

Ethical Storytelling of Forcibly Displaced People's Personal Stories

This guide has been created for staff and partners of the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies (CGRS) who collect, edit, or share personal stories from people who have experienced forced displacement. The guide aims to prevent re-traumatization, ensure respect for the interviewee and their agency, and avoid common storytelling pitfalls that can harm the very people we aim to support. This guide was developed by a 2026 CGRS Refugee Leadership Program fellow based on personal experiences and challenges working with non-profit organizations on ethical and supportive storytelling. This guide also draws upon research and existing ethical storytelling resources, which are listed in the References section at the end of this document.

Pre-interview

WHAT TO DO?

Before approaching the interviewee:

1. Identify the purpose of the interview. What are you trying to achieve?
2. Does an interviewee need an interpreter? If so, make sure you provide a trusted or otherwise vetted interpreter.
3. Set up a scope for the story you are trying to share on behalf of the interviewee. Get informed consent about their story being published or otherwise incorporated into your organization's work.

During initial conversation with the interviewee:

1. Set up clear boundaries and expectations for the interviewee. Explain the purpose of the interview and/or storytelling project, how their story will be included and what goals you are trying to achieve (i.e. what will/won't be shared, who will see it, and where it will appear).
2. If it is possible, ask the interviewee what they would like to share during the interview, what is important for them, and why.

3. Make sure to let the interviewee know that their long-term editorial contribution matters. If they are no longer comfortable participating in the process, reassure them of their choice to opt-out at any time.
4. If your organization has a budget for storyteller honorariums, disclose this amount upfront. If no compensation is available, state that clearly before the interview begins.
5. Establish follow-up check-ins with the interviewee to make sure they are comfortable with their story being used in your organization's communications.

LOGISTICAL & SAFETY SETUP

1. Make sure to create a safe environment for the interviewee to share their story based on the interviewee's input (i.e. What is comfortable for them? What is their preferred way to do the interview? What support do they need during the interview itself?)
2. Establish a list of referral resources (i.e. legal, social, health care, and housing services) for the interviewee to use during and after the interview process. If available and if the interviewee is interested, provide them with a list of resources/initiatives that could strengthen the interviewee's skills in storytelling.

WHAT NOT TO DO?

1. Do not extract information that serves your agenda while disregarding parts of the story you deem unimportant.
2. Do not offer false hope (i.e. "This story will change immigration policy", "This story will help your case", etc.)
3. Do not conduct a live interview/panel discussion without sharing questions in advance and obtaining consent for participation.
4. Do not ignore the interviewee's editorial contributions, requests, or follow-ups.
5. Use uplifting, positive images of impacted people so as to not perpetuate negative and/or harmful stereotypes.
6. Avoid victimization of the interviewee to prevent a "perfect refugee" narrative — i.e. tying their worth to their skills, work experience, education, etc.



During the interview

WHAT TO DO?

1. Welcome the interviewee to the safe space you have created.
2. Go over information about their safety, scope and purpose of the interview, potential risks and security measures you are taking.
3. Make sure that the interviewee is still comfortable to share their story or parts of it.
4. Avoid phrases that invalidate or ignore the interviewee's experiences. (*See language guidance →*)
5. Listen carefully and make sure that the interviewee is reflecting upon what matters to them. Create space for taking breaks during the interview to prevent re-traumatization. If in person, make sure you have water, snacks, tissues, or anything else that would make the interview a safer and more comfortable space.
6. If it's a live interview/panel discussion, avoid putting the interviewee or parts of their story in the spotlight without prior consent.
7. Conclude the interview on a positive note reassuring the interviewee that they are not alone in their journey and that there are people who are willing to support them. Reiterate the referrals or resources your organization can provide to the interviewee.

LANGUAGE GUIDANCE

AVOID → USE INSTEAD

"I am happy/glad you are here."

→

"I am happy/glad you were able to find safety."

The majority of refugees/asylees did not want to be here especially because of circumstances they have faced. By saying that you're happy they are here, you unintentionally ignore the circumstances the interviewee had to face to get here.

"I am sorry for what happened to you."

→

"I am sorry for what you had to endure because of ... actions."

There is a reason why certain things happen but most importantly there are people and governments behind what led to the interviewee fleeing their home. By excluding the perpetrators actions, you unintentionally dismiss the interviewees' experiences and the responsibility of those who have caused the harm.

"Hold on while we go through this administration."

→

"How would you like to be supported while living through this administration?"

Immigrants are one of the least protected classes in the United States. What may seem like "holding on" to US citizens is adversely affecting the futures and safety of refugees/asylees every day. Examples of harmful policies and practices include: reports of asylum being halted for an unforeseen amount of time creating an even bigger backlog; indiscriminate terminations of asylum claims, arrests, detentions, and/or deportations to hostile countries using so-called Asylum Cooperative Agreements.

"It will get better over time."

→

"I hope you are able to establish a support system that will help you heal from what ... was inflicted upon you. Please let me know if you need assistance in exploring the resource referrals we have for you."

You cannot guarantee that it will get better over time, especially under such a hostile administration. Instead of leaving it up to fate, ask how you can support them right now based on what they are facing.

Post-interview



WHAT TO DO?

1. Carefully review the materials you have collected.
2. Revisit the scope and objectives you've set up for the interview and compare them to the information you were able to get during the interview.
3. While drafting your materials using the interviewee's story, avoid generalization about their path and the use of whatever you personally think is of certain importance. Instead prioritize the parts of their story the interviewee had identified as important.
4. Do at least two follow-ups with the interviewee to make sure they are still comfortable with their story being told by your organization, as well as making sure they are comfortable with the way you decide to share their story.
5. Send the drafts to the interviewee for review in the format and/ or language that's accessible to them. Do not exclude the interviewee from editorial steps.
6. Before any story is shared, obtain written or recorded verbal consent that specifies:
 - Where the story will appear (social media, annual report, press, etc.)
 - Whether the interviewee's real name, initials, pseudonym, or no name will be used.
 - That consent can be withdrawn at any time, for any reason, without consequences for any services they may receive from your organization.
7. Stay in touch with the interviewee and check in periodically on whether they are still comfortable with their story and/or image being shared publicly. Consider current safety and security concerns for the interviewee, and take down the information upon their request.

References

- Emily Case, *Sharing compelling refugee community stories*, American Press Institute (Dec. 18, 2017) available at <https://americanpressinstitute.org/sharing-refugee-stories/>.
- Beverly Goldberg, Matt Schiavenza, Sharon Samber, *Guide to ethical storytelling*, HIAS (Dec. 10, 2024) available at <https://hias.org/wp-content/uploads/Guide-to-Ethical-Storytelling-1.pdf>.
- Claire Loughnan and Philomena Murray, *Changing the narrative on refugees*, Pursuit, University of Melbourne (Sep. 13, 2022) available at <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/changing-the-narrative-on-refugees>.
- Brigid Schulte, et al., *A Glimpse of Stability: The Impact of Pandemic Aid on Families in Poverty, Appendix B. Ethical Storytelling Guidelines*, New America (Dec. 3, 2024) available at <https://www.newamerica.org/insights/a-glimpse-of-stability/appendix-b-ethical-storytelling-guidelines/>.
- Refugee Storytellers Collective, *10 best practices for engaging with refugee leaders* (2022) available at <https://www.onlinelibrary.iihl.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-Refugee-Storytellers-Collection-10-Best-Practices-for-Engaging-with-Refugee-Leaders.pdf>.