Images of girls and girls’ education: ‘Re-viewing’ and Rethinking

Girls’ empowerment?

Child labour?

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March 2009
To Dr. Jackie Kirk (July 16, 1968 – August 13, 2008),
whose energy and creativity inspired this work.
# Images of Girls and Girls’ Education: ‘Re-viewing’ and Rethinking

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................... 4
2. Methodology .......................................................................................................... 5
    2.1. Image selection ............................................................................................... 5
    2.2. Focus group discussions ............................................................................... 5
    2.3. Researcher process ....................................................................................... 6
3. Image Analysis ...................................................................................................... 6
    3.1. Girls’ visibility, strength, agency, and voice ................................................ 7
     - Strength in gaze and activity
     - Consideration of educational content
     - Girls in juxtaposed pairs/groups
     - Engaging with girls and making them visible
    3.2. Participation and activity ............................................................................. 9
    3.3. Children’s rights, education and gender equality ................................. 10
     - The right to education
     - The right to education for girls
     - The right to education for girls in difficult circumstances
     - The right to play
     - Right to education vs child labour or exploitation
    3.4. Symbols of education .................................................................................. 11
     - Books, materials, desks, buildings, uniforms
     - Light and color
     - Ambiguous symbols
4. Discussion: Images in relation to policy and practice ............................ 15
    4.1. From girls’ education to gender equality .................................................. 15
    4.2. From rights to education to rights in education ......................................... 15
    4.3. Adolescence and older girls ....................................................................... 16
    4.4. Ethnic and cultural diversity ...................................................................... 17
    4.5. Social interactions and contexts ................................................................ 18
5. Other challenges and opportunities ................................................................. 19
    5.1. Stories from the field ................................................................................... 19
5.2. Security and protection for children in images......................... 20
5.3. Reality vs hope: challenges in showing change......................... 22
5.4. Technology and image-aware audiences................................ 25
   Photoshopping
   Portraiture/Staging
   Cropping
   Simple and Contemporary

6. Recommendations........................................................................... 26

Annexes............................................................................................ 30

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1. Introduction

Girls’ education is a priority issue for UNICEF, as for other international development agencies and organizations and is a field of interest to scholars using a variety of research approaches. Despite the extensive use of photographic representation of girls in reports and promotional materials by such international organizations, little attention has been paid to exploring the meanings and messages related to these images, nor to their impacts on international development policy and practices. Furthermore, in the field of comparative and international education there has been little attention paid to the use of visual images and visual analysis methods for research, professional development and/or policy development processes.

Based on prior exploratory research conducted by Jackie Kirk and Cathryn Magno, UNICEF Division of Communications (DOC) initiated this research project to investigate the visual representation of girls in their posters, report covers and other communications materials related to education, gender equality and girls’ education. UNICEF DOC already plays a lead role in the provision of communication support to UNICEF education programs around the world, as also to the partners involved in the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI). As UNICEF DOC expands on this role, and makes available more resources - particular photographs, and potentially video and other multimedia items – as well as communications trainings and capacity development opportunities, it is important to reflect on the processes, impacts, strengths, weaknesses, gaps and opportunities for work with images in the promotion of education and gender equality.

The specific objective of this initial six-month project was to provide insights into how UNICEF-promoted images of girls’ education are read and interpreted by sample groups of different relevant stakeholders, with a view to informing UNICEF’s image-based communications and advocacy strategies as well as girls’ education programming. Working with UNICEF, UNGEI partners, peer agencies, and other ‘viewers’ of images as participants in the process, the research aimed to outline policy- and program-relevant recommendations and to provide tools for UNICEF, UNGEI partners, and peer agencies to use to promote more sophisticated visual literacy with regard to girls’ education and to promote technically coherent, ‘girl-centred’ images of girls’ education.

This summary report provides an overview of the project activities/methodology, a summary of ‘image analysis’ based primarily on the individual data provided by participants as rapid response, a broader ‘discussion’ section which draws on data generated through group discussion, follow up with specific participants and additional document review, and two sets of recommendations. Tools and additional information are provided in a series of annexes.
2. Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used, based primarily on focus group discussions, to gather in-depth reactions and responses to a sample set of images. Participants from diverse organizations, countries and backgrounds represented a variety of perspectives on image production, utilization, and consumption. This section outlines how the sample of images was selected, summarizes the number and types of focus groups conducted, and the researcher image analysis process. Through a two-tiered analysis of data, the results capture participant feedback on individual images themselves as well as on issues related to representation, policy, and practice in international educational development.

2.1 Image selection

UNICEF DOC sought to investigate a sub-sample of a bank of 400 photographs recently commissioned for projects relating to girls’ education, and staff selected a group of 26 images known to have been accessed from the photo bank to be used in the study. From those 26, we randomly selected 16 to be used in the focus group discussions. After the random selection, we checked to ensure somewhat proportional representation (to the group of 26) of the following: 1) girls alone, girls in pairs, and girls in groups; 2) young and adolescent girls; 3) geographic spread; and 4) inclusion of “typical” schooling symbols. We were satisfied with the initial random selection and did not make any subsequent changes. We believed these four aspects would capture the most common elements that UNICEF staff or others would seek in the bank of images. The group of 16 images were randomly assigned to one of five groups of images, and each group was utilized in approximately three focus groups. With an average of four participants in each focus group, each image was “read” (i.e., viewed and responded to) by approximately 12 participants. Six images from the remaining 10 were analyzed through in-depth researcher image analysis. This selection was purposive, as we each chose three that we felt, based on previous analysis experience and our subjective response to the images, held the most compelling aspects for our analysis (see Section 2.3 below). It should be noted that the images used in this report represent a collection of photographs commissioned to support UNICEF’s girls’ education initiatives, and therefore most images depict girls in schooling contexts rather than girls engaged in other (family, work, etc.) activities.

In an effort to incorporate comparative analysis to the image reading process, the researchers identified and selected several images used by partner agencies in their promotion of girls’ education and gender equality (from websites, reports, and other promotional materials available online) and included those images in the five groups of images. Thus, each of the five groups included nine images consisting of both UNICEF images and sister agency images. View the entire sample of 42 images in Annex 9.

2.2 Focus group discussions

A total of 15 focus group discussions were held over three months. A total of 78 respondents participated in focus group discussions, with an average of 5 participants per focus group. Each focus group was approximately one hour long, with a powerpoint presentation guiding the participants through the process. The procedure included: 1) an introduction to the study’s purpose and background, 2) an informed consent agreement, 3) a rapid-response portion for
which participants were provided with data collection sheets (see the Rapid Response Tool in Annex 1), and 4) a group discussion about two images and broader policy and practice questions (see sample group discussion questions in Annex 2). Participants were encouraged to share personal experiences with image selection and use, as well as perspectives related to how their particular work environment shapes and informs the use of images. Ten focus groups were held in a typical face-to-face format and five focus groups were conducted virtually, using WebEx technology facilitated by UNICEF Headquarters. This process required participants to log on to a WebEx portal and simultaneously call in to a conference line, so that all participants and the researchers were viewing the material on the computer screen and were able to talk by phone as well. See further details regarding representation in the 15 focus groups, including gender, ethnicity, and country of origin identification, in Annex 3 and further description of the WebEx technology experience in Annex 4.

2.3 Researcher process
To develop an in-depth analysis of six UNICEF images, the two researchers also engaged in “reading” the images at a variety of levels, using an analysis tool previously developed for similar research. This deeper analysis supplemented the focus group discussions, as the longer analysis tool (see Annex 5), allowed each researcher to reflect on a single image and provided an opportunity for the researchers to dialogue more extensively about each image, pushing our observations further by questioning what seem to be, on the surface, obvious message. This dialogue included analysis of surface readings, ideological readings, oppositional readings, etc., and served to triangulate (i.e., confirm) responses by focus group participants. A Data Matrix was constructed to organize all of the data collected from the focus groups and the researcher analysis, thus allowing the researchers to “mine” for themes and patterns across all the data, as well as look into all readings of a particular image or group of images. We took a holistic approach to data analysis and interpretation, and sought to report on major trends across the majority of responses, rather than sub-group comparative analysis. This was partly to meet time constraints and maintain a manageable report length.

Important areas for further research would include comparative analysis of image groups (e.g., UNICEF images compared with UNGEI partner images) and respondent groups (e.g., UNICEF staff compared with sister agency staff).

3. Image Analysis
This section identifies key themes which emerged from participants’ initial rapid response reading of specific images and in their later comments and discussion. The analysis of the images and the responses to the images is necessarily theme based rather than image based, although comments pertaining to individual images are reported as illustrations of the themes. The themes are necessarily inter-connected and we highlight the linkages between them. In this summary report the data are not disaggregated by participants or by participant ‘types’, rather it is aggregated and presented in relation to the different image themes.
3.1 Girls’ visibility, strength, agency and voice

This section focuses on participants’ perceptions of girls in the images as ‘present,’ strong and vocal characters with opinions and ideas to share. The complex and contested term ‘empowerment’ was frequently mentioned; we therefore use it in a general sense of confidence, self fulfillment, taking up of opportunities and control of one’s life.

Strength in gaze and activity

One type of image portrayed to participants the strength of a girl in a traditional or typical way, that is, the strong direct gaze of the single girl in a cropped photo (images 1.4, 3.8, 5.1). We can identify contrasting approaches to the portrayal of strength and empowerment used in two of the images in the sample: one image of girls playing on monkey bars in the playground of what is presumed to be a school (image 2.2) and an image of the face of a single girl, whose eyes and expression have a striking intensity (image 1.4).

Image 2.2

Image 1.4

Image 2.2 portrays the physical strength and energy of girls – energy that the participants understand as more than playground activities but also symbolic of a strength of voice, and a freedom to be girls and to enjoy their childhood. “There is freedom for them in their play,” “a lightness in their movement.” The photo emphasizes the physicality of learning and shows “…that play is so important – but the fact that they are in their school clothes indicates they are getting their academic learning and this is adding to that - it is showing holistic education.” Another image which portrays girls in the process of the physical – and collaborative - activity of moving a desk, provoked much discussion (Image 5.2). For some it was indicative of girls’ enthusiasm for education, their readiness to move desks to improve their learning environments and their energy and physical strength in general. For example, “A school has been built and the children are contributing by helping set up their classroom.” Also, “the girls are united and they demonstrate a spirit of tenacity;” “The girls will do whatever they need to do in order to learn;” “Girls are empowered with education;” “Girls are capable, strong, able and should be these at school;” “It could be a message of empowerment. The girls are taking ‘education’ in their hands.”

The symbolism of physical activity and its correlation with strength of character and purpose for girls as understood in the above photo is quite different to the image 1.4 in which energy is captured in the intensity of the face: “An African girl - her eyes are lit up with hope; a lot of dignity;” “This image is intriguing and you just want to look at it;” “serious, pensive;” “An
African girl child with a book (?), with a serious face.” The message understood here is “Girls have right to learn;” “Assertiveness of girls, education is a right for every child.”

Consideration of educational content
In contrast, the intensity of the face of girls in a different image (2.5) stimulated at least one participant to reflect on the implications with regards to the content of what they are being taught. If girls are so serious and purposeful about their learning, the onus is more than ever on educators to ensure that the learning experience and the content of the learning is relevant, inspirational and oriented to their personal and collective fulfillment. “The gaze is quite different here – they are looking away, at the teacher - and who knows what they are being taught, what they are being indoctrinated in…I was feeling worried for them, that they are so young and have a long life ahead and that I just hope education will help them….“ Additionally, image 3.5 stirred some confusion about content, “Are they reading prayer books?”

Girls in juxtaposed pairs/groups
There are a number of “pairs” images in which the strength of one girl stands in contrast with another girl in background, usually blurred or in contrasting colors. A participant noted, “I think they use contrast to their advantage.” Image 4.1 is interesting in that it does present girls actively engaged in an activity which is also understood as having symbolic meaning related to voice and assertiveness for at least some viewers. Two girls are visible in the image, the front one of whom is speaking into a microphone, and although the ‘story of the image’ is understood as being “karaoke” or “singing” by some, others see it as reflecting that “Girls have something important to say. They can be trusted even at a young age to speak to crowds and share their opinions;” “Girls have a voice that should be heard, they feel empowered when they are allowed to voice their opinions;” and “…girls have a voice also.” However, the use of such symbolism also creates possibilities of less positive interpretations for the girls who are not speaking into the microphone; some of the viewers notice that, “Girl is able to take the mike – but perhaps the Moslem girl is silenced in the background.” Another pair image (3.2) provoked the following comments, “Hope/optimism (although the girl to the left - fuzzy image - has a sad expression” and “Close up more on single girl (blurry, glazed over look of girl…in front). Gives impression that [she’s] unique, lucky.”

Image 3.2

A similar notion was stirred by image 4.7 of a group of girls: “The girls are staring at the photographer - afraid and vulnerable - the center girl looks straight ahead and is more empowered than other girls;” “I see anxiety - there is fascination by the photographer - but they
also seem a little worried and afraid – it’s an unfamiliar situation, perhaps they shouldn’t be there. Except the central girl is very strong.” It is not clear whether this contrast is intended or desired by UNICEF.

Although as detailed below, there may be disadvantages and limitations to images of single girls, images which focus in on one girl - perhaps in a crowd of others which are left out of focus, do have the effect of drawing attention to girls, literally to making them visible in a population of ‘children.’ Not only can such images make girls visible, but they also do so in ways which present them as strong, empowered, vocal and/ or seriously reflective and intelligent; as one UNICEF staff member stated, “I equate it with girls being as good as boys and showing they are committed to education – seriousness about what they are doing.”

Engaging with girls and making them visible
UNICEF’s commitment to making girls visible, taking them seriously and responding to their educational needs was recognized by participants. Perhaps this was more the case in the past, but participants in a UNICEF HQ focus group made the point that images of education might otherwise concentrate on boys and that it has been important for UNICEF to be proactive in the dissemination of images of girls to counter the tendency to ignore them. Without a particular brief to capture images of girls in schools, photographers may be more drawn to boys’ activities, and boys may just be greater in number and more accessible and easier to engage with than girls; this may be more so in some communities than others.

3.2 Participation and activity

“This image grabs my interest immediately. Two blind children are learning to read using some kind of Braille device or are learning math through touching and using an abacus” (image 3.7).

This theme is inevitably closely related to that of visibility and strength, as well as to diversity (see section 5.4), as it is often through children’s activities that meanings about childhood, adolescence, gender and learning are constructed. Here, though, we focus on how images capture the actual behaviours, the engagement of girls in learning or other education-related activities rather than the assumed outcomes of them (such as ‘empowerment’). Several images stimulated responses which recognized girls’ involvement in activities. Images of girls engaged in their learning may serve to remind the viewer of girls as active participants in schools and communities and especially in their own development. An image of a girl reading out of school (5.4) stimulated diverse responses, most of which recognized the way in which the girl was taking action to learn, despite the difficult circumstances: “Big sister is teaching little brother;” “Against all odds, the girl works to practice reading, as well as read to or distract her scared brother.”

Images of girls engaged in activities with other girls (1.2, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 4.1, 5.5, for example) tended to generate positive responses from participants. A response to image 1.1 for example, was: “Girl enjoys company of her classmates. She needs to relate with others as part of her development.” A complex message about the importance of a range of learning and socialization processes was received through another response: “Children who are coming from totally different background
from the culture existing in schools...require some sort of learning process that use their body, and also enjoy the process of learning that will encourage their commitment to stay in schools.” Girls playing together on schools grounds or talking together in a group tended to stimulate very positive responses, such as image 5.5: “They are engaged in animated discussions on a topic that is obviously interesting;” “Importance of participation;” “Girls are having opinion, sharing thoughts;” “Focus, assertiveness, active participation.”

Participants responded positively to the “energy” and “agency” represented in the images in which children were at play or engaged in dialogue. One participant said she “want[s] to see children doing things and being busy and active – not just posed for the camera.” About image 3.1, a participant said, “Looks like a Matisse painting! I thought this one had movement, not like the others,” to which another participant added, “This was my favorite image – there is something celebratory about it,” and a third said, “They are holding hands, showing connection…solidarity is important in education.”

However, careful decisions have to be made about the type of activity that girls are engaged in, as there are certainly risks that activities may reinforce stereotypes and/or that they may be subject to diverse and potentially negative interpretations. For example, the messages participants took from image 1.2 include: “Girls are good at making things with their hands. Girls have a good sense of colour;” “Girls are meticulous in hand work projects;” “a specific training programme for girls;” “Somewhat stereotyped depiction of girlhood;” “Biased image of girls’ expected roles.”

3.3 Children’s rights, education and gender equality

In line with UNICEF commitments to rights-based approaches, children’s rights were mentioned by many participants in response to a number of images; perceptions of rights fulfillment rather than the existence of the right itself dominated. The responses are grouped into three main categories.

The right to education
Participants noted the right to education, in contrast to rights in education (which take into consideration process, quality, etc.). Interestingly, rights to education were expressed in responses to diverse images including those portraying that right and those portraying the absence of it. For example, in response to image 5.8, messages were “Boys and girls have the right to education;” “Both boys and girls have equal right to education – early start is important;” and “Right to education for all!” In response to image 3.3, “Right to education;” and in response to image 2.1, “Education has no age. Learning how to read and write is a fundamental right for every individual.” Some participants combined rights, as in response to image 3.1, “Right to education, right to play, most importantly at school.” And in response to image 5.4, which does not portray classic ‘schooling,’ “All children love rights to education... the key to development.”

The right to education for girls
Several participants pointed out that girls in particular have rights to education, evidenced by the following comments: “Girls have right to learn” and “Assertiveness of girls, education is a right
for every child” (image 1.4), “Every girl across the world is beautiful, unique. They deserve equal right to education” (image 2.8), “A girl in the library and enjoying the right to education” (image 3.4), and “UNICEF strives for the girls’ rights in education” (image 3.3).

The right to education for girls in difficult circumstances
This right was not expressed explicitly; rather responses demonstrated awareness that poverty, disability and conflict should not compromise access to education. Challenges posed by the lived reality of many children were noted in a response to image 6.2, “Children need education, and this is a right, but in the same time they have to work for family.” Others saw a more action-oriented message, implying that agencies or others should be providing assistance to these children. For example, “Girls live in poor areas and need more resources so that they can learn and have fun” (image 3.1). In a general focus group discussion, a participant stated, “Inclusiveness – all children have right to education – even poor children.” Finally, inclusion was noted in image 3.7, “Education is a right for all children even the disabled.” Some saw the notion of education as a right more abstractly, indicated for them by children looking happy when doing school-related activities. For example, one comment on image 2.3 was “Poor but happy. Dirty clothes…. Happy learning to read.” Another had the initial reaction of “Poor children who are happy to be photographed reading a book” followed with the message, “Education for all, the poor.” Reviewing these responses in which participants do not use the explicit language of “rights,” we wonder about the challenges of maintaining a rights-based approach to education in the context of difficult circumstances, when perhaps emotional concerns are at the forefront of readers’ minds.

The right to play
Participants expressed the right to play in responses to image 1.1 with “playing is a right!” and image 2.2 with “To experience the simple beauty of life and play that is their birth right.”

Right to education vs child labour or exploitation
The right to education was sometimes articulated in contrast to exploitation or labour. For example, there were several differences of opinion as to whether some images portrayed children working or in school. One participant responded to image 5.2, writing, “Using girls to labor, gathering materials” and another responded, “Kids are not laboring – they are in school.” Image 1.2 sparked a similar contrast of viewpoints, with one respondent saying, “an art class” and another noting, “it’s a little child-labor-esque.” Emotional affect was attributed in the positive to schooling and play, such as “Made me smile,” “Happiness,” and “I am happy!” and in the negative to labor, as in responses to an image that included: “They are being forced to do something,” “They are definitely not happy,” and “It is a very sad picture.” A respondent wrote, regarding image 2.8, “Desolate, bleak, unhappy…She is unable to attend school because she needs to work in the fields.”

3.4 Symbols of education
Participants responded to the use of various powerful symbols of learning and of education in the images and in this section we highlight how meaning is created by key objects such as books, desks and uniforms.
Books, materials, desks, buildings, uniforms
A “universal” symbol of schooling recurrent in images is the book or workbook (Magno and Kirk, 2008). Participants made frequent comments related to the important positive message of books and materials; of image 1.4, for example, participants wrote, “She is with a book and has access to education;” of image 1.6, “educational material like textbooks should be available to girl child;” and of image 2.1, “Books open in front of them shows they are learning.” Participants further associated books and materials with education and feelings of happiness, as with image 3.4, “Symbolic of girls' educational opportunities...The printed word and books are the tools to happiness and success;” with image 2.3 “Positive image - happy - girls are enjoying reading from a book,” and “Poor children who are happy to be photographed reading a book;” with image 3.4 “Girls like the books/school/it's a positive place for them;” “When a girl has material...she's happy;” and “A literate girl is a happy girl?” Furthermore, the inadequate supply of books can symbolize the lack of resources, as when “Girls are having to share book because there are not enough, but they don't seem to mind - just happy to go to school” (image 2.3).

Flowers played a symbolic role for some participants. One said, in response to image 1.2, “This one was interesting because it was the only one with a symbol – the flower, rebirth - an iconic symbol” and another noted, in response to image 5.8, “I’m distracted by the flowers on his pants – not on the girls’ pants/clothes – what does that mean?”

Desks are clear indicators of classrooms, as evidenced by many responses to image 5.2 such as “Girls are setting up a classroom and are moving desks;” “This picking up of the desk symbolizes that women are empowered in taking control of their education” and “It could be a message of empowerment. The girls are taking "education" in their hands.” This symbol does not guarantee girls’ participation in the classroom however, evidenced by the comment, “Two girls...preparing for school - not sure if they’ll participate in class.”

Uniforms are also compelling symbols of schooling, such as in images 4.2, 5.1, and 5.5: “The uniform really catches my sight!” “Uniforms are catching my eyes;” “beautiful young girl in her uniform, clear and intriguing... Schooling is a positive option - provides opportunities (girls are well- dressed);” and “Formal uniforms. Clean, orderly. Formal education is good for young girls.” They can demonstrate school enrollment, “Poor girls and boys are going to school - uniform implies they’re all attending” and they can also indicate further needs, such as in image 4.3, “The girls have uniforms, but no school to attend...You gave the girls uniforms and now it’s time to give them an education.”

School buildings can represent many aspects of education and allow for diverse interpretations. For example, regarding image 5.2, one participant described the ‘story’ as “Muslim girls moving a desk from a blown up school building to a new one” and went on to explain the ‘message’ as “Difficult for girls in Muslim nations to obtain education - picture isn’t of them at a desk reading/writing.” In reference to image 3.1, one participant noted, “Playing, happiness, poor building and surroundings without plant life;” another wrote, “Girls and boys can play, even if the country where they are is in conflict;” and a third wrote, “You don’t need fancy school for education.” As with the uniforms, school buildings can indicate needs, as one participant said, “Looks rather poor where they are. It’s showing how much they need.” Gender and power
relations were inferred as well, from the location of subjects vis-à-vis buildings. In response to image 4.6, participants said, “Not everyone is educated in a classroom like Americans;” “Girls need more resources;” and “Maybe the boys are inside.”

Whilst the use of ‘obvious’, universal symbols is a key visual communications strategy, some symbolism might be unintended, such as the writing on a chalkboard in image 3.6. For some “The girl is studying hard and writing on board is a way to express it,” but for others the chalkboard is a device to communicate something “larger,” such as for the following participants: “Takes me a minute to be able to tell that she wrote ‘wonderful day’ on the board. At that point, the image becomes loaded for me;” “Why is she learning English? The fact that it's English jumps out at me;” and “Can get ‘powerful’ classes with English.” In the latter quotes, the educational symbol of the chalkboard is overshadowed by the symbolic nature of language, with an undertone of concern about power relations as connected with language.

Portrayal of children in non-typical school settings prompted affective responses of sadness and empathy, as well as recognition that education can take place in non-traditional and culturally appropriate spaces. For example, in response to image 1.7, “Not happy;” “Difficult situation;” “It’s a sad picture...They are in a tent provided after a natural disaster or violent crisis;” and “The girls are probably in a tented school - all girls - gender segregation according to the context...Education should be relevant and adapted to the local context. Provision of single gender learning spaces may be critical to girls' participation in school.” Such comments indicate the challenges to balance the communications potential of universal images with the need to convey diverse approaches to equality and inclusion in education (see sections 5.1, 5.4, 5.5).

Images of girls in very ambiguous settings, with no ‘obvious’ symbols of schooling, also prompted unease and concern on readers’ parts, as evidenced by responses to image 1.8: “They’re waiting, apathetic, bored;” “They don’t know what is happening;” “Girls out of school, sitting there with nothing to do...wasting their life, childhood with no education;” “Are they watching another girl getting married?” and image 2.8: “Unhappiness - harsh living;” “Tender feelings for vulnerable child;” “Discomfort with life;” “I do not see a relation to education - in an opening-outdoors;” “Girls need freedom from their physically demanding roles at home (indirect link that education can provide that freedom).” Lack of typical school symbols prompted readers to construct meanings and context, such as with image 4.5. Some participants noted that the girl “is taking part in school, perhaps a makeshift classroom (maybe for refugees, IDPs?)” while others described the story of the image as “In an African country, a girl is in a community meeting, giving her voice;” and “This girl looks like she is working - maybe selling things, but maybe wants to go to school b/c there is a notebook in front of her.”
**Light and color**

Light, both real and artificial (through the camera flash) shaped participants’ readings of images, as did color. One participant noted about image 3.3, “This image is striking. The light is beautiful.” “Positive, light, a very active picture that is fun to look at” (image 2.2), and another noted, “The light of knowledge. An aha moment.” In some images, the light manipulated the actions/intentions of the subjects, such as in image 3.2, “This girl is thinking about something as she looks up toward the light.” Light can convey emotion, as with image 5.2, about which one participant noted, “Stark setting by contrasting dark and light shadings.” The lack of light also conveys lack of resources, as with image 5.4, “Child wanting to review school work in room with no light,” “Learning in the shadows; girls wish they could be outside;” and finally, “Although this girl cannot afford lighting she still has an education so she can read and take care of her younger brother.” About the same image, “darkness” conveys emotional deprivation, evidenced by the comment, “Hopeless. Setting with dark, endless surroundings.”

Use of color was noted by participants as being symbolic, such as with image 5.2, “a community thriving as represented by bright paint.” However, they were not always clear about what the colors were symbolic of, such as in reference to image 5.5, “The contrast of colors symbolizes purity, the blue tie of each possibly hope.”

**Ambiguous symbols**

One symbol that did not generate consistent reactions was the globe featured in image 1.5. Some participants read this image as, “In formal school being exposed to a world bigger/beyond her community;” “Girls are curious individuals, they have many questions about the world….I want to learn about the world;” “girls regardless of race should be given quality education;” “She wants to show where is her country;” “Lucky African girl in a classroom with learning materials;” and “Importance of knowledge in a globalized world.” Meanwhile, other participants responded with, “A bit troubling, She's not happy;” “alone, distant….want to understand, but…;” “Girls cannot concentrate when other concerns bother them;” and “serious, lost.”
4. Discussion: Images in relation to policy and practice

4.1 From girls’ education to gender equality

The discussions with UNICEF staff particularly were reflective of the shift in perspective within UNICEF from prioritizing girls’ education towards a gender equality approach to education policy and practice. The latter is encompassing of boys’ gendered disadvantage in certain education contexts and is more reflective of the social relations and power dynamics. This shift is articulated in UNICEF’ Medium Term Strategic Planning (MSTP) documents: MTSP 2002-2005 emphasizes girls’ education as the number one organization priority. The subsequent, current MTSP (2006-2009) – very much focused on the MDG goals - articulates a slight shift in emphasis away from “gender parity” and toward “gender equality.” This includes a stronger recognition of the relationship between gender disadvantage and boys’ education, as well as the relationships between gender and other disparity factors.

In relation to the sample images under discussion, whilst, as described above, participants appreciated the importance that was given to girls when they are made visible as the focal point of a photo, when she is shown to be strong and proactive in a certain role or activity, UNICEF staff especially expressed the desire to communicate these newer perspectives on gender and education through different sorts of images. However, images of boys and girls together, for example, girls taking on different roles in relation to boys, even boys taking on different, and perhaps typically ‘female’ roles, were not very available. The photographs available tend to focus on either individual girls or groups of girls, and are not necessarily able to convey positive gender dynamics of the girls’ lives and activities, in relation to those of boys and men. This is important regarding boys’ development: for example, in response to image 4.2, one participant shared an evolving reading of the message: “The message is that girls and boys should be learning together – that they can share – well, she’s sharing because he’s cheating off her.” An HQ staff member found the message of this image to be “See what happens to boys when you focus on girls?” And finally, a participant noted, “We need to give the message that we are talking gender equality…and that disadvantage can be for both.” It is also relevant in terms of taking a proactive approach to improving gender equity in the larger society, as demonstrated by this comment: “Gendered education is socialization – i.e., learning to collaborate early so they don’t need to ‘unlearn’ gender roles later.” In response to girls’ collaboration in image 5.5, “Education is also important because it allows girls to make friends, build relationships with one another.” As important as this is among girls, it can be extrapolated to include the potential of building better future inter-gender relationships should boys and girls collaborate in the educational process. As one participant noted, in response to image 5.8, “Girls and boys interacting is important and necessary at a young age.”

4.2 From rights to education to rights in education

As demonstrated and discussed above, participants do recognize the portrayal of girls’ right to education in the images; in this way they reflect the importance for UNICEF and other agencies of rights-based thinking about and approaches to education. However, in relation to a more comprehensive vision of rights to education, as articulated in UNICEF’s human rights-based approach to programming in education (HRAP), of interest is the participants’ emphasis on
rights to education and the scarcity of reference to rights in and through education. These are more complex concepts and relate to quality education as well as to achievements and outcomes of education - all of which are perhaps less obvious to portray in images. Education quality and outcomes exist in the processes of educations, the activities, opportunities and relationships related to learning (quality) and the application of this learning (outcomes); images of individual girls, decontextualized from relationships and from activities, are therefore limited in their ability to reflect the full extent of rights-based approaches to education. Other types of images that portray girls engaged in the application of learning, in positive relationships with others, for example, are required for this.

4.3 Adolescence and older girls

“Adelescents – it is always hard to find adolescents. It is a policy issue too that the mandate has been up to 18, but somehow our policies mostly apply more to younger children…it is hard to find, especially a variety of positive and negative things for adolescents’ photos...Most photos we have are of them demobilising – not participating – we don’t find those – only after the tsunami do we have some photos of them doing things – but not very much ....”

Another significant area in which it would seem that image availability has not yet caught up with policy and programming approaches is that of the adolescence and older girls. UNICEF images tend to include pre-pubescent girls - usually seen as being primary school aged. The predominance of younger girls can perhaps be explained by a number of different factors:

- younger girls look cute and attractive on posters and publicity materials:
  (image 4.4: “Cute girl....I am glad [she] is in school;” “she is very cute and her sly smile makes me curious;” and may even be slightly provocative: “cute girl- little provocative” “cheekiness”; image 3.8: “Pretty child - confirmation style dress”; “She’s a cute girl”);

- young girls convey a strong sense of the promise of education, the need for education to ensure their full potential (image 4.4: “The girls who have not been give opportunity to learn earlier are now provided with opportunity to learn, and they are happy;” “The girl is happy because she is learning;” “A girl in school is happy to be learning”);

- in traditional cultures it is more acceptable for younger girls to be included in photographs rather than adolescent or older girls for whom showing their faces may bring shame to their families.

Yet when UNICEF and partners are increasing attention to adolescents, and working increasingly to support post-primary education (whilst at the same time recognizing that in many contexts there are also large numbers of over aged, adolescent girls in primary schools), it is difficult for staff to find appropriate images that are specific to education, and which ‘say something’ about the sorts of learning environments and opportunities which should/ could be created for them.

Feedback on image 2.1 is indicative of the power of an image to convey policy/ program relevant messages:

“There are no age limits – showing that it is never too late to learn”

“A message about teen pregnancy – the girl with the hand raised is not likely to get pregnant.”
“The girl with her finger up – she is really excited and engaged and has just got something – a light has come on.”

Image 2.1

The sense of girls’ community was recognized in an image of a group of older girls working or talking together in what is assumed to be a school environment (image 5.5): “The girls are very comfortable together - they are engaged and talking and this might not be the case if they were not in a single sex group”; “Girls are very interested in helping each other learn at the higher levels of schooling”; Teenage girls excited about learning” and these readings create clear messages to the viewers: “Girls can express their views and opinions”; Collaborative work groups help young women share important ideas in learning”; “Post-primary education is important for girls too.”

4.4 Ethnic and Cultural Diversity

UNICEF and partners are also increasingly attentive to the interplay between gender, ethnicity, language and other ‘diversity factors’ to create exclusion and marginalization from and within education. Yet in discussions of image availability through UNICEF channels, participants described frustrations with not being able to find enough of these types of images. They identified gaps in access to images which reflected integration, social diversity in the classroom or school setting. Although school uniforms may conceal dress-related markers of cultural diversity, most images are interpreted as portraying apparently homogenous groups of children - most likely to be from the same or very closely related ethnic groups. Participants would like to be able to use images to convey the positive possibilities for children of interaction between diverse groups. One UNICEF participant working in a regional office had had to go to one country program in particular to request images which reflected the ethnic and cultural diversity which she knew to be a feature of the region and something which had to be addressed in education programming for gender equality. She found it hard to find images of girls from ethnic minorities in the existing regional photo-bank.

Only one of the sample images could possibly be interpreted as reflecting ethnic diversity and social heterogeneity (image 2.7) and yet none of the participants comment on this at all; in fact the readings of this image are quite negative and reflect participants’ concerns that the girls who are apparently either on their way home from school or who are in a playground setting, are not being allowed to play and/ or are not at all happy: “These girls don’t look happy about going to school - or being photographed”; ‘Do I really want to be here?’ or “What am I here for?” are questions written by one participant.
Markers of social groups, ranging from ethnicity to race to class to religion, are often evident, displaying homogeneity as well as identifying or highlighting stereotypes. An important example is the ways in which participants’ responses reflected a high level of awareness of Muslim identity – as conveyed through the marker of girls’ headscarves. As one participant explained, “The desk is a powerful symbol of learning and the hijab is a powerful symbol of Muslim girls.” Images of girls in headscarves (eg 1.7, 2.5, 3.3, 4.1, 4.4, 4.7, 5.7) prompted very ‘Islam-aware’ responses which could be interpreted as indicating stereotypical ideas about Muslim communities and their commitment to girls’ education. Responses included, for example: “Girls can learn even in situations where many are against girls’ education” and “Girls recently allowed to attend school….Girls want to go to school. For the organization - 'look we were able to get girls into this school'” (2.5); “Muslim girls being educated. Probably in a place where historically that hasn't happened very much” (3.3); “Many girls are not provided with enough exposures, and living with limited opportunities. They need to go out and see the world surrounding them for them to grow” (4.7). One participant actually reflects quite self-consciously on the message that she feels she is being encouraged to perceive from image 4.7: “The message is again less clear. One message I pick up as a Westerner is that these girls belong to a specific culture and religion…..” However, most are less conscious in their response (as was expected with the research tools used). For most viewers, images of girls in headscarves in schools are now part of a much bigger and more complex collective visual imagery related to Islam, ‘gender apartheid,’ international security and ‘the war on terror’ used by the media, politicians and other partial actors in both subtle and non-subtle ways to construct certain mindsets. In their use of images to convey positive messages about girls’ education, education actors cannot ignore or be innocent to this current global context, and must make careful choices about the use of certain images. As one participant said, “There's been so much misuse of imagery w/Muslim content that it is a [fraught] area.”

Marking class structure through symbols of poverty can be effective in galvanizing needed support for programming (e.g., through fundraising). One participant said the images “bring to life stereotypes.” In a focus group discussion, the following exchange took place:

Participant 1: Some of the photos had a stereotypical feel – they might be hungry or war-torn. But when you see them as people you want to give them equal opportunity.
P2: They want to show that Third World countries don’t value girls’ education.
P3: We can “save” them with just pennies a day; even if they’re stereotypes it helps Unicef because it shows there’s still work to be done.
P4: The CIS photo [image 5.6] makes it seem like there isn’t a problem – what she’s waiting for is coming – and she’s going home to a safe, comfortable home. She’s not lacking – not like the others. It sounds strange to say, but she’s not “ethnic” enough – it doesn’t sell the image – she’s so like us, why does she really need our help?

4.5 Social interactions and contexts

“There are so many single girls!” “The message is a bit ambiguous. The woman is strong, speaking and has agency and power, but because we cannot see to whom she is speaking, it is not clear what the topic is or how it is being valued” (image 4.6). Participants expressed frustration
at images of girls and boys that are ‘floating,’ decontextualized, and without clear messages. For example, image 3.8: “I have no idea what this image is about...I don't think this photo is related to girls’ education at all;” “She’s a cute girl. I can’t see much else.” Regarding image 4.7, “Hard to identify a story for this – there is no context, they are not engaged in specific activity - I wonder what message UNICEF was sending with this. I don’t see what the connection is with UNICEF policy.”

Such responses speak to the need to source and use images which better reflect understandings of gender as socially constructed within different institutions, social structures, and interpersonal relations. Girls who are the focus of photographs in the midst of crowds and groups, and especially those which set the background slightly out of focus (for example, images 1.5, 2.5, 3.2, 5.1, ) , are frustrating in that they isolate the individual girl. She is disconnected from the context and from the relationships which might be supporting her education, for example, teachers, parents, older girls as mentors/ role models. In the single girl photos we are given no indications of the sort of positive interventions which may be being implemented, such as gender–responsive teaching strategies, text books and other teaching and learning materials which portray positive female role models, safe and secure latrine locations. Teachers especially are noticeable in their absence from both specific sample of images - and the broader collection of images to which we have had access. From the sample images, there are many which would expect the viewer to imagine a teacher somewhere behind or to the side of the photographer, yet only one image includes an adult figure who is interpreted by some viewers as a teacher (image 4.6). However, even in this image the relationships between the woman and the girls around her are rather ambiguous: “I like seeing this woman standing talking. All the colours of the photo are striking / bold. They capture the eye and you are led up to the woman. She seems strong. But the others seem less engaged. Most have their eyes on her, but less visibly engaged or passionate.”

One participant further noted that context is critical to demonstrating processes rather than static educational moments, explaining, “It is difficult to get photos to show things that are not tangible, for example all the work on policy development....Can we show pictures of policy implementation?” It was mentioned that this type of image would be challenging to obtain, but still, “People working in school change and school reform are always asking how to bring policies to life – how can we show school reform in a photo?” Similarly, the context-related policy of “child-friendly schools” was mentioned often, however participants had difficulty pinpointing specifically how the policy was represented in the images. One participant, when pressed, noted that the message of an image was “CFS – it is very well-ordered classroom – the learning resources are ordered.”

5. Other Challenges and Opportunities

5.1 Stories from the field
The research process elicited a number of interesting stories related to image selection and use in very specific contexts, especially within UNICEF. Stories highlighted some of the tensions between intended message and messages received as well as the need for in-depth sensitivity to the local cultures and the different meanings which may be conveyed by very small details.
A story from Eritrea, told by a non-UNICEF participants who had worked in the country some time ago, highlighted the reach of UNICEF images in a country, but also the risks and responsibilities for an agency that may accompany large scale dissemination of communication materials with images.

“In the mid-1990s, UNICEF Eritrea published a calendar featuring photographs of local children, one photo for each month. In one of the photos, there is a close-up of a young girl, 8 or 9 years old, holding the bowl of peanuts that she sells on the street, at the bus terminal, and in the bars to help supplement her family’s income. She represents many of the young children who sell peanuts in communities throughout Eritrea. These calendars were widely distributed freely by UNICEF. According to a teacher who taught in the community in which this girl lived, this young girl, who was attending the local primary school, was teased so severely by the children at her school because of her image in the calendar that she dropped out of school”.

issues, but was perceived as perhaps losing impact at the local level: a field staff member recounted an example in which they had to pull back from using photos that would have been acceptable for the local community because the children were sometimes naked. “This [the nakedness] is fine for them – and was in fact very inspiring in that the children just went to the school as they were – but UNICEF could not show this!”

Another UNICEF staff member told the story of selecting a photo for the Back to School Campaign in Togo where there was an explicit objective in the image selection process to show that girls too should be going back to school. There were many beautiful pictures to choose from, and the group convened for the selection chose one that they preferred. This was then circulated for approval, and in this final step there was one person who did not want it because according to her reading of the image, the fact that the girl did not have earrings was problematic; as a woman from the regional with in-depth cultural knowledge, she felt concerned that without earrings, the girl would be perceived as “not girl enough.” It was a small detail but an important one which could have had important implications not only for the individual girl if she were to be associated with the image but also for the effectiveness of the campaign to promote girls’ participation in education. An alternative picture was then found and used - of a girl who was wearing earrings!

5.2 Security and protection for children in images
Participants in focus groups from agencies in which there is a strong emphasis on child rights and participation highlighted in particular the protection concerns related to the use of children’s images. Agencies such as Save the Children and World Vision International explained their agency protocols and procedures with regards to issues of consent, of ensuring dignity; World Vision, for example, has particular guidance on the use of children’s images: “We use shadows, blackouts, etc., to not give away a child’s identity. We don’t present any kind of sexualized image
of children – they are always fully clothed, for example.” All members of the WVI advocacy team have had training on images of children and protection concerns. Before any document is released it goes through a complex signing off process which for any location- or program-specific document always involves people at the local level. One participant from Save the Children also described the high level decisions and commitments that have been made regarding the agency’s use of children’s images in promotional materials of all kinds. She also reflected on the ways things have changed, and the legacy of image use which now has to be countered: “Save has a very strict policy about images of children – the fundraising department wants to use sad pictures to raise money – well this was more in the past - we used to use photos of children on the streets and outside brothels.” Although agency policies clearly provide important parameters, checks and balances, it was clear that for one participant at least, her own ‘gut feeling’ was as important as any corporate policy: “I think about it in relation to my own kids – would I want my kid to be in that photo? Would I allow that photo of my kid to be on a website?” The ubiquitous accessibility of websites and images within them indicate the need for UNICEF to develop guidelines that pertain specifically to the use of images on internet sources.

Protection and reducing vulnerability is particularly critical to UNICEF staff working in South Asia and the Middle East where there could be very real potential protection threats for girls if their images were used publicly. As a staff member (Communications) from the Iraq Support Centre in Amman (ISCA) described,

“Since the outbreak of sectarian divisions in Iraq, all people, women and girls in particular, have been shunning appearance in the media lest they will be targeted. Moreover, the work of United Nations and foreign bodies has also been associated with grave risks for the employees and the beneficiaries as well. UNICEF for its part has been taking this notion into serious consideration hence pursuing a low visibility policy when it comes to publicizing photos, identities and locations of the subjects quoted by the media or even for the organization’s own advocacy material such as videos, photos and audio interviews to ensure protection of those subjects against potential retaliation risks of kidnapping, killing, etc. Generally the office has taken precaution measures to avoid appearance of public generally and specifically girls in media. This policy and UNICEF Iraq’s abidance by the ethical guidelines of visualization and imagery has so far worked well and no incident has been reported.”

In this context, other strategies are used to promote girls’ education, which include media campaign using actors and illustrations rather than images in posters and leaflets and the use of aliases instead of real names.

(Examples provided by the UNICEF office in the Iraq Support Centre in Amman (ISCA)
These examples and the interest shown by focus group discussion participants in MENA and ROSA especially in a sharing of strategies and approaches to image use in highly sensitive contexts, highlight the need for further attention to this issue, for the documentation of ‘good practice’ and effective strategies and focused capacity building efforts. As a UNICEF staff member from Afghanistan reflected, “We have to be very careful in choosing out approaches and our tools.....we have to be very careful”

5.3 Reality vs hope –challenges in showing change

A theme that emerged in several focus groups was the importance of balancing the depiction of ‘reality’ with a sense of ‘hope.’ In response to participants’ feelings that many of the images seemed ‘posed’ or ‘decontextualized,’ several suggested that UNICEF attempt to represent a more realistic portrayal of the subjects lived experience. This requires the ability to render complexity, movement and change over time in images. Dialogue regarding the portrayal of reality occurred in one virtual focus group:

Participant 1: There has to be dignity in the eyes of the children, whatever the circumstances.

P2: If we show children as only happy, we may lose the balance, for example the children from the Karamojo. How do we capture that – their difficult circumstances?

P3: Yes, we have to show the contrast – if we don’t then what we show could be taken for granted here – we have to show that this is not always the reality.

P4: We have to keep the balance of the reality/the negative with the positive.

Participants identified potential tensions between trying to show the reality from a human rights perspective – “this is what’s wrong that we need to fix” – and “this is what we’re creating for the future that’s positive.” Other comments included, “We need positives because we need some reason to hope – need to show the juxtaposition;” “Unicef needs to ask what it really wants. What does it want from the images;” “Ask questions like, ‘Are the pictures doing justice to the complexity of the situation?’” A participant in the girls’ focus group discussion made the following point: “Girls can be discouraged by society – this is reality – it’s important to represent reality. Be honest!” Another participant mentioned, “In a way it seems like they are more interested in appeasing colonial guilt than really showing poverty and destruction that may be the experience of these girls.” A photographer was particularly impassioned, “They need to not cover up [poverty and war]...I don’t care about optimism...I’d rather get you pissed off than make your day!”
Meanwhile, the theme of hope and optimism was described by the participants from UN agencies and large international NGOs: “WVI can only use our sponsored children and we can’t use painful sad pictures. Now we use happy faces to show the impact of the program.” “We receive images from HQ - they are always very positive images. Now we are using positive images of children to show resilience, empowerment, etc.” (UN agency participant). One participant recognized possible differences in perspectives and image messaging needs of UNICEF and other actors: “Optimism - that is the UNICEF message - and yet some organizations might want to show more realism.”

However, there may be very real challenges to the desire to present the reality, especially in relation to actual or perceived critique that could be assumed accompanies the photos (‘Who is to blame for this situation? Which are the duty bearers which have neglected their responsibilities?’) Relationships with ministries of education are particularly sensitive to such perceptions of critique and it may therefore be safer for UNICEF and other partners to choose to present the positive elements of the situation – to show the girls who are in school and not what those who are out of school are doing, for example. The experience of one UNICEF staff member indicates the sensitivity of image selection and presentation. Some time ago he participated in a regional network meeting on basic education which included education chief/specialists of UNICEF as well as senior MoE officials from 20 countries in the region. A UNICEF senior manager delivered a key note speech on the role and potential of education in accelerated child survival, development and health-related MDGs.

“He used in his presentation some photos about extremely thin, stunted and sick/dying children to show/remind the participants of the gravity of challenges in the continent. The photos were so shocking and powerful, and seemed to have served its purpose in that presentation. However, after the presentation, a ministry official from a country in the region stood up and said to the presenter and other participants that he did not like the fact that many people, typically those from aid agencies, always use such negative images of African children and countries whenever we make presentations. He claimed that the challenges such as poverty, hunger, HIV, disasters are all real, but he would also like to see more positive images of the African countries and people in such presentations when we discuss development of the continent. It seemed many participants, notably other Government officials from the countries, had agreed with and supported his claim. His claim was in fact well received in the

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**Researcher memory piece**

I remember as a child in primary school, a regular event of selling ‘Smiley Faces’ to raise money for a charity supported by the school or the church. I used to really hate the whole thing – we were given these little booklets of smiley faces which were perforated to allow people to select a smiley face that they particularly liked and then give money for it. All the books had the same set of children’s faces in them and there were always some which were more popular than others – although I hate to say it, the angelic looking boys with curly blonde hair and blue eyes. This meant that at the end when I was struggling to find people who had not already been targeted for smiley face purchase, I was also struggling to ‘sell’ the last few children – inevitably the less attractive children....”
Yet discussion in one non-UNICEF focus group of a recent agency communication tool featuring an image of a girl in school provoked criticism of how images may be selected with the explicit purpose of playing safe and closing down any possibilities of discussion. Government policies and procedures which stifle active and critical policy dialogue clearly can have an impact on the ways in which images are selected and used. A ‘safe’, traditional image of a girl in a school uniform, sitting in a very obvious school setting (at a desk with school books in front of her) is one which – according to participants - is not going to provoke any substantive reaction or questioning from any viewer; rather it sustains the status quo of policy and approach.

Recognition of these diverse perspectives is critical to effective communication strategies; they highlight the need for sensitivity to context - as well as to clear articulation of purpose behind any image use. Participants indicated that images should show a good balance of both positive and negative aspects of life for children in difficult circumstances which highlight the challenges as well as opportunities/successes they experience. And yet that balance should not be sought through quotas or other such numerical means, rather in relation to the purpose of the image use and the audience for which the image is to be used – always being attentive to the fundamental issues of ethical responsibility to the subject/s of the image to use in ways which they approve and which do not expose them to any undue risk. As highlighted above, these are particularly critical issues with regards to the protection and well-being of children used in images.

One significant consideration is that of the dignity and privacy of image subjects. This was mentioned in a few focus groups, and there was concern about whether or not the subjects would want to be shown in certain conditions. Protection issues are largely being addressed, also supported by UNICEF branding guidelines to protect ‘at-risk children’ particularly regarding issues such as sexual exploitation and child soldiers, as with the following examples: “With the issue of sexual exploitation we wanted to show reality but needed to protect the identity of the child so we blurred the image;” and “Another sensitive topic is child soldiers – we had wonderful photo – child soldiers putting down their guns and walking away so we only saw their backs – it was a perfect photo.” However questions around privacy and release of rights to use photos are not as well addressed nor are guidelines in this area delineated. While it was explained that “All UNICEF photos have copyright and people need to write in to the photo department to request permission to use them…each photo needs to be true to the real situation – and there is a caption with the location and description,” there was no direction regarding permission from the subject of the photo. Adolescent girls had clear ideas about this process when asked about their potential role in capturing and portraying their educational experiences in images. They said, “I’d want to participate with the photographer – to plan it. I’d have a sense of power;” “A picture only captures one person’s perspective of what’s going on;” and “The photographer might not have the right information – might not be the knowledge-holder of that place or school. He has to ask us.” This moves the discussion from one of privacy rights to empowerment as well. This process may face serious logistical challenges in the field, yet it should not be ignored.
5.4 Technology and image-aware audiences

Viewers today are, as one participant noted, “much more sophisticated now when it comes to images. In this world where images are everywhere, with this bombardment of media and images, people are more sophisticated....UNICEF needs to ratchet up its level of sophistication.” UNICEF has extensive photography guidelines, in addition to the UNICEF Brand guidelines, which direct the use of images. One important element of these guidelines is the use of captions. Captions play an important role in informing the reader as to the setting of a particular image and they ensure accurate and respectful use of images. Savvy image-readers look to captions not only for appropriate photographer credit but also for fidelity to context, thus potentially mitigating some of the issues raised below (photoshopping in particular).

Photoshopping

Participants in several discussions questioned whether or not some images had been ‘photoshopped.’ Because viewers know this possibility exists, the “truth” of the image can now be questioned in new ways. Regarding one image, a participant asked, “Are they photoshopped? The boys don’t seem to be in the same lighting. It seems almost misleading – like they weren’t in the same space.” This comment is particularly significant given the limited number of images portraying girls and boys together. A participant questioned the legitimacy of a different photo, asking, “How much do they ‘work with’ these photos?”

Portraiture/Staging

Several comments revealed viewers’ attention to whether or not the photos were “portrait-like,” “natural,” or “posed.” Regarding one image (4.4), a participant said, “It’s a nice portrait.” UNICEF has made an effort to capture the single girl, looking straight at the camera (through its guidelines on imagery with instructions regarding simplicity, boldness, and cropping), so when a participant sees such an image as a “nice portrait,” it reflects the success of UNICEF’s effort toward this. A few participants felt that the “straight on” gaze demonstrated the girl’s strength (images 1.4, 3.8, and 5.1, in particular). Other participants noted that in the “portrait-like” photos the girls look very passive. Regarding one image, “This is a ‘performance’ photo – they put on a show. The photographer came in and it was like, ‘ok, sit right, look ahead.’ Very unnatural.” Another person noted that in an image the subject was “pushed against a wall – so contrived.” Regarding another image, “Yikes this is awful – looks really staged – look at the notebook – doesn’t it say ‘Budget’ – don’t you think someone just whipped it out of their briefcase and told [the children] to hold it and smile?” Another participant responded, “This is a typical development photo,” revealing a cynical viewing of images as related to development messages. One participant felt that the images were “all very colonial – so colonial – she is sitting so typically at a desk, neatly in uniform.” “I have a hard time with single kid images – exploitative...some one has said, let me take a photo - so disconnected from the context, from the school, etc.” These responses cause us to question the effectiveness of the branding guidelines in supporting communication of the messages of optimism and confidence that UNICEF intends.

Cropping

UNICEF’s emphasis on portraiture has resulted in many images being cropped to depict a child by her/himself or a group of children with only one, in the center, in focus while the children in
the background remain blurred. Cropping is promoted in the branding guidelines in an effort to “focus attention, heighten emotion, and strengthen the appeal of a subject.” However, it can hamper the relationship that the viewer can build with the subject of the image. For example, one participant said, “A lot of images are cropped. They don’t show the whole scene. This really bothers me. I don’t feel like I’m in the image, part of the experience, I’m always on the outside.” It can also imply that some information is being withheld from the viewer, reflected in this comment, “You don’t know what is happening when the image is cropped and you feel like you’re missing something, or not allowed to know.”

Simple and Contemporary
While the branding guidelines on imagery aim for simplicity, the focus group participants did not necessarily find the more simplistic images interesting or compelling. “There is no nuance, they are very opaque – there aren’t multiple levels to these images.” Staff noted that they would like more dynamic photos representing activity and complexity. “It would be nice to have photos to choose from for reports to go along with what you’re talking about….like a photo that has a message, not just ‘nice.’”

As well, many participants felt that the images were “anachronistic” and “out-dated,” which may indicate a need for more sophisticated images in terms of content and quality. Lighting played a role in this perception, based on comments such as “They are old, even archaic in the coloring/lighting;” “Lighting is distracting;” and “the harshness of the flash in this image doesn’t really make this environment seem inviting to me.” Amateur photographers (and field staff in particular) may not have the technological skills, proper equipment, or sensitivity to angles and colors as would a professional photographer, yet staff’s images are often used and can be positive in their ability to capture local cultures and dynamics, but the possibility of images reflecting a contemporary style is potentially compromised.

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are aimed at the multiple groups who are working on issues of gender and education in local, national and international contexts – particularly UNGEI partners. The recommendations relate to image use and ways to support the effective use of images in and for the promotion of gender equality in education, and most specifically, girls’ education.

- Reflect new approaches/ directions/ understandings, for example adolescence, post-primary, social relations, diversity in images commissioned and used in education products and promotional materials
  Source and use portrayals of a broader range of social interactions and relationships in and around school, as well as in other ‘learning and application of learning moments’ (for example doing homework in the home, doing math calculations whilst shopping with a parent, reading a letter for a community member). Participants suggested that more obvious images of positive relationships between, for example, a woman teacher and an adolescent girl or group of girls engaged in learning, would be very powerful, and as discussed in section 5.2, may be a way to depict rights in education. Images of girls
engaged in community activities as described above may be a way to convey outcomes for girls of education and therefore to better reflect rights through education.

- **Increase collaboration between communications and publication units and technical experts in education in image selection and use processes; specific tools may support such collaboration – in a cycle of planning/ developing the communications materials (image selection etc), monitoring impact and evaluating effectiveness**

  The pilot suggested tools to promote and support dialogues between communication and sector specialists with view to refining and then disseminating and providing to UNGEI partners. Processes which clarify the purpose of the image, the desired message and also discuss other possible interpretations are recommended. See Annex 6 for the Tool for Inter-sectoral Dialogue, Image Analysis and Selection as well as Annex 8 for a flyer summarizing the current image analysis project and potential future facilitation of image analysis by the researchers. Use tools in annexes to gain clarity about the “purpose” of the photo (e.g., for advocacy, fundraising, education, etc).

- **Strengthen the capacity of all relevant staff to understand the complex ethical issues related to the use of images of children and especially vulnerable children such as disadvantaged girls and to ensure appropriate procedures are followed for taking photographs and for using/ placing the images**

  As one participant suggested, “There could be rules that could be circulated among UNGEI partners as strong suggestions for use by anyone who is an UNGEI partner.”

- **Give greater attention to participation strategies for engaging children and youth and their communities engaged in image and message production**

  UNGEI partners promote children’s participation as a right in and of itself, but one that is linked to the approaches used in different sectors, as well as in multi-sector processes of needs assessments and project design. While we did not find explicit evidence of girls’ participation in the production, selection and use of images specifically related to girls’ education, we were thrilled to see the photo essays produced by youth, found at [http://www.unicef.org/photoessays/index-pe_29913.html](http://www.unicef.org/photoessays/index-pe_29913.html). Empowering girls with tools and processes through which they can contribute to their own representation and the portrayal of their desires for and relationships with education is recognized through these photo essays. We would encourage staff to connect these efforts more closely to program initiatives.

- **Consider images as strategies for promoting gender equality in education (“going beyond the decorative”)**

  The focus group discussions - virtual and face to face – have demonstrated the relevance of image and analysis as stimulus for professional reflection and discussion on policy and programming in education. For UNGEI partners the tools of image analysis developed for this study lend themselves to a range of learning and professional development contexts in which strategies are to be developed, approaches refined, competing interests are to be addressed. Furthermore, advocacy and awareness raising campaigns may be supported by the use of images to stimulate questions and reflection on issues related to gender and
education. In both of these areas we are inspired by the imaginative advertisement campaign of HBSC, often seen in airport corridors in which a series of images are given contrasting captions.

- Wherever possible, include feedback loops and opportunities for communication about image-based communication tools into the dissemination plans for strategic publications such as policy briefs, reports, etc.

- Ensure new approaches/ directions/ understandings related to gender and education are reflected in photographer briefs/ selection for UNGEI partners – e.g., post-primary education, gender and social relations, ethnic and cultural diversity and homogeneity and try to engage a broader group of ‘non-traditional’ photographers, especially women.

- Devote specific attention to developing tools and strategies for image use that conveys ‘policy in action’ with particular attention to obtaining and using images of quality education processes and outcomes for girls (rights in and through education)
  It is recommended that UNEGI increase efforts to “tell the whole story” through the use of contiguous or patterned images or “photo essay” techniques. Rather than catching a “moment,” these approaches can demonstrate layers of complexity within a single setting or processes of change over time or place. The photo essays currently produced by UNICEF provide some material for use by staff in program planning, monitoring and evaluation. As well, such photo essays could be utilized in policy analysis and perhaps in additional written publications beyond the website.

- Recognize the capacity of local staff and local photographers to understand their contexts and create culturally meaningful images – but recognize the capacity gaps and provide appropriate capacity development opportunities to improve the quality of the local work

- All partner agencies explicitly should articulate and follow appropriate ethical guidelines on the complex ethical issues related to the capture and use of images of children and especially vulnerable children such as disadvantaged girls

- Support further interaction among partner agency staff in countries experiencing severe safety and protection issues in relation to image use; use this to inform the development of specific communications guidance for such contexts (to be followed up with training, piloting processes, for example)

- Develop an action research project to generate insights into effective participation strategies for engaging children and youth – especially girls - and their communities engaged in image and message production related to gender and education

- Conduct additional research with non-Western participants in focus group discussions to be sure to fully capture the “non-donor,” “non-Western” perspective on the images. Further, additional data analysis should include comparative analysis of disaggregated data (sub-group by sub-group).
• Continue to work with WebEx as a tool for engagement with UNGEI partners from different locations on communications materials and strategies; virtual FGD would be a means to consult widely on, for example, images to be selected for a major publication.
List of Annexes

Annex 1: Rapid-Response Tool
Annex 2: Focus Group Discussion sample questions
Annex 3: Focus Group Representation
Annex 4: WebEx Technology
Annex 5: Researcher Image Analysis Tool
Annex 6: A Tool for Inter-sectoral Dialogue, Image Analysis and Selection
Annex 7: References
Annex 8: UNGEI flyer
Annex 9: Images
Annex 1: Rapid-Response Tool

**Photo 1**
Please write your thoughts in response to the following questions:

1. What is your immediate reaction to the image? (write whatever comes to mind)

2. What is the “story” of the image? (What do you think is happening in the image?)

3. What do you think is the message of the photograph related to girls’ education?
Annex 2: Focus Group Discussion sample questions

Please note: questions were adjusted slightly based on the background and perspectives of participants.

Discussion Questions

a. As a Unicef staff person, what message do you think/ hope viewers will see in this image? Why/ how? (because of which specific elements?)

b. How does the message you think/ hope viewers see relate to Unicef’s policies/ approaches/ priorities for girls’ education? In what ways?

Image Selection Processes

a. What is the process for image selection in your Unicef office? (ie who searches? proposes? reviews? decides?)

b. What sort of criteria do you have for image use?

c. Do you use any specific tools? (checklists etc?)

Group discussions regarding this process/ discussion

a. Do you think this sort of discussion is important/ relevant in terms of your agency’s work on girls’ education and/ or communications strategy? If so how?
Annex 3: Focus Group Representation

Face-to-face focus group discussions

The majority of focus groups, totalling 10, were held in a typical face-to-face format. The following details the locations and participants in those focus groups: Two focus groups at UNICEF Headquarters in New York City, two groups with graduate students and faculty in the field of education at higher education institutions (McGill University in Montreal, Canada and Southern Connecticut State University in the U.S.), one mixed group in Manila, Philippines, with participants of an Capacity Building Workshop of the Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE), a group at USAID in Washington DC and a group at CIDA in Ottawa, a group at the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, one “peer” group in New York City with adolescent girls, and a group of professional international photographers in New York City. The rationale for including various stakeholder groups (not only UNICEF staff) was to include diverse perspectives from potential consumers of these images. For example, university faculty and students of international education and education foundations programs routinely utilize UNICEF documents in courses, international photographers are keenly appreciative of the contexts and practicalities of image gathering and production, and urban, socioeconomically disadvantaged adolescent girls provide an interesting perspective regarding the portrayal of girls in situations somewhat similar to theirs. We sought a heterogeneous sample in order to gather a diverse array of responses, however the intention was not to analyze them subgroup by subgroup. Rather we maintained a holistic analysis, bringing in particular perspectives where we felt they were uniquely important. While we attempted to include as many participants from field offices (including nationals in those offices) as possible through the WebEx technology (see below), additional focus groups with non-Western participants would be important for further research, and with additional time, responses from all the various stakeholder groups could be disaggregated for comparative analysis.

Virtual focus group discussions using WebEx technology.

Five focus groups were conducted virtually, using WebEx technology facilitated by UNICEF Headquarters. This process required participants to log on to a WebEx portal and simultaneously call in to a conference line, so that all participants and the researchers were viewing the material on the computer screen and were able to talk by phone as well. Participants in four of the virtual sessions consisted of UNICEF field staff located in eight regions (CEE/CIS, EAPRO, ESARO, MENA, WCARO, TACRO, and Geneva), and included representation from the following countries: Colombia, Switzerland, Kenya, Turkey, Thailand, Jordan/Iraq, Senegal, Nepal, and Afghanistan. Participants in these groups totalled 14. An additional virtual focus group with four participants was held to include perspectives of UNGEI partners, with participation by representatives of agencies such as World Vision International and FAWE. As with the face-to-face groups, the participants viewed a series of nine images and took notes using the “notes page” function in WebEx. They then emailed those notes to the researchers at the end
of the session. WebEx is able to archive presentations used in the session, but not individual participants’ notes.

*Participant sample demographic description*

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Annex 4: WebEx Technology

Using WebEx technology for policy relevant research

Using this innovative technology had many advantages from a research perspective. The researchers were able to show images and discuss them in “real time” enabling authentic communication. This “real time” data collection, occurring on several continents, would have been absolutely cost prohibitive in a face-to-face format. The researchers were able to ask follow up questions based on comments made or tone of voice used, and the participants, while unknown to each other, tended to respond quite honestly and openly, feeling part of a community right from the beginning. This was perhaps because of the element of anonymity still remaining (i.e., no video component). Interestingly, field staff were able to share insights and experiences in a way that they would have been less likely to have done previously, as they were in different regions and often working in different programs. Furthermore, it seemed that the fact that the WebEx methodology forced the participants to focus in on their computer screen created a more intense individual engagement with the images in question than may otherwise be achieved through a project image on the wall of a meeting room. From a more pragmatic perspective, the fact that we were able to reach participants literally at their desks was a huge advantage compared to their having to take the time to leave to move to a designated meeting place.

We had concerns beforehand that we would feel that the process would be too disembodied and that we were not able to really create a rapport with the participants, but it seemed in some ways even the opposite. Participants joked about the fact that they were drinking tea or coffee as they spoke (depending on the time of day we were reaching them and their location) and that they were occasionally having to break off to deal with inevitable interruptions. Given the full schedules of UNICEF and UNGEI partner staff, the fact that all participants remained in session for the full hour and were never interrupted for more than a minute or so may reflect the commitment of the participants to the topic and their interest in it as well as their levels of comfort and enjoyment of the methodology.

Technical glitches could have hampered participation, as phone lines were unreliable in some locations from time to time. However, we are pleased that this did not happen to any participants or would-be participants in this project. Everyone who was available and interested to take part in the process was able to do so. An additional help was the UNICEF technology facilitator, who set up the meetings, sent instructions to participants ahead of time and was available to assist them with set-up, remained online and on the phone during the sessions, and was able to troubleshoot technological stumbles while the researchers carried on with the substance of the sessions. It would have been very challenging to facilitate the session with some participants and troubleshoot with others simultaneously. Phone lines can be purchased through WebEx, which allows the session to be audio-recorded. UNICEF has not purchased this component, however, so a separate conference call line was used. The ability to record sessions for future use by participants and for sharing with others who could not attend would be of great benefit. This technology, with the addition of the phone line as well, is recommended for wide use among UNICEF staff across departments, sectors, and programs.
Annex 5: Researcher Image Analysis Tool

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Annex 6: A Tool for Inter-sectoral Dialogue, Image Analysis and Selection

Guiding Questions for Discussion:

- What is the purpose of the image? Why is it being used? (To illustrate a particular policy, approach, to showcase a program, capture attention, draw the viewer into reading a report?)

- What is the intended message(s) of this image?

- What is happening in the image? What are the possible “stories” of the image? Are the possible stories in line with the intended image?

- Who are the potential viewers/consumers of the image?

- Does the image reinforce - or challenge - certain values (ideological foundations)?

- How are symbols being used and what meanings are encoded in those symbols? Are they positive or negative? To what extent do they support or challenge stereotypes? Are they mono- or multi-cultural? Are they universal or culture-specific?

- Does the image appropriately represent relevant program or policies? In what specific ways (symbols? activities?) does it represent that program or policy?

- Does the image reflect the content/message of the report/study/publication or communication product?

- What might be some alternate or ‘oppositional’ readings of this image (i.e., alternate to the intended message)?

- Has due attention been paid to the protection concerns for the girls/children portrayed?

- Who else should be consulted on the selection of this image? Representative viewers? Girls whose realities might be reflected in the image?
Annex 7: References


Annex 8: UNGEI flyer

IMAGES OF GIRLS AND GIRLS’ EDUCATION: ‘Re-viewing’ and Rethinking

Girls’ empowerment?

Child labour?

Girls’ education is a priority commitment for the partners in the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI). Photographic representation of girls is used extensively in reports and promotional materials to advance girls’ education and gender equality in basic education. But the messages and meanings that are actually conveyed in those photographs, and if and how these images effectively support policy and programming, are rarely explored.

The ‘Images of Girls and Girls’ Education’ project is working with key actors in education to explore key issues and develop strategic and creative uses of images. The project seeks to answer such questions as:

- How do organizations that are committed to girls’ education and gender equality in education use images?
- What are the messages conveyed by these images?
- What is the relationship between the images used and policies and programming for girls’ education and gender equality?
EMERGING FINDINGS

A series of focus group discussions were held to collect responses from a wide range of participants. Some key themes that have emerged include:

- Positive focus on girls.
- Strength and ‘voice’ of girls – empowerment.
- Hope and aspirations for the future, to be realized through quality education.
- Importance of schooling for girls.
- Energy, agency and actions by girls, both within educational settings and made possible through education.

Evolving challenges and opportunities for the effective use of images:

- Girls’ education as priority à Gender equality in education perspectives.
- Girls’ access to education à Girls actively participating in relevant educational activities in a variety of learning spaces.
- Education for All (EFA) and universal primary education à Post-primary education, expanded learning opportunities for youth.
- Working with local cultures and contexts à Maintaining a global perspective.

These emerging findings will inform policy and programme recommendations, strategies, and tools for capacity building and technical support. They will enhance the overall objective of encouraging more sophisticated visual literacy in relationship to gender equality. And they will promote the use of coherent, girl-centred images of girls’ education.

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Cathryn Magno, magnoc1@southernct.edu
Sonia Yeo, syeo@unicef.org

June 2008
Annex 9: Image sample

Image 1.1

Image 1.2

Image 1.3

Image 1.4

Image 1.5
Girls’ education: towards a better future for all

AFGHANISTAN: Girls at a community-based tent school in the village of Baghlan in northern Panjshir Province. There is no permanent school in this remote area, but one is currently being built. See p. 8 for more on education in Afghanistan.