

# Displaced Voices

A JOURNAL OF MIGRATION, ARCHIVES AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Special Issue: In Their  
Own Voices

Making Visible Lives of  
Refugee Women  
In Kuala Lumpur , Malaysia

Volume 1 Issue 2

Winter 2021

# Displaced Voices: A Journal of Migration, Archives and Cultural Heritage

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Displaced Voices is an online journal of the Living Refugee Archive.

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Front Cover Image Copyright

**Amin Kamrani**

Photo No 1: *In the absence of sun*

Taken in: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

—

Memories  
must be the poems  
of the deprived,  
and night is the paper.

**Mwaffaq Al-Hajjar**

See 20/20 Photo exhibition for contextual details

<https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/exhibitions/20-20-virtual-exhibition/>

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Paul Dudman, *Editor of Displaced Voices*

Kirandeep Kaur, *Lead Guest Editor for Special Issue: In their own voices*

# Displaced Voices: A Journal of Migration, Archives and Cultural Heritage

## Title Page

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For co-written papers and for edited works please use both names of author (first) followed by co-writer/editor (where the co-writer/editor is specifically mentioned in the paper's heading and contents page).

**e.g. Ismail and Kaur (2021)**

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# Acknowledgements

This special issue is a collection of papers written by and with refugee women based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Our final paper is a contribution from an Iranian photographer who has worked alongside the refugee communities in Kuala Lumpur. He contributed the front cover and much of the photography in this issue. Mwaffaq Al-Hajjar, a Syrian poet, contributed the poem that exhibited alongside the front cover image (included on the title page). All photography in this issue aims to highlight the spaces, actions and voices of the contributors without emphasizing a victimhood narrative or imagery.

All contributors to this project were participants in a doctoral participatory action research (PAR) project in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The PAR project was conducted between 2017–2018 by myself, Kirandeep Kaur, doctoral researcher in Law and Development at Tilburg University.

Due to the participatory nature of the original fieldwork, I also wished to find a collaborative and inclusive method of dissemination that continued the dialogue we started in Malaysia. After several years of discussions with participants and difficulties finding an appropriate space to publish, we found support from Paul Dudman at the Living Refugee Archives. As a team, we explored different options and undertook a journey to find the best way to utilise the Living Refugee Archives to be a supportive platform for the voices of the refugee participants. As Paul notes in his paper; 'This is a journey of storytelling through which an alternative archive for marginalised narratives can be created. Through community participation we open the door to challenge traditional notions of archival structures and documentation, hoping to constitute a living history of refugeehood.'

Unfortunately due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures in place, this special issue was delayed from its originally publication date. Nevertheless, this time was an opportunity to reflect, connect and allow more time for the stories to develop.

Given the hard work and support I have received from all involved, I would like to give a special thank you to Paul Dudman, the writers and contributors to this special issue. And, a further special thank you to Nergis Canefe, Associate Professor, Center for Refugee Studies in York University, Canada, who kindly wrote the foreword for this issue and has supported our goals to work more inclusively in academic dissemination. You have all inspired me to believe again we can find a way to stop speaking over each other and instead speak together.

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February 2021

# Foreword

Nergis Canefe, Associate Professor, Center for Refugee Studies in York University

This issue of Living Refugee Archives titled *In Their Own Voices* is a special collection of papers written by and with refugee women based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It is fortified by the contributions from Iranian photographer Amin Kamrani who worked alongside the refugee communities in Kuala Lumpur, and the verse of Mwaffaq Al-Hajjar, a Syrian poet. All contributors were participants in a doctoral participatory action research (PAR) project undertaken in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, conducted between 2017–2018 by Kirandeep Kaur, a doctoral researcher in Law and Development at Tilburg University. The project is a testimony to the fact that using collaborative and inclusive methods of fieldwork in the form of a genuine human dialogue and materializing the transformative potential of wilful action is indeed possible.

In each chapter, Kaur and her companions invite us on a journey of storytelling through which “grief, pain and loss” commonly leading to furthering the “collective fears of the unknown stranger or an invasion of the other” instead end up challenging canonized forms of archiving, collecting testimonies and keeping a tally on human suffering. Our inability to connect with forced migrants’ hopes and suffering goes hand in hand with the lack of visibility of their faces, not just in the media, but in the registers of humanity at large: disposable lives, disposable bodies, disposable life stories. Kaur

chose to go against the grain and trained and worked alongside the Afghan, Syrian, Somali and Rohingya communities with the aim of inclusive publishing and co-writing at the expense of turning her back to formal academic writing and editing processes. In the final instance, this work brings narrative politics, storytelling, witnessing and collective action together in a seamless flow.

Although narrative politics has long been recognised as both practice and theory, there has been little investigation about how survival narratives and testimonials delivered as first-hand accounts are constituted, could be mobilised and what kind of alternative political spaces they could create<sup>1</sup>. The interdisciplinary nature of narrative politics as method is readily embraced by critical humanities, drawing on philosophical properties of the narrative self. In this collection, however, the focus is not on the specific stories of individuals alone. These are instances of circumscribed storytelling that aim to challenge the assumptions, lacunae and areas of tension in our record of the present time, and they compel us to develop a more critical approach to the image of the refugee, the asylum seeker, the illegal migrant. Together with photography and poetry that do not victimize the dispossessed but identify their agency, these essays lead us to think about further possibilities offered by such communicative for-

<sup>1</sup> See Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before reading: Narrative conventions and the politics of interpretation*. The Ohio State University Press, 1998, and, Frederick W. Mayer, *Narrative politics: Stories and collective action*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2014.

mats of delivery of research findings and the novel spaces and practices of understanding they bring about.

Deliberately, Kaur introduces the whole body of work in the language of stories about stories. She is very insistent that the people whose stories we hear are not to become anonymised participants in an empirical study. These stories are real, refer to actual experiences, and yet the mode of their delivery also challenges the assumed transparency, neutrality and compulsory positivity of survival narratives. Furthermore, echoing contemporary debates on the image and the possibilities of dialogue and understanding through photography, the collection at hand combines a deep and vested interest in the pain and suffering of others with politics of representation<sup>2</sup>. Presenting an engaging exploration of the ethical challenges posed by the ubiquity of narratives and images of dispossession, suffering and loss, Kaur and her companions' take on both the power and the danger of humanizing forced migration is worth a really close look. Inching towards a new theoretical model for understanding human agency and political subjecthood, this compilation of essays/stories/images/poems proposes a series of paradigmatic shifts in terms of both the ontology and historiography of the representation of the dispossessed and of displacement. Moving away from the dualistic understanding of the spectator and the image, contributors to the volume embrace a triadic model that is constituted of the writer/photographer, the analyzed/photographed subject and the reader as an active participant. They therefore invite us to re-think the role of witnessing, documenting

and disseminating testimonials in the wider context of violence, citizenship, statehood, borders, exclusion, lives rendered disposable, survival vis-à-vis perceived limits of academic spectatorship.

Both testimony and photography are linked to memory in the context of loss, abyss, failure and absence. While the questions of what is missing or what cannot be recalled have a negative relation to memory, they are essential pillars of the endeavour of building archives that bear the traces of the past in pursuit of 'tangible evidence' or 'records.' If so, how could one establish a 'living archive'? Bringing these two seemingly disparate concepts into a conversation with each other initiates complex negotiations around subjectivity, belonging and witnessing. The living archive is an anchor through which one attempts to resist the imposition of what is deemed as 'appropriate' to be remembered. It creates a platform for making a judgment that enables the utilization of witnessing as a self-reflexive engagement with the aim of achieving historical accountability for those who are made invisible at the present moment and thus likely will not be accounted for otherwise when the very present becomes tomorrow's past.

If so, action research is a perfect entry regarding the growing roster of the Living Refugee Archives. This type of scholarly work challenges the cognitive models of reflection that are implicit in much of the methods literature and instead underlines the importance of human capacity for relational understanding of struggle and survival. All the while, relying on our capability of reflection which could ultimately facili-

<sup>2</sup> See Susan Sontag, "Regarding the pain of others." *Diogenes* 1 (2003): 127-139 and Judith Butler, "Photography, war, outrage." *pmla* 120, no. 3 (2005): 822-827.



tate personal, societal and ultimately systemic change. Indeed, theoretical conceptions of reflective scholarly practice and action research are inherently related. In both cases, our witnessing of, engagement with and reflections on human experience are deemed to be transformative of the lives of individuals and situations involved. And yet, this does not mean reflective practice is tantamount to action research or active forms of witnessing<sup>3</sup>. One has to have a genuine consideration of the concept of strategic action and wilful consideration for the aforementioned transformative potential to be materialized. Strategic action involves the development and utilization of a deliberate framework to solve a particular problem using a coherent, systematic and targeted methodology. Though action research, by definition, must incorporate these components, in and of itself it does not provide a destination for the choices that emanate from our capacity for judgment and resort to human will. The framing of it determines its potential outcomes.

In this context, Kaur and her collaborators' work articulate a global, cross-cultural historiography in which absolutist notions of statehood, political subjectivity and identity are re-fashioned according to the demands of a new frame of reference. The contrapuntal perspective their work proposes in and of itself exposes the violence that underpins the formation of modern sovereign subjectivity finding its ultimate expression in national citizenship. Citizenship and the dominant rights discourse that comes with it is in turn an integral part of a sys-

tem in which relations of domination are structurally occulted. The stories shared in the collection also highlight the social and political production of a particular type of individual body, which is regulated, enclosed, sovereign and yet only so if it is recognized by the system and thus rendered visible. As such, they posit the need for a radical re-imagining of realities of forced migration in order to enable the emergence of a new type of agency and its embodiment as a heterogeneous assertion of specificity while contesting the global commodification of human suffering. Attacking the two-dimensional view of the political discourse pertaining to refugee status determination, in which the ethical boundaries of statehood and peoplehood dangerously overlap, the techniques utilized in Kaur's collection exhibit a complex awareness of what is anticipated from a representative work of refugee stories, testimonials and survival narratives and what is silenced as a result.

If we recall pivotal work such as Lisa Marie Cacho's *Social death: Racialized rightlessness and the criminalization of the unprotected*, Kaur's collection of stories is an excellent contribution to the kind of scholarship on social death<sup>4</sup> as the term applies to forced migration studies. Not only does it have new things to say on issues related to vulnerability and agency, but her contribution crosses a number of disciplines while anchoring them back in critical legal studies. The fluidity witnessed in this work is a result of an engaging analysis of alternative methodologies of academic work hand in hand

<sup>3</sup>See Nergis Canefe, "Gender, Dispossession and Ethics of Witnessing," and "Gender, Identity and Displacement: Nexus Requirements for a Critical Epistemology" in Nasreen Chowdhory and Paula Banerji, eds., *Gender, Identity and Migration in India*, Palgrave (forthcoming)

<sup>4</sup>Cacho, Lisa Marie. *Social death: Racialized rightlessness and the criminalization of the unprotected*. Vol. 7. NYU Press, 2012.

with an open condemnation of the effects of state-sanctioned personhood.

In her introductory essay, Kaur frames the debate by re-introducing story-telling and testimonials not only as form but also as potent content inherently related to the politics of survival. Kaur's work establishes an important dichotomy that guides the organization of the volume: the value of one's humanity is made intelligible through racialized, sexualized, spatialized, and state-sanctioned representations of political subjects or the lack of these thereof. Each section in the collection thus offers a captivating narrative of these absences and offers

a counter-narrative of presence and visibility. This is especially compelling due to perceived illegality of asylum seekers and migrant workers and the victims of exclusion, marginalization and societal violence becoming guilty of what could best be identified as a "*de facto* status crime,"<sup>5</sup> rendering them ineligible for personhood and what Judith Butler calls 'grievable lives.'<sup>6</sup> The question that lingers is what comes after claiming that very space which was habitually denied and for that, the Living Refugee Archives should be considered a site of protest as much as a platform for exchange and dialogue.

<sup>5</sup>See Dov Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's separatist states: Unresolved conflicts and de facto states*. US Institute of Peace Press, 2004.

<sup>6</sup>See Judith Butler, *Frames of war: When is life grievable?*. Verso Books, 2016.



Photo Credit: Amin Kamrani, [20/20 Exhibition](#)

Photo Titled:

Photo No. 3 Your Pattern on the Window

Taken in: Georgetown, Penang, Malaysia

[20/20 Photos are available for purchase](#) with 60% percent going to refugee communities in need

In your absence  
the sun is just the sun  
the day, day  
night, night.  
Your presence is a  
moonlight mixture.

# Action Research and Academic Skills: Co-Creating with Refugee Women

Kirandeep Kaur, Doctoral Researcher in Law and Development, Tilburg University

The suffering of refugees, stateless, asylum seeking and undocumented people have been broadcast widely in the media. Their grief, pain and loss commodified, packaged and sold as shocking news meant to appeal to our better instincts at best, and at the worst meant to awaken our collective fears of the unknown stranger, an invasion of the other. Glimpses into their lives, perspectives and experiences are rarely given in their own voices. Often their suffering and pain is placed outside the realm of our (usually Western audience's) understanding. This basic inability to connect emotionally and empathetically with forced migrants' hopes and suffering denies them (and perhaps ourselves) access to a basic shared humanity. If we cannot connect with their stories, can we truly understand them? More worryingly, are the stories which are seen in the media actually representative?

During the past 6 years on my PhD, these observations required me to ask; how can we find better pathways for refugee self-representation both in the media and perhaps also within academia? I started this process by asking myself how I might make the dissemination, from my own PhD, more inclusive. And thinking more widely, how (as academics, researchers and practitioners) we can increase the space for connection and co-creation of ideas, articles and images.

In this special issue for Displaced Voices we bring together four refugee women community leaders in Kuala Lumpur; Naima Ismail,

Sharifah Shakirah who translates for Syedah Husain, Parisa Ally and Arifa Sultana. Their writings are based on their experiences of refugeehood in Kuala Lumpur. Their stories and perspectives highlight their advocacy and activism to support their communities as well as the real challenges and hardships of the women they work for. Alongside their papers we bring in the work of Amin Kamrani as a photographer, who has worked with the refugee communities and documented their lived realities and ability to create change. In this issue we present some of his photography as well as his article that stresses the lack of visibility faced by refugees in the media.

In this article I will document all our writing journeys these past 6 months. We hope to show how the collaboration between Paul Dudman of the Living Refugee Archive, Amin Kamrani, Arifa Sultana and myself as a Doctoral researcher in Law and Development worked to create this issue. The past six months have been a testament to the importance of listening and patience as well as important lessons in learning from participatory and inclusive practices in academic publishing.

I'd learned from my work with refugees previously and my PhD participatory action research (PAR) project that marginalised groups have little space to have a voice in public spaces; academia, the media or at policy-levels. I hoped through applying PAR to discover ways to be more inclusive not only in my research but also in academic writing, collaborations

with other researchers or spaces where decisions are made that impact refugee communities. This meant, of course, finding ways to be co-creative, inclusive and participatory outside the scope of my own PhD. Leading me to work with the participants to generate project ideas, potential ways to disseminate with a greater sense of ownership.

By connecting with the Living Refugee Archives, through Paul Dudman, I was able to consider how applying PAR in publishing with participants can ensure that research outputs are more representative. These outputs, however, did not need to be limited to the scope of my own findings, but also be considerate of where the participants found themselves now years after my fieldwork ended. When working with marginalised or vulnerable communities, it is important to have and maintain trust. And, this trust I found is not easily cultivated nor kept. As a researcher, it meant needing to be reflexive and even challenging of my own practice both during and long after the fieldwork. In this dissemination, I was consistently questioning whether I was 'taking over' in the writing process or if we were working together to communicate an authentic message based on the participants' goals, desires and needs. It is easy even with the best of intentions to overwhelm another's voice.

We hope despite the difficulties we can demonstrate how using this approach can benefit how we communicate research ideas, broadening our ability to connect and make impact with the communities who are often the focus of our research (though not often included in how we speak of the outcomes). The final important message I would like to communicate is that the standards of academic writing

do not need to be an impediment to including refugees as writers of their own stories. Indeed, academic communication can allow for inclusive spaces for marginalised communities to strengthen their voices as well as disseminate the messages from our research findings.

## Action Research in Malaysia

From 2017 to 2018 I conducted a participatory action research project where I trained and worked alongside community leaders from the Afghan, Syrian, Somali and Rohingya communities. I arrived in Malaysia in 2017 to conduct the fieldwork for my Doctorate in Law and Development ([under the EDOLAD programme with Tilburg University](#)). I went to Malaysia with the hope to gain a greater understanding of the lived experiences of the forced migrant community development actors despite the legal difficulties which formed their context. To understand their voices, perspectives, motivations and daily lives as they fulfilled the roles they had assigned themselves in providing services or support to their communities. Despite its history of hosting refugees, Malaysia is not a state party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees nor its' 1967 Protocol. This means for the many thousands of refugees, asylum seekers and stateless communities living in Malaysia they have limited access to healthcare, education and public services. The right to work is restricted, leaving people to rely on cash in hand employment and often 3D work (Dirty, Dangerous and Difficult or in some cases Demeaning). It was during my action research fieldwork, I first met and got to know Naima Ismail,





©Amin Kamrani

Photo Credit: Amin Kamrani, 20/20 Exhibition

Photo Titled: Photo No. 4: After the rain

Taken in: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Hosted through collaboration between Amin Kamrani (photographer) and the Living Refugee Archives 20/20 Photos are available for purchase with 60% percent going to refugee communities in need

20 copies of 20 photographs taken in the year 2020

...With the last train  
they arrive home  
Her eyes,  
At the time of farewell,  
Turn larger and blacker  
In the blackness of her eyes,  
And  
Blackness of the night,  
They walked up  
the wet stairs...

**Ahmadreza Ahmadi**

Sharifah Shakirah, Parisa Ally and Arifa Sultana. I learned how, despite the lack of legal status for many, they were able to develop their communities and work towards shared common goals of inclusion, provision of basic services, sharing of resources and social support. I conducted training where we discussed how research is created and how they might input more community and academic approaches into their own work. We connected on experiences of shared trauma and emotional challenges. We worked together closely over the period of 11 months. We jointly conducted interviews, focus groups and discussed how they might use this information for themselves. Due to the strong participatory ethos of action research, I kept contact with many of the participants and interviewees after returning from the field to the Netherlands. I continued to work with them and provide support or listen as they required. As the result of numerous discussions, we finally came to the idea of publishing this short special issue. With the aim being to provide a platform for the women who are often hidden in the view of the media to have a greater voice.

Originally our project aimed to produce a photovoice issue. This photovoice project hoped to provide a space for the forced migrants to self-direct how they are represented, frame their own stories and resilience in dealing with the current crisis. We wanted to show the need for a participatory approach in modern-day Malaysia to be an antidote to ongoing media backlash against refugees and worsening political and financial situation as a result of COVID-19. Unfortunately, however the worsening spread of the virus and the Movement Control Orders placed by the Malaysian gov-

ernment meant it became difficult to connect with the communities. The forced migrant communities were placed under an extreme stress; more vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19 and lack of work meant many families needing to rely on emergency food supplies from local community organisations and NGOs. There is a worrying undercurrent within Malaysia's media reporting and social media discourse blaming and discriminating against forced migrants. This alongside the increase of government crackdowns has meant the communities are living with increased fear for their safety. Unfortunately, in our project this meant having to pull the photovoice project.

Moving on from the photovoice I instead chose to return to the basic principles of PAR practice and reconnect with the women leaders who I had worked with during my fieldwork. We rethought how we could allow space for self-representation and voice within the journal and use storytelling to our advantage to communicate what they felt was important.

## Inclusive Publishing: Academic Skills and Co-Writing

An important lesson we have had to learn is that you cannot give anyone a voice. We have made and allowed space for those on the margins to speak, and to actively listen as they share their experiences. We tried to remember sharing experiences allows the possibility for collective action, but we cannot expect to place the burden for change on the most marginalised alone. Instead we need to be proactive to find ways to listen. We used this as a baseline philosophy in trying to find a new way forward.

I got in touch with the refugee women who I interviewed and trained in my doctoral project. Here we picked up the conversation of what their interests might be and what they wanted to communicate to a wider audience. Drawing on my experiences as an academic skills lecturer, I pulled together a plan where the leaders would be able to write their ideas and I would be able to support them through editing and teaching some basic academic skills. All the women wrote their own first drafts, chose the themes and final message. Ultimately, we had 4 editing stages, after this first draft was written. We gave support on narrative and structure, creating a flow through sentence structure, peer review and making the message clear. As a final stage myself and Paul Dudman edited the final typos and grammatical issues, but remained careful of changing the meaning.

As editors we never choose the main message or conceptual frameworks. I spent time to speak with women on their aims and message, ensuring that we made the words in the papers as close as possible to their ideas and voice. When clarifying issues related to grammar and vocabulary, we would explain and allow opportunities for the participants to respond. At times, we would spend hours on a video call to discuss how their message was being communicated and how they could become clearer in writing what they hoped to achieve. During the peer review stage the writers were able to read each other's works and use the same editing tips and advice. In the papers you will see where we have been included as either co-writers or as editors. As editors, this is in addition to the usual editorial duties but took a more active approach. The paper was primarily written by the participant and we would support them through the stages to think of struc-

ture, language and with questions to deepen their ideas. As co-writer, I often had to support them a little further in thinking on sentence construction and work with them to reorganise ideas. The primary drafts were always entirely their own as was the main message of the paper. At times, they were unable to articulate, or needed some support to clarify their ideas. Here is where they spoke and I wrote, and we then compared how close to the meaning they wished to convey, I had made the words on the paper. Rather than rely on formal academic writing and editing processes, with this special issue we felt better to trust the creative, learning and collaborative journeys we all found ourselves on. Simply our editing process involved some 'teaching' but mostly asking questions and listening deeply. We chose to forego traditional citation and referencing (not because we do not believe the importance of this) but to allow the writers to have more control of their own writing style and voice.

In keeping with the theme of the original photovoice approach, we reached out to the writers to provide images that were meaningful to them. The images in the articles were chosen with the women and depict something that connected with them from either their own experience or came from moments in my research project. Unfortunately, we were unable to achieve our full objective of a photovoice issue, which would have involved the refugee contributors staging, framing and creating the images with us. We are the first to admit our process is not without its challenges. We hope, however, that in the following papers you can see the individual narrative style and voice of the refugee women who have shared their stories.

# Introducing the Writers

## **Arifa Sultana, Rohingya Journalist**

Arifa started with this project in the hopes of using the photovoice approach to reconnect with the more marginalised women in her community by using her interviewing skills. In her paper she describes her own personal journey as a Rohingya refugee woman and journalist, who become more aware of how the most marginalised in her community are unfairly represented in the media. Importantly Arifa asked the question of how can we find ways to improve self-representation for refugees in the media and alternative platforms? In our conversations during her editing process, we discussed how difficult it was to put her journey into words.

One of the notable conversations which made its way into her paper was how as a result of anti-refugee discourse, we increasingly see how refugees are required to earn their status and basic rights to work, access education and healthcare. The focus on being deserving and the implementing frameworks of human rights forgets to include the right to dream of a better life. Hope, we realised, isn't in the refugee convention and often is not in refugees' lives. For Arifa the persecution is reflected in her identity as Rohingya women and refugee. Yet, it was her hope for a better life and her desire to be more than this limited (and violent) response to her identity, that drove her to become a critical Rohingya voice in the media.

## **Naima Ismail, leader of [Somali Women's Association Malaysia](#)**

Naima has always been passionate about health policy and speaking up on health inequities. When I first met her she was working with the Somali Refugee Community to sup-

port as a liaison with the UNHCR and connect with her community on questions of health and gender. Her further work as a translator at Health Equities Initiative in her early days as a refugee in Malaysia motivated her desire to connect more with the women in her community to improve their ability to access care and understand their own bodies and health concerns better. In this time I worked with her as she set up the Somali Women's Association Malaysia (SWAM). We have remained in close contact since my fieldwork in 2018 and it has been wonderful to see how she has flourished in this new role as a leader. We have continued to have conversations on her challenges as a leader of her own community based organisation particular with other well-meaning partners. In our discussions during the editing process of this article, we spoke about her desire to study a masters and learn the steps to writing in more detail. She applied herself to engage in the academic writing skills, after taking on board comments and engaging in peer review. She accepted every critique and brought her own voice out. In her paper Naima speaks firmly about the challenges faced by the community but also how NGOs can be more respectful and authentically collaborative with refugee-led initiatives and organisations.

## **Parisa Ally, Author of [Three People in A Suitcase: An Afghan girl's fight against the stigma of trauma](#)**

Parisa is an active storyteller. Ultimately, we connected over her love of writing and particularly on writing as a way to heal from trauma. Parisa is currently working on SGBV projects with the Afghan community and wishes to start a project with the refugee women from every



community. She has a strong focus on how stories can help us better share experiences but also reach a more criticality.

During our discussions, I noted her interest in critical thinking through storytelling to share with her the work of [Paulo Freire, particularly in relation to the four levels of consciousness](#); magical, naïve, critical and finally political consciousness. We both shared how we had experiences these levels of consciousness ourselves. How the feeling of powerlessness is connected to a belief in that we are controlled by magical forces out of our control such as fate. Even past this, the lack of agency can lead to a belief can we are not strong enough to meet the challenges that the world metes out. Freire describes this as naïve consciousness. That can feel, however, rather cynical and hopeless. Parisa was most interested in speaking about critical consciousness, as this frames a great deal of her work. In the stage of critical consciousness Freire shows how a person can become more aware of the systems that oppress and empower them. Their understanding leads to the ability to share their stories and empower their own voice. It is in this stage the person can start to understand their power as well as the limits placed upon us. This leads us to the final stage, where through this ability to share realities and change perceptions that we can engage in collective action to create change. What is at the heart of the idea we need critical consciousness and action (the unity of which we call Praxis) is to create change. People who are marginalised and oppressed (and traumatized) need the ability to critical understand the systems they live in to be able to create change that is positive for their own lives and communities.

Parisa took these ideas and incorporated them into her vocabulary and through long and

meaningful discussions we co-wrote her paper; on how stories can heal and raise critical consciousness.

**Syedah's Journey: From Child Marriage to Activist translated by Sharifah Shakirah, Founder of [Rohingya Women's Development Network \(RWDN\)](#)**

Syedah Husain, an anti-child marriage activist and community leader at Rohingya Women's Development Network (RWDN). She provided us an interview to explain her work and experiences of SGBV and child marriage. In the interview she speaks with Sharifah Shakirah to explain how it feels to experience the challenges of domestic violence and pressure to marry at a young age.

Sharifah, herself was a refugee in Malaysia prior to her resettlement. During her time in Malaysia Sharifah founded RWDN. An organisation aimed to support women in her community through literacy projects, SGBV workshops, entrepreneurial projects and even self-defence. Through these projects she created a team of women leaders from the Rohingya community who were able to take over RWDN after she had to leave. Sharifah continues to support the work of the women in the organisation. For this reason Sharifah chose not to write her own story but the story of a young community leader in RWDN. Syedah Husain told her story and with Sharifah's support they wrote her experiences. In the final editing process, I worked with Sharifah to fill in the blanks and highlight how the challenges of child marriage impacted Syedah's life. In Syedah's story, we learn about the pressure from within families to conform to gendered norms, post-natal depression and the destructive impact this can have on a person's life. Syedah's life has not only been a challenge due to her status as a refugee, but

as a Rohingya woman. However, her story is also an example of empowerment and growth. Syedah now spends her time working on SGBV, education and empowerment projects in RWDN and raising awareness in her community on the issues of child marriage.

### **Amin Kamrani, Photographer and Community Worker at Asylum Access Malaysia**

Amin has been active on refugee rights since 2012. He has worked with the Malaysian Social Research Institute, Asylum Access and Parastoo (a refugee-led theatre company) to support the refugee communities. From a creative perspective, he has also supported refugees artistic endeavour and showcased their agency through this photography and work as a filmmaker. Most recently, he worked with Allie Hill to create [Portraits of a Diverse City—Stories of Migration in Kuala Lumpur](#). This is a photozine project which was funded by the Diverse Voices Media Grant 2020 from Projek Dialog. It is hosted on the Living Refugee Ar-

chives. In addition to this, last year he curated his 20/20 exhibition, also available [on the Living Refugee Archives](#), depicting life in Kuala Lumpur. The exhibition contains some poetry from refugee actors. This exhibition has been relaunched and is for sale and 60% percent of the proceeds will be used to support refugees who have lost their work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic measures. In this paper Amin has contributed his thoughts on what photography means when reflecting realities, and in line with the journal of Displaced Voices' own mission, asks what the function of photography as a tool for narrating stories and documenting these realities. Again the theme of representation and visibility is shown as he discusses the dehumanisation of the refugees portrayed in the media. In this issue, Amin has also contributed his Portraits of Refugee Actors. These are people he has worked with in Malaysia and whose images challenge the negative interpretation and frequent misrepresentation in the media.



Photo Credit: Amin Kamrani. Portrait of [Afghan-led Parastoo Theatre's](#) Director Saleh Sapas

# Lived Experiences of a Rohingya Journalist

**Author** Arifa Sultana **Edited with** Kirandeep Kaur

The ongoing genocide of Rohingya has been known about for decades. But, what do we know of the experiences of Rohingya women? Do Rohingya women have any power of self-Representation? This is my story as a Rohingya Refugee and my role as a journalist in times of COVID-19. I want to tell you how I have been dealing with the continuing anti-Rohingya and hate-sentimental era in Malaysia might lead you answer these questions.

I usually think, why can't I feel like any other person living out there? Be fearless and hopeful. With all such dreams and in search of a hope, peace and to find that place that can be my home. In the year 2014, I, a 19-year-old Rohingya women arrived in Malaysia. Unaware of the situation of Refugees in Malaysia, and in part due to my confusion in my sense of belonging to a persecuted community, I thought

my dreams would have wings in the famous fancy air of Kuala Lumpur. Shortly after arriving to Malaysia, however, my dreams got exhausted. I lost hope in the strict and anti-human rights' policies in a country where, many like myself, indeed 150, 000 Rohingya arrived with more or less similar dreams. Searching for a better life like any human being and dreaming which a lot of anti-refugee discourse forgets to include the right to dream of a better life. Hope isn't in the refugee convention.

After sometime I got an internship in a Rohingya owned News Channel, where I found my passion to work for my persecuted community through writing news, stories, and articles. Often people state that migrating to improve yourself is against the refugee definition, which only sees persecution as a principle of movement. Here people get stuck in having to justify the violence and victimhood of their lives.



Photo credit: Arifa Sultana, Photo Titled: a day in the life of a Rohingya Journalist

Their choices and dreams are usually taken away. For me it was both, the persecution in reflection to my identity as Rohingya, but also my desire to be more than this limited response to my identity. Between 2014 till 2019 I worked on thousands of Rohingya News stories and wrote their stories and happenings on the website. During these years I also documented Rohingya genocide stories which were either published as videos on YouTube with mostly subtitles (from 2016-2017). During these years I grew as a person as well as a journalist, my emotions in reporting and writing stories of genocide survivors gave me more courage to work further and today I can proudly say I can grow into a stronger woman with a decisive mind both professionally and personally. The courage and experiences I gained all these years made me think further and made me realize in a society of very few educated women how valuable I am to my community and in search of my queries that keeps on haunting me. I resigned in 2019 from a 9-5 job and started as a freelance to broaden my work scope where other issues like refugees, migrants also became a concern to me.

Currently, my life is also on hold for a while for COVID 19 situation like every citizen of this world and facing similar restrictions due to severe movement control. Now, I am only doing those stories where things can be done virtually and like many others, my work became limited to staying home and working online. But, the best part of this lockdown is the maximum use of technology and pushing our boundaries of existing technologies to the invention of more communication platforms.

Although technology seems so easy and simple to most of us, is it actually easy for marginalized communities? Do they feel and use it the way we like to use?

These questions also affected my journalism life as well as dealing with the issue on a daily basis.

Unaware of the use of Social media and the positive impacts of the news and media outlets, many marginalized communities like Rohingya, Syrian, and other refugee communities usually hesitates to get involved in them. This type of behaviour is usually because of the misconception and fear of negative impacts these platforms offer and some of them can also be related to the rooted cultural norms in certain communities.

By working with such types of groups I usually rejects those projects where I feels certain groups will be hesitant to use the video chat or allow to shot their face. These rejections are usually due to fear of violence both on myself and the communities involved. It is also because many times they are portrayed wrongly and most medias are also not interested in publishing the same stories or stories with similar emotions and happenings. Although technology has reached every hand it is also equally important to raise awareness and campaign on these technologies, so that everyone can equally benefit from this by using it rightly in the right circumstances.

Especially at the time of this pandemic, the social media platforms have shown us a new era of virtual communication, which is one of the effective and fastest ways to communicate with anyone that lives on the other side of the world. So now no meeting is being delayed for late flights or terrible traffic on roads. But, before doing that we must ensure the safety of these platforms and show these groups the benefits of using them.

Along with these interactive tools, social media has also played a vast and major role in the life of anyone but it can be more useful to marginalized communities like Rohingya, as a tweet or a Facebook post can become viral in seconds and the message can be given very effectively and efficiently as well to a targeted audience or the public in general.

# The Challenges of Self-Representation

On the Rohingya issue, there are two types of news media that impact the narration of the Rohingya Story. One is the local or Rohingya owned media, where they themselves are reporting the story of the Rohingya and another major player is the international one, where we see their narration of the Rohingya issue. It is not necessary that Rohingya media always shows the positive side and International media the opposite way. When it comes to Rohingya media they know what they want to show and it gives them the power of self-representation and there they can also decide their image through the stories they report. For example, in mostly Rohingya related articles the international media will write religious or communal violence a cause of the unrest in Rakhine state. The Rohingya media, however, would communicate this as state-sponsored violence or Genocide.

Self-representation is a key issue especially in international media. Refugee communities do not get the opportunity to decide for themselves how they can be understood or seen and it is always someone else (media, government or law makers, etc.) deciding for them how they will be represented or even what they need. However, we can explore ways to improve self-representation, either through the media, or looking at alternative platforms perhaps, e.g. theatre, art, music etc. And one of such example do exist where a Rohingya Story was successfully shown in a theatre performance by a group of Rohingya in Canada.

Similar issues are also faced by the Rohingya as well, as the major media reporting the Rohingya genocide is the role of international media due to their reach of large crowds. Although, they have a greater responsibility in terms of reporting and creating stories they

tend to lose the authenticity of the story or issue due to their policies and pressure of making the story relevant to the audience. The process which most of the international media requires usually narrates the story according to their pre-planned narration. So, the question is raised here; does this help or further exploit the issue?

To avoid such exploitations and consequences, it is very important to report the story as it is and the priority of reporting the reality should be the first choice of any media. The purpose is not to question self-representation of the Rohingya. Instead the news should give clear answers to the audience or public.

The representation of the Rohingya image or identity should be taken as close to their reality and it should also give them the choice of how they want them to be seen by the whole world. This is something a person like me always faces like on daily basis where people simply cannot accept the fact that being a refugee is not a choice of any human being would wish for and we are not here to steal anybody's job or opportunities they have. We are simply here because governments expelled us and the so called civilised world "kept silent". To me they seem to allow the situation in Myanmar to continue as further for their own political or economic interests. In order to fix this narrative, happier and positive stories along with ongoing issues and problems should be more reported rather than focusing on one side of the community to feel the stories seen more real and authentic rather than making their image as useless people for the communities they live in. The useful manner to represent the Rohingya stories would be better if the Rohingya themselves are asked about how they want to be represented and how they see themselves in real life. Similar to this, I also want herself to be represented as authentic and real as I am and I "just wants to be seen as human" not something special and nor degraded as refu-



gees. I want myself to be an example to the Rohingya, especially women where they usually see themselves useless by sitting at home. This is because, usually we do not have any women to look up and get inspiration from our earlier generations. Although in the past we had some women who were really exemplary and ahead of times but due to lack of documentation those stories were lost in time lapse. I want my work life to be an inspiration for any Rohingya women out there sitting at home and show them that “even by sitting at home, there are many things where a woman can do for her society”.

Although, I think I haven’t done so much for the community, but I am doing my part of the responsibility for my community through my writing in media and encouraging others to do their share of responsibility “as in a community all must play different roles to take the community forward”. I want to contribute further by breaking my current limitation and am looking forward to my resettlement to bestow more to my community.

Currently, in Malaysia, I think I am not able to contribute the way I want to do my work and I feel my voice is not heard the way it should or could be heard. The reality in Malaysia as a ref-

ugee is very limited and it is already seen as illegal who work with UNHCR identification. The current anti-Rohingya and refugee sentiments have further limited my work scope as well and I might attract more danger and threats if I reports the real situation of refugees and other migrants, etc. The main limitation here is due to the lack of documentation and the denial of working legally.

After living a life of confusion, struggle and hopelessness I can see ray of hope through my upcoming resettlement where I hope to further extend my work as a freelance journalist after resettlement to a third country and there I first hope to complete my education. Then, I want to work on reporting and also hope to report Rohingya stories from the Camps in Bangladesh and also from Rakhine state if it gets possible or I get lucky with a job that would allow me to do so. I hope to report the stories on the first hand and also would love to work with any other international media and report the Rohingya story with full authentication and self-representation as well. According to my wish, I want the world to see us as “human” rather than a “burden” and wants to see their “contribution” rather than a “consumption” in the societies we live in.

Photo credit: Arifa Sultana. Arifa was conducting interviews for a report with the Wall Street Journal. The Rohingya families she interviewed offered traditional Rohingya food.



# Health Inequities with Somali Women in Kuala Lumpur

**Author** Naima Ismail, (Founder of [SWAM](#)) **Edited with** Kirandeep Kaur

I am from Somalia, Mogadishu. I fled my country of origin because of the war and the persecutions I was seeing every day. I knew nothing of Malaysia, when I arrived and had no idea how to start living.

I saw that refugee rights, especially access to healthcare, was very limited in Malaysia. Being an educated person with a bachelors honours degree in Public Health, I knew I could support my community. I decided to use my language skills in English and knowledge from my degree as a translator in different health clinics, NGOs and hospitals. Here I saw that the Somali mothers seeking treatment were mostly illiterate, and I wondered if there was a community role for me in assisting these women and girls. I started conducting health education sessions for community members particularly women and girls by volunteering at the Somali Community Centre. I also worked part-time with Health Equity Initiatives (HEI), a local Malaysian NGO, as a community health worker to help refugees with mental health problems. After a while I have met my mentor Kiran Kaur, a PhD in Law from Tilburg University. She equipped me with a lot of knowledge on human rights, ethics, and showed in me the potential in myself so that I am able to serve my community even more than I thought I could. I have learnt from her a lot of the laws in Malaysia and the refugee context. All of this allowed me to see how Somali women in Kuala Lumpur, having escaped violence from the war in Somalia, were still denied access to basic health. Their voices were being hidden and I wanted to do something more about it.

During those years, I faced a lot of hardships and felt that the Somali women needed to be more nurtured and empowered. As such I founded a women's centre named Somali Women's Association Malaysia (SWAM) in August 2018, whose vision was to create an actively supportive refugee women circle. We hope this will empower women and their families to thrive economically, provide a safe and secure environment. We offer community building services such as counselling and access to personal development and enrichment. The goal is to improve the quality of their living, so that in a longer term they enable to be a self-sufficient, integrate into the local ecosystem and effectively overcome the barriers they face. I wanted women to connect with opportunities and network with one another. SWAM galvanizes access, resources, tools and opportunities that will value-add in creating sustainable changes.

The centre is a private and a safe space for the Somali women and girls thus, I had to continue to work part time in order to pay for the monthly rental from my own pocket. I continued doing so for one year, single-handedly. eventually, these women needed more support, as there are over 200 members registered under SWAM, so giving up my job was necessary and this is how my experience will help. "The centre is like a second home for us and our children, we come to learn, to heal, socialize, educate ourselves and share our personal problems, It's a safe place for us to be and it is the heart and soul of our women community" they say.

# Health Challenges

The Somali women who are asylum seekers and refugees (ASR) face difficulty accessing health care in the host country Malaysia that they often face circumstances in which their health and wellbeing can be compromised. The constant fear of arrest, detention and even deportation pushes these women and other undocumented members underground. Most are reluctant to venture outside and delay seeking healthcare, even in emergencies, in case hospital staff report them to immigration services.

The Somali refugee women have different types of issues that hinder them from maintaining a proper treatment. Whether in the public and private clinics / hospitals, there is always a language barrier, as large number of these women are illiterate. This means they are dependent on someone else's assistance. They are barely able to communicate with the doctors. Nor is it acceptable to accompany with a male interpreter from the community as it is always sensitive and shameful for the women to

share or talk about their private parts or pain with the male allies in the society.

Another barrier is a cultural stereotype among the Somali community which escalates a gender sensitivity as being a women, a fear of cultural behavior, a shame based on nowhere among the society belief which women make them deteriorate at their homes instead of sharing their pain and seeking treatment in time. Moreover, residing in a country where it is a non-signatory of 1951 refugee convention and all its protocol is another reason that refugee education, work, and health treatment are very limited as refugees recognize as illegal immigrants making all their rights limited and inaccessible.

Cost of treatment is another main challenge for these women as refugees are not legally allowed to work in Malaysia, this opens up doors of refugees' inability to finance their own treatment and determinants of health. The good thing is, there is a 50% discount entitled for the refugee card and under consideration (UC) letter holders, which even means that the remaining cost of the 50% refugees are yet unable to cover. But, the bad is that there are a large percentage of asylum seekers holding an appoint-



Photo Credit: Naima Ismail and Waheeb.je. Somali women of SWAM



ment letter and being registered under UNHCR who are thoroughly left behind having zero entitlement from the 50% discount, thus they remain the most vulnerable among the community. When these women with an appointment letters submit a health complaints, my capacity is very limited however I do refer third parties NGOs or UNHCR to assist their cases.

Unemployment is another significant concern. Generally refugees in Malaysia work odd jobs called 3D, meaning dangerous, dirty and difficult. Somali refugee women mostly work as cleaners, maid servants, cooks / bakers, and nannies as they are mostly uneducated. However, this covid-19 pandemic making the life worse for refugees. Under the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) movements for refugees especially is severely restricted. Some pregnant women, for example, who require a delivery operation (caesarian) are unable to attend the hospital. Others are in on their last stages of cancer and being on chemotherapy whereas a few others are diabetics

and taking insulin twice or thrice daily are finding it hard to have their treatment. It is impossible that refugee women cover their medical treatment costs, as most are single mothers struggling to access and maintain the basic meals for the day to feed themselves and children.

Fear of arrest and detention is a primary concern for Somali women. The police have always every authority to arrest refugees at any time as refugees in general are recognized as illegal immigrants in Malaysia. However, Somali refugee women live as being gender based violence victims whether from their own spouses or strange perpetrators, in the result of bleeding, being beaten with physical injuries or sexually assaulted, yet they hide it, for they fear of seeking medical treatment and eventually ending up to worsen their injuries suffering more and more that might even possible losing their lives.

Adolescent girls and women of reproductive age reports that the travel experiences during



Photo credit: Naima Ismail, SWAM. Crafts for Sale, made by local Somali Women. SWAM supports women to make their own crafts for sale. To encourage entrepreneurship and support them to gain further financial independence.

migration, unaffordability of the living costs and cultural practices of the refugee community affect the reproductive health of female refugees. Reproductive health issues are a main leading factor of maternal morbidity and mortality, for Somali women. This includes menstrual health issues, reproductive tract infection and sexually transmitted diseases, gender-based violence, poor access to family planning and limited knowledge on reproductive health issues and services.

The Somali female refugees are vulnerable to various types of SGBV before, during and after displacement and resettlement resulting in societal, emotional and financial implications. It is crucial to address the family planning needs of women in refugee settings. Unexpected pregnancies will rise without appropriate accessibility of family planning (FP) and result in an increase in unsafe abortion practices; a cause of maternal deaths.

A few of the women members under SWAM got pregnant unwillingly and unplanned as these women's spouses stop them to participate in the family planning, reproductive health workshops and the awareness raisings of those topics. However they come and suffer after pregnancy, as the less knowledge and the perception of the Somali mothers led them be less interested and involved in using contraceptive tools and methods of family planning as such they prefer ending up unexpected children with unexpected times while no initial budget planned ahead.

Some of the Somali mothers developed different mental health problems due to a long waiting of their processes under UNHCR Nevertheless, few had passed away with cancer, Tuberculosis, and other chronic surgery related matters that triggered the long hopeless living as being a refugee in Malaysia for many years.

In the midst of Covid-19 pandemic, some women visit at the centre suffering from domestic violence as this pandemic accelerated

and opened doors for the perpetrators and women abusers at home, quite a number of mothers are domestic violence survivors currently in our community, however I can assist only those few women and girls who can have a voice and have the courage to come, share, show their pain and suffering. There are times when I have no choice but to take them to my home until further response from NGOs with shelters, making sure these women are safe.

Health is a fundamental human right and women rights are human rights. I hope Malaysia will consider health as a first line priority for the all refugees and asylum seekers in the country and funders and NGOs provide platforms and training projects to support those women suffering on mental health and reproductive health issues, or try to support the livelihood projects at the centre that required to be funded so these refugee women might at least earn some income.

Due to the Malaysian government hosting refugees, both refugees and asylum seekers are subjected to discrimination, exploitation and lack protection. As a leader of this organization, I have faced worst as few organizations/NGOs approach me for partnership, never respecting the core value of our community, culture and religion. Rather they ask for implementation on their projects even when It is not a need of the community. Stating that since we are refugees, we can't choose. They take photos, videos without the consent of the refugee members. In these circumstances I never felt an appreciation or recognition from those NGOs of what I do for my community. The struggle to create change is bigger than I ever thought. I humbly request the sponsors/donors or other NGOs out there to help cooperate and work with me on this hard journey for a good cause.



# Trauma and Criticality: How Stories Raise Our Consciousness and Can Heal Our Past

**Author** Parisa Ally **Co-Written with** Kirandeep Kaur

*Should women with power support women who are at risk or hidden from society?*

*What if critical consciousness could be improved and be helpful as a way to raise awareness in wider society?*

*How could we benefit from deeper communication through storytelling to understand others and not just ourselves?*

When I migrated to Malaysia in 2017 I had experienced trauma. We experience trauma not only from leaving our home country but also through the challenging situation in Malaysia. That time was full of darkness; I was judging my present life from my past and I always was fearful of the future. I had mood swings, often behaved harshly and blamed others. I can recognize that causes for the trauma may be different, but the result of fear and depression are much the same inside us.



Photo Credit: Kirandeep Kaur PAR project Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 2017-18. Photo Titled: Papers and Borders. Taken with Afghan refugees in the Nahel Afghan Community Centre.

Whilst there are great mechanisms such as local and international organizations providing therapy, counselling and skills to empower women with trauma. However, this assistance alone cannot provide what the women require to succeed.

Refugee women in Kuala Lumpur are unable to find their own identity and they cannot feel at peace with themselves. To help you picture how women are experiencing violence the ways this creates a lack of visibility of their lives and challenges, I will break down the cases of three Afghan refugee women who are educated and are mostly young girls with depression and stress who are keen to be heard. They had access to primary and secondary school education in their home country previously. These young and educated women are not hired in job employment even if they have sufficient further education degrees. Due to the legal situation they can't be hired in their professions. Often these ladies are sent to work outside their chosen fields in for example sewing or other traditionally feminine occupations. Furthermore, they experience domestic violence in their homes from their partners. In the second group are refugee women who never had the chance to gain a skill and are living in survival mode, further these women face to sexual abuse and job harassment, exploitation, even brutal and verbal harassment by their partners and family.

For myself, as group facilitator and Afghan women with experience in their situation, it is obvious that how women are interested to take action but they are concerned about their starting point. To bring changes we need a

new combined skillset in building authenticity in self-identity through storytelling so that women are able to better access support and find ways to heal from trauma. As we see the level of education, and accessibility to support through NGOs can help women but it is not sufficient. Let's meet three women<sup>1</sup> and understand their traumas through their stories; a mother called Zohra, a young, now single, divorced woman known as Nargis and a survivor of SGBV, Shamila. Through these three women we understand more about different groups and their ability to access social support.

Zohra is struggling with herself and she feels she cannot heal from her past. She is 35 years old and mother of a young girl. Tears always appeared to be on the verge of dropping from her eyes, and a knot seemed to live permanently in Zohra's chest, 'I don't know why I feel like this. Is this my fault? Am I bad Muslim? Is all this a result of my weak beliefs in God?'

Zohra shares a story about some female refugees who are being abused sexually, who often unconsciously go for a relationship where they experience emotional abuses. She further explains about her young girl in a similar position, and who stays in black market work to be able to provide funds for their family. Working in Malaysia might provide financial freedom, however, it is also dangerous and leaves the young women more vulnerable to exploitation. There are stories of young women who are hired by men, often non-Afghan, to be companions for the evening by attending restaurants or parties with them. This might not be sex work directly but leaves the young women in vulnerable situations. This can cause

Footnote:

<sup>1</sup>These women are not actual women but examples drawing on the experience of women in the Afghan community living in Malaysia. This is to protect the identity of the women in the projects.

a cause a stigma or gossip in the community about the young women, who is labelled a 'gold-digger'. If any young woman is seen with a foreign man the community will assume there might be a sexual relationship, even if there is not. This means for the young woman and her family feel shamed by the community. Potentially leading to further abuse by the family for the young woman. Zohra concluded her story crying, "I worry for our young girls. They do not know what to do here in Malaysia". Zohra after finishing her last sentence she mumbled, "The point is we know we need freedom, I am still stuck and confused about what to do. I pray every day for answer."

Zohra is desperate for change for her children. However, she constantly blames herself and believes her problems are due to religion. It is common for Afghan women to believe that their circumstances is due to not praying enough, or losing their community roots by becoming refugees in Malaysia and religious identity. In order to create change for women like Zohra, we need to offer her the ability to understand her situation more critically. This means giving her a space to tell her story and for her to hear other stories of the women in her community. In storytelling we learn about gender, self-identity, connection with the audience and what our relationships mean. Through writing we discover ourselves in a new way. Through a facilitator she can learn more about her own specific niche, her own strengths and how she can empower herself. Storytelling allows us to also search and explore the answers to our own questions about the troubles in our lives. Engaging on this journey she can raise her own critical consciousness and awareness. Critical consciousness for Zohra could mean having a new vision of her life and how she wants to develop the men and

women in her community. If she can build partnerships with men as well as women, they can help each other working collaboratively and finding a stronger belief for themselves and others.

Now let's meet Nargis, who is 25 years old and divorced. Women who are divorced, including older women who might never have married, similarly suffer within refugee communities. The word "refugee" for these women is a dream of freedom. But, in Malaysia this does not giving them legal status, and causes stigma even from their partners and society. "I do not know how should I introduce myself; a divorced woman? Single? Never want to marry? But I have to explain my marital status, because many ask me every day", explains Nargis. This is how even women who do not get married or break up with their partners suffer and often live in shame in the eyes of their community. Nargis points out the importance of social acceptance and finds herself apart from society where she cannot dare to find a definite label for herself. Often women prefer to say their husband has died or is in another country rather than admit divorce. To admit divorce, the women face a similar stigma from the community to the young women who are seen to be involved in sex work. Often they are labelled as 'bad women'. Nargis migrated from Afghanistan as a result of emotional abuse from her husband's side, but still she has mental health issues since she cannot find her own thoughts behind her decision. Similar to Zohra, Nargis can start a journey through storytelling to understand her own trauma and the stigma surrounding divorce. She has been involved previously with skills workshops "I had many short courses here in Malaysia about women's empowerment. I had a sewing class but I have a problem that why I am here? My nights are

worse than before". However, this had not got to the heart of her problem with her trauma, which she cannot speak about openly. Whilst sewing classes might allow her work in some places, it does not empower herself to heal. Financial income is not the only way to have empowerment. To increase her own critical consciousness, she needs to learn for herself what her own needs are and choose how she wants to be more empowered.

Shamila, our final story, joined a workshop entitled "Violence and Women", which focused on SGBV and discovered more about what it meant to experience beatings and violence she had lived with. SGBV is a common label now that many organizations use when discussing how to fight for women who experienced violence. The main solution for NGOs is to provide

awareness workshops and SGBV programs. These services are available for refugees as well. Shamila, like many women, decided to attend one of these programmes. However, in the workshop Shamila is confused, "But what if I see at myself as a crazy and worthless girl? I do not know what should I do. I know my relationship is abusive. What should I do?", says Shamila, a 20 years old lady. Shamila got married with her loved one, but he has been gaslighting her to believe her abuse is her own fault. However, she stays in her relationship because she feels it is safer, more financial stable home environment and she cannot be independent. Despite the support she receives from the NGOs and domestic violence counselor, Shamila chooses not to leave her partner due to the fear of lack of financial stability and the stigma she may have from her community.



Photo Credit: Kirandeep Kaur PAR project Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 2017-18. Taken with Afghan women who wanted to show the invisibility of Afghan women in Kuala Lumpur. Used as part of Photo voice exhibition in refugee-led conference titled In Their Own Voices: Refugees as Development Actors as part of final event of my PAR project in May 2018.

Shamila has come to believe this problem of abuse is rooted in the lived reality of all women. The solution is not simple for her, especially when we are talking about women who have complicated relations with families and their communities. Shamila feels that "I accept the brutal relations. I see other women also in brutal relations. A woman is forced to be responsible for the man's emotion and she must accept how he reacts when he is sad or angry with his wife", said Shamila to her friend and decided to stop sharing her story. In Shamila case, she is not ready or able to share her story, empower herself or heal from her traumas. We often hear feedback from refugee women who are dealing with similar mental health and domestic violence issues:

"I never could explain what I wanted to share, my background is very different with what others understand it", says a divorced woman. Another young girl, who is disappointed from talking about her wishes, "becoming refugee caused me to lose my identity more than what I was judged before for my interests".

So critical consciousness is aimed to build agency - i.e. the ability to act and create change in your circumstances. Women can have solidarity with people who have very different identities to our own. But, Shamila would need time to understand her value as a woman and her own ability to choose, act and speak. She is unaware of how a counsellor might support her through her story. She doesn't want to talk if she is only sharing her experience. She does not believe that sharing her experience will change her situation. The problem is people assume they do not have ideas, skills or ability to work on.

We can benefit by self-coaching and two-sided communication in storytelling and understand

others as well as ourselves. I would like to propose a project for refugee women to be able to share their stories. I hope this project will have the combination of two components: art (storytelling) with ally-ship (frame of coaching for public). Here is the form of ally-ship which combined with art of storytelling: many searches showed their positive answers for positive impact of coaching and storytelling for social change, but now we need to implement it through fun way.

By developing critical awareness of the benefit of storytelling, I mean to build a sense of authenticity of their self-identity. This is the start where we can learn from each other as women, but also access more information from other more experienced people. This is important for women who never studied and are in marginalized communities. Many workers women, survivors and women whom are interviewed in projects are all saying they are ready for change, and they are ready to take responsibility for their wellbeing. We have to of course accept that many women might not be ready to share their stories. Many want to get success but they do not know what success is for them, and it is the problem. I hope through my project to show even with the refugee status women can find ways to empower themselves with support from other women.





Painting titled: *A Woman is not a Shadow* by Parisa Ally used as cover for her book. Please click to see the book titled [Three People in A Suitcase: An Afghan girl's fight against the stigma of trauma](#)



# Syedah's Journey: From Child Marriage to Activist

**Author** Syedah Husain **Translated by** Sharifah Shakirah ([Founder of RWDN](#))

**Co-Written with** Kirandeep Kaur

Syedah Binti Nur Husain is a women rights activist and community leader with the Rohingya Women's Development Network (RWDN). In her interview with Sharifah Shakira (founder of RWDN), Syedah shares her experiences from her childhood; the displacement but also the life as a Rohingya woman. This story is about an inspiring young lady, who is bravely trying to bring change in her community by empowering women to become independent.

She starts her story at the beginning. She was born in Myanmar during the on-going Genocide that has been taking place against the Rohingya community.

During the interview, Syedah was at first hesitant to share intimate and personal experiences with the world. She was not able to express her emotions without getting teary eyed, especially when she thought about her mother's struggle. It was apparent that the pain from this memory still exists in her heart.

The Myanmar government refuses to acknowledge the Rohingya community as citizens, even if they are born there. The United Nation have confronted the Myanmar's government, regarding the injustice taking place against the Rohingya people, who are one of the largest Muslim minority groups living in a predominately Buddhist country. The government has denied them their human rights and views them as illegal immigrants residing in their country. Buddhist and government supported groups have burned entire villages, actively engaging in genocide and persecution of

the Rohingya people. The Rohingya community are being treated inhumanely and are being abused physically, emotionally and mentally every day.

As she remembers this, Syedah stops the interview for a moment. She has experienced flashbacks of her journey and remembered the traumatic events of that time. This caused her to experience overwhelming feelings and she had to take a few minutes to gain her composure back in the interview. She kept apologizing for crying because she couldn't believe those memories still manage to prick her heart. To relive those moments which seem to be one's nightmare was an uncomfortable yet courageous decision. This discrimination and persecution towards Syedah and her family escalated into increasingly violent outbreaks, which threatened their lives. Eventually the decision was made to flee to a nearby country. Syedah's mother had no other option but to try to escape even if it meant putting their lives at risk.

Syedah embarked on her journey to Thailand, walking for miles and miles with her two daughters by her side. Syedah was very young at that time and barely recalls the journey. However, she remembers when she was crossing the sea by boat with her mother and sister heading to Malaysia. She was tightly grasping to her mother's hand while hoping to make it out alive, being deathly afraid of being separated from her mother or being caught by the police.

Along the way, she encountered many dead bodies floating on the water as she felt her stomach sink with terror. Finally, they reached the Refugee camp in Malaysia and were picked up by a relative immediately. She was relieved that they survived the horrific journey and was ready to put her miserable days behind her, only to face many more challenges ahead.

Her mother, she describes, is a fearless woman who escaped the persecution in Myanmar and saved her two daughters from harm. Little did she know that her mother would face emotional blackmail, disrespectful taunts and pressure to remarry by her relatives. If she did not they threatened to sell her off. Syedah remembers feeling anger and helplessness in that situation because she was not able to help her mother escape that forced decision. Eventually, her mother remarried which caused a rift between the mother and daughter relationship.

Syedah, aged around 15 years old, left her family home in Kuala Lumpur. She eloped with her new husband. She also could not accept her stepfather and was filled with rage due to what had happened. This event caused her to become distant from her family. She suffered depression and thoughts of suicide would often cross her mind. She started questioning her existence because she felt invisible and silenced. No one was listening to her and she felt like disappearing from everyone's lives. After some time the situation started to mend, and she welcomed her baby brother into her family. Living with her new family she realized her stepfather was a decent man. He always supported and stood up for them in their society, gradually her emotions softened towards him. She finally had some stability in her life and felt taken care of by her step-father.

Syedah attended a school in Kuala Lumpur

which was for refugee children, after 2 months she decided to stop attending because she felt demotivated. Refugees do not have access to primary or secondary educational institutions in Malaysia. This means they cannot access standardised curriculum nor testing to achieve recognised qualifications. As a response many NGOs, local community groups, religious organisations and refugee-led groups, supported the refugee communities to set up informal centres. These learning centres lacked recreational activities, basic school supplies, efficient teachers and students. The lack of continuity and structure made studying difficult for Syedah.

Her stepfather started teaching them at home, but it didn't last long. In the Rohingya community once girls reach the age of puberty, they are pressured into marriage. At the age of 11 Syedah's cousins were married. This felt like a normal occurrence to her. However, it was frequently pointed out to her that she was 15 years old and unmarried. She felt that she was delaying her marriage because everyone around her age was already married. Everyone she knew was getting married young, and her family were being pressured from others in the community. Her stepfather's friends were asking for her hand in marriage. At this point, she decided getting married with someone closer to her age was a better idea. In 2007, she decided to elope and get married despite her family's disapproval.

Although, once she was married, she started feeling like her life has become, nothing but a chain of obligations. She realized that she's just a child who wanted to escape from the burden she was carrying. She didn't know understand what her responsibilities were as a wife. The family and cultural expectations confused her. Living with her husband and her in-laws made

things much harder and the family had expectations of her that she could not understand.

They lived with the in-laws and she felt all her flaws were being picked on and constantly both husband and wife felt shamed. This led to



Photo Credit: Syedah Husain. Syedah was approximately 15 years old in this photograph.

domestic violence in the her relationship, which increased her depression.

When she was 16 years old, she became pregnant at and was unaware of how to manage her pregnancy complications. She didn't understand the process of being pregnant and felt dislocated from herself. Suddenly her stomach is getting bigger and she struggled to know what was happening. During her labour, the nurse asked her to push. But, she didn't know what push meant, and didn't know what to do. In many ways she felt like a child. She was embarrassed and confused because she didn't have adequate knowledge of her own reproductive system. Later on, Syedah experienced domestic violence and during this time, she felt miserable, suffocated and didn't know how to cope physically, emotionally or mentally. She was barely discovering herself when she became a mother for the first time. She did not have the emotional maturity or financial means to raise a child. She had post-natal depression, but like many Rohingya women in Malaysia she didn't understand what her mental health issue meant. Nor were there adequate services nor support available to help her understand or access therapy. She remembers feeling like a child who just got a new toy (her daughter) to play with, but she did not experience any motherly emotions or instincts. She was at a point in her marriage where she was contemplating a divorce from her husband.

She witnessed her cousins (who had originally been married at the age of 11) getting divorced and remarrying multiple times. They all experienced domestic violence in their relationships. They also struggled to know their responsibility as a wife and how to live by the Rohingya community rules. When Syedah was not able to cook, make her husband happy or

listen to him, then the abuse and violence would start.

The women have no role in the community, outside of their marriage. They are not independent, and have no financial resources of their own. They need to get married to be looked after by the husband.

Syedah eventually decided she will remain patient and work on her marriage instead. Fortunately, they were able to work out their marital problems. After leaving her in-laws home, both her husband and herself were able to speak to each other more easily. They were both very young when they got married and couldn't understand each other. After the baby was born and they had their own space, they started to understand each other better. Now, she says she has his full support for wanting to advocate against child marriages.

For Syedah there are many dangers of child marriage. It can destroy a person's life. As a woman she couldn't enjoy her life, or understand herself before becoming a mother. She felt forced into it by her environment, family and community. She lost her childhood and became an adult too young. If she had more information she would not have gotten married so young.

Now, she wants her community to understand these dangers of getting married at a young age and how it ruins and destroys their community. Though Syedah took it upon her shoulders to preach against child marriage, it is hard to get her community to listen. How long would Syedah, alone, continue speaking to a group of people refusing to change their minds about child marriages? Eventually, Syedah gave up advocating because she felt alone and hopeless. She decided to rather focus on raising her daughter and making sure she is empowered

through education.

In 2017, Syedah attended a training session at RWDN, (Rohingya Women Development Network) which is a Rohingya woman-led organization that tackles social issues, including gender equality, in their community. The workshop she attended was on mental health, and she realised this is what she was experiencing. Syedah observed how other communities have solidarity among themselves and that inspired her to feel empowered to start advocating for her community once again. Syedah decided to join RWDN. She started her training which would lead her to start teaching within her community. As soon as she joined the team, she took on leadership roles within the organisation due to her dedication towards her cause.

She is now the Community Leader in charge of creating awareness of social injustice within their community. She speaks Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) and English as well as the Rohingya language. This means she can reach out to the Malaysian Government for support, UNHCR and media to raise awareness on child marriage and domestic violence. She continues to try to educate her community on mental health, domestic violence and child marriage through arranging workshops, leading women to do crafts and livelihoods projects. RWDN's philosophy is that workshops on mental health or education alone cannot create change. Women must take active roles in their own empowerment and this means they must earn money and be seen for this by the family and community. During the COVID-19 pandemic time for the Rohingya community in Malaysia, many have lost their jobs and been unable to support their families. The women who have been able to work through RWDN's crafts and entrepreneurship projects however have been able to continue with their work. For the first





Photo Credit: Sharifah Shakirah. RWDN's Earrings Entrepreneurship Project with Rohingya Women Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

time becoming the main bread winners. For men, who have previously not seen women being able to help, this has been a big change.

Syedah journey has been a large success, in that she went from experiencing child marriage, domestic violence and depression to being able to speak on these issues. From attending RWDN's mental health courses, she now is leading them. In addition to these roles, she is also acting as a community counsellor. Counselling with professionals is difficult for Rohingya women, because they require translators, who may not be sensitive to their problems or may mistranslate. Community counselling means the women can share experiences and find solutions together.

Being such a powerful young woman and empowering women to do the same takes much

strength. Unfortunately, her role is not without challenges. People in her community who do not understand her cause or fear the empowered women. They instead try to bring your morale down by trying to slander the names of women leaders. It is challenging to work with a community who does not wish to change. Rumours against the female leaders are often used to discredit their agency and voice. It is hard to work for a community that seeks to work against you.

In 2018, Syedah gave birth to her second daughter and at that time, she experienced different emotions than she did with her first daughter. This time, luckily she no longer experienced post-natal depression. She was older and more mature, and she was able to cope with her maternal role.

Syedah was experiencing emotions that are commonly referred to as, “motherly instincts” which was an exciting moment for her, since she didn’t experience it with her first born.

She has now been married for 10 years and has two daughters, whom she dearly loves and wants to see them as empowered women. She has an open and friendly relationship with her older daughter, because she understands how important it is to know about your own health and about yourself before you get married. Syedah allows her daughter to help her at RWDN in her spare time, but getting her a strong education is her first priority. She wants to educate her daughters– and let them be successful. She says she will never pressure them into marriage. They will choose their own husbands,

men she hopes are also educated. She wants to stop child marriage by educating and empowering the women in her community, by giving women the tools to know themselves and to earn money .

From time to time, Syedah still has nightmares of her past because the events that she has experienced have been traumatizing to her. Nevertheless, Syedah believes in learning from the past, but focuses on the future, changing one life at a time.



Photo Credit: Sharifah  
Shakirah, RWDN's Founder.



Photo Credit: Syedah Husain at RWDN. Selling the Earrings and RWDN's cookbook at the local refugee events in Kuala Lumpur



# Portraying Minorities

**Author** Amin Kamrani **Edited with** Kirandeep Kaur

The English adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” is about how a single still image can be more effective in narrating a reality than a long descriptive text. However, do pictures really reflect realities? To answer this question, it is important to understand the function of photography as a tool for narrating stories and documenting the realities, and to know what the important elements of it are.

## Frame

Renowned filmmaker and photographer Abbas Kiarostami once said, “I've often noticed that we are not able to look at what we have in front of us, unless it's inside a frame.” By acknowledging the importance of frame in photography, and the fact that what we can show is limited, we can realize the role of a photographer as the person who chooses what should be exposed from a reality and what should not be inside a frame. On other words, not only the subjects and the way they are placed in a frame are telling us a story that is worth a thousand words, but what is not inside a frame is also important and a photographer is consciously deciding about this. For example, when photographers go to a refugee camp and are tasked to take photos of the place and the refugees, they are actively choosing what part of the life and the environment to cover inside the frames and what not to cover.

## Light

If a frame is like a canvas for a photographer, light would be the colours. In fact, coining the word “photography” is usually attributed to Sir John Herschel in 1839, is based on the Greek  $\phi\omega\varsigma$  (phōs), (genitive: phōtós) meaning “light”, and  $\gamma\rho\alpha\phi\acute{\eta}$  (graphê), meaning “drawing, writing”, together meaning “drawing with light”. By noting that, we can realize how essential light is in photography and how the amount of it in a frame, can change the meaning that an image conveys. It is again the photographers who choose how much light their subjects should get when they are placed in a frame. The amount of light can guide the audience how to feel about an environment and it is important to know the role of a photographer in this process. The amount of light also has significant effect on the way colours are seen in a non-monochromatic image.

## Angle

Angle is what has been noted as an important element of describing a reality, not only in visual arts but also in literature. Thinking about the angle of a story is in fact analysing where the narrators are standing when they are describing a reality and acknowledging that their position has a role in the story. In photography, the distance between the lens of the camera and the subject, as well as whether the lens is placed higher or lower than the



subject when the picture is taken, is an important factor on how the audience would feel about the subject. When the subject of a portrait photograph is even slightly looking up to the camera, it gives the viewers the sense that the subject is in a weaker position. In other words, the angles suggest whether a subject is in a dominant or vulnerable position.

## Portraying Refugees

Considering all the elements and factors that create an image, we can see the importance of the role of a photographer in a story. In every image, there is an unseen presence of the photographer where he or she is interacting with the subject and that would impact on how the audience will see the subject and feel something about it. In a country such as Malaysia, where there are a lot of sensitivity about the presence and the public image of foreigners and refugees, the portrayal of refugees in mainstream media directly affect the lives of this minority group. The dehumanization of refugees can be traced in the way media have portrayed them as a group of people who have no skills to contribute to the society and instead, they are in a lot of need that would take away the limited resources in the country. This misrepresentation of refugees where their human side is overshadowed by their legal status -and the financial situation caused by their legal status in the country- has in fact helped the xenophobic narrative that refugees are but a burden for the country.

When these deliberate misrepresentations of

refugees in media occur, it is inevitable to see that during a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the government, the media and the general public would hand in hand spread false information about this minority group that would worsen the hostility towards them.

## Further Note on the 20/20 Photo Exhibition

In this last year I curated the 20/20 exhibition, available on the Living Refugee Archives, depicting life in Kuala Lumpur. This virtual exhibition is an intimate portrayal of life, people and landscapes. In our exhibition, you will see the photographs accompanied by lines of poetry. This literature offers a chance to hear the voices of people unheard. Words from famous authors, some of whom are refugees themselves, express the daily nuances of emotions that are often overlooked. However, these lines should not define the stories of the frames, rather be read as moments of emotion and experience to be felt by the viewer. This exhibition has been relaunched and is for sale with 60% percent of the proceeds will be used to support refugees who have lost their work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic measures. We are relaunching the project this time with a higher rate of donations to refugee families due to the increased severity of the current lockdown on the refugee communities. Unfortunately unlike the last lockdown, there has been less support in terms of food and other necessities distributions from the NGOs. Please follow [Living Refugee Archives](#) for further information.



Photo Credit: Amin Kamrani, [20/20 Exhibition](#)

Photo No 2: I watched the rain all evening

Taken In: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Hosted through collaboration between Amin Kamrani (photographer) and the Living Refugee Archives [20/20 Photos are available for purchase](#)

20 copies of 20 photographs taken in the year 2020

there's a bluebird in my heart that  
wants to get out  
but I'm too clever, I only let him out  
at night sometimes  
when everybody's asleep.  
I say, I know that you're there,  
so don't be  
sad.  
then I put him back,  
but he's singing a little  
in there, I haven't quite let him  
die  
and we sleep together like  
that  
with our  
secret pact  
and it's nice enough to  
make a man  
weep, but I don't  
weep, do  
you?

**Charles Bukowski**

## Featured Portraits



In this following section I have chosen a number of portraits of refugees who I know, have worked with, eaten alongside and enjoyed life with and shared sorrows.







©Amin Kamrani



©Amin Kamrani





©Amin Kamrani

In these portraits of refugee individuals, we have poets, writers, photographers, actors and directors.

Now Nazanin has been accused of escaping from home under police surveillance. Nobody knows what will happen to her in the future. Whereas the law does not assume as a crime escaping the girl from home, but there are numerous women who have been imprisoned because of saving their lives and escaping from family violence. Nazanin has not lost hope yet. In fact her action is a kind of struggle against social injustices women's rights in Afghanistan. Her fate has been so tragic so far. What is the solution that how Nazanin and girls like her not to get victims of tribal traditions and ignorance not any longer in Afghanistan?

Subtitles from [Parastoo's play on child marriage Screaming in Silence](#) for the scene below.



We have women's leaders, advocates , educators and activists. People who take charge and make change.













©Amin Kamrani



©Amin Kamrani



©Amin Kamrani





All these people have rich and full lives, which are all ignored in the way refugees are portrayed in mainstream media. Therefore I attempted to challenge that misrepresentation of refugees with these portraits.







©Amin Kamrani



©Amin Kamrani

These portraits are not individually captioned, but they can be seen together, simply as they are.







The nights are the questions.. passengers are the answers..  
"Why can't music lead me?" Asked myself. "Music is a message not a messenger" answered the wind  
The night is heavy.  
Its weight is memories.  
The night is an open land for thoughtful horses to run.  
The night is starry, I am thinking of you.  
The night is a flower that would blossom blue.

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Photo of and Poem by Mwaffaq Al-Hajjar

A Syrian poet and qualified engineer, Mwaffaq is also the writer of Poetic Entropy and a chapter in the Lockdown Chronicles





# Living Archives Built with Communities

**Author** Paul Dudman, Editor of Displaced Voices

We hope you have found some time to read and engage with the narratives presented here as part of our Special Issue of Displaced Voices. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincerest thanks to Kirandeep Kaur for her hard work, perseverance and support in being the driving force for making this Special Issue a reality, and to our writers and contributors whose words and experiences we have the honour to share with you within the pages above.

We have all experienced the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on all aspects of our lives over the course of 2020, and whilst 2021 has begun with the hope that the newly produced vaccines will help us return eventually to some semblance of 'normality,' it is unlikely that our lives will ever be quite the same as they were before. We have borne witness to the impact of the pandemic across our societies, the financial and practical impacts of Lockdowns and the uncertainties and mental health implications this brings, not to mention the tragic ongoing loss of life across the world. In the context of the refugee experience, the onrush of the pandemic has made an already life-changing situation much more difficult and challenging, and the narratives included within this Special Issue bare witness to these challenges in stark detail.

However, it is what was important we felt, that these narratives were not purely of trauma and loss, but to enable through the writing and sharing of their stories, an opportunity for advocacy and a sense of agency to be present within the contributions. An opportunity to present a rep-

resentation of experience in your own words, and by doing so, retaining ownership of the narrative and supporting notions of agency building through participatory collaboration. One of the key aspects behind the creation of the Living Refugee Archive back in 2015, and more recently the inception of this journal post lockdown in 2020, was to help facilitate a neutral space where narratives and stories of displacement could be shared and heard. To explore different forms of personal expression and narrative, facilitating access to non-traditional forms of archival record that are often overlooked with the pre-existing archival context. It was important to us to create a space which could bring together different modes of expression. This has taken shape in the form of written testimony to oral history; media representations through photography and artwork, and the role of performance theatre in representing a more visual and spoken word approach to documenting experiences. Amin Kamrani's work as a member of the Parastoo Theatre Team, an Afghan refugee-led theatre group, which highlights the experiences, emotions and lives of Afghan people living in exile, is a good example of this approach.

The articles included in this Special Issue are testament to the value and importance of life history writing. By eschewing the established notion of the academic-focused journal, we are hoping that Displaced Voices can open the door to the inclusion of such first-hand documented accounts of refugeehood, enabling genuine voices to be heard and supporting the agency that underpins these contributions. I

hope that through this participatory approach to sharing these experiences, we are developing a sense of community agency and solidarity. This is a journey of storytelling through which an alternative archive for marginalised narratives can be created. Through community participation we open the door to challenge traditional notions of archival structures and documentation, hoping to constitute a living history of refugeehood.

We were pleased to be able to support the participatory nature of Kirandeep Kaur's original doctoral fieldwork. Working with her and the contributors to formulate collaborative and inclusive methods in terms of the dialogue and dissemination of the narrative work that the contributors wanted to share. The writing of our four refugee women community leaders in Kuala Lumpur; Naima Ismail, Syedah Husain (translated by Sharifah Shakirah), Parisa Ally and Arifa Sultana highlight the importance of identity for refugee women in Kuala Lumpur and each of these contributions highlight the trauma and struggles associated with trying to re-establish a sense of self-identity, whilst wanting their voices to be heard. These articles reflect the value of empowerment through storytelling and the ability to help build 'authenticity in self-identity' through storytelling as a medium for social change. The articles document the experiences of refugeehood by women refugees in Kuala Lumpur, the difficulties but also the opportunities for activism and advocacy in support of their own rights and those of their communities. Amin Kamrani's photography uses a visual methodology to reflect upon the lack of visibility faced by refugees in the established media, which is touched upon also in Arifa's article reflecting on the role of the Rohingya media in documenting stories of genocide not reported in the mainstream media

channels - indicating the importance of self-representation in terms of how these stories are reported and the authenticity of the story itself.

Notions of authenticity, trust and the impartiality of records as evidence have traditionally been cornerstones of the archival profession. As we increasingly move into a digital world, and as records move from traditional mediums to digital ones, it becomes more important that ever for the Archive to be able to present its criteria as being an ethical and trustworthy carrier for stories of displacement and refugeehood. The Refugee Rights in Records (R3) Initiative at UCLA has been undertaking a lot of good work on issues surrounding how the rights of refugees can be managed within the archival context, and how archives can be better prepared to support refugees and displaced persons in accessing key documentation in support of accessing their legal rights through access to key documents and records.

Being separated from our physical archival collections at the University of East London, and working from home for the last ten months, has highlighted and reinforced the importance of the collaborative and participatory engagement work that we do. It has also been an opportunity to explore new forms of outreach and methods of collaboration. As Arifa reflects in her article, we must be open to how we can work with communities to support self-representation in the ways stories are presented, archived and made accessible. We endeavour to ensure that we continue to be open to reflecting upon and challenging our own academic and archival practices to ensure that we continue to uphold our ethical and participatory processes to community engagement.

# Displaced Voices: A Journal of Migration, Archives and Cultural Heritage.

## Endpage

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[www.livingrefugeearchive.org/](http://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/)

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