The Visual AI Dilemma

The AI Stereotype Mirror & Algorithmic Stigmatisation

Why AI isn't neutral

AI models do not create images from scratch; they predict what an image **should look like** based on billions of existing and often biased internet photos.

Biased Archives

AI models are trained on internet data that already contains decades of stigmatised imagery regarding migration.

Pattern Recognition

AI **doesn't know** truth; it knows patterns. If most photos of migrant people are "problem" shots, AI defines migration as a threat in the neighborhood.

The Mirror Effect

Generative AI reflects our existing biases back at us, often amplifying the most dramatic and negative tropes.

Identifying the Stereotype Mirror

Why AI reflects existing social biases and how to spot algorithmic stigmatisation.

➢ **The urban crisis default:** Does the AI-generated image shows grey urban backgrounds, serious expressions, and a sense of loitering. This cements the *neighborhood threat* trope without using a single real photograph.
  ○ *Note:* AI often defaults to high-contrast, moody visuals. It "hallucinates" social tension even in peaceful contexts, because the internet archives it was trained on are saturated with conflict-based imagery of migration.

➢ **The demographic erasure:** Does the AI image show only men ?
  ○ *What's happening:* Algorithms often **cleanse** the diversity of real-world migration (women, children, elderly, families) to match the most common and often most feared visual tropes found in training data.

Warning: The danger of AI isn't just about faking an event. The deeper danger is **algorithmic stigmatisation**. When/If using AI images for "illustration" purposes, media outlets can accidentally cement the *Confirmation Bias* of their audience without using a single real photograph.

Spotting the Technical Details

While AI is becoming more realistic, it still sometimes fails at the messy details of human reality.

➢ **Anatomical incoherence:** Look at the hands, eyes, and teeth. AI often struggles with complex human geometry (e.g., merging skin into metal fences or generating extra fingers).

➢ **Waxy textures:** Does the skin look too perfect, or like plastic? Authentic photography has "noise" such as pore textures, sweat, and irregular lighting.

➢ **Nonsense details "hallucinations":** Look at background text or objects. AI often generates pseudo-text that looks like letters but is unreadable, or objects that physically don't make sense (e.g., a head disappearing into a person's back in the example).

The prompt loop

When a creator uses a simple prompt, the AI defaults to the "mathematically most likely" image is usually a stereotype.

If you prompt: "migrant people in Hamrun"

Result: AI often produces visuals showing people loitering or looking out of place. It ignores working environment and community life because those images are less "viral" in its training data.

AI is not a camera; it reflects our collective digital past. If the past was biased, the AI output will be biased.

Image from Chat GPT in February 2026 with the prompt: "Migrant people in Hamrun"
Note: Hamrun is a neighborhood in Malta with a substantial number of residents of foreign origin. Nowhere in Hamrun though, will you see migrant people seated in the middle of the street.

MILD
More correct Information. Less Discrimination

Exercise : Critical prompt analysis

Imagine you are using an AI tool to illustrate a story about <u>migrant workers in your country.</u>

➢ **The Initial output:** You type **"Migrant workers in Malta"**. The AI *reframes autonomously* the prompt to produce an image of *"Migrant workers on a construction break in Malta"*, showing men resting on bags of cement.

➢ **The critique:** Identify at least two stereotypes in that output. (e.g., are migrant people only construction workers? Are women not migrant individuals? Don't they work?)

➢ **The counter-prompt:** How would you rewrite the prompt to force the AI away from its "stereotype mirror"?

Critical thinking tip: AI is **not a window** into the world; **it is a reflection** of our collective digital past. To use it ethically, we must actively challenge the stereotypes it tries to sell us as *reality.*

Image from Chat GPT in february 2026 with the prompt: "Migrant workers in Malta"
The <u>AI autonomously reframed</u> the prompt to produce an image of "Migrant workers on a construction break in Malta"