The background features abstract red line art on a white page. It includes several circles of different sizes, some with crosses inside them. There are also wavy, flowing lines and a dotted line that meanders across the upper right portion of the image. The overall style is minimalist and artistic.

# new routes to narrating migration



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# new routes to narrating migration

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written by:



**Switch  
Perspective**

with the support of:



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**Angela Saade** is the co-founder of Jibal, an NGO in Beirut working on environmental and social justice. She has a background in anthropology and engineering in the energy sector, and now does popular education and facilitation with groups including youth workers, teachers, farmers and journalists. She has a personal experience of migration as one of many who were forced to leave Lebanon during the civil war, and later on as a student and employee in France.

Many thanks to all the storytellers and former participants who were interviewed for this publication and contributed with their time and important input. This publication would never exist without them. Thanks also to Rana Hassan for contributing to the research with her ideas and knowledge, and to our colleague Clément Girardot for reading and giving valuable input on the chapters. We also extend our thanks to Jana Al Obeidyne for editing, Saseen Kawzally for translating the text, and Siwar Kraytem for the graphic design. The publication was made possible thanks to the support of GIZ Civil Peace Service

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# introduction

Migration. Rarely in history did we talk as much about a topic. We discuss people and families crossing borders or moving from place to place, either to work or to settle down; sometimes temporarily, others for good; at times by choice, others by force or necessity. Media outlets, politicians and people conversing across their kitchen tables – everyone these days seems to talk about migration. This makes it easy to believe that our worlds are shaped, more than ever, by the causes and effects of human migration.

Whether this statement is correct or not matters less than the fact that our worldviews are shaped to a high degree by the many conversations and media reports on the topic. When we hear about something often enough, we start to think about it and our ideas get shaped along those lines.

This is why we, a project called Switch Perspective based in Beirut, started to organise workshops around the topic of migration. We felt a need to discuss, reflectively and critically, how migration is being covered by storytellers and what impact it has on the world. The first workshops were organised in 2016, and brought together practitioners from across the fields of journalism and academia for week-long sessions of exchange and self-reflection. Journalists, writers, NGO

workers, activists and others, many of whom had experiences of being refugees or migrants themselves, came together to discuss how we tell stories about migration. What image of the world are we projecting? How do we invite readers and listeners to think about it? What does bad reporting lead to – and how can we do it better?

Throughout the course of more than four years, the conversation continued. Many experiences were shared, and both personal and professional accounts were told. Participants talked about individual experiences of being refugees or migrants, and about being reporters on a topic to which they were personally connected. They shared strategies they used, and ways in which storytellers can be more aware of biases and inequalities. So much important knowledge was created that somewhere along the road, we realised that it should be documented and shared. This publication is the result of that.





# switch

The name Switch Perspective captures the idea behind the project: to find new angles and ways to think about things, in order to see them differently. Switch Perspective emerged in its current form in 2018, two years after the first workshops were organised. The project is headed by Angela Saade, a popular education trainer, and Jenny Gustafsson, a journalist and writer, both of whom have experience of covering and facilitating discussions on migration.

Before 2018, Saade and Gustafsson organised the first rounds of workshops together with team members from other countries. These were week-long sessions bringing together participants thrice, each time in a different country. Since then, Saade and Gustafsson have held weekend workshops and 'dardachet' (Arabic for small talk) events in Beirut and other Lebanese cities, bringing together participants from different communities in the country.

During the workshops, participants get to exchange and reflect on their own ideas and relations to migration. Professional experiences, as well as events that shaped them on a personal level, are shared, giving way to new understandings of migration and mobility.

This is important for two reasons. First, because it allows for more diverse and

unconventional ways of telling stories, based on self-reflection and awareness of our own relations with the world. Second, because it gives way to a broader and more inclusive media landscape, where stories are told from different horizons by storytellers from a variety of backgrounds.

# perspective





# background

Most Switch Perspective participants have a link to Lebanon. Some were born and brought up in the country; others moved or migrated there as adults. Some are Lebanese, others come from Lebanon's Syrian and Palestinian communities. Some are from other parts of the world but came to work in the country.

Lebanon is a small country on the eastern Mediterranean shores, with around four and a half million citizens and almost two million refugees and migrant workers from a number of different countries. This makes the nation home to more refugees per capita than any other country in the world.

Lebanon's history of migration stretches far back in time. People from across the region, including today's Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, migrated both abroad and within the area. In history, the seafaring Phoenicians traded and travelled across the Mediterranean. During the Ottoman Empire, several minorities came to live in the region. In turn, periods of conflict and economic hardship in the 1800s led many others to seek safety in Europe, West Africa, the Americas and elsewhere. Many also left as a result of famine in the region during World War I. The same period saw the arrival in Lebanon of Armenians escaping the genocide against them. A few decades later, and increasingly following the 1948 creation of Israel, Palestinians displaced

from their homes arrived. Today, many Palestinians continue to live in what are still called refugee camps, socially excluded neighbourhoods in Lebanon's cities.

In more recent years, the Lebanese civil war from 1975 to 1990s forced large groups of people to leave and seek refuge elsewhere. In the mid and late mid-1900s, Syrian workers – who for long had been part of the Lebanese workforce – started to arrive in Lebanon in larger numbers. They have since been joined by people from countries like Sri Lanka, Egypt, the Philippines, Ethiopia, Sudan and Bangladesh, who have also come to work in the country. As a result of the war in Syria starting in 2011, many Syrian families crossed the border to seek shelter in Lebanon, and still remain in the country.

Much reporting has been done and continues to be done on these issues. Beirut is a long-standing hub for journalists and the base for many newsrooms, researchers and foreign correspondents. A large number of local and international NGOs have their offices in Lebanon, including many that work on displacement and migration. This is why the country provides an important and interesting place to reflect on stories of migration, which is what this publication sets out to do.





# publication

The following chapters are the outcome of discussions and conversations held during Switch Perspective workshops from 2016 to 2020. Each chapter describes one step in the storytelling process. It starts by looking at who storytellers are; then it examines how topics are selected, preparations are done, experts are consulted, interviews are conducted and narratives are crafted; then, finally, it discusses the impact of stories once they are published.

In this publication, storytelling is discussed in a wide sense, including journalistic work, academic research and communication by NGOs (non-governmental organisations). Migration coverage today is not just the domain of traditional media outlets. It is being featured by all kinds of publications as well as independent voices on social media and local or international NGOs. Storytellers, therefore, include a multitude of people who publish and share stories on different platforms. The concept of migration is also dealt with in a broad sense, to include processes of mobility and movement as well as displacement and refugees or asylum seekers.

The seven chapters in the publication build on interviews and conversations with journalists, filmmakers, researchers, NGO workers and others who took part in Switch Perspective

workshops. Many have personal experiences of migration in addition to professional expertise. Fourteen participants in total were interviewed in 2020. These interviews served as the basis for the analysis in this publication; the outline, sections and content of each chapter were drafted based on what came out during these conversations.

The purpose of this publication is to be a resource for other storytellers, both in terms of practical advice and inspiration for self-inquiry and reflection. It pinpoints the processes behind why stories are told in certain ways. It also describes how reflection and exchange can bring more awareness to the way we work. The result of that, we hope, is better reporting and storytelling on migration.

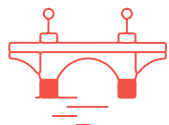








# storytellers interviewed for this publication



## Shehrazad

I am a student of political science and contributor to the PAM Pan African Music magazine. I was born in France and my parents are both Moroccan. France is a country with many diasporas, and I always try to capture this diversity in my articles. I write about things like art, feminism, anti-racism and religion. My fiancé is French of Algerian descent. It is important for both of us to be at the Saint Michel bridge in Paris each year in October, to commemorate the 1961 massacre when French police attacked and killed, by mass-drowning, Algerians protesting against the war in Algeria.

contact: [www.instagram.com/shehrazaaaaad](https://www.instagram.com/shehrazaaaaad)



## Sam Mustelin

I am a freelance writer and content manager based in Berlin. My academic background is in media and cultural studies, and I have an interest in how racism and different kinds of privilege and

prejudices shape how migration stories are told in the media, in particular local media. My own migration background is European: I hail from two different European countries and have lived in a third country in the region. Having grown up bilingual, I am interested in stories about migration and identity. As a writer, I want to find ways to explore my own voice as well as to amplify the voices of others.

contact: [about.me/samustelin](https://about.me/samustelin)



## Simone Spera

I am a PhD researcher in anthropology at a university in Paris and I come from Italy. My grandparents were among the many peasant and working-class families that migrated from southern Italy to countries like Germany, Switzerland and France in the 1960s in search of job opportunities. Myself, I left my hometown at 15, to study at an international boarding school in the U.S. Since then, my studies have brought me to Spain, France, Greece and Lebanon. I am interested in how displacement affects our lives and worldviews, and my current research looks at alternative education programs in northern Lebanon, put in place for (and by) Syrian refugees.

contact: [www.lesc-cnrs.fr/fr/cb-profile/459/userprofile](https://www.lesc-cnrs.fr/fr/cb-profile/459/userprofile)



## Fatima Alhaji

I am a journalist and activist from Damascus and came to Lebanon in 2013 as a refugee from Syria. Since then, I have worked with refugee communities in Lebanon, including as a freelance journalist and for different media platforms on refugee and human rights. In Lebanon, I worked as a video reporter and documented the daily lives of Syrian families in the country. I was also engaged in several advocacy campaigns on refugees' right to health. Since the end of 2019, I live in Berlin.

contact: [www.facebook.com/fatimaha0](https://www.facebook.com/fatimaha0)



## Abby Sewell

I am a journalist based in Lebanon, where much of my work since 2016 has focused on migration and refugee communities. I also have volunteered with local NGOs and initiatives providing relief and English classes for migrant workers and refugees. My interest in migration goes back to the years I spent growing up in Arizona close to the U.S./Mexico border and later in Los Angeles, which is home to immigrant communities from around the world. It was in L.A. that I had my introduction to the Syrian community, which led to my interest in reporting in the region. I live in Beirut with my cat, Darwish.

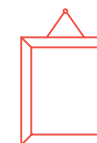
contact: [www.twitter.com/sewella](https://www.twitter.com/sewella)



## Jelena Dzekseneva

I am an artist and anthropologist living in Lyon. I was born in Kazakhstan, where my family hails from. In their youth, all of my grandparents moved to Lithuania – they did not know it back then, but that is how the migration story of my scattered family started. My parents, after they met, moved back to Kazakhstan in search for a better future. Myself, I moved from there to France when I was 18. I often feel that I am a stranger without a real home. Then, after studying anthropology, I started to look closer at the issue of identity. This led me to realise that migration is not a problem, but an opportunity.

contact: [www.instagram.com/jelenadz](https://www.instagram.com/jelenadz)



## Rayan Sukkar

I am a journalist working with the online media platform Campji in Lebanon. I am a refugee: I am the daughter of refugees and have 25 years of refugee history in my family. My grandparents came to Lebanon from Jaffa in Palestine in 1948. Myself, I only saw the city in a picture hung on the wall of my grandfather. My own story of migration started when I was born in the Palestinian refugee camp Burj El Barajneh in Beirut, and went to a UN school for refugees. The word 'refugee' has been with



me all my life – even now, I have fallen in love with another Palestinian refugee.

contact: [rayan.sokkar1@gmail.com](mailto:rayan.sokkar1@gmail.com)



## Inga Hajdarowicz

I am a researcher and activist from Poland, a country where migration for a long time has been either forced or restricted. The autonomy of migration has therefore always been my concern. The ‘migration crisis’ in Europe in 2015 inspired me to get involved directly in the topic. My own interests and experiences of participatory democracy and grassroots mobilisation led me to seek out initiatives creating spaces for people, with or without migration experiences, to collaborate. I joined the local initiative ‘Welcome to Krakow’ that prepares the ground for refugees in Poland, and volunteered in grassroots initiatives in Serbia, Greece and Lebanon.

contact: [inga.hajdarowicz@doctoral.uj.edu.pl](mailto:inga.hajdarowicz@doctoral.uj.edu.pl)

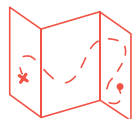


## Laure Makarem

I am caregiver, coach and member of different initiatives working towards migrant rights, racial justice, queer mutual support and feminist movement building in Lebanon. I am currently working with the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM), pursuing

a masters in Gender Studies at LAU and caring for a cactus named Prickles.

contact: [laure@armlebanon.org](mailto:laure@armlebanon.org)



## Samih Mahmoud

I am a citizen journalist with the online platform Campji in Lebanon. I think of migration as something fundamental to humanity: human life started with movement from place to place, in search for food and water. Throughout history, migration has been fundamental for human beings to learn, grow and develop. I have a personal link to migration as well: I am the son of a Palestinian refugee who was born in Syria, and came to Lebanon as a refugee when the war started in Syria.

contact: [www.facebook.com/samihmhd](https://www.facebook.com/samihmhd)



## Nour Ghoussaini

I am a journalist and social media specialist based in Beirut. More than 60 years ago, my grandparents migrated to Kuwait, and my mother was born and raised there. They all grew up with the Kuwaiti culture, and my grandmother hid her Druze religion from her kids until my mother’s teenage years, so that she would not face any kind of discrimination. My grandmother now says that migration was the best choice they could make in a time of instability in Lebanon. Kuwait became their home away from home. My mother

returned to Lebanon in the 1980s, but still holds on to some traditions from her childhood in Kuwait.

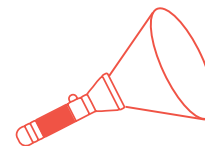
contact: [www.instagram.com/nourghoussaini](https://www.instagram.com/nourghoussaini)



## Ghadir Hamadi

I am a journalist and communication specialist based in Beirut. I spent my childhood in Saudi Arabia, where I grew up with my Lebanese family. As someone who went to an international school and lived in the cosmopolitan city Al-Khobar, with residents from many different countries, I have always felt at home with people from diverse backgrounds and nationalities. As light as it may sound, I try to focus my journalistic work on the positives, and tell stories that build bridges between communities and help to create a friendlier world.

contact: [www.instagram.com/ghadir\\_hamadi](https://www.instagram.com/ghadir_hamadi)



## Omar Saadeh (not his real name)

I am a filmmaker based in Beirut. My mother’s family, who come from a European country, escaped war and emigrated to Lebanon. Growing up, we often celebrated the heritage from that side of the family. But my migration background is one of privilege. My family

never faced discrimination because of our European descent. When I started to work with Syrian refugees, I was able to see firsthand how racism and alienation go hand in hand. Trying to shed light on this is an ongoing struggle. I don’t claim to know how. I can only tell stories. We have a long way to go but by telling stories, we can shift one perspective at a time.



## Doha Adi

I am a journalist and activist and have worked in the humanitarian and development fields since 2015, supporting Syrian refugee communities with local and international organisations. I am one of the founders of the M23 filmmaking team, which founded the Beirut Film Institute and produces feature and short films revolving around war, migration and refugees. As a teenager, I fled with my family to Syria, escaping the 2006 Israeli assault on Lebanon. We lived there as refugees for 40 days, which was one of my most life-changing experiences. It is the reason why I am so adamant to support refugees in Lebanon, since I can relate to their fears and loss of a sense of belonging.







chapter 1

who are the  
storytellers?



# who are the storytellers?

Stories, whether written, filmed or recorded, are intimately connected to their tellers. How stories are told vary depending on who tells them, and where these storytellers come from. The same topic can be researched and narrated in different ways depending on the background, experiences, gender, class and other identities of the storyteller. The same place can be observed from different angles, and the same context can be related to in different ways. Stories of migration and mobility, consequently, are told in several ways, depending on who is the author. This is why, in the first chapter in this publication, we start by asking the question: Who is the storyteller?

The chapter looks at who tells stories about migration in the world today. It describes the impact lack of diversity has on our understanding of the topic, and how power dynamics in society influence who gets access to reporting and telling stories. It also points to the value of experiential knowledge, knowledge gained through experience, when covering migration and highlights how self-reflection can lead to better narration.



First of all, in order to understand the impact that storytellers like journalists or communicators with NGOs have on our conception of migration, we must start by looking closer at who they are. We may be heading towards more diversity in newsrooms, academia and organisations, but we are far from a balance in representation. Stories still tend to be told from a mainly Western perspective and get published by outlets based in that part of the world. The same goes for major international non-profits, including their funders. Mi-

gration stories are regularly told by people who lack the lived experience of migration themselves. Much too often, they 'look in from the outside.'

This issue was addressed by several participants from the workshops. Samih Mahmoud, a Syrian-Palestinian video journalist working with the online platform Campji in Lebanon's refugee camps, said that his own experience of being a refugee who escaped the war in Syria gives him a different kind of understanding. "The fact that I am from the area I cover and face the same conditions as other people living there means that whenever I tell a story about something, I also tell my own story. People's problems are also my problems," he said. His colleague from Campji, Rayan Sukkar, who is a Palestinian born and raised in Lebanon, described something similar: "When I started working here, I felt that this was my place. That I can express myself here, and transmit messages better than someone from the outside." Her insider position, she said, allows her to "present people the way they like to be presented."

Mahmoud and Sukkar produce videos that are published online and watched by both camp residents and many others. The idea from the start, they said, was to be a locally grounded voice, something that was missing before Campji. "Our slogan is 'from camp to camp' or 'from refugee to refugee,'" they said. Fatima Alhaji, a Syrian journalist who now lives in Berlin, spoke in a similar way about the importance of lived knowledge. She recounted her experience when arriving in Lebanon with her family, and having to register as refugees with the UN. "This was at the beginning of 2014, so refugee stories were everywhere. At the UN there was a journalist with a big camera, and I thought to myself: 'Maybe someone will see me on television' and I didn't want that. I didn't want to be seen like that," she said. For Alhaji, these experiences put her in a different position than other journalists writing about migration: "I have the tools to tell these stories, and I can tell them in a way that people can identify with."

While personal experiences give an intimate understanding of the topic at hand, it does not necessarily mean better reporting. There are cases where an outsider's view

"Whenever I tell a story about something, I also tell my own story."

"Our slogan is 'from camp to camp' or 'from refugee to refugee.'"



is important, and others where reporting from ‘the inside’ is more valuable. The main problem with conventional media coverage on migration is that the former – people who speak from experience – is much too often absent.



Other kinds of direct understandings of a certain reality also have an impact on the produced narratives. Jelena Dzekseneva, an anthropologist who moved from Kazakhstan to France to study, spoke about the differences in perspective between people who have personal experiences of something and those that have not. “Not everyone realises that anyone can become poor, that anyone can lose their house. These ideas do not come naturally to people,” she said. People who experienced displacement first-hand, she said, may have a better understanding not only of migration but of other difficulties people face as well: “They can empathise with migrants, and maybe they understand poverty too.”

Shehrazad, a student and writer from France, said that the fact that her parents are from Morocco allows her to easily spot stereotypes in the media. “Since I was young, I have seen racism displayed on French TV towards people from North Africa and Africa in general,” she said. In many cases, this applies to Muslims too, not least women who wear the veil. “My mum wears the veil, so for me it’s difficult to identify with the images in the media.” Therefore, Shahrazad said, writing from our own perspectives is important: “We have to tell our own stories. We cannot just have allies and other people telling our stories. All minorities have to tell their own stories from their unique point of view.”

There are ways to be more aware of how the stories we tell are shaped. One of them is to acknowledge our positionality – the way socio-political identities influence our worldviews. Inga Hajdarowicz, a PhD researcher from Poland studying grassroots and feminist approaches to refugee women, said that she started to think like this early on in her life. “Spending time at my grandparents’ place in a working-class neighbourhood, attending feminist meetings and doing research trips with my mother, who is also a sociologist, impacted on me, as did growing up in a weird time of transformation

“We have to tell our own stories. We cannot just have allies and other people telling our stories.”

in post-communist Poland and learning about my own family’s history of migration and exile. It all shaped how I could see who was being represented or heard and who was not.”

Nour Ghoussaini, a journalist from Lebanon, said that her own experiences also impacted her way of thinking. At one point, she said, she realised that she had internalised racism: “I never knew I was racist, really. But sometimes, incidents or stories that people tell you, movies you watch or your parents’ stereotypes, influence you. All of this impacts the way you see life, whether you want it or not.”

Sukkar from Campji said that experiencing one kind of migration could lead to a deeper understanding of other people’s experiences in general. She recounts being interviewed by someone who, like her, had a background of migration in their family: “This was the first time I felt comfortable in an interview with a foreigner. I felt that he wanted to listen, not extract information. I felt that he understood me. I think this is because he has a migration experience of his own.” Although their experiences were not similar, Sukkar said that there was a connection: “I didn’t have to explain much even though we come from very different places. He told me that he himself struggles with issues of identity, so that was something we shared.”

The fact that experiential knowledge matters when reporting on migration is not to be confused with the idea that people who are migrants by default can tell stories about all kinds of migration – or that they should tell stories about only that. It is not uncommon that people with one kind of migration background are asked to comment on other topics. “People in France sometimes think that because I come from Morocco, I should be able to know what is happening in Iran or the Middle East,” Shahrazad said, “So I tell them that, ‘Sorry I don’t know Iran, I don’t even know Morocco well enough.’”



Some participants mentioned that it is important for people from refugee and migrant communities to be authors, not just subjects, of journalistic stories. Doha Adi from the NGO Sawa for Development and Aid that supports refugees in Lebanon said, “We can get a lot of positive effects from such



stories, because they show these individuals as people who are thinking, participating and contributing to society.”

The fact that this kind of refugee or migrant led storytelling is uncommon has to do with power dynamics in society. Depending on factors like social class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, ethnicity or nationality, people don’t have equal access to education, information, support networks and job opportunities. Economic, political and cultural structures give way to inequalities: while some are privileged, others are discriminated against and oppressed. This applies to the worlds of media, academia and NGOs just like all other parts of society, and determines who has the chance to tell stories about others.

“This is a question of justice.”

For Shahrazad, the student and writer in France, “this is a question of justice.” Across the world, access to journalism schools and university programs is not equal. “Many migrant communities live in poverty, we don’t live in neighbourhoods with good schools. So we don’t have a chance to influence the media,” she said. Dzekseneva, the anthropologist, recalled a journalism conference she attended after the Charlie Hebdo attack in France: “There was no diversity among the people who were at the conference. If you go out in the streets, people don’t look like that. I thought, how can you then do journalism?”

Somehow, we got used to the image of the foreign correspondent or NGO worker as a White person from the West. Exceptions exist, but they are far from enough. Just imagine a world where reporters from Uganda, Guatemala or Bangladesh go to cover stories in the U.S. or Germany – oftentimes without speaking the language or being familiar with the context. In reality, instead of getting their own assignments, many journalists get hired as ‘fixers,’ combined translators and guides, for foreign reporters. The foreign reporter gets the byline for the story while the fixer – even when their contributions to the story are major – are often not credited at all. The difference between correspondent and fixer, says<sup>1</sup> journalist Priyanka Borpujari, is “not one of experience or qualification, but of geography.” In other words, access to the media corridors of power.

1 | [www.cjr.org/special\\_report/fixers.php](http://www.cjr.org/special_report/fixers.php)



On more than one level, getting the opportunity to tell stories is a matter of privilege. Media and NGO doors are not open to everyone alike. On the contrary, access is contingent on social, political and economical structures in society. This is also true when it comes to storytelling on migration. Individuals who have experienced exile, displacement and migration seldom write stories of migration. Instead, they tend to be portrayed and represented by others. This does not only affect individuals who are excluded from media and other opportunities, it also narrows the worldviews of all others, who are deprived of hearing diverse voices. Inclusion of voices who have personal and intimate connections to migration would steer the conversation towards a more nuanced understanding of global migration.

Getting the opportunity to tell stories is a matter of privilege.

## Questions in this chapter

Who tells stories on migration in the world today?

How does the identity and past experiences of storytellers influence their stories?

How do power dynamics play in on the way migration is narrated?



chapter 2

choosing  
the topic



# choosing the topic

2 | [www.ou.edu/deptcomm/dodjcc/groups/02B2/Literature\\_Review.html](http://www.ou.edu/deptcomm/dodjcc/groups/02B2/Literature_Review.html)

“Featuring something in the media means telling people: ‘This is important and you should think about it.’”

In 1963, media researcher Bernard Cohen said<sup>2</sup> that while “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think,” it is “stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” In other words, topics journalists choose do not only captivate people’s attention and interest, they also set agendas for society. Featuring something in the media means telling people: “This is important and you should think about it.”

NGOs and civil society often act in similar ways, by focusing their attention on one issue at a specific moment. Since the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015, migration has been the centre of attention all over the world, across almost all sectors. But if we look at what is being published, how come certain topics are covered and others not? What is behind the decision to document certain aspects of migration but not others?

Participants in our workshops had different answers to these questions. Jelena Dzekseveva, the anthropologist in Lyon, said that the issue of migration is more than just a topic: “It is the whole world. Everything in terms of how we live our lives is based on the movement of people. Every path I take leads me to people who have changed countries, languages or cities. Migration is all around us.” Dzekseveva started to pay attention to why some topics are less represented in the media when she was taking classes in anthropology: “I started to ask why the media never speaks about my country, Kazakhstan. We changed the president last year, and we changed the name of our capital. That’s huge! But no one talked about it.”

Nour Ghoussaini, the journalist from Lebanon, said

that she lacks historical contextualisation when migration is portrayed in the media: “We discuss migration, identity and stereotypes but we don’t go back to the origins of things. To those who drew the geographical borders, those who combined people into groups and said: ‘You are Lebanese, you are German.’”

For both Dzekseveva and Ghoussaini, deep and complex discussions on migration don’t happen. This is partly due to the lack of diversity among journalists, editors and publishers. If those who are, as Cohen said, “stunningly successful” in setting the agenda are not a diverse group of people, stories will not be diverse either.



More diversity among storytellers translates into more diverse topics because interests and perspectives are more diverse. Samih Mahmoud, the video journalist working in Lebanon’s refugee camps, said that journalists living in the camps can understand people’s concerns better: “The difference for me as a journalist from the camp is that my life is research in itself. The topics I cover concern my own situation so there’s no need for research from the outside.” But Mahmoud challenges the idea that refugees can and should only write about ‘refugee issues,’ just as women don’t have to write only about ‘women’s issues’ or a specific minority about their own community. A journalist once came and asked him about what camp residents thought of global warming. “At first, I was like, ‘We don’t think about that, we have problems with electricity, water and security and you come to ask about global warming?’” Mahmoud said. “But then I thought, why not? People here can and should have opinions on other issues as well.”

Campji, the online media Mahmoud works for, has a big audience in Lebanon’s refugee camps, and while they mainly cover topics related to life in the camps, they also discuss many other issues. Past features include videos on gender, Lebanon’s Armenian community, revolutions, the Arab Spring and the Beirut port explosion in 2020. They don’t think that people who are refugees should only care about ‘refugee issues.’ “It is important that journalism plays

“It is important that journalism plays the role of widening people’s horizons.”



the role of widening people's horizons," Mahmoud said.



Several participants expressed a preference for 'small stories,' snippets from daily life that do not confine people to singular categories like 'migrant' or 'refugee.' Simone Spera, a PhD student from Italy, does research on informal education among refugee communities in Lebanon. "In anthropology, we tend to start from the lived experiences of people. My research is on education in general but related to political activism. It looks more specifically at Syrian initiatives in Lebanon. My intention is to go beyond views on refugee education as sheer emergency responses to humanitarian crises, and see how refugees experiment and create in the process. That way, agency is brought back to the actors themselves," he said. Omar Saadeh, who worked with an international NGO in Lebanon at the time he attended the workshops, used to produce videos about refugee issues. But he said that he lacked diversity in the coverage he was asked to do: "I never saw stories about the villages where people came from. Or how they worked together in the camps. Or about this [Lebanese] fieldworker who said that it would be sad if everyone returned to their country because of all their new friendships in the camp."

Fatima Alhaji, the journalist in Berlin, used to report on refugee issues in Lebanon. She said that she prefers everyday topics too: "They reflect the human side of life; people's daily struggles. And they portray people's backgrounds, where they come from and why they are where they are." Even if writing about people's daily lives may seem less complex, this is often not the case. 'Small topics' require the same awareness and self-reflective attitude, and consideration of privilege and positionality. Sam Mustelin, a writer from Germany, said that when researching a story on Germany's queer history, they realised that the story had many dimensions: "the same awareness and self-reflective attitude as other topics, and the same consideration of privilege and positionality." Mustelin questioned their own authority when writing about something that can be approached in so many ways: "I think that sometimes it is just not possible to tell the full story, the truths of all people. We should be aware of this. No one can answer all questions, and each story is just one part of the whole experience."



Several participants mentioned that journalists should seek out topics that matter to the community they cover instead of coming with set ideas in mind. Alhaji, who used to report on migration in Lebanon, said that a friend who is also a journalist asked her about topics she should cover in the refugee camps: "I told her to connect with people directly, because not everyone has the same experience. Of course, there are general issues that concern everyone, but there are also many individual experiences. You need to be in contact with the community before deciding which topic is interesting," she said. Mahmoud and his colleague Rayan Sukkar from Campji said similar things. "When we don't have ideas we just go out into the streets to talk to people. Sometimes we don't even have to ask, people tell us stories and raise concerns anyway," Mahmoud said. Often, people ask to be featured in Campji's videos. "They send us messages on Facebook, we don't have time to work on all of these stories. Someone might say, 'I live in the Nahr El-Bared camp and I have a story to tell, can you do a feature on me?' Or a girl who plays football may say, 'I saw this video that you did, can you come and meet me?' We are very happy about this," Sukkar said.

"You need to be in contact with the community before deciding which topic is interesting."

However, letting communities set the agenda can be hard. Many factors play in when determining how stories will be framed in the media: readership numbers, funding, trends in what interests people at the moment. Spera, the PhD student from Italy, said that academics and journalists play an important role in shedding light on a diversity of topics: "Media has the potential to spread critical thinking on a larger scale." Still, he said, the media is never fully independent because it is "always connected to economic and political structures." Saadeh, the filmmaker, described how he often felt pushed to pick topics that would interest funders: "We did films to show what donors expected to see. If we wanted to be funded, we had to document misery. I don't like this approach." What is worse is the impact such stories have on refugee communities. "People got used to being portrayed this way. So when I went to film them, they would 'wear that face' again," Saadeh said. At times, he tried to suggest to the NGO to cover other topics: "I once tried to



“Have  
you ever seen  
a story about a  
Palestinian who  
succeeds?”

pitch a story about the weddings in the camp, and how people always brought a lot of music, to feature the role music plays in the lives of the camp’s residents, but it didn’t work. I don’t get it, why not give people tools to be more powerful?”



Sukkar from Campji thinks that mainstream media in Lebanon fails to paint a nuanced picture of the country’s long-standing Palestinian community. “Have you ever seen a story about a Palestinian who succeeds?” she asked. “The same goes for Syrian refugees, you never hear a positive story. If you don’t show the good sides of life, how can people get to know about them?” Sukkar questioned. Another journalist in Lebanon, Abby Sewell from the U.S., said that the global coverage of migration has been both good and bad in recent years, but a lot of it has been shallow: “You see a lot of different coverage. In Europe and the U.S., the Syrian refugee crisis was covered mainly in terms of the effects it has on the host countries, rather than covering the stories behind people’s migration.” This approach, Sewell said, dehumanises the subjects of the stories and creates unjustified fear and resentment on the part of the viewers and readers. “People become paranoid and believe that people will come into their countries and change their societies. Even with positive coverage, like the story of a Syrian refugee who opened a sweets shop in Berlin, the person’s whole history is ignored – maybe they were a doctor before leaving Syria, but that’s not told.”

As for her own work on covering migration, Sewell believes that it may accomplish something: “I guess it can help people understand the world they live in. I am less and less certain that journalism has a direct effect on how things happen in practice, like decision-making. But you can help people understand the world better,” she said. This means that selecting topics with attention indeed has an impact on the world around us. And if we trust Cohen’s premise that the media is skilfully directing people’s attention, then that impact can be huge.

## Questions in this chapter

Why are certain topics covered more than others in reporting on migration?

What can we gain from telling more everyday and ‘small’ stories?

How can more diversity among storytellers translate into more diverse stories?







chapter 3

preparation



# preparation

The next step in the storytelling process, preparation, is closely linked to the process of selecting the topic. Most of the time, the preparatory phase starts when storytellers begin asking themselves what topics are interesting and important to cover. Once these questions are asked, they begin to think about the topic analytically and critically and start placing it in context. The preparatory phase lays the groundwork for the story and can be done in different ways, including research in the form of readings and listenings, arranging for interviews and spending time in neighbourhoods and places related to the story.

“The main thing is to listen to people.”<sup>9</sup>

“The main thing is to listen to people and read about the topic,” Shehrazad, the writer and student from France, said. “If you want to ask about migration, you have to read about it beforehand.” This idea, that storytellers research topics they work on, comes naturally to many. But it is not only a matter of doing readings, it is also about the nature of those readings. Omar Saadeh, the filmmaker with an NGO working with refugees in Lebanon, said that he often met people from abroad, both visitors to the NGO and journalists, who came with preconceptions in mind. “The types of questions they asked were always very basic and lead to the same patterns in stories.” This attitude, he said, had to do with a lack of research on their behalf and stereotypes they had about the topic: “They came with a premeditated image of the country, they did not come thinking ‘let’s find out what is there.’”

Samih Mahmoud from the video platform Campji said that when reporters come from outside the camps, they often show a lack of knowledge: “They don’t do deep research beforehand, unless we are talking about journalists who spend time in the area to get to know it before writing their stories. But some rely only on sources and information written by outsiders, so the research is done from the outside looking in.” This, he said, is the consequence of a larger problem, one that goes beyond the storytellers themselves: “It is because there

is not enough input from the camps, from people living there, about how life really is.”

“There is not enough input from the camps about how life really is.”<sup>9</sup>

For journalists and others telling stories of migration, it might be an easy option to resort to readings that are widely available and published by well-known outlets and institutions. This is not wrong: these are often well-researched and comprehensive. But local, people-centred perspectives are many times missing in these publications. And if they are there, they are often narrated from ‘the outside,’ by authors coming from privileged backgrounds or parts of the West, not refugee and migrant communities. If storytellers rely only on such readings, they will miss important perspectives.

Preparing well for a story therefore requires looking further than what first meets the eye. This includes reading things that are locally produced and published, even if it means spending more time searching (and oftentimes translating). Such readings can be local newspaper articles, poetry and short stories, podcasts and material published on social media. Shahrazad spoke about the importance of looking beyond the traditional coverage: “Sure, mainstream media is a useful source, but we should also read blogs and other smaller platforms, especially if we want to understand how people live. If we want to write about a community, we have to read what people from that group write.” Social media, Shahrazad said, can be very useful to get a better understanding of people’s lives: “It lets you discover new things and opens your mind. Even if you are not friends with someone you can follow what they write. I learn a lot about people’s realities that way.”



Laure Makarem, who works with migrant worker communities at the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) in Lebanon, said that research can impact the quality of interactions journalists and others have with people interviewed for their stories. “I have a good example,” Makarem said. “It was a person who had done a lot of readings and realised that there is a lot of knowledge out there. She wanted to explore how she could contribute to the existing literature.” This, Makarem said, was refreshing: “She didn’t come with a preset profile in mind for who she wanted to interview. Usually, this is what



people do. They come to us and say, 'I want a person who was trafficked,' or 'I want access to the Filipino community,' but she did not."

Makarem described how storytellers and NGOs collaborate and rely on each other to produce stories on migration. When storytellers do features in areas they are not familiar with, the preparations partly depend on the resources and connections of NGOs working in those areas. Benefits can go both ways – storytellers can get access to places they don't know well, and organisations can bring media attention to issues they work on. But this may also lead to a disconnect between the storyteller and the people featured in the story. "Reporters and journalists can sometimes be oblivious to the power dynamics that exist between them and the person they are working with," Makarem said. "There is a lack of interest in engaging with that person beyond the level of collecting data or extracting a story for their article. The relationship then becomes one-way and very transactional."

"Reporters and journalists can sometimes be oblivious to the power dynamics that exist between them and the person they are working with."

Doha Adi from the NGO Sawa for Development and Aid recounted a case where good preparations made a big difference: "We did a series of testimonies of people who had been injured in the war or in accidents in Lebanon. It was a very tricky process, very scary, because how can people retell such stories without re-living the trauma?" Adi worked with a social worker and spent much time describing what the material would be used for to the potential interviewees. "It was hard to find people. Out of 30, only three wanted to talk to us. But they were very positive, which made it easy – and at the same time hard because you want to respect these people and their positivity," Adi said.



Often, the ability to prepare is contingent on factors like the time and resources available to the storyteller. Neither is at any point endless, so choices and priorities have to be set. Rayan Sukkar from Campji said that if there is an alternative, she would not do features in regions she is unfamiliar with. "If I know someone from my area, I would speak

to them instead," she said. There are always ways to prepare, she continued, even on tight deadlines: "I don't think that time is really an excuse. It is easy to do research these days: there is information available in the community. There is technology. You can send long voice notes, talk over the phone, get to know the person you are interviewing. Check Facebook to see what they are interested in." Otherwise, she said, "work on stories you have access to in your own area."

That said, both journalists and storytellers from NGOs remain at the far end of the chain of power and influence within their institutions. Publishers and senior editors make the decisions in the newsrooms, and owners are responsible for securing the financial resources. NGOs, both large and small, rely at the end of the day on funders, often located far away. Makarem from ARM said that they acknowledge the situation for journalists who are asked to "write an article about a topic they didn't sign up for and only have five working days to deliver the story." It would be wrong, Makarem said, to tell them: "We are not working with you, go to another NGO and talk to a migrant worker there and do damage that is not on our premises." Instead, Makarem continued, organisations can ask journalists to provide information about their purpose, main topic, interview questions, ethical considerations and publishing details beforehand. "This procedure, in our experience, gives journalists a kind of self-check, saying 'I am being held accountable for this story.'"



For anyone telling stories about migration, the preparatory phase is when the blueprint for the entire story is drawn. This is when the direction of the story is set and the tone for what comes after is determined. Limitations in terms of time and resources are real, so storytellers will often find themselves forced to stop their research before having fully explored all possible angles. Still, as described by several participants, there are several steps a storyteller can take in order to, as Sukkar from Campji put it, "not come out of nowhere, knock a door and tell someone, 'I want to interview you about this and that.'"

If the preparations for a story are honest and sincere, chances are that the story will be too.



## Questions in this chapter

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What kind of research is often done by storytellers on migration?

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How can storytellers prepare to do better and more diverse reporting?

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What are some ways to do locally grounded research and preparation?



chapter 4

who are  
the experts?



# who are the experts?

The first chapter asked us to identify the storyteller in order to understand why migration is covered in certain ways. This chapter invites us to ask similar questions about the authorities and experts featured in articles and publications. Who are the people who get to share their knowledge and opinions? How do journalists find them and introduce them in their stories? Who are presented as experts and who are what journalists and editors call ‘cases,’ individuals asked to share things from their own lived experiences? And, consequently, what knowledge is presented as either valid and significant or subjective and unimportant?

In both academia and the media, experts are often male, White and from the West. Women figure significantly less as authorities, as do people who are Black and from other ethnicities. The more we get accustomed to this, the more we are convinced – often unconsciously – that White, Western and male expertise is more reliable and valuable. Indeed, the occurrence of all-male panels is so common that a word was coined to describe the phenomena: ‘manels.’ It is also common<sup>3</sup> that women get assigned the role of moderators rather than panellists, which lets them elevate other voices, but not establish themselves as authorities in the field. Similarly, the absence of experts from diverse backgrounds gives the idea that Western voices have more authority than others. Colombian science journalist Ángela Posada Swafford said<sup>4</sup> in a discussion about Latin American expertise in science reporting that researchers outside the West “are not cited enough” which is “like a catch-22:” since their expertise is seen as less important, they appear less frequently than colleagues from the West.

All of this is damaging not only for experts and researchers but also for us in general, readers, viewers and lis-

teners. We get deprived of a multitude of perspectives and opinions, and consequently get fewer chances to build diverse and more accurate understandings of the world.



Many conversations during our workshops revolved around the issue of who is considered an expert or authority. Laure Makarem from ARM in Beirut said that journalists often come to them with set ideas of who is an ‘expert’ and who is not: “It is sometimes very explicit. First they want to speak to someone from the organisation and then take a testimony from one of the members,” Makarem said, referring to members of ARM’s migrant community centers. “You see the difference at conferences where all experts are White or Lebanese, and migrant workers are just there to share their stories – even though the migrant worker can speak so much more in depth about the kafala system [the legal structure regulating migrant work in Lebanon] than any of us.” Makarem said that many journalists don’t see migrants as the source of knowledge: “They don’t involve them in the process of producing knowledge. And they speak to us differently. As a staff member, I get questions that are more analytical or require more critical thinking.”

Doha Adi from Sawa for Development and Aid said that it is important to see people’s migration experience as expertise: “Ask migrants to guide you and help you with your research. You are not the expert on what the community is facing, they are.” In reality though, this is not how journalism often works. While people who are refugees or migrants do get to share their personal experiences, they are rarely asked about larger political and systemic issues, like analysing the causes behind the conflicts that led them to migrate or escape.

Rifaie Tammam, a Syrian researcher and activist, wrote an article<sup>5</sup> about when he was invited to discuss airstrikes on Syria on Australian TV. But instead of commenting he found himself featured for only a few seconds, “half in tears and conspicuously traumatised while mentioning the loss of my brother and father.” Meanwhile, “the clip continued with a white Australian observer who gave his ‘objective’ and scholarly analysis of the situation.” Sometimes, people who

“You are not the expert on what the community is facing, they are.”

3 | [www.opensociety-foundations.org/uploads/c3f34e39-bcc2-43bc-9cca-cab57e445869/an-end-to-manels-20180308.pdf](https://www.opensociety-foundations.org/uploads/c3f34e39-bcc2-43bc-9cca-cab57e445869/an-end-to-manels-20180308.pdf)

4 | [www.theopennotebook.com/2019/09/24/invisible-science-why-are-lat-in-american-science-stories-absent-in-europe-an-and-u-s-media-outlets](https://www.theopennotebook.com/2019/09/24/invisible-science-why-are-lat-in-american-science-stories-absent-in-europe-an-and-u-s-media-outlets)

5 | [www.opendemocracy.net/en/refugee-stories-could-do-more-harm-good/](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/refugee-stories-could-do-more-harm-good/)



6 | [www.twitter.com/  
WIIS\\_Global/status/  
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7 | [www.undark.  
org/2016/07/25/  
ferocious-dinosaur-in-  
visible-scientists-ar-  
gentina/](https://www.undark.org/2016/07/25/ferocious-dinosaur-in-visible-scientists-argentina/)

are migrants and refugees are not included in the process at all. In August 2020, the organisation Women in International Security hosted a discussion<sup>6</sup> on the impact of the Syrian crisis on women – without including a single Syrian woman on the panel. Similarly, in February 2021, a panel on the Biden administration's policies on Syria at first did not include a single Syrian. Only later on, one Syrian-American was added to the five-person panel. Another example is the 2016 discovery<sup>7</sup> of a gigantic dinosaur fossil by a team of archaeologists in Argentina. Several news outlets, including The New York Times, The Guardian, BBC and Science Daily, only cited American scientists from the team, not a single Argentinian archaeologist.



This under-representation of non-Western expertise in the media and elsewhere not only contributes to obscuring entire groups of people in international affairs, it also limits our understanding of the world, since it presents fewer worldviews. In fact, the entire dichotomy between the expert and the so-called 'case' – where experts analyse and voice opinions while so-called 'cases' share personal experiences – leads to a narrow understanding of knowledge itself. It suggests that only scientific research constitutes knowledge, whereas experiential knowledge does not.

"The main thing you have to acknowledge is that people have knowledge."

Inga Hajdarowicz, the PhD student from Poland, said that, "The main thing you have to acknowledge is that people have knowledge. If you don't, the research is absolutely pointless." This kind of knowledge, Hajdarowicz said, has more weight than technical or professional knowledge. Makarem from ARM said that many journalists requesting interviews with migrant workers don't think like that. "People are multilayered and have their own journeys. I feel that journalists need to value people's experiences and nurture interest in different stories. But they don't see migrants as the source of knowledge on migration."

Finding diverse voices and expertise may require dedicated work. The 2019 Expert Sources Survey<sup>8</sup>, done in collaboration with the news agency Associated Press, found

8 | [www.expertfile.com/  
expert-sources-survey/](https://www.expertfile.com/expert-sources-survey/)

that journalists primarily locate sources in three ways: their own lists of contacts, through google searches and via referrals from colleagues. This brings us back to the enquiry in the first chapter: Who are the storytellers? In general, as humans, when asking for information we have a tendency to prefer people we perceive to be similar to ourselves. Lack of diversity among journalists and storytellers therefore leads to less diversity among our sources as well. It is often said in journalism that, "who you know is what you know." So, in order to expand what we know, we first need to broaden who we know – and who we reach out to for input and expertise.



There are several ways for storytellers to consult experts from different backgrounds. The idea to "check your biases" – to see if people you will interview are diverse in terms of gender, identity and background – helps to locate what perspectives are missing. Instead of reaching out to scholars at Western universities, storytellers can contact researchers elsewhere in the world. They can interview experts working locally instead of those giving analysis from afar. Social media is often a good place to find diverse voices (like the Twitter account Cite Black Women).

Apart from this, it is equally important with awareness in the approach – that storytellers recognise privilege, power dynamics and stereotypes when consulting their sources. That they ask so-called 'cases' as well as experts about complicated and analytical matters, and treat all input as valid and important expertise. That they give local know-how the same weight as information from international institutions. And that they let both men and women, whether experts or so-called 'cases,' speak in equal ways about political and professional matters as well as family-oriented things.

Adi from Sawa for Development and Aid said that her organisation makes sure to work in ways that build on refugee communities' knowledge and expertise: "If people want to build a community centre, for instance, we get the funds and organise the logistics, and we connect them to the builders. But the community decides how to build it and use it. We think of ourselves only as facilitators."



As outlined in this chapter, there are many ways to avoid some common pitfalls when looking for expertise or dealing with knowledge and information. These include using more diversified and locally connected expertise and treating input from both traditional experts and so-called ‘cases’ with similar weight. This allows us to expand what is seen as valid knowledge and consider the experiences of people who are migrants and refugees. It also broadens and deepens our understanding of migration, which leads to a more nuanced view of what role it plays in the world.

### Questions in this chapter

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Who are often consulted as authorities for stories on migration?

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What is in general considered expert knowledge and what is not?

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What kind of expertise and expert voices are often missing?

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How can storytellers integrate more diverse expertise in their stories?



chapter 5

interviews



# interviews

Journalists often speak about being ‘on the ground’ or ‘in the field’ when they do interviews or spend time in the places they write about. Researchers many times do the same, and people from NGOs as well. While this serves to define a specific part of the storytelling process, it is misleading in the sense that there is no separate ‘ground’ or ‘field’ that storytellers suddenly step onto. Interviews, recordings and observations don’t take place in an isolated space that can be entered and exited but happen, like everything else, in our common and shared reality.

Many conversations with participants took place around what happens during this part of the storytelling process, when storytellers meet with people to interview for their pieces. In these discussions, both positive and ill-fated examples of such encounters were brought up, as well as points to consider for doing interviews better.



“I am happy when I work and it is important to me that the people I meet are happy too.”

First of all, several people spoke about the importance of establishing a good and respectful connection to the person sharing their story. “I am happy when I work and it is important to me that the people I meet are happy too,” Rayan Sukkar from Campji said. “I always think that in order to get good content, the interviewees have to feel comfortable being with you, and get to know you as well.” Building such connections requires awareness of things brought up in earlier chapters: recognising one’s own positionality and how power dynamics play out in each given situation. Laure Makarem from ARM said that storytellers should work in a way that gives back to the people they meet: “The process should not be exploitative but shift power in favour of the people sharing their experience.” Stories, Makarem said, should be “something that fuels.”

Doha Adi from Sawa for Development and Aid described an instance when a journalist came to interview women whose husbands were disappeared or detained in Syria. “The journalist was very respectful,” Adi said. “She sat with them, not just as a journalist doing a recording, but she had coffee with them and asked about their children.” Before the interview started, the journalist had told the women to only share what they were comfortable with, and that they could ask to remove anything afterwards if they changed their mind. “It was more of a chat, and it was edited in a way so that the women were telling their own stories. It is important to build bridges in this way,” Adi said.

“Stories should be something that fuels.”

Participants gave opposite examples as well. Fatima Alhaji, the journalist who now lives in Berlin once translated meetings for a TV-team coming to Lebanon from abroad. “They were interviewing this amazing woman, she was the head of an NGO and her husband was detained in Syria. But they were not sensitive to how hard it was for her to talk about her missing husband. Many of their questions were not respectful. What bothered me was how they dealt with the situation. It was as if their interview was more important than the woman’s feelings and experience.”



Whether or not a genuine connection is established during the meeting often depends on the approach of the storyteller. If they arrive with set ideas and expectations, the interview will likely be transactional and not reciprocal. The opportunity for it to become a genuine conversation, based on listening and sharing, is lost. Omar Saadeh, who used to film videos for an international NGO in Lebanon, said that when he met families for his stories, they often brought up entirely different topics: “I felt that they needed to tell their stories. Once people started to talk they usually wanted more time to share their problems.” This, he said, is something that journalists and others are not always open to hear. “They instead ask them very basic questions which always lead to the same pattern in the stories. Like, ‘What happened in Syria during the war?’ or ‘Was your house destroyed?’” Sometimes, when his NGO had visitors from abroad, they acted as if they were producing a film, Saadeh said. “They did not give the space to the people they met to tell stories they wanted to tell.”



“There needs to be a shift so that people have power enough to take ownership of the story written about them.”<sup>9</sup>

Gary Younge, who served as The Guardian’s editor-at-large and long-term U.S. correspondent, said<sup>9</sup> in an interview that “sometimes the things that aren’t stories should be stories, and the news agenda is skewed towards power and the powerful. Also, the people in the newsroom think if it’s not happening to them, it is not news in the same way.” This explains how power dynamics impact the practice of storytelling: people in privileged positions tend to make choices based on their own views of the world. Then, they approach interviewees accordingly. Makarem from ARM said that this is apparent when journalists feel that they have “a lot of entitlement.” In such interview situations, the approach “is very top-down and questions are thrown at people.” There needs to be a shift, Makarem said, “so that people who share their stories still own them.” People who are interviewed should “have power enough to take ownership of the story that is written about them.”

One good example is a journalist who came to interview one of the members of ARM’s migrant community center. “This person was very open and wanted the people she met to direct the conversation,” Makarem said. “Her questions were like, ‘How do you deal with everyday problems?’ or ‘What brings you joy?’ She also sent a voice note to introduce herself before coming, saying that, ‘If you are interested in chatting we can chat, but you are not prompted to talk,’” Makarem continued. ARM now runs a media capacity-building program for their members that is continuously being developed. “We did a session recently on how to take interviews with journalists – how to answer difficult questions, navigate certain conversations, set a tone and boundaries,” Makarem said. “And a chunk of the training is for people to be able to produce media on their own.”



Participants also spoke about the set-up of the interview session itself, in particular the onus on storytellers to make sure that interviewees understand the implications of speaking to them. Abby Sewell, the journalist from the U.S. working in Lebanon, said that it can be hard for people to foresee what sharing their stories with a journalist may lead

to. “There have been times where I did an interview and then realised that these people are not used to dealing with the media, they don’t understand what a journalist is.” In such cases, Sewell said, she tries to be as protective as possible: “Even if people say that I can use their names, I sometimes refrain from doing so if I think it might cause them problems.”

In Lebanon and elsewhere, it is common that people from refugee or migrant communities get interviewed on several occasions by people in different roles. One day, NGO field-workers or UN staff may come to ask about an issue; another day, local or international media may inquire about something else. Sometimes, people in different capacities from the same NGOs visit the same family but for different purposes. In such cases, the difference between one meeting and another is not always clear. Saadeh, the videographer, said that people he filmed sometimes expected that the interview would improve their situation. “If I interviewed a mother for a story about education, for example, she would also tell me about water or food problems. Why? Because she believed that she could get help.” Independent reporters should be aware of this too. “Sometimes I realise afterwards that people might be thinking that I work with the UN, or if they tell me something it might lead to them getting aid,” Sewell said. In such situations, she said, she tries to refer people to organisations that provide help and support.

Other participants spoke about the idea of ‘giving back’ to interviewees as well. Inga Hajdarowicz, the PhD student researching migration in Lebanon, said that she tries to find ways to offer things in return. “There are not so many things I have but I have time, for example. So I usually offer workshops or conversation classes, spaces where people can discuss what they want to discuss and I update them on my research,” she said. “Research can be a process of solidarity. I try for it to be as much of an exchange as possible.”

Makarem from ARM also mentioned reciprocity, and gave the example of an organisation approaching them to collect testimonies from migrant workers for a report. “It was an amazing process,” Makarem said, “because they first took their time to meet with everyone, then walked them through the entire report.” This, Makarem said, did not raise any false expectations. “It was very participatory and there was a cer-

“Research can be a process of solidarity.”<sup>9</sup>

9 | [www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/the-further-you-are-from-power-the-more-you-see/article30925158.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/the-further-you-are-from-power-the-more-you-see/article30925158.ece)



tain safety and trust so when people spoke about things that did not feel great, there was still a lot of support.” There was also the fact, Makarem said, that people were fairly compensated for their time. This is not always the case when researchers or journalists contact ARM to be put in touch with people who are migrant workers. “Other times, they have asked about ‘the rate for migrant workers,’ as if it would not be the same as for others. That is a red flag because come on, it is doing the same job.”



If interviews don’t take place on a ‘ground’ or ‘field’ that you step off once they are over, then the commitment to the interviewee does not end there. Saadeh, the videographer, said that he was once interviewed by a journalist himself, but the connection was not maintained afterwards. “It felt like a one-night stand,” he said. “And when I reached out later, the person ‘ghosted’ me.” After the explosion in Beirut on August 4 2020, the same person contacted Saadeh for a new interview. “But I didn’t do it, they had not maintained the connection,” he said.

Many participants said that they appreciate staying in contact with people they meet when working on their stories. Fatima Alhaji, the journalist in Berlin, said that she does not believe in “this rule within journalism that you cannot get personal.” That, she said, is not right: “It turns people you meet into only material for your story.” Instead, she prefers to be close to the community. “That is how I like to work on stories.” Shehrazad, the writer from France, said that she finds a lot of joy in the interview moment: “It is really beautiful to sit in front of someone who tells you all about their life. You don’t know the person, yet they can tell you everything. This is an experience of pure humanity.” After the interview, she often stays in contact. “I want to know how their life is going. I am not saying we become best friends, but I send messages maybe once a year. I don’t see the person solely as a project I work on and that’s it,” she said.



More than a chance to get quotes or prove beliefs or assumptions, the interview is an exchange and commitment. If we think and act like this, not only does it make the interview more equal, it also enhances its potential. Storytellers who enter conversations with an open mindset and curiosity to listen and discover – perhaps also get proven wrong – are not only more true to the people they meet, but also to the stories they tell. And such stories will always capture the world better.

“It felt like a one-night stand. When I reached out later, the person ‘ghosted’ me.”

## Questions in this chapter

How do power dynamics tend to manifest during interviews and meetings?

How can interviews be more reciprocal in nature, and not transactional?

What kind of stories can come out from more equal and open-minded interviews?



chapter 6

building  
the  
narrative



# building the narrative

When setting out to craft their narratives, storytellers have a huge task at hand. Stories, depending on how they are crafted, can literally change the way people think. “Journalists create the world for people,” Jelena Dzekseva, the anthropologist in Lyon, said. “They imagine the world from what they see and hear in the media, and approach people they meet in the streets based on this.” Indeed, it is hard to underestimate the power of narratives. The philosopher Michel Foucault, in his writings on power, spoke about how discourse defines and produces knowledge, an important form of power, and impacts the way we act and think. Our stories and how we narrate them, therefore, are real manifestations of power.

“Journalists create the world for people.”

Many participants spoke about the process of crafting stories: how it may be done in damaging ways, but also for the better. Laure Makarem from ARM in Lebanon said that the fact that someone writes well and has a track record of covering an issue does not necessarily mean that their approach is good: “It doesn’t mean that they intend to transfer power to the people they meet. There has to be some sharing of power, otherwise ethics and trainings don’t matter.” Makarem remembered a journalist who photographed one of ARM’s members in a particularly good way. “It was not like, ‘I want this to be a dark portrayal’ but rather asking the person: ‘How do you want to portray yourself?’ Such small things make a difference,”

“There has to be some sharing of power, otherwise ethics and trainings don’t matter.”

Makarem said. Rayan Sukkar from Campji also recalled an example that she liked, a video she saw about a girl living as a refugee in Lebanon. “She took us on a visit to where she lives. She spoke about problems in her life – lack of water, other things. But it showed the girl’s strength. I think even when she grows up, she will feel proud about this video.” Sukkar said.



Storytellers make many decisions when building their narratives. They select what angles and orientation to take, which details to bring to light or omit, and how to describe people and places. Therefore, even if they are invisible in the story itself, storytellers remain at the center of the narrative process. Fatima Alhaji, the journalist in Berlin, said that she acknowledges her privileged position. “I know that I am powerful in this position and that I have to keep an eye on myself all the time. Because it can be tempting as a journalist to use your privilege, to just ‘go and get the best story and that’s it,’” she said. Sukkar, the journalist from Campji, agreed with Alhaji: “The person writing an article should think one thousand times about what kind of a link or connection they create with their story,” she said.

Stories may serve to enrich our understanding of certain topics – or do the opposite, reinforce stereotypes and narrow ideas. Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in a widely viewed [TED Talk](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)<sup>10</sup> from 2009, describes how the fact that we only have ‘single stories’ about certain issues and places in the world limits our understanding. ‘Single stories’ lack nuance and complexity, and convey only one type of image from a particular place, over and over again. When this happens, when one singular story gets told over and over again, we will think that this is the full and only truth.

Dzekseva, the anthropologist, described a film she watched about an Italian island where many migrants arrived: “It was a nice movie and I really liked it,” she said. “But we only got to know the Europeans in the movie. We came with them into the kitchen, we went on someone’s boat, we saw someone’s son playing. The migrants in the movie were only shown as a group of people, and we didn’t get to know any of them.” If people who are migrants or refugees are portrayed in the media like this, only as members of anonymous groups and without showing their own trajectories, it leads to othering and xenophobia in society. “The media plays a huge role in reproducing a discourse of ‘us’ and ‘them’, especially in Europe,” Simone Spera, the PhD student from Italy, said. “It reproduces the idea that migrants are people who arrive in boats, even though in Europe most migration happens between European countries.”

10 | [www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)



"If you have more stories it becomes like a kaleidoscope."

11 | www.soundcloud.com/user-968223567/unlocked-bonus-episode-49

Nudrat Kamal, a writer and lecturer of comparative literature in Karachi, Pakistan, spoke in a [podcast episode](#)<sup>11</sup> about the need to dismantle the hegemony of 'single stories.' "If you have more stories it becomes like a kaleidoscope. Instead of one view it's like many, many images and stories, and all of them are in conversation with one another, perhaps contradicting and complicating one another." In every way, Kamal said, this is a question of power: "If we want to, like I want to, make the world more equitable in power, we need more stories. We need less stories from people who are already in power and more stories from people who are different and don't necessarily have that global power."

All of this is contingent on how storytellers narrate stories. It is the result of choices that may be unconscious, but can be brought to attention with self-inquiry and reflection. Doha Adi from Sawa for Development and Aid said that they changed the way they tell stories through experience: "Organisations like us, which started as grassroots organisations, learned about ethical standards along the way. We used to share posts on social media with children crying and people receiving aid. But people told us, 'I don't want to be portrayed like that, I was going through a bad phase and that is not who I am.'" Now, Sawa for Development and Aid has another way of working. "We have created standards and now keep them in check. At first, we drew bullet points and then kept developing them. This document is now fifteen pages long," Adi said.

Representations in the media have real implications. Several participants described how negative images of migrants and refugees "create a world," like Dzeksenewa said, that reflects such negativity. Adi mentioned the media's focus on portraying families in camps. "There are a lot of refugees who don't live in camps, who are students and employees. We rely on them for the human resources for agriculture and industries for our basic needs." When journalists fail to capture that, "refugees feel useless and lose their self esteem," Adi said. "If you are constantly told that you are worthless, you will be convinced of that." Samih Mahmoud from Campji said that the mainstream media continues to show refugees in Lebanon in bad light: "When a Syrian person for example does something wrong, they broadcast their nationality. Even if it has nothing to do with the person being Syrian."



This – details and cliché descriptions, references to nationality, race or gender – is how narratives play a role in shaping our understanding of migration. Throughout the last few years of reporting on refugees and migration, many major outlets have used expressions like 'waves' or people 'flowing' across borders: words fit to describe natural emergencies, not the movement of human beings. David Cameron, the former prime minister of the U.K., was [quoted](#)<sup>12</sup> saying that a "swarm of people" was coming to the island. Even the BBC, the British public service broadcaster, [spoke](#)<sup>13</sup> of people who are migrants as a 'flood' and 'stream' in their reporting (and illustrated the same article with a photograph where migrants are portrayed in a group, without introducing anyone by name).

Adi said that her NGO thinks carefully about what words to use in their documentation and communication. "We don't use the word 'beneficiary' for instance, we say 'community member' or 'participant,'" she said. Once, Sawa for Development and Aid did a video about the community kitchen they put up each Ramadan. "But the subtitles said, 'we are feeding 10,000 people.' That was wrong, we don't use that language. We are not feeding people, as if they are passive recipients of aid," Adi said.

Sukkar, the journalist from Campji, also spoke about the importance of choosing words. "After I travelled abroad and saw perspective there, I realised that giving importance to the veil, for instance, can lead to islamophobia." For her, describing someone as veiled in a story had never had particular meaning – it was just a description like any other. "But if we want a common message, one that does not evoke hatred or generate stereotypes, we should think about words like these," she said. For Adi, again, a seemingly insignificant choice between 'war' and 'crisis' has real consequences. "Many journalists say 'the Syrian crisis' even though it is a war. This lessens what people go through. If we use the word 'war' we remember that these people are not safe in their country," she said.

When writing about migration, very small and simple measures can contribute to shifting per-

12 | www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jul/30/david-cameron-migrant-swarm-language-condemned

13 | www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33204681

"It is really beautiful to sit in front of someone who tells you all about their life."



spectives. There is a difference for instance between introducing someone as ‘a migrant’ and ‘a person who is a migrant’: in the first case, we have reduced their identity to only being a migrant, while the second option allows for them to retain all their other identities as well. Migration narratives may be internalised as well. In one of our workshops, two Syrian journalists in Germany applied and were accepted as participants. Later on, they said that they had taken for granted that they were selected to take part in the workshop only as ‘migrants’, not for their professional backgrounds as journalists, which was really the case.



Moving away from the dominance of ‘single stories’ requires not only a diverse content of stories, but also an increase in their numbers. Spera, the Italian PhD student, said that more stories are needed. “Policymakers operate with large-scale data, so if we present many narratives they cannot say, ‘Oh but that’s just one case so it doesn’t make a difference.’ It is our task to produce enough stories for them to realise that they need to do differently,” he said.

Crafting new, diverse and alternative narratives is not necessarily easy. Few of us – no one in fact – are able to free ourselves from preconceptions and conventional ideas about the world. Still, there are ways to try. Mustelin, the writer from Germany, mentioned one way that we often introduce in the workshops: to imagine replacing the protagonist in a story with someone else. “If we do this with ourselves, it shows stereotypes we might have about gender or other identities,” Mustelin said. Nour Ghoussaini, the journalist from Lebanon, suggested that we constantly challenge the brain in order to recognise diversity. “Just like everything else in life, we have to train the brain,” she said.

## Questions in this chapter

How can storytellers craft migration stories that are more equal and diverse?

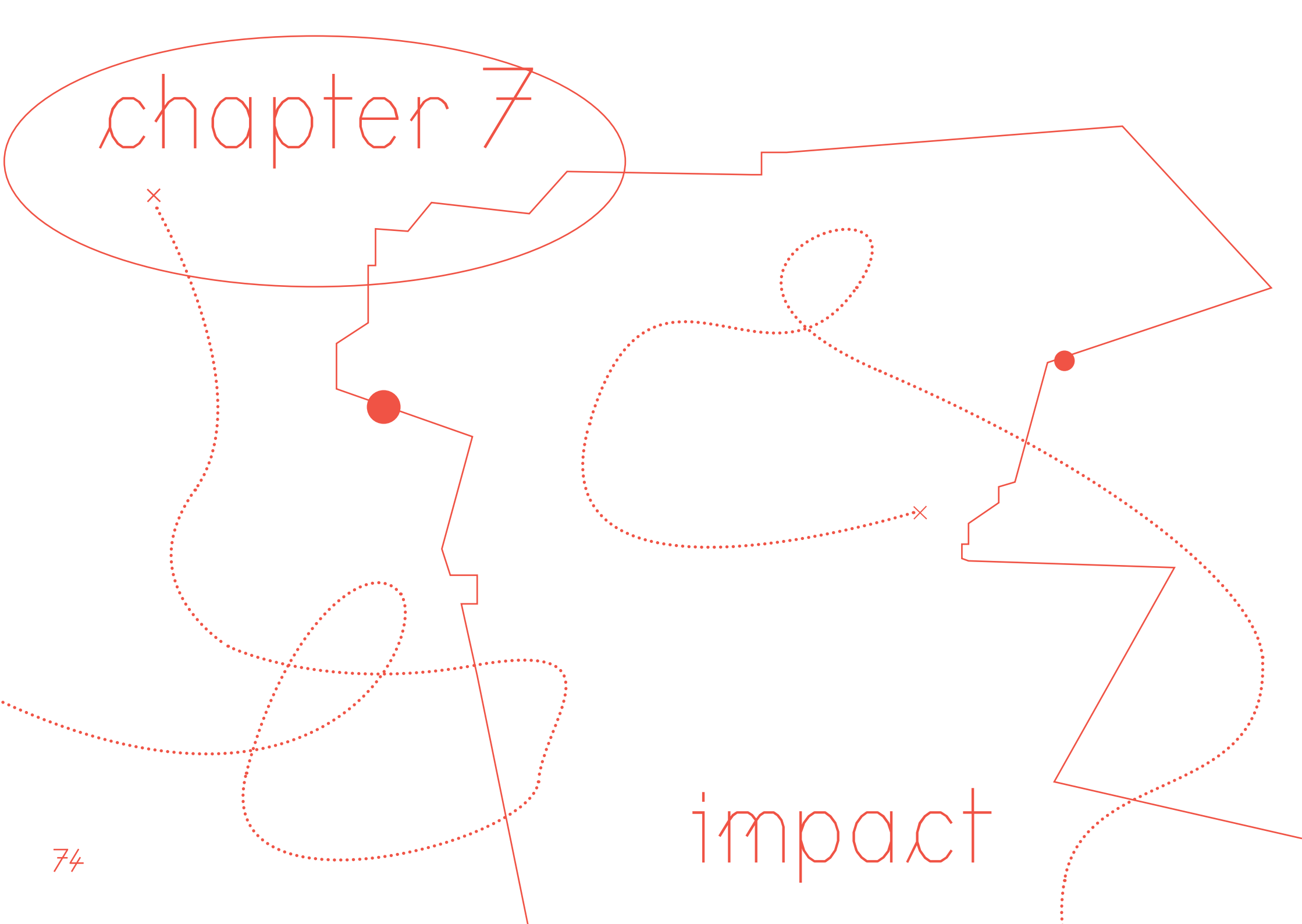
What kind of impact do word choices and the way we describe people have?

How can storytellers move away from reproducing ‘single stories’?



# chapter 7

impact





# impact

The final part of the storytelling process begins the same moment you press ‘save’ on the computer. Having arrived at the end of the production phase, only one thing remains: that the story gets out to readers, listeners and viewers. This includes people who know very little about migration as well as experts on the topic. It also includes everyone who was interviewed for the piece, and now gets to see their input in the larger context of the story. The moment of publication is also when a story starts to have an impact. All that was done so far now comes to the test: the research phase and interactions with people, choices when crafting the story, and details or quotes that were either included or left out.

Several participants spoke about the importance of sharing quotes with the interviewees before publishing. Omar Saadeh, who filmed videos for an NGO in Lebanon, said that people featured in stories should always get a chance to see the material. “Even getting it translated word by word, like, ‘this is your story, these are your quotes, this is the general introduction,’” he said. Shehrazad, the student and writer from France, said that she always wants people to read her features: “I want to make sure that I didn’t make any mistakes or misunderstood something. Usually we think it’s enough to get people’s consent but it’s important to check afterwards too.” This, Shahrazad added, depends on whom you interviewed: “If you were talking to a rapist for example, then no. But it is always important when you interview marginalised communities.”

Staying aware of the power dynamics of each situation helps to guide in these choices. Is the storyteller in a position of power vis-à-vis the interviewee? Then, yes, the people quoted should get a chance to see and agree with how they were cited. Or is the opposite true? If the person quoted is in a position of power – perhaps an official spokesperson or a politician speaking on the record – then the roles are reversed and the information should be published the way it was originally related.



Besides checking quotes and citations with interviewees, there are other ways to make sure that people are represented in accurate ways. Rayan Sukkar from Campji said that she always asks herself a number of questions before publishing a story: “Are the people in the story happy about how you portrayed them? If they are refugees and migrants, will it lead to any change in their lives? What will those reading or watching the video think?” Something, she said, should “connect them to the people in the story.” Inga Hajdarowicz, the PhD candidate researching migration, said that her articles must be true to the experiences of people: “They need to work. I need to be able to reflect the experiences of the women I meet, as well as the organisations that opened their doors for me.” Hajdarowicz said that what she writes “must be powerful enough so that it inspires other people to do similar work.” This, she concluded, “is a huge responsibility.”

“Are the people in the story happy about how you portrayed them?”

But it happens that storytellers and media outlets fail to respect the intentions and wishes – sometimes the safety – of people. In 2018, researcher Johanna Foster and lawyer Sherizaan Minwalla published a [study](#)<sup>14</sup> on the experiences of Yazidi women who were interviewed by journalists documenting sexual violence. Eighty-five percent of the women said that journalists had done something unethical, such as pressuring them to speak or failing to protect their identities. During the 2019 terrorist attack on a hotel in Kenya’s capital Nairobi, many international media outlets were criticised for publishing images of people who were killed, even as the attack was ongoing. “African victims of atrocities [...] often get their death displayed for consumption with little to no regard for their privacy or the grief of their family members,” media and mass atrocities fellow James Siguru Wahutu [said](#)<sup>15</sup> to the BBC then. A similar criticism was raised against The New York Times in 2018, when the paper featured a story about mental health in post-war Sri Lanka. A [thread](#)<sup>16</sup> on Twitter questioned if it was ethical to publish images of people with mental health – even if, as the paper said, they had given formal consent. Some suggested that had a local photographer contributed to the story, the approach could have been different.

14 | [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277539517301905](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277539517301905)

15 | [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46889822](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46889822)

16 | [www.twitter.com/garikaalan/status/1070173084420730880?s=21](https://twitter.com/garikaalan/status/1070173084420730880?s=21)



Laure Makarem from ARM described an incident where a journalist did not respect the safety and integrity of the migrant woman she interviewed: “The discussion was first very broad, she asked to know the person’s story and why she was in Lebanon.” But then the vibe changed, Makarem said. The person was applying for asylum, and could not return to her country for political reasons. “Apparently the journalist knew that, but kept asking questions even though she was not comfortable.” Afterwards, the interviewee realised that she had said more than what she wanted to say. But she knew neither the name nor the phone number of the journalist. “We managed to find it and ask to keep some information off the record. But we don’t know because she never shared what she wrote with us,” Makarem said.

Several participants also said that journalists and communicators with NGOs sometimes feel pressured to reproduce images of refugees or migrants as vulnerable, passive or weak. Doha Adi said that her NGO has a strategy for when donors ask for this kind of material. “We say that we have policies and internal codes of conduct that dictate not showing individuals in vulnerable positions, children crying or women as weak individuals. We only show dignified content, not the inside of a dirty or messy house, for instance.” Such images, Adi said, may be used for internal documentation but not for media purposes. “We use different formats for different things. Detailed material is usually shared only with donors. Then we feature other kinds of stories on social media.”

Numbers and statistics, which media outlets often rely on to underpin their stories, should also be used with similar caution. Presenting accurate data on migration and refugees is important and comes with a lot of responsibility. Numbers mean little if not put in context, and they can easily be used to promote political agendas. When presented as ‘true’ or ‘final,’ we sometimes forget that statistics and data are always subjective representations of reality, and need to be accompanied by reflections and people’s stories.



For many journalists there is an idea, or at least hope, that their work will lead to change or betterment in the world. But it is hard, if not impossible, to measure the impact of a story. Effects are long-term and indirect, if any

at all. “As a journalist, you always want your stories to have an impact and help people’s lives. But in reality they often don’t. Sometimes they do, even if it’s just by making people happy that someone has heard their story,” the journalist Abby Sewell said. Fatima Alhaji, the journalist in Berlin, said that journalism should be relieved from the ‘burden’ of always having to lead to change: “Just do your work and show what’s happening. Be gentle with people and what they are doing.” Alhaji said that she thought a lot about whether or not journalists can contribute to social change: “At one point I got the answer. As a journalist, it is not you that make the change. You can only support people in what they want to change.”

“It is not you that make the change. You can only support people in what they want to change.”

Still, storytelling does retain the power to create change. As mentioned in several chapters, it raises issues and directs people’s attention. In this sense, it can be a force of both bad and good. Adi from Sawa for Development and Aid said that storytellers can function as connectors between people featured in their stories and those in power. “Most refugees we work with may not have a way to reach donors and decision-makers. So we play a role, let’s say, as a microphone.” In the long run, she said, this can have an effect: “We have shared many interviews and testimonies with donors who actually have an impact on authorities and governments.”

“We play a role, let’s say, as a microphone.”

Rayan Sukkar and Samih Mahmoud from Campji described how their relationship with people grew over the course of them working in the neighbourhood. “At the beginning we didn’t have that big of an impact, but now we do. We have a program called ‘News from the roofs’ where we look critically at the news coverage. If there’s an issue that we don’t bring up, people write to us and ask why,” Mahmoud said. “They then continue the discussion on their own, criticising politicians and mocking them.” He described how once, a young man died from an electric shock in one of Beirut’s camps: “His brother called us to speak and release all the tension. This is how important independent media is for citizens and refugees.” Sukkar said that, “Sometimes people scold us, asking ‘Why don’t you come to our neighbourhood, we haven’t seen you here for a while.’ We are happy when they do this, because if they didn’t, it would mean that they don’t like our work.”



The close connection Campji maintains with the community allows them to see the immediate impact of their stories. “When we go and ask about something – social or economical issues for instance – the person we interview might be someone’s neighbour. So they will add their own perspective and a discussion starts, discussions about things that no one asked about before.” This, Mahmoud said, has changed the general image of journalists among residents of the camps: “Now people come up and ask to be interviewed. The camera has become part of their lives.”



Regardless of whether storytellers are connected to the people and communities they cover or not, their work is bound to have some kind of impact. It might be on a small scale, as in providing opportunities for people to talk about matters that are important to them, or raising issues locally. Sometimes the scope is larger, as in bringing light to oppression and injustice, and ultimately impacting on political decisions. In either case, the kind of impact a story has reflects the entire process of storytelling from start to finish: if it was inclusive, reflective and thoughtful, or if it was done in ways that did not respect those involved. Many journalists and others hope that their work will create change and positive impact. A storytelling process that makes many stops on the way, with chances for critique and self-reflection, raises the stakes for that considerably.

## Questions in this chapter

What kind of impact can migration stories have beyond their publication?

How might people interviewed and portrayed in a story be impacted by it?

What are ways for storytellers to be preemptive about the impact of their stories?



