



Jan. 9, 2024

To the Judges:

The Rohingya are a people largely invisible to the world. Covering this persecuted Muslim minority is always an ethical minefield due to their extreme levels of trauma and desperation, the dangers inherent in reporting from the refugee camps and the risk of retaliation the Rohingya face for telling their stories.

Reporting on the sexual abuse of minors is one of the most difficult tasks in journalism. But Associated Press investigative correspondent Kristen Gelineau had the additional dilemmas of trying to report on a population of child victims who are literally locked up and hidden from the world, and for whom speaking out could spell death.

Gelineau has spent years reporting on the Rohingya refugee crisis, and was tipped off to a growing number of underage Rohingya girls being trafficked from Myanmar and Bangladesh to Malaysia to marry much older men, who frequently subject them to rape, imprisonment and other abuse.

Gelineau knew she had to tell their story. But human rights workers warned her that doing so would be nearly impossible. The girls are deliberately hidden from society – some of them are locked in their bedrooms all day by their husbands -- so finding them was the first hurdle. But even more difficult than finding them was figuring out how to interview them without putting them at risk of violent reprisals from their husbands.

To get around those problems, a contact suggested trying to do the story out of Indonesia, where many Rohingya transit en route to Malaysia. But Gelineau ultimately ruled that plan out because it was too dangerous for the girls. Conducting the interviews in Indonesia would put the girls at serious risk of retaliation from the same traffickers who would be ferrying them to Malaysia. Even if Gelineau managed to sneak the girls away from the transit camps for an interview, and even if she kept them anonymous, it would be too easy to identify them.

Haunted by the knowledge that these girls were suffering in silence, Gelineau was determined to find a way to do the story safely from Malaysia. She eventually found a Rohingya women's advocate in Malaysia who was herself a child bride and now campaigns against the practice. The advocate works directly with the girls, and was the key to making the story both possible and safe.

Gelineau worked with the advocate to identify a group of girls willing to talk, and then discussed how they could get the girls away from their husbands for the interviews. The advocate worked out a carefully coordinated plan with each girl; some concocted an excuse to leave their homes and then met the AP team at safehouses arranged in advance.

For some girls, however, there was simply no way to escape their homes; in one case, a 12-year-old girl who was scheduled to meet Gelineau at a secondary location was instead locked in her bedroom that morning by her husband.

For the girls who couldn't find a way out, Gelineau and her team had to find a way in. The advocate coordinated timings with the girls so that the AP team would arrive at their homes after the

husbands had left for work, and would leave well before the husbands returned. Every interview was thus conducted safely.

Gelineau is acutely aware of the risk of re-traumatizing survivors if interviews are not handled with the utmost sensitivity. She therefore conducted each interview slowly and carefully, ensuring none of the girls felt pressured into talking. She began each interview by explaining who she was, how the AP worked, and why she felt the girl's story was worthy of being told. But she also added a caveat: If at any time the girl felt uncomfortable, or did not want to answer a particular question, they would stop. There was no pressure to continue.

In some cases, this meant Gelineau would get to a point in an interview where she was certain the girl was withholding information – due to embarrassment and fear -- about sexual violence she had experienced. But Gelineau never pressed the girls to reveal those details. Getting that information was simply not worth causing the girls more pain.

In most cases, however, the girls were forthcoming about their assaults. They repeatedly pointed out that Gelineau and the advocate were the first people who had bothered to ask them about what they had endured, or even bothered to speak with them at all. One girl said she hadn't had contact with anyone apart from her husband in months; she later wept as the AP team left.

Care had to be taken to ensure the girls were not identifiable in the written story, photos or video piece. Because the AP does not use pseudonyms, Gelineau identified the girls only by their first initials, and withheld certain identifying details such as their home villages. AP video and photojournalist Victoria Milko shot the girls in silhouette, or tightly cropped to keep their identities hidden. For the girl featured in the video piece, care was taken to ensure she changed her outfit to something plain and unrecognizable, her face was kept out of the frame, and her voice was altered.

Gelineau also grappled with the agonizing knowledge that when she left these girls, their abuse would continue. But she knew reporting the abuse to authorities would put the girls – who entered Malaysia without paperwork – at risk of being thrown into detention centers, where they were likely to be further abused by guards. Ultimately, she listened to the guidance of the advocate, who warned that the girls would be even worse off if the authorities were alerted to their plight.

Gelineau also made a trip to the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh to investigate the disappearance of a missing boat that was carrying 180 Rohingya to Indonesia. In recent years, militant groups have taken control of the camps, leaving residents fearing for their lives and making any visit dangerous for journalists and – most crucially – for journalists' translators and fixers, who must continue to live in the camps when the story is finished.

Hours into Gelineau's reporting, warring gangs set a massive fire that wiped out thousands of shelters in an area of the camps where Gelineau's translator lives with his family. The AP team raced to the scene with Gelineau's translator so he could check on his family, and then got to work covering the fire.

In the following days, there were killings by militants, the threat of kidnapping by gangs seeking ransom, and worries about run-ins with the very traffickers the AP team was investigating. Because of the safety concerns, Gelineau had to constantly weigh the value of every piece of information she sought. Was it worth making the trek to the desolate area where the traffickers gather, or was it too dangerous? Was it worth staying later to get that one last interview, or was it too risky to

remain in the camps after sunset?

In the end, Gelineau deferred to the same ethical code she abides by on all her stories: If seeking the information puts her team at risk, it isn't worth it. She nixed suggestions by well-meaning helpers to go into the mountains to find traffickers' hideouts, and urged her team to get out of the camps every night before sunset to avoid run-ins with militants.

There was also the ethical dilemma of how far a journalist should go to help the desperate. And never has the desperation in the camps been so acute, thanks to food ration cuts that have left the population starving. Day after day, Gelineau found herself sitting in stifling shelters with sobbing, hungry people, wishing she could give them whatever money she had. But to give money to a person who was giving her information is forbidden because it calls into question the validity of that very information. Which would mean the bravery of Gelineau's sources in coming forward with that information would be for nothing.

And so instead, Gelineau offered her sources the only thing she ethically could: A promise to find and tell the world the truth about what happened to their loved ones, and to force the international community to open its eyes to the Rohingya crisis.

The impact of both stories was profound. Readers across the world responded in droves, asking how they could help. Donations flowed in to help the girls, including one reader in Australia who donated AU\$1,000 to "S," the pregnant, homeless teenager at the end of the story. S recently gave birth to a baby girl who died three days later, so the money paid off her hospital bill. The Royal Malaysia Police also reached out about the story.

The missing boat story, while painful for the loved ones of the lost passengers to see, provided them with the answers they had long hoped someone would find. No officials had bothered to visit the families to figure out what happened to the boat, leaving them feeling abandoned. From inside his shelter, the tearful father of the story's main character, Setera, told Gelineau: "It has been three months since the boat disappeared -- and you are the only one who has come."

For sensitive, empathetic and ethical reporting that gave voice to the truly voiceless, we are proud to nominate Gelineau's work for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,
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Reporter who produced the stories:

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Links to nominated works:

[‘I feel trapped’: Scores of underage Rohingya girls forced into abusive marriages in Malaysia](#)

[A boat carrying 180 Rohingya refugees vanished. A frantic phone call helped untangle the mystery.](#)