

# Why representation matters

Picturing the personal  
impact of an NGO's work



## Getting the message across

Personal stories told through photography, film and first-person accounts are a powerful tool in building support for an NGO's mission – but one that needs to be used responsibly.

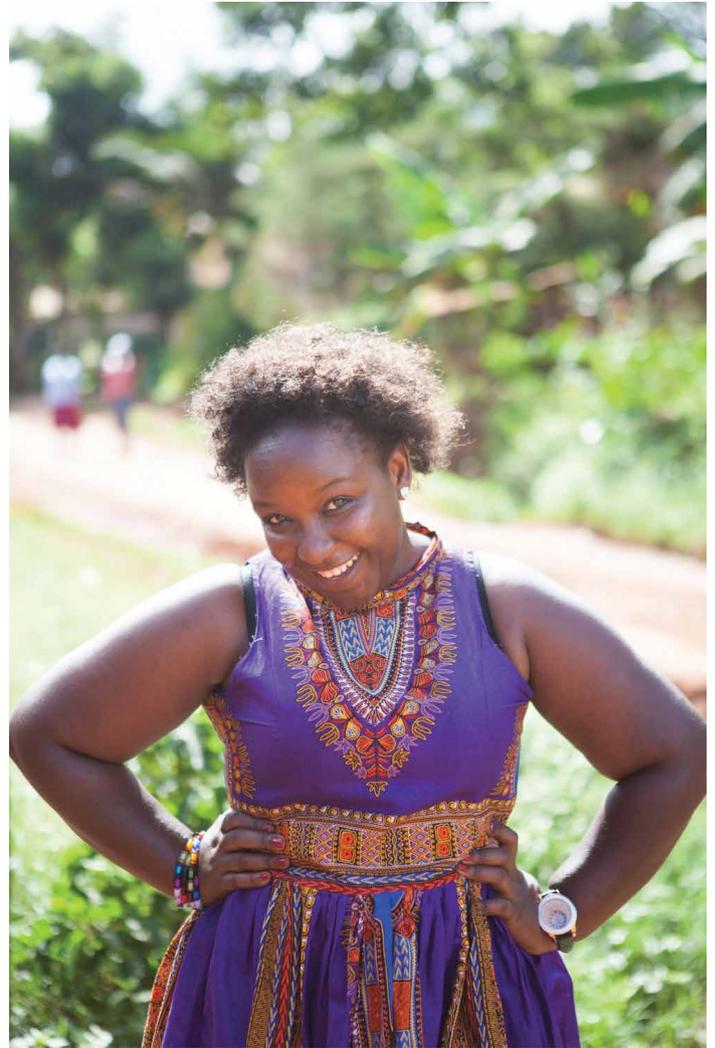
Consider getting across this statistic: *of the estimated 37 million people living with HIV worldwide, over 20 million do not have access to treatment.* It is a shocking fact but we are exposed to shocking and unfair facts daily. It may be hard to get people to engage and consider the individual impact.

But, introduce someone to 19-year-old Daphine from Kampala in Uganda, through her words, photography and film and you might have a better chance of getting their attention.



I thought after my mother's death I was really going to be nothing, I thought I would die anytime ... I thought HIV positive people never get married, I thought I'd never get anyone to love me, and I'd never be happy ... but I thought wrong."

Daphine



Daphine talks about her life as a young person living with HIV in the short film *I love to live a positive life*. [www.aidsalliance.org/our-impact/making-it-happen-old/750-i-love-to-live-a-positive-life-daphine-uganda](http://www.aidsalliance.org/our-impact/making-it-happen-old/750-i-love-to-live-a-positive-life-daphine-uganda)

## No more clichés

Charity images and stories are all too often clichéd and negative. Often, for fundraising in particular, you may hear “but it works”. As a charity that believes the lives of all human beings are equal, and that people most affected by HIV are the people to drive the HIV response, the Alliance does not believe the end justifies the means.

Consider an 90s-esque image of an ‘AIDS victim’ – as well as that phrase – or an emaciated African child, typical of fundraising adverts during daytime TV. This may raise funds initially, but is a short-term strategy with a damaging long-term impact.

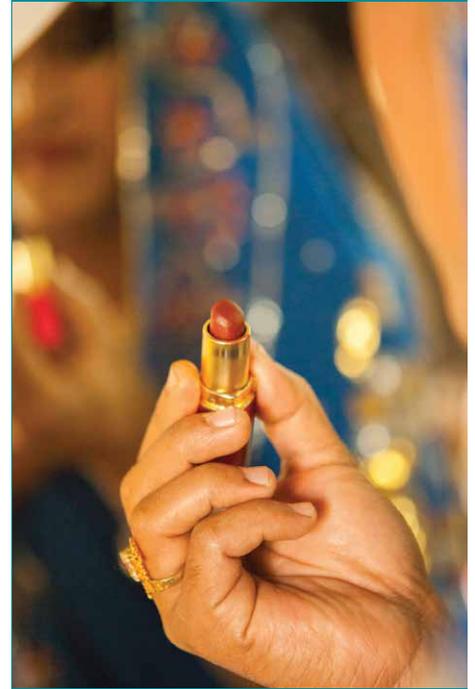
This type of imagery can lead to:

- a homogeneous view of people and cultures
- a pity culture that dehumanises people and fuels stereotypes
- disengagement – “These people are different, it’s not relevant to me.”
- apathy through repetition – “How is my money helping? It’s clearly not working.”

It is also disrespectful to the person featured and usually does not represent their reality. There is also a growing backlash; take this route and you run the risk of winning a Rusty Radiator Award ([www.rustyradiator.com](http://www.rustyradiator.com)) and joining the ranks of Bob Geldolf and other misguided celebrities and embarrassed charities.

Instead, use photography and film to tell interesting, inspiring and real stories that reflect the NGO’s values and mission. Involve the person whose story it is so that representation is collaborative and something that they have ownership of.

This is not the same as creating a ‘rose-tinted’ picture for the sake of being positive. It is about showing a real and rounded story and ensuring the person is happy with and in control of how they have been represented. This is especially important given the spread and scope of media and social media coverage.



Rashida from Dhaka, Bangladesh did not want her identity as a *hijra* (transgender or third identity) to be known. “I only feel safe to dress like this indoors with friends”. We found a way to represent her true gender identity without her being recognised.



## Show the complexities

Rachel founded local community-based organisation, Voice of Hope, in Walvis Bay, Namibia, to support sex workers, primarily in understanding their legal and human rights.

Rachel is not a victim and to depict her as one would be one-dimensional. Her many facets and attributes make her an inspirational role model in her region.



“Let’s be proud of who we are, being a sex worker, being a trans woman, but first and foremost a human being with dignity and integrity.” Rachel

Nahimana from Bujumbura, Burundi, has two children. Her finances are so tight that she has to take two jobs – selling fruit at a market and as a sex worker. Unlike Rachel, who says she “will die a sex worker”, Nahimana is looking for an alternative and a different future for her children and so has recently studied for an ICT qualification.

Sex work is just one example, but take any issue and no two stories are the same. The lives of people are as complex and multi-faceted as the issues that we may wish to highlight through their stories.

Our job is to let go of pre-conceptions and tell the story as it is. By telling the deeper story – not just the sex work element, for example – you will do justice to that person and give them space to share what they think is important. You will also create deeper engagement with your audience – being a daughter, parent or planning for the future are universal themes and can help build empathy.

No-one is *just* a sex-worker or *just* a drug user. Once audiences connect to people’s stories, you can then challenge stereotypes and perceptions and make a worthwhile contribution to reducing stigma and discrimination. One of the Alliance’s memorable headlines was ‘Drug users can be good parents too’, which also inspired ‘Joan: Grandmother, entrepreneur, drug user and role model’. This rather sums up the sentiment of this document but check with Joan, or whoever you are interviewing.



Rachel describes how she feels walking into her local nightclub; “I feel like a diva, I feel like a celebrity, I feel like Beyoncé! When Beyoncé walks into a room everyone stops and stares at her.”



When Rachel was getting ready to go out on this particular night, my first thought was ‘Oh no, I wish she wasn’t wearing such a stereotypical mini-skirt’. But, on reflection, what she wore was not my decision. Rachel is proud of her profession – and her pins – and wanted to be photographed feeling and looking feminine and attractive. She also wanted to be photographed in her summer dress, her jeans and t-shirt and her business suit – and she was.”

Gemma Taylor, photographer



Ricardo won the Mr Gay Namibia Award in 2013. He and his husband Marc are reportedly the first gay couple living in Namibia to legally marry although the ceremony was held in neighbouring South Africa because of Namibia's discriminatory laws. For this shot, Ricardo planned the clothes – “co-ordinating but not matching” – and where the photograph would be taken. They wanted somewhere that spoke of where they live. Marc joked, “I haven't yet had time to explore the country as I'm busy exploring my husband!”



The Alliance launched Marc and Ricardo's film *It's all about love* for the 2014 International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia. Available at: [www.aidsalliance.org/our-impact/making-it-happen-old/82-gay-marriage-in-namibia-its-all-about-love](http://www.aidsalliance.org/our-impact/making-it-happen-old/82-gay-marriage-in-namibia-its-all-about-love)



When Nahimana's friend suggested sex work to her, she recalls replying, "at this stage honestly, I would accept anything". She is working for the future of her children. She says: "As a girl, I hope that I will be able to support Nasla's education. If she could finish her studies and find a good job that would bring a positive impact to her future."





This photograph was taken during a PhotoVoice workshop in Yangon, Myanmar. PhotoVoice is a participatory process through which people photograph their own stories. However, even when people aren't physically behind the camera they can still make decisions about representation and narrative.



In Terengganu, Malaysia, fishermen can spend up to eight days at sea – it is a physically and mentally gruelling job. Many take heroin to deal with the harsh conditions while at sea. We chose to focus on this story because the image of a strong fisherman, many providing for families, doesn't tally with the stereotypical view of a heroin user.