Global health photographers navigate murky ethical waters for clients

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Global health photography is often caught between photojournalistic intentions of accurately reflecting local communities and marketing directives to create attention-grabbing imagery, according to a study published in *PLOS Global Public Health* by Arsenii Alenichev from Oxford Population Health, the University of Oxford, United Kingdom,

and colleagues.

Standing at such representational crossroads, photographers are forced to engage with numerous—and often unresolvable—ethical and practical dilemmas.

Photographers are often commissioned by non-governmental organizations and agencies to document the pain and empowerment of others, with a goal to yield donations and attract attention to issues in communities. While photojournalism is often framed as objective, simply by being present, photographers interfere with local communities and can face challenging ethical dilemmas.

To better understand how global health photographers operate and ethically obtain consent from subjects, the authors interviewed 29 photographers reflecting the demographic realities of the field about the moral and practical challenges they face on the job. The authors identified common themes across the anonymized interview transcripts to highlight major issues faced by global health photographers.

The authors found that in the current global health landscape, organizations often direct photographers to quickly create attention-grabbing marketing images to compete with mainstream ads. Photographers typically have to work with client-created 'briefs' detailing what images they need to take, and with limited time and resources.

In practice, it pushes photographers to increasingly sanitize, sensationalize, or stage scenes to produce the desired image—misrepresenting the realities of local communities, especially in the Global South, to which photographers react with resistance. Acquiring ethical consent from subjects is also complicated by power imbalances, language barriers and illiteracy, and misplaced fear and trust

in both the photographer and the legal documents they are asked to sign.

Given these emergent themes, the authors argue that organizations should push for a more photojournalistic approach to the creation of global health images, weighing ethical clarity over potential economic sacrifice. While their sample of respondents may have been biased towards critical perspectives, the authors believe that this broad overview of tensions will equip other researchers to conduct future studies of more localized, nuanced experiences.

The authors add, "Decolonization of global health and its visual culture will prove impossible without taking the ethical experiences of photographers seriously, especially the local ones. Global health images should not be understood as neutral depictions of interventions—they are in fact political agents participating in the formulation of stereotypes about people and entire communities."

  More information: Assembling a global health image: Ethical and pragmatic tensions through the lenses of photographers, *PLOS Global Public Health* (2024). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pgph.0002540

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