

GUIDELINES FOR ETHICAL REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL GROUPS IN ADVOCACY WORK

Those involved in advocacy work often find themselves in positions where they need to represent the groups they are working with, whether it be for fundraising or advocacy campaigns. However, representing these groups can be challenging, and without careful consideration, it may inadvertently reproduce stereotypes and conventional discourses rather than foster understanding of others. These guidelines were created as a result of the Erasmus+ project “Towards Ethical Cultural and Social Representations in Advocacy Work” in 2023. It introduces crucial principles to follow in representations of social and cultural groups.

Main organiser: Anthropos (LT).

Project partners: CAAT projects (NL), Izglitibas iniciativu centrs (LV), Ecos Do Sur (ES).



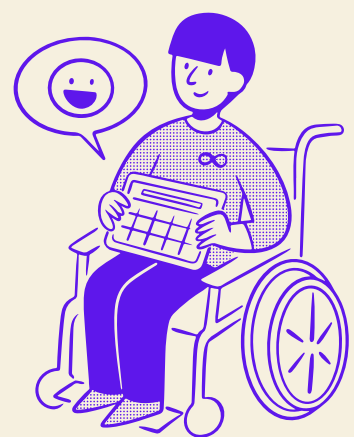
/01

Nothing About Us, Without Us!

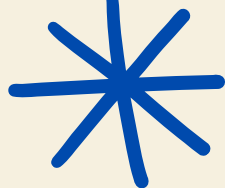
Representations always deal with the questions who is presenting who and why? Who has the power to represent? To avoid talking for others and misrepresenting, always check with the community and if possible, include community members in the discussion. Avoid paternalising - talking for others, imagining you know better what others need. Acknowledge power relationships among you, the community, and the broader public to whom advocacy campaigns are directed. Reflect on the questions: Who has the power to represent? Who is privileged or marginalised in a given situation? How could that be changed? It is important to always encourage the members of the community to act themselves through inclusion: allow them to be the voice and the guide in choosing the direction in which they feel the issue should be addressed. Community empowerment itself is not simply addressing predetermined issues, but it is a complex, inclusive and inductive work. The people of the community are essential experts on any given issue the community is facing. Therefore they should be addressed as such and fully included in conversation and determine what are the issues to be addressed and how it should be done.

02/

Diversity of Stories to Avoid Stereotypes



One of the biggest challenges we encounter while trying to represent a particular group of people facing an issue is to avoid creating or promoting stereotypes about them. Our efforts to communicate the problems that people of any specific group face can create what writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls "the danger of a single story" (<https://youtu.be/D9lhs241zeg?si=lnEhHMqdwliWBHfw>). For example, numerous Western international aid and charity organisations have created the image of Africa as a continent of poverty, hunger and numerous other problems. This became a single story of Africa. Adichie remembers her first encounter with a new roommate in the USA: "What struck me was this: she had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronising, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa - a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals." Groups of people are not homogenous, but diverse and complex. Not only is it important to recognize the diversity within the groups, but also take into account multiple identities (black AND woman AND mother AND sister AND doctor AND queer etc.) that intersect within each individual. To avoid stereotyping, include multiple individual stories representing the group. Do not make people fit your narrative; change the narrative instead. One does not fit all.



/03

Informed Consent is a Must!

Always get informed consent before using stories and photos of any given person. Be open about your aims. Explain and ensure people understand how and where the materials will be used. Some groups can be especially vulnerable. Consider carefully whether it is necessary to use photos of the person or/and their real names. Be particularly careful with children and adolescents. Ask for their parents' or guardians' consent and take into account the child's wishes. Your good intentions can have unexpected consequences. For example, children and adolescents might be bullied, there might be negative reactions from the community etc. It is important to remember that the same standards apply everywhere and to everyone. People tend to forget about consent as a main rule when they enter other countries and communities, especially in the Global South.



04/

Promote empathy



When representing easily vulnerable socio-cultural groups, it is crucial to constantly train empathy. It helps to be more open about others' beliefs, ways of living, cultural norms and practices etc. Encouraging empathy is essential because beyond things we see (behaviour, body language, physical interactions, etc.), there is much that is not obvious (personal history, feelings, thoughts, pain, traumatic experiences, etc.).

It is essential to encourage several types of empathy:

- **emotional empathy, or the ability to share or understand another person's feelings;**
- **cognitive empathy, or the ability to understand what another person might be feeling and what they might be experiencing;**
- **affective empathy, or the ability to respond to the feelings experienced by another.**

Working towards ethical representation through empathy is not only learning to listen but also being attentive to hear what others are saying. Promote genuine curiosity about others, validate feelings of the others, imagine yourself in others shoes, and discover similarities.



/05

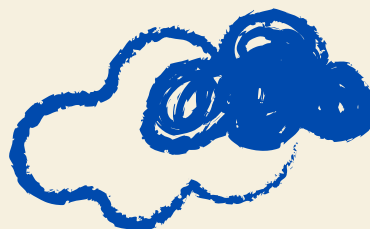
Avoid Victimisation, Promote Agency

Victimisation can do as much harm as stereotypes and various forms of discrimination. Victimisation means to victimise someone or to be victimised, become a victim. A victim is someone who suffers direct harm or threatening (physical, mental, or financial harm). In advocacy work, we are often confronted with suffering and work with marginalised people experiencing various hardships. They are often victims of historical, socio-economic contexts or crimes. However, a victim is someone who is powerless and has no means to influence the situation they find themselves in. If victimhood becomes the only story of their life, identity, and portrayal, it harms their dignity and reduces their agency. Therefore, alongside the stories of suffering, include the stories in which people are agents of change overcoming and resisting oppression and suffering, taking power into their own hands.



06/

Positive stereotypes are still stereotypes



When we think about stereotypes, we usually think about negative portrayals of certain groups and peoples. However, stereotypes may also harm people even if they portray what we perceive as positive traits of the group—something we understand as different, exotic, authentic, romantic etc. For example, a positive stereotype of Roma people as free-spirited travellers or dancers, while a negative stereotype defines them as criminals. Another example: negative stereotypes depict autistic people as incapable and disabled, whereas positive stereotypes define autistic people as geniuses in certain fields. Exotisation, authentication, and romanticisation make people as well as groups of people distant from "others" and make their stories and struggles harder to empathise with.

