

By **Rassim Khelifa**

The hard way

I signed in to our virtual lab meeting feeling especially nervous. I had volunteered to give a presentation about my background as a first-generation college student from Africa. For the first time in 8 years abroad as an international researcher, I planned to point out privileges that scientists from the Global South had to work hard to earn, but many of my colleagues in Canada took for granted. I did not know how my postdoc supervisor and fellow lab members would react. But I had decided it was worth taking a risk to raise awareness and perhaps spur action.

I grew up in Algeria and have had to pay an extra price throughout my scientific journey as a result. Unlike most wildlife researchers, I was disconnected from nature growing up. A civil war had made wild areas unsafe to visit. I encountered the natural world during biology field trips as an undergraduate student and quickly fell in love with it. I decided I wanted to become a wildlife biologist, a field that was in its infancy in my country.

I knew studying abroad would be key for my success, so I was thrilled when I won a scholarship to attend a U.K. university for graduate school. But there was a catch: I needed to take an English test. I was fluent in Arabic and French, the languages spoken in Algeria, but I didn't have a solid grasp of English. I studied hard but didn't score high enough to secure entrance. The university asked me to retake it, but I couldn't afford the cost of another test.

I stayed in Algeria to complete a master's degree instead. I kept learning English on my own and started to write scientific manuscripts about my work. Before submitting each paper, I sent it to researchers in Europe whom I'd never met, asking for feedback. It was the only way I could think of to receive language help. To my surprise, some of them sent responses and kindly revised my English.

Two years later, I earned a Ph.D. scholarship to study in Switzerland. I was excited about the opportunity. But it was discouraging to learn that the coursework I'd taken in Algeria was deemed insufficient. I had to spend a semester taking more than double the usual amount of credits.

Midway through my Ph.D., a professor remarked, "You are quite productive, but why don't you publish in the regular journals in our field?" Shocked, I responded, "What do you mean by regular journals?" He gave a few examples, all journals dominated by researchers from the Global North. I had been publishing my papers in specialized, low-impact



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more than a series of hurdles. It's also an intellectual asset, giving me a platform to speak up about global inequities.

Since my lab presentation, I've continued to share my story. I believe it's important to help privileged scientists recognize their own privilege—because that may lead to a shift in how they interact with others. For instance, wildlife biologists who travel to Africa to conduct research could seek collaborations with local researchers. And scientists with strong English skills could help edit the work of researchers from non-English speaking countries. It's not easy to find those kind of volunteer opportunities, but I'm working to change that. I've started discussions with a preprint server about integrating an English language peer proofing system into its platform, which would connect authors who need language help with scientists who are in a position to provide it.

We can take steps to make the global scientific community more inclusive. And I want to be part of that push for change. ■

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