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for every child

Respectful Child Imagery:
Avoiding harmful stereotypes

Does our imagery meet UNICEF's core values?

As an organization working for the rights of children, UNICEF must be a leader in protecting the rights of children, including their representation. The stories we as UNICEF tell, and how they are received, are critical to the success of UNICEF's communication, advocacy, brand and fundraising efforts.

When UNICEF's imagery carries representations of children that perpetuate harmful stereotypes, this creates a history of hurt from which children may never recover, poses reputational risks to our brand, and financial risk for the organization, and reduces our esteem and credibility among our comparators.

Our duty to protect children's rights

All UNICEF staff, whether in a country office, HQ or National Committee, have a responsibility to ensure children's rights are upheld. Our duty to protect children not only encompasses physical protection from harm, but also the protection and respect for a child's political, social and cultural identity.

The UNICEF Imagery Working Group is providing these recommendations to guide UNICEF country offices, headquarters, national committees, and partners in applying UNICEF's existing imagery guidelines in respect of stereotypes, race and discrimination. The focus of these recommendations is on challenging-to-represent situations such as extreme poverty, 'white saviourism' and malnutrition.

These recommendations apply to all content using photo and video across UNICEF's channels including national committees, partners, influencers, external media use, digital adverts, cause related marketing, social media posts, direct response fundraising, etc. These recommendations should not be challenged based solely on what 'works' for achieving financial objectives. UNICEF's imagery users have a responsibility to ensure children's rights are upheld and should identify the strongest possible imagery within the parameters of these recommendations and UNICEF's imagery guidelines.

How do harmful stereotypes cause offence and reputational risk?

Stereotypes are generalizations about the personal attributes or characteristics of a group of people. Societal stereotypes exist about a broad range of social groups and can vary by context or situation. Many stereotypes have a long history and were created as a result of specific economic, political, or social circumstances.

Stereotypes are learned, and can be both explicitly and implicitly taught or reinforced to people through many different societal influences. These representations can affect audiences' endorsement of stereotypes, especially if people do not have frequent, close contact with members of the groups being represented outside of what they are seeing. While presenting a problem doesn't inherently lead to negative stereotyping, using stereotypes to tell the story can be harmful to the child and others who continue to confront systemic racism and discrimination.

Outdated imagery perpetuates harmful stereotypes and encourages verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups. The images and videos of children used in our work may not endanger children directly, but we must ask whether these depictions encourage other forms of harm through reinforcing long-held negative stereotypes feeding systemic racism and discrimination?

Key questions to ask yourself when making or selecting imagery

To guide you in avoiding imagery that perpetuates harmful stereotypes and unintentional implicit bias, reflect on the following questions before you finalise your imagery choices.

1. Are we representing the diversity of people in the countries where UNICEF works, when it comes to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and disabilities?

2. Are we perpetuating harmful stereotypes through the use of outdated imagery? Is this an old image that has not been used for several years? If so, have you checked with colleagues in PFP/DOC whether the imagery is still representative of the situation in the country now?

3. Does the content assume a particular nationality and race of audience member? Think about how the image could be received by an ethnic minority or member of the diaspora, for example. UNICEF's global voice has historically communicated more from a white, western perspective to a North American audience, but society is changing, and UNICEF's audience now spans many countries, regions, with people of varied ethnicities and experiences.

4. Have we considered carefully where the balance of power lies in this situation, in terms of all involved – parent, caregiver, child, content producer, content distributor – and how this might lead to negative stereotyping and other harm? Carefully consider the power dynamics between those in the imagery, those taking the imagery and those looking at imagery. For example, is there one person who 'towers' over another in the camera's gaze, including the photographer/videographer? Can we find ways to represent people as equals?

5. Are we representing the children with whom UNICEF works with the same level of sensitivity and sense of dignity as our own children or those we know?

6. Have we maintained honesty and integrity in our advocacy, communication and fundraising storytelling?

UNICEF's approach to imagery is shaped by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as well as our core values of Care, Respect, Integrity, Trust and Accountability (CRITA). Key articles and principles from the CRC are to be considered throughout for making and choosing imagery. The *8 Quick Steps to Ethical Imagery*, the summary of UNICEF'S imagery guidelines, notes the following steps are important to ensure to protect the rights of the child in making or using imagery:

1. Ensure the context & use of the image

2. Respect the real situation of the child

3. Avoid stereotyping and walk a nuanced line between 'positive' and 'negative' imagery

4. Expression of the core elements, backed up by the facts of the imagery

5. Protect children at risk

6. Informed verbal or written consent

7. Empathy check - what if it were my child?

8. Don't change the meaning the imagery makes through digital manipulation.

Guidance in action – extreme poverty

Recommendations:

✓ Create a sense of connection and empathy rather than pity. Use imagery that captures the essence of childhood, adolescence, parenthood and other shared human experiences.

✓ Recognize that people participating in UNICEF's interventions are key stakeholders in our advocacy, communication and fundraising efforts and not one-off interactions. Present people as human beings with unique experiences and feelings.

✓ Use photos/videos/text that make a story relatable or compelling. Often this is achieved through content featuring a single character/single child who shares their story. Try to find/use scenarios that capture context and enable greater understanding of the person's specific situation and challenges. Wherever possible try and connect the supporter on a journey that tells the holistic story of the child/family, creating touchpoints that give deeper context to their stories, and shows the impact of UNICEF interventions. This reduces cynicism and builds trust about the impact UNICEF can have.

✓ Clearly show how UNICEF is making an impact in the various spheres of our work; this will reassure audiences of the emotional and financial trust they have placed in UNICEF.

✓ Show how UNICEF is championing and including the expertise of local agencies and individuals in both defining problems and finding solutions. Show the ways in which a community has the capacity and agency to help improve their situation.

✓ Show the many ways people within particular countries are working to address problems through stories of UNICEF's impact, community empowerment, and innovation. One country shouldn't be defined by one problem.

Figures 1

In figure 1, a young girl is bathed by her mother. This image passes as the context of the image is related to the importance of access to safe water in early childhood development, and the girl's genitals are not visible and hidden behind the bathing basin.

Avoid:

✗ Avoid the use of a narrative that paints an entire people, country or continent with one-dimensional characteristics that perpetuates a stereotype, and an incomplete truth.

✗ Avoid using tired and one-dimensional imagery suggesting the people UNICEF serves are helpless and lack agency.

✗ Avoid the use of use imagery that diminishes or dehumanises the child, for example, an image of a child begging for food, or imagery that looks down on someone with the intention of creating a greater sense of vulnerability or pity, encouraging our audiences to 'look down' on them.

✗ Avoid showing genitals in any photo/video. The preference is to crop the imagery at the waist to preserve the privacy of the child. Avoid showing nudity from the waist up for older female children or adults, unless they're breastfeeding. Consider the message a photo of implied nudity is trying to tell: does it serve a larger point? Or is it gratuitous?

✗ Avoid the use of imagery that sexualises a child, for example those in which a child's pose could be seen as sexually suggestive, or that show children dressed in adult clothing or wearing excessive makeup.

Guidance in action – white saviourism

Recommendations:

- Recognise the "white saviour" narrative has racist and colonial roots and is prevalent in the international development sector where there is an obvious power dynamic between those who donate aid and those who receive it. Be aware of this in any imagery where there is a power imbalance at play.

- Think carefully about the use of celebrities or high-profile figures, especially if taking them to see UNICEF's programme work. Consider if there are other personalities you can work with who might have a closer relationship with the country such as a member of the diaspora or a person of the same race? Consider if there are other ways you can work with traditional high-profile figures?

- Check with national colleagues regarding the use of celebrities or experts to ensure that there are no racial, colonial or cultural connotations arising from their engagement/involvement.

- Ensure that any content which includes celebrities, experts or staff members shows the participants as equals to the celebrity, expert or staff member rather than as people who are dependent on their knowledge, assistance or pity. This can be achieved through framing, posture and angles that can create more of a sense of balance between the subjects and the photos.

- Use content documenting UNICEF's progamme work, highlighting the diversity of our staff, especially when it comes to race and ethnicity, and place an emphasis on those who are underrepresented in the public sphere and in donor countries. Show staff and especially national staff as committed professionals determined to make things better.

- Make everyone look great – just like in any group photo. Use photos that are empowering to the entire group, and not only to the celebrities, experts and staff members.

Figures 2

Figure 2 shows a celebrity actively engaging with the community - if the image is used in its entirety. If this image is cropped to remove the child on the left, and focuses only on the celebrity, then we aren't doing justice to the work the celebrity is trying to draw awareness to. Include the person who the celebrity is engaging with, to show genuine interaction and treat both child and celebrity as equals.

Figures 3

Figure 3 shows the celebrity actively engaging, drawing attention to the issues UNICEF is supporting rather than the celebrity being the centre of focus of the image.

Avoid:

- Avoid the use of imagery that suggests a person of privilege is 'saving' a participant in UNICEF's programmes. 'Othering' or 'saviorism' is not limited to the west or whiteness but exists in many cultures and societies where there is inequality.

- Avoid the use of content featuring celebrities that serves to amplify the celebrity and silence or overshadow the voices of the people UNICEF is working for. We should not frame the celebrity as the hero of the story, but instead use them to help frame an issue.

Guidance in action – malnutrition

Recommendations:

✓ Use imagery of close, loving relationships between babies and their main carertakers, through highlighting cuddling, eye contact and skin contact. Where possible and relevant, include imagery shots with men as well as women to emphasise the importance of male caregiving in a child's life.

✓ Use imagery of babies with their main caregiver or UNICEF staff, other family members or members of the wider community caring for and supporting the child.

✓ Show infants and children being treated with ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) or milk in clinical settings with a care giver rather than alone.

✓ Make and use images of children having their Body Mass Index (BMI) measured with MUAC (Middle Upper Arm Circumference) tape looking comfortable during the process.

Figures 4

Figures 4 and 5 show the same girl in the same situation, and both images pass the guidelines. Despite the obvious distress in figure 4, there is evidence of the caregiver in the frame. While we do not require the whole person in the photo, it is preferable. Include shots of the child being cared for by a caregiver within the video.

Figures 5

Figure 5 has the same girl, not in distress, showing two obvious caregivers in the frame. Figure 4 and 5 tell different stories – one would be more appropriate if we were trying to describe the challenges of the child's situation, the other would be more appropriate if we want to focus on the care they were receiving.

Figures 6

The child in figure 6 is clearly malnourished and in need of support, but does not look like he will imminently die. The child is composed, and not distressed, and is actively participating in his recovery, together with a caregiver. Include shots of the child being cared for by a caregiver within the video.

Avoid:

✗ Avoid showing a child who is dead or appears to be dead in malnutrition imagery.

✗ Avoid knowingly showing a child who has died since the imagery of the child was made.

✗ Avoid the use of imagery of children who are extremely emaciated, and clearly on the brink of death. They are likely too far advanced in malnutrition to recover through UNICEF's response, and therefore is misleading if used to promote or advocate for UNICEF's response.

✗ Avoid the use of outdated malnutrition imagery showing flies on children's faces or with mucous running down their face. A fly should never be visible on a child's face. Avoid the use of flies on the body unless incidental or momentary, eg. in a video clip. This is no longer acceptable because it portrays people in an undignified manner and perpetuates a harmful stereotype.

✗ Avoid showing children in visible distress without a caregiver or evidence of a caregiver. Err on the side of caution and use imagery that shows a child in lesser states of visible distress. Include shots of the child being cared for by a caregiver within the video or sequence.

✗ Avoid showing a baby bottle feeding as UNICEF's programme work advocates for exclusive breastfeeding and combined feeding (solids and breastmilk) after six months.

Further reading

On UNICEF's imagery standards:

- See the summary of UNICEF's imagery guidelines – 8 Quick Steps to Ethical Imagery

- See the full imagery guidelines in WeShare

- Read more about the relevance of the CRC to imagery

On UNICEF's child safeguarding standards:

- UNICEF Standard on Child Safeguarding in Corporate Partner Image Use

- UNICEF Standard on Child Safeguarding in Media Engagement and Interactions

- UNICEF Standard on Child Safeguarding Multimedia – Photo and Video

Read more about stereotyping:

- Read What if she/he were my child?

- Read Negative and positive clichés

- Read Embracing the 'Other'

- Watch an explainer video on implicit bias from the New York Times: Peanut Butter, Jelly and Racism

- Read White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

- Read Teju Cole's The White-Savior Industrial Complex

- Watch Trevor Noah: You laugh but it's true – the UNICEF Fly

- Read Poverty Porn as a Sign of a Postcolonial Wall Between "Us" and "Them"

- Read Iconic photographs and the ebb and flow of empathic response to humanitarian disasters

- Read From Flies in the Eyes to Smiling Selfies: The difficulty of portraying children who've survived life's very worst

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UNICEF Imagery Working Group

Questions?
Would you like to check the compliance of your image, discuss a challenge or get some advice?

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