

**CanWaCH**  
Canadian Partnership for  
Women and Children's Health



**CanSFE**  
Partenariat canadien pour la  
santé des femmes et des enfants

# Best Practices for Impactful & Ethical Storytelling



September 23rd, 2025

# Roadmap to Ethical Storytelling

## What is Ethical Storytelling?

Overcoming Barriers to Ethical Storytelling

Guiding Principles: The 4C's

Building Blocks

1. Map brand values to storytelling principles
2. Define metrics
3. Align teams early

Community-Led Storytelling

1. Identify the right stories
2. Round out the story
3. Share stories ethically
4. Create feedback loops



# Power of Storytelling

**Stories don't just reflect the world – they shape it.**

- Educate audiences on systemic issues and lived realities
- Demonstrate program impact through human connection
- Inspire support, advocacy, and solidarity
- Shift narratives from charity to justice



# Discussion

What makes a story memorable to you?



# What does ethical storytelling mean?

Ethical storytelling is a mindset and practice focused on how, why, and for whom stories are shared – with an emphasis on dignity, agency, and shared power.

## Key Shifts:

- From storytelling to storyholding
- From extractive to relational practices
- From urgency to intentionality

## What it *feels* like:

- In relationship with the storyteller, community, and purpose
- More connected, accountable, and aligned
- You feel humbled, not heroic
- You, your partners, and community members feel proud



# Why should we tell stories ethically?

- Because how we tell stories matters as much as what we tell
- To protect the dignity, safety, and agency of the people in our stories
- To build trust with communities, partners, and audiences
- To avoid causing harm, retraumatization, or misrepresentation
- To ensure our storytelling is aligned with our values, not just our goals





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CHILD**

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OF LIFE-SAVING PEANUT PASTE TO  
A MALNOURISHED CHILD.**

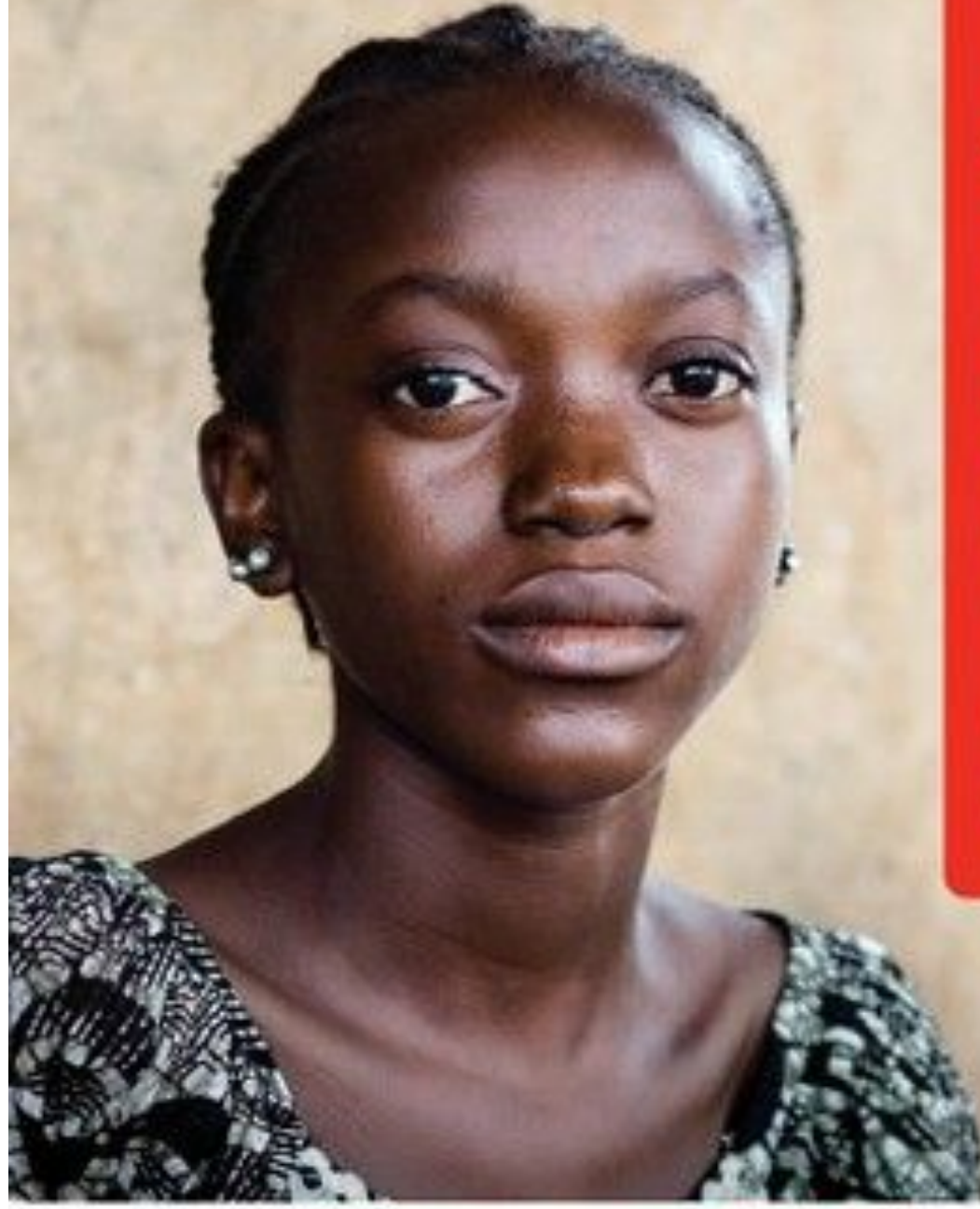
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SHE'S LOST HER HOME.  
SHE'S LOST HER FAMILY.  
WILL YOU HELP HER  
KEEP HER DIGNITY?



Every month, thousands of women and girls in war-torn countries suffer the humiliation of getting their period and having no sanitary products.

Will you help a young woman like Kadiatu keep her dignity when she's at her most vulnerable?


Change lives. For good.  
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Just £5 from you  
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# Why don't we always tell stories ethically?

Not because we don't care.

But because we're under pressure, under-resourced, and operating in systems that prioritize speed over integrity.

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# Discussion

What are some barriers you face to implementing ethical storytelling?



# Barriers to ethical storytelling

<b>Capacity &amp; Knowledge</b>	Time, budget, and staff Lack of local context, training, editorial policies Don't know where to start
<b>Organizational Culture</b>	Urgency mindset Siloed teams Resistance to change
<b>Power &amp; Fear</b>	Lack of leadership buy-in “Too political” pushback Fear of donor reactions

# Capacity & Knowledge: Response

## Audit Questions:

1. Do we build in time for story review and consent?
2. Are we relying too much on assumptions over local expertise?
3. Does the team have support to share stories safely?

## What to Try:

1. Start small: pilot one ethically co-created story
2. Build ethical steps into existing workflows (e.g., M&E planning)
3. Provide just-in-time training or templates for story planning
4. Bring in local knowledge through partners or program staff



# Organizational Culture: Response

## Audit Questions:

1. Is storytelling treated as intentional or reactive?
2. Who's at the table for story planning?
3. Has our approach evolved?

## What to Try:

1. Align storytelling with brand values and program impact
2. Set up cross-team planning sessions (Comms + Programs + Partners)
3. Make ethical storytelling a performance metric
4. Reward intentionality, not just speed

# Power & Fear: Response

## Audit Questions:

1. Are we avoiding discomfort at the cost of dignity?
2. Does leadership understand why ethical storytelling matters?
3. Are we assuming what donors want, or inviting them into our values?

## What to Try:

1. Reframe storytelling as brand alignment, not risk
2. Educate leadership on ethical risks (reputational, legal, emotional harm)
3. Share examples of donor engagement with rights-based storytelling
4. Ask: Are we telling the truth, or just what's comfortable?

# Ethical Storytelling is not All or Nothing

Small steps matter. Every decision you make can move you closer to storytelling that reflects your values.

- You don't need a new strategy – just a new lens.
- It's okay to start with one channel, one story, one shift.
- “Better” can mean more time, more voices, more care – not just more budget.



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# The 4C's: Principles for Ethical Storytelling

Every stage of the storytelling process – from deciding *what* story to tell to *how* and *with whom* – should be grounded in ethical principles.

Consent – Informed, voluntary, ongoing, revocable

Context – Systems framing, not just symptoms

Co-creation – Shared authorship, not just featuring

Care – Trauma-informed, strength-based, culturally respectful



# Consent

## Key Practices:

Explain what the story is for, how it will be used, and why

Establish consent checkpoints and withdrawal options

Share the final version when possible



# Consent

## Questions to Ask Yourself:

Would they be comfortable if this story were shown to their family or community?

Did they understand where and how their story would be used?

Can they opt out or request changes later?

Are we telling this story with them or about them?



# Consent

***“Always remember: it is still my story, not your story.”***

- Nassu Kandeh



# Context

## Key Practices:

Frame individual stories within broader structural causes

Pair anecdotes with data or policy framing

Avoid tropes that erase systemic injustice (e.g., “hard work” myths)

Use language that identifies oppression, not just need



# Context

## Questions to Ask Yourself:

Are we naming the systems at play?

Does this story reinforce or challenge harmful stereotypes?

Can the audience understand the root cause or just the immediate issue?

Are we inviting solidarity, not just sympathy?

# Context

***“If you’re telling my story, don’t leave out my hopes for a better future.”***

- Nassu Kandeh



# Co-Creation

## Key Practices:

Collaborate early: don't just "feature," co-design

Offer multiple formats (audio, visual, written) to meet people's expression styles

Compensate people for their time and expertise

Provide space for review and feedback

# Co-Creation

## Questions to Ask Yourself:

Who decided this story should be told. Why?

Whose voice is centered? Whose is missing?

Could the storyteller add or shape the narrative themselves?

Are we prioritizing performance, or participation?



# Co-Creation

***“I am a community woman: I live with people who love and respect me. The way you talk about me could go a long way in maintaining my respect, or stigmatizing me and my community altogether.”***

- Nassu Kandeh

# Care

## Key Practices:

Use strength-based, trauma-informed language

Avoid dehumanizing terms or “poverty porn”

Share back published stories with participants

Provide space for community feedback on tone or framing

Treat stories as relationships, not transactions



# Care

## Questions to Ask Yourself:

Is this story honoring the storyteller's humanity?

Could this language or imagery cause harm?

Are we romanticizing suffering, or respecting resilience?

Would we feel proud to stand behind this content with the people in it?



# Co-Creation

***“Tell my story from a strength and resilience point of view: I survived a difficult life that many people can’t survive. Tell my story from an achievement point of view: I’m now a proud mum of a successful footballer who is serving the community.”***

- Nassu Kandeh

# 4C's in Practice

	<b>Good</b>	<b>Better</b>	<b>Best</b>
<b>Consent</b>	Verbal/written consent with purpose	Detailed consent form + reconfirm before publishing	Co-review/edit; withdrawal options
<b>Context</b>	Avoid harmful tropes	Add system-level framing	Link stories to structural change & advocacy
<b>Co-creation</b>	Credit storyteller	Involve in story review; multiple formats	Co-design narrative & compensate contributors
<b>Care</b>	Use respectful, strength-based language	Share back stories & invite feedback	Revise stories if harmful; build feedback loops; provide support

# From Principles to Process

Ethical storytelling starts upstream in how stories are identified, shaped, and shared.



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# Step 1: Map Brand Values to Storytelling Principles

Ethical storytelling is a brand exercise.

Hold a cross-team alignment workshop to document how your values translate to storytelling principles

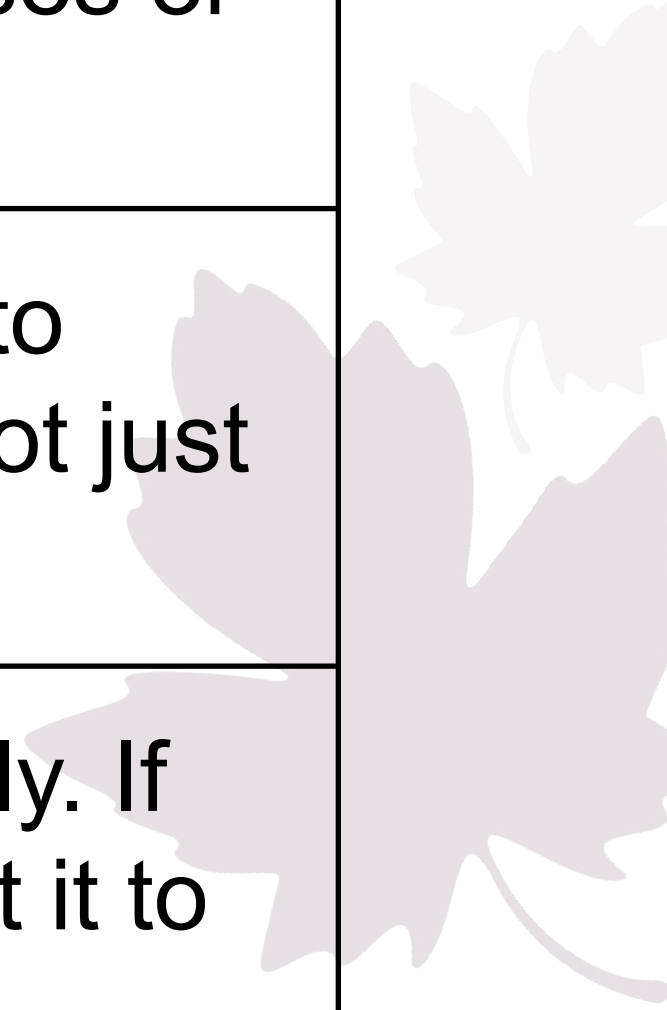
**Why this comes first:** It defines the foundation for every future decision. It's how you align storytelling with your organization's core purpose.



# Step 1: Map Brand Values to Storytelling Principles

Sample Value: Every person deserves to be represented with respect.

<b>Consent</b>	We reconfirm consent before publishing any sensitive detail. Consent is not a one-time transaction. It must be informed, ongoing, and context-aware.
<b>Context</b>	We avoid reducing complex human experiences into emotional shortcuts. We provide systems-level framing so individuals are not portrayed as isolated cases or exceptions.
<b>Co-Creation</b>	We invite storytellers to shape how their narrative is told, from deciding what to include to suggesting how it's framed, ensuring the story reflects their truth, not just our content goals.
<b>Care</b>	We proactively assess what details may cause harm, even if shared voluntarily. If any part of the story could create stigma or safety concerns, we revise or omit it to protect the subject's well-being.



# Step 2: Define Metrics for Ethical Storytelling

Build accountability into your storytelling from the beginning.

Identify what ethical storytelling success looks like (beyond reach or engagement)

Examples of metrics:

- % of storytellers who review/approve content
- Number of stories framing systemic issues
- % of stories that were shared back with communities

Collaborate with M&E and comms to integrate metrics and build these into campaign reporting templates



# Step 3: Align Teams Early

## **Create a shared brand narrative and editorial calendar:**

- Use this to align storytelling priorities with programmatic and fundraising goals
- Helps move from reactive to intentional storytelling
- Co-develop it with Programs, Fundraising, and local teams

## **Attend Programs meetings:**

- Stay up to date on program developments
- Catch emerging stories early, not after the fact
- Build relationships with those closest to the work

## **Work with M&E to identify stories with real impact:**

- Gain insight into why the change matters and how it fits into a broader system
- Build on existing data collection to reduce extractive practices and duplication



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# Step 1: Identify which stories to tell

**Start with impact:** Review M&E data (e.g., Most Significant Change, qualitative findings) to identify where meaningful change has occurred. Use participatory analysis with local teams to interpret the story behind the data

**Dig deeper with local teams:** Consult program staff and implementing partners through story harvesting sessions. Ask what outcomes they've seen, what surprised them, and what stories communities are already telling themselves

**Impact-to-story mapping:** Connect priority outcomes or change areas to specific story opportunities.

Ask: What story illustrates this impact in action? Who should tell it, and how?  
Where does this story best fit in our narrative strategy?

# Step 2: Round Out the Story

Co-design story guides with country teams and partners

- Clarify purpose + audience
- Surface the story behind the data
- Draft questions collaboratively
- Plan for safety and consent

Provide media support and guidance for photo and video composition, probing and follow-ups, consent documentation

# Step 2: Round Out the Story

Section	Guiding Prompts
<b>Before</b>	What was life like before this program/event/shift? What challenges or strengths existed?
<b>Turning Point</b>	What happened that sparked change? Who or what helped shift things?
<b>Now</b>	What is different now? How does it feel? What's still in progress?
<b>Systems</b>	What policies, barriers, or community efforts influenced this story?
<b>Meaning</b>	What does this change mean to the community? What do they want others to take away?

# Step 3: Share Stories Ethically

- Focus on empathetic, human narratives that center on the people they're really about
- Think carefully about how the story is framed, the details you're choosing to include, and the voice of the piece.

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## How not to help the wretched of the Earth

*If we really want to help the poorest people in the poorest countries, we should buy more of the goods they produce, including those produced by children*

Published Dec 08, 2021   Last updated Dec 08, 2021   3 minute read    10 Comments



# Common Language Challenges

- Deficit-based language
- Passive framing of harm
- Saviour narratives
- Dehumanizing shorthand
- Symbolic or vague impact



# Common Language Challenges: Deficit-Based Language

Describe context and agency

**Instead of:**

*“Poor,”*  
*“disadvantaged”*

**Try:**

*“A farmer adapting to climate pressures...”*

# Common Language Challenges: Passive Framing of Harm

Describe context and agency

**Instead of:**

*“She was abused...”*

**Try:**

*“She faced repeated violence due to discriminatory land laws...”*

# Common Language Challenges: Saviour Narratives

Shift to shared or community-led framing:

## Instead of:

*“Thanks to you, they survived...”*

## Try:

*“With local support, she led the effort...”*

# Common Language Challenges: Dehumanizing Shorthand

Use people-first or locally preferred terms:

## Instead of:

*“Beneficiaries,”  
“cases,” “the  
disabled”*

## Try:

*“People with disabilities” /  
“participants”*

# Common Language Challenges: Symbolic or vague impact

Anchor in a real example of change:

## Instead of:

*“She’s thriving now...”*

## Try:

*“She launched a seed exchange with 12 women in her village...”*

# Step 4: Create Feedback Loops

## **Share back all story outputs with storytellers and communities**

- Set a cadence that is doable
- Collect blog posts, social media posts, newsletters, emails that feature community members

## **Assess the story collection experience**

- Collaborate with M&E to gather feedback on whether the process was trauma-informed, respectful, and clear for participants

## **Monitor audience feedback**

- Pay attention to external responses (donors, public, media) to identify any ethical concerns or blind spots

# Ethical Storytelling in Action

## Ebola virus response: experiences and lessons from Sierra Leone

Published: April 23, 2017 6:21am EDT



The public in Sierra Leone was proactive in reporting suspected Ebola cases. Reuters/Luc Gnago



It's 18 months since Sierra Leone was declared Ebola free after a two-year outbreak that left 4,000 people dead.



While the outbreak might be over, its effects will persist for many

While the outbreak might be over, its effects will persist for many years. In the small nation with a population of just 7 million many lost relatives and friends to the disease. And its economy which was growing rapidly before the outbreak was devastated.

It will take time for Sierra Leone to rebuild. But there are valuable lessons learnt from the outbreak. The importance of engaging communities in outbreak response is one of the most important. The country's commitment to public health awareness about the disease was critical in disease prevention and control. This was seen in the active participation of ordinary citizens in reporting the suspected cases.

The public health response to the outbreak was structured in three phases. In the first the government increased the treatment beds and encouraged behaviour changes like handwashing to prevent the spread of the disease.

In the second phase health workers engaged and worked in communities to identify infected people and those in close contact with them. Communicating with the community groups built trust and confidence in the response efforts.

In the third phase, the focus was on accurately defining and rapidly eliminating all new chains of Ebola transmission while restoring health services to normal.

**Stories have the power to change the world. How we tell them matters as much as the stories themselves.**

- How will you bring this into your own organization?
- What small change can you make today to ensure that every story is an ethical story?

**Thank you.**

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**Merci.**

