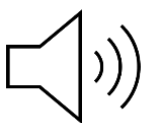




Cover photo caption: Samar Ab El-Ouf, a Palestinian freelance photojournalist, at work in the Gaza Strip. 23 July 2019.
Photographer: Alyona Synenko/ICRC

Ethical Content-Gathering For Public Communications

Guidelines to ensure we treat people with dignity, respect and care when gathering content for public communications.



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ICRC

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1. The ICRC: a trusted source

The ICRC's photographs and videos show the reality of people's experiences caught up in war and violence and the organization's work to limit their suffering. Our images may show people's struggles – but also their resilience and how they cope. Our communications must be “truthful, accurate and respectful”, while preserving “the dignity of communities affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence” in line with the ICRC's [Policy Document 7](#).¹

Our content should show some of the following aspects of the ICRC's work:

- the reality of people caught up in war and violence
- the ICRC close to people and how we are helping
- the ICRC with its partners in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement
- the ICRC's branding – more details on [communicating for fundraising](#).



Photo caption: Before Saturday, Fatimé had never set foot outside El Geneina, Sudan. But after her nephew was injured, they fled, walking for days to reach the border with Chad. “They shot my nephew in the face and left him for dead. This is how he survived. I had to pick him up and walk for two days before we reached Adré. Thanks to you, he will receive the care he needs,” says Fatimé. Adré hospital, Chad, 12 July 2023. Photographer: Eleonore Abena Kyeiwaa Asomani/ICRC

¹ The ICRC's guiding principles were informed by the [Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations \(NGOs\) in Disaster Relief](#), the [ICRC Rules on Personal Data Protection](#), the [Concord Europe Code of Conduct on Images and Messages](#) and Policy Document 7: [ICRC External Communication Doctrine](#) (see Principle 8: Communicate for Impact and ethically, p. 15).

Dignity and vulnerability

Given the nature of the ICRC's work in armed conflict and other situations of violence, the individuals and communities we work with are often experiencing some level of vulnerability. They may be injured, fleeing violence or in need of food and shelter. These are important aspects to document in order to highlight their situation and why humanitarian assistance is necessary. However, photographing or filming vulnerable people requires careful consideration. To respect people's dignity and avoid putting people at risk, we work closely with our protection colleagues and:

- avoid equating vulnerability with helplessness, by showing resilience, courage and empowerment despite the difficult situation.
- avoid objectifying the person, by focusing on their humanity, emotions, preferences and aspirations. Showing people as whole beings, and not just what makes them vulnerable, also helps viewers connect to the person and their experience.
- avoid showing people in humiliating or degrading situations.² While portraying dignity varies by culture and circumstances, degradation can usually be avoided by seeking informed consent (see page 8).



Photo caption: Umar Sanda has been searching for his son Grema for over seven years. They fled their village when it was attacked and became separated. Sanda does not believe reports that his son might have died. The ICRC is working with the Nigerian Red Cross Society to find answers about missing loved ones and, in the best-case scenario, reunite families. Sanda copes by praying, busying himself with his kola nut business and surrounding himself with friends. North-eastern Nigeria, 2020. Photographer: Prichilla Absi/ICRC

² In the ICRC's previous audiovisual guidelines, "degraded" was defined as "causing a loss of self-respect; causing one to feel ashamed or undignified".

To guide you as you gather content, it can be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have I recorded the **who, what, where, when and why** of someone's situation that I have photographed/filmed, and do I have their consent? Without their consent, we may not be able to use the content. (See informed consent on page 8 and essential data on page 14)
- If this were about my family, friends or loved ones, would I feel comfortable with how they are portrayed?
- If this were my child, how would I feel about this photo or video?

For more guidance, please consult [People-centric communications: Internal guidance](#).

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are oversimplified generalizations about groups of people, reducing the complexity of human beings to a single idea. Stereotypes can be damaging and dangerous and have real-life consequences, particularly when they convey negative ideas about marginalized people.

We have all internalized stereotypes without realizing it, and these stereotypes can emerge when we take or curate photos or videos. However, we have a responsibility to not perpetuate them. Ensure local colleagues or the community is involved when creating content, and ask yourself the following questions:

- Who is (or what groups are) being shown?
- What are the power relations between these groups? Are the power dynamics displayed intentionally?
- Is anyone shown in a stereotypical role?
- Is the community helping or only receiving help? Are the community members talking or being talked to?
- Beyond capturing the who, what, where and why, is this person presented as a whole human being (their hopes, resilience and determination)?

If your photos or videos are for a global audience, be mindful that the following imagery is overrepresented in humanitarian communications:

- poverty in certain countries, particularly on the African continent
- women and people with disabilities in passive roles
- children shown in undignified clothing
- white Western workers giving, and locals receiving passively (or appearing in the background).



Photo caption: Shamsullah is 14 years old. He lost his legs in a landmine explosion in 2015. He was referred to the ICRC's physical rehabilitation centre by the Emergency Hospital. He can now walk with a prosthesis and two crutches. Shamsullah is studying hard. In the morning, he goes to a private school, and in the afternoon he studies in a public school. Lashkar Gah (Helmand Province), Afghanistan, 15 November 2018. Photographer: Andrew Quilty

Authenticity

Working in conflict zones, we often gather content in situations that are sensationalized by the media. The integrity of our content depends on keeping it true to people's lived experience – "truthful, accurate and respectful". Ideally, images should be taken in the person's natural environment, and not staged (such as by re-enacting life-changing or dramatic events). Above all, content-gathering should never do harm to the person or cause additional stress (see informed consent on page 8).

AI-generated content and greenscreen

A comprehensive policy on this is forthcoming. In the meantime, please be guided by the fact that the ICRC is a trusted source of information. Therefore, any AI-generated content must be clearly labelled as AI-generated so it cannot be confused with reality. The same is true for the use of greenscreen; it should never be used in such a way that a viewer may be confused about what is real, or that someone is somewhere they are not.³

³ Cautionary example: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/02/amnesty-international-ai-generated-images-criticism>

Graphic images

Discretion must be used when considering whether to publish graphic images (such as burns or mutilation), images of violence or personal health information on digital platforms. In addition to applying the criteria of dignity and vulnerability as discussed above, please consider how sensitive the data are. This is especially relevant in the case of images disclosing health data. Health-related data are, by definition, sensitive information and thus require extra care when being processed.

When in doubt, consult an ICRC protection colleague to consider whether the publication of the image or video creates a risk for the individual or heightens their vulnerability.



Photo caption: The Mexican Red Cross provides medical assistance to a migrant who got hurt while trying to catch a moving train. The Red Cross provides migrants with leaflets detailing the location of free phone call points, medical assistance centres and shelters along the migratory route. Ciudad Serdán (Puebla state), 27 September 2016. Photographer: Brenda Islas/ICRC

2. Informed consent

The purpose of consent is to build trust and show respect to the person whose image and content you're capturing. The trust built by asking for consent can enhance our work with the person and how the community perceives the ICRC. Therefore, in every situation possible, we try to get written consent before photographing or filming. In the rare cases where it's not possible – and as long as the situation is not degrading – you can get consent afterwards. **Always ensure the delegation has consent forms available in the required language so you can take several copies with you when gathering content.**

Note, however, that even when valid consent has been obtained, the ICRC is required to consider all foreseeable consequences of identifying individuals. In this context, “identifying” means “providing personal data, i.e. showing their faces in a recognizable way in photographs or video, naming them, including in audio recordings or radio, or providing other identifying information such as the names of their parents, siblings or home address, or elements related to their particular content, a piece of clothing, etc.”⁴ The process of obtaining consent is just as essential as gathering the content, and it's important to carefully consider the quality of the consent obtained and whether the person was under duress when providing it. A person's consent should be informed, explicit, unambiguous and freely given. It requires meaningful dialogue and is about listening and asking questions.⁵ Fully informed consent requires a full conversation reflecting on any risks; although this ethical approach to obtaining consent takes extra time, it also engages participants more than a simple yes-or-no approach.

When gathering content, the consent forms will help you to clearly communicate to the person (or their legal guardians or family members) in simple terms:

- who we are and why we are there
- where the photos or videos may appear, by showing examples
- that we will keep the content in our archives.

People should also be informed of their data protection rights (information, access, correction and objection), and they should be provided with the contact details of an ICRC employee and of the [ICRC Data Protection](#) team⁶ so they can reach out if they have a question or wish to withdraw their consent. It's important to specify that once a communication product is published, the ICRC's control over it will diminish, since we cannot control how third parties use it. Safeguarding people's personal data is an essential aspect of protecting their lives as well as their physical and mental integrity. Be sure to refer to and abide by the standards set out in the ICRC Rules on Personal Data Protection.⁷

When we want to photograph or film someone, we should provide them with numerous opportunities to say “no” and express their concerns. This can be done by going through the checklist at the beginning of the consent form with them and asking, for example:

⁴ [Guidelines – The identification of children in communication products](#)

⁵ Bond, [Putting the people in the pictures first: Ethical guidelines for the collection and use of content \(images and stories\)](#), Bond, London, 2019, p. 14.

⁶ ICRC Data Protection Office (dpo@icrc.org)

⁷ [ICRC Rules on Personal Data Protection](#)

- Is there anyone who you don't want to see this photo or video?
- Would you feel more comfortable if we didn't take your/your child's photo, or film you/your child?
- Are you still comfortable with being filmed?⁸

You must make clear that if they decline, there will be no impact on the services the ICRC provides to them or their community.

If the person will be photographed or filmed in a way that does not reveal their identity (especially if they fall under one of the vulnerable categories listed in the next section), you should also communicate this to reassure them. For example, show them the images after you've taken them and speak with them to ensure they're comfortable with the way they are portrayed.

Informed consent forms for content-gathering

The consent forms with the corresponding checklists and explanatory information can be found here:

Adult consent form

Child consent form

Informed consent is needed in almost every scenario. The only exceptions are when you are dealing with public figures in public places, individuals in public whose faces cannot be seen clearly or do not feature prominently, and large crowds.

Please ensure these consent forms are translated into the appropriate languages and share them with your communications colleagues and freelancers. Ensure they have read this document and understand informed consent.

IMPORTANT: Leave one signed copy of the consent form with the person you have filmed/photographed for their reference. A second signed consent form (or video format if written is not possible) must be stored together with the content on [MediaHub](#)⁹ for sharing and archiving.

Vulnerable groups and consent

The following serves as a general reference when informed consent is needed. In all situations in which people are identifiable, and when they're not in group A, informed consent is needed.

Some situations require a certain amount of spontaneity (e.g. medical evacuations). In such circumstances, make sure to obtain consent at the earliest opportunity. If informed consent cannot be obtained (e.g. wounded people being rushed to hospital), the person should not be identifiable in the images or videos.

⁸ Bond, [Putting the people in the pictures first: Ethical guidelines for the collection and use of content \(images and stories\)](#), Bond, London, 2019, p16

⁹ [MediaHub](#)

A. Consent is not needed:

- for public figures (officials, celebrities) in public situations
- in a public setting, for individuals whose faces cannot be seen clearly, or where they do not feature prominently¹⁰
- for large crowds in public¹¹

B. Informed consent (written or filmed) is needed to film/photograph:

- people in a public setting who are identifiable
- patients in a clinic or hospital

Under certain conditions, and in consultation with an ICRC protection or detention colleague, it is permissible to film/photograph the following people:

- the wounded and sick: consider their dignity and if they are able to give informed consent
- weapon bearers (members of armed groups/soldiers)
- migrants and refugees
- children:¹² consider their dignity and whether they or their guardians are in a position to give informed consent
- detainees (excluding POWs): this requires a case-by-case assessment with an ICRC protection or detention colleague. Without consent, detainees' identities should be protected (blurred face, filming from a certain angle).
- adult victim/survivor of sexual violence

C. Due to their inherent vulnerability, the following people must never be identifiable in content:

- presumed perpetrators of sexual violence, regardless of age and gender
- people who asked the ICRC not to make them identifiable in its communication materials, or who withdraw their consent
- prisoners of war¹³
- certain categories of children, including child victims/survivors of sexual violence and children born from sexual violence
- hostages, as they are likely to be suffering from trauma. Therefore, consider protecting their identity (blurred face, filming from a certain angle) and consult your protection or detention colleague.

Photos and videos should never be used for public communication showing:

- children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG) carrying weapons or acting in a threatening manner
- people holding unexploded ordnance.

¹⁰ The ICRC document [Guidelines – The identification of children in communication products](#) defines “prominently” as the dominant person of the image, where the features of the person’s face can make them easily identifiable.

¹¹ People identifiable in a crowd or in the background of an image should be warned that a photo or video will be taken and given the option to object or step out of the frame.

¹² [Guidelines – The identification of children in communication products](#)

¹³ For prisoners of war, see the Third Geneva Convention, Article 13, and the Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 27.

Remember:

- As the photographer or videographer, consider how lighting, angle, proximity, lens choice, framing and backdrop influence how someone is depicted.
- In situations where people show that they do not want to be photographed or filmed (e.g. they shy away from the camera or put up a hand to block your view), you must respect their wishes.

Here are two examples of how to photograph or film people so they are not identifiable, either at their own request or in keeping with the rules set out above:



Photo caption: Child whose father is incarcerated in Israel. The border has been closed since the conflict escalated in 2022, limiting family visits. The ICRC works with the authorities to promote humane conditions of detention, including the right to contact with families. Gaza City, 30 August 2022. Photographer: Abed Zaqout/ICRC

In this example, the ICRC's war surgery work is conveyed without showing the patient's identity.



Photo caption: "Tonight it was very noisy," said ICRC nurse Susanne Serry. "The explosions are coming closer. So many children have burns, with wounds full of maggots. It's a tragedy. One of my colleagues broke down while working with me in the operating theatre. He got a call that ten people in his family, and his best friend, were killed in Rafah. It's heartbreaking. We could work 24/7 and it wouldn't be enough." European Hospital, Gaza Strip, 8 November 2023. Photographer: Paul Ley/ICRC

The deceased

Clear guidelines on the use of images depicting deceased persons, the loved ones of deceased persons, forensic practitioners and forensic action in general in communication products are available in the ICRC's [Practical Guidance on the Dissemination of Audio-Visual Material Involving Human Remains](#).

Depicting human remains in photos or videos should be avoided, except for purposes of forensics case documentation and internal training. For external publications, where possible, consult a Forensics colleague. Forensics activities should be communicated about in ways that do not show human remains (e.g. through audiovisual material on trainings or repatriation events).

Here's a [list of images pre-approved by Forensics](#) that show forensic-related situations, in keeping with the provided guidance.



Photo caption: Four of Marcelino's family members – his mother and three younger siblings – were killed in the 1980s during Peru's armed conflict. More than 30 years passed before the remains were discovered, identified and returned to the family. The four coffins were transported over the mountains by horse and donkey to the family's original village, where the family could provide a dignified burial. 4 December 2016. Kathryn Cook-Pellegrin/ICRC

Sexual and gender-based violence

Due to the high sensitivity of sexual and gender-based violence, greater attention and consideration should be paid when depicting and communicating about this topic. The personal and legal implications of such violence, and its impact on the community, make raising awareness about it and the harm it causes a matter of great importance.

However, like any complex issue, it's crucial to communicate without causing any harm when capturing a victim/survivor's experience. Their safety and best interests should take precedence over everything else. Always consult an ICRC protection colleague ahead of any content-gathering on this topic. Questions asked during an interview should be respectful and avoid judgemental language and culturally insensitive remarks. Victims/survivors may need to take breaks or to stop the interview altogether. In some instances, they may require emergency mental health support if the interview unknowingly leads to increased anxiety, panic or distress.

Child victims, children born from sexual violence and presumed perpetrators of sexual violence or sexual exploitation **must never be identifiable** in ICRC communication products. For more information, please consult the [guidelines on identifying children in communications products](#).

One of the key principles of ICRC action is that we do not gather content from victims/survivors without offering them referral pathways,¹⁴ such as information on where they can go to get help (including health care, legal aid, protection and economic support). You should always have the delegation's updated sexual violence survivor referral list ready, and always share this information before and after the interview in a clear and simple way. Lastly, wherever possible, ICRC media coverage should include information on available services, hotlines or ways to seek help (such as the webpage for survivors of sexual violence). ICRC communications staff should include this message when pitching stories about sexual violence to media outlets.¹⁵

3. Post-production

As a trusted source, the ICRC must be “truthful, accurate and respectful” in its communications. **It is therefore essential to document and share the who, what, when, where and why of content.** When conveying someone's experience, the more information the better. All these data need to be carefully inputted into the [MediaHub](#) together **with the consent form**, detailing whether this content is approved for public communications and [ICRC archiving](#).

Essential data: loglists, captions and metadata

Please document and share on the [MediaHub](#) the following essential data in connection with photos or videos (which should be high-resolution):

- **who** was filmed/photographed. Please provide accurate information about each individual who appears: correctly spelt full name, age, location, date and whether the person has benefited from ICRC support or not. We should try to avoid producing content featuring anonymous people.
- **adult consent forms/child consent forms**.
- a brief explanation describing the situation: **what, where, why** and **when**. Whenever possible and appropriate, that explanation should include the people's “before” and “after” situation, what their current needs are, and how the ICRC has supported them. This allows for a more well-rounded understanding of the situation, as opposed to what might otherwise be a single moment of vulnerability.
- any **copyright restrictions** or freelance contracts connected to this content.
- metadata tagging.¹⁶ Please fill in the required fields following the guidelines for [videos](#) and [photos](#).

Note: Do not assume the viewer knows about specialized topics or is familiar with ICRC jargon (e.g. “IHL”, “MHPPS”). Concepts should be summarized and written for a non-expert audience.

¹⁴ If there are no services available for victims/survivors in a given area, interviews with victims/survivors of sexual violence or the inclusion of images or videos in communications material must be carefully managed. This means the victim/survivor must be fully informed of the lack of services and aware that the communication could be used for awareness-raising and advocacy purposes.

¹⁵ [Key Principles on Ethical Communication Practice on Sexual Violence](#)

¹⁶ [Metadata – Short summary of good and bad practices](#)

Post-production considerations

How content is post-produced – cropped, scripted, and edited with other photos/videos – can profoundly influence how an individual is depicted and an audience’s perception. As a trusted source, the ICRC must, in its post-production work:

- provide an accurate and comprehensive representation of someone or a group of people
- never manipulate elements in an image
- adhere to any editing restrictions on footage/photographs noted on [MediaHub](#) or in the [ICRC archives](#)
- avoid placing text over people’s faces
- consider changing children’s names to add an additional layer of protection.



Photo caption: Residents receive welding equipment purchased by the ICRC. Vodiane (Donetsk region), Ukraine, 1 October 2019. Yevgen Nosenko/ICRC

4. Useful links

[Adult consent form](#)

[Child consent form](#)

[ICRC's Code of Conduct](#)

[Digital ToolBox, with guidance on filming, photography, social media](#)

[Introduction to Fundraising Communications](#)

[ICRC archives](#)

[Photos and videos to be archived: do's and don'ts](#)

[Guide to archiving videos](#)

[Guide to archiving photos](#)

[Audiovisual archives policy](#)

[MediaHub](#)

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Description: These institutional guidelines are for any staff member collecting photographs and video content. They describe the ethical standards required when collecting and choosing content, how and when to apply informed consent, and the proper storage of digital files. This document was prepared in accordance with best practice standards in the humanitarian sector in 2024.

Keywords: International Committee of the Red Cross; ICRC; photography, film, video, ethics, consent, data, archives, AV, content, fundraising, communications

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