ActionAid UK

Shifting the Lens on Representation

gettyimages
Credit: Bettmann
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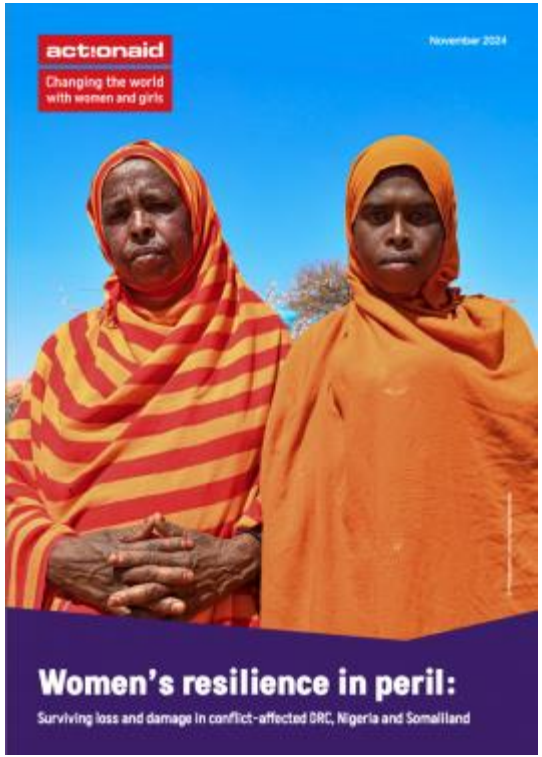
Why It Matters

- Women are often objectified or stereotyped in humanitarian imagery
- Women photographers bring fresh, empathetic, and authentic perspectives
- Who tells the story shapes how it's told
- Less than 15% of photojournalists globally are women
- Humanitarian visuals often reinforce colonial and gendered power dynamics



ActionAid's approach

- Centring women and girls as agents of their own stories
- Prioritising women photographers, especially from the Global South
- How our communications align with our anti-racism commitments:
  - No more parachute journalism.
  - Prioritising photographers with lived experience.
  - Equity in commissioning, payment, and platforming.

How we make change and challenge the norm

- Refuse to commission photography that doesn’t centre on consent and dignity.
- Invest in capacity, not just content. We mentor and train local women photographers.
- Advocate with media to use images that centre the dignity of the rights holder.

Women by Women

Women By Women is our global photography project that showcases stories of women and girls exclusively through the lenses of local women photographers.

It’s active across countries like Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Palestine, and beyond.

Decolonising Humanitarian Storytelling

We've worked intentionally to move away from stories of helplessness to stories of resistance, strength, and everyday life.

You'll see women farmers, activists, mothers, students; not posed or 'performed' for a Western audience, but portrayed with respect, dignity, and context.

We also ensure the subjects of our images give informed consent and are part of the storytelling process.

Transforming our practice

Internal shift in how we brief, review, and publish stories

Collaborations with local networks and feminist journalists

Training and mentoring initiatives

Feedback and learnings

- Used across campaigns, fundraising, and policy work
- Featured in exhibitions and global media
- Positive feedback from photographers and communities

But this hasn’t always been easy. Some challenges we’ve faced:

- Pushing back against sector norms, especially with partners or donors who still expect certain types of imagery.
- Balancing authenticity with media visibility — media often want 'shock value,' but we want dignity.
- "And logistically, working in crises with women photographers who may face additional risks. This includes how you pay someone in a warzone where there are no longer any banks and the economy is almost purely cash-based."
- "But each challenge deepens our resolve that this is the right direction."

Shifting Power

We believe decolonising communications is not just a trend, it’s a necessity.

It means shifting power, resourcing storytellers on the ground, and building new visual languages that honour people’s dignity.

We hope Women By Women can be a model, not perfect, but evolving, for others looking to do the same.