

# Co-writing and inclusive publications

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**My reflections on publishing inclusively through co-writing highlighted many barriers faced by refugee researchers and research participants in the quest to be published on an equitable standing with western, non-refugee researchers.**

Refugee narratives have flourished in recent years both in the media and in academia.<sup>1</sup> Many of these efforts illustrate ways that refugees have begun reclaiming their voice and agency through different narrative forms, with increasing control over their storytelling. Yet the conversation about how to include refugees' voices, experience and knowledge in academic discourse and knowledge practices is far from over.

Coming from a background in language teaching as well as forced migration-related research, I have long struggled to know how to communicate to others about my shared experiences with forced migrants in my research journey. Is it possible to engage in research communication with refugee participants (who are not already scholars themselves)? Are equal voices possible in research communication when deeply unequal power dynamics exist?

Last year I worked to publish a special issue of *Displaced Voices: A Journal of Archives, Migration and Cultural Heritage* entitled 'In Their Own Voices'.<sup>2</sup> This special issue was conceptualised to re-centre the voices of female forced migrant

leaders in Kuala Lumpur, who became my co-authors<sup>3</sup>, and to portray them as agents in communicating their knowledge through co-writing. I discovered, however, that co-writing is fraught with questions around power, practice and knowledge.

## **Challenging times and writing processes**

Our first challenge was finding a 'safe' publishing space. We found that the publication processes in refugee-related journals or online magazines were prohibitive. There were few built-in mechanisms for supporting first-time writers from vulnerable backgrounds and these mechanisms lacked discussion space for co-writing practices between researchers and participants. We came to consider the publication process as a barrier to co-writing with the female refugee leaders. It inhibited the space to develop ideas collectively. A reimagination of the usual process (submission of concept, first draft, editing with comments, final drafts and edits) was needed. The second challenge was the writing experience and digital literacy of the co-authors. It became clear that the stress



Sharifah Shakirah, Founder and Director of Rohingya Women Development Network (RWDN) (Credit: Amin Kamrani)

of adhering to publication deadlines and producing submissions without mentorship and writing instruction reduced our chances of co-authoring successfully. The co-authors required flexible processes based on dialogue that enhanced their writing skills.

The Living Refugee Archive and the newly established *Displaced Voices* journal offered flexibility. Nevertheless, all those involved in the project were spread out globally and we were working during the pandemic. In total we spent seven months from first meeting with the women to publication. A significant time was dedicated to working on the writing skills of the co-authors, who requested individual guidance based on their writing skills, knowledge and personal circumstances. Most were highly capable in their speaking skills and had presented at numerous UN-related, NGO or academic conferences, but their writing abilities were very fixed on producing a certain type of text such as writing for NGOs to obtain funding, or writing social media posts or short news articles. Writing in longer prose or specifically for a journal article was

a new experience. Most were unfamiliar with the general format (introduction, main body, conclusion) or basic paragraphing practices. These are writing skills that many of those who have been taught in western<sup>4</sup> educational institutions take for granted. What is often unacknowledged is the communication privilege granted by such access to writing practice. This is an additional layer through which academia places an emphasis on western knowledge over the voices and knowledge of disenfranchised communities.

### **Creating a co-writing practice**

The *Displaced Voices* journal allowed us to create our own timetable and process that was supportive but also met the journal's standards. We agreed to leave aside referencing, for example, to allow greater forms of expression and re-centre the co-authors' voices and writing styles. We created an iterative process (brainstorming, training on writing, writing, co-writing, editing and peer feedback) to support the establishment of dialogue and reflexivity. Differentiating the processes for co-authors based on their

individual writing level also meant having to set aside time for individual Skype sessions, creating individual and group chats on social media and also a peer feedback loop.

Eventually, I embedded a Reflect pedagogy<sup>5</sup>, a participatory process which places emphasis on reflexivity and co-action as well as on learners' voices at the centre. Flexibility, creative inputs and informality on the side of the publisher were essential in allowing the co-authors space to produce their work. Nevertheless, all the co-authors came to view my role as a teacher of writing skills rather than as a co-author. We attempted to offset this issue by using their ideas or texts they had already produced as starting points to discuss strategies to improve linguistic structures separately from discussions on content. Even so, questions continued to arise about how we could produce the content of the articles on a truly equal basis.

Another practice we implemented was peer feedback between the co-authors to increase their confidence and dialogue between them. We found this process to be far more effective, less intimidating and more empowering than a peer review process with experts and other researchers. The final editing check involved some aspects of sharing their articles with other researchers and the journal editor.

The most important practical learning outcome was to create space to vary my own role and adapt it to the needs of the co-authors as required, while always placing their voices at the forefront of the articles.<sup>6</sup> At times I might challenge them to rethink, reimagine and reengage with their own stories beyond the usual 'refugee story' they would tell others about themselves. Despite some of the successes of these practices, however, our original relationships as researcher/participant/co-researchers did not grow into the equitable writing partnership we had envisaged. Rather, teaching elements overshadowed my intended role as a second author.

### **Balancing power and voices**

Publishing is not by its nature inclusive. The standards and expertise in writing and the

process of publication can be barriers which prioritise Western modalities of writing over voices expressing lived experiences. My experience working on this project showed that a flexible attitude and willingness to engage in conversation with contributors can create space for greater inclusion of these voices. More inclusive and equitable publishing practices that provide a platform for forced migrants' knowledge and voices are possible, by experimenting with new roles and viewing study participants as co-authors in research communication. However, concerns and challenges remain.

Within expected standards in academic discourse, potential co-authors from vulnerable backgrounds may lack the precise skills demanded and confidence to access opportunities to express their realities. Co-writing with those originally in a researcher role may create opportunities; however, if the researcher has greater ability to mimic accepted writing forms, they may ultimately dominate the co-authors' voices.

Using a pedagogic approach instead of focusing purely on research communication was unexpected. Although the co-authors said that this learning was an important motivation for them, it provoked questions around power and positionality. Working with participants from my research meant there was already a tendency for them to see me as more knowledgeable, regardless of the participatory approach emphasising their knowledge. The attempt to mitigate this through our co-writing practices did not entirely eradicate the imbalance, which I find is still embedded in some form throughout all the articles.

As an early career researcher, I admit I am hesitant to re-engage in this form of co-writing. Publishers who are willing to provide this flexibility may not be considered high-impact journals. This may mean such contributions are not necessarily valued by academic institutions. Also, co-authorship itself does not necessarily reflect the deep processes that the co-authors and I engaged in to create these articles. Much of our collaborative knowledge-work is rendered invisible. I have at times

questioned if these efforts are valuable to either myself or the co-authors.

Publishing inclusively and co-writing still require greater structural support, innovation and willingness on the part of researchers and publishers. There does appear to be an increasing desire to make publication spaces inclusive of forced migrant voices. However, a discussion is needed on how to determine best practices and whether adhering to writing norms is still desirable given the inherent hierarchies it creates. Academic institutions which are open-minded and place high value on co-writing (rather than primarily on 'high impact' journals with their stricter requirements) can also provide further opportunities, though this does not answer how to involve practitioners. Co-writing as a practice is currently fraught with questions. Hopefully, these questions challenge us to reimagine how we communicate research and work

with forced migrants as agents able to express their lived realities and hidden knowledge.

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1. I've drawn inspiration from a number of platforms that showcase refugee narratives, such as Refugee Tales, Exiled Writers Ink, The Archipelago and ArabLit. These and others challenge assumptions around knowledge, story and power by allowing space to forefront forced migrants' experiences.
2. Journal created by the Living Refugee Archive at University of East London. Special issue at: [bit.ly/displaced-voices-journal](http://bit.ly/displaced-voices-journal)
3. Naima Ismail, Syedah Husain, Sharifah Shakirah (who translates for Syedah Husain), Parisa Ally and Arifa Sultana represent the voices from Somali, Afghan and Rohingya communities.
4. In this article, the author avoids capitalising 'western' in order to more gently emphasise the need for decentralising.
5. I trained in Reflect for ESOL teaching while teaching women from asylum backgrounds. [bit.ly/reflect-esol-resource-pack](http://bit.ly/reflect-esol-resource-pack)
6. In the special issue you will see my name listed alongside the co-authors but with different roles – co-writer or editor – depending on what primary role I played in each article.