

Guide to Ethical Storytelling

How to Communicate the Stories of Asylum Seekers and Refugees

In the field of humanitarian communications, storytelling is one of the most powerful tools we have at our disposal. Through storytelling, we can create empathy among diverse audiences, draw attention to challenges displaced people face, and demonstrate the positive impact that refugees have on their host communities.

However, telling the stories of asylum seekers and refugees is a task that should be approached with responsibility and professionalism. Sensitivity is essential to guarantee the physical and psychological safety, wellbeing, and protection of people who choose to speak up.

Before you start researching and interviewing

1 Obtain fully informed consent for use of their story and image

When a refugee or asylum seeker tells their story, there are many different power dynamics that may arise. **One way to provide more power and control to the storyteller is to obtain their fully informed consent** before starting any storytelling exercise. This includes clearly stating the right to anonymity, right to withdrawal, right to remain informed, right to understand how and where their information may be used, etc. We should also obtain consent to use their image separately — this is important because some people might feel comfortable telling their stories but may not feel comfortable with using their image, and vice versa.

2 Consider their asylum process and how telling their story may impact this

Is the protagonist of the story currently applying for asylum or refugee status? **How we tell their story could have an impact on this process.** An inconsistency in how we present their story to the public and how they present their stories to migration officials may result in their claims of persecution being discredited. Attention to detail is important, and also consider whether to tell their story anonymously or wait until their asylum process has concluded.



A group of women receive support from HIAS and weave handmade bowls as part of an MHPSS intervention in the Metché refugee camp in eastern Chad. June 12, 2024. (Moundi Kouakaine/HIAS)

This practical and short guide is designed for communications professionals from the humanitarian sector who work with displaced populations. This guidance applies to storytelling pieces developed for a wide variety of digital channels, such as websites and social media outlets.

3 Emphasize and center humanitarian principles

We must maintain **neutrality** when discussing any country context that forced someone to flee. We must remain **impartial** when discussing causes of displacement — if the causes are political in nature as is so often the case, we should carefully evaluate how to represent them in our narrative in a way that reflects our commitment to assisting all those in need, regardless of their identity or political inclinations. As objective narrators, we should be **independent** from any national interest or ideological or political stance other than defending the rights of displaced people. If the person we are interviewing expresses an opinion, we should carefully evaluate whether to publish this information. If we do, it should be clear that the opinion is not ours. Finally, we should center the **humanity** of refugees and asylum seekers, and their right to live a life free from violence and persecution.

4 Anonymity should be used to protect refugees at risk

Refugees and asylum seekers **may still be at risk from threats or danger** after escaping from their countries. We should offer to present their stories anonymously if any risk against them remains, by using pseudonyms, hiding their faces, and omitting any identifying details from their stories.



During the researching and interviewing process



1. Introduce yourself, your organization, and set expectations

As humanitarian communicators, we may often find ourselves interviewing displaced people who have already received assistance from our organizations. Nevertheless, **before interviewing someone, you should clearly explain what your organization does and your role within it. During introductions we should also set expectations:** we should ensure that interviewees are aware that their participation will not gain them favorable care or support. Financial remuneration for participation is not the norm and this point should be clearly stated. It is also crucial to ensure that the interviewee understands that they will not gain immigration benefits or access to other services by virtue of their participation.



2. Respect the boundaries of your protagonist

Asylum seekers and refugees may express discomfort in different ways. Some may get visibly upset when discussing sensitive topics, but others may stay silent. **It is important to remain alert to any potential signs of discomfort and to offer the person a chance to stop or pause** an interview process if they need to. If someone either conveys or tells you that they are uncomfortable with something, don't push them for the sake of a good story. Respect their boundaries.



3. Avoid revictimization and sensationalizing of trauma

Some refugees and asylum seekers may not want to discuss difficult experiences, however others will feel more comfortable doing so. **If someone is willing to discuss a traumatic event, we must take care of their emotional state** and provide them with opportunities to stop, pause, or skip any uncomfortable questions. When retelling their story, we should avoid sensationalizing their trauma — we should instead center their strength, resilience, hopes, dreams, and achievements, no matter how big or small.



4. Avoid reinforcing the stereotypical “perfect refugee” narrative

When we think of stories about refugees and asylum seekers, success stories come to mind. However, **not all refugees have huge ambitions and dreams — many just want to live in freedom, peace, and safety** with their loved ones. Other refugees may struggle to achieve their dreams due to the structural barriers they face in host communities. Reinforcing only stories that fit into the “perfect refugee” narrative creates stigma toward refugees that do not meet these standards and expectations. It also creates a harmful idea that some refugee stories are more worthwhile than others.

Getting your story ready for publication

Ask for feedback and final approval before uploading content

Whenever possible, we should reach out to our protagonist to seek final approval for the content and remind them how it will be uploaded to different

channels. This step is important as there may have been a misinterpretation of information that could be resolved in a final feedback process. If this isn't possible, then we should validate our interpretation of the testimony with colleagues to ensure that we are representing their story as accurately as possible.

When telling the stories of refugees and asylum seekers one must approach the process purposefully and with care. A powerful, well-crafted story about a person's journey from violence to safety should not only protect the protagonist but also give a voice to the person. Their stories are not just about their status but rather their whole selves, and HIAS is committed to presenting their lives in an ethical way.

Contact

For more information on ethical storytelling, contact us today: info@hias.org | [hias.org](https://www.hias.org)

Authors: Beverly Goldberg, Matt Schiavenza, Sharon Samber.
Contributors: Raphael Marcus, Noah Gottshalk, Rebecca Kirzner.

