



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency

# JOURNALISM

# GUIDE



A HELPFUL GUIDE FOR REPORTING ON REFUGEES,  
ASYLUM AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT

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## A HELPFUL GUIDE FOR REPORTING ON REFUGEES, ASYLUM AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT




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Issues of asylum and migration raise important social debates around the globe that often quickly become politicized. UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, has developed this guide for all journalists working on the complex issues involved in forced displacement. The goal is to provide information essential to a sound understanding of the right of asylum and the long-term solutions available to refugees.

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# 01

## REFUGEES OR MIGRANTS? AND OTHER FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**It is critical to realize that when journalists get it wrong, people suffer directly. Therefore, information must be rigorously fact-checked and cross-verified, sources' credibility thoroughly researched, and attention paid to the language and context in which it is presented.**

The legal foundation for UNHCR, also known as the United Nations Refugee Agency, is the 1951 Refugee Convention (the Convention). To date, the Convention is the most important international instrument for refugee protection. It defines who is considered a refugee and the rights guaranteed to them by the signatory states. In return, refugees must comply with the national laws of the host country. The Convention excludes certain categories of people, such as war criminals, from obtaining refugee status.

Originally, the Convention was limited to protecting European refugees immediately after World War II. To reflect the changing refugee situation around the world, the 1967 Protocol expanded the scope of the Convention. To date, a total of 149 states have



signed the Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol.

### **What terminology should be used?**

The different terms included in migration vocabulary are commonly confused or misused. The purpose of this section is to explain the nuances and clarify the meaning of words used in media coverage of these issues.

#### **Asylum-seeker**

Asylum-seekers are people who have fled their country of origin and seek protection in another country. They may become refugees if the country where they apply for protection recognizes them as such. Many asylum-seekers are forced to

travel without documents or travel authorizations because of the circumstances of their flight. Not every asylum-seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every refugee is initially an asylum-seeker.

#### **Human smuggling**

Human smuggling is the facilitation, transportation, attempted transportation or illegal entry of people across an international border by “smugglers.” The smugglers guide people who pay them through their migratory journey. Human smuggling generally occurs with the consent of the person(s) concerned.

### Human trafficking

Human trafficking generally refers to the process whereby individuals are placed or held in a situation where they are exploited for economic purposes. Unlike smuggling, human trafficking rarely involves consent by the trafficked person. From the outset of the trafficking activity, the aim is to profit by exploiting the victim. It follows that fraud, force or coercion all play a major role in trafficking. Trafficking victims are often exploited at their destination through some form of forced labour.

### Internally displaced person

Internally displaced persons are those who are forced to flee inside their own country for reasons such as conflict, violence, human rights violations, or disasters. They remain in their own countries and do not cross international borders.

### Irregular or illegal?

Under Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) and international law, crossing a border irregularly, that is, outside official ports of entry, is not illegal if done to claim refugee status. The right to seek asylum is a human right and remains protected irrespective of the method or mode of entry into a country.

### Migrant

A migrant is a person who has voluntarily settled in a country other than their country of origin for various reasons, including for work, education or family reunification. UNHCR recommends that the word "migrant" not be used as a generic term to refer to refugees or persons possibly in need of international protection because it does not include the unique legal rights and obligations which apply to refugees and asylum-seekers.

### Documented migrant

A documented migrant has identity documents and a compliant travel authorization allowing them to enter the national territory of the country where they are headed.

### Undocumented migrant

An undocumented migrant does not have authentic identity documents or a compliant travel authorization and is therefore unable to enter the country of destination through regular channels.

### Refugee

Under international law, refugees are people who have fled violent conflicts or persecution and were forced to leave their country of origin. They are also called "Convention refugees,"

meaning a person who meets the Convention criteria. According to the 1951 Convention, in order for a person to be recognized as a refugee under international law, their fear of persecution must be linked to one or more of the following five grounds: race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

### Resettled or sponsored refugee

These are people who have fled their country of origin and become refugees in a second country before being offered residence in a third country if they meet a number of criteria. In Canada, they are either assisted by the federal government or privately sponsored by groups of citizens. Resettled or sponsored individuals arrive in the country with permanent resident status.

### Separated children and unaccompanied minors

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a minor is a person under 18 years of age. UNHCR defines separated children as children who are separated from their parent(s) or legal guardian. Unaccompanied minors are children outside their country of origin who come to a third country without being accompanied by a parent or legal guardian. This may include

children accompanied by other adult family members.

### Stateless person

The international legal definition of a stateless person is "a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law". This means that a stateless person does not have the nationality of any country. Some people are born stateless, but others become stateless.



## What is persecution?

Neither the Convention nor the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) provide a specific definition of “persecution.” The courts have therefore had to define the term based on several criteria.

The Refugee Protection Division (RPD) of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) identifies persecution as follows:

- Serious harm to a fundamental human right
- Repetitive, persistent or systematic harm
- The harm must relate to a Convention ground (see below)
- Harm associated with a criminal act for which an individual cannot seek state protection
- Harm caused by an agent of persecution whether or not such agent is a representative of state authorities
- Cumulative acts of discrimination or harassment where state protection is not available

According to the Convention and the IRPA, individuals may be subjected to persecution for their:

- race or ethnicity
- religion
- nationality

- political opinions, real or assumed
- membership in a particular social group (sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.)

or, under the IRPA, have faced:

- personal risk (victim of crime)
- risk of torture

## What is involved in the asylum or refugee claim process in Canada?

The right to seek asylum is a universal human right. This fundamental right does not vary based on how someone arrived in a country to claim asylum. People fleeing conflict or persecution have the right to come to Canada to claim asylum.

When someone claims asylum, Canadian authorities conduct stringent security screenings, including fingerprinting, luggage inspection, and identity and background checks through North American and Interpol databases.

A refugee claim is a long and complex process. In Canada, several of the steps involved may take years to complete depending on the processing capacity and the number of claims.

The image shows a 'Basis of Claim Form' for persons claiming refugee protection in Canada. The form is held by two hands. It includes sections for Client I.D. Number, Claimant's first name(s) and family name(s), and RPD file number. The form contains instructions for completing it, including a warning about providing false or misleading information.

In Canada, a refugee claim is determined to be accepted if the claimant is:

- a Convention refugee (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), s. 96); or
- a person in need of protection because their lives would be at risk or because they would be subjected to cruel and unusual treatment or punishment in their country of origin (IRPA, s. 97).

In Canada, the majority of asylum applications are processed at the independent administrative tribunal known as the Immigration

and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB). The Refugee Protection Division (RPD) of this tribunal adjudicates the asylum application. There is an option for an appeal at the Refugee Appeal Division (RAD) of the IRB and/or the Federal Court of Canada for judicial review.

A small minority of people who have already filed an asylum application in the U.S., the UK, Australia or New Zealand will have their cases processed by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) through a pre-removal risk assessment (PRRA) application.

In all instances, a decision maker must assess whether the fear of persecution in the claimant's country of origin is substantiated by the specific facts of each case, the testimony and evidence provided. If the refugee claim is refused and the person has exhausted all legal remedies, they will receive a removal order requiring them to leave Canada.

### **Detention of asylum-seekers**

Some asylum-seekers may be detained in Canada Border Services Agency's (CBSA) immigration holding centres (IHC) or, in some cases, in provincial correctional facilities. In Canada, asylum-seekers are detained primarily for identity and flight risk reasons. In addition to their refugee claim process, they must undergo a regular detention review process before the Immigration Division (ID) of the IRB. The UNHCR detention guidelines urge States to use detention for asylum-seekers as a measure of last resort with liberty being the default position.

### **Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA)**

Under the Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA), individuals coming to Canada from the United States via a land border cannot apply for asylum unless

they qualify under an exception to the agreement. Originally, the agreement applied only to asylum claims made at official land points of entry.

Asylum-seekers who entered Canada through irregular border crossings were allowed to make a refugee claim in Canada. However, on 25 March 2023, an Additional Protocol to the STCA came into force. The Additional Protocol extended the application of the STCA to the entire border. It requires irregular asylum-seekers crossing between official land points of entry from the U.S. to also qualify for an exception to the agreement.

For more information on the STCA, including exceptions, visit the IRCC website.

### **Resettlement and other humanitarian-type processes**

Refugees are sometimes denied their fundamental human rights in a country where they sought refuge. Their lives and freedom can still be threatened, or they sometimes have needs that cannot be met in their host country.

Resettlement allows UNHCR to help them relocate to a third country.

Canada may also select refugees to resettle in its national territory. Resettled refugees, identified by UNHCR, are selected by the Canadian government before they arrive in Canada, and are granted permanent residency once on Canadian soil. Three different resettlement programs operate in Canada: the Government-Assisted Refugee Program (GAR), the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSRP), and the Blended Visa Office-Referred Program (BVOR).

In 2022, UNHCR helped resettle 114,300 refugees to third countries around the world at a time when nearly 2 million refugees were in need of resettlement.

### **Complementary pathways**

In addition to traditional resettlement designed for the most vulnerable, other migration pathways offer refugees safety and opportunities. These pathways can take many forms, including labour mobility, family reunification or education in Canada. They expand the concept of refugee mobility from a purely humanitarian perspective to one that includes mobility based on skills, abilities and other attributes. For more information on programs in Canada, visit IRCC's website.

### **How is climate change impacting displacement?**

Climate change and natural disasters can increase and aggravate the threats that force people to flee across international borders. The interaction between climate, conflict, poverty, and persecution significantly increases the complexity of refugee crises.

Most climate-change-related displacement is internal to one's country, not cross-border. When people are displaced solely by the effects of climate disasters and natural risks and cross international borders, they are not generally considered refugees under the Convention's definition which does not capture these criteria as a reason to seek asylum.

Technically speaking, the term "climate refugee" is therefore problematic because it has no basis in international law. However, millions of refugees and displaced populations are affected by climate change and natural disasters, and these factors could weigh into their decision to leave or contribute to the causes of their persecution.

# 02

## INTERVIEWS WITH AND STORIES ABOUT REFUGEES OR ASYLUM-SEEKERS

The way we frame stories and present images and language when reporting on refugee and asylum issues holds immense power to shape public perception. Inaccurate reporting can pose significant risks to the safety and well-being of asylum seekers and refugees, as well as their asylum claims. This can also have far-reaching implications for their loved ones back in their countries of origin.

Reporting on asylum-seekers and refugees is a sensitive exercise. The choice of words, images and statistical data is not always obvious. Revealing their personal history can put a claimant at risk and influence public understanding and reaction.

At each stage of the refugee claim process, any information shared with the media can be used in the refugee determination process. People are often unaware of this fact and should therefore be made aware before a story is published.

### There is no typical refugee

Since people from all walks of life can experience persecution, asylum-seekers present a wide variety of profiles. Refugees contacted for an interview may be at different stages of the refugee claim process and procedures



can vary depending on the circumstances.

### Perceptions of the journalist's role

It is important to be aware that perceptions of journalists and their roles in society differ around the world. Some asylum-seekers and refugees come from countries where the media is strictly controlled by the government, and they may not entirely understand how journalism works in Canada.

### Media coverage

As mentioned above, sharing refugee stories is not without

consequences, both for the refugee's claim and potentially for loved ones back in their country of origin, due to the circulation of information online and via social media networks. Recordings, photographs or videos, or disclosure of the person's identity, can therefore compound the risk for refugees whether they know it or not.

For these same reasons and given that each media outlet has its own procedures concerning the anonymization of persons interviewed, an editorial discussion weighing these factors should always take place when sharing information related to

the identity of refugees. Such a discussion helps mitigate the potential risks of retaliation for refugees and loved ones still in their home countries.

### The interview

Interviews and conversations with people who have fled persecution can cause emotional stress, particularly if interviewees are not ready to discuss past trauma. Professionals in contact with asylum-seekers, such as social workers, can be useful resources in conducting these interviews or obtaining information about the asylum seeker's background.

Refugees and asylum-seekers are under no obligation to share their experiences with the media. Their participation is therefore entirely voluntary. Consequently, interviewees may withdraw their consent at any time before, during and after the interview until the story is published. This means that journalists must ensure that informed consent is given at each step.

A good practice to avoid a withdrawal of consent is to contact the claimant's counsel in advance to ensure that publication of the interview will not cause prejudice to their claim. To ensure informed consent, the interviewee must be notified that

the story could potentially be translated into several languages and shared internationally, via social media networks, including in the refugee's country of origin.

This may be a determining factor in the refugee's consent as it may potentially affect their safety and that of their loved ones in their country of origin.

Refugees and asylum-seekers have often experienced traumatic events that can be difficult to discuss. A number of strategies can be used to avoid re-traumatizing the interviewee:

- Provide breaks when the interview touches on these traumatic moments
- Do not insist on details of the violence suffered
- Respect the interviewee's privacy
- Ensure that the person has access to psychological support or provide contact information for a social worker or psychologist in their area if the need surfaces during the interview

This list is non-exhaustive and provided for illustrative purposes only: not all people experience trauma the same way, and some are better able to cope with their emotions when talking about it.

These traumatic events can be difficult for journalists, and the interpreters they work with, to hear. The mental health of everyone involved in this type of interview must take priority, and certain best practices can mitigate the risks of negative mental health impacts:

- Conduct an advance interview to get a clear idea of the events to be recounted to prepare for them
- Ensure that listening to the account of violence does not involve a risk of (re) traumatization

In cases where an interpreter is used:

- Ensure that the interpreter is comfortable translating this type of story. Sometimes, interpreters come from the same cultural community as the person interviewed and certain taboos may exist regarding gender-based violence or refugees persecuted on the basis of their sexual orientation, or whose gender identity or expression (SOGIE) is not socially accepted
- In cases of gender-based violence or persons persecuted on the basis of their SOGIE, ask if the interviewee has a preference

concerning the interpreter's gender (note that this person may also have a preference for the journalist's gender)

### Photography and filming

Photographic images and video footage play an important role in telling stories. They help storytellers foster greater understanding through the common language of visual media. It's crucial to take special care when selecting photos and visual material to accompany stories about refugees and asylum-seekers.

The images we use can shape public perception and understanding of these communities, which can have a significant impact on their lives. It's essential to ensure that the visual material we choose accurately reflects the experiences of refugees and asylum-seekers, respects their dignity, and avoids perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

For example, while a story may focus on the human right to asylum, advocating for rights-based approaches, if the featured photo or video footage accompanying it only depicts interactions of asylum-seekers with police officers, it may

reinforce attitudes that associate asylum with unlawful activity.

Make sure captions are accurate and avoid unethical manipulation of photos, for example, cropping out significant areas.

Take care when publishing images that may identify vulnerable individuals, especially children. The security of people fleeing persecution, and serious domestic, gender-based and gang violence may be endangered if their whereabouts are revealed.

If in doubt about the use of images, talk to the people being portrayed, making sure you have obtained their permission for the use of the image or footage in digital products or television.

When photographing or filming refugees and asylum-seekers, it's important to ask for their permission first. This is called seeking proper consent. Informed consent means that the person being photographed fully understands what the photo will be used for and agrees to have their picture taken.

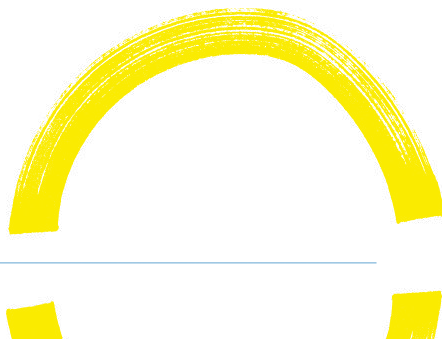
Refugees and asylum-seekers may have already experienced trauma and difficult situations in their lives, and having their picture taken without their permission can

make them feel uncomfortable, violated, or even re-traumatized. Seeking proper consent respects their dignity and gives them control over their own image.

Simply asking someone if it's okay to take their photo or use their name is not enough. It's important to ensure the individual is competent and understands what they are consenting to (for example, making sure consent is asked and provided in plain language, preferably in the individual's native language).

It must also be clear the individual is making the consent voluntarily and with sufficient information to take a decision (for example, they know what their information will be used for, how it could affect their asylum processes, understanding that there will be no repercussions to them for saying no).

Asylum-seekers and refugees are entitled to have their privacy respected.



# 03

## USEFUL RESOURCES

You can contact the **UNHCR communications team in Canada at [canot@unhcr.org](mailto:canot@unhcr.org)**. In addition, **UNHCR's partners in the field who work with refugees and asylum-seekers are also helpful resources.**

### What role does UNHCR play?

#### Internationally

As the world's leading refugee agency, UNHCR delivers and coordinates international relief for displaced persons. Whether through an emergency response or long-term assistance in urban settings and camps, UNHCR supports these individuals until they can return to their country of origin or establish themselves in a new home.

UNHCR works to ensure that every individual can exercise their right to seek asylum and find safe refuge, with the opportunity to return home one day or find an alternative solution.

#### In Canada

The office of UNHCR in Canada has been in existence since 1976 and has four objectives:



- Promote the highest standards of protection for refugees and asylum-seekers in Canadian policies and legislation
- Seek sustainable solutions in Canada through refugee resettlement and the development of complementary pathways
- Communicate by informing and educating the public about the situation of refugees and UNHCR's mandate
- Raise funds from the Canadian public and the Government of Canada for UNHCR programming around the world

### How can UNHCR help you?

UNHCR's annual reports on global trends, news releases, data

portals and operational updates are an invaluable source of information for fully understanding humanitarian issues around the world. The annual Global Trends report compiles data on countries, population profiles, the number of people repatriated to their country, and estimates on the number of stateless people.

UNHCR encompasses a network of experts in 135 countries available to give interviews in the field. For contact information for UNHCR spokespersons worldwide, please contact us.

A bank of UNHCR multimedia content (photographs, B-roll videos, infographics, graphic animations, etc.), called Refugees Media, is available to all information stakeholders.

## What other resources are available?

Individuals and entities working with asylum-seekers and refugees are active at all levels of government and in civil society. Below is a non-exhaustive list of relevant resource entities in Canada.

### 1. Government

#### Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)

IRCC is the federal department that facilitates the arrival of immigrants, provides protection to refugees and, through its programs, helps newcomers settle in Canada.

#### Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA)

The CBSA administers legislation governing the admissibility of persons on their arrival in Canada. Officers also determine who should be detained and are responsible for the removal of persons who are inadmissible.

#### Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) - Refugee Protection Division (RPD)

The IRB is the largest independent administrative tribunal in Canada. Its mission is to make informed decisions on immigration and refugee matters efficiently, fairly and in accordance with the law.

#### Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)

The RCMP is Canada's national police force. In certain regions of the country, the RCMP is also responsible for provincial and municipal policing. RCMP officers are stationed between official ports of entry at Canada's land border and elsewhere.

#### Quebec Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration (MIFI)

MIFI is a government department in Quebec responsible for immigration, francisation, and integration of new arrivals in the province.

#### Regional Program for the Settlement and Integration of Asylum-seekers (PRAIDA)

Set up by the provincial government, PRAIDA carries out a regional mandate to meet the needs of asylum-seekers throughout Quebec.

#### Bureau d'intégration des nouveaux arrivants à Montréal (BINAM) [The Newcomer Office]

The Newcomer Office (BINAM) is a municipal department set up to help newcomers integrate into Montreal's society and economy, and work towards the inclusion of immigrants and racialized people.

### 2. Civil society

#### Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR)

The CCR is a national non-profit umbrella organization committed to the rights and protection of refugees and other vulnerable migrants in Canada and around the world.

#### Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes (TCRI) [Coordination Council of Organisations Serving Refugees and Immigrants]

The TCRI is an umbrella group of community organizations committed to the rights and protection of refugees and immigrants in Quebec throughout their immigration, settlement and integration journey through services, assistance, support, critical thinking, and solidarity.

#### Action Réfugiés Montréal (ARM)

ARM is a non-profit refugee advocacy organization. It works on multiple fronts through its detainment, sponsorship and twinning programs and helps raise awareness within Quebec society about the issue of refugee rights. The organization works on multiple fronts, including supporting detainees.

Réseau d'intervention auprès des personnes ayant subi la violence organisée (RIVO) [Organized Violence Response Network]  
RIVO Résilience is a network that fosters the rehabilitation and integration of newcomers and anyone traumatized prior to their arrival in Canada by organized violence, whether political, social, religious or identity-related.

#### Quebec Immigration Lawyers Association (AQAADI)

The AQAADI was founded in 1991 to group Quebec lawyers actively working in the field of immigration to help them make better use of the services provided by the Quebec Bar and to allow for better representation of the group before political, judicial and administrative institutions dealing with federal and provincial immigration.

#### Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers (CARL)

The Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers serves as an informed national voice on refugee law and the human rights of refugees and forced migrants and promotes just and consistent practices in the treatment of refugees in Canada.

## Acronyms

### BVOR

Blended Visa Office-Referred

### CBSA

Canada Border Services Agency

### GAR

Government-Assisted Refugees

### IHC

Immigration Holding Center  
(CBSA)

### IRB

Immigration and Refugee Board

### IRCC

Immigration, Refugees,  
Citizenship Canada

### IRPA

Immigration Refugee Protection  
Act

### PRRA

Pre-Removal Risk Assessment

### PSRP

Private Sponsorship of Refugees  
Program

### RPD

Refugee Protection Division

### STCA

Safe Third Country Agreement

### UNHCR

United Nations High  
Commissioner for Refugees



Visit our online  
guide for the full  
list of resources  
and definitions.

## CHECKLIST

### 1. Terminology

Does the term I am using to refer to this person match their situation?

- ☐ Has this person claimed or do they plan to claim refugee protection?
- ☐ Does this person have refugee status?

### 2. Consent

Is this person able to give informed consent for an interview?

- ☐ Does this person know that interviews published in the media can be used by government authorities for purposes related to their refugee claim?
- ☐ Could the public release of this interview put the individual or their family members at risk?

### 3. Anonymization

Is the individual comfortable with disclosing their identity?

- ☐ Is this person comfortable having their first name, last name or any other identifying element disclosed in the interview?
- ☐ Are the anonymization steps used in this interview sufficient to protect this person's identity?

### 4. Photos/videos

Did this person give their informed consent?

- ☐ Was prior notice given to the person before the images were taken?
- ☐ Did this person give informed consent to have their image released publicly?

### 5. Psychological (or psycho-social) assistance

Does this person have access to appropriate psychological or psycho-social assistance?

- ☐ Did I establish a relationship of trust with the person concerned?
- ☐ Did this individual discuss sensitive topics during the interview, including topics related to potential trauma?
- ☐ Did a need arise to offer a means of contacting a social worker or psychologist?

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