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To cite this article: Deanna Dadusc, Aila Spathopoulou, Anna Carastathis & Camille Gendrot (30 Aug 2026): The criminalisation of freedom of movement: an abolition feminist analysis, *Mobilities*, DOI: [10.1080/17450101.2026.2720046](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2026.2720046)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2026.2720046>



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Published online: 30 Aug 2026.



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The criminalisation of freedom of movement: an abolition feminist analysis

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ABSTRACT

In EU policy debates and mainstream discourses, the criminalisation of migration and its facilitation are framed as necessary for the protection of 'vulnerable victims.' Building on abolition feminism as a critical epistemological and political foundation, we propose a critique of the criminalisation of facilitation and migration which synthesises border abolition with prison abolition, and which conceptualises it as part of global border apartheid. Focusing on Greece and Italy, we show how, whilst portraying themselves as patriarchal protectors, states amplify border violence rather than reducing it. In this context, 'violent protection,' 'control as care,' confinement, and criminalisation form part of a continuum of carceral border violence that mobilises scripts of gendered and racialised violence. Moreover, we explore how by shifting the blame for border violence on its victims, the criminalisation of facilitation inverts perpetrators and survivors/victims, obscuring state accountability for killing and letting die people on the move, who defy and resist borders by crossing them through illegalised means. As part of this critique, we argue, it is crucial to deconstruct state-imposed differentiation between types of facilitation, some denoted as 'humanitarian solidarity', others as 'smuggling', as these differentiations reinforce border and carceral regimes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 September 2025

Revised Accepted 6 August 2026

KEYWORDS

Borders; migration; feminism; abolition; facilitation; smuggling; border violence

Introduction

The last two decades have been marked by increasing tendencies to regulate migration through crime control measures (Aas 2025), criminalising migration to restrict freedom of movement across and within EU borders. The creation of hostile environments for people on the move has been combined with the implementation of various forms of criminalisation. Whether through the creation of new crimes related to peoples' movement, the differential implementation of existing laws (Bosworth 2022; Stumpf 2006), or the carceral turn in migration governance (Bosworth 2022; Mountz and Loyd 2014), criminalisation has amplified border violence. In this article, we argue that the criminalisation of migration, and specifically of facilitation and solidarity with people crossing borders and remaining within them without state authorisation happens on a continuum of state

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violence. Embedded in broader practices of segregation, migrant criminalisation consolidates racial apartheid. It normalises border militarisation and the structural violence of borders, seeking to generate citizens' consent to this violence by representing migrants as 'violent criminals' that threaten nation-states (Walia 2021). At the same time, criminalisation diverts attention from state authorities' responsibilities for violence and death, by blaming people on the move and those who facilitate their movement for the structural violence of borders, as well as by illegalising attempts to hold authorities accountable. As Angela Davis (2011) explains, whilst carceral regimes claim to make 'problems' disappear, they only disappear people. The state attempts through criminalisation to repress defiance of border regimes and racist state logics that sustain neo-colonial forms of (im)mobilisation, exploitation, and dispossession (Hawthorne 2022; Thompson 2023; Walia 2021).

The criminalisation of migration and of facilitation is disguised as a form of humanitarian intervention (Aas and Gundhus 2015; Anderlini 2025). Rescue operations by Frontex, the EU border agency; state-led humanitarian missions; EU common security and defence policy operations have created a humanitarian-military nexus bordering Europe (Pallister-Wilkins 2017). Humanitarian approaches to 'care' and 'protection' play a crucial role in disciplining migrant people. Humanitarian narratives obscure practices of control as care (Dadusc and Mudu 2022), which reinforce existing gendered, racialised and neo-colonial structures of oppression (Ticktin 2011).

We propose an abolition feminist analysis of the mechanisms of oppression reproduced through the criminalisation of facilitation. We make three arguments: (1) first, we show how, rather than reducing violence, the criminalisation of facilitation is a key source of border violence. (2) Second, we argue that the construction of 'vulnerabilities' linked to humanitarian narratives of 'care' and 'protection' mystify border violence, with a focus on the gendered-racialised construction of 'vulnerability' as a powerful patriarchal, colonial tactic to divert attention from state violence, and legitimise it. (3) Third, we suggest that criminalising facilitation has as an objective the repression of collective resistance, undermining life-sustaining and life-affirming actions that resist border violence.

The notion of 'facilitation' refers to a range of practices subject to criminalisation in order to quash freedom of movement and safer passage across violent borders. We invoke this term to avoid reproducing oppositions between subjects such as the 'migrant activist,' the 'boat driver' or 'lorry driver,' the 'sea rescuer,' or the person providing water, food, medical care, or shelter. Adopting an abolition feminist perspective, we avoid scrutinising the individuals who are criminalised, placing their actions on moral hierarchies and evaluating their 'guilt' or 'innocence,' which in turn would dictate whether they are 'deserving' or 'undeserving' of criminalisation. We argue, instead, that most forms of facilitation are a product of the criminalisation of migration, a necessity derived from increasingly violent borders. The concept of facilitation enables us to bring forward political claims, envisioning how the abolition of borders requires the decriminalisation of facilitation of freedom of movement. States that criminalise facilitation primarily target self-organised migrant communities who create 'underground railroads' (Brigden 2019), in defiance of the state logic, as practices of survival and escape routes in a bordering regime. Facilitation creates alternatives to the stranglehold of borders through people's everyday practices of mutual support (Mengiste 2018). Framed by states as 'trafficking,' 'smuggling,' or 'facilitators' networks, the prefigurative webs of mutual support woven by people on the move are forms of border resistance—whether they are organised or informal, intentional or unintentional, expedient or ideological, involving the exchange of money or purely altruistic. Yet, these practices are rarely understood as solidarity, self-organisation, survival, and border defiance through the 'white gaze' of those who criminalise them as well as of certain movements in solidarity with migrants.

Abolition feminism

We position ourselves as abolition feminists committed to struggles for freedom of movement. Over the past years, within no-border networks—including the Feminist Autonomous Centre

for research (and its annual Feminist No Borders Summer Schools), the Captain Support Network, borderline europe, Watch the Med—Alarm Phone, the Iuventa crew, the Ragazzi Baye Fall, Sportello Sans Papiers of Arci Porco Rosso, Legal Centre Lesvos, Aegean Migrant Solidarity, the #FreePylos9 and #FreeHomayoun campaigns, the Maldusa Project, Feminist Researchers Against Borders, Musaferrat, and many others—we have been articulating and discussing the relationships amongst struggles against borders, the illegalisation of people on the move, the criminalisation of facilitation, gendered violence, and freedom of movement. The analysis in this paper draws upon our ongoing organising and collaborative research within and alongside these collectives. Our abolitionist analysis is shaped by a relational methodological orientation; our engagements are not treated as ‘empirical data’ but as situated, relational forms of knowledge that carry their own ethical and political weight. The knowledge we share in this article draws upon collective processes of researching, analysing, and imagining the world otherwise and is informed by priorities and dilemmas encountered in everyday collective praxis and conversations starting from 2019. During no-border workshops held in Nantes in 2019 and in Palermo in 2021, a consensus emerged of the need to decentre the criminalisation of white solidarians from no-border campaigns, and to prioritise mobilisations around the criminalisation of people on the move themselves, often imprisoned for ‘facilitating illegal entry’. As a result, we contributed to the creation of the Captain Support Network, a platform to provide legal support to criminalised people on the move, as well as to link, at a transnational level, groups conducting research and solidarity campaigns. In September 2022, collective reflection led us to create materials to counter the mainstream discourses of ‘smuggling’ and ‘trafficking’ that mobilise public support for criminalisation of people on the move. With this aim, we developed two community courses and a related podcast series (see Dadusc et al. 2024, 2025), to address the discursive, political, and legal implications of the criminalisation of facilitation. The first course involved community organisations, scholars and researchers engaged in decriminalisation campaigns, as well as people subject to criminalisation; the second further centered the voices and analysis of people criminalised by the border regime specific to Italy. Our engagement in these processes has had a specific focus on Italy and Greece.

From an abolition feminist perspective, we argue that migration policies reproduce the very conditions they claim to ameliorate. Existing EU policy debates and mainstream discourses on border governance tend to frame the criminalisation of migration as necessary. There is a widespread legitimisation of the criminalisation of ‘smugglers’ in particular as needed for the protection of vulnerable victims (Anderlini 2025). Yet, criminalisation depends upon the carceral, racialised, and gendered logics through which both border violence and vulnerability are produced. Drawing on existing perspectives that foreground the inevitable intersection between border violence and migrant criminalisation (Anderson et al. 1969; Bradley and Noronha 2022; Riva et al. 2024; Tazzioli 2023), we refuse policy solutions that seek to make borders more humane, without confronting the carceral continuum of violence that sustains them. Black abolitionist feminist scholarship provides a critical epistemological and political foundation for our critique of the criminalisation of facilitation and migration (Bierria et al. 2022; Davis et al. 2022). Rooted in analyses of colonial domination, racial capitalism, slavery and its contemporary afterlives, abolitionist feminists conceptualise violence as structural, atmospheric, and spatially organised through state-corporate institutions such as prisons, policing, welfare systems, and borders (Davis et al. 2022; Thompson 2026; Walia 2021). Rather than treating violence as a deviation from rule of law or an aberration in otherwise just governance, this tradition foregrounds how violence is structurally produced through the ordinary functioning of legal and administrative systems that regulate mobility, labour, and life itself (Battle and Powell 2024; Thompson 2025; Thompson 2026). The violence routinely enacted through borders is not an accidental excess of sovereign power, but a constitutive feature of racialised regimes of mobility control. Moreover, central to abolitionist feminism is the insight that ‘organised abandonment’ (Gilmore 2007)—namely, the deprivation of life-sustaining infrastructures—is enabled by state

violence, criminalisation, and repression; it is aimed at preventing those targeted from resisting. Through this lens, borders emerge as carceral spaces that operate along a continuum of violence, where racialised populations are rendered governable through exposure to precarity, disappearance, and death as well as surveillance and criminalisation (Thompson 2026). Organised abandonment, criminalisation, and humanitarian containment are interlocking technologies of racial governance that operate across space and time to manage people on the move, constructed as 'migrant populations'.

Bringing abolition feminism into dialogue with border studies, including critical scholarship on humanitarianism (Oliver, 2017; Pallister-Wilkins 2022; Sahraoui 2020), has significant implications for analysing how border regimes operate. Humanitarian logics often legitimise carceral border regimes and seek to mitigate gendered racial violence through ameliorative policy reform. Abolitionist approaches reject reformist solutions that seek to make borders 'more humane', leaving intact their underlying logics of carcerality, securitisation, and racialised exclusion (Key 2025). Instead, we call for a fundamental rethinking of mobility grounded in self-determination, care, accountability, and the redistribution of resources, away from punitive governance infrastructures and toward life-sustaining autonomous infrastructures and relations (Jones 2022; Thompson 2025). Within an abolitionist framework, criminalisation is understood as a form of state violence, resistance to which demands the dismantling of structures of domination that render certain lives unliveable (Day and McBean 2022). Confronting the violence of criminalisation requires a political refusal of the continuum of violence that sustains contemporary border regimes. Normatively, this entails shifting analytical and political attention away from border enforcement and toward the conditions that sustain life, mobility, and collective care. Such a reorientation foregrounds demands for freedom of movement, the decriminalisation of migration and solidarity, and the dismantling of borders, prisons, and police, while recognising that these demands exceed existing policy and humanitarian frameworks. Situating resistance to border violence, including facilitation of freedom of movement, within abolitionist feminist praxis, this article contributes to the synthesis of border abolition and prison abolition (Riva et al. 2024; Tuck 2025).

The criminalisation of facilitation

The criminalisation of the facilitation of movement is part of the global apartheid policy with the EU, and Italy and Greece, amongst others, enthusiastically participating (Achilli 2023; Brigden and Mainwaring 2016; Gendrot and Dadusc 2023). The shift in the 1990s towards a reinforcement of the criminalisation of those facilitating the arrival of people constructed as undesirable by European states is inscribed in the development of the militarisation and externalisation of European migration policies (Picum 2024), a key element of the production of border regimes and racial apartheid in Europe and globally. Harsha Walia (2013) demonstrates how the differentiation between 'citizens' and 'migrants' constitutes 'border imperialism'—the ways in which contemporary borders are constitutive of ongoing processes of imperialism. Borders are global systems of power rooted in histories of colonisation, genocide, and slavery, animating their contemporary forms into the present, where the convergence of migration and criminal law, '*crimmigration*' (Stumpf 2006), is a main feature of migration management. The illegalisation of most people attempting to reach Europe from the global South creates racialised hierarchies where illegalised inhabitants are governed by criminal laws, policing practices, carcerality and exclusion (Aas 2025). *Crimmigration* goes beyond traditional forms of criminalisation of actions, by illegalising every aspect of people's existence in EU territory (Anderson et al. 1969; Browne 2015; Dadusc 2019).

The criminalisation of migration involves a constellation of state and non-state actors who enact strategies of surveillance, monitoring, and control (Rumford 2013). An example is the 'Hostile Environment' policy in the UK, turning every citizen into a potential border guard, and

every social space into a border zone (Bhatia 2020; Jones et al. 2017). Employers, landlords, educators, and health care workers are legally obliged to check people's immigration status and to report 'irregularities' to the Home Office. Not doing so is not an administrative infraction but could bring criminal charges (Griffiths and Yeo 2021). Indeed, in the 2025 Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, migration is equated with terrorism threats (Khiabany and Williamson 2025). In the EU, equally oppressive laws criminalise migrants, framing them as a security threat and implementing tactics of segregation (Fekete 2018): the result is not only criminalisation, detention, and incarceration (Bosworth 2022; Esposito et al. 2024), but also the repression of solidarity to people who are illegalised on EU territory. This repression seeks to make migrants' lives unlivable and frames their social relations and forms of mutual aid as 'criminal organisation' (*associazione a delinquere* in Italy and εγκληματική οργάνωση in Greece).

Italy was a main advocate for an international treaty that would impose an obligation to criminalise acts of facilitation of illegalised mobilities, which led to the framing of facilitation as a transnational organised crime with the adoption of the Palermo Protocol in 2000. Paradoxically, two decades later, in the aftermath of the Cutro shipwreck, one of the most lethal shipwrecks off Italy, (Memoria Mediterranea 2023), the political response (the so-called 'Cutro Decree'), which we discuss below, was further criminalisation of anyone who attempts to cross borders without state permission, or who acts in solidarity. (Caprioglio et al. 2023). In Italy, thousands of people who are accused of facilitating each other's journeys are currently in prison under charges of 'facilitating illegal immigration' (Article 12 of the Decree n° 20/2023); some of them condemned to up to 30 years imprisonment, accused of causing deaths at the border, usually for driving a boat across the Mediterranean Sea, which shipwrecked or where people lost their lives (ARCI Porco Rosso and borderline europe 2025). People supporting fellow migrants on land are often accused of criminal association, trafficking, or smuggling (Caprioglio et al. 2022; Gendrot and Dadusc 2023).

Greece has established a legal framework to criminalise people on the move themselves for their own flight (Hänsel et al. 2020). Under the pretext of 'fighting smuggling', people undertaking and criminalised for facilitating these journeys—who are routinely arrested and charged on interception or arrival—constitute the second largest group in prison (after drug-related offenses), receiving the longest prison sentences, often hundreds' of years in trials that last an average of 27 minutes (borderline europe 2023; Hänsel et al. 2020). Years of imprisonment are calculated according to the number of people someone is accused of transporting into Greek territory, either by land or by sea. The nine passengers charged with causing the shipwreck near Pylos—for which officers of the Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG) are currently facing trial in Naval Court—like thousands of people criminalised as 'boat drivers' and 'smugglers' are treated not as survivors of border violence, but as those responsible for it (Forensis 2023): in the Pylos massacre, as we discuss below, the Greek state tried to blame the death toll of a pushback operation, which the HCG routinely conducts, on survivors of the deadly shipwreck it itself caused (Human Rights Watch 2023; Feminist Autonomous Centre for research 2024).

In Italy and Greece, civil society organisations exposing human rights violations by EU authorities and by Frontex accused of espionage face up to 20 years imprisonment for unmasking state violence (Dadusc and Denaro 2021; Kourakis 2026). Since at least 2017, Greece has prosecuted journalists documenting border violence, and enforced bans to obstruct reporting on the Closed Controlled Access Centres (Human Rights Watch 2025; Reliefweb 2020). In September 2025, a new law was passed that further criminalises people on the move: those whose asylum application has been rejected will face deportation if they refused so-called 'voluntary return' or face prison sentences of 5 years (Greece 2026, Law 5275/2026).

Although most attention has been given to the criminalisation of solidarity enacted by European citizens, particularly those who are privileged by whiteness, most criminalisation cases target racialised people on the move, who act in solidarity with one another and facilitate freedom of movement toward or within European territory (Gendrot and Dadusc 2023;

Kolankiewicz and Sager 2021). According to the 2025 'From Sea to Prison' report (ARCI Porco Rosso, Borderline Europe 2025), at least 3,200 people who arrived in Italy driving boats across the Mediterranean Sea, or who were accused of doing so, face extremely long prison sentences and consequences that will follow them most of their life, including the difficulty of receiving asylum and residence permits, as well as high fines: up to 3 million Euros in the case of the people arrested for boat driving in the aftermath of the Cutro shipwreck. People accused of being boat drivers are often literally taken from the sea to the prison, where they are denied access to legal support, translation, or information, not even allowed to communicate with their loved ones, who might fear they have died at sea in the months or even years it often takes to find out where their loved ones are being detained (Captain Support Network 2022). Some people are not imprisoned but are nevertheless kept in a legal limbo for years awaiting a decision, and are prevented from continuing their lives (ARCI Porco Rosso et al. 2021).

Diaspora communities accused of providing assistance to people on the move have also become targets of criminalisation: the 'Agaish case' is one example, where a solidarity initiative of the Eritrean diaspora in Rome, providing hospitality and support to Eritreans who recently arrived in Italy, was charged with being a criminal facilitation network. 'Agaish', Eritrean for 'guest', was mistranslated by the Italian prosecutors as 'client', distorting acts of welcoming in an organised migrant-to-migrant solidarity network into a 'criminal network of profit-seeking traffickers' (Caprioglio et al. 2022).

States select who can live and who shall die, and incarcerate those who were not meant to survive or who facilitate survival. Not only crossing borders, but also surviving their violence becomes a political act, a direct action against racist and white supremacist politics that seek to make people disappear, to render them invisible and to erase any memory of them (Di Meo Forthcoming). Facilitating people's journeys, supporting people defying borders, helping people survive them becomes a threat to state power and a life-affirming practice in face of organised violence (Mengiste 2018). As such, actions that work toward the abolition of the border regime and of the racist apartheid it supports, become the target of the harshest forms of criminalisation and punishment. In Italy, Greece, and across the EU, these forms of criminalisation are taking place across a broader spectrum of repression, where multiple forms of dissent and social organisation outside the prescribed channels are criminalised and punished.

The criminalisation of rescue

Although often diverting the attention away from more pervasive forms of criminalisation of facilitation outlined above, the criminalisation of solidarity and rescue is on a broader continuum of violence aimed at reproducing racial apartheid. The most mediatised cases of criminalisation of facilitation in the Italian and Greek contexts, as well as through international solidarity campaigns across Europe, concern the criminalisation of European Search and Rescue (SAR) activists, human rights defenders, or other solidarity initiatives. These include the Iuventa crew; Mediterraneana Mare Jonio crew; Sea Watch captain Carola Rackete; Baobab Experience and Linea d'Ombra activists (see Carrera et al. 2018; Fekete 2018). These cases show the attempt of the Italian government to repress solidarity with migrants, as well as dissident voices and critical gazes documenting and denouncing border violence (Dadusc and Denaro 2021).

The criminalisation of NGOs conducting SAR in the Central Mediterranean Sea, aiming at finding boats in distress in international waters, started around 2017, when the seemingly smooth cooperation between the Italian MRCC (Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre) and SAR NGOs ended. The state's political objective shifted from rescuing people on precarious boats to arresting so-called 'traffickers' and 'smugglers' who had allegedly organised their journey, and who, according to Italian authorities, would be found among the rescued. In parallel, bilateral agreements with Libya established the contested Libyan Search and Rescue zone, and externalised Italian maritime borders to Libya, providing training, equipment, and financing to the

Libyan Coastguard (Dadusc and Mudu 2022). Rather than directly hindering the NGOs' rescue operations, the Italian government attempted to co-opt them, forcing them to act as law-enforcement actors rather than humanitarian rescuers. Those who refused to collaborate with Italian authorities, were then accused of collaborating with 'smugglers and traffickers'. In July 2017, Italy imposed a 'code of conduct' on civil rescue NGOs, which permitted police officers aboard civil SAR vessels, forcing NGO crews to collaborate with police officers as a mandatory condition for their operation. The aim was to enable Italian authorities to gather information from and about rescued migrants and alleged 'smugglers and traffickers'. Failure to accept these conditions entailed the accusation of refusing to collaborate with authorities' efforts to 'arrest smugglers' and as a consequence, possible charges of collaborating with so-called 'criminal smuggling networks'. Italy made a clear shift from rescuing to arresting survivors of border violence, seeking to hinder acts of solidarity beyond state control (Dadusc and Mudu 2022).

The accusations against SAR NGOs by Frontex, Italian and European Parliamentarians, and media not only claimed that they were 'colluding with smugglers' for their own profit; but also, paradoxically, that by constituting a 'pull-factor', sea rescue would endanger migrants rather than helping them. Frontex alleged that

all parties involved in SAR operations in the Central Mediterranean unintentionally help criminals achieve their objectives at minimum cost, strengthening their business model by increasing the chances of success. Migrants and refugees—encouraged by the stories of those who had successfully made it in the past—attempt the dangerous crossing since they are aware of and rely on humanitarian assistance to reach the EU (cited in (Pallister-Wilkins 2017, 32).

As a response to some NGOs' refusal to accept conditions for operating at sea, on 2 August 2017, the prosecutor of Trapani seized the *Iuventa* rescue ship, under suspicion of 'assistance to illegal migration' (Article 12 of the Italian decree n° 20/2023). This led to a 7-year-long pre-trial process based on evidence gathered through police infiltration and surveillance (including bugs on the ship), with four defendants facing up to 20 years imprisonment. All charges were finally dropped on 19 April 2024 due to lack of reliable evidence.

Through the 'code of conduct' requirement and the collection of information, the Italian state attempted to turn civil society SAR initiatives into border control agents. The main objective was to identify and arrest those who allegedly organised the journey from Tunisia or Libya, and the identification of the so-called '*scafista*', a derogatory Italian term for 'boat driver'. When SAR initiatives refused to cooperate with authorities in identifying alleged traffickers, they were accused of 'collaborating with traffickers and smugglers' (Dadusc and Mudu 2022). 'Smugglers' and migrants themselves—rather than border policies—were constructed as the cause of border violence and deaths at sea. State discourses thereby created a predator-victim figure to legitimise the humanitarian-military nexus as the only possible protection of migrants' lives at the same time as securing European borders. Behind the predator-victim figure, states sought to conceal the fact that it is the presence of the militarised border itself that necessitates the reliance on facilitators (Achilli 2023; Anderlini 2025; Carrera et al. 2018; Zhang et al. 2018).

In a context where the EU border regime attempts to create a 'black hole' and 'selective visibility' in the Mediterranean Sea, with their presence, civil rescue ships attempted to challenge the state monopoly of 'visibility' (Pezzani and Heller 2013), practicing 'sousveillance', or surveillance from below (Browne 2015): not only making border violence visible, but also making visible the institutional responsibility for this violence, enabling civil society to hold states accountable for it. Documenting border violence, civilian SAR is threatening to the border regime.

The presence of civilian SAR actors is crucial in current struggles against borders; their criminalisation proves their 'dangerousness' to the border regime. These legal cases have become turning points of mobilisation, with large campaigns mobilised to defend humanitarians who, according to civil society, do not deserve criminalisation for attempting to save lives. Although claims of innocence are often prescribed by legal discourses and proceedings, and

campaigns against the criminalisation of civil rescuers are necessary in their defense, we argue that at a political level, these narratives have inadvertently contributed to the depoliticisation of understandings of border violence. When the focus is placed on the ostensibly apolitical, purely humanitarian, efforts of the civil fleet to save lives, an opportunity is lost to reclaim civilian SAR's political power to disrupt existing modes of visibility of border violence. Moreover, declarations of (white) humanitarians' 'innocence', implicitly invoke binaries of 'innocent' versus 'guilty', 'deserving' versus 'undeserving', which misrepresent how criminalisation functions in border regimes, and whom it targets. To say 'they are not smugglers, they are just saving lives' reinforces a clear differentiation between the life-saving (white) rescuers versus the life-threatening (migrant) smugglers, and reproduces the racialised figure of the predator-victim as responsible for border violence. The criminalisation of migration and of solidarity are not separate issues.

However, through their separation, migrant-to-migrant solidarity, collective attempts to survive borders and create safer passages outside and against the logic of white saviourism, are rarely understood as 'solidarity' not only by lawmakers but sometimes also by human rights campaigners. Those driving boats across the Mediterranean Sea and helping hundreds of people survive the passage to reach Europe to claim asylum, for instance, are not usually represented as 'heroes' or 'lifesavers'; their criminalisation as 'smugglers' or 'traffickers' is rarely contested. Alternatively known as pilots, captains, drivers, co-travellers, agents, or brokers, facilitators are often perceived by people on the move as service providers, expert guides, friends, communities of mutual aid and solidarity and sometimes heroes, rather than violent criminals (Achilli 2018; Augustova et al. 2023; Brigden 2019; Mengiste 2018). However, hard to portray as acts of saving lives, and often delivered as a service, either paid or unpaid, these acts do not fall within the 'state of necessity' that is often upheld to defend civilian rescuers; nor can these actors be elevated as innocent victims undeserving of punishment, since their very presence in nationalised territory is criminalised. Yet, not only are the criminalisation of boat drivers and the criminalisation of SAR NGO rescuers intertwined; differentiating between them perpetuates power structures, where (white) rescuers' actions are portrayed as morally superior, moved by altruism and voluntarism rather than necessity or profit, and therefore undeserving of criminalisation and punishment, as opposed to those portrayed as 'profit-seeking traffickers'.

In recognition of these dynamics, campaigns in solidarity with people criminalised for SAR have sometimes used the media spotlight to make explicit the connection with the criminalisation of migrants (Fallon and Grillmeier 2026) as the primary targets of prosecution and incarceration for 'Crimes of Solidarity' (Crimes of Solidarity 2026). Taking an abolition feminist perspective on criminalisation means deconstructing socio-legal categorisations; refusing white saviourist representations based on a hierarchy of solidarity with colonial and heteropatriarchal roots; and dismantling white supremacist and patriarchal violence against people on the move (Picozza 2021). Creating differentiations between forms of solidarity risks reinforcing narratives and categories that naturalise border violence and carceral institutions. By depoliticising migrant-to-migrant solidarity we allow states to frame migrants' agency as criminal, and border violence finds legitimisation.

Shifting the blame for border violence onto its victims

The facilitation of migration is represented by states as a form of violence and coercion enacted by 'profit-seeking smugglers' against 'vulnerable victims', who—according to this narrative—should be protected by the state through the prosecution of smugglers (who are usually migrants themselves) and the further militarisation of borders. On 13 June 2023, the *Al-Mutawakkil*, a fishing trawler (misidentified as the '*Adriana*' by the international press), with approximately 750 people on board, was intercepted by the Hellenic Coast Guard, which, in an attempt to tow the ship out of the Greek Search-and-Rescue (SAR) zone, led to its sinking, off the coast of Pylos,

Greece. Over 600 lives were lost in one of the deadliest maritime disasters in recent Mediterranean history Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2023). In an attempt to evade accountability for this state crime, nine Egyptian survivors—known as the ‘Pylos 9’—were unjustly detained and charged with smuggling and causing the shipwreck (FreePylos9 2024).

As a response and in solidarity with the nine survivors, the #FreePylos9 campaign emerged demanding justice for the Pylos state crime. In May 2024, a Greek court acquitted the nine survivors, ruling that the incident occurred in international waters and therefore the Greek courts lacked jurisdiction (#FreePylos9 campaign), also dismissing charges of facilitating illegal entry since the ship had not entered, and had no intention to enter Greek territorial waters (Feminist Autonomous Centre for research 2024; Legal Centre Lesbos 2024; Mediterraneana 2024). Importantly, the Pylos shipwreck is not unique or exceptional, contrary to how the Greek state and the EU have tried to construct it, since what led to the Pylos shipwreck is systemic border violence. Similarly, the Cutro shipwreck of 26 February, 2023, is one of many shipwrecks that have occurred in recent years off the coast of Italy, but one of the few that hit the headlines, because the bodies of dozens of lifeless people that arrived on the beaches of Cutro could not be ignored or pushed into invisibility. As with many others, just a few months later, the authorities’ responsibility for the Pylos and Cutro shipwrecks was demonstrated, proving the orchestrated and intentional nature of border violence, including non-rescue. The Italian authorities were aware of the dangerous condition of the boat carrying 200 people during a storm, but decided to treat it as a matter of border control rather than a rescue operation (Memoria Mediterraneana 2023; Di Meo Forthcoming). They decided to wait for the boat to reach the coast in order to arrest and imprison the boat drivers. In doing so, they let one hundred people die before their eyes.

Today, a plaque stands on the Cutro beach, commemorating those ‘poor migrants [...] travelling the seas aboard a boat, [...] seeking a future of redemption and freedom’, whose lifeless bodies reached the shores and those whose bodies were never found, and indeed were made to disappear on the seabed. At first sight, the plaque is a rare act of humanisation of migrants; yet, it exceptionalises the shipwreck as a ‘tragic event’ that ‘calls on us to exercise our sense of humanity, solidarity and hospitality, in the name of our neighbours and the highest ideal of human brotherhood’(1). Rather than holding the border regime accountable for their deaths, in what was not an isolated event, but the consequence of systematic state practice, the plaque shifts the blame for the ‘tragic loss of lives’ from the state towards those named as ‘unscrupulous traffickers and smugglers’ who by ‘endangering the lives of desperate migrants’ are blamed for causing the deaths of fellow travellers. These words, engraved in stone, express all the hypocrisy and violence exercised by the Italian authorities in evading their responsibility for these deaths; categories of ‘vulnerable migrants’ in opposition to ‘unscrupulous traffickers’ legitimise the militarisation of borders as a humanitarian action needed to protect innocent people from those who would violently exploit them. Here, the responsibilities of EU authorities disappear, as they become grieving humanitarian actors. Shifting the blame for the shipwreck onto those on board, three people accused of driving the boat that capsized off Cutro, currently each face between 11 and 16 years in prison. The massacre has been grotesquely used to name the so-called ‘Cutro decree,’ which raises sentences up to 30 years for people accused of facilitating migration; legalises longer permanence within repatriation centres (CPR) for asylum seekers and people awaiting deportation; and eliminates special forms of protection (*protezione speciale*) that previously provided (precarious) residence permits in Italy.

Violent protection

As we have argued, states seek to legitimise the militarisation of borders by constructing socio-legal categories and narratives that construct those who facilitate migration (or those accused of doing so) as dangerous criminals, exploiting and harming vulnerable people who

are said to be at their mercy. Women's protection and gendered narratives of vulnerability and victimhood are often a carceral flag under which gendered and racialised punitive regimes are legitimised (Abji 2020). The 'women-and-children trope' is often mobilised to legitimise border militarisation and border violence, allegedly necessary to protect vulnerable victims (Rigo 2018); the role of the patriarchal protector of migrants is suspended to the extent that European states position themselves as '*parens patriae*', protecting the nation from 'uncontrolled outsiders, even if they are children' (Bhabha 2014, 19–20 in Achilli 2023, 3296). In fact, the state controls, detains, deports, and kills those gendered as 'women-and-children' on a daily basis. All of the women and children who were aboard the Al-Mutawakkil/a.k.a. Adriana were killed when the ship capsized and sank near Pylos. Violence is perpetuated and legitimised through a weaponisation of notions of 'care' and 'protection', while migration is represented as self-harm or self-endangerment in a victim-blaming way: people crossing borders risking their lives at sea, or endangering the lives of their children whom they 'put in boats.'

Protection and punishment are two sides of one coin: EU states present themselves as magnanimous saviours, whilst enforcing borders that put people in danger in the first place. Narratives of protection go hand in hand with the construction of gendered and racialised categories of vulnerability (Rigo 2019), which dehumanise people and reduce them to 'endangered objects' of protection or 'dangerous subjects' in need of control, thereby depoliticising their acts of survival and defiance against violent borders. States thereby evade their own responsibility for border violence and create a process of inverted justice: rather than perpetrators, border regimes are constructed both as saviours of those in danger, as well as victims of those who try to defy them and transgress their logic. This construction of control as care has a long history, linking the carceral border regime to "'colonising care' relationships of enslavement and imperial occupation, manifest in carceral care [...] and in] continued sites of policing" (Maynard 2017 in Jones 2022, 147). 'Protection' in state, NGO, and corporate discourses is often inseparable from confinement and incarceration. These discourses embody the afterlife of colonial categories and racist narratives with origins in slavery; enable the entanglement of humanitarian and securitarian practices; and legitimise the repressive and lethal enterprise that has been consolidating as the global border regime over the last decades. Indeed, 'discourses about race and colonization also replicate institutional divide-and-rule tactics' (Jones 2022, 97). Humanitarian and securitarian practices are carceral to the extent that they profit from, maintain, and require infrastructures of containment, control, and surveillance of people's lives, which confine and segregate them (Dadusc and Mudu 2022; Fassin 2005).

Taking an abolition feminist perspective, we can deconstruct the narratives of vulnerable subjects that need state protection, whilst at the same time revealing the multiple, interwoven forms of violence to which border crossers are subjected. Border regimes enact scripts of gendered-racialised violence. States exploit the patriarchal trope of protection with the one hand, whilst meting out control and punishment with the other. Neocolonial, white, carceral feminisms deliberately obscure this dual function of state violence in order to legitimise war, invasion, occupation, border violence, and killing in the name of protecting 'women' from non-European, non-white—and therefore immediately classified as 'dangerous'—men (Bernstein 2010). It is important to acknowledge that people encounter interpersonal violence in their journeys, and for resistances to this to be part of struggles for freedom of movement. Interpersonal violence needs to be contextualised within the violence and coercion of immobility regimes. In particular, criminalisation is an amplifier of violence, toward criminalised people themselves, who face years of imprisonment in violation of their fundamental rights; and toward people who rely on their services for safer journeys, and who, in order to avoid pushbacks or capture, are forced to take longer, more precarious journeys (Sanchez 2017a, 2017b). It has been demonstrated that the more invisible these journeys are, the more dangerous they become, as people face conditions where they become subject to violence, abuse, and exploitation (Sharma 2002; Spener 2011).

Conclusion

Humanitarian narratives that reinforce rather than challenge border regimes and their militarisation (Sciurba and Furri 2018) reproduce state constructions of 'emergency' and 'crisis'. They construct border violence as an unintended effect of the border regimes, representing violence as a *failure* of the border regime, rather than a constituent structural element (Bassi et al. 2019; Sajjad 2022). Border violence is represented as an unintended effect or an unfortunate, but necessary consequence of border policies, rather than acknowledging the role of border politics in creating this violence. Moreover, framing migration as an 'emergency' or a 'crisis', humanitarian narratives mystify the role of colonial and neo-colonial histories and relations, and the long trajectories of violence that led to the current situation (Vernon 2024). It is only by acknowledging the political orchestration and the historical patterns of border violence that we can start laying the foundations for understanding it as a geopolitical strategy. Humanitarian discourses naturalise the existence of the border regime by exceptionalising border violence; in fact, they operate on a *continuum*, obscuring and obstructing politics that would centre migrant autonomy, working towards an abolition of the border regime, rather than its amelioration through reform. Abolition feminist struggles against borders highlight that borders work exactly the way they are intended to. Violence and death is not a failure of the border regime but an integral part of its operation. The distinction between 'good borders' and 'violent borders' is a false dichotomy; violence, segregation and racial apartheid are the very reason for the existence of borders. Therefore, we need to build counter-narratives, arguing that in addition to 'extra-legal' spaces of emergency and exception, violence is exercised in 'mundane' ways precisely through laws and policies. Violence is inscribed within laws and policies rather than happening outside or in violation of them. Abolition feminist struggles against borders and prisons pay attention to how carceral institutions and punitive measures are inscribed in a language of 'care' and protection that whitewashes its patriarchal and white supremacist enactments, as well as narratives of innocence and guilt that inform who is deserving and undeserving of punishment and also of solidarity (Wang 2014). Processes of criminalisation and certain practices of resistance might label some actions as 'benevolent', 'humanitarian', and therefore 'innocent', whilst impugning others as potentially dangerous and deserving of carceral punishment. Words like 'trafficking', 'smuggling', or 'migrant solidarity' are used to differentiate across racialised lines amongst those who *facilitate* freedom of movement and safer passages in the context of border violence.

Moreover, struggles for freedom of movement make visible the tensions between, on the one hand, forms of contestation and solidarity that shake the foundations of the border regime and work toward the abolition of racial capitalism and the borders and prisons that sustain it; on the other, neocolonial codes of humanitarianism that seek reform. These reproduce the same systems of oppression that kill, incarcerate, and violate migrant lives, sustaining the forms of racist apartheid that characterise Europe. The construction of self-organised abolitionist practices and spaces as 'criminal', as 'trafficking networks', and as 'organised crime' represents migrants either as victims of smuggling or trafficking, or as predator-victims responsible for border violence. State intervention through either securitarian or humanitarian mechanisms is then constructed as necessary. Yet, most people in these abolitionist spaces who are constructed as either 'criminals' or 'victims in need of protection', are political actors attempting to survive or subvert a broader geopolitical system characterized by racial apartheid, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. Bordering practices are inextricable from this carceral regime, with repression and incarceration of people who help one another survive borders and racist apartheid in Europe. Criminalisation, in this context, does not only attack humanitarian interventions, but those practices, counter-narratives, and social relations that contest the border regime, unmask its violence, and attempt to dismantle it.

The self-organised struggle for freedom of movement often constitutes prefigurative politics for a world without borders. Practices of solidarity that do not pretend to ameliorate borders

or to turn them into more benevolent spaces, but are organised in defiance to both the carceral and the humanitarian forms of oppression that borders enact. Rather than performing charity, these solidarity practices constitute spaces, imaginaries and social relations that defy the logic of borders and that act towards their abolition rather than reform. Whilst demands of rights-based citizenship, inclusion and integration are still present and necessary as ‘non-reformist reforms’ (Gilmore 2007; Gilmore 2022; Davis et al. 2022; Bradley and Noronha 2022), these are often accompanied by (often intentionally) less visible, active forms of inhabitation and mutual aid (Dadusc, 2019): people challenging and resisting the proliferation of borders in each aspect of their lives. Often, it is due to the refusal, by those embodying these practices, to speak the (neoliberal) rights-based language of the state, and to to be contained within its categories and cages—be they spatial or temporal, material or figurative—that these practices become the main target of repression, criminalisation or attempts of capture and repression. While these practices of refusal may not constitute abolition as such, they generate moments and acts of freedoms within and toward the ‘as-yet-incomplete project of freedom’ (Hartman 2008, 12), of border and prison abolition (Jones 2022). As Maryama Omar powerfully explains in an extract from De Verbranders podcast (2021), the border regime created thousands of prisons around people’s bodies; it criminalises and makes illegal every aspect of their lives. Her very existence was illegalised before and after she arrived in the Netherlands. But again, as Maryama explains, like prisons, borders do not work. They do not stop people’s movements. They do not stop movements of resistance. They do not silence people’s struggles for freedom.

By understanding solidarity as an abolitionist feminist praxis, ‘not as a practice that “fills the gaps” of the state and other bordering agencies, but instead create cracks, resisting both the commodification and de-politicisation of border violence’ (Dadusc and Mudu 2022: 1207) we can understand its dangerous potential. Solidarity, mutual aid, ‘abolitionist intimacies’ (Jones 2022), and ‘abolitionist care’ (Feminist Autonomous Centre for research 2023) are part of this praxis; just as border violence shapes people’s embodiments, disrupts their relations, and materialises a world in which they are not meant to survive, its abolition requires and rejoices their survival. It is this praxis that affirms life, love, and care that threatens nation-states and their borders, by undoing and defying their necropolitical violence, and as such becomes the object of criminalisation.

Note

1. A picture can be found here: <https://www.consiglioregionale.calabria.it/portale/Home/DetttaglioComunicato?IDComunicato=1548>

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