

Lived Experiences of a Rohingya Journalist

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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.

