SPEAKING OUT, STAYING SAFE

A PRACTICAL RESOURCE

# STORYTELLING IN HOSTILE TIMES

**How to keep telling human stories when it is not safe to be seen**

VOICE NOTES · ANONYMOUS PHOTOS
ANIMATION · STAFF VOICES



imix

# WHY THIS RESOURCE?

**Across the migration and refugee sector, people are asking the same question: how do we keep sharing lived experience when being visible can bring harassment?**

**Organisations have had hostile comments on photos and taken posts down. Many are planning appeals without a person to put at the front. This resource brings together the tools IMIX uses to help organisations speak out and stay safe.**

Anonymity is not a barrier to a strong story. Nobody should have to choose between being heard and being safe.

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# SEVEN GROUND RULES



**These apply to every format in this resource, whatever you are making and wherever it will appear.**

01
### ANONYMOUS UNTIL STATUS IS GRANTED

Anyone still awaiting a decision on their asylum claim stays anonymous until they have refugee status.

02
### CONSENT IS A CONVERSATION

Talk it through together, give people a day to think, and get consent in writing before anything is agreed.

03
### SAYING NO COSTS NOTHING

Make it clear that nothing about someone's support depends on saying yes, and that they can change their mind before or after a story is shared.

04
### CONSENT CAN CHANGE

Consent given in a calm week may not hold in a week of heightened attention. Check in before every use, a quick text is enough.

05
### IDENTITY IS MORE THAN A FACE

A location, a routine, a workplace, a country of origin, a journey or a family detail can all point to one person, especially locally.

06
### NEVER BLUR A FACE

It dehumanises the person and associates them with criminality. Every technique in this resource is a better option.

07
### SAFEGUARDING IS FOR YOUR TEAM TOO

Many staff and volunteers have their own experience of migration or seeking asylum, and frontline workers are being targeted as well.

# THE CONSENT CONVERSATION

## Ask these five questions together

**Before anyone's story goes anywhere, have this conversation. Give the person at least a day to think it through before they commit to anything.**

- ☐ Do you understand what "on the record" means, and that published content is very hard to take down?
- ☐ Are you happy to be named, photographed or recorded? If not, how would you like to be described?
- ☐ Is there anything you do not want to be asked about?
- ☐ Could any detail put you, a family member or a friend at risk, including people outside the UK?
- ☐ Would you like someone with you, or an interpreter?

### THEN WRITE TWO LISTS

What can appear, and what cannot. Everything you make has to respect them. This example is fictional.

#### CAN APPEAR

- That he is waiting for a decision and cannot work
- That he was an electrician
- That he volunteers at "a bike project" in the city
- His own line about waiting

#### CANNOT APPEAR

- Any name, even a changed one
- The neighbourhood, or anything that pins down his area
- His country, his claim, how he arrived, or his family
- Any image of him, hands included

02

# VOICE NOTES

**A voice note lets someone tell their story in their own words and their own rhythm, with no face and no name. It can go straight to a journalist or onto your own channels, so the storyteller never has to speak to a reporter directly.**

Journalists will take an anonymous story if it is strong, because the lived experience perspective is what they need. Voice notes suit radio especially well, since there is nothing to reformat. Expect the journalist to ask for a staff interview alongside, and prepare for it.



## TWO WAYS TO RECORD

### STAFF-FACILITATED

Recorded together with a trusted member of staff or a volunteer.

### SELF-RECORDED

Recorded in the person's own time, on their own phone, then sent to your organisation.

**Both go through the same consent and review steps before anything is used.**

HOW TO:

# A SAFE SYSTEM FOR SHARING VOICES

01
### EXPLAIN BEFORE RECORDING

Who might hear it, where it could end up, that it is always anonymous, and that they can say no or stop at any time.

02
### USE SOMEONE THEY TRUST

A familiar face, not a stranger. A phone voice memo app is fine.

03
### PRIVATE AND UNHURRIED

A quiet space, no rush, and an interpreter or bilingual colleague on hand if English is not comfortable.

04
### KEEP IT SHORT, ONE TOPIC

60 to 90 seconds per question, easy to record again if they want another go.

05
### PLAY IT BACK AND RECONFIRM

Check they are happy, and catch anything that could identify them, such as a specific location, a routine or a distinctive detail.

06
### TRACK IT SIMPLY

One spreadsheet: internal reference, date, topic, consent status, file location, who holds it.

07
### RE-CHECK BEFORE EVERY USE

A quick check-in text costs nothing.

08
### A FINAL SAFE-MESSAGING PASS

Strip anything unnecessary that could identify them, and make sure the framing centres their humanity, not their danger.

Consent given in a calm week may not hold in a week of heightened attention. A quick check-in costs nothing.

# THE CONSENT RECORD

Keep a simple consent record for every voice note, whichever way it is recorded. Everyone stays anonymous, and the record is only so you can keep track of who has said yes.

| FIELD | WHAT TO RECORD |
|---|---|
| Name | Internal reference only, kept private and never shared |
| Public description | How they want to be described, for example “a man in his 30s”, or a made-up name of their choosing |
| Method | Recorded with staff, or self-recorded and sent in |
| Topics | Everyday life, faith and community, hopes for the future, a message to the public |
| Location | A general area can be mentioned, or no location at all |
| News links | Whether it can be connected to recent coverage or events, or must not be |
| Duration | Ongoing use, or check with them each time |
| Withdrawal | That they can withdraw at any time, and who to contact to do it |

## WHERE A VOICE NOTE CAN GO

- To a local radio reporter first, who can pass a strong piece up to national programmes.
- Onto your social channels as audio over a still image, with captions.
- Into an appeal email or web page, as a short clip or a transcribed quote.
- Under an animation, see page 11.

If someone’s voice could identify them locally, ask whether they would prefer a colleague to read their words instead.

# PROMPTS FOR SELF-RECORDING

**Give people a short prompt sheet. Ask them to find a quiet moment, pick one question, talk for about a minute, listen back, and record again if they are not happy.**

**THEY CAN OPEN WITH:**

"I'm happy for [organisation] to use this recording to help share my story. Please don't use my real name."

## SOME QUESTIONS TO OFFER

- What does a normal day look like for you here?
- Is there a food from home you miss?
- What is something small that has made you smile recently?
- Do you have a hobby, a skill or a bit of music people would not guess about you?
- What do you hope for, a year from now?
- If someone who has never met a refugee heard this, what would you want them to know?

**They do not have to mention where they live or their journey here.**

# NINE WAYS

to take a powerful photo without showing a face



### 01 THE TURNED BACK

From behind, up close or far away. It works every time.



### 02 SILHOUETTE

Stand the person in front of a window, a lamp or the sun.



### 03 ALL IN THE DETAILS

Hands, feet, a small detail. A narrative without a face.



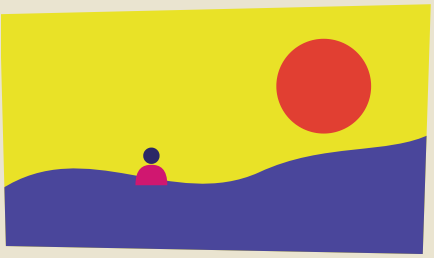
### 04 ONE AMONG MANY

In a group or crowd, facing away from the camera.



### 05 OUT OF FOCUS

Focus on something else and let the person soften naturally.



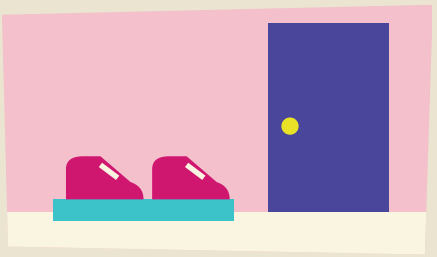
### 06 SMALL SUBJECT

More environment in the frame, so the person is too small to recognise.



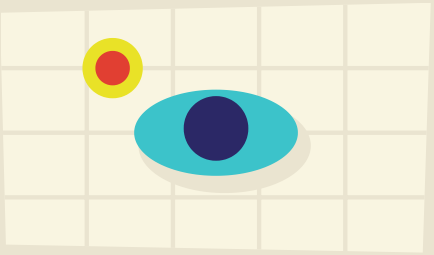
### 07 USE OBJECTS

A book, a plant or a camera held up to the face.



### 08 WHAT YOUR THINGS SAY

A desk, a kitchen table, a pair of shoes by the door.



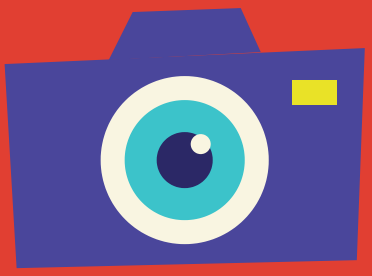
### 09 PERSPECTIVE

Shoot from above, or from an angle that hides the face.

**NEVER BLUR A FACE.** It dehumanises the person and associates them with criminality. Every technique above is a better option.

See each technique in real photographs by Nastia Nizalova at imix.org.uk/tips-taking-anonymous-photos

# BEFORE YOU PRESS THE SHUTTER



01

### CHECK THE CONSENT LIST

Some people will not want any part of themselves shown, hands included. Objects, tools and places can carry the story instead.

02

### CHECK THE BACKGROUND

Look for anything that pins down a location: street signs, shop fronts, landmarks, a recognisable building or a uniform.

03

### NO PHOTO POSSIBLE? WRITE AN IMAGE BRIEF

Three lines: what is in the frame, what is out, and why. It will help whoever makes the image later.

### TRY IT WITH YOUR TEAM

**This takes 20 minutes and needs only smartphones and a few props, such as books, plants or household objects.**

1. Split the room into photographers and models.
2. Photographers have 10 minutes to photograph the models without showing their faces, using the nine techniques.
3. Swap, so everyone gets a turn behind the camera.
4. Share the photos on a screen and discuss which are most effective, and why.

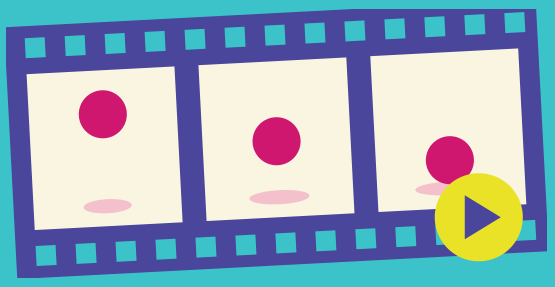
**The learning: a powerful photo does not have to compromise anonymity.**

04

# ANIMATION

## AND ILLUSTRATION

**Animation tells a real story with nothing of the real person on screen. It is the safest visual route when even hands or a turned back feel too risky, and it works well for social media and appeals.**



### SIX IDEAS TO TRY

#### VOICE NOTE WITH MOVING VISUALS

The person's recording plays under simple animated illustration and captions.

**Good for: Social video, appeal pages**

#### ANIMATED QUOTE

The storyteller's own words appear line by line on a branded background.

**Good for: Quick social posts, email headers**

#### ILLUSTRATED SCENE

A drawn place or object from the story, such as a workbench or a kitchen table, with gentle movement.

**Good for: Appeals, website stories**

#### STOP MOTION WITH OBJECTS

Objects from the story photographed frame by frame on a phone.

**Good for: Small teams with no budget**

#### ILLUSTRATED CHARACTER

A drawn figure stands in for the storyteller, designed not to resemble them.

**Good for: Longer stories and short films**

#### STAFF-NARRATED ANIMATION

A support worker or volunteer tells the story of the work over illustration.

**Good for: When no storyteller can take part**

# MAKING IT SAFE AND HONEST

**AI-assisted animation can be a powerful, low-cost way to bring a story to life when the person at its centre must stay anonymous. Used carelessly, it can undermine trust. Avoid AI-generated photos of people: they fabricate someone who looks real and sit badly with consent.**

01
### HUMANS LEAD, AI ASSISTS

Use AI for backgrounds, mood boards and drafts, never a person's face, likeness or voice without their full involvement.

02
### ILLUSTRATED, NOT PHOTOREALISTIC

A hand-drawn look protects anonymity and is honest with your audience about what they are watching.

03
### CONSENT TRAVELS WITH THE STORY

Anyone named or identifiable sees and approves the treatment first, as they would a quote or a photo.

04
### ANONYMOUS MEANS ANONYMOUS

For anyone who must stay unidentified, including anyone awaiting an asylum decision, use symbolic imagery, never a likeness.

05
### DISCLOSE AI USE CLEARLY

Add a visible, plain-English credit, such as "Animated with AI assistance, based on [name]'s own words". Metadata alone is not enough.

06
### FACT-CHECK BEFORE YOU GENERATE

Confirm how someone travelled or where they lived before building a scene. A wrong detail is a wrong story.

07
### GUARD AGAINST STEREOTYPE

Tools default to stock "refugee" imagery: desert, rubble, worn clothing, boats. Write the real city, activity and clothing into every prompt.

08
### REVIEW EVERYTHING FIRST

Never publish the first generation. Check for stereotype, insensitivity or an accidentally realistic face.

### TICK BEFORE YOU PUBLISH

- ☐ Has the storyteller seen and approved the finished treatment, where named or identifiable?
- ☐ Is the AI use disclosed visibly, not just in file metadata?
- ☐ Does the imagery avoid stock "refugee" visual clichés?
- ☐ Is anyone who needs to stay anonymous genuinely unidentifiable in what has been generated?
- ☐ Have you checked the facts behind each scene?
- ☐ Would the person themselves be comfortable seeing this representation of their story?

HOW TO:

# CREATE AN ANIMATION WITH AI

**These tools turn a written description into a short illustrated clip, and you may already have access to one of them.**

## CHOOSE YOUR TOOL

### CANVA AI

**A good start if you already work in Canva. It creates short clips, a few seconds long, from a text prompt. The free plan has a limited number of generations.**

### ADOBE FIREFLY

**A good fit if you already have an Adobe subscription. It is trained on licensed and public domain content, and attaches disclosure metadata automatically.**

### TEMPLATE TOOLS, SUCH AS VYOND OR ANIMAKER

**You direct pre-built characters and scenes, so the result cannot drift into photorealism. Often the safer default for testimony.**

### PRO BONO ROUTES

**Media Trust Films gives UK charities free professional filmmaking support. University animation courses often want live briefs.**

## A REPEATABLE WORKFLOW

1. **Build one style anchor.** A fixed block of wording for style, palette and tone, kept identical across every clip.
2. **Break the story into short scenes.** Tools generate a few seconds at a time, so write short beats, each one the anchor plus a scene.
3. **Keep narration human.** The storyteller's own voice, a colleague reading their words, or a voice actor. Never an AI voice pretending to be them.
4. **Generate, review, regenerate.** Two or three attempts per scene is normal. Budget for it.
5. **Edit together and label.** Sequence the approved clips with narration, add captions and the visible AI disclosure, then publish.

**Aim for 30 to 60 seconds in total, one moment and one message. Tools and plans change quickly, so check what yours offers before you start.**

# EXAMPLE PROMPTS

**These come from IMIX's own attempts. Copy the structure, then write your own for the story you are telling.**

### STEP 1 · THE STYLE ANCHOR, REUSED UNCHANGED IN EVERY SCENE

Hand-drawn 2D illustrated animation style, soft warm colour palette, gentle pencil and watercolour textures, no photorealistic faces or specific likenesses, dignified and tender tone, slow gentle camera drift, warm golden light suggestive of memory. Modern clothing throughout, no ragged or worn clothing, contemporary urban settings, no desert or dust unless specifically noted.

### STEP 2 · A SCENE PROMPT, BUILT ON THE ANCHOR

[STYLE ANCHOR] A paved five-a-side football court between modern apartment blocks in an ordinary city neighbourhood, young people in contemporary football kit and trainers training together, everyday urban life around them (shops, parked cars, washing lines), energetic and purposeful, not impoverished.

### BEFORE: THE STEREOTYPE

"A dusty football pitch on the edge of a refugee settlement, young people training together, worn goalposts, a sense of purpose and community."

**Dusty, settlement and worn are poverty-coded words that pull the tool toward stock imagery.**

### JOURNEYS: CALM UNTIL FACTS ARE CONFIRMED

[STYLE ANCHOR] Figures in modern everyday clothing at an airport departure gate, simple suitcases beside them, a plane visible through large windows, calm and resolute, soft evening light, quiet determination rather than distress.

**Try something, and tell us what you find:**
**media@imix.org.uk**

05

# STAFF AND VOLUNTEER VOICES



Support workers and volunteers are trusted messengers, often more persuasive than a chief executive or a policy expert.

**They can carry a story when the person at its centre cannot be seen.**

01

### TELL THE STORY OF THE WORK, NOT THE PERSON

What the problem was, what changed, and what made the difference.

02

### KEEP IT TO 80 WORDS

A short post in a support worker's or volunteer's own voice is enough for social media or an appeal.

03

### MANY SMALL VOICES, NOT ONE FACE

For an appeal, several short anonymous lines from different people keep lived experience central without putting one person at the front.

04

### OFFER STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS ANONYMITY TOO

A first name, a role such as "a volunteer English teacher", or no name at all. The consent conversation applies to them in exactly the same way.

### CONSENT-LED WRITTEN STORIES

A first-person or third-person written piece still works when the storyteller has agreed exactly which details appear. Say clearly if a name has been changed.

# WHICH ROUTE FOR WHICH JOB?

**Most stories can use more than one route.**

| ROUTE | WORKS WELL FOR | YOU NEED | WATCH OUT FOR |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Voice note** | Radio, social audio, appeal pages | A phone, a trusted colleague, a consent record | Details in the recording, or the voice itself, that identify someone |
| **Anonymous photo** | Social media, press, appeals | A phone and a willing subject | Backgrounds that give away a location |
| **Animation** | Social video and appeals when nothing of the person can be shown | A design tool or an illustrator, and an agreed script | Drawing a likeness, or realistic AI images |
| **Staff or volunteer voice** | Appeals, local media, social posts | A willing colleague and 80 words | The colleague's own safety |
| **Written story** | Newsletters, appeals, press | An agreed list of details | Unlabelled changed names |

Pick the route that fits the consent list first. Then think about the channel.

06 THE FINAL CHECK

# BEFORE YOU PUBLISH, AND AFTER

**Run this check on every story, whatever the format. If it breaks the consent list, it does not leave the room.**

## BEFORE

- ☐ Consent is in writing, and you have checked in again this week.
- ☐ Every detail has been checked against the “can appear” and “cannot appear” lists.
- ☐ You have read, watched or listened once as a hostile stranger would. Could you work out who this is, or where they are?
- ☐ The storyteller has seen or heard the final version and is happy with it.
- ☐ Changed names and illustrations are clearly labelled.
- ☐ The framing centres the person’s humanity, not their danger.
- ☐ Someone is named to watch the comments, and knows what to do if they turn hostile.

## AFTER

- ☐ Monitor comments on the storyteller’s behalf, so they do not have to.
- ☐ Make a follow-up call. It makes a real difference.
- ☐ If consent is withdrawn, stop using the story and tell the person it has been done.

# IF A STORY ATTRACTS HOSTILITY



**Abuse, hate and threats are a red flag. The job is to protect people, not to win the argument.**

01
### DO NOT ENGAGE

No reply, no quote-post.

02
### SCREENSHOT IT

Keep the date and the link.

03
### REPORT AND LOG

Report it to the platform, and keep your own record.

04
### ESCALATE ANY OFFLINE RISK

Report hate crime to the police on 101, or 999 in an emergency.

05
### TELL THE STORYTELLER

Say what has happened and what you have done. Taking a post down is a legitimate choice.

06
### ASK FOR HELP

Contact IMIX at media@imix.org.uk if you need crisis communications support.

You hold more knowledge about your work than any journalist, and certainly any troll.

# BEFORE YOU GO...

**You do not have to do everything in this resource at once. Start with what feels most urgent for your organisation and build from there.**

## MORE FROM SPEAKING OUT, STAYING SAFE

| | |
|---|---|
| THE FULL GUIDE | Speaking Out, Staying Safe: a practical communications guide for grassroots organisations, on the IMIX website resource page. |
| NETWORK | Join the IMIX Staying Safe, Speaking Out network to stay in touch with others in your region. |
| CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS | Downloadable guides at imix.org.uk/resources/crisis-communications |
| PHOTOGRAPHY | Tips for taking anonymous photos at imix.org.uk/tips-taking-anonymous-photos |
| ETHICAL STORYTELLING | The Commons Library transformational ethical storytelling framework. |
| TEMPLATES AND ADVICE | Email media@imix.org.uk for the voice note consent form and self-recording prompt sheet, or to talk through a story you want to tell but cannot yet see how. |

And remember, you are not doing this alone.

**IMIX and the wider migration sector are here to support you.**

Speaking Out, Staying Safe is an IMIX initiative. IMIX is a national charity dedicated to media, communications and narrative change for the migration and refugee sector. Registered charity number 1183693 · imix.org.uk