

# A Conversation about “Doing” and Being “Done To” in Humanitarian Storytelling

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This co-authored article is the result of a series of conversations between Arash Bordbar and Jess Crombie, who met in 2021 while working together to develop UNHCR’s internal ethical communications policy. Jess had been brought in as a communications and ethics consultant, and Arash as one of the members of the UNHCR evaluation team, also contributing as a person with lived experience of being a refugee. During the process of developing the communications policy, their conversations revealed a shared interest in the power of stories, but also a recognition of the inequalities in the humanitarian sector in terms of who has the power to shape and share narratives about affected populations and individuals.

The title of this essay is borrowed from Jessica Benjamin who, in her text exploring intersubjective psychoanalysis, describes the basic building blocks of connection as understanding “whether doing is *with* or *to*” (Benjamin 2018, 5). A theme running through this conversation is how to complicate who falls into the roles of “doer” and “done to”, so that “doing *with*” becomes the norm.

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**THIS CO-AUTHORED ARTICLE** is the result of a series of online, virtual conversations between Arash Bordbar and Jess Crombie. Arash is a former refugee and a refugee rights advocate and humanitarian worker. He works in the education department of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), working to increase opportunities and access to higher education for refugees and other forcibly displaced and stateless people. Jess is a former humanitarian aid worker who now works as a researcher on humanitarian narratives and their impact, focusing on the opinions and experiences of the people featured in the stories told by humanitarian organisations.

Arash and Jess met in 2021 while working together to develop UNHCR's internal ethical communications policy. Jess had been brought in as a communications and ethics consultant, and Arash as one of the members of the UNHCR evaluation team, also contributing as a person with lived experience of being a refugee. During the process of developing the communications policy, their conversations revealed a shared interest in the power of stories, but also a recognition that there are inequalities in the humanitarian sector in terms of who has the power to shape and share narratives about affected populations and individuals.

The conversation shared here was guided by co-written questions and then transcribed verbatim (with the exception of some “umms” which were removed). The decision to work in this way was inspired by qualitative research methodologies which recommend this method to “capture the interaction and richness of discussions” (Hill et al. 2022, 1), a quality that is difficult to capture with the more common edited “fair note” method. Inspiration was also drawn from Nell Dunn's seminal text “Talking to Women” (Dunn 1965), in which the author recorded and published a series of verbatim transcribed conversations between herself and nine women. The text was intended as a feminist act designed to bring the voices of ordinary women and their ordinary conversations into the literary canon. In the brief afterword, Dunn explains the “intense pleasure of these conversations [...] feet up [...] the tape recorder balanced precariously nearby [...] we'd go to pin down what we wanted out of our lives” (Dunn 1965, 211). It is this idea of capturing the richness and pleasure of a conversation between two individuals interested in what the other has to say that this text seeks to convey.

The title is borrowed from Jessica Benjamin's “Beyond Doer and Done To” (Benjamin 2018), a text that explores intersubjective psychoanalysis, primarily

in relation to the mother-child context. Benjamin describes the basic building blocks of connection as understanding “whether doing is *with* or *to*: doing *to* me implies that complementary twoness of opposing doer and done to, while doing *with* suggests that shared state of fitting in, coordination, or purposeful negotiation of difference” (Benjamin 2018, 5). A theme running through the conversation shared here is how to reimagine who falls into the roles of “doer” and “done to”, so that “doing *with*” becomes the norm. It is a shared ambition of Arash and Jess to shift the traditional humanitarian story gathering roles from “professional story gatherer” (humanitarian aid worker) and “story subject” (person with lived experience in need of humanitarian assistance) – a relationship where power resides firmly on one side – to a space of collaboration and recognition of the need for a fair exchange of knowledge. Arash and Jess have both, at times, been in the traditional humanitarian story roles, with Jess as the story gatherer and Arash as the potential story subject. In this conversation, however, there is a deliberate attempt to negotiate a way through this topic together, exchanging experiences and inviting the differences that each brings to the virtual table.

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**Jess Crombie (JC):** The first thing that we thought we’d talk about was, why are we interested in power sharing in storytelling? And I think the reason we framed the question in this way is because when we think about this work, a lot of what it boils down to is power and who has power.

**Arash Bordbar (AB):** Storytelling in general is quite interesting. Since we are little, we are really tuned into listening and putting yourself in people’s shoes. I think for the people who have lived experience, it’s important to share. It is because firstly, I guess there is no hidden agenda, right? For example, you know a lot of people who have gone through trauma or have lived through refugee experiences or are still living through them. It’s quite powerful because not only do they talk about the challenges that they have faced, whether it was, you know, happy memories, sad memories, but they really bring the people who are listening to them on a journey, without allowing them to raise question about whether it’s true or not, it’s, you know, they pay full attention.

The other very interesting aspect is that the person who tells their story, who has a lived experience, will not only impact the people who are the audience, but also other people who have experienced the same thing will really find

it interesting because it gives them an opportunity to self-reflect and find strength within that trauma, it can be empowering. It kind of takes people on a journey with you.

Labels separate people, it's us and them. But when you hear stories, you're like, "Wow, I felt that before, I've been there, I've seen that." So then you feel connected with the person and try to put aside the labels. Listening to someone who is telling their story is quite powerful in itself, because you see the power within them, not only to be quite brave to talk about when they were, or if they are still, vulnerable. But also, how far they've gone. So again, you know, it changes the perception.

**JC:** When I think about power sharing in storytelling, it encompasses all of those things because what you're talking about are people being able to share their direct experiences in a way that they choose. It's not, "What story do we want to tell and how can we find a person that exactly fits the little box that we've decided we want to talk about?" But instead, "What is happening to you and what do you want to say about it?"

And, what you're describing is the process when people are able to have editorial power to say, "This is my experience, and this is how I have decided to share it with you." That's the power, isn't it? And that's when all those things you're talking about, connectedness and believability and people not becoming stereotypes. All those things happen.

I don't see it happening as much as I'd like it too, I think humanitarian organisations are scared to do that. They think they have ways of working that they have to stick to, which allows them to engage audiences and they feel like if they share that power, maybe they won't be able to do things they need to do. Perhaps... I don't know if you think that's fair. I mean, obviously you work for one of these organisations as well.

**AB:** Yeah, there is definitely fear. I mean, you know we are always afraid of the unknown. And if you're giving the mic to someone because everyone has a voice, you're acknowledging that some people don't get to share theirs.

But you can't just throw someone in the middle of, you know, 1,000 people, and expect them to share their stories. It needs support. I've seen this where a lot of people or organisations, if they see the person who's talking who is

sharing, you know, getting emotional, or it's hard for them, they make them stop. But that's the first step and I think we should make sure we create that environment that they're able to come back and practice.

**JC:** Yes, so it's holding someone through that experience of sharing their story. It's not just going, "Here you go, here's the mic, off you go." It's about saying this is what might happen, this is how people might respond to you, this is how you might feel when you do this.

You're flipping the work so the communications task changes from being "what story do we want to tell and how are we going to find someone who fits into the box" to "how are we going to put our energy into facilitating and supporting someone to tell the story they choose to stand in the way they choose". That's a really interesting flip.

**AB:** I have had a very interesting experience when we were recording a video for youth and we went with a team of videographers and everything, and they're like, "You tell your story the way you like." But they also said, "You've got to come here, you're going to sit down and do it in the way we want, even though it's your words." Of course, we wanted to tell our stories, but we also wanted to design the way it's recorded, the way it's set. These youths were talking about their refugee experiences, but at the same time there were professionals, you know, engineers, IT support, cyber security experts or whatever. We said we want it to be black and white at the beginning, where we say, "I'm a refugee from XX country," and then bring the light on and basically give it colour and say, "But I'm also a civil engineer/teacher, etc." It worked, but it's more about going into the unknown and then of course you know, sometimes you will make mistakes. But it's then not only engaging people to tell their stories, it's also engaging the way they want to do it.

**JB:** And what's the impact of that story?

**AB:** Yes, what's the impact? What can they do? What is the key message that they want to have? Because the other aspect is that. OK, yes, people can come and talk about their lived experiences, but they can also come as experts in different ways, they come in as an expert in the field on saying I have experienced it myself; climate change, torture... But also, these are the recommendations.

**JC:** That's really interesting, so it's storytelling facilitating that bigger discussion about what programmatic actions are taken. The kind of purpose of the organisation?

**AB:** Yes, exactly. I also wanted to talk about audiences. We feed people what they're used to and I think we have to be part of that change to say OK, when you let people talk about their experiences, it might be different but audiences, don't take sides.

**JC:** There's fear, isn't there, about the idea of adding nuance and context and complexity into stories, but of course, by doing that what you do is you humanise people, because you show everyone's existence on this earth is nuanced and complex and full of context. There's this idea that audiences for complex messages can only handle very small, simple messages, and that if you try and share anything more complex, they will somehow recoil from that or not engage with that.

But then the other thing is challenging humanitarian organisations to acknowledge their role as educators. So you're not just trying to raise money or engage people in this issue. You are educating them on that issue and therefore you have a responsibility to educate them properly.

**AB:** If we really want to change the perceptions, we have to start taking risks. Everyone has a role to play, and it's more about how best you play it. If you are a news reporter, if you capture stories, it's really good to do it in some sort of partnership with the person whose story you want to tell. Sit together and discuss, tell them, "I've been sharing a lot of stories, but now you are here. What do you think? You know the real dilemma and what's what? What's the gap? What's missing? What should we look at?"

By doing this, they change the conversation, and that's the way I see that we might be able to shift the way we talk about humanitarian crises, by making sure people with lived experiences are there not only because they have lived experiences, but because of their expertise as well.

There is a saying when it comes to serious conversation, that if you have ten people together who follow the same social norms, if you want to change things, introduce just three different people and you will change the whole conversation in the room.

**JC:** That's such a nice way to frame it. The idea that a minority bringing a different perspective can change the whole conversation. It's also the argument for inclusivity and diversity of experience and opinion and ideas in any kind of decision-making forum.

**AB:** Just imagine if 10% of or even 1% of every group was like this. A population would be able to actively participate not only in sharing their stories but also to take action using these stories for change.

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In *The Questions We Ask Together*, an edited compilation of 100 short responses to a series of 100 questions generated by participants in the Open Engagement conference, contributor Katie Hargrave stated their intention to engage in socially engaged art practice by creating "a forum for people to share their knowledge, we want to create the possibility for the community to see itself and its power" (Turnbull 2015, 15).

In this conversation, the professional lives of both participants – an academic and a UNHCR staffer – provide them with platforms to share their voices. They both have this power. However, the voices of those with lived experience of needing humanitarian assistance are rarely heard sharing their opinions on the process of creating narratives about their situation (as opposed to their personal lived experiences) (Crombie 2020).

In a modest way, this text carries the same ambitions as Dunn and Hargrave – to share a moment of common interest and experience in a topic, to acknowledge how rarely we hear from those with lived experience on this subject, and perhaps even to try to change the humanitarian sector's view of the subject of the story. From being framed as an "unfortunate marionette" (Spivak 2010, 30) mediated through and by the more powerful, to a collaborating co-conspirator that would speak of true collaboration. Perhaps this shift in understanding would allow for the creation of a space described by Benjamin as one in which "each partner can feel and think independently without feeling the push-pull of complementarity" (Benjamin 2018, 7) because both exist in a "third space" which is mutually created.

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## Short Biographies

**Jess Crombie** is a researcher and scholar working as a Senior Lecturer at UAL, and as a consultant to some of the leading organisations in the humanitarian sector. In both contexts, Jess draws on nearly two decades as a senior leader in the charity sector to explore the ethical complexities in documentary storytelling. Her research focuses on exploring the potential for power shifts in both story gathering and storytelling by seeking out the opinions and ideas of the people in the images and stories, a process she has coined "contributor centred storytelling practice".

**Arash Bordbar** is an Associate Education Officer at UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency in Copenhagen, Denmark. He is an advocate for policy and advocacy, refugee rights and accountability to affected populations, co-founder and former co-chair of the UNHCR Global Youth Advisory Council, and former chair of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN). Arash is also the recipient of the 2016 Young People's Human Rights Award for his advocacy on refugee youth and asylum seeker rights, refugee youth education rights and LGBTIQ rights in Australia and the Asia Pacific.