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## **Writing about Refugee Rights**

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Drawing on their respective experiences in writing research on refugees, Dona (2007), Maillet, Mountz, and Williams (2017) discuss how we can better write research that informs the field of refugee studies and how we can overcome the practical and ethical challenges we run into as researchers when engaging with such vulnerable groups. What this paper will address is the ethical concerns researchers need to contemplate as they engage with refugees, especially in terms of the power that they exercise over the discourse on refugees and the power that can be imparted on them by researchers.

Dona (2007), Maillet, Mountz, and Williams (2017) chose to highlight the role of the researcher and their power in informing the discourse on refugees rather than acknowledging the power of the refugees themselves. Once again, the fears of Butler (2016) are manifested in how the refugees are seen as vulnerable and weak in a dynamic where the researchers are the party that dictates how they could be represented in the literature, the methodology to be adopted, and the questions to be asked oblivious to what the refugees bring to the table and their power of resistance. Not only does this assumption continue to reinforce stereotypes about refugees, it neglects the fact that it is the refugees who have the upper hand when it comes to research. Refugees have more power, I dare to say, than researchers or international organizations in this dynamic. For it is the stories of the refugees that scream to be told and etched in human history. It is their stories that bridge the gap in the literature. It is their unique and individual experiences that enrich the data with well-rounded perspectives. If it were not for the refugees' voices, the

field of migration and refugee studies would not exist in the first place. And it is these refugee voices that dictate the trajectory of research: It is how the refugees conduct themselves that determines whether the researchers perceive them as weak victims or equal participants and decision makers in the process.

What they fail to highlight in their papers is how refugees have the power to direct the stories/research written about them. They are not passive observers; they are the more powerful partners who decide which researcher they want to engage with and which one they do not trust and refuse to work with. They are the ones who decide what question to answer and what question to decline; they are the ones who decide what part of their stories they choose to highlight and which ones they refuse to share. They are, therefore, the more powerful partner in this relationship. This is what I feel the studies did not emphasize enough, especially when it came to the agency afforded participants. There was more concern with what the researchers should and should not do rather than with how refugees might be empowered to make decisions about the direction in which the project will go and their contribution to it.

The problem also persistent in both papers is that the researcher-refugee relationship is business-like where the researcher's primary concern is to elicit all the data they need from the "clients". Although the authors acknowledge the practical and ethical issues to consider before, during, and after collecting the data from the participants, they do not emphasize how they might empower the refugees/participants to tell the side of the story they are more comfortable sharing, which dehumanizes the refugees. The human side of them is not fully respected. Their safety is not prioritized; their fear of being outed—and their personal safety being compromised as a result--or identified when research is published is not considered. Once again, they are denied a basic human right: to safeguard their personal security.

## References

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