

SHOCKING IMAGES

Taking pictures of children

By Mike Jempson
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Some of the most powerful images of tragedy, conflict and hope presented by the media have featured children.

Writing about the power of images of children caught up in atrocities committed by adults, novelist Christopher Hope says that they reveal "the ability, lodged deep within older, taller individuals of our species ... to do serious damage to children, their own and others, when and if it suits them ... What the pictures we cannot forget do is expose the fact that hope has been betrayed again and again. They make us remember how we would have felt. After all we were children once. They make us remember a time when we expected better of people like us."

The destructive force of napalm will forever be associated with nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc running naked along a road in Viet Nam. The dreadful waste of young lives during the second Palestinian intifada was brought home by the image of 12-year-old Mohammed al-Durrah cowering in his father's arms moments before he was shot by Israeli soldiers. Similarly, in recent years, the enormity of the Mozambique floods was communicated to the world through the televised helicopter rescue of Rosita Pedro, who was born in a tree above the rising waters. When film-maker Sorious Samura captured footage of the execution of a teenage boy in his film *Cry Freetown* he summed up the obscenity of civil war and its aftermath in Sierra Leone.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of images like these is that the children are identified, they are real people with names and histories. Yet identifying children without giving their names can be fatal. The identification of a child soldier in a western newspaper resulted in the assassination of that child thousands of miles away in a war-torn African country, because those who abuse children want no witnesses to their cruelty. During the Kosovan crisis, editors in the Balkans declined to use pictures of children driven into exile because they knew the risks of identifying potential witnesses at war crimes trials. There was no such reticence in other western media, which saw that the power of these images would encourage intervention by the United Nations and NATO.

Using pictures of children caught up in the horrors of war, crime and natural disasters requires delicate judgement. Photojournalists themselves have complained about their pictures being used inappropriately and out of context. Aid workers have complained about camera crews setting up pictures of bereft children in refugee camps, unaware that the children's fear and trauma may itself be the result of sudden confrontation with foreign journalists. NGOs (non-governmental organizations) who are quick to complain about the media's abuse of children's rights may themselves exploit pathetic images of children to raise funds.

This is a complex challenge for which there are no simple solutions. Under what circumstances, if ever, do 'news values' override the best interests of the child? What techniques are appropriate when constructing images of children, especially to illustrate stories where the identity of the child may have special risks attached?

So concerned has the Center for the Protection of Children's Rights Foundation in Bangkok become about the motives of foreign journalists investigating sex tourism that it requires all press callers to complete a detailed questionnaire before affording them access to its project. Greater sensitivity among photographers and camera crews, as well as their editors, may require specialist training, and children's NGOs may need to develop guidelines about the conditions under which they provide assistance to the media, or use images in their own publicity material.

Images of children are immensely powerful, and popular. But there can be many hidden and unexpected dangers. Concern about the risks how the work of their members might be abused or misinterpreted led the UK Association of Photographers to devise some Draft Guidelines for Working with Children. Although this guidance is directed primarily at commercial photographers, there are messages here that are of value to all photo-journalists and film crews.

Draft Guidelines for Working with Children

Compiled by the Association of Photographers in 1997

1. Photographers should try to stop taking pictures of children in underwear, especially for mail order catalogues (a known and easily accessible source of paedophile material). Assistance from large mail order firms and large groups of department stores who produce smaller catalogues and PR pictures needs to be sought.
2. Photographic collections of children held with stock libraries need to be monitored carefully, to be doubly sure who they are selling to and what they will be used for.
3. Manipulation of stills and films, and especially pop videos where children are being used a lot, need to be looked into. (One parent was asked if her son could be filmed dancing and pulling off his shirt - the plan was to then manipulate his sister's head on to his body. The mother refused and it didn't happen.)
4. No child should ever go on any shoot without a chaperone.
5. The chaperone should have the right to be in the same room where the child is working, at all times. If at any time the chaperone feels the child is being misused, over-worked or bullied, s/he should be able to withdraw the child from the session without forfeiting the fee - especially in such cases where the child is asked to do something utterly different from that for which they were hired.
6. A chaperone must never leave a child in a session on her or his own, however boring it may be to sit and wait for the session to finish.
7. If a parent cannot take a child to the shoot, s/he should notify the photographer with the name of the chaperone and make sure the photographer has a phone number to contact the parent/s in an emergency.
8. Children must not be allowed to travel unaccompanied in mini-cabs or taxis. If this is really necessary, a radio-controlled black cab should be used in order to keep the child in contact with an adult known to them.

9. If a child (usually a young teenager) is sent on a shoot without a chaperone, the agency and photographer/client must be notified before the shoot and given the right to cancel if they are not willing to accept responsibility for the child. At all times, the parents' contact number must be supplied in advance in case of emergencies.

10. If the model agency has a call from a photographer/client for one of their children's books, and the photographer or client is new to them, references need to be sought before the book is sent.

11. Children are often worked far too long, or kept hanging about on shoots. Strict guidelines are needed as to how long each age group may work.

12. Parents must be educated, possibly through women's magazines, in what are normal modelling activities and what are not. Too many parents are keen to get their children photographed and consequently can put them in potentially dangerous situations.