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Please consider only printing the greyscale article pages

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TELLING THE STORY

# THE IMAGES DON'T FADE: BE CAREFUL WITH VISUAL CHOICES

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TELLING THE STORY

## THE IMAGES DON'T FADE: BE CAREFUL WITH VISUAL CHOICES

Once images are out there, they can't be reeled back in. Universal access to the internet can put people in many kinds of danger.

**When you're reporting on CRSV, the visual choices you make – whether in filmed footage or in photographs – are vitally important. Particularly now, in the digital age, images have an afterlife long beyond that of the story you're working on. It is crucial that survivors fully understand how they'll be presented visually and what the implications are. You should consider:**

- **Is there strong justification for identifying survivors, or is it safer to start with anonymity?**
- **Have they given their meaningful consent to be photographed or filmed? Do they understand the reach of social media that may be seen in their communities?**
- **Is there anything in the image that could inadvertently reveal their identities?**
- **How can I involve them in image making so that they are comfortable with the final products?**
- **And the basic ethics check: would I be happy for myself or a family member to be filmed or photographed this way?**

*"Let me be clear – images of conflict rape and rape survivors need to be made and widely seen. They just need to be made differently in ways that protect subjects, that respect context, that don't perpetuate cliched stereotypes, and aren't presented by media companies as some kind of magical elixirs for survivors."*  
Nina Berman<sup>[a]</sup>

Images are a vital component of conflict reporting, including on CRSV, and can be a powerful means of connecting with readers. But there is also significant scope for harm to survivors, that goes beyond the risks of interviewing them.

Visual clichés are common – showing the survivor as isolated and brutalised, removed from their own environment, or focusing intensely on the physical. On some occasions, this can also tap into a long history of racist imagery that dates from colonialism and slavery. Visual literacy is a vital component of getting this right.

Moreover, images are shared easily in the digital age, on different devices and across platforms, meaning that survivors can be haunted by them even if they live in remote communities and for years to come. In the Balkans wars of the 1990s, there were cases in which women married without telling their husbands that they had been raped. Few had any idea that archival material might still be available online, decades later.

The digital age is also giving rise to more image-led stories, and the pressure on editors and photographers to produce the most shocking, attention-grabbing picture can be intense. This can result in images that fetishize the body of a survivor or identify them unnecessarily.

[a] Nina Berman is a documentary photographer who has covered conflicts in Bosnia and Afghanistan. A contributor to the research for this project, she has written on the ethics of photography in conflict and in peacetime and is a professor of journalism at Columbia University. For more, see: <https://dartcenter.org/resources/visual-choices-covering-sexual-violence-conflict-zones>

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As previously discussed in section #3 on consent, involving interviewees in decisions about how they will be portrayed is good practice. Journalists reporting on the rape of Yazidi women by ISIS thought they were guaranteeing the anonymity of the women by photographing them with their faces covered but in fact they were easily identifiable within their communities by their eyes and distinctive scarves.

## Making more effective and ethical visual choices

While photojournalists are often operating with pressure from the desk to get the most impactful image, it is possible to make images of CRSV survivors that avoid harm to the subject and clichés even when time is tight. Here are some questions to ask yourself about the images you are taking:

- Could you start with the assumption that any images of survivors will be anonymous, and that they'll only be identified if there's a strong justification for doing so? Consider discussing this in detail with your editor before arriving at your destination.
- There are many powerful and creative ways of making images which don't identify survivors. It is best to think these through well ahead of time. Maybe keep a digital scrapbook of the many ways others have achieved this.
- Given that the story is about rape, be aware of how you are depicting the survivor's body. What part of the body are you drawing attention to and how can you avoid any perception of the person as a sexual object?
- Try to avoid visual clichés that suggest the person is lonely or destroyed. In some cases, extreme isolation may be the reality of the story, but usually people do have a broader context of support – and it is more accurate to reflect that.

If you are using digital techniques to mask identity, the original pixels need to be removed from the image, not just blurred and, of course, you should make sure that there is no metadata in a file that identifies location. It is also important to think about who might be around when images are being taken and why. Here are some points to consider:

- Would the subject like to have someone present with them or are there people around who shouldn't be watching? For documentary filmmakers, consider minimising the crew.
- After the images have been taken, consider showing them to the survivors to allow them to express whether they are happy with the way they have been captured.
- Make sure the survivors understand that images of them may be around for a very long time and that they can be shared across platforms, even in their own community.

Are there ways of not rushing the assignment? Could you discuss how the shoot will work in advance and explain how long it will take? Remember that children can never give consent to have their identity shared, regardless of whether an adult provides it.

## Photojournalism and Editors

*"I can see how a photographer might not have all these things going on in their head, but an editor, that's just shocking. I feel that for editors, there's more of a sense of responsibility about being visually literate in terms of historical context."*

Nina Berman.<sup>[a]</sup>

Photographers interact with survivors and make decisions about visual choices. But editors bear ultimate responsibility for what images are commissioned and chosen from a set of pictures before they reach the

[a] Nina Berman contributed to this project see also: <https://dartcenter.org/resources/visual-choices-covering-sexual-violence-conflict-zones>

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public. What might be appropriate for an inside page – where it has meaning and context – might have an altogether different impact if it stands alone on a cover or in an Instagram post.

With the benefit of expertise and time to think strategically away from the pressures of the field, editors should consider the visual language that a photograph may deliberately or inadvertently reference. There's a long history of images of enslaved people, for instance, that image-makers working in developing countries should avoid.

Photo editors might also have the power to make decisions about the afterlife of an image – its licensing and availability – as well as the way in which it is used on social media.

As an editor, you may be working with long-term colleagues or commissioning freelancers you've never met. Making time for a brief 10-minute conversation about boundaries, meaningful consent, and anonymity can make a huge difference. Here are some things to consider:

- Have you had a proper conversation with photographers around consent?
- Do survivors really need to be identified? What visual treatments would work for you while preserving anonymity?
- Captions are part of the story and, just like the images, they shouldn't fetishise or stigmatise the person.
- Can you give images of CRSV survivors a time limit? Can you make them objects for one-story use that don't get sold onto agencies?
- How are you using images on social media? Do you need to show a survivor's face or body on Instagram, for instance, or is there another way of promoting the story which does not leave an individual survivor carrying the whole weight of it?

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