
Tips for Using Images When Reporting on Human Trafficking

By Jessa Dillow Crisp, Co-Founder & Executive Director, BridgeHope
jessa@jessacrisp.com

Photojournalism and media illustrations hold the power to tell a story worth a thousand words—pictures can draw readers into the story being told or turn them away. Using this power to accurately report on human trafficking takes sensitivity, an understanding of human trafficking, and the willpower to move beyond sensationalism.

Taking Steps to Understand Human Trafficking

In order to accurately report on this issue through words or images, journalists first must engage more deeply with the topic. Admittedly, this takes time—a luxury in a deadline-driven industry—but here are some recommendations for reporting a more complex and accurate story:

- Attend educational events on human trafficking.
- Know the different [typologies](#) of human trafficking.
- Talk to your local anti-trafficking organizations to get an idea of how human trafficking appears in your community (e.g., are there illicit massage parlors doing business there).

Best Practices:

- Use pictures that accurately express the story you are sharing.
 - Since audiences interpret things differently, make sure that the pictures being used are captioned to describe what it is being depicted if they cannot be easily understood or associated with the story focus or theme.
 - For example, do not show a picture of a girl in a miniskirt standing by a car when the story you are reporting on includes familial trafficking in which he/she was taken to his/her buyers or had buyers come to his/her home.
- Use pictures that accurately represent the kinds of trafficking that occur in your community and the ways it is experienced. (Trafficking takes place within *all* communities.)
 - If you have interviewed survivors, ask them what kind of media illustrations they prefer to use to help share their story. Show your survivor-sources the pictures you are going to use *before* they are published.
 - For example, use a picture of apps on a phone to show a common platform currently being used in the trafficking of males and females.
- Use pictures that impart hope for audiences.
 - A smiling and happy individual is often not how the public sees survivors, but this is what can help audiences understand there is life after trafficking.

- For example, one of my favorite stories published about me is anchored by a photo taken on my wedding day with the headline, [“Road to Freedom—A Colorado Survivor Shares How She Escaped Sex Trafficking.”](#) I suggested this picture to the journalist as a way to communicate that while I’ve experienced considerable trauma, I am living in the present and planning for the future.
- Use pictures that break down the misconceptions about victims.
 - Help the public understand that there is a continuum of trafficking. Anyone who is vulnerable is at risk for exploitation, but each victim has a different experience.
 - Trafficking affects individuals from all races, socioeconomic groups, and backgrounds. It occurs in a multitude of ways; pictures should depict these different typologies.
- Be creative; think outside the box.
 - Consider sharing survivor artwork in your story. Have a link or website address available where people can purchase prints directly from the survivor to help him/her in their recovery journey.
 - Consider utilizing original illustrations that depict the story without overdramatizing it. For an example of this, [see](#) the award-winning Atlanta Journal-Constitution series on doctor abuse, and [listen](#) to the designer, Richard Watkins, explain his process.
- Hire a survivor-leader in your area to give constructive feedback on the pictures being used by your media outlet to illustrate coverage of trafficking and other issues requiring sensitivity to victims.

To Avoid:

- Never share pictures of a minor victim, even with the face blurred or otherwise obscured.
 - Ask, is the picture being shared for you, your audience, or the victim? If it’s shared for you or your audience, it is re-exploitative for the victim.
 - As adults, we need to protect minors at all times. Minors may lack the ability to know the implications of having their picture used in the process of telling their story. There are laws in place to protect minors from having their personal information shared publicly; the same sensitivity should be used here.
- Stay away from the typical “trafficking-representative” stock photos. These pictures misrepresent the issue and, moreover, make it easy for victims to be misidentified or self-identify.
 - A picture overused among the anti-trafficking movement is a pair of hands in handcuffs, sometimes with caption “*help me.*” This picture sensationalizes and misrepresents the issue of trafficking. If someone is looking for victims with handcuffs, they will miss the individuals that are being trafficked in plain sight through other types of control or coercion.
 - Individuals who are being trafficked might not identify as victims simply because they are not experiencing what is displayed in sensationalized pictures.
- When reporting on a survivor, do not pull and use their pictures from Facebook or other social-media platforms.
 - Survivors often do not know the implications of public photos. Do not exploit this lack of knowledge.

- Ask for consent to use pictures you find. If a survivor agrees, they can give you the picture you are looking for.
- When survivors see pictures used in the media without their consent, it can register as a profound invasion of privacy and may trigger a trauma response.
- If using a photograph that shows a tattoo, find out if it is a gang symbol or the brand of a trafficker. In either case, do not use that picture or, at the very least, blur out this identifying and compromising information.

Moving Beyond Sensationalism with Media Illustrations

Many news organizations embrace the [professional standards](#) to “seek truth and report it” and “minimize harm”—these same impulses can guide the selection of illustrations to accompany stories about trafficking. Such decisions should be motivated by your efforts to report the issue of trafficking accurately, and to never harm trafficking victims and survivors by holding them up to public ridicule. Reporting that includes context about why and how trafficking occurs improves the likelihood that audiences will comprehend the issue and feel sympathy for its victims, as well as be moved to action. On the other hand, stories and photos that are limited to or linger on the salacious details of someone’s trafficking experiences impede public understanding. Ask yourself, “Am I sharing these pictures to get more views or am I sharing to tell the truth about what someone has experienced?”