

# UNSEEN

GUIDE TO PHOTOGRAPHY



SHARING HOPE OVER DARKNESS



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## **INTRO**

To create the best possible marketing products, and tell the story of your organization's work and the people you work with, it's important to have solid, high quality images.

Without effective images, print and web designs become cluttered, imbalanced, and aesthetically unpleasing.

In this guide, we'll explore effective photography techniques and styles to capture images that tell impactful stories and connect with those supporting your work.

# 1 - PERFECTIONISM

First thing to understand about photography: **there is no such thing as “perfect” composition.** As a subjective form, you won't ever reach a point at which you have achieved the perfect shot. But it *is* possible to have poor and excellent photographs.

There are many aspects to the composition of a photograph, which we will touch on—each step acting as a guideline that will help you take strong, effective, and engaging photographs!

# 2 - SIMPLICITY

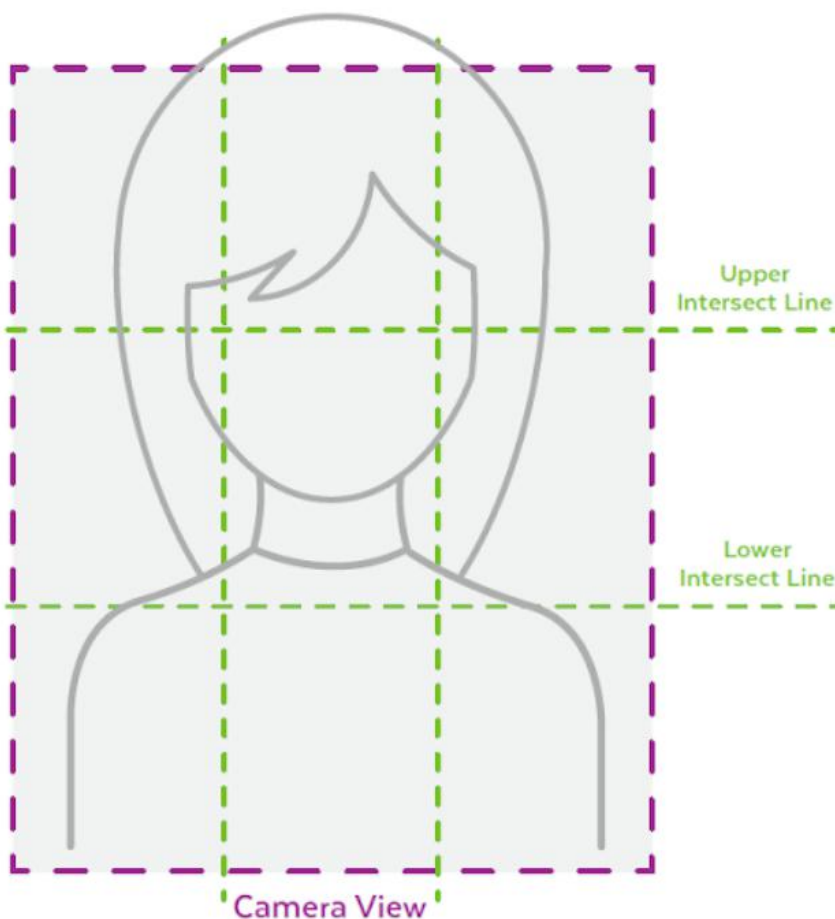
Consider how elements within the shot relate to each other and how they influence what you include or leave out of the frame. There is often a temptation to fill the frame with as many points of interest as possible, but it is better to be selective and focus on the story you want to tell through the photograph. **Some of the most dramatic photographs have very simple, yet effective composition where the eye is led into the image.**



# 3 - RULE OF THIRDS

What is composition? Composition is how your photograph is composed, or arranged. It's how all the elements (or individual subjects) that you're photographing combine to create your final image. Composition creates the story of your image.

The simplest rule of composition is the **Rule of Thirds**—a common tool for amateur and professional photographers. This method involves dividing the frame into thirds, vertically and horizontally, creating an imaginary grid with four intersecting points. You use the imaginary grid-lines to section off areas of the image, and use the points at which the lines cross as key areas for *points of interest*. (See diagram below)



For example, if you're photographing a person, it's effective to place the eyes at the points where the upper horizontal line intersects the two vertical lines. Eyes are considered points of interest because they're what viewers see first when looking at a face. **Eyes engage the viewer better than any other element in a photo.**

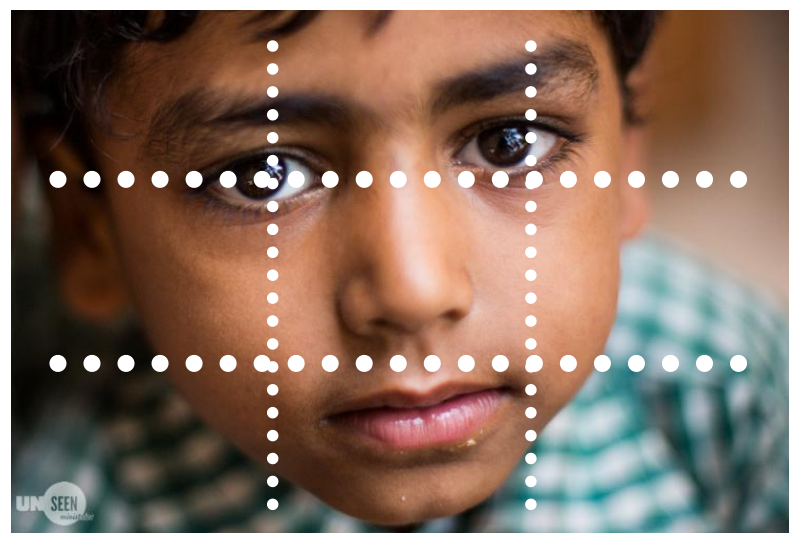


If you're photographing a person, but not close enough where both eyes would be the interest points, place the face in one of the upper intersected lines instead. This is more interesting than placing the person in the middle of the photograph. This also leaves room for *negative space*, which we'll touch base on later.

Don't worry if your subject isn't exactly on the points of interest—the general area is just fine!

**These examples have points of interest at one or more intersecting lines.**

In some cases you might choose to place the subject in the middle of the frame, especially if the background is very symmetrical. But as a general rule, try to place the subject off-center—using the *rule of thirds*.



## 4 - FOCUS

The subject you choose to focus on should be the most clear (or in focus) element of the image. For example, in the *Rule of Thirds* section above, we talked about eyes being a key point of interest. If you're taking a portrait, not only would you want the eyes or face to be on one of the *Rule of Thirds'* intersecting points, you also want them to be in focus. It's okay (and often preferred) if the rest of the image is more "blurred" or "out of focus", but at least one element (in this case, the eyes/face) should be super clear to the viewer.

**The element you focus on tells the viewer where you want their eyes to be drawn first.** As mentioned above, it's important that you always have at least one subject in focus in the photograph or the viewer may start to feel uncomfortable or nauseous.

**How to focus on a subject:** Maybe you only have a smartphone to take photos with, and that's okay. You can still take great photos without a fancy camera! Open the camera on your phone. You should be able to hold the camera up and tap the element you want in focus and your phone will automatically ensure the focus is on that element. Be sure to hold your phone steady so it doesn't end up blurry.

If you have a camera, you can usually hold the shutter button halfway down to focus, making sure the little dot in the viewfinder is where you'd like your image to be focused, and then press all the way down to snap the photo. We recommend looking at your camera manual to see all the different focusing techniques that it offers. ("Back-button" focusing is a great option if your camera has that capability.)



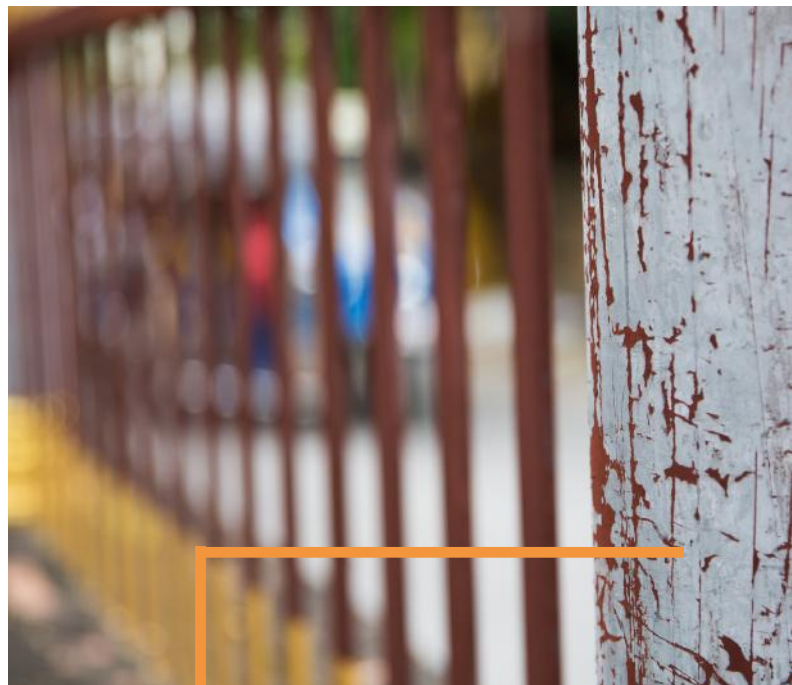
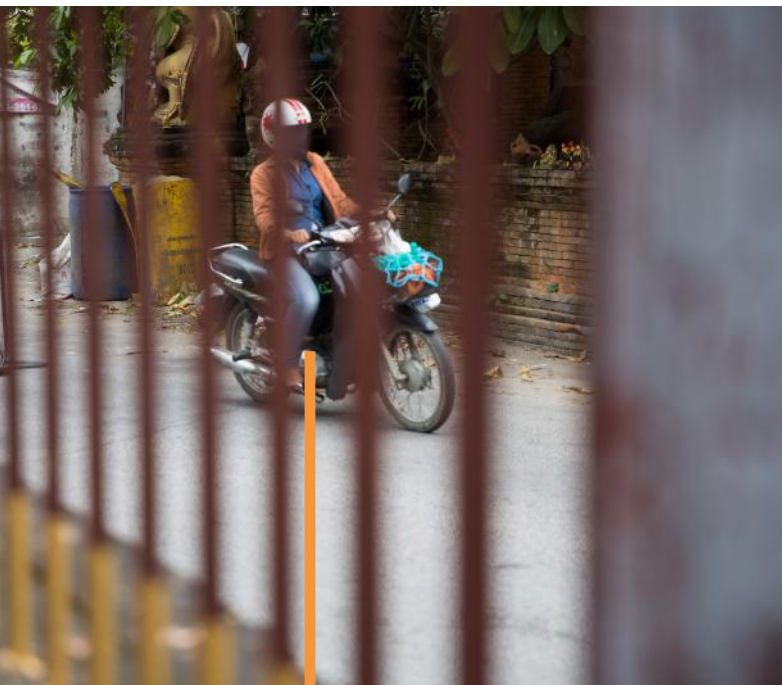
**Focusing on the eyes**



**Focusing on one girl amongst many students**



**Focusing on the bubble in front of this boy's face**



**Focusing on the motorcycle behind the bars**

**Focusing on the post**





## 5 - LIGHT

Photographers are always “chasing light.” Light is what makes photography possible and can make or break a great image. You can have your focus set and your composition perfectly aligned, but with poor lighting, your image won’t *shine*.

If you have too much light, your image will be **“over-exposed”** and will be so bright that certain elements will look white, and won’t show up. If you don’t have enough light, your image will be **“under-exposed”** and will be so dark that certain elements will be hidden in the shadows.

**There are two main types of light: Hard light and soft light.** Hard light is what we get from the direct sun. It’s coming straight down and can cause harsh shadows on someone’s face. Soft light is what we get on an overcast day, the light is diffused through the clouds and is ideal for portraits without shadows. You can also find soft light during the “golden hour.”

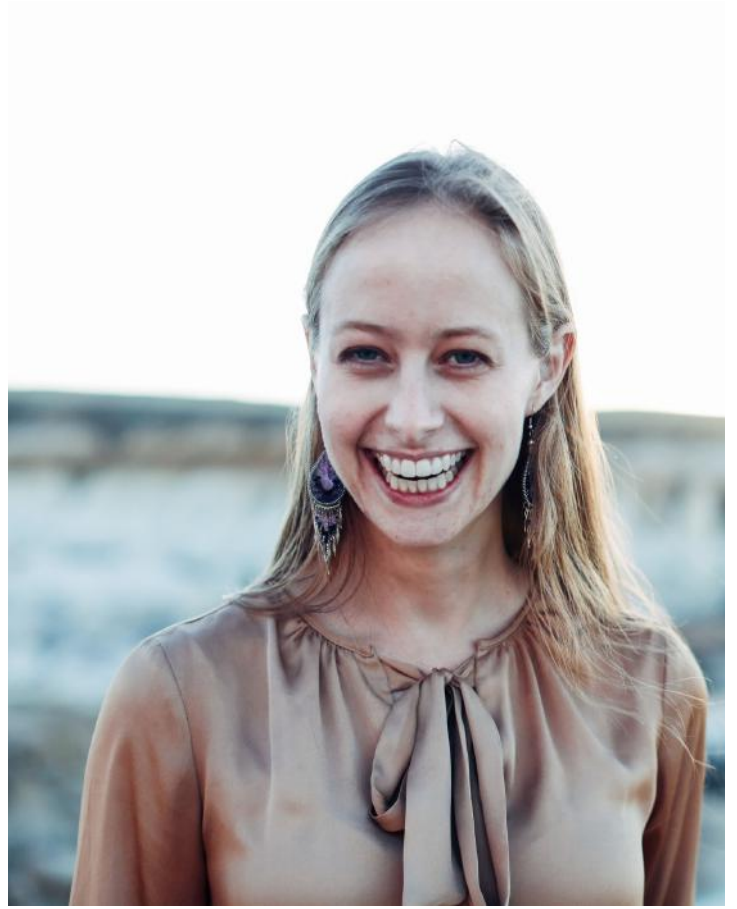
**Golden Hour** - The “golden hour” is the hour before sunset and the hour after sunrise. Photographers love shooting at these times since it provides beautiful, soft, warm light! The opposite period of time is the hour after sunset and the hour before sunrise. This is called the “blue hour.” The sun’s light is evenly diffused, but has cooler tones.

**How do you find great light?** When shooting indoors where it’s slightly dark, **look for windows.** Natural light coming through a window (or even a door) can create beautiful images. Place your subject close to the window and shoot at an angle so the light is reflected on their face.

When shooting outdoors on a very sunny day, **look for shade.** Shooting under direct sunlight is not always flattering for portraits. If no shade is around, try to shoot the subject so the sun is behind them, that way they won’t be squinting their eyes or have shadows on their face.

Ideally, the next time you have a bright, but overcast day, go practice your photography skills! That type of light will always make for great photos :)

## GOLDEN HOUR VS. BLUE HOUR



## USING NATURAL LIGHT FROM A WINDOW





## 6 - NEGATIVE SPACE

Negative space is the space within an image that doesn't contain any points of interest. It can be a blurred background, a blank wall, the sky, or anything other than the subject you're shooting. When working with singular or small grouped subjects, the tendency is to shoot close up so they fill the entire frame, with little space on either side. In reality, the inclusion of a background in the composition is far more dramatic and engaging.

In some instances you *will* want to fill the entire frame with the subject(s), getting extremely close. This is a great technique if you want to make an especially strong connection with the viewer and plan to use this image as a "stand alone" image. However, negative space can provide context to the image by showing the environment of the subject, and allows for better usage in marketing and media materials.

**Having photographs with negative space allows for placement of additional text and graphics on print and web projects.**



**See examples on the following page of how text and graphics are added to photos in the negative space.**

# SAMPLES OF POST-PRODUCTION CONTENT ADDITIONS.

**Break cycles of poverty and hunger.**

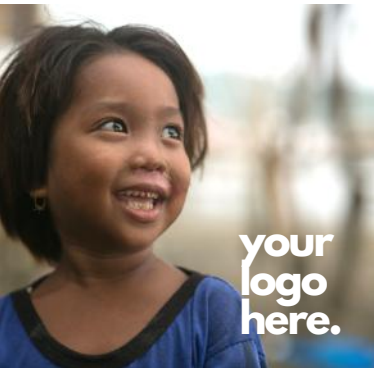
INDIA HAS OVER 200 MILLION PEOPLE IN HUNGER, AND OVER 40% OF CHILDREN ARE MALNOURISHED.



But, opportunity brings hope!



*Provide Clean Water*





# **SAMPLES OF FILLING THE FRAME WITH THE SUBJECT(S).**



**These types of photos are great for social media, Facebook cover photos, website banners, and other situations where added text and graphics aren't needed.**



# 7 - LANDSCAPES

Maybe you want to show your supporters the environment where you serve! While landscape photos may not always be ideal for marketing materials, they can be used as a beautiful art piece to hang on a wall, a background image on a website, in an email or vision packet for building campaigns, or in a slide deck presentation.

One of the most effective things you can do when shooting a landscape is to create depth. **When possible, include a person or subject of interest (e.g. building, tree, river, anything close to you) in the foreground to add a sense of depth and scale to the image.** While never *essential* to a great landscape photo, it can give it more awe.

**Ask yourself what you want your shot to be about.** Is it about the water? Mountains in the distance? A village? The horizon? Plants in the foreground? Which elements do you want to emphasize? Make sure your focus is set on these things.

Using the *Rule of Thirds*, add layers within the image. (e.g. the bottom third of the photo could be the foreground, the middle third could be a point of interest, the top third could be the sky). Think about the main *point of interest* in your photo and place it on one of the intersecting lines (e.g. if shooting a lone tree or building, try placing the tree/building so it lands on the one-third mark, rather than staying in the middle of the frame).



Rule of Thirds Line





*Image by Clay Cook Photography.*



## 8 - DEPTH

Depth is achieved when you create layers within your image. Much like working with layers in landscape shots, try to include elements of depth within your images by staggering subject matter. This can be done in a variety of ways depending on what you want your image to be about.

We'll stick with our portrait example. By using the *Rule of Thirds*, focusing on your point of interest, within a great light setting, look at what's going on around your subject.

Maybe there's more people, buildings, trees, or a playground. Or maybe they're actively doing something (i.e. sewing, cooking, working, studying, etc.)—include those extras in your frame (behind the main subject) to emphasize the depth.

**Tip:** If you include other elements behind the subject for depth, make sure they're off to the side and not directly behind them. The last thing you want is a tree or pole coming out of someone's head!







## 9 - DIRECTING LINES

Natural lines within an image draw the viewer to a specific point. Horizontal and vertical lines add particularly strong structure to images, where curved lines give a more relaxed feel. Roads, rivers, railway lines, and architecture are usually great subjects for strong lines.

**Take notice of where the lines within your shot start and lead to.** You want lines in your image to lead the viewer to your point of interest.

When working with horizontal and vertical lines within your shot, it is a good idea to make sure the shot is straight. **Often photographs can be ruined by a slightly tilted line (especially a tilted horizon line).** It is possible to correct this mistake in post production (using editing software), but it's better to get into the habit of capturing images that are correctly aligned.

**Optional Tip:** Just as people read books from left to right, people usually view images left to right. Look at where your lines are pointing. Ideally, you want them to point toward the right. (That's not a hard rule, though, so feel free to be creative).

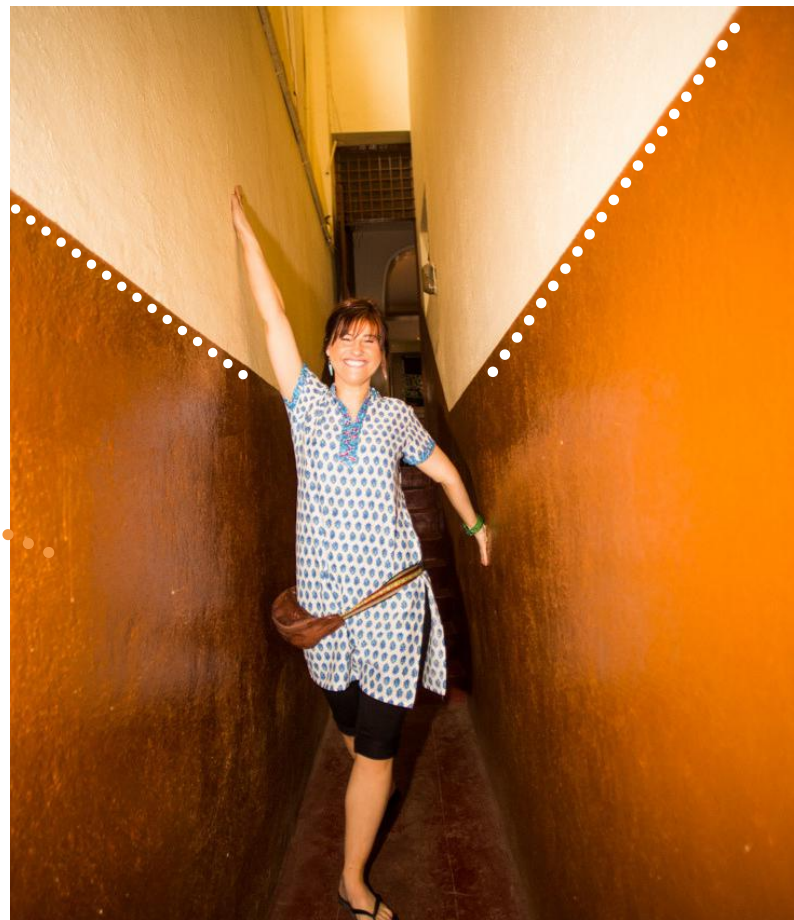




The overpass's frame creates directing lines leading the viewer's eyes into the distance.



The orange dots show how the sidewalk chalk points to the woman, and how the railing points to the girl in the background.



The white dots show how the lines on the wall point to the woman.



# 10 - POSITION

Always consider the angle from which you're shooting. It's easy to photograph a subject from the angle at which we see it, but try exploring a variety of angles and approaches. When shooting a portrait of someone, shooting down from above can give the viewer the feeling of looking down on them, and can minimize a person's strength and resilience. Shooting up at them may show empowerment, but isn't always the most flattering angle. **Shooting at eye level connects the viewer and shows the subject as equal.**



LOOKING DOWN ON THE SUBJECT



EYE LEVEL WITH THE SUBJECT

You also want to consider the way a person is positioned, or posed. Ask your subject to stand nice and tall, rolling their shoulders back and down so they aren't slouching. Instead of having them face the camera straight on, have them turn their body slightly to the right or left (this is automatically slimming). Give them something to do with their hands, whether its putting them in pockets, holding something, or placing a hand on their hip. And finally, have them tilt their head slightly (ear to shoulder) to bring out some personality.

**Don't be afraid to move around and shoot multiple different angles, using lots of poses to see which one you like best!**



# 11 - AGENCY & DIGNITY

In the section above, we mentioned that the angle at which you shoot a portrait of someone is very important. **Photographs should *always* give the subject agency and dignity** and never feel as if the viewer is supposed to pity or think less of them.

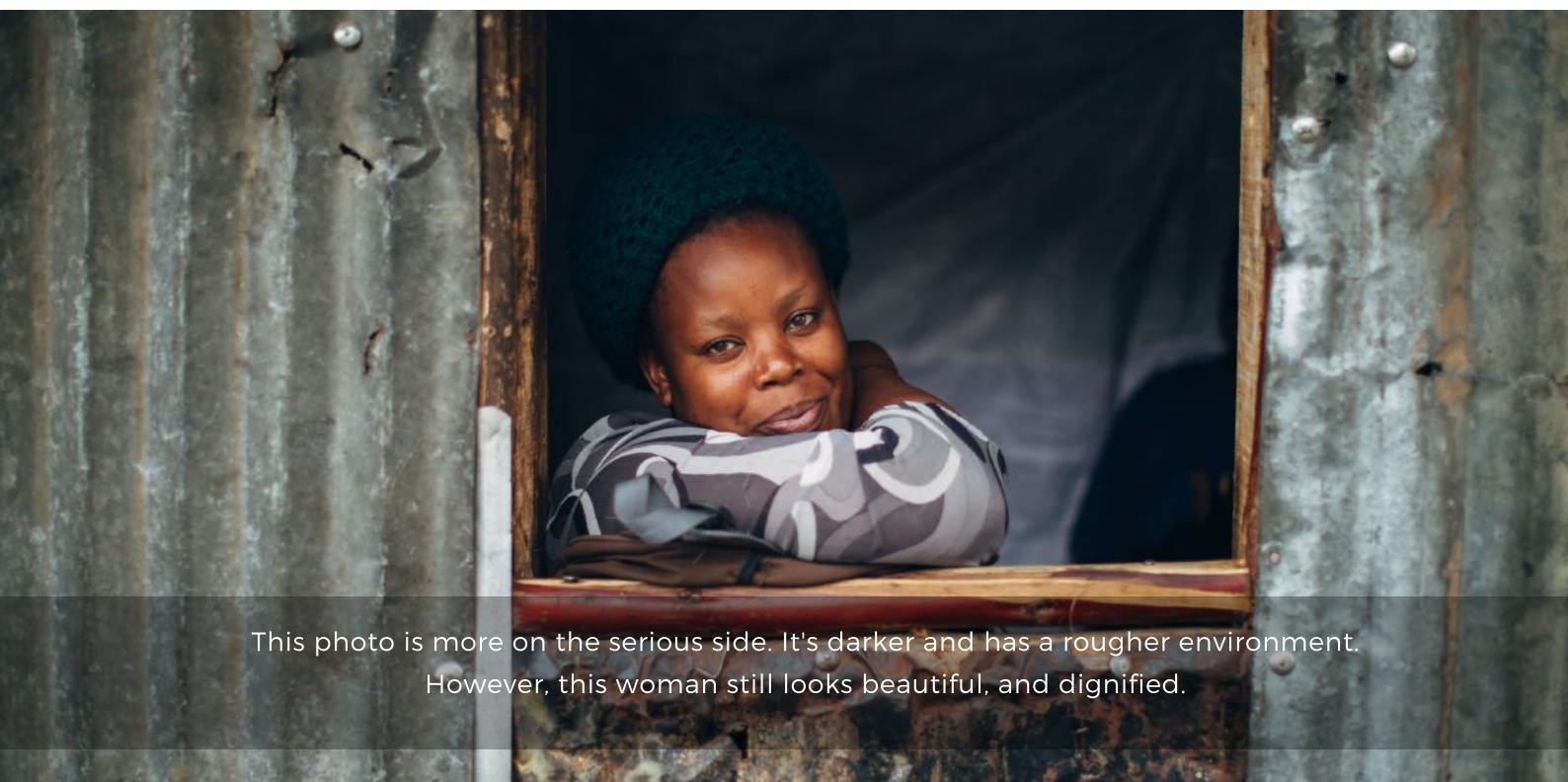
Nonprofits sometimes make the unintentional mistake of posing children with dirty faces and tattered clothes to compel their supporters to donate, perhaps under a feeling of guilt. Where possible, we propose reversing this tendency. **It is often far more effective to show hope over darkness** by shooting images that show the end results—of someone who has overcome (or is overcoming) difficult circumstances in their life. Think of ways to portray their strength, their agency, their skill, and their humanity.

We know that smiling, *hopeful* photos may not always fit the content of what you are writing about (i.e. a problem statement or jarring statistic). In these cases, a solemn photograph may be more impactful. But consider how that person is being portrayed in the image. Does the image dehumanize or re-exploit them? Would they be embarrassed if they saw it? Then it's probably not the best choice. Does the image portray them with dignity and strength but in a difficult environment that provides context to the problem? Then this may be a good fit.

**The key question to ask yourself is:**

*Would I be okay with sharing this photo if it was of myself or my children?* If you hesitate to answer "yes!" then it's best to choose a different image that you *would* be okay with—or even better, *proud* of.

**ALWAYS SHOOT PHOTOS THAT GIVE AGENCY AND DIGNITY TO THE SUBJECT.**



This photo is more on the serious side. It's darker and has a rougher environment. However, this woman still looks beautiful, and dignified.



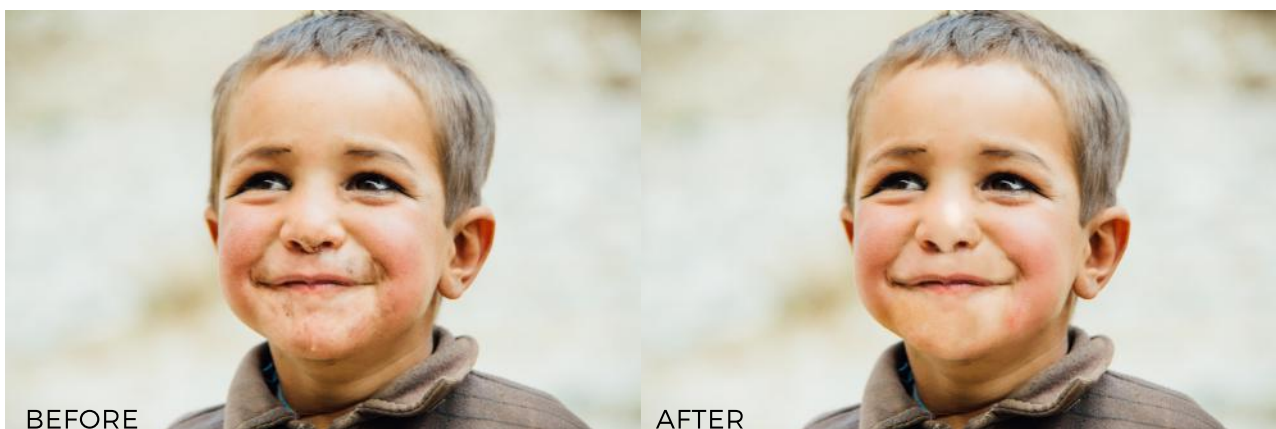
## TWO IMAGES TO CONSIDER



These photos don't portray the children as *strong, confident, and empowered*. They appear sad and uneasy, which may, or may not, be how they are on a daily basis. However, they may highlight the problem your organization is working to solve and help your supporters better understand what is at stake. Ask yourself why you are using these particular images. What are you trying to say? Are you simply trying to show the reality of the environment you work in? Or, are you using a photo of a seemingly impoverished or hopeless child to guilt donors into giving? If it's the latter, then it's likely not the most ethical use of the image.

**TIP:** If you know you want to take an afternoon to shoot some photos of people within your care, plan ahead. Make sure they are aware and have a chance to look and feel their best that day. If you're shooting images of children, make sure they have clean faces and clothes. Think of how *you* would want to dress for a photoshoot!

The example below is an *adorable* photo of a little boy. It doesn't get cuter than this! But one small thing that would've improved this image is if someone was able (and if it was the appropriate setting) to wipe his face prior to taking the photo, as if he were their own child, nephew, etc. :) If it's not appropriate to wipe his face—maybe you're out and about taking photos and don't actually know the child—consider cleaning it up in an editing software prior to using it in marketing materials/social media posts.



## 12 - PROTECTING IDENTITIES

Maybe you've read through this whole guide and are now thinking, *"Those are great photography tips, but we can't show the faces of those we serve. We need to protect their identities."*

Here are some ways you can creatively shoot images that are full of life, yet don't disclose the true identity of the subject.

### Just a few ideas:

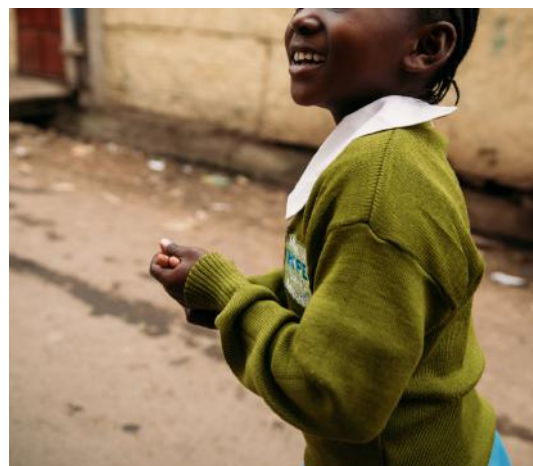
- Photograph a person from the nose down (or shoot a normal portrait and crop it post production).
- Use any object to hide the eyes or mouth of your subject (e.g. flowers, leaves, clothing, trees, etc.) Get creative!
- Photograph from above so faces are unrecognizable.
- Photograph someone from behind.

**See some great examples below!**





# MORE SAMPLES OF IMAGES THAT PROTECT IDENTITIES





**QUESTIONS? EMAIL US AT  
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