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Guide to Building Your Narrative

Many people around the world face discrimination, injustice, and prejudice in their home country. Despite the difficulties they may encounter, it may not force them to leave their life behind, abandon their home, uproot their family, and settle in a foreign country. This sets refugees/asylum seekers apart from everyone else in the world who may face discrimination, persecution and violence. The imminent threat upon their life, the atrocities they experienced, the inhumane persecution they suffered, has forced them to risk everything in search of a safe place to call home.

The goal of this guide is to assist you in telling your story so that the Canadian Migration Officer conducting the interview has a clear understanding of the reasons why you fled your country of origin (COO) and why the country you are currently living in is not a long-term/durable solution.

This guide is divided into three sections. The first section will provide you with some key points for you to keep in mind as you tell your story. The second section will outline the key questions that you should address in your narrative. The final section outlines some points to remember as you prepare for your interview.

Section 1: Key things to keep in mind as you write your narrative

- 1. Tell the truth:** It is important to be honest as you write your story; that you do not embellish or add events and details that did not take place. Your credibility is vital for you to pass the Visa Office interview. If the Migration Officer detects major inconsistencies in your story, it is likely to result in a negative decision and your inadmissibility to Canada;
- 2. Present the key events in a chronological order:** Presenting the important events of your story in a sequential order will help the Migration Officer better understand your story;
- 3. Include as many details as possible:** It is insufficient to say that you were discriminated against or that you feared for your life. You must present the events that forced you to make the decision to leave your country of origin in as much detail as possible. Including details such as the date and time that the event(s) took place; who was present at the event(s); what injuries you sustained; your feelings during the event(s); steps that you took to seek the help of civil authorities; etc. are important to include in your narrative.
- 4. Provide evidence, where possible:** Providing proofs that support your story should be included, where possible. If available, include things like police reports, pictures of fatwahs issued against you, hospital reports, and pictures of damage to property or injuries that you sustained, etc.
- 5. Consistency:** It is vital that your story is consistently told. The story that you tell the Migration Officer must match the story that you presented in your narrative. If you have forgotten to include details in your narrative that you plan to include in your interview, it is important to provide these details in advance of your interview. Please contact our office for further details on this.

It is also important that all members of the family who are interviewed consistently tell the story.

Section 2: Key questions that you should address in your story

1. **What is your personal story of persecution that forced you to flee?**

A general statement that you faced persecution is not sufficient. A detailed and personal story of persecution is needed.

You should indicate the nature of the persecution that you faced (i.e., race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion)

The Migration Officer will review your story and your interview will be treated much like a forensic audit. You should present the facts of your case in a chronological order and include as many pertinent details as possible of the events that took place that forced you to flee your country of origin (i.e., date, time, location, names of persons involved, actions taken, injuries sustained, etc.). Support your account with as many proofs as possible, which back-up your claim of persecution, violence and threats that you and your family faced (i.e., police reports, fatwahs, picture of property damage, injuries sustained, etc.).

2. **Why was relocation within your country of origin/citizenship not a viable option for you?**

You must also address the question of whether relocating to another part of the country would have remedied the situation. If you relocated to another part of the country to flee the persecution, did you continue to face threats to your life? If you did not relocate, why do you believe that the persecution would continue even if you were to relocate? Would your persecutors be determined to find a way to persecute/kill you even if you relocated to another part of the country? If so, why do you believe that this would be the case?

Did your relatives face harassment/arrest/questioning to find where you were?

Blasphemy: If a charge of Blasphemy has been laid against you, it will be important for you indicate whether relocating to another part of the country would resolve the threat that the charge poses. You may also consider referencing if a charge of blasphemy has resulted in extra-judicial killings by mobs, and whether civilians who mob, attack, torture, and kill individuals accused of blasphemy are held accountable by civil authorities for their actions. You may wish to reference whether the practice of killing those accused of blasphemy is followed in all parts of the country (i.e., large urban centres, rural communities, etc).

3. **Prior to you fleeing the country, did you seek the protection and help of civil authorities?**

And, if not, why not? If you did seek protection, was any protection made available to you? It will be important to answer whether any protection is available from police or other civil authorities and, if so, did you seek such protection.

In certain countries, it is common that those accused of blasphemy are unwilling to seek the help of civil authorities because of the reluctance of officials to involve themselves in blasphemy cases, out of concern for their own safety. In some cases, instead of offering protection for the accused, the police will sometimes arrest the accused because they themselves are afraid of mob retaliation.

If the case involves a charge of blasphemy, it may be prudent to include information about the Blasphemy Law and the reluctance of the government and courts to offers protection against those accused of blasphemy.

4. **What conditions are you currently facing in the country of asylum (COA) that make it impossible to stay for an extended period of time (durable solution)?**

Please describe the conditions you face living as an asylum seeker in the country that you currently reside in. Does it provide the hope of a long-term sustainable solution? Do you have the right to work? How do you support yourself? If you have children, do they have the right to be educated? Do you have freedom of movement? What will happen if police detain you?

5. What would happen if you were to return to your country of origin/citizenship (COO)?

Canadian Immigration Law is always forward looking. Therefore, it is important that your narrative address whether you are able to return to your country of origin/citizenship. Have conditions changed in your country to allow for your safe return? If not, why do you feel that the current threats to your life still exist?

If your case involves a charge of blasphemy being laid against you, you may wish to reference the concerns expressed by civil society organizations regarding the application of the country's blasphemy laws. Do you believe that you would receive appropriate protections from civil authorities and from the judiciary? If not, why? Do you feel that you would be safe if the courts found you "not guilty" of the charge of blasphemy? If not, why not?

Section 3: Preparing for the interview

During your interview, the Migration Officer will ask you about particular events/incidents that drove you to flee from your COO. It is important that the information you share be relayed properly and accurately.

Here are some guidelines to help you with preparing for your family's narrative

1. **Ensure Consistency:** It is important to recognize that memories and details of events blur over time. To ensure that you and your family are able to relay the story in a consistent fashion, we recommend that you review the narrative that was included in your application and that you convene a meeting with your family prior to the interview to review the details of the story. To ensure that credibility is maintained, it is important that one version of the story is told by all members of the family. While the story may be told from different perspectives, the various accounts should not conflict with each other.
2. **There are no small or insignificant details:** While it is important that you remember the big details (e.g., 5 men attacked us in our home) you also need to try and remember details about the event, even though you may consider these details as unimportant (e.g., when 5 unknown armed men kicked down the front door of our house, I was in the living room watching TV while my mother was in the kitchen. My brother was not at home).

We've seen it happen before that cases are rejected because one family member said they were alone at home when the attack happened while another family member said that they were present but in another room. When families are consistent with their story, it supports their credibility.

3. **Time, Timing & Duration:** The very basic piece of information that is oftentimes overlooked is time & timing. "When" an incident happened. It is not enough to know the specific date (i.e. I was attacked on June 1, 2019). Families need to try to remember the date and time that the event happened or at least an approximation of the date and time that it occurred (i.e. around 8:00PM). Families must also know what each member was doing at that specific time.

Example

- John: Five armed men kicked down our front door while my mother was alone cooking breakfast. I was not at home, because I had left for work.
- Camille: At around 4PM, five armed men kicked down our front door while my mother was alone at home. I was not at home, because I was at my classmate's house to do a project

Credibility Issues: The details of the story are conflicting. One happened in the morning while cooking breakfast while the other story happened a bit later in the day. While most of the details are the same, if the date, time or duration do not match, it may lead to concerns about credibility and may lead to a negative decision by the visa officer. The activities, date, time and duration must match.

There is also the very important detail of “how long” something happened or the duration of an event.

Example

Camille: After the attack, I was rushed to the hospital and they found out that I had broken my wrist. I needed to undergo immediate surgery that very evening. I was confined in the hospital and released after 2 days.

Michael: After the attack, we rushed my sister Camille to the hospital and she needed to undergo immediate surgery. She was confined in the ICU of the hospital for a week.

Please remind families that especially for events they experienced together, they have to make sure that the duration of the event is consistently told. When it started, how long it lasted, when it ended.

4. **Who was there? and, Who was not there?** Another basic piece of information that can cause inconsistencies is the simple question of “Who was there during the event?” Families must be consistent on who was present during the event. Not only do they have to remember who was present, they should also be consistent on who was NOT present and where they were.

Example

John: 5 armed men kicked down our front door while my mother was alone at home. When my siblings and I came home that afternoon, she showed all of us the death threat with a bullet in the envelope that they had given her

Visa Officer: When did your mother show you the death threat?

John: She showed us the death threat when my siblings and I came home from work and school

Visa Officer: Apart from yourself, who else saw the death threat?

John: My brother Michael and my sister Camille. We were all shown the letter when we came home from work and school that evening.

During the separate interview with Camille:

Camille: I saw the letter 1 week later while I was visiting my family during the weekend because I live in my aunt’s house in Lahore during the week. Her house is close to my University

Apart from knowing which family members were present, it would be good for them to establish other people who were also present and who are important to the story. If possible, the number of persons and any important items they might have had with them.

Example:

John: I was driving, on my way home from work, when a boy on a motorcycle swerved in front of my car and slid on the road. I was worried that I had hit him by accident so I got out of my car to help him and see if he was all right. Once I got out of the car, around five masked men grabbed me and began dragging me to a white van. I was shocked, screaming and shouting, asking who they were. While they were dragging me on the floor, they were punching my head and kicking my stomach. They said they were members of the Taliban and that they were going to kill me. It was happening near a petrol station and two security guards who saw what was happening fired their guns in the air to scare my abductors. The men let me go and escaped in their van. A rickshaw offered to take me home.

Camille: My brother was on the way home when a young man on a motorcycle slid in front of his car. My brother got out and helped the boy but when he did, three men grabbed him and starting dragging him towards a van. They beat him severely and hit him on the head with a gun. A

crowd of bystanders started gathering around them, shouting for it to stop. When the men who were attacking my brother saw many people, they let go of him and escaped in their van. Two elderly strangers then helped my brother get a taxi to go home.

Credibility Issues: Was he attacked by around five men or three men? Was he punched and dragged or did the attackers have a gun with them that they used to hit him with? Did the attackers stop because of the security guards' gunshots or because an angry crowd started to gather? Did John get home through the kindness of a rickshaw or by the assistance of two elderly strangers who hailed a taxi for him?

5. **Sequence of Events:** One of the most important details to get right is "how" things happened and the specific order in which they happened. Families need to map out events in chronological order and stick to the sequence of events

Example 1

Camille: After work, I was walking to my car when someone came up from behind me and slapped the back of my head. They grabbed me, put a gun to my head and demanded to know where my eldest son was. I was in so much shock that my body froze. I started to cry and then fainted out of fear. As I fainted, I distantly heard three gunshots and thought they were shooting me. When I woke up, I was back in my office surrounded by my co-workers and the security guards of my office.

Michael: My mom was about to get in her car when she saw two men running up to her. They grabbed her. One of them pulled out a gun and pointed it at my mom. My mom fainted when she heard three gunshots because she thought the attackers were shooting her. Her office's security guards who saw the attack happen fired the gunshots. My mom fainted. When she woke up, she was in the office with her coworkers

Credibility Issues: Was Camille attacked by men who came up behind her by surprise or did she see the men running up to her? Did they point a gun at Camille or did they put a gun to her head? Did she faint out of fear and then hear the gunshots or did she faint BECAUSE she heard the gunshots and thought she was being shot?
