

UNESCO RIELA: The Sounds of Integration

Episode 81: Julie Ward and the *No to Hassockfield* campaign (30/7/2025)

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Speaker 1: Esa Aldegheri.

وسهلاً أهلاً, benvenuti, fàilte, titambire, welcome to the podcast series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts at the University of Glasgow. We bring you sounds about integration, languages, culture, society, and identity.

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Speaker 2: Catherine McGrath

Hi. My name is Catherine McGrath, and I am a volunteer editor for this podcast. Today's episode was recorded at our annual UNESCO RIELA Spring School: The Arts of Integrating in May 2025. Today's presentation is called Julie Ward on the *No to Hassockfield* campaign. Julie is a former MEP, serving on the European Parliament's Committees for Culture & Education, and Women's Rights & Gender Equality from 2014 to 2020.

Julie is also a board member for organisations such as Culture Action Europe, Festival of Thrift, Newcastle Circus Arts, and the Civil Society Forum based in Berlin. When she isn't campaigning, she enjoys foraging and looking after her grandchildren.

In 2021 she helped found the *No To Hassockfield* campaign, based in Durham. The campaign aims to close a Home Office detention facility for women seeking asylum, using creative arts both as a tool for resistance and self-care. Enjoy.

Speaker 3: Julie Ward

Thank you so much. I'm really thrilled to be at Spring School in person, because during lockdown when I felt really lost — partly because Brexit had happened, I'd just lost my job, you know, we were in such kind of multiple crises. It was pretty horrendous — and I joined Spring School online. Actually, I thought, Yeah, I'm with my tribe. And I think that's what we're all trying to do right now. Be with our people, be in the good places.

So, Hassockfield is an immigration removal centre that is sited about 12 miles outside of Newcastle Upon Tyne, near the former steel town of Consett. It's in a very remote place, quite difficult to reach. It's on the site of a former boys' detention centre that was called Medomsley, where the boys who were there were victims of historic abuse. And so, when that was discovered, the government closed the place down and nothing happened there. And then they reopened the place, and they called it Hassockfield Training Centre, and it was only open a few years and then 14-year-old Adam Rickwood from Burnley took his own life there, so they closed it down again. And then in 2021, under cover of COVID when there was zero scrutiny of what the government were doing, the Home Office took it back into the detention estate and announced that they were going to turn it into a women's detention centre — immigration removal centre — to replace Yarl's Wood.

So, those of you who know about the immigration story will know that Yarl's Wood was also a place where there was all kinds of abuse and horrific incidences, mental health problems, people self-harming, and there was a very organised network around Yarl's Wood, particularly the Yarl's Wood Befrienders.

I think what the government thought they would do is relocate women asylum seekers. They'd relocate them far away from the network of support. There'd be very little access to interpretation, translation, very little access to legal support, and there wouldn't be a really organised resistance from the local people. So, some of us in County Durham, when we were still in lockdown, heard about this undemocratic decision to make this centre into an immigration removal centre, an IRC, for women. In fact, the site had already been given planning permission to be knocked down and to be made into a housing estate, including some social housing and a pocket park. That had already got passed through the local democratic planning procedure. So, Priti Patel basically went, 'I'm not having any of that. I'm just going to have it back and we're going to stick women in there.'

We decided that we would need to set up a campaign that we didn't want it to open. Our campaign was initially about stopping it. Actually, at the time I was still working for City of Sanctuary, running a COVID emergency response project and online arts programme for refugees, and I remember speaking at one of our staff meetings about this. So, it was happening in my back yard, close to where I lived, and all my former work as an MEP and as a campaigner before that, I had worked on loads of issues around women's rights and violence against women, and I'd met women and children who were on the move across Europe and spoken to them and learnt that on every stage of their journey, they faced violence. They are fleeing violence. On their journey, they are subjected to violence, victims of trafficking, et cetera. When they arrive in Europe, they are also subjected to state violence. So, they come into places like this and they are re-traumatised, actually, by being locked up, by being treated as criminals.

I became part of the core group, and in fact, Alf Dubs — wonderful Lord Alf Dubs — came to speak at one of our very early online meetings. Those of you who don't know Alf Dubs, he was a child refugee, he was on the Kindertransport, he's a Labour lord, he's in the House of Lords, and he is very vocal on these issues. It's very, very personal for him.

So, he came and spoke at one of our meetings and reminded everybody that no one is illegal, and I repeat his words a lot of the time, because he's 90 years old, he knows what he's talking about, he has position, he also has life experience of being somebody who was given sanctuary.

Anyway, we finally decided that we needed to start protesting rather than just having online meetings, and we received a lot of support from the Oxford campaign, Keep Campsfield Closed. Bill MacKeith is really active in that, who I met through the detention forum, and came to give us lots of advice on how we should run our campaign, and he was really, really firm about, You need to get out there and demonstrate, and you need to demonstrate on a regular basis. So we began regular demonstrations every third Saturday of the month. We started that in July 2021. Where are we now? 2025. And we have kept that up the whole time. We are still doing that.

So, then the place opened at the end of December that year, and the first women were brought and locked up here in between Christmas and New Year. And there is a history of the authorities moving people during the holidays, in the middle of the night, when they think that none of us are going to be there to campaign. We've continued to keep up the campaign. Initially, the focus of the campaign was very, very much on the issue that women were being locked up there, and we worked closely with Women for Refugee Women. Their hashtag is #set her free, and Agnes Tanoh, who is one of the key speakers from Women for Refugee Women, she often comes to our campaigns. She's on our WhatsApp group. She's giving us advice and support.

It is quite hard to get people with lived experience to come and speak in this environment. Many of them, if they haven't got their asylum cases sorted, if they haven't been given leave to stay, then they're quite afraid of being in public. But you will have seen some people whose situation is now much more secure feel a little more confident about coming and speaking. You might have also seen Roza Salih, who is a Glasgow councillor. She came to speak at one of our demonstrations as well. And so, we have these regular Saturday monthly demonstrations, every third Saturday of the month. You'd all be welcome. We have to maintain a presence at this site. We are committed to being there until we close it down, and we know it could take 10 years. We have to keep going.

But we also have a very big, what we call, national demonstrations. The first one was in Consett town centre in December, I believe. Then the next one was on Palace Green in Durham, in front of the cathedral, on a fantastic sunny day. And now we have these national demonstrations actually at the site, and we've had something like three, four hundred people come to the national demonstrations from across the UK. We're working really, really closely with other campaign groups like Right to Remain, who have a wonderful group within them called These Walls Must Fall. There's also a brilliant campaign group from Sheffield [*not named but known as the South Yorkshire Migrant and Asylum Action Group*], they are really active with us as well. Groups also from London. So, we're very well networked now with all these other groups.

But this conference is about the use of arts and creativity, and our campaign has used arts and creativity as a fundamental tool, both for raising awareness, using colours and arts and performance, but also as a way for us to take care of each other, because it's a really brutal system, it's a really hard campaign. Our commitment to it is, like, until we close it down. We know that could take a long time, and it is exhausting. So, in fact, using arts and culture in that context has become really, really important for us also.

So, what I'm going to do is just talk through, basically list, some of the things that we've done using different art forms. The very first thing that we did was actually online, and we did a form of what was called newspaper theatre, where we used real examples from the news but also from trade union campaigns around the institutional racism of the private company who had the contract to run the place. Initially, it was Mitie — I won't call them mighty. Initially, it was Mitie. And so, we did this kind of online newspaper theatre, so it was actually using extant material that was in the public domain to try and explore this kind of institutional racism within the system. Then we also did a kind of version of that in an almost commedia dell'arte way, where we used masks and grotesque characters, and we performed that at the first national demonstration in Consett.

Also, clowning. So, we've got this wonderful young woman, Rosa Stourac McCreery, who is a practitioner of Theatre of the Oppressed, forum theatre, but also clowning. So, she also comes and brings that sort of lightness to it. In fact, she was at Glasgow COP doing all that kind of clowning police stuff, which you might have seen.

We read poems. Some people write poems, but we read a lot of poems that are in the public domain, again. Poems that can help us say something. In fact, as has been happening here at this conference, often the use of poetry can be powerful, it can be more direct, it can help connect people with their emotions.

Loads of music. And we have a PA system. We speak through a PA system, and that is because we want the women inside to hear us. We want them to know that they have not been forgotten about, and that we are outside and we are speaking up for them, we are with them. So, we speak through a PA system, but we also play music when we're not speaking. Our regular demonstrations last two hours, so we just keep going for that whole two hours. And we have lots of local musicians come and sing. A samba band called the Dead Canaries. Wonderful local folk singers. And in fact, a choir, a wonderful community choir got set up principally because they wanted to come and perform at our demonstrations, but they're now performing all over the place as far as I know. They're called Northern Outcry. So, we're really proud that that happened.

We work very closely, I said, with Walls Must Fall. We have some amazing video of some of the incredible African women from the Walls Must Fall campaign in Liverpool, in Manchester, who basically came to our big demo last October and just kind of took over the space with singing and dancing, and it was wonderful.

Visual art is also really important. There's a kind of— I hate to use the word branding, but we've got a style. It's very recognisable, it's very bright. I mean, these things are up all the time. And so, local artists, particularly a local artist called Jane Gower, who lives

quite locally, who couldn't come along to many of the demonstrations but desperately wanted to help — 'What can I do? What can I do? And I was like, Well, you can make some banners and posters for us, Jane. So, she did that and then she ran a workshop, and so lots of people were also encouraged to make these bright banners, which are made on plastic so they don't disintegrate if it rains, because we're there whatever the weather. So, we have loads and loads of amazing banners and placards.

Crafts. A local woman from a craft group, she made all the orange hearts for us. Lots of them were embroidered. We put them all over the fencing, we tie them onto the fencing, sometimes with coloured ribbons, like, for example, when it was International Women's Day. But also, you would've seen the orange hearts around an MP's office. So, we went up, and it was a Tory at that time, Richard Holden. He never ever talked about the women as people. He only ever talked about them or wrote about them as criminals or illegals. Shame on him. Shame on him for that. And we went up after one demonstration, and we took those orange hearts and we put them all over the front of his office. He then actually called the police and a couple of people from our campaign had to go and answer to charges of criminal damage, if I believe correctly. I'm not sure anything came of that, but it kind of just shows you how ridiculous the situation is.

So, crafts, and then beautiful little posies made of wildflowers. We always theme our protests and our demos. When it was coming up for COP, we're like, Well, we should do something about the environment. We know that people are fleeing not just conflict, but they're fleeing unsustainable lives. We have to talk about that. People who cannot live in the places where they live because the crops fail, or because it floods, or because there's a heatwave, or because of a swarm of locusts or whatever else. You know, poverty and unsustainable lives is a reason why people flee. So, we made these beautiful little posies for that particular day, and then orange flares.

Our protests and our work is documented by a documentary photographer who lives locally called Simone Rudolphi, so we've got a fantastic set of images. But we have also been part of an international documentary photography project called Seven Doors, by Greg Constantine, who is working all over the world by visiting detention centres and documenting them. There's a black and white photo, and that is the photo that's in Greg's exhibition, of us doing one of our pop-up actions.

In addition to our monthly demos on the third Saturday of every month, we like to surprise the staff. We turn up on International Women's Day, on Mother's Day, on all the anniversaries we can think about when they're not expecting us. When we know that women are going to be deported, we get there at seven in the morning, and we take our banners and we stand in front of the vans, and recently we were able to stop a deportation van. In fact, several times, we've been able to do that, or at least delay it long enough for the lawyers to try and get a case for judicial review.

So, that's all the different art forms that we use, and as I've said already, we do this also to take care of ourselves, because it is a brutal system that we're up against, and it's a long campaign. And so, we eat together. Very important. Helen, who's the chair of our group, always brings beautiful homemade cakes and flapjacks and hot tea and coffee.

But we also go out, and we've had meals together, and we've had planning sessions where we bring food to share. And we have fundraisers which are just as much important because they're social events, and at those social events are food, but we have music and ceilidhs with a brilliant band of diverse people who were former refugees and now have got permission to stay in Newcastle. They're called Crossings.

Speaker 2: Catherine McGrath

If you would like to know more about the campaign or the organisations Julie mentioned in this episode, please head to bit.ly/thesoundsofintegration for the full show notes. Thank you.

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Speaker 1: Esa Aldegheri.

أشكر , grazie, tapadh leibh, totenda, thank you for listening to this episode. For the full show notes and for more information about our work, please visit bit.ly/UNESCO_RILA.

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Note: SYMAAG attended the national demonstration on 18th November 2023 in a partnership with People and Planet, Sheffield Solidarity Group, Sheffield Action Group, and Sheffield Student Action for Refugees. According to:

https://www.symaag.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/SYMAAGannualreport23_24-compressed.pdf

Note: After Julie's presentation a fellow campaigner from No To Hassockfield, Alison Stancliffe, ran a card-making workshop whereby Spring School participants made cards bearing solidarity messages to give to the women in Derwentside IRC.

Names and organisations mentioned:

- No To Hassockfield — <https://www.notohassockfield.org.uk/>
- Yarl's Wood Befrienders, now called Beyond Detention <https://www.beyonddetention.org/>
- City of Sanctuary UK — <https://cityofsanctuary.org>
- Lord Alfred Dubs - <https://www.migrationmuseum.org/distinguished-friends/lord-dubs/>
- Keep Campsfield Closed — <https://keepcampsfieldclosed.uk>
- Bill MacKeith, organiser for the Coalition to Keep Campsfield Closed.
- Women for Refugee Women — <https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk>
- Agnes Tanoh, key speaker from Women For Refugee Women.

- Roza Salih, Scottish politician and human rights activist.
- Right to Remain — <https://righttoremain.org.uk>
- These Walls Must Fall — <https://wallsmustfall.org>
- South Yorkshire Migrant and Asylum Action Group — <https://www.symaag.org.uk>
- Rosa Stourac McCreery, theatre and clowning practitioner, director and founder of Forum Theatre NE - <https://www.facebook.com/theatreforumne?>
- Dead Canaries Samba Fusion Collective — https://www.facebook.com/p/Dead-Canaries-Samba-Fusion-100064953030982/?locale=en_GB
- Northern Outcry, community choir - <https://www.mouthfulway.co.uk/northern-outcry>
- Jane Gower, artist — @jane_gower on Instagram.
- Simone Rudolphi, photographer — <https://www.simonerudolphiphotography.com>
- Seven Doors — <https://www.7doors.org/about>
- Greg Constantine, photographer for Seven Doors.
- Dr. Helen Groom, chair of the No to Hassockfield campaign.
- Crossings, band — <https://www.facebook.com/thecrossingsband/>
<https://www.informationnow.org.uk/organisation/crossings-community-group/>
- People and Planet — <https://peopleandplanet.org>
- Sheffield Solidarity Group — @sheffsolgroup on Instagram.
- Sheffield Action Group — @sheffield_action_group on Instagram.
- Sheffield Student Action for Refugees — https://www.facebook.com/studentactionforrefugees.sheffield/?locale=en_GB
- Alison Stancliffe, organiser for the No to Hassockfield campaign.