

ETHICAL PHOTOGRAPHY IN GLOBAL HEALTH

A GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINE



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WHO THIS DOCUMENT IS INTENDED FOR

These guidelines are intended to be a thoughtful reference for ethical considerations when storytelling through photography. While primarily designed for photographers, ethical standards in global health photography require shared responsibility among commissioning agencies, publishers, and audiences alike. Anyone who creates, commissions, publishes, or engages with imagery related to health, inequality, and lived experience may find these guidelines and the reflection they elicit useful – whatever their level of expertise.

Rather than offering a prescriptive checklist, the document aims to provide guidance that can be adopted and adapted across different contexts and roles, from photographers and creative professionals to global health practitioners, educators, funders, and community partners. The intention is to invite deep reflection on power, representation, and ethics. Readers are encouraged to pause, question who they are, what they bring, and where they sit in relation to power (we refer to this as positionality throughout), and make more thoughtful, accountable choices about how visual stories are commissioned, created, and shared.

The word 'participant' has been intentionally used instead of 'subject' to reflect a more equitable partnership with the people being photographed.



1. CONSIDERATIONS DURING PROJECT PLANNING

A. AGENCY AND POSITIONALITY.

Good ethical practice means giving due consideration to your positionality and understanding your relationship to the subject and narrative of your work. Take time to consider your influence over the work, especially in commissioned projects, and whether the commission is one that you can take on while maintaining your ethical position. In most commissioned projects, there will be prior knowledge of the project, and efforts should be made to minimise bias.

While negotiating with commissioning bodies isn't always possible, reflecting on these issues before accepting an assignment helps ensure alignment with your professional and personal ethics and informs whether to accept it and, if so, how to plan. It's worth noting that different kinds of assignments (e.g. advertising, model shoots, PR, news, editorial, reporting, narrative) will elicit different ethical considerations. Understanding how images will be used is an important consideration. Acknowledging that syndication is a secondary source of income for many photographers, it is important to ensure that participants are aware that their images may be used for multiple purposes by multiple agents.

It is important to clarify how syndication aligns with ethical principles before accepting an assignment.



Questions to ask yourself before accepting and planning for an assignment:

- 1. How is the commission aligned with my ethics, agency and positionality?**
- 2. What is my connection to the story I'm about to tell?**
- 3. What kind of power dynamics exist between the potential participant whose image I will be taking? How might I redress these power dynamics respectfully?**
- 4. What steps can I take to protect the dignity of those I photograph and maintain narrative integrity?**
- 5. Am I well informed about how these images will be used and published? Is this usage consistent with ethical and equitable values?**

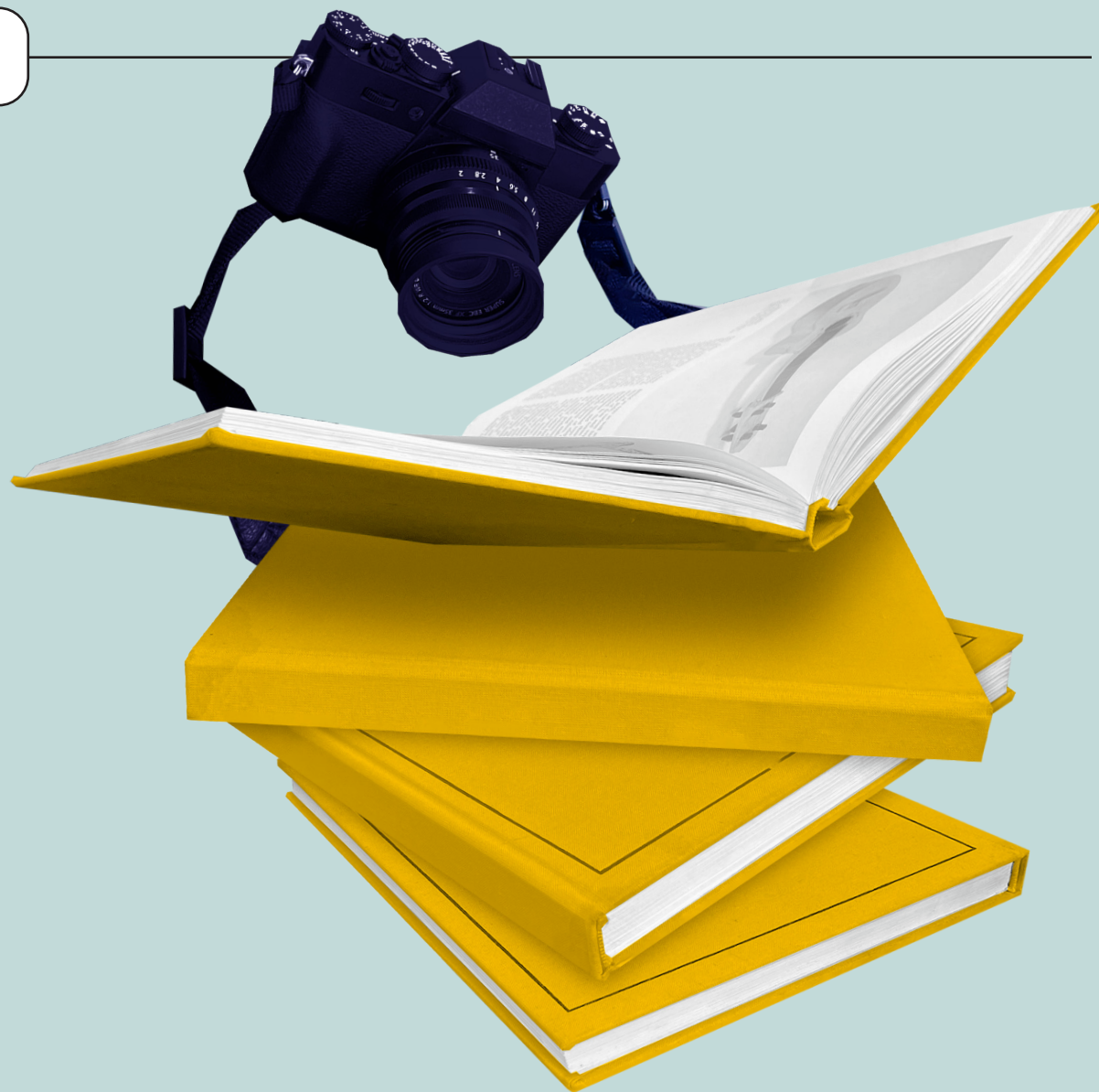
1. CONSIDERATIONS DURING PROJECT PLANNING

B. RESEARCH AND CONTEXT.

Taking time to research and understand the context of your photography project helps create more authentic, respectful work. Thorough research not only prevents stereotyping or stigmatising participants but also enriches your storytelling with depth and nuance. Researching safety aspects of your shooting locations helps protect you and the people you're working with. Consider reaching out to local experts and photographers before beginning your project for valuable insights around context, cultural nuance and potential narrative development.

Questions to ask yourself while planning:

1. **What research do I need to do to understand the context I'll be working in? Are there local experts I should / could consult or partner with before or during the project?**
2. **What cultural nuances, especially regarding potential stereotypes or stigma, am I aware of?**
3. **What safety considerations should I keep in mind for this specific project, including the safety of the participant(s) during and after the assignment?**



2. CONSIDERATIONS DURING IMAGE CREATION

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A. STORYTELLING AND NARRATIVE.



To maintain integrity and ethics within photography, it is important to consider narrative. Avoid images that reinforce stereotypes or stigma, or those that might tell an inaccurate or irrelevant story due to insufficient context. One of the best ways to do this is to enable participants to have some autonomy over how the story is told. Telling the truth and facilitating participant autonomy while maintaining the creative integrity of the image and your own identity as a photographer is a delicate balance.

Questions to ask yourself when taking the image:

1. **Could the image reinforce any stereotypes or stigma?
If so, how could this be avoided?**
2. **Have I given the participant(s) a chance to express preferences around how to be represented and how the story is told?**
3. **How will I respond to/what will I do with participant perspectives? What will I do if the participant's perspectives clash with mine, the commissioner's, or the publication's?**
4. **How might my perspective (or that of the commissioning agency) be shaping the story told through this photograph?**
5. **Does this image represent the participant authentically, respectfully, and with dignity?**

2. CONSIDERATIONS DURING IMAGE CREATION

B. PERMISSION AND CONSENT.

Permission and consent to tell a particular story through an image are fundamental to ethical practice. Consent goes beyond a signed form. Ensuring that permission is freely given with adequate information is critical. Where possible, developing a genuine professional relationship with participants before photographing them allows for greater trust and richer storytelling. Meaningful, individualised consent sometimes goes beyond what legal and institutional frameworks require, and navigating this thoughtfully demands time and care.

Building and maintaining trust between yourself as a photographer and storyteller and the people you are working with is essential. Honest conversations with clear expectations can go a long way toward building relationships. Importantly, consent and permission should be clearly documented and a copy provided to participants. The specific mechanisms for documenting consent (e.g., written, audio/video recorded) are less important than ensuring consent is freely given, fully informed, and documented in some way.

Questions to ask yourself while asking for permission:

1. **Have I given the participant enough information and time to consider granting permission? Have I been clear about remuneration?**
2. **Have I been clear about the intended narrative and been transparent about how the images will be used? Have I been clear about whether the participant will be able to approve images or quotes? Is there a process for changing or removing images if participants request it, and if not, have I been clear about this?**
3. **Have I considered the vulnerability of participants (e.g. children, people who are ill or seeking healthcare, or power imbalances)? How will I ensure that vulnerable participants are adequately protected?**



3. CONSIDERATIONS DURING POST-PRODUCTION AND PUBLICATION

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A. INTEGRITY OF THE IMAGE.

Post-production, particularly in the age of artificial intelligence, can involve substantial alterations and manipulation of an image. It's worth maintaining awareness of how these might affect the ethical integrity of your storytelling. The editing phase deserves the same ethical attention as the shooting process itself.

Post-production and editing include context-dependent consideration. For example, in photojournalism, alterations to images generally follow strict codes of conduct to preserve authenticity and avoid distorting the truth. In this context, altering images can undermine the credibility and trustworthiness of the image and story. In contrast, conceptual photography actively encourages creative expression.

Any image alterations must be made in line with permissions given by participants. Manipulating images in a way that distorts the truth or violates permissions risks causing emotional and social harm to participants, has legal repercussions, and serious reputational damage to yourself and associated parties.



Questions to ask yourself during post-production:

- 1. Have I preserved the integrity of the original image?**
- 2. Are my edits staying within the boundaries of what was agreed to with participants? Does the edited image still respect the original message?**
- 3. Am I introducing any fictional elements or inaccuracies into the story, and if I am, was permission provided by participants? Do these elements change the narrative or agreements I made with participants?**
- 4. Am I inadvertently introducing elements into the image that could be disrespectful, stigmatising, or stereotyping?**

3. CONSIDERATIONS DURING POST-PRODUCTION AND PUBLICATION

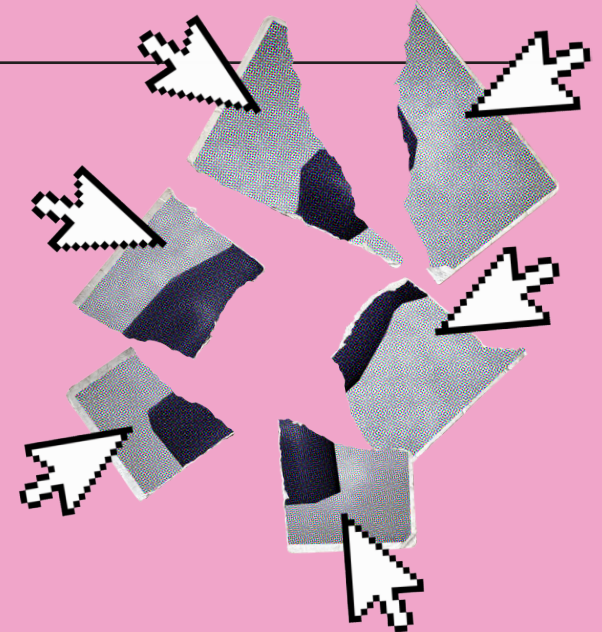
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B. CONTEXTUALISATION AND FAIRNESS.

Where and how an image appears can significantly influence the story it tells and what types of image are appropriate to use. In some cases, images may be published (with consent) to spark dialogue or discourse, while in other instances, images may be taken at face value. Published images should be relevant to the story being told. While photographers may not have full control over how images are published, it's important to have this discussion with publishers where possible. Another opportunity to provide context and maintain integrity is through the captions and text that accompany images. Image captions should be as detailed and accurate as possible, particularly if images are syndicated or considered for further use.

Questions to ask yourself in the publishing process:

1. **Have I provided enough context to the image through captioning or accompanying text to frame the narrative appropriately?**
2. **Does the publishing platform allow for meaningful discourse or constructive critique of an image?**
3. **Am I publishing the image on a platform that the participant may not have explicitly consented to?**
4. **Have I continued to honour the privacy, dignity and anonymity of the participant(s) during the publishing process?**



HOW THIS DOCUMENT WAS PREPARED

The following guidelines emerged from Things We Left Unseen, a participatory photography project that equipped young people from Khayelitsha, an underserved area in Cape Town, to tell stories about the lived experience of infectious disease, climate change and mental health. The project was implemented by Eh!woza in partnership with the Wellcome Photography Prize. Learners produced images between July 2024 and February 2025, with images exhibited in London alongside the winners and top 25 entries of the Wellcome Photography Prize 2025, as well as in an exhibition in Khayelitsha in 2026.

These guidelines build upon the foundation established by Charani and colleagues in their Lancet Global Health (2023) publication titled The use of imagery in global health: an analysis of infectious disease documents and a framework to guide practice. The framework was validated and developed further by: 1) incorporating feedback and insights from South African photographers, creative industry professionals, and global health experts, and 2) conducting four workshops with Khayelitsha high school learners to incorporate perspectives on ethical photography from young people most affected by these health challenges.

All Interview and workshop feedback was transcribed, anonymised, and analysed for key themes and recommendations, with all participants consenting to share their perspectives. The Eh!woza team received support from Prof. Esmita Charani (Wellcome Career Development Fellow, Department of Medicine, University of Cape Town), Prof. Sipho Dlamini (Department of Medicine, University of Cape Town), and Dr Alex Pinto (NHS, UK), who contributed significantly to the framing, analysis, and synthesis of this document.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Below you'll find a selection of readings and resources that may prove valuable at different stages of your project. These materials can help deepen your understanding of ethical photography practices and provide guidance when you encounter challenges. For further information about how this guideline was developed or about the work, please contact Tasha Koch: tash@ehwoza.com or info@ehwoza.com.

Charani E, Shariq S, Cardoso Pinto AM, Farooqi R, Nambatya W, Mbamalu O, Abimbola S, Mendelson M. The use of imagery in global health: an analysis of infectious disease documents and a framework to guide practice. *Lancet Glob Health*. 2023 Jan;11(1):e155-e164. doi: [10.1016/S2214-109X\(22\)00465-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(22)00465-X).

Alenichev A, de Laat S, Solomon N, Suwalowska H, Peeters Grietens K, Parker M, Kingori P. Assembling a global health image: Ethical and pragmatic tensions through the lenses of photographers. *PLOS Glob Public Health*. 2024 Feb 14;4(2):e0002540. doi: [10.1371/journal.pgph.0002540](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0002540).

Alenichev A, Kingori P, Grietens KP. Reflections before the storm: the AI reproduction of biased imagery in global health visuals. *Lancet Glob Health*. 2023 Oct;11(10):e1496-e1498. doi: [10.1016/S2214-109X\(23\)00329-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(23)00329-7).

Global Health Network's [The Practice and Ethics of Participatory Visual Methods for Community Engagement in Public Health and Health Science Course](#).

[Photographers Without Borders Code of Ethics](#)

[Ethical Journalism Network Photography Ethics Toolkit](#)

[Thomson Foundation Ethical Photographers Toolkit](#)

Global Health Network's [Essential Elements of Ethics](#)

[Photography Ethics Centre](#)

[Associated Press Standards and Practices](#)