



Ethical Representation: An Overview

1. Consider the power dynamics at play.

Power dynamics are present in almost every relationship, but much more so when there are differences in wealth, race, class, nationality, or status. As you post and share about sponsorship within your network, consider how your actions and others' responses might be (and probably are) influenced by the power differential between you both.

Example questions to consider:

- Would you be comfortable if a total stranger took a picture or video of your child in your community and shared it globally?
- Would you be comfortable if someone wrote about you or your family using the words you're using to write about someone else's family?

Be mindful of how your background, appearance, nationality, language, and status impacts the people around you, and avoid sharing stories, images, or videos you wouldn't want shared if the power dynamics were different.

2. Don't generalize; do be specific.

Westerners are infamous for referring to Africa as a country instead of as a continent made up of 54 nations and 2000 individual languages. Be precise and specific in your communication about Rwanda so that you don't risk either erasing or romanticizing the people and places you're representing. Use names, check your facts, avoid generalizations, and honor others' individuality.

Examples:

- ~~"Africa is amazing!"~~ "Rwanda is amazing!"
- ~~"Children in Rwanda are shy and polite."~~ "Josiane seemed shy and polite when I met her."
- ~~"We met some village children."~~ "We met children in the community of Kageyo, near the eastern border with Tanzania."
- ~~"I learned about the suffering these people have faced."~~ "I learned about the ethnic tensions that led to the 1994 Rwandan genocide and about the way the nation has rebuilt and reconciled in the years since then."

3. Use people-first language.

When we describe someone as "a poor child," "a needy person," "a disabled person," or "a starving child," we immediately diminish that person to their circumstances rather than acknowledging and honoring the fullness of their humanity. Use people-first language to signal equality and solidarity with those you are meeting and talking to. Name the person/people first, then add a description regarding their circumstances if necessary. Try to share more about people than JUST their difficult circumstances. No one is just their poverty, their hunger, or their pain!

There's always a balance to be found in this area. Should you capture/share the struggles that this person is facing? Of course. Do you want your followers to understand the depth of hunger and suffering you are seeing so that they will do something about it? Of course! But a little creativity and attentiveness can help you do this in the best, most compassionate, most loving way. Remember, if you're struggling to represent an individual, community, or situation well, you don't have to post immediately.

Notes:

- Avoid the word "victim" especially; replace it with "survivor" if appropriate (this automatically connotes life beyond the circumstances) or rewrite the sentence completely.
- Avoid the words "starving" and "needy" completely. There is no way to use these without creating or playing into stereotypes and power differentials.

Examples:

- ~~"Kayitesi Cynthia is a poor, hungry child I met today who never has enough to eat."~~ "Kayitesi Cynthia and her family face a consistent shortage of food, in part because they live in a region that is prone to droughts."
- ~~"I met this needy family and felt so sad for them."~~ "I met a courageous family experiencing deep poverty."
- ~~"She is a genocide victim."~~ "She is a survivor of the genocide."

4. Be sensitive with personal stories and information.

If a family or individual chooses to share a personal story with you, consider that an honor that you should protect. Unless you have received explicit consent from the family or individual to share that story, it could be inappropriate, even dangerous, to share another's personal story or information.

For example, women may describe a time in their past when they experienced intimate partner violence. If they shared their story with you, and if you were to post about their story and include their picture, you could unintentionally expose their name and location to an abusive partner. Avoid this situation at all costs; we should never cause more harm than good with our presence in Rwanda.

This principle doesn't just apply to abusive relationships. Think about other types of family circumstances that could risk someone's safety or reputation if it were made public to their community.

Examples:

- Drinking alcohol carries different cultural connotations in Rwanda than it does in the Western world. Avoid sharing any information about someone's drinking habits or alcoholism.
- Many people have overcome significant hardship to gain respect in their communities. Avoid sharing details about disadvantages people have faced, like illiteracy or socioeconomic status, without their explicit consent.
- Many Westerners are sympathetic to refugees and are fortunate to have never fled the countries in which they were born. However, refugees are often fleeing dangerous or life-threatening situations. Sharing a refugee's

personal story may expose them to the dangerous situations they were trying to get away from.

5. Take and post photos carefully.

When you share photos or video, make sure they capture the dignity, joy, hope, and fullness of people's humanity, even amidst their hardships. Do not share photos or video that turn your fellow humans into mere spectacles of suffering. Review Africa New Life's social media images for examples, and read [this article](#) about humanitarian photographer Esther Havens Mann for inspiration and thought-provoking suggestions.

You should practice discretion when choosing photos of Rwanda to share with your networks. If you are in the photo with another Rwandan or a group of Rwandan people, think about how someone you don't know may view your post. Are you standing while the others are sitting down? Are you posing with a group of young children you don't know? Photos should reflect equal power between you and the others in the photo, and show Rwandans in a dignifying way.

Here are key principles to bear in mind:

- Don't post "white savior" photos; don't pose or post images of you with children you don't know, don't pose with children who aren't your sponsored student, do ask permission first (and it's always good to state in your post that you did ask permission), and do avoid any image or content that places you in a superior, "helping/serving," patronizing mode, and places a Rwandan in an inferior, "helpless/needy" mode.
- Never publish "fly on the face" poverty photos of our sponsored students or other images that attract the wrong kind of sympathy or make our brothers and sisters into spectacles. Instead choose images that show dignity, joy, hope, and fullness of humanity, even amidst hardship, wherever possible.

Examples: Bad photos to share

- Prominently displaying the fallen state of these buildings is not dignifying to this community. Also notice how far away and small the young women in the photo seem compared to the background. We cannot see their faces; they are delegated to a corner of the photograph while the main subject is the buildings. Who are those girls? What are their hopes and dreams? We will never know from this photo.



- Strenuously avoid taking and posting photos of children who are not fully clothed or shown in a dignifying light. The global threat of child exploitation is real and exacerbated by photos shared online. This child doesn't appear to know they are being photographed, and even if safety isn't a concern, they are not shown here in a flattering or empowering way.



Examples: Good photos to share

- Imagine how this photo would change if the camera angle were pointed down at the student's face instead of up! As it is, this image literally looks up to the student as she writes on the schoolroom chalkboard, giving her dignity, respect, and equality with the photographer. She is smiling, receiving an education, and inspiring hope for all who see this photograph.
- If you've traveled to Rwanda, consider this image as a healthy model for which of your own trip photos you choose to share. Note how all the women are positioned equally, with none above or below the other. There is also an emphasis here on shared experience and shared faith, which aligns with Africa New Life's emphasis on *coming alongside* Rwandans in equity and partnership, not "saving" them.



Thank you for coming alongside Africa New Life and the impact in Rwanda. These ethical representation tips are meant to protect you, Rwandans, and Africa New Life from creating unhealthy responses to the need in Rwanda and from inviting negative criticism or unflattering interpretations of your advocacy from the world of social media. Always remember: once a post is shared, it is out of your control! If you have any doubts or concerns about what you can or should post, talk to a staff member at Africa New Life.