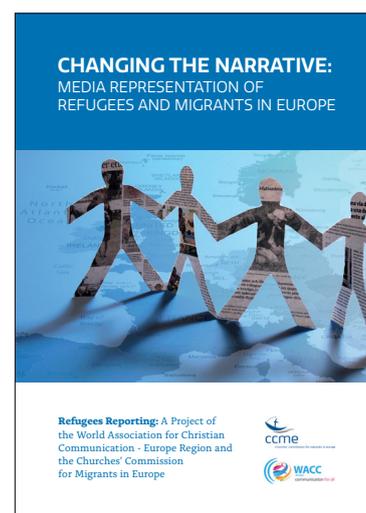


# CHANGING THE NARRATIVE: MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN EUROPE

**Refugees Reporting:** A Project of  
the World Association for Christian  
Communication - Europe Region  
and the Churches' Commission for  
Migrants in Europe



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Globally, we are facing unprecedented levels of displacement. According to UNHCR, currently over 65 million people around the world have been forced from their homes. In Europe, while the number of arrivals in 2017 have dropped from its peak of more than 1 million in 2015, the welcome and integration of refugees and migrants remains a highly divisive political, economic, and cultural topic.

*Refugees Reporting* is a research and advocacy project conducted in 2017 to support the communication rights of refugees seeking safe passage into and through Europe and to challenge public attitudes of intolerance and discrimination against them.

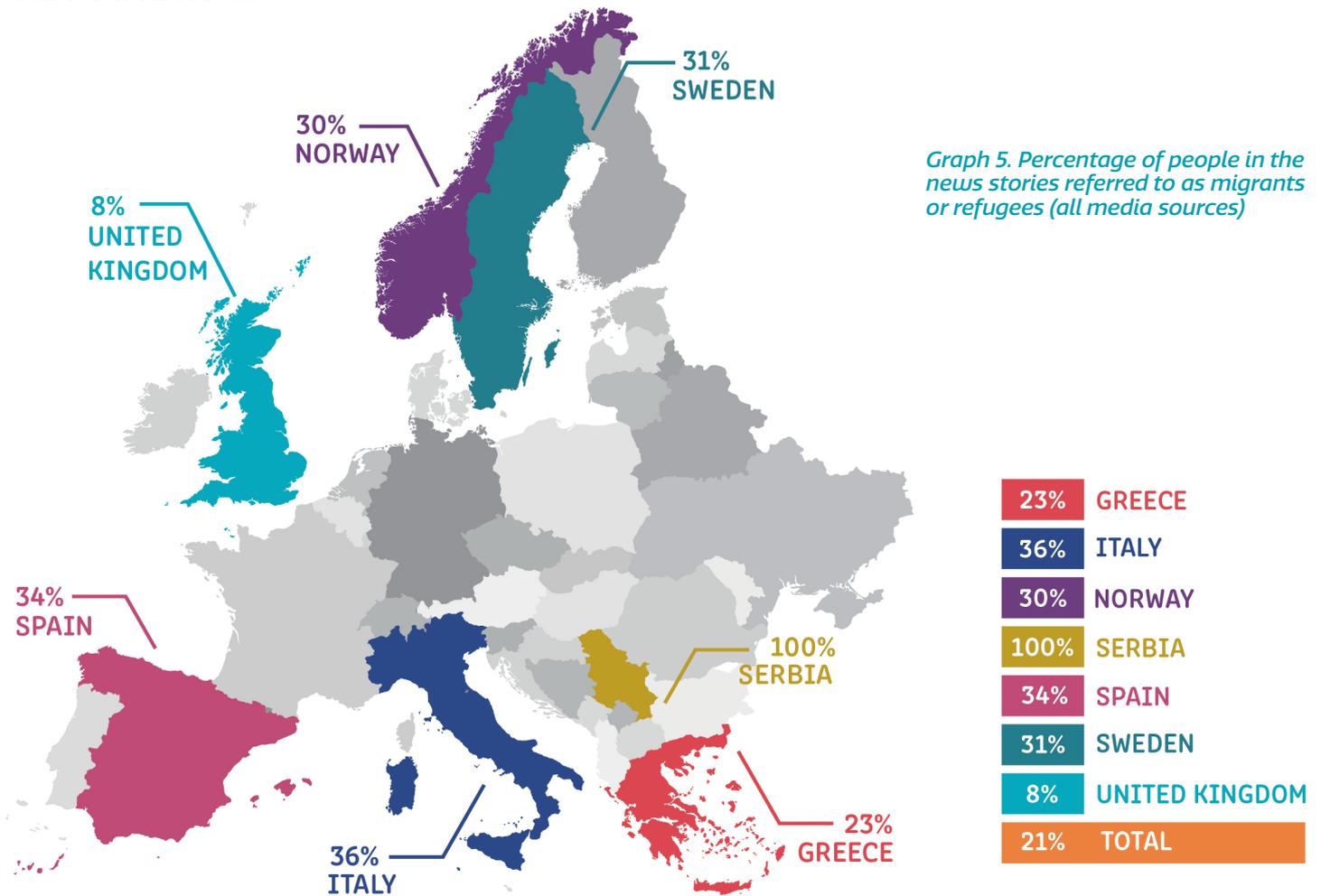
The project coordinators – the World Association for Christian Communication - Europe Region (WACC Europe) and the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) – believe that the representation of refugees and migrants in the media plays a major role in the tone of the

public debate and, ultimately, in the welcome and integration of refugees and migrants into their new countries.

Research was thus conducted to assess the media representation of refugees and migrants in Europe. Participating countries were Greece, Italy, Spain, Serbia, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Norway. In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives of refugee networks and media, including a consultation bringing people from both groups together to review the initial research findings.

The media monitoring results reflect general patterns rather than a regionally representative picture, given that in this initial study, the overall sample is relatively small and there are wide differences across individual country results. The aim of this report is to spark discussion on the topics considered, build on positive trends, and inspire more research and action on the issues.

## KEY FINDINGS



Graph 5. Percentage of people in the news stories referred to as migrants or refugees (all media sources)

**Only 21% of news items on asylum and migration reference a refugee or migrant.**

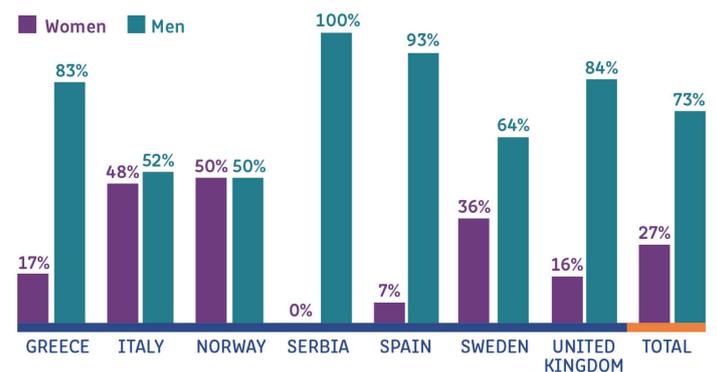
Over three-quarters of the stories analysed in this project that talk about migration and asylum issues do not identify an individual refugee or migrant nor include their voice or experience. This is partially explained by the focus of the majority of articles on national legislation. However, it points to a pattern of invisibility that creates a clear divide between the policies being discussed at the political level and the effects of those policies on people.

**Certain groups of people are even more invisible.**

Women and some other groups of people are disproportionately absent from the news on refugees and migrants. Of the 21% of articles that mentioned a refugee or migrant, in only about one-quarter (27%) was that person a woman. In other words, of all people mentioned in the news articles, only 6% were refugee women.

Some communities are also widely absent from the news stories. For example, Afghans represent the second-largest group of asylum applicants in the EU, yet they were only the fourth most represented group in the news sample. In addition, data suggests that Nigerians make up most of the current arrivals to Italy and a considerable part of

the migrant population in Europe, yet citizens of that West African region were present in only 2% of the articles analysed in the sample.

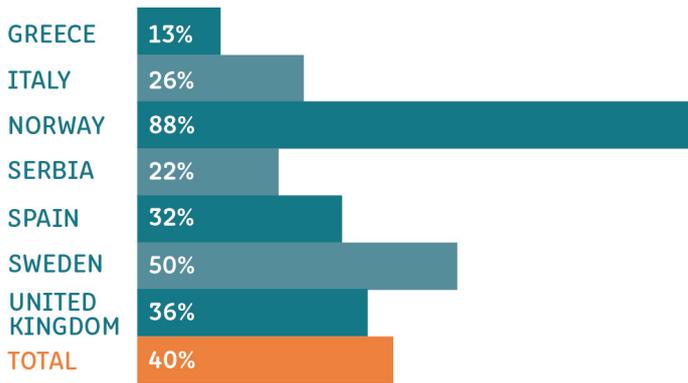


Graph 7. Gender of people in the news stories referred to as migrants/refugees, all media

**Of the 21% of the news items that reference migrants or refugees, less than half (40%) of the articles quoted them directly.**

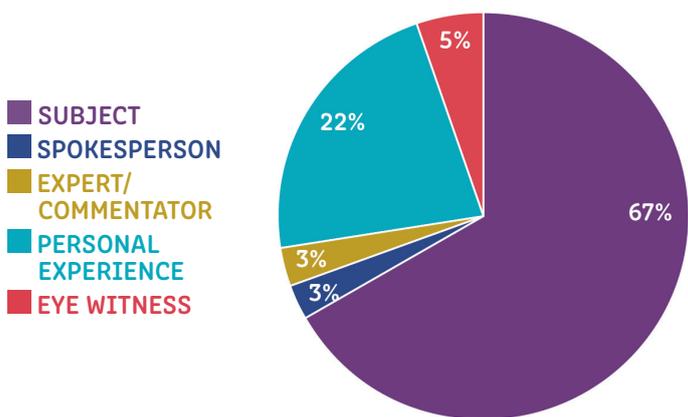
This result points to a trend of indirect representation of refugees and migrants in the news. Direct quotes are the most accurate way to represent people. Inaccuracy of representation can easily lead to misunderstanding, and misunderstanding can in turn lead to a lack of tolerance.

Graph 11. Percentage of refugees/migrants in the news stories directly quoted, all media



**Refugees and migrants are most often only identified by their displacement.**

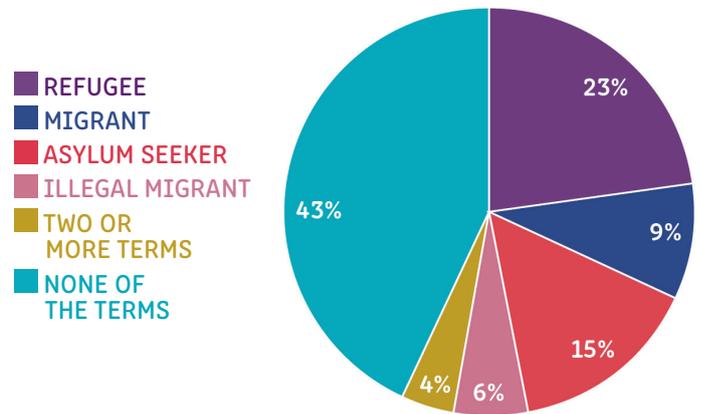
The function and role of migrants in the news speaks to broader trends of marginalisation. In the vast majority of cases (67% of the overall sample), migrants and refugees are subjects of the stories; only in 3% of the cases are they present as experts. In 43% of the articles mentioning a refugee or migrant, their occupation is not stated; while in 27% of the cases, the only “occupation” mentioned is that of migrant or refugee. When media does not go beyond the refugee label, and when the public tacitly accepts refugee as an occupation, people are deprived of their humanity and dignity. Not only are they not given a space to express themselves, by labelling them in this way, it is assumed that this label is all that there is to know about these people.



Graph 12. Function of refugees/migrants in the news stories, all media, all countries

**Terminology and impartiality may be positive signs.**

The findings suggest a low use of the term “illegal migrant.” Correct terminology signifies an understanding of the topic and avoids confusion in the minds of the readers. However, the full findings on terminology used showed significant differences across countries; other terms besides “refugees,” “migrants,” and “asylum seekers” are being used with unknown positive or negative connotations.



Graph 8. Terminology used to refer to migrants/refugees in the news story, all media, all countries

Project participants were positively surprised by the overall neutral tone in approximately half of the stories in the sample, with another one-third deemed *sympathetic*. Impartial journalism, which presents facts and perspectives from different sides, is vital to uphold. *Sympathetic* journalism, however, runs the risk of over-emphasizing the refugee as a victim. Thus, rather than sympathy, journalists should strive for *empathy*, allowing the person to express her or himself and covering the issue from a perspective of understanding, based on facts.

While the topic of migration and asylum appears to have receded from the news in the last year, it is still an issue that affects millions of people in Europe and tens of millions around the world. The role of media in this regard is more important than ever. Media can present and explain the existing challenges, provide accurate information on issues and events which can become inflammatory or be misunderstood, and provide a platform for the voices of refugees and migrants themselves. This enables the audience to move beyond a label to a real person with experience and expertise.

This project has raised the importance of following existing journalistic codes of practice, building trust and capacity between refugee groups and media professionals, creating better media understanding among NGOs working with refugee groups, and, above all, giving voice to the diversity, experience, and expertise of refugees and migrants themselves.

We must change the narrative that still too often speaks of a “refugee crisis” in Europe. The crisis is not one of numbers or capacity. The crisis is one of political will and understanding.

Full report available at:  
<http://www.refugeesreporting.eu/report/>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## For media professionals and news organisations

**Adhere** to the five core principles of ethical journalism: accuracy, independence, impartiality, humanity and accountability.

**Respect** the five-point guideline on migration reporting: Facts not bias, Know the law, Show humanity, Speak for all, Challenge hate.

**Ensure** a better and more consistent use of references to national and international legislation relating to human right and refugee law.

**Continue** using correct terminology; avoid at all costs the use of terms that have a negative connotation in the local context.

**Include** more individual refugees and migrants in stories on refugee and migration issues, and use more direct quotes from refugees and migrants.

**Ensure** that all communities of refugees and migrants living in Europe are given appropriate space in the news, to combat invisibility and improve social integration.

**Go** beyond the label: refugees and migrants are experts; include them as such in the news.

**Seek** and share news focusing on the positive contribution of refugees and migrants in host countries.

**Consider** training of journalists to promote cultural sensitivity to improve gender ratio in reporting on migration.

**Foster** links and mutual capacity building with refugee networks and groups.

**Seek** more diversity in the newsroom, including more people with a refugee/migrant background in newsrooms and in editorial teams.

## For refugee-led organisations and groups

**Identify** journalists at the local and national level who work on migration and asylum issues and reach out to them to develop a relationship.

**Train** and engage refugee communities in the use of social media to reach out to different publics, especially building upon the expertise of younger generations.

**Engage** with the media, at all levels, to raise awareness about refugee organisations, opportunities, situations faced, and needs of refugees and migrants.

**Help** identify individuals willing to share their stories and find ways to share refugees' direct experiences to aid public understanding of their realities and perspectives.

**Understand** the needs of the media in order to be able to present stories most effectively and in a way that enables media to make the best use of them.

## For civil society organisations working with refugees and migrants

**Grant** refugees and migrants with whom the organisations is in contact the right to determine whether or not they want to engage with media professionals.

**Ensure** that refugees and migrants have a voice in all matters relevant to them.

**Assist** in identifying stories with a human angle.

**Together** with media professionals, develop training programmes to build media capacity for refugee-led organisations.

**Together** with refugee-led organisations, develop training programmes on migration reporting for journalists.

## And for all

**Work** together to change the narrative in Europe from "crisis" to "opportunity", from "faceless floods" to individual people each with their own story, hopes and capacities.

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More information about the project is available at [www.RefugeesReporting.eu](http://www.RefugeesReporting.eu)

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