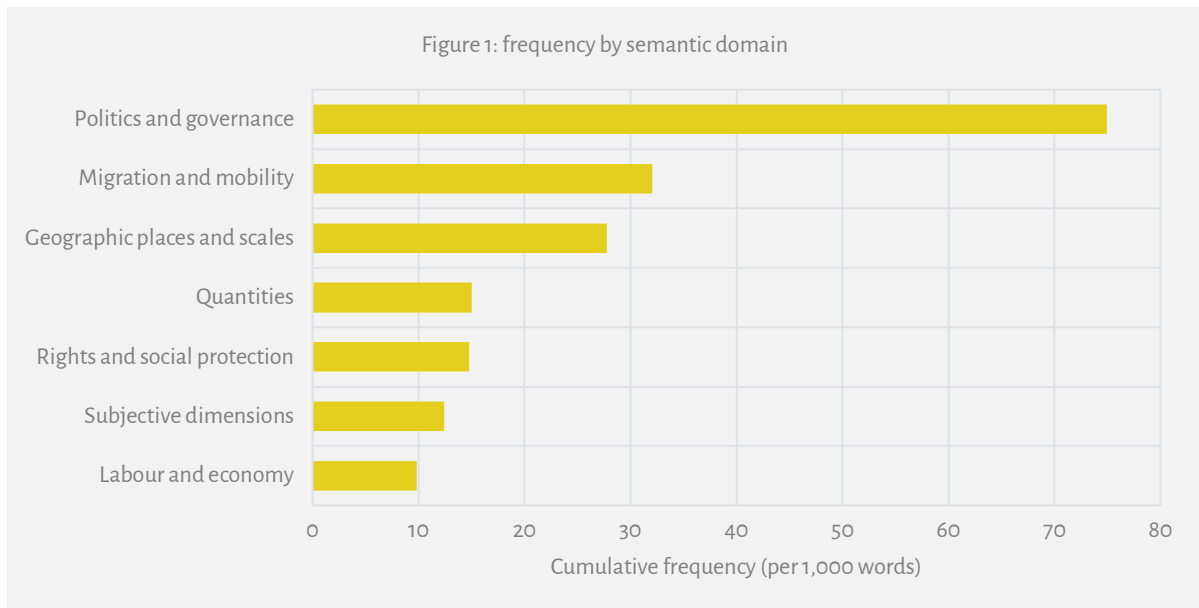
The next most prevalent semantic domains are 'migration and mobility' (227 words, sum frequency 32‰) and 'geographic places and scales' (124 words, sum frequency 28‰). The former comprises words primarily describing asylum seekers, small boat crossings, and border control (e.g. *sent*, *stop*, *prevent*). The latter shows diverse geographical coverage, with the *US*, *France*, and *Russia* being the most frequently mentioned foreign countries. The *UK* accounts for 20% of the corpus frequency, with coverage heavily concentrated on *Britain*, *London*, and the English *Channel* — a key geographical focus that overshadows other UK regions.

The 'rights and social protection' domain (65 words, sum frequency 15‰) covers welfare services like education (e.g. *schools*, *university*, *students*), healthcare (e.g. *health*, *NHS*, *hospital*), [2] and housing (e.g. *homes*, *hotels*, *accommodation*), as well as other areas of social support (e.g. *aid*, *relief*, *benefits*). COVID-19 related words (e.g. *coronavirus*, *vaccine*, *lockdown*) are included in this domain, accounting for one-third of its cumulative frequency. This lexical distribution reflects both the heightened focus on public health during the pandemic and the media attention to the controversial use of hotels as temporary accommodation for asylum seekers.

The 'subjective dimensions' domain (96 words, sum frequency 12.4‰) covers physical, relational, experiential, emotional, and identity aspects. Terms related to life (*live*, *lives*, *living*) and death (e.g. *deaths*, *death*, *died*) emerge as a salient dichotomy that characterises the description of lived experience.

The 'labour and economy' domain (106 words, sum frequency 10‰) is in the last position. Notably, terms related to finance (e.g. *business*, *financial*, *company*), political economy (e.g. *tax*, *trade*, *inflation*), and transactions (e.g. *money, cost*) appear more often than work-specific terms, reflecting a limited focus on labour issues. These refer to incomes (e.g. *pay*, *income*), strikes (e.g. *strike*, *industrial*, *walkout*), modern slavery (e.g. *slavery*, *slave*, *enslaved*), and *exploitation*.

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[2] NHS stands for National Health System.

3.2.3. Word collocations

In discourse analysis, 'collocations' refer to the combinations of words that frequently occur together in a given context. Collocations are measured through a 'likelihood' value that indicates their association strength in a statistically significant way. They are crucial for uncovering underlying patterns and themes in how different topics are represented in, exposing potential biases and stereotypes that shape dominant discourse.

Building on our previous analysis of lexical patterns, this section examines collocations of selected words related to the key themes of migration, households, and labour. Notably, we consider the terms migration/migrants and work/workers in tandem to elucidate how the different corpora narratively construct the general phenomenon and its protagonists. Moreover, we compare the collocations for 'women' and 'men' to elucidate the gendered narrative construction of irregular migration.

Migrants and immigration

Collocation analysis for 'migrants' reveals a vast lexical landscape that reinforces the interconnectedness between the English Channel and the production of irregularity. Indeed, the semantic group most strongly associated with migrants evokes maritime imagery (e.g. *channel, small boat, dinghies, shores*), closely followed by terms denoting immigration status (*illegal* and *undocumented*) and verbs depicting border crossing (e.g. *crossing, crossed, across*) and arrivals (e.g. *arrived, reached, enter, influx*).

In contrast, the abstract term 'immigration', which reflects the perspective of the receiving country, is more closely linked to governance and control being however while being strongly associated with immigration status descriptors (predominantly 'illegal'). Indeed, the dominant semantic groups associated to 'immigration' centre on legal and policy frameworks (e.g. *system, policy, reform*), immigration enforcement (e.g. *block, stop, clamp, curb*) and law enforcement priorities (e.g. *crime, raids, offenders, arrested*).

Families, women, and men

Collocation analysis for 'families' suggest that media discourse predominantly focuses on issues of unity and separation (e.g. *separated, reunite, apart*), child-rearing (e.g. *children, kids*), emotional well-being (e.g. *loved, struggling, affected, pain*), and socio-economic challenges (e.g. *income, low, food, poorer*), with secondary emphasis on support systems, vulnerability, and loss.

Media discourse surrounding women (fig. 2) predominantly focuses on *children* and women's reproductive roles (e.g. *babies, pregnant, abortion*), racial or ethno-national identities (e.g. *colour, black, Afghan, Asian, Muslim*) and youth age (e.g. *girls, young, adolescent*). Additional areas include rights and empowerment (e.g. *equalities, rights, access, empowerment*) and violence and abuse (e.g. *violence, trafficked, harassment, raped*).

Men (fig. 3) are primarily characterised in terms of quantities (e.g. *two, three, mostly, group, thousands*), young age (e.g. *young, boys, adolescents*), racial and ethno-national identity (e.g. *black, white, Albanian, Pakistani*) and crime (e.g. *arrested, innocent, charged*). This characterisation notably includes terms associated with sexual violence (such as *groped* and *raped*) and underscores the prevalence of media narratives that foreground the imaginary of large groups of racialised young males with a propensity to sexual violence and criminal activities. Other distinctive areas with lower but still relevant association strengths include those describing physical attributes (e.g. *crouched, bodies, masked, bellies, fatigues*), warfare (e.g. *armed, fighting, enlist, conscripts*), and boat crossings (e.g. *carrying, boat, dinghy*).
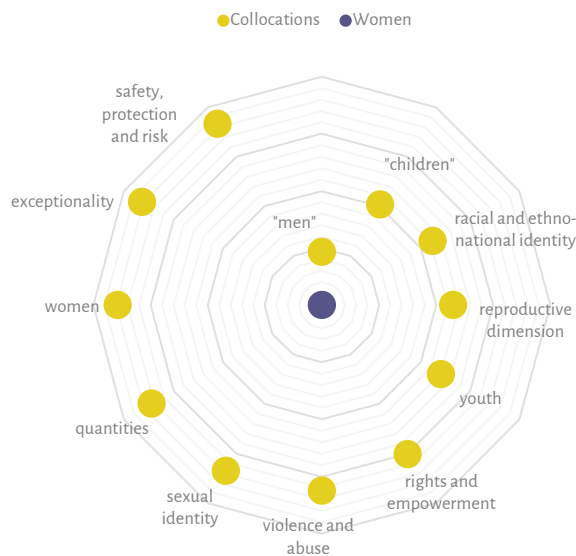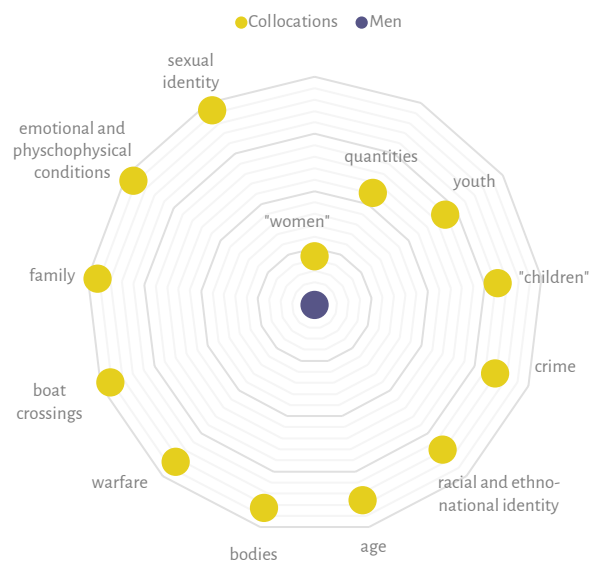
Fig. 2: semantic group collocation for *women*

● Collocations ● Women

safety, protection and risk · "children" · exceptionality · "men" · racial and ethno-national identity · women · reproductive dimension · quantities · youth · sexual identity · rights and empowerment · violence and abuse

Fig. 3: semantic group collocation for *men*

● Collocations ● Men

sexual identity · emotional and physophysical conditions · quantities · youth · "women" · family · "children" · boat crossings · crime · warfare · racial and ethno-national identity · bodies · age

Work and workers

Collocation analysis for 'work' shows an interesting interplay between labour, immigration status (e.g. *visas, permits, legally, holders, residency*), and moral assessment (e.g. *hard, tirelessly, willing, essential, fair*). Additional semantic fields, albeit less prominently associated, include work requirements (e.g. *unable, allowed, permitted, authorisations*), compensation (e.g. *pensions, pay, salary*), and specific labour market sectors (e.g. *sex, construction, farms, carers*).

The term 'workers', on the other hand, is primarily linked to labour market sectors, predominantly healthcare (e.g. *NHS, nurses, medical, doctors*) and agri-food (e.g. *farm, agricultural, meat, farmers, poultry*). It is also strongly associated with worker categories that either gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. *frontline, essential, key*) or are defined in immigration schemes (e.g. *skilled, seasonal, temporary, overseas*). Additional semantic areas include, in descending order of association strength: salary (e.g. *pay, wages, low, minimum*), migration (e.g. *migrant, foreign*), employers (e.g. *employers, recruit, hiring, gangmasters*), quantities (e.g. *thousands, many, million*), and unions (e.g. *union, striking, bargaining*).

3.3. Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis of the media, politics, and civil society corpora examines selected content featuring variations of dominant proto-narratives identified through quantitative analysis. Proto-narratives are exemplary forms of storytelling with a basic structure (character, action, settings, means, and moral) that serve as building blocks for fuller narratives. These preliminary narratives guided our selection of texts for analysing dominant narratives in each domain.

This section presents a qualitative analysis of media narratives surrounding three salient figures: (a) migrant workers, (b) 'illegal' and 'undocumented' migrants, and (c) 'illegal' and 'undocumented' migrants in employment. Specifically, it examines how media representations mainstream particular understandings of

irregularity and highlights two significant shifts in public discourse: first, how the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a temporary reconceptualization of 'key workers', rearticulating the tension between 'economic contribution' and 'limited capacity' arguments; second, how media coverage of both the Rwanda deportation policy and Channel crossings has systematically supported dehumanising and criminalising narratives.

3.3.1. Migrant workers

During the pandemic, frontline/essential/key workers, including migrant workers, were essential in maintaining critical services

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The characterising workers as *frontline*, *essential*, or *key* constitutes a prominent narrative trend in the media corpus, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This framing appears predominantly in The Guardian, indicating that the 'contribution' argument is primarily articulated through liberal media outlets. While the term 'frontline' is typically linked to healthcare workers, it is never explicitly associated with migrant workers. In contrast, the expression 'essential workers' is used more inclusively, encompassing lorry drivers, grocery store employees, and transportation workers, and showing stronger association with migrant workers and workers from marginalised or racially minoritised communities. Though present in UK newspapers, 'essential workers' mainly appears in US-focused coverage. Lastly, the phrase 'key workers', used more frequently in the UK contexts, appears almost exclusively in The Guardian and prevalently to highlight contradictions between public praise for their role in maintaining critical services and the prevailing anti-immigrant rhetoric shaping government migration policies.

> *It is not enough for some Conservative MPs to realise that the migrants they dismissed as "low-skilled" are in fact "key workers". The logic that underpinned this thinking is the problem. People's rights, their access to healthcare, their ability to survive — none of this should be determined by how much they earn, their perceived skills or their immigration status. This is as true now as it will be when the pandemic is over. But if we aren't careful, it risks being ignored. (M-Guardian-2020-03-30).*

Right-leaning newspapers discuss migrants as workers that are 'key' or 'essential' for maintaining critical services only twice over the five years considered in our study. In these cases, they either refer to "individual immigrant doctors" (M-Times-2020-05-04) or frame the recruitment of foreign workers within a broader narrative that depicts immigration as a burden on limited public resources and services, as shown in the following excerpt:

> *Since 2000 the UK population has risen by some eight million to about 67 million. Some 80 per cent of that rise has been from immigration. Already, the sheer weight of these numbers means more and more people finding difficulty getting housed, obtaining a doctor's appointment or finding a school place. Although there are shortages of certain key workers in Britain, hiring foreigners to fill those posts often means bringing in their dependants too — which puts even more pressure on those public services. (M-Times-2022-09-06)*

3.3.2. Undocumented and illegal migrants

While media narratives characterise migrant workers primarily through their alleged economic contribution, migrants without legal status are framed exclusively as a matter of border control.

With regard to the terminology used, the media corpus predominantly characterises them as *illegal* and less frequently as *undocumented*. A significant geographical divergence is observed in the deployment of these terms: the phrase 'undocumented migrants' is exclusively associated with US policy discourse, specifically in relation to citizenship rights and immigration enforcement at the U.S.-Mexican border. Conversely, 'illegal migrants' appears exclusively in UK contexts, particularly in conservative-leaning newspapers, and is clustered around three primary narrative areas: the Rwanda deportation policy, Channel crossings, and criminality.

The policy of sending illegal migrants to Rwanda is unlawful / flawed / in a legal limbo

Narratives about Rwanda deportations are central to media representations of 'illegal migrants', yet these stories focus not on the migrants themselves but on the legal and practical challenges of implementing such policies. Our analysis shows that despite using varied language, newspapers consistently employ dehumanising rhetoric that reduces migrants to mere items in the logistics process of deportation. The dominant terms *send* and *sending*, along with the less common *transport* and *packed off*, serve as objectifying mechanisms. Similarly, the bureaucratic terms *deport* and *remove*, favoured by the Guardian and Times, distances readers from the human impact of these policies.

A further critical point is that, in line with most recent immigration acts, media descriptions of the Rwanda deportation plan consistently blur the distinct categories of 'illegal migrants' and 'asylum seekers':

The government insists the policy under which illegal migrants are deported to Rwanda to apply for asylum, is necessary (M-Times-2022-12-19)

This narrative construction functions as a discursive mechanism through which the notion of 'illegal immigrants' is constructed as a means to establishing a moral categorisation that transcends the legal classification of asylum seekers. This rhetorical shift effectively relocates migration debates into an area of legal exceptionalism, wherein conventional juridical frameworks are suspended or superseded.

Right-wing publications offer a less common narrative about the Rwanda plan, presenting it as a potential deterrent to Channel crossings, and introduce to another major theme in conservative-leaning media coverage of 'illegal migrants': Channel crossings.

Great amounts of illegal migrants cross the Channel
Smuggling gangs send illegal migrants across the Channel

These two emerging proto-narratives reveal a strong emphasis on migrant numbers and smugglers' roles, with smuggling narratives playing a crucial role in portraying migrants as both victims and threats.

Smugglers are portrayed in two ways: either as ruthless gangs or as tour guides and taxi services enabling illegal migration. In the first portrayal, smugglers are framed through a criminalisation lens, with migrants constructed as victims. In the second, the moral judgment of smugglers is softened, while blame and negative attributes shift onto the migrants themselves. This dual framing is fundamental to media coverage of Channel crossings, which consistently links both groups until they appear complicit in the criminal endeavour of 'illegal migration'. Adding a tragicomic note, the portrayal of 'illegal migrants' as an inevitable and threatening sea invasion is reinforced through the frequent use of the Spanish Armada metaphor, as shown in the following excerpt:

In an attempt to recapture the spirit of Dunkirk and of Sir Francis Drake, who foiled the Spanish Armada, a number of small ships set sail from Dover to intercept a flotilla of illegal immigrants in speedboats and on a selection of novelty inflatables, who were attempting to cross the Channel in a bid to beat Brexit border controls. (M-Mail-2019-07-05)

Finally, media narratives systematically link 'illegal migrants' with 'criminals', as shown in the proto-narratives below.

Lawyers make it hard to deport foreign criminals and illegal migrants
New policy initiatives will make it easier to deport foreign criminals and illegal migrants

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The persistent pairing of these terms creates an implicit cognitive connection that uses proximity instead of explicit assertion to construct perceived criminality. This semantic transfer, where connotations from one group extend to the other, aligns with and reinforces existing policy framework that already subjects both categories to identical deportation measures.

3.3.3. Undocumented and illegal migrants in employment

References to '*undocumented* (migrant) workers' are predominantly employed by The Guardian in narratives emphasising their economic contributions and susceptibility to exploitation across diverse international contexts. Conversely, the less common phrase '*illegal* (migrant) workers' is primarily used by tabloid publications (The Daily Mirror and The Daily Mail) in coverage of enforcement actions – specifically raids, arrests, and business penalties – with exploitation-related content emerging as a secondary theme:

Companies have been fined for employing illegal workers

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4. The discursive construction of irregularity in politics

4.1. Data sample

The politics corpus was compiled primarily using the Search Parliamentary Material database from the House of Commons Library. Relevant content was identified using filters adapted from the media corpus search, focusing on Parliamentary and Committee proceedings. Results were then manually refined to exclude unrelated documents. Data collection was then expanded by examining unlisted documents produced by parliamentary committee inquiries or submitted by the government to the Independent Chief Inspector of

Borders and Immigration (ICIBI). This approach ensured comprehensive coverage of documents related to irregular migration. While parliamentary documents were the primary focus, the search also yielded statements and declarations from government members. The final corpus comprises 107 parliamentary documents (including debates, committee reports, and expert testimonies) and 96 governmental documents (such as committee responses, written evidence to ICIBI, Q&A sessions, and ministerial written statements read in the parliament). Additionally, fifteen political manifestos from UK parties were added. With 218 documents, the politics corpus encompasses 27,100 words and 2,490,453 tokens.

4.2.   Quantitative analysis

Following the structure of the media analysis, we start by examining the distribution of high-frequency words (frequency ≥ 0.08‰) to uncover dominant lexical patterns. Next, we explore the main semantic themes and their hierarchical relationships to each other. Finally, we investigate the 'collocations' for salient words (e.g. *migrants*, *families*, *workers*) to understand the dominant structure of meanings associated with them.

4.2.1.   *Lexical patterns*

In this section, we examine and compare high-frequency words pertinent to the construction of narratives surrounding irregular migration, focussing on four key areas of migration, legal status, gender and family dimensions, and labour.

Framing migration

The politics corpus frames irregular migration primarily in terms of asylum seekers. Notably, words linked to asylum (e.g. *asylum*, *claim*, *refugee*, *seekers*) appear six times more (5.9‰) than words describing migrants (e.g. *migrants*, *foreign*) (1‰). Moreover, unlike in the media, the politics corpus shows a marked preference for representing the abstract phenomenon rather than for its protagonists. Indeed, the term *migration* (0.9‰) and *immigration* (1.7‰) appear two and four times as often as *migrants* (0.4‰). A similar trend can be observed with regard to the words indicating asylum applicants (e.g. *refugee*, *refugees*, *seekers*) which appear up to four times less than the term *asylum* (2.2‰). The prevalence of abstract terms reveals a focus on governing the broader socio-political phenomenon of migration rather than on migrants themselves. This approach also explains the large use of a more impersonal lexicon indicating administrative processes (e.g. *process*, *apply*, *assessment*, *review*, *application*).

Framing irregularity

Similar to the media corpus, the discourse surrounding legal status centres on illegality, while also distinctively emphasising its counterpart — legality. The term *legal* has the third highest frequency rate (1.3‰) in the 'migration and mobility' domain, after *asylum* and *migration*. Its high frequency stems from its strong connection to words indicating both legal access (e.g. *safe*, *routes*, *access*, *entrants*) and legal processes (e.g. *aid*, *advice*, *challenges*, *proceedings*). Instead, the term *illegal* and its variations (e.g. *illegally*) appear slightly less frequently (1.1‰) but represent substantially the unique terms used to define access and stay in the country without a residence permit. It is more strongly associated with migration and migrants than with words describing entry (e.g. *crossings*, *arrivals*, *flow*). Notably, the term *illegal* appears in the phrase 'Illegal Migration Bill' and 'Illegal Migration Act' only 23% of the time. This means that in 3 out of 4 instances, it is the default term used to describe irregular migrants in political documents. Interestingly, the term *status* appears as frequently

as *illegal* (0.7‰). However, collocation analysis (e.g. *pre-settled, scheme, EU, settlement*) shows that is especially used in relation to more privileged categories of migrants, such as EU citizens and refugees.

Framing households

The politics corpus reveals a clear hierarchy among demographic groups. *Children* and related terms are prominently featured (2.8‰), followed by family-related words such as *families* and *parents* (1.1‰), with *women* (0.4‰) and *men* (0.1‰) mentioned far less frequently. This uneven lexical landscape may stem from the strategic use of family- and childhood-related narratives in political discussions about irregular migration.

Framing labour

The politics corpus is characterised by a focus on labour that emphasises exploitation and modern slavery (e.g. *modern slavery, exploitation, exploited*) as main areas of concern (3.1‰). Comparatively, generic words describing work (e.g. *work, jobs, employment*) appear slightly less frequently (2.8‰) while those related to workers (e.g. *workers, staff, union*) are comparatively very low (0.9‰). Notably, the words *sex* and *sexual* present high frequency values and are often found in association with *exploitation, abuse, assault, violence, crimes, harm, trade*, and *trafficking*.

4.2.2. *Semantic preoccupations*

Analysis of word frequencies within the politics corpus reveals a strong self-referential focus, with debate oriented toward future actions, guided by moral evaluations, and directed at enforcement measures. The corpus, however, maintains a balanced attention to other areas, including social protection issues and economic and labour-related considerations (fig. 4).

The 'politics and governance' domain dominates the politics corpus, comprising half of the lexicon (390 out of 770 terms) with a cumulative frequency of 112‰, matching all other domains combined. It covers various areas of political discourse: decision-making (e.g. *should, ensure, decisions*), public sphere (e.g. *public, local, community*), progress and opportunity (e.g. *future, improve*), moral evaluations (e.g. *fair, wrong, genuine*). Institutional roles (e.g. *minister, committee*) and legislative frameworks (e.g. *bill, amendment*) are also prominent, while law enforcement terms (e.g. *victims, crime, gangs*) appear less frequently.

Figure 4: frequency by semantic domain
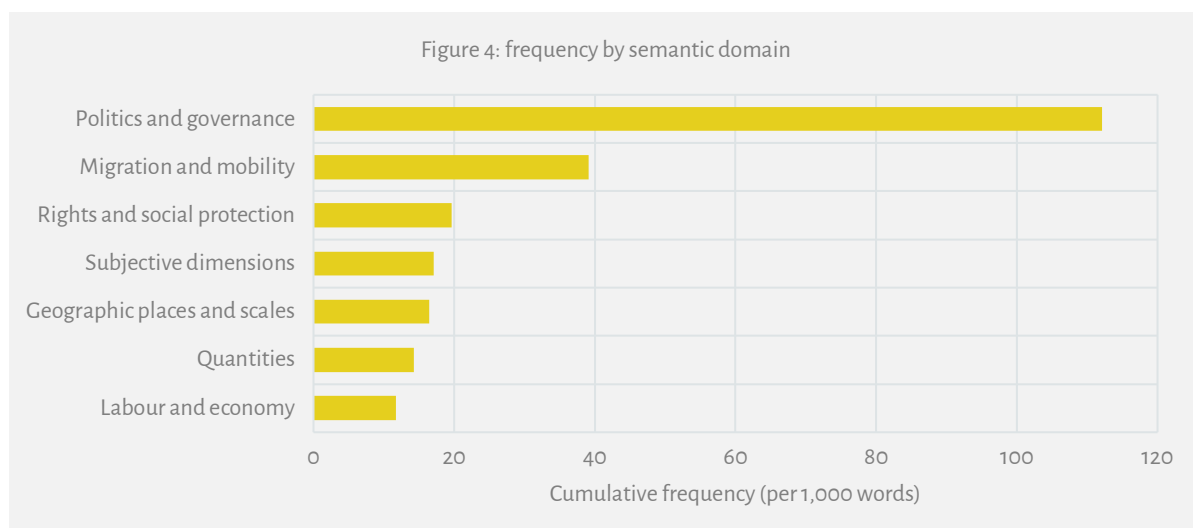
'Migration and mobility' is the second most prominent semantic domain (123 words, sum frequency 39‰). Its lexical distribution suggests that the political corpus frames irregular migration primarily through its connection to asylum seekers (e.g. *asylum*, *claim*, *refugee*), emphasising bureaucratic and administrative procedures (e.g. *assessment*, *review*, *eligible*) rather than arrivals (e.g. *come*, *entry*, *arrived*), crossings (e.g. *small boats*, *crossing*) and border control measures (e.g. *borders*, *stop*, *cap*, *ban*).

The five remaining semantic domains exhibit comparable levels of prominence within the corpus. The 'rights and social protection' domain ranks third (70 words, sum frequency of 20‰) covering key aspects of migrant experiences: risks associated with Channel crossings (e.g. *safe*, *harm*, *dangerous*, *emergency*), access to welfare provisions (e.g. *provisions*, *help*, *benefits*), concerns about migrant accommodation (e.g. *accommodation*, *hotel*, *facilities*), and health-related issues during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. *NHS*, *medical*, *healthcare*). The phrase "human rights" also appears frequently in the corpus.

The 'subjective dimension' domain (46 words, sum frequency 18‰) is dominated by *people*, accounting for 25% of its frequency. Key areas include age descriptors (e.g. *children*), emotional and psychophysical terms (e.g. *hope*, *vulnerable*, *fear*), and family-related words. The prevalence of emotion-related terms reflects the corpus's personal nature, often including first-person statements from government officials or parliamentary committees, rather than indicating increased concern for migrants' well-being.

The 'geographic places and scales' domain (41 words, sum frequency 16‰) emphasises state-level terms (e.g. *UK*, *country*, *national*) over both international ones (e.g. *world*, *global*, *Europe*) and domestic regions and cities (e.g. *Scotland*, *Wales*, *London*). The top mentioned foreign countries differ from the media corpus, being less linked to the international geopolitical context and more associated to border policy issues. These include, in descending order: *Rwanda*, *Ireland*, *Albania*, *France*, *Afghanistan*, and *Ukraine*.

The 'quantities' domain (52 words, sum frequency 14‰) emphasises large quantities (e.g. *many*, *most*, *million*), increases (e.g. *more*, *higher*, *rise*), and measurements (e.g. *numbers*, *figures*, *statistics*). While not exclusively linked to migration flows, these terms emphasise a data-driven approach to understanding migration-related social phenomena that prioritises and instrumentalises quantification and numerical analysis.

The 'labour and economy' domain is the less relevant (49 words, sum frequency 12‰). Key areas include labour exploitation (e.g. *modern*, *slavery*, *sexual exploitation*), financial aspects (e.g. *cost*, *pay*, *tax*), and general work descriptors (e.g. *jobs*, *employment*). Despite ranking lowest in overall frequency, this domain boasts a rich vocabulary for financial and economic concepts.

4.2.3. *Word collocations*

Following the structure of the previous chapter, this section examines the collocations of salient words in three main areas of interest: migration, households and gender, and labour.

Migrants and immigration

Collocation analysis reveals that 'migrants' are primarily portrayed as either *illegal* or *undocumented*. Additional collocates highlight the role of moral assessment in the narrative construction of irregular migration, with words such as *economic*, *unscrupulous*, and *dodgy* depicting migrants either as undeserving of state support and public compassion, or as victims of smugglers and criminal gangs. The association with

words related to arrivals and crossings (e.g. *coming*, *arriving*, *boats*, *crossing*) and quantities (e.g. *flow*, *number*, *surge*) contributes to completing the picture.

As expected, the abstract term 'immigration' is more strongly associated with the governance of the phenomenon rather than the characterisation of its subjects. Collocates show a prevalence of regulatory terms (e.g. *rules*, *compliance*, *act*, *amendment*), references to criminality and law enforcement (e.g. *enforcement*, *organised*, *bail*, *offences*), and institutional stakeholders responsible for its implementation (e.g. *officer*, *inspector*, *teams*). Overall, the emphasis is on the administrative and legal aspects of immigration policy rather than its social or economic dimensions.

Family, families, women, and men

The word 'family' appears twice as often as the plural 'families'. This suggests that political discourse predominantly focuses on family as a context and area of intervention (with *family* functioning as an adjective), rather than as an actor in migration discourses. Migrant families are primarily constructed in terms of reunification (e.g. *reunion*, *together*, *joining*) and separation (e.g. *splitting*, *apart*, *separated*). The term 'family', being more abstract, is also more strongly connected to equally abstract dimensions such as regulatory frameworks (e.g. *policies*, *rules*) and immigration status, among which emerge references to the "private and family life" routes for acquiring a permanent residence permit. The word 'families', instead, is distinguished by a strong association with more experiential dimensions, especially childhood-related terms (e.g. *children*, *unaccompanied*, *dependent*, *minors*), reproductive dimensions and roles (e.g. *pregnant*, *women*), and socio-economic conditions (*No Recourse to Public Funds*).

In line with the gendered representation of families, politics discourse surrounding women primarily focus on their reproductive roles (*pregnant*), youth (*girls*, *young*), followed by experiences of violence and abuse. This last domain alone accounts for a third of the words associated with women, and includes terms such as *violence*, *trafficked*, *punish*, *torture*, *raped*, *abuse*, *prostitution*, *exploited*, and *sexually*. Other areas with lower but still relevant association strengths include childhood (*children*, *babies*, *unborn*, *dependent*), detention (*locked*, *imprisoning*), and to a lesser extent, racial and ethno-national descriptors mainly from Eastern Europe (*Romanian*, *Albanian*, *Roma*) (fig. 5).

In contrast, 'men' are mainly described as young (*boys*, *young men*) and identified by specific nationalities, particularly from Sub-Saharan Africa (*Malawi*, *Kenya*, *Nigeria*, *Gambia*, *Mali*, *Ghana*, *Liberia*, *Mauritius*) and the Balkans (*Albania*, *Montenegro*). Additionally, among the descriptors related to relations, sexuality and sexual orientation (e.g. *sex*, *gay*), the term *single* ranks as one of the five most strongly associated words with men. Further areas with lower levels of association, but which merit attention due to their continuity with the media corpus, include those encompassing crime-related terminology (*raped*, *criminalise*), quantitative descriptors (*rate*, *more*), and references to temporary accommodation facilities such as *hostels* (fig. 6).
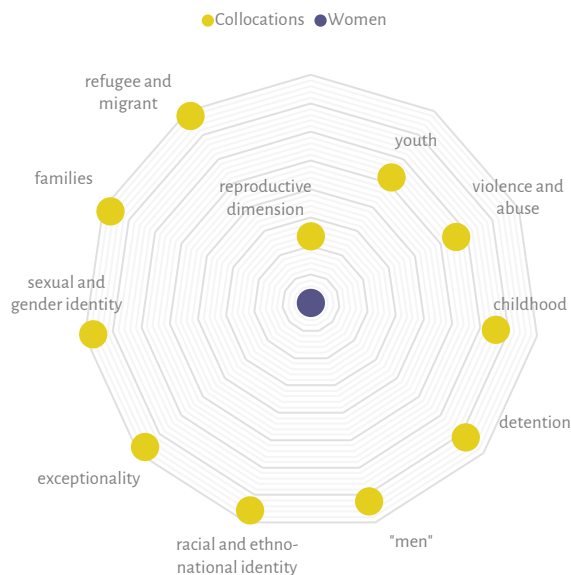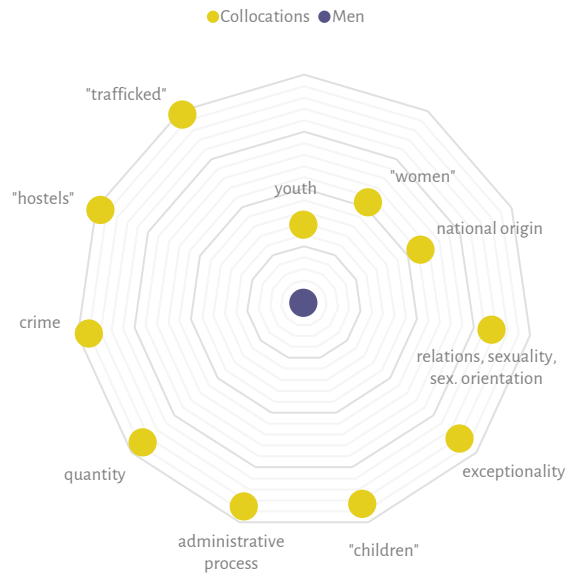
Fig. 5: semantic group collocation for *women*

●Collocations ●Women

Fig. 6: semantic group collocation for *men*

●Collocations ●Men

In general terms, collocates for 'men' and 'women' reveal gender pairing and age-based grouping tendencies, as both terms are closely linked to each other and are strongly associated with youth descriptors. This pattern suggests gender-inclusive discourse (shown in phrases like "men and women") and collective consideration of adults and youth (as in "women and girls"). Analysis reveals a dichotomy in the portrayal of women and men in political discourses. Women are predominantly depicted in terms of reproductive roles and childhood, and presented as victims, particularly in the context of sex trafficking from culturally and politically closer Eastern European countries. Conversely, men are characterised as potentially threatening subjects, primarily due to their young age, lack of family ties, and origin from culturally distant African countries.

The term 'work' has two distinct uses: it either describes the stakeholders' effort to achieve a policy goal (e.g. *done, continue, underway*) or collaborate (e.g. *collaboratively, constructively*), or it denotes specific areas of immigration enforcement (e.g. *right, permission, allowing, checks*) and working conditions (e.g. *workload, bullying, hours, flexibility*).

The less abstract term 'workers', instead, reveals that discourses about irregular migration are predominantly associated with specific labour market sectors. These include, most prominently *social* work, *care* work, *sex* work, *transport work*, and *skilled* labour. Other sectors strongly associated with 'workers' are *healthcare, nursing, construction* and *seasonal* work, *frontline* services, and *agriculture*. Other minor areas associated with 'workers' are *employers* and the issue of *bogus self-employment*.

4.3. Qualitative analysis

This section analyses politics narratives surrounding three salient groups: (a) migrant workers, (b) 'illegal' and 'undocumented' migrants, and (c) 'illegal' and 'undocumented' migrants in employment. The analysis reveals how these narratives create sharp distinctions between 'desirable' and 'undesirable' migrants, primarily based on skill levels and economic contributions. Conservative-led discourse on "illegal migrants" shows particular complexity, weaving together both restrictive and liberal arguments to support inclusive policies for some migrants while justifying restrictions for others.

4.3.1. *Migrant workers*

Migrant workers, especially skilled ones, make a valuable contribution to the UK

Parliamentary debates and party manifestos frequently acknowledge the significant contributions of migrant workers to the UK's economy and society. However, these acknowledgments predominantly emphasise either 'skilled' or 'essential' workers, as evidenced in the government's response to the Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry "Finding a diplomatic route: European responses to irregular migration inquiry" (ERM):

> *The UK Government recognises the benefits the UK derives from immigration and the positive contributions skilled migrant workers make to our diverse society and dynamic economy. The UK Government will deliver a firmer, fairer, points-based system from January 2021 which will attract the brightest and best from around the world to ensure that the UK has the skills and talents that it needs to support and grow our economy. (P-Committee-Foreign-Affairs-Government-Response-ERM-2019)*

In various political debates, this positive narrative has been applied particularly to care workers. The following excerpts is exemplary as it demands to combine the recognition of the essential contribution of migrant care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic with the elimination of NHS surcharges for this specific category of workers.

> *The Prime Minister and Conservative party have joined the country in its outpouring of gratitude for health and care workers throughout the pandemic, with a Clap for our Carers every Thursday, which I think we can all agree has been an absolute phenomenon […] The immigration skills charge the employer-paid fee is the other part of this. Addressing both together would be a big step in the right direction. Warm words now need to make way for firm proposals, and I look to the Minister to provide just that. It would not be right to clap for people and then charge them. (Holly Lynch, Lab, P-Committee-Public-Bill-ISSCB-2020-06-16)*

Government and opposition statements acknowledge migrant workers' potential contributions to UK society. However, these positive representations are applied selectively to migrants considered beneficial to the UK economy and society, while being contrasted with those deemed undesirable. Discourse about the need to attract and retain 'skilled workers' while reducing 'low-skilled' ones feature prominently in the manifestos of both the Conservative Party and the liberal-leaning Alliance Party of Northern Ireland:

> *Only by establishing immigration controls and ending freedom of movement will we be able to attract the high-skilled workers we need to contribute to our economy, our communities and our public services. There will be fewer lower-skilled migrants and overall numbers will come down. And we will ensure that the British people are always in control. (P-Manifesto-Conservative-Party-2019)*

> *The government's decision to end freedom of movement for EU citizens will restrict the supply of labour in sectors where migrant workers are vital, such as the health service and agriculture. It also potentially restricts highly-skilled workers in innovative and high-value industries from*

entering the labour market despite their valuable skills and experience [...] [Alliance will] Remove the cap on non-EU migrants as this has been detrimental to attracting high-skilled workers and students to British companies. (P-Manifesto-Alliance-Party-2019)

This trend suggests that parties across the political spectrum have adopted 'skilled migration' as a preferred framework for positively contextualising migration within their electoral platforms.

Notably, while 'low-skilled' workers are often either invisible or portrayed as undesirable migrants, narratives about generic 'migrant workers' tend to depict them as victims of exploitation who need protection. Elements of these narratives, generally put forward by Labour MPs (Kate Green, Stephen Kinnock, John McDonnell), emerge during the sessions of the Public Bill Committee on "Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill" and parliamentary debates over the "Illegal Migration Bill". These narratives share a common demand for better protection of migrant workers from abuse and exploitation through improved resources, stricter enforcement, and more effective monitoring systems.

On identifying possible issues down the line, has the Minister seen the report by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in The Independent, which is based on the Home Office's findings on the treatment of migrant workers? It identified wage theft, forced unpaid overtime, racist abuse, illegal charging of fees for jobs, and insanitary living and working conditions. Will he review the mechanisms for the monitoring of and enforcement against abuse of migrant workers? (John McDonnell, Lab, P-Commons-Debates-2023-10-24, Illegal Migration)

4.3.2. Undocumented and illegal migrants

Undocumented migrants represent potential economic contributors

The 'economic contribution' argument applies to 'illegal migrants' only marginally and briefly. Their representation as potential economic contributors appears almost exclusively in a parliamentary debate on e-petition 567681, "Amnesty for Undocumented Migrants" (P-Commons-Debates-2021-07-19, Amnesty for Undocumented Migrants). Borrowing the term *undocumented* from the petition, this debate is unique in extensively discussing policy options that support regularisation. While focusing primarily on migrants' contributions, the debate also addresses their exclusion from essential services. In response to such unexpected shift in the conversation about irregular migration, the government employs the 'fairness' argument (discussed further below) drawing a clear moral distinction between legal and illegal migrants to reject the amnesty proposal:

We must maintain the integrity of our immigration system and ensure it is fair to those who have done the right thing and migrated here lawfully, plus contributed by paying items like the Immigration Health Surcharge, while also ensuring it works for UK taxpayers who fund public services. We will not reward those who exploit the system and break the rules by implementing this request.

This excerpt foreshadows a dominant approach in the politics corpus, where arguments based on equity, fairness, and benevolence are used to support restrictive policy options. This pattern emerges primarily in

labelling migrants without legal status as *illegal*. It then follows a three-step argumentative structure with 'illegal migrants' as the central focus to justify restrictive migration policies: first demonstrating limited intake capacity, then blaming specific categories of migrants, and then proposing exclusionary policy solutions. Each component of this argumentative framework is underpinned by distinct proto-narrative patterns, some of which are detailed in the subsequent analysis.

Arguments	Proto-narratives
Limited capacity narrative	The number of illegal migrants is increasing
	Illegal migrants put unsustainable pressure on our society
	Housing illegal migrants in hotels is wrong and costly
Blaming narrative	Unscrupulous stakeholders enable illegal migration
	Illegal migrants harm our communities
	Illegal migrants are gaming the system
Exclusionary narrative	Schemes are in place to prevent illegal migrants accessing resources
	We need to stop the flow of illegal migrants
	It is essential we remove illegal migrants

Illegal migrants put unsustainable pressure on our society

The discourse surrounding increasing numbers serves as a rhetorical foundation for a prominent narrative that frames illegal migrants as exerting 'unsustainable pressure' on finite public resources. The phrase was initially employed by Conservative MP Tom Hunt precisely during parliamentary deliberations regarding the "Amnesty for Undocumented Migrants" petition mentioned before, and was since then systematically adopted by members of the Conservative government, particularly by former Minister of State for Immigration, Robert Jenrick:

> *Illegal migration undermines the integrity of our immigration system. It puts unsustainable pressure on our housing, health, education and welfare services, and it undermines public confidence in our democratic processes and the rule of law. That is why we want to stop the boats and secure our borders, and this Bill is dedicated to that goal. It will send a clear message that people who enter the United Kingdom illegally will not be able to build a life here. Instead, they are liable to be detained, and they will be removed either back to their home country, if it is safe to do so, or to a safe third country, such as Rwanda. (Robert Jenrick, Minister of State for Immigration, Cons, P-Commons-Debates-2023-04-26a, Illegal Migration Bill)*

This excerpt synthesises how the 'limited capacity' argument functions as a rhetorical preamble for multiple interconnected sub-narratives encompassing concerns about public spending and social cohesion, and questions of deservingness, ultimately legitimising and generating public consensus for deterrence-based immigration policies that might otherwise be perceived as controversial also for a conservative electorate. An exemplary case is the establishment of military sites, barracks, and vessels as alternative facilities to hotels, whereby the intentional worsening of living conditions of asylum seekers is legitimised with a 'fiscal responsibility' argument:

We have to deliver them to save the British public from spending eye-watering amounts on accommodating illegal migrants. And we have to deliver them to prevent a pull factor for economic migrants on the continent from taking hold. (Robert Jenrick, Minister of State for Immigration, Cons, P-Commons-Debates-2023-03-29, Illegal Migration Update)

Illegal migrants harm our communities

A variant of the framing of 'illegal migrants' as exerting "unsustainable pressure" on UK society claims that their alleged preferential treatment vis-à-vis British citizens is a catalyst for social tensions, manifesting in a 'native supremacy' argumentative framework exemplified in the declaration that "we should not elevate the interests of illegal migrants over those of the communities we are elected to serve" (Robert Jenrick, Minister of State for Immigration, Cons, P-Commons-Debates-2023-10-24, Illegal Migration). Central to this discourse is the deployment of 'queue-jumping' metaphors in constructing migration management as a matter of 'fairness'. This rhetorical device portrays 'illegal migrants' as circumventing established procedures or "gaming the system", thereby disadvantaging 'legal migrants' who pursue protection through official pathways. This position emerges clearly in the government's response to the Human Rights Committee inquiry on the Illegal Migration Bill:

> *This legislation is formed around the central premise that those in need of protection should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach that is the fastest route to safety […] The UK cannot accommodate all those that may wish to come to the UK, it is right that we take action to safeguard our system for those most in need, not those who attempt to jump the queue and could have sought protection elsewhere (P-Committe-Human-Rights-Government-Response-IMB-2023-09-07)*

This binary narrative juxtaposing 'legal' and 'illegal' migrants obscures a fundamental contradiction: the legislative framework establishing these distinctions emanates from the same political actors who subsequently deploy the 'fairness' argument as an exclusionary mechanism. In general terms, the deployment of the 'fairness' argument as a rhetorical strategy in differentiating between legal and illegal migrants reflects a broader shift in migration governance discourse. This shift centres on notions of deservingness and genuineness, framing migration primarily through moral considerations that emphasise normative distinctions between 'desirable' and 'undesirable' migrants while attempting to bypass policy frameworks based on human rights.

4.3.3. *Undocumented and illegal migrants in employment*

Similar to the media corpus, narratives about 'undocumented' and 'illegal (migrant) workers' predominantly focus on enforcement mechanisms and punitive measures directed at employers, reflecting policies aimed at deterrence through financial penalties and legal sanctions. In the following excerpt, Lord True's statement notably frames 'illegal work' as a pull factor for migration, a source of exploitation, and a detriment to the economy:

> *Illegal working is not a victimless crime. It destabilises society and, although there are extensive controls in place, it remains, as he acknowledged, a primary pull factor for illegal migration. There is evidence that some of these criminal gangs are offering places to people whom they are*

trafficking, something which we need to stop. Businesses that employ workers illegally undercut their law-abiding competitors and may damage the local economy. There is tax fraud, carelessness about food standards and health and safety, and exploitation of the vulnerable, which we all detest. The fairness in protecting the public from that is important. (Lord True, Con, P-Lords-Debates-2022-12-14, Illegal Immigration)

5. The discursive construction of irregularity in civil society

5.1. Data sample

The civil society corpus was compiled using a two-step approach. First, we gathered 264 written evidence submissions from various stakeholders responding to migration-related parliamentary inquiries. These included responses to Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs Committees, as well as evidence for the Joint Committee on Human Rights' legislative scrutiny of the Nationality and Borders Bill and the Illegal Migration Bill. Second, we selected 320 documents (reports, briefings, website content, and press releases) published by 18 civil society organisations, along with 27 reports from two independent public bodies that monitor and advise the government on migration issues: the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration and the Migration Advisory Committee. We employed snowball sampling to find these documents, selecting organisations with relevant interests or experience in migration research, campaigning, and intervention, and prioritising content addressing irregular migration issues. The final corpus contains 611 texts, comprising 28,464 words and 2,793,436 tokens.

5.2. Quantitative analysis

Following the structure of the media and politics analysis, we start by examining the distribution of high-frequency words (frequency ≥ 0.08‰). Next, we explore the main semantic themes and their hierarchical relationships to each other. Finally, we investigate the 'collocations' of salient words.

5.2.1. *Lexical patterns*

Framing migration

Frequency analysis reveals several key patterns in the portrayal of migration and migrants. Similar to the media corpus, civil society organisations seem to employ a dual framing approach. They prefer *migrants* (and not *immigrants*) for individuals and *immigration* (and not *migration*) for the broader phenomenon. This lexical choice suggests an actor-centred perspective for individual experiences and a state-centred view that emphasises directionality and territorial entry for the abstract concept. Furthermore, the corpus shows a clear prevalence of words related to the asylum-seeking process and its participants (e.g. *asylum, claim, seeking, seekers, refugees*) (6.2‰) over terms referring to migrants. This emphasis underscores the importance of asylum-related issues within the broader discourse on irregular migration.

Framing irregularity

The corpus presents a multifaceted portrayal of immigration status. *Status* is the most frequently used term and often collocates with adjectives such as *settled, insecure, secure, temporary,* and *precarious*, as well as verbs like *regularise*. The second most prevalent term is *legal,* which is generally associated to *routes, access,* and legal processes (e.g. *advice, representation, challenges, proceedings*). Although *illegal* remains a high-frequency term, its

usage is predominantly confined to discussions of the 'Illegal Migration Bill' and 'illegal working'. Therefore, *undocumented*, while less frequent, emerges as the preferred single term to describe the lack of legal status. However, when considering the cumulative frequencies of words with similar meanings, we notice that visa-related terminology (e.g. *visa, visas, tier, breach, SWV*) and administrative terms used to designate the permanent residence permit, officially called "Indefinite Leave to Remain" (e.g. *leave, remain, permission, indefinite, permanent, ILR*), are used with equal frequency. This lexical distribution suggests a representation of irregularity primarily as a consequence of status loss rather than as an inherent condition.

Framing households

Analysis of the household dimension reveals a significant emphasis on childhood (1.5‰) and households (1.4‰) with these references appearing nearly twice as often as mentions to women (0.7‰) and more than seven times more frequently than men (0.2‰). This distribution suggests a deliberate focus on family and childhood narratives, mirroring trends found in the politics corpus.

Framing labour

Frequency analysis reveals a strong presence of work-related terms, underscoring the importance of labour issues in civil society's migration discourse. Words like *conditions, workforce,* and *workplace* suggest a focus on broader systemic labour concerns. Among sector-specific terms, *domestic* work stands out as the most frequent. Terms referring to employers also show relatively high frequencies, highlighting the significant attention paid to employers' roles in migrant labour dynamics – a focus not typically found in other corpora. Similar to the politics corpus, words such as *sexual* and *sex* appear frequently, primarily in connection with exploitation contexts (e.g. "forced sex work" or "sex trafficking"). These linguistic patterns suggest that civil society discourse on migrant labour is characterised by a strong focus on vulnerabilities and potential abuses.

5.2.2. *Semantic preoccupations*

Within civil society discourse, unlike other corpora, the predominant institutional and policy-oriented perspectives are counterbalanced by substantial attention to rights-based considerations, welfare, and labour-related concerns (fig. 7).

'Politics and governance' (313 words, sum frequency 87‰) emerges as the predominant framework for conceptualising irregularity. This domain encompasses political processes and concerns (e.g. *target, statement, Brexit, duty*), institutional structures (e.g. *secretary, representatives, appeal*), law enforcement (e.g. *police, criminal, torture, threats*) and legislative frameworks (e.g. *policy, clause, convention*). This lexical distribution underscores the profound influence of governance-related issues on irregularity discourse within civil society contexts.

Fig. 7: frequency by semantic domain
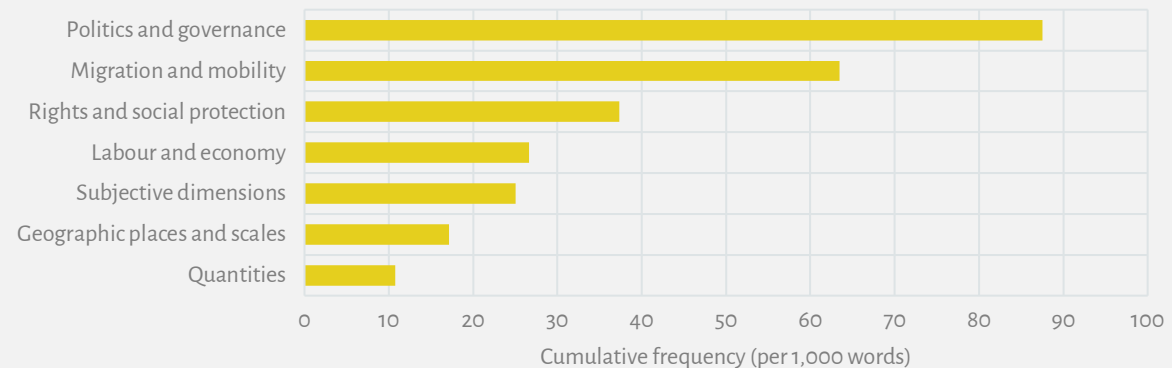
Concerns about 'migration and mobility' (204 words, sum frequency 63‰) follow closely. This domain includes words describing settlement and mobility (e.g. *route, living, return, settlement, boats*) as well as migration and asylum management (e.g. *immigration, removal, refugee*). It also covers bordering-related terms (e.g. *checks, stop, inadmissible*) and immigration status (e.g. *undocumented, EUSS, indefinite, precarious*). [3] This linguistic pattern suggests that civil society conceptualises migration primarily through the lens of administrative processes and legal frameworks, while maintaining a strong focus on the precarious nature of immigration status and its impact on individuals' mobility and settlement options.

The third key domain is 'rights and social protection' (114 words, sum frequency 37‰). It encompasses rights-related terms (e.g. *human, statutory, freedom*), areas of welfare provision (e.g. *health, accommodation, education*), and various forms of social support or its absence (e.g. *risk, protection, safeguarding*). The domain underscores civil society's emphasis on rights-based discourse and social welfare concerns.

The domains of 'labour and economy' (73 words, sum frequency 27‰) and 'subjective dimensions' (82 words, sum frequency 25‰) exhibit comparable levels of prominence within the corpus. The former encompasses terminology especially related to working conditions (e.g. *slavery, exploitation, wage*) and economic costs (e.g. *fees, costs, debt*). The latter incorporates terms associated with familial structures and experiences (e.g. *family, reunion, parents*), social identities (e.g. *women, poverty, black, young*), and affective experiences (e.g. *abuse, harm, fear, trauma*). This parallel prominence reveals a perspective that is equally concerned with structural and human dimensions of migration.

The remaining areas, 'geographic place and scales' (44 words, sum frequency 17‰) and 'quantities' (49 words, sum frequency 11‰) are at the bottom of the preoccupation scale. Geographic terms (e.g. *Ireland, London, international*), despite their limited lexicon, occur frequently. In contrast, the 'quantities' domain has a larger vocabulary but lower frequency. This distribution highlights differing emphases on spatial references versus quantitative descriptors, reflecting a more nuanced concern for of quantity and measurement in civil society discourse compared to other corpora

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[3] EUSS stands for EU Settlement Scheme.

5.2.3. Words collocations

Following the structure of the previous chapters, this section examines the collocations of salient words in three main areas of interest: migration, households and gender, and labour.

Migrants and immigration

Collocation analysis reveals that the term 'migrants' is disproportionately associated with immigration status. While *undocumented* demonstrates the strongest connection, other expressions such as *insecure, precarious, absconded,* and *illegal* add nuance to the portrayal of migrant irregularity. Semantic areas describing asylum (e.g. *seekers, claims*) are also strongly associated to migrants, followed by crossings of maritime borders (e.g. *influx, boats, channel, drowning*) and terms related to exclusion and discrimination. Among these, terms such as *racialised, xenophobia, scapegoating, blame, demonisation,* and *hatred*, while individually weakly associated with migrants, collectively indicate a significant focus on these issues within civil society organisations.

The term 'immigration' is most strongly associated with enforcement and related words (e.g. *control, powers, teams, taskforce*), as well as terms referring to policies and legislation (e.g. *act, system, plan*). *Status* and related concepts (e.g. *nationality, insecure, visa, irregular*) are also closely linked to 'immigration' followed by words referring to detention and deportation (e.g. *detention, centres, removal, prison*), immigration rules (e.g. *rules, exemption, compliance*), inspections (e.g. *chief inspector, inspectorates*), border (e.g. *borders, customs*) and crime (e.g. *bail, raids, organised, offender*). In general terms, the emphasis lies on the legislative, regulatory, and stakeholder landscape responsible for immigration enforcement through criminalisation, detention, and deportation.

Family, women, and men

The singular form 'family' predominantly functions as an adjective, occurring three times more frequently than 'families'. Discourses surrounding migrant families primarily revolve around reunification processes (e.g. *reunion, join, unity, reunite,* and *joiners*). Two other prominent semantic clusters relate to administrative processes (e.g. *applicants, sponsors, granted*), visas and settlement (e.g. *visas, resettled, permits, permanent*). Settlement applications based on "Family Life" or "Private Life" grounds and the "Ukraine Family Scheme" emerges as salient legislative frameworks within this context. In general, these semantic clusters indicate a strong understanding of family reunification as the main avenue for settlement and regularisation.

Collocation analysis for 'women' and 'men' reveals significant disparities in the narrative construction of both demographic groups. Men are predominantly framed through the lens of race, with top collocates including words such as *racialised, brown, stereotypes, colour, orientalist, white, Muslim,* and *black* (fig. 9). Further collocations reveal a strong association with youth (e.g. *boys, young, girls*) and crime (e.g. *trafficked, violent, raping, terrorist, gangs*). Interestingly, men are often associated with terms such as *depicted, manufactured,* and *imagery*, suggesting that the civil society corpus mainly frames negative descriptors as social constructs. Civil society's representation of men stands out from other corpora due to association with experiences of discrimination (e.g. *stereotypes, demonisation, monsters*) and emotional aspects (e.g. *intimidated, depressed, traumatised, suicide*).

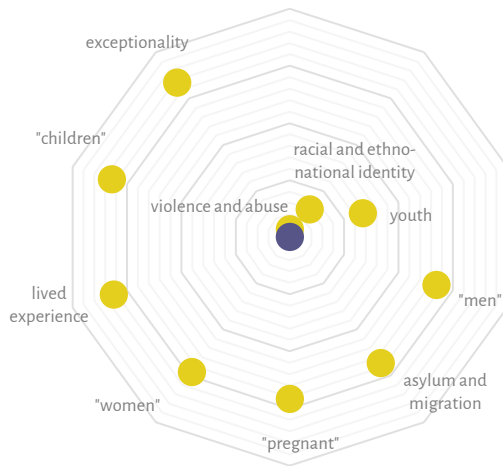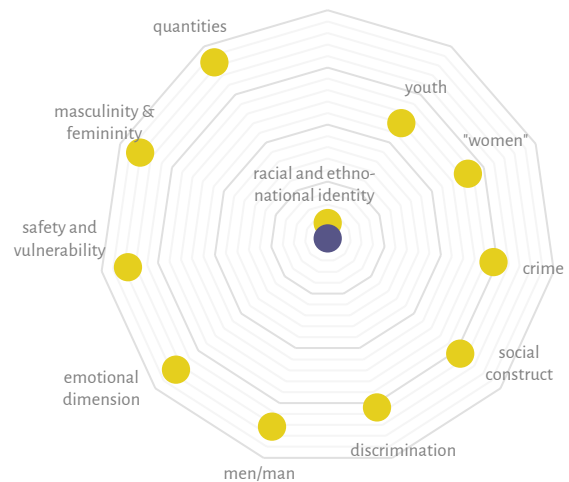Fig. 8: semantic group collocation for *women*
● Collocations ● Women

Fig. 9: semantic group collocation for *men*
● Collocations ● Men

Conversely, representations of women are more multifaceted (fig. 8). The most prominent area is violence and abuse (e.g. *violence*, *VAWG*, *trafficked*, *sexual*, exploited), closely followed by racial and ethno-national descriptors (e.g. *BME*, *Latin*, *Asian*, *Kurdish*) [4] and youth (e.g. *girls*, *young*). Two words broadly linked to reproductive roles, namely *pregnant* and *children*, form together another semantic area that is strongly associated to women. Other distinctive themes include asylum and forced migration (e.g. *refugee*, *fleeing*), and exceptionality (e.g. *disproportionately*, *particularly*, *especially*).

Similar to the politics and media corpus, collocates for 'men' and 'women' reveal gender pairing and age-based grouping tendencies. This pattern indicates that discourse about one gender often incorporates references to the other, and that adults and youth of the same gender are frequently considered collectively.

Work and workers

The term 'work' emerges as a contested area for governance and control of irregular migration. It is primarily associated with words related to everyday bordering practices (e.g. *checks*, *prohibiting*, *restricting*). The strong collocation with *right* should also be understood in this context, as it primarily exists in connection with the phrase "right to work". Secondary semantic clusters relate to working conditions in terms of both remuneration (e.g. *paid*, *low*, *earn*, *contracts*) and experiential aspects (e.g. *decent*, *hours*, *forced*, *exploitative*, *hard*, *intensiveness*).

Conversely, the term 'workers' is most strongly associated with immigration schemes (e.g. *pilot*, *temporary*, *SWV*, *SWP*, *SAWS*, *TMPs*, *SWS*, *WRS*) [5] but also puts centre stage employer-related terminology (e.g. *sponsored*, *employers*, *recruitment*, *operators*, *hire*). Notably, the sectors most strongly associated with either

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[4] VAWG is the acronym for Violence Against Women and Girls. BME is the acronym for Black and Minority Ethnic.

[5] SWV stands for Seasonal Worker Visa, SWP for Seasonal Worker Pilot, SAWS for Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme, TMPS for Temporary Migration Programmes, SWS for Seasonal Workers Scheme, and WRS for Workers Registration Scheme.

The narrative construction of migrant irregularity in the UK

work or workers are domestic and agrifood, followed by care and sex work, and then cleaning, construction, and hospitality.

5.3. Qualitative analysis

This section examines civil society narratives about three key groups: (a) migrant workers, (b) 'undocumented' migrants, and (c) 'undocumented' migrants in employment. Specifically, it shows how civil society organisations consistently challenge mainstream media and politics narratives by highlighting the structural causes of irregularity, emphasising both migrants' vulnerabilities and societal contributions to society, and more generally advocating for rights-based approaches to migration governance.

5.3.1. Migrant workers

UK policies are responsible for the vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers

In the first place, civil society narratives portray migrant workers as particularly susceptible to exploitation, attributing this vulnerability to a variety of factors, including broad labour market dynamics, restrictive immigration policies, and inadequate labour enforcement, as articulated in the following excerpt:

> *In informal and precarious sectors there are already higher rates of under-payment of minimum wage, poor working conditions, and low levels of unionisation (e.g., the gig economy, care, agriculture). These factors combine with hostile environment policies, leaving migrant workers facing double risk of exploitation — exploitation due to the broader conditions of their sector and exploitation due to their vulnerability to hostile environment policies. (C-FLEX-Statement-2022)*

In particular, vulnerability to exploitation is seen as being significantly exacerbated by exclusionary policies orchestrated at the state level, which limit migrant workers' access to protective measures and grant employers disproportionate control over their workers:

> *The power imbalance that is inherent in the notion of sponsorship, combined with the fact that migrant workers do not have safe reporting mechanisms in place to report exploitative sponsors even where they have fallen into a precarious form of immigration status, means that incoming migrant workers into the sector are routinely complying with exorbitant demands placed on them, particularly lengthy working hours. (C-WORC-Evidence-ICIBI-2023)*

Notably, the state is seen as having not only an indirect responsibility in the production of exploitative contexts through failing to provide adequate protective mechanisms for potentially abused workers, but is viewed as the primary actor responsible for implementing exploitative financial practices that actively perpetuate migrant workers' vulnerability:

> *Whilst charging a worker recruitment fees is unlawful in the UK, migrant workers often have to pay a number of upfront costs, including visa fees, health surcharges and travel costs. These costs can be prohibitive, particularly for low-wage workers, leading people to take loans or use up their savings to migrate. (C-FLEX-Briefing-2022)*

In this context, domestic workers emerge as central actors within civil society's discourse, wherein their dual exclusion is seen as a direct outcome of state policies. On the one hand, the sector's regulatory framework systematically excluded them "from a number of statutory provisions including health and safety legislation and the Working Time Regulations which limits the maximum hours worked each week at 48" (C-FLEX-Letter-2021b). On the other hand, the restrictive conditions of the Overseas Domestic Worker visa make them particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. This is highlighted in evidence submitted by a group of organisations working on labour exploitation to the Home Affairs Committee:

> The UK's use of short-term restricted visas, with no routes to long term regularisation, are key drivers in the UK's exploitation of migrant workers. The restrictions in the UK's Overseas Domestic Worker (ODW) visa increases the vulnerability of migrant domestic workers to abuse, exploitation and trafficking. (C-Committee-Home-Affairs-Written-Evidence-HUM0047)

5.3.2. *Undocumented migrants*

Undocumented is the word that is more strongly associated with 'migrants' in the civil society corpus and emerges as the preferred term to describe the lack of legal status. Undocumented migrants appear in four main narratives that characterise them as (1) people at risk of poverty and exploitation due to denied access to basic services, (2) vulnerable people especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, (3) integral members of society, and (4) potential beneficiaries of regularisation initiatives.

Undocumented migrants are at risk

A prominent narrative describes 'undocumented' migrants as systematically excluded from basic rights and vulnerable to exploitation, highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified existing patterns of socioeconomic marginalisation and health inequality. Notably, these vulnerability narratives frequently incorporate references to *unscrupulous* employers, demonstrating significant overlap with the politics corpus. Indeed, evidence from multiple organisations documents how employers weaponize workers' precarious immigration status as leverage, using threat of deportation or visa cancellation to maintain control over their workforce.

> Barred from accessing public funds and other protections, it is essential for most to work, even without the right to do so. This makes undocumented people extremely vulnerable to unscrupulous employers, as they are forced to take whatever work they can find, even if it is unsafe. (C-JCWI-Report-2021d)

Undocumented migrants are integral members of society

Another significant narrative prevalent within civil society discourse characterises undocumented migrants as integral members of UK society. This framing presents a direct counterpoint to political rhetoric that frames 'illegal migrants' as detrimental to both economic welfare and social cohesion. This counter narrative uses a dual framework. First, it articulates an emotional-relational dimension of belonging, exemplified by

the assertion that "undocumented migrants are our neighbours, our friends and part of our communities" (C-StatusNow-Blog-2021-01). Second, it highlights their societal integration and economic contributions through labour market participation, notwithstanding their irregular immigration status.

> *Undocumented migrants are a vital part of UK society, making significant contributions to the workforce, economy, social and cultural fabric of the country. Many work in essential, low-paid and often high-risk jobs in sectors such as construction, domestic and care-work, hospitality and agriculture, pay taxes in various ways including through the purchase of goods and services, and contribute to the country's cultural diversity. (C-Regularise-Report-2023)*

The 'contribution' argument, which serves as the foundation for a broader narrative advocating the regularisation of undocumented residents, is predicated upon empirical evidence suggesting potential socioeconomic benefits of amnesty policies:

> *According to The Economist, studies in America suggests that citizenship for its 11 million undocumented immigrants could boost the economy, with GDP rising up to $1.5 trillion over 10 years (C-StatusNow-Blog-2021-07)*

5.3.3. Undocumented and illegal migrants in employment

As we have seen, civil society organisations describe migrant workers, including 'undocumented' ones, as either vulnerable to exploitation or contributors to the economy. While advocating for safe reporting mechanisms represents the most pragmatic and radical outcome of the first perspective, asserting that 'undocumented' workers are, despite themselves, "at the heart of the economy" emerges as perhaps the most radical interpretation of the second view:

> *This is not an issue just of a peripheral minority. Illegal working is at the heart of the economy. Illegal workers are not just in the restaurants or street markets that make easy and symbolic targets for ICE raids. They are the base level of the driving sectors of the UK economy: building workers, office cleaners, food pickers and packers, warehouse lifters, drivers and couriers, the menials in every service industry. The "discount" on illegal workers makes a fundamental contribution to every business model. Every blue-chip company relies on illegal labour. (C-AntiRaids-Report).*

6. Comparative analysis

6.1. Quantitative comparison

This section compares quantitative findings across the three corpora, analysing similarities and dissonances through lexical patterns, word frequency distributions, semantic preoccupations, and word collocations.

6.1.1. Lexical patterns

Comparative analysis of lexical patterns across the three corpora shows that media coverage has a distinctive approach to framing migration and household topics, while civil society stands apart in its framing of irregularity and labour issues. First, the media notably emphasises maritime arrivals, particularly Channel crossings, when discussing irregular migration. Meanwhile, politics and civil society corpora frequently use

asylum-related terminology, reflecting policy efforts to undermine asylum rights through the criminalisation of irregular migration. Second, in both media and politics, terms related to illegality have become the default way for describing lack of legal status, with the politics discourse showing particular sophistication by using a binary approach that constructs 'illegality' alongside 'legality' and maintains a clear lexical distinction when describing the legal status of unwanted and privileged migrants. Third, all three corpora place children at the centre of household-related discourse. However, media coverage differs from politics and civil society discourse in its representation of family, men, and women. While they give greater visibility to women over men, media outlets maintain a balanced representation of gender categories. The media also employs a richer vocabulary for household relationships, whereas the other two corpora primarily use 'family' as an umbrella term — likely because they treat it primarily as an administrative legal category rather than a descriptive, practical one. Finally, in addressing labour issues, both media and political discourse tend to obscure migrant workers' experiences. The media uses abstract terminology that minimises references to actual workers, while politics emphasises victimization, vulnerability, exploitation, and modern slavery over labour issues. Civil society discourse, by contrast, focuses on systemic labour concerns, including workplace conditions and employer dynamics, while also addressing vulnerabilities and potential abuses. Both civil society and political corpora particularly emphasise forced sex work and sex trafficking.

6.1.2. *Semantic preoccupations*

The comparative analysis of semantic preoccupations across different corpora (fig. 10) identifies distinct thematic patterns. Notably, the 'politics and governance' domain exhibits predominant frequency across all corpora, with particular salience in the politics corpus, which can be attributed to the inherent nature of policy documents, characterised by extensive terminology related to decision-making processes, legislative frameworks, and public administration. The civil society corpus demonstrates a notably higher frequency of 'migration and mobility' terminology compared to other corpora. This phenomenon can be explained by the presence of a more sophisticated and nuanced vocabulary within that domain compared, for instance, to the politics corpus, which contains approximately half the lexical variety; and the concentrated focus on migration-related themes in the sampled documents, in contrast to the newspaper articles' broader topical coverage. References to 'geographic places and scales' are particularly prominent in the media corpus. This aligns with newspapers' role in providing global political coverage, though the extensive reporting on Channel crossings by small-boats has also contributed to this high frequency. References to 'quantities' show comparable frequencies across media and politics corpora, with the civil society corpus displaying marginally lower occurrence rates. While these quantification-related lexical items are not exclusively associated with migration flows, they serve as crucial elements in narrative construction. Finally, it must be noted how the civil society corpus exhibits distinctive characteristics in its emphasis on 'rights and social protection', 'labour and economy', and 'subjective dimensions', with the first two domains appearing at approximately twice as frequently as in other domains.

Fig. 10: cumulative frequency by semantic domain
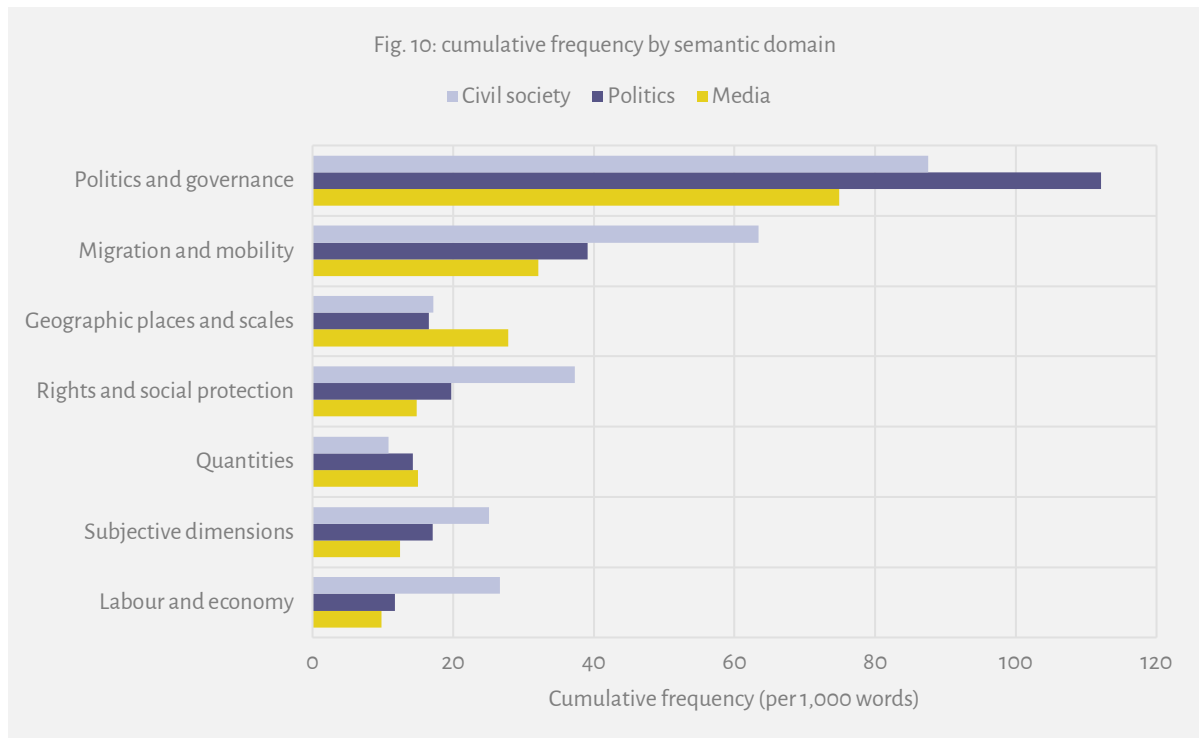
6.1.3. *Word collocations*

The next sections offer a comparative analysis of key word collocations across three areas: migration, households and gender, and labour. This analysis examines how these dimensions interact with processes of racialisation and gendering.

Migrants and immigration

Across all three corpora, the terms 'migrants' and 'migration' are strongly associated with immigration status, aligning with our sample selection criteria. However, this association is most pronounced in the media coverage and less evident in the civil society, suggesting that civil society considers a broader range of migrant experiences.

Notably, migrants are consistently associated with maritime border crossings, especially in the media coverage. Beyond this common feature, the media strongly links migrants with stigmatising areas such as detention, deportation, accommodation, and crime. Politics discourse, while also concerned with migrant accommodation, distinctively connects migrants and related stakeholders (such as *gangs*, *smugglers*, and *landlords*) to moral judgments. Instead, civil society takes a different approach, associating migrants primarily with rights, exclusion, and regularisation.

As we have seen throughout our analysis, the abstract concept of 'immigration' is primarily linked to migration governance and crime-related terminology. However, key differences emerge between the media, which strongly links immigration to bordering practices, and civil society, which focuses more on detention and deportation. This disparity reveals a media bias toward covering Channel crossings at the expense of broader immigration enforcement implications highlighted in the civil society corpus.

Notably, ethno-national categorisation is fifteen times more prominent in media coverage compared to political or civil society discourse. This pattern reflects broader differences in vocabulary. While politics texts predominantly refer to migrants as *Albanian*, and civil society organizations mainly identify them as *Filipino*, *Muslim*, or people of *colour*, media discourse employs a wider range of ethno-national terms. This coverage features four prominent identity clusters: *Albanian*, *African* (including *Saharan*, *Ethiopian*, *Libyan*), Central and South American (*Venezuelan*, *Haitian*, *Guatemalan*, *American*), and Asian and Middle Eastern (*Vietnamese*, *Iraqi*, *Iranian*, *Afghan*).

In gendered and family-related representation of migrants, media discourse again stands apart. While all corpora emphasise children and families, media uniquely portrays migrants through male-centred language and age-related terms. By contrast, the politics corpus specifically links migrants with childhood and pregnancy. The more abstract term 'immigration' is more strongly associated with adulthood in politics and civil society documents, while in media discourse connects it with women and childhood as primary identity markers, portraying them as protagonists in vulnerability narratives that run parallel to a prevailing criminalisation of men.

A pervasive criminalization framework exists across the three corpora, even without explicit associations with criminal activities. On the one hand, terms strongly associated with migrants and immigration describe the spatial imagery of criminality (e.g., *detention*, *agents*, *bail*) rather than crime itself. On the other hand, crime-related terminology portrays migrants primarily as vulnerable victims of organised crime rather than perpetrators. These distinct patterns of linguistic sedimentation of crime descriptors suggest two interpretations: they may represent remnants of past criminalization narratives so deeply ingrained that they no longer require explicit reinforcement, or they may indicate how vulnerability and criminalisation discourses, rather than being mutually exclusive, work together to shape public perceptions and migration governance approaches.

Men, women and children

Our analysis shows how public discourse on migrant irregularity in the UK is strongly gendered, with 'men' consistently associated with young age, racial or ethno-national identities, and criminal activities – especially sexual violence – while 'women' are strongly linked to children, reproductive roles, and experiences of violence and abuse.

In media coverage, men are primarily described through numbers and depicted in contexts of warfare and boat crossings. Politics discourse contributes to this threatening linguistic landscape by emphasising the "single men" narrative. Within this stigmatising discourse, civil society provides a contrasting view that presents these negative portrayal of migrant men as social constructs while emphasising their experiences of discrimination and emotional lives.

Regarding women, media discourse strongly links them with childhood, echoing the politics discourse's focus on reproductive roles. While both politics and civil society corpora emphasise women's experiences of violence and abuse, the former markedly stresses this aspect, allocating about one-third of women-associated terms to these issues. Media coverage distinctly portrays women in association with of empowerment, sexual orientation, gender identities, and emotional experiences. Civil society echoes this framing while emphasising lived experiences. Notably, across all three sources, despite their varying focuses, women are consistently framed through a lens of exceptionality.

Our analysis reveals that gendered representations are also strongly racialised. Notably, men are associated with ethno-racial descriptors almost exclusively in the civil society corpus, which describes them as *racialised*, *brown*, [of] *colour*, *white*, *black*, *Muslim*, and *Jewish*. The other corpora instead link men to national identities, revealing processes of racialization without directly naming racial identities. Media primarily focuses on Asian men (of *Pakistani* and *Albanian* origins), while the politics corpus emphasizes Black men from Sub-Saharan African countries (*Malawi*, *Kenya*, *Nigeria*, *Gambia*, *Mali*, *Ghana*, *Liberia*, *Mauritius*). Regarding women, media predominantly describes them as Black, Asian, Muslim, Latin American, and native. This partially aligns with civil society discourse, which portrays women as either Latin American or through racial categories (e.g., *brown*, *white*, *black*, *colour*). The politics corpus uses fewer of these descriptors and shows a different pattern which portrays women primarily as Eastern European (*Romanian* and *Albanian*) and as members of historically discriminated European ethnic minorities (*Roma*, *Travellers*), reinforcing narratives about women trafficked from Eastern Europe for sexual exploitation.

Finally, public discourse portrays men and women in contrasting ways when it comes to family connections. Men are consistently portrayed as detached from family ties and parental duties, while women are overwhelmingly represented as mothers. When examining men, family and children-related references are either absent or appear only to emphasise their lack of family ties (e.g. "single man"). This framing excludes the representation of meaningful relationships between men and children. In contrast, childhood and family are central to the narrative construction of migrant women, especially in media coverage. This linguistic pattern suggests a prevalent construction of women and children as a cohesive unit, implying a unique relational dynamic that is not equally attributed to men.

Work and workers

Across the three corpora, 'work' emerges as a primary field for the governance and control of irregular migration. The term is consistently linked to everyday bordering practices, as evidenced by strong references to authorisations, restrictions, and residence permits. Working conditions emerge as a second key feature, framed as remuneration in media coverage and as experiential factors (e.g., *workload*, *bullying*, *flexibility*) in politics discourse, with the civil society corpus taking a more comprehensive approach by addressing both aspects. Media discourse notably connects 'work' to moral values (e.g. *hard*, *tireless*, *willing*, *fair*, *essential*), showing how public discussions about migration often link work-related topics to questions of deservingness and desirability.

Analysis of the term 'workers' reveals two predominant patterns. Media and civil society sources primarily characterise them as skilled or associate them with temporary and seasonal immigration programs, focusing on sectors with high migrant employment, such as agri-food, healthcare, and roles that gained prominence during COVID-19 (e.g. "key workers"). Political discourse covers a broader scope, including additional low-wage occupational categories (e.g. *sex*, *transport*, *construction*). A significant finding emerges regarding the representation of employers: they receive marginal attention in media and civil society discourses and are notably absent from political discourse entirely.

Finally, migrant workers are predominantly characterised as Filipino, British, Latin American, and African. Filipino workers receive the most attention in both media and civil society discourse, likely due to their well-organised civil society organizations and significant representation among Overseas Domestic Worker visa holders, featured in media reportages. British workers maintain a consistent presence across all three corpora, suggesting equal consideration within public discourse about migrant workers. Latin American

workers feature prominently in both U.S. immigration and integration policy media coverage and UK civil society initiatives. African workers, though less frequently mentioned, receive balanced attention in both politics and civil society discourse.

6.2. Qualitative comparison

Our qualitative findings provide deeper interpretive insights into our analysis. In this section we show how media and politics narratives about migrant workers and irregular migrants construct the figure of the 'illegal migrant' as a disciplinary counter-image that serves to legitimise two key purposes of the post-Brexit migration regime: disconnecting migration and asylum governance from international legal framework and creating a disposable and deportable migrant workforce that aligns with state-centric economic imperatives and competitive interests.

6.2.1. *'Illegal migrants' in the politics of deservingness*

'Illegal migrants' primarily serve as a rhetorical device that helps reconfigure deservingness criteria by undermining asylum rights and justifying restrictions on migrants' access to fundamental services. This reconfiguration mainly emerges in media discourse – the main arena for shaping societal moral values and perceptions – through a two-step equivalence between asylum seekers, 'illegal migrants' and criminals: if asylum seekers are illegal migrants, and illegal migrants are criminals, then asylum seekers must be criminals. This narrative, places vulnerability frameworks based on 'human-rights' and 'humanitarian' arguments with a criminalisation framework that draws state protection and public compassion away from large migrant population. Politics discourse similarly contributes to shifting ideas of deservingness through a more nuanced narrative that deliberately constructs 'illegal migrants' as morally suspect figures. This approach uses an ostensibly fairness-based framework that contrasts 'bad' illegal migrants with 'good' legal migrants and weaponize perceived antisocial behaviours to justify restricting migrants' rights. Interestingly, the 'illegal migrant' image seems to resolve contradictions in the 'economic migrant' trope used in anti-immigration politics discourse, which paradoxically stigmatises migrants' financial motivations while primarily valuing their economic contribution to UK society.

6.2.2. *'Illegal migrants' in the politics of desirability*

Similarly, narratives about migrant workers and irregular migrants in employment show how the 'illegal migrant' figure help redefine desirability criteria through a dual rhetorical structure distinguishing between economically 'desirable' and 'undesirable' migrants. While this framework appears primarily in politics discourse, where economic directives are formulated, it also influences debate across other corpora. Notably, the construction of 'desirable' migrants is predicated upon their perceived value to the country's economic development and societal contribution. However, this framework is problematic because it creates an artificial and economically ineffective divide between desirable 'key' or 'skilled workers' and undesirable 'low-skilled workers'. While the former group is central to the 'economic contribution' argument, the latter's position remains ambiguous in a country dependent on migrant workers across all skill categories. At this juncture, the image of the 'illegal migrant' emerges as the true antagonistic figure and moral antithesis to the 'desirable' migrant worker. Within this shifting landscape of desirability, 'illegal migrants' serve three purposes: they enable framing migration as a persistent problem despite the country's known dependence on foreign labour; they become protagonists in the 'limited capacity' argument that stigmatises supposedly unproductive categories of migrants as drains on finite public resources while obscuring necessary but potentially disposable

low-wage migrant workers; and they make 'skilled' migrant workers largely immune to anti-immigration rhetoric, turning them into an idealised representatives of migrant labour, which is mobilised to counter allegations of anti-immigration sentiment across the political spectrum.

6.2.3. *Reframing Irregular Migrants' Deservingness and Desirability*

Within this context, a question emerges about whether and how irregular migrants are (or can be) represented as both deserving of state protection and public compassion, and socioeconomically desirable — questions where civil society narratives play a crucial role. In this regard, the civil society discourse features a dual narrative framework based on humanitarian concerns and economic contributions, which applies to both migrant workers broadly and irregular migrants specifically. It characterises migrant workers as vulnerable to exploitation, particularly 'undocumented' migrants who face greater risks due to their limited access to legal and economic protections. At the same time, the 'economic contribution' argument appears prominently in narratives that portray 'undocumented' migrants as integral members of the community and is strategically used to advocate for amnesty initiatives to regularise their status. Echoing this dual narrative framework, the politics discourse — through the parliamentary debate on the "Amnesty for Undocumented Migrants" petition — provides a narrow yet meaningful narrative space for extending the 'humanitarian' and 'economic contribution' arguments to 'undocumented' migrants. Media coverage similarly supports 'economic contribution' arguments for irregular migrants, albeit indirectly, by emphasising their essential role in maintaining crucial services during the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. In general terms, however, narratives supporting irregular migrants' deservingness and desirability remain limited in both scope and sophistication, rarely advancing beyond 'humanitarian' and 'economic contribution' arguments.

7. Conclusions

This report has examined how UK media, politics, and civil society shape narratives about migrant irregularity. Our analysis of lexical and semantic patterns, narrative structures, and discursive strategies, reveals key trends in how irregular migration is discussed, as outlined below.

Several counterintuitive patterns emerge from our analysis. First, the media corpus paradoxically reproduces conservative narratives about irregular migration, despite being dominated by centre-left outlets. This trend suggests that, by framing migration primarily as political commentary rather than an autonomous social phenomenon, newspapers play a central role in amplifying government rhetoric even when attempting critical coverage. Second, conservative political discourse notably avoids explicit border control rhetoric, instead framing migration through moral arguments about legality and exploitation. This approach enables anti-immigration messaging while avoiding overtly supremacist positions. Third, civil society organisations struggle to balance creating alternative narratives while addressing political concerns. This challenge manifests most clearly in their use of victim-focused rhetoric and arguments about migrants' economic contributions.

A key insight from the report is the prominence in media and politics discourse of the 'legality' versus 'illegality' dichotomy, which was formalised in 2023 through the "Illegal Migration Act" and the subsequent split of immigration ministerial roles along these lines. The report particularly demonstrates how the notion of 'illegality' (and its opposite) derives its power from operating simultaneously in both geopolitical and moral domains. The first dimension is primarily shaped by media coverage that uses Channel crossing imagery to frame irregular migration as a border control crisis. This portrayal presents small boat crossings as threats to state sovereignty, dehumanising migrants as mere items in logistics processes of crossings and

deportations, while justifying aggressive enforcement and obscuring other paths to irregularity. The second dimension emerges through the transfiguration of the Channel into a moralising space where distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undesirable' migrants are produced. In this context, the Channel operates as a rhetorical sorting mechanisms primarily through the removal or allocation of agency, whereby migrants are portrayed as either helpless victims or willing lawbreakers. This narrative framework, which media and politics discourses leave strategically unresolved, serves to maintain a dual structure of meaning that contrasts positive migrant figures (e.g. the 'legal', 'skilled', or vulnerabilised migrants) against their projected counter-image: the 'illegal migrant'.

As could be expected, measurability and quantification emerge as key features in how irregularity is narratively constructed. While not always directly referencing migrants, this quantitative framing reflects a perspective that favours measurability in understanding and governing migration-related phenomena. This is especially evident in the numerical characterisation of male migrants in media and politics discourse, the emphasis on Channel crossing statistics, and the use of quantity markers to support 'unsustainable pressure' arguments. This emphasis on numbers is narratively productive, as it creates an illusion of measurability and control in public opinion, especially for a phenomenon long framed as requiring increased regulation. While many paths to irregularity are harder to quantify, border crossings provide a measurable space where anti-immigration rhetoric can materialise through concrete metrics: intercepted boats, arrested smugglers, and deportations become both statistical indicators and symbolic displays of control – benchmarks against which political promises are measured.

Within a context dominated by media and politics narratives, our analysis invites us to consider civil society's challenging role. Building on our preliminary findings, a stakeholder consultation with London-based migrant rights organisations in December 2024 explored how the sector positions itself in irregular migration discourse. Subsequent analysis identified nine key argumentative frameworks that shape how migrant irregularity is constructed in UK migration governance and advocacy, raising questions about civil society's engagement with these arguments.

Restrictive arguments	Definition
Fairness	While ostensibly promoting equity, it actually serves to criminalise and limit rights for certain migrant groups. It specifically portrays irregular migrants as 'undeserving' for bypassing established procedures and disadvantaging 'deserving' migrants who follow official pathways.
Fiscal responsibility	It advocates for restrictive immigration policies based on perceived fiscal burden, claiming that more generous immigration and asylum policies would be too costly for British taxpayers.
Limited capacity	It suggests that the UK has finite resources and infrastructure to accommodate migrants. Rather than explicitly opposing immigration, it advocates for controlled migration based on the capacity of public services.
Native supremacy	Though not overtly xenophobic, it prioritises the interests and rights of citizens and native-born populations over those of migrants.

Liberal arguments	Definition
Economic contribution	It emphasises migrants' positive economic impact on British society, highlighting their role in filling labour shortages, contributing to tax revenues, and enriching the cultural and economic fabric of communities.
Human rights	It emphasises the fundamental equality of all persons under international law, asserting that migrants possess the same basic rights as British citizens, including the right to seek asylum.
Humanitarian	It focuses on the moral imperative to assist vulnerable individuals regardless of their legal status, highlighting the often-dangerous conditions and circumstances that force people to migrate.
Post-colonial	It contextualises contemporary migration within historical patterns of colonial exploitation and ongoing global inequalities, highlighting how current migration flows is shaped by neo-colonial economic relationships.
Unapologetic	It presents human migration as a natural, historical constant rather than a modern crisis. It challenges the very premise of migration as a problem to be solved, instead advocating for acceptance of mobility as an inherent aspect of human society.

Within this rich discursive landscape, migrant rights organisations face the significant challenge of reconciling human rights and humanitarian perspectives with 'economic contribution' arguments. In fact, while dominant public narratives constrain broader discussions of migrant rights, using 'economic contribution' arguments to counter restrictive policies can unintentionally reinforce a state-centred neoliberal logic of 'deservingness' that privileges particular migrant categories over others. Consequently, civil society's dual framing remains limited and reactive rather than transformative. This limitation became clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, when more liberal approaches to migrant workers' rights and governance proved merely episodic, ultimately aligning with existing political discourse.

Overall, our findings underscore the urgent need to reimagine how we discuss and frame irregular migration in UK public discourse. The current narrative landscape, dominated by moralising frameworks of illegality, deservingness, and desirability, does not only fail to capture the complexity of human mobility and migrants' lived experiences. It also strategically uses the figure of the 'illegal migrant' as a disciplinary counter-image against which notions of deservingness and desirability are defined and reinforced within an emerging post-Brexit migration regime. Within this context, recurring public narratives, whether focused on economic benefits, humanitarian aspects, or fiscal responsibility, frame migration primarily through a transactional lens between 'host society' and 'newcomers'. Regardless of their intent, these approaches further constrain migrants' ability to express their experiences of alienation and non-belonging, and create conditions where such expressions are labelled as signs of failed integration or undeservingness, ultimately reinforcing an exclusionary narrative structure.

Perhaps, reframing migration discourse through an 'unapologetic lens' — one that presents human mobility as a natural phenomenon rather than a crisis — could offer a promising path forward. In its most radical form, this shift could lead to 'de-migrantising' migration advocacy and campaigning, thus abandoning the 'migrant' category in favour of alternative frameworks and identities (e.g. workers and workers' rights). While this approach presents certain risks, such as neglecting migrants' distinct legal status and reducing their

complex experiences to another single social dimension, it represents an important strategic consideration for future debates.

Looking ahead, transforming migration narratives requires a fundamental paradigm shift across the media, politics, and civil society—one that acknowledges migration as a fundamental aspect of human society while recognising the unique challenges and perspectives of those who move across borders. Only through recalibrating public discourse can we pave the way for a more equitable approach to human mobility that respects everyone's right to move and belong.

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