

# UNICEF Promoting Child Rights: Ethics of Representation

## 8 Quick Steps to Ethical Imagery

### 1. Respect real situation

Children have almost no say in how visual images of them are used and we have a responsibility as documentarians to ensure that the real situation of the people we photograph is represented. Due to the universal appeal of children (including their vulnerability), their images are used in almost every conceivable context – all implying a connection to a particular child or the state of childhood that may be direct and real, or may be only tenuous or symbolic. Overwhelmingly children do not control how they are depicted visually. This underscores the need for UNICEF to ensure that its use of images of children upholds their right to be treated with respect.

### 2. Intention & context

A useful factor in establishing criteria for appropriate use of images of children is why a particular image is used, and its context. For example, with no accompanying text for clarification, a documentary image of adolescent girls pretending to be fashion models is used with a text denouncing child prostitution. Another example is when children from one country are used in an article about children in a nearby country like the recent example of a photo of girls from Guinea used to illustrate the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. Misrepresentations may be well-intentioned but actually violate the right of the subjects to be accurately represented. Audiences of these photographs could end up feeling manipulated. Appropriate use is linked to the context in which images are used and our own positioning - our relationship with race, gender and culture.

### 3. Edits & facts

While the first criteria must remain child rights (or other human rights) it's useful to review the purpose of the assignment or the research: general advocacy? part of an educational campaign? public relations or promotion? to challenge a stereotype? and who the audiences will be (specialized media? government or other social leaders? programme-targeted local communities? the general public?). Select images that:

- successfully capture (emotionally express) the core elements of the topic;
- cover a representative range of related people, activities, locations
- offer varied visual perspectives (close-up, medium range, long distance) in both horizontal and vertical formats;
- are good technically (properly framed, exposed and processed).

First person narratives photo essays that tell stories are very useful. Stories of a 'day-in-the-life' of a subject, or sequences that follow an event or programme activity as it occurs (such as the delivery of vaccines from manufacturer to child recipient), can be more informative and more convincing, precisely because of the strengthened narrative that it offers.

The five 'W's of journalism - who, what, where, when and why - apply to captions and production paperwork.

Photos and videos without these "fact" documents can't be properly edited and distributed.

Photographers are expected to provide complete caption information with their images. This includes:

- the date on which the images were taken (if not self-evident);
- the specific location (name and designation: a town? district? etc.);
- descriptions of the subject(s) (mother? health worker? relative? teacher?), what they are doing and their relation to each other (not always self-evident);
- any UNICEF programme or other relation; and
- the names of the principal subjects (if names are key to the image's usefulness and as long as this does not unduly interfere with photographing the activity) and (if children) their ages.

### 4. No content manipulation

The vast majority of UNICEF photographs are documentary images that is, documents of people in real situations. To change that reality, even with the best of intentions, is to imply a different reality or to misrepresent. While digital manipulation offers limitless opportunities to 'fix', 'improve' or 'enhance' image content - all highly subjective judgements aimed at making the image more 'effective' - these changes have ethical and legal implications that also affect UNICEF's credibility. Following are examples of digital manipulation that were proposed but not cleared:

- removing an object in the background in an historical image;
- inserting clouds into a cloudless sky;
- removing an NGO logo from a measuring scale;
- removing a commercial brand logo from a child's T-shirt;
- removing dirt from a child's face;
- whitening a child's eyes and teeth.

In all of the above examples, the intention was to increase the impact of the images. But the criteria ultimately comes down to removing elements that might distract from a UNICEF focus and prettifying the children (or their environment), presumably to make them more 'appealing'.

### 5. Use releases

UNICEF encourage a strict separation between:

- Editorial Subject Releases for advocacy and journalistic uses. (UNICEF permissible)
- Commercial Model Releases permitting use in commercial contexts. (Not permissible)

The vast majority of photographs owned by UNICEF are documentary: images of people going about their lives in specific, real situations. Their images can be used ONLY IF the representation is fair and there is no commercial endorsement. Legal constraints apply to the use of documentary photographs protecting subjects against false or commercial use of their image without their consent.

Inappropriate use of UNICEF's documentary images includes:

- misrepresentation of the subject's identity or circumstances;
- use in a false or fictional context;
- digital manipulation of image content;
- unauthorized use in a commercial context.

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Editorial Subject Releases should be obtained by UNICEF in three situations:

- if the use of an image puts a child or other subject at potential risk of harm, but the subject is aware of and wishes to assume this risk
- if the photograph is an identification or programme document and not a journalistic/documentary recording. An example of this is child tracing programmes where children are photographed in order to reunite them with their families.
- An additional copyright issue relates to the ownership of original artwork be it a drawing, photograph, video or text created by children. Like adult artwork, children's art cannot legally be reproduced, including photographic reproductions of drawings, without their consent. For drawing art work, where security is a concern, the full name and age of the child should be written on the back of the work, not the front, where it would be reproduced, and notification attached to the work advising that identity protection must be a consideration in reproduction.

## 6. A question to ask

A useful guide in the process of using appropriate images is the question: If she/he were my child, how would I want her/him portrayed? Asking this question eliminates the tendency to treat child subjects in photographs as objects, there to accommodate our temporary advocacy or fund-raising needs, rather than as subjects who are in our care and deserve to be represented fairly. UNICEF's goal is to represent who a particular child really is and what her or his real circumstances are.

## 7. Avoid stereotypes

Polarization of the discussion between images of suffering children, on the one hand, and very happy children, on the other. While it is generally acknowledged that despairing or strongly 'negative' photographs of suffering children exemplified by the 'starving African child' have become stereotypes, these images continue to be widely disseminated, partly because many children continue to suffer. The real child tends to get lost, replaced by an object - what the photograph literally is. This process also weakens our sense of shared responsibility for the conditions that have created this distress. A related concern, particularly for fund-raisers, is how to maintain UNICEF's and focus on child issues in major humanitarian disasters without appearing to exploit human suffering, especially amidst intense media coverage and the advocacy and fund-raising efforts of numerous relief agencies, all using the suffering child image to symbolize the crisis. The opposite extreme to the suffering child image is the very happy or very 'cute' child image. Often proffered as an antidote to the starving child cliché, is the very happy or very 'cute' child image.

While positive images of smiling or laughing children can be wonderfully expressive of the uniqueness of childhood, it is also true that they tend to objectify children into an idealized and sentimentalized happiness that negates the complexity of their reality. Reactions to happy child photographs are emotionally complex. Happy children deeply affirm all that adults or other children, want for them and also validate (or compensate

for) an adult's memories of her/his own childhood. In a fundamental way, this makes people feel, legitimately, good. Consequently, images of happy children are used to sell almost everything, contributing to a distortion of genuine sentiment about children. The exploitative potential in the repeated use of happy/cute child images also needs to be acknowledged.

## 8. Protect children at risk

Advocating against human rights abuses can put individual children or women at risk. Reprisals, including physical or psychological harm and life-long stigmatization or rejection.

Both the taking of images of children and women in vulnerable situations, and the subsequent use of those images should respect the subject's rights to privacy, to participate in decisions affecting them, and to protection. Rights and protections in image use are most commonly overlooked or ignored when depicting subjects in faraway countries - a classic use of the rationale of the 'other' which is, ultimately, discriminatory.

In instances where publication of an image may put a child or woman at risk even if the name is changed or omitted, it is advisable not to publish the image at all. UNICEF has clear guidelines for reporting on children's issues, advising that children should not be identified, either visually or by name, if they are:

- victims, or perpetrators, of sexual exploitation;
- charged or convicted of a crime;
- current or former combatants, IF being so identified puts them at risk of future reprisals.

HIV positive; IF being so identified puts them at risk of future reprisals;

UNICEF's global policy that child soldiers who are holding weapons must also be protected - in anticipation of their eventual rehabilitation. However, there are instances where risks exist to use of a particular image, but arguments for publishing it are valid. This is the case, for example, with child advocates who have chosen to take a public stance on a potentially high-risk subject, either in their community or in national/international fora. In such instances, the child's right to expression and participation in issues affecting her/him must be respected. Whether a subject's identity should be protected is an editorial judgement that must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

### Further reading:

Log into <http://weshare.unicef.org> and see the following link to read more on appropriate use of visual imagery and maximizing photography use:

[http://weshare.unicef.org/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=UNIUN1\\_30&FRM=Frame:UNIUN1\\_41](http://weshare.unicef.org/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=UNIUN1_30&FRM=Frame:UNIUN1_41)

**EDITORIAL PHOTOGRAPHY SUBJECT RELEASE FORM**  
**UNICEF – UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN’S FUND**

(This is not a release for commercial use.)

By signing this release form, I hereby grant to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) the right to reproduce, display and disseminate worldwide and in perpetuity, in any traditional or electronic media format, my likeness as shown in the photographs described below, which photographs are owned by UNICEF, for the purposes of promoting peace, tolerance and children’s rights.

The photographs containing my likeness were taken on (date) \_\_\_\_\_  
in the (location including town/country) \_\_\_\_\_  
by (photographer’s name) \_\_\_\_\_

I further confirm that these images are a true likeness of me and the images were taken with my knowledge and consent.

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| Name of Subject | Age (if under 18 years) | Date | Signature |
|-----------------|-------------------------|------|-----------|
|-----------------|-------------------------|------|-----------|

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Address and other contact information

IF SUBJECT IS A CHILD UNDER 18 YEARS OF AGE:

I confirm that I am the legal guardian of the child named above and therefore may grant permission for this subject release on behalf of the child:

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| Name of Legal Guardian / Relationship to Child | Date | Signature of Guardian |
|--|------|-----------------------|
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| Name of Witness / Organization Affiliation | Date | Witness Signature |
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**ORIGINAL MEDIA COPYRIGHT RELEASE FORM**  
**UNICEF – UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN’S FUND**

**COPYRIGHT RELEASE FOR ORIGINAL MEDIA CREATED BY CHILDREN\***  
*[\* all people under age 18 years]*

**Explanation:** UNICEF – the United Nations Children’s Fund – supports the right of young people to express their views in all media on issues affecting them. So this expression is not misrepresented and so the rights of subjects in these works are also respected, UNICEF promotes the protection of children’s rights to the works they create. This includes supporting children’s rights to own their media creations and to understand how to share the copyright to their reproduction responsibly.

To publicize these works in the interests of promoting children’s issues and rights, UNICEF requires permission to reproduce this work in varied media throughout the world.

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**Individual Release:**

This form hereby grants to UNICEF the non-exclusive\*\* copyright to reproduce, display and disseminate worldwide and forever, in any traditional or electronic media format or platform, the original work or works described here and created by me, whether drawings, photographs, audio recordings, videos, writings (including their translation into any language) or other media. I affirm my permission to grant these rights to UNICEF with my signature here:

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***Name of Child Creator / Age of Child / Date / Signature***

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***Description of Work or Work Project & Media / Year Created / City, Country***

***If creator/copyright holder is a child – under age 18 years – this release must also be signed by the child’s legal guardian:***

I affirm that I am the legal guardian of the child named above and therefore also grant permission for this copyright use:

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***Name of Legal Guardian / Relationship to Child / Date / Signature of Guardian***

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***Name of Witness / Organization Affiliation / Date / Witness Signature***

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[\*\* A grant of ‘non-exclusive’ rights means that the copyright owner also keeps the rights to continue to reproduce her/his own work as she/he wishes.]