

SHARED VISIONS

A TOOLKIT FOR BETTER
MEDIA REPRESENTATION
OF UNDOCUMENTED
PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

WHY THIS TOOLKIT?

Public discussion of undocumented people is too often shaped by harmful representations and misleading narratives. In the media, undocumented individuals are frequently scapegoated, stereotyped, or shown only in pitiful situations, such as faceless crowds in shelters or images that strip away their individuality. These portrayals create negative perceptions, reducing people to one-dimensional stories that fail to honor their complexity and humanity. This toolkit offers guidance on building more authentic, respectful, and empowering representations of undocumented people and their experiences.

The topic of media representation of undocumented people is in constant evolution. Therefore, this toolkit should be seen as a living document, bound to develop further in the future and always open to feedback!

FOR WHOM IS THIS TOOLKIT?

This toolkit is designed to guide creators, journalists and NGOs in crafting accurate, respectful, and empowering portrayals of undocumented communities. This toolkit is also a valuable resource for policymakers engaged in shaping diversity and inclusion policies. It can guide them in choosing respectful and accurate language when discussing undocumented communities, for instance during municipal consultations.

Some sections also cater more specifically to undocumented people themselves on how they can make informed decisions about appearing in media and how to they can be the storytellers of their own stories.

By adhering to ethical guidelines and centering the autonomous voices of the community, we can foster a more nuanced and compassionate understanding of what it means to be undocumented.

- **Pick and Choose**

This toolkit has many different sections and depending on your level of experience and expertise regarding undocumented people, some sections might be more or less relevant to you. Use the table of contents to guide yourself through what feels important!



THE CREATION OF THIS TOOLKIT

The toolkit was developed in July 2024, after a two-day hackathon that brought together undocumented individuals, media creators, researchers, and support organizations from all over the Netherlands. This collaborative session provided a space for meaningful dialogue about the media and public portrayal of undocumented people. Through interactive brainstorming and co-creation, participants engaged in a rich exchange of perspectives and experiences, with the shared goal of developing practical approaches to more authentic and inclusive public communication about what life looks like while being undocumented.

This toolkit was created for the project Shared Visions, part of the [Actienetwerk Kansfonds](#). The organizations that formed part of Shared Visions include: [Stichting Gast Nijmegen](#), [Stichting Noodopvang Vluchtelingen Nijmegen](#), [STIL Utrecht](#), [Here to Support Amsterdam](#) and [Vluchtelingen in de Knel Eindhoven](#).

The design of the toolkit was made by Olivia Effron-Pool.

Pictures in this toolkit are a joined effort guided by photographer and media-maker Julian Sarmiento.

Inspiration for this toolkit was taken from the toolkit that was developed to counter narratives on homelessness, made by [Het Beelddepot](#).

UNDERSTANDING UNDOCUMENTED STATUS

This toolkit provides guidelines for how to ethically represent undocumented people in the media. Before diving in, it is important to understand what being “undocumented” means.

An “undocumented person” generally refers to a non-national residing in a country without a valid residence permit. These people may not have been able to obtain or maintain a residence permit or citizenship because of restrictive migration and residence policies.

Why people may become undocumented:

- “Irregular” Entry: Systemic factors that push people to enter a country without authorization and therefore lacking a residence permit.
- Failed Asylum Claims: Having an asylum application denied, leaving people without a legal basis to stay.
- Overstaying Visas or Permits: Remaining in the country beyond the permitted time on a visa or permit.
- Children of Undocumented Parents: In the Netherlands, birth does not grant citizenship, so children may inherit their parents’ undocumented status.

People living without a regular residence status often face forms of exclusion and risk which are harmful to their well-being. Undocumented people live, and usually work, for years while experiencing insecure housing, abuse at work, poverty and fear. Living and growing up undocumented requires a tremendous amount of resilience. The uncertainty about the future, constant stress of making ends meet and risks of being uprooted from their lives, negatively impacts people’s health. This additionally highlights the importance of ethically representing undocumented people in media, as to not further contribute to their vulnerability.

STORYTELLING GUIDELINES

FRAMING AND CONTEXT

How images of undocumented people are presented and framed, can affect either positively or negatively people's perception of this group.

DO's

- **Showcase people's individuality and autonomy**
- **Photograph people in different sceneries and environments, such as in work, family and community contexts**

This helps highlight the complexity of each person's character.

- **Focus on the individual power and autonomy people possess to shape their own lives and communities** (see an example of how this can be done in the [Resource](#) section)

DON'TS

- **Avoid focusing only on undocumented people's struggles or legal status**
- **Avoid framing undocumented people as passive victims to evoke pity**

While it is important to acknowledge the challenges undocumented people face, portraying them only through hardship strips away their individuality and agency. This can influence people to see undocumented people only as a dependent group in need, instead of recognizing them as full human beings with strength and agency.

- **Be aware that you are not "giving people a voice" by telling their story. Therefore, avoid using this type of language. Rather you are simply amplifying people's voices and giving their story a platform.**

LANGUAGE

Language is an essential factor in shaping narratives and public perception. It is important to be mindful of the choice of words when talking about people who are undocumented.

Words have the power to strengthen feelings of "otherness". This feeling can be created especially by using terminology such as "us and them".

Instead of referring to undocumented people as "them", terms like "people from the community", "individuals", "community members", or simply "people" decreases the alienation and again highlights the humanity and individuality of each person.

Dehumanizing words such as "illegal", "criminal", or "alien" should be avoided as they often imply guilt and criminality.

Why the term "illegal" is problematic

Firstly, no human being is illegal. The main criticism of the term is based on the fact that only an act can be illegal whereas a person cannot be "illegal" or "criminal".

Secondly, a person should not be defined as illegal simply for a journey they took to seek asylum. Describing people who have fled their countries of origin as 'illegal' is dehumanizing and portrays them as criminals and threats, encouraging punishment rather than humane policies.

The use of these negative terms to refer to undocumented people, in the media and politics, is often taken advantage of to influence public opinion. Using the most negatively charged terms when referring to undocumented migrants can conveniently create prejudices, and shape uninformed opinions, increasing the power of politicians and the media to use undocumented migrants as scapegoats in extreme right political campaigns across the world.

GATHERING PERSONAL STORIES

TALK ABOUT CONSENT

Those covering the stories of undocumented people should keep in mind that many sources have experienced trauma and may still be living in vulnerable conditions. This makes it even more important when telling someone's personal story to first gain the person's trust and consent.

DO's

- **Consider using a consent form!**
Check out the template for a consent form in the [Resources](#) section.
- **Make sure they clearly understand the purpose of you wanting to share their story**
- **Make sure they know who you are, who you are working for and what your role is in them telling their story**
Transparency and consent are essential.
- **Ensure they know the risks, benefits, and implications involved with telling their story**
- **Respect people's time**
Be clear about how long an interview will take, do not cancel appointments and stick to time agreements.



PROTECT PEOPLE'S IDENTITIES

Connected to gaining people's consent it is important that you make sure people's identities are protected and anonymity potentially respected.

Life while being undocumented brings uncertainty and instability. Appearing in media should not negatively contribute to these circumstances. People might agree to appear in media without fully understanding what that means and or the implications of it. Online publications have a degree of permanency to them. Media appearances accompanied by individuals' real names can attract unwanted attention. Make sure people understand this as thoroughly as possible so they can make an informed decision.

TIP

- **Suggest a legal check-in**

To further ensure the protection of people's identity, it is a good idea to ask if the interviewee has spoken with their case manager or lawyer about appearing in the media, so they can feel confident their participation won't create unexpected risks.

Media Participation Checklist for Undocumented People

This checklist, which can be found in the [Resources](#) section, is designed to help undocumented people decide whether appearing in the media feels safe and right for them. Sharing your story can be powerful, but it can also carry risks. These questions are meant to support you in making an informed choice, protecting your safety, and ensuring your voice is heard on your own terms.

- **Share the checklist!**

Journalists are encouraged to give this checklist to undocumented interviewees so they can make an informed decision.

HOW TO GATHER PERSONAL STORIES

DO's

- **When writing about someone who is undocumented, prioritize their voice and perspective!**
Remember personal stories should be told from the individual's own motivation, not the publisher's.
- **Respect a people's wishes about which parts of their story and which details they want to share and which they prefer to keep private**

DON'TS

- **Avoid sensationalizing people's experiences**
- **Avoid framing stories solely around a person's legal status**

HOW TO INTERVIEW A PERSON

Preparation

Understand the cultural context of your interviewee!

Do some background research on the cultural context of your interviewee. This can help you ask better questions and understand your interviewees answers more deeply.

Use the right interpreters!

If you need to use an interpreter, spend time finding the right one. They can make or break an interview!

- **Use translators or interpreters as partners in understanding the essence as well as the factual meaning of what is being said**
- **Remember how much information you can pick up through body language and tone of voice, but do not solely rely on this**
- **Ensure the interpreter shares the same dialect as the interviewee, not just the same language**
Dialects can be very different from one another and can alter meanings if not properly understood.
- **Make sure your interpreter adopts a trauma-informed approach**
Discuss what a trauma informed approach looks like before the interview.
- **Do not accept summaries from the interpreter**
Ask translators to translate everything as closely as possible so as not to misinterpret meanings and contexts.

During the interview

- Avoid interrupting or leading the conversation too much
- Let the interviewee share the parts of their story that matter most to them
- Honor the person's unique perspective and do not try to fit their story into a pre-determined framework
- End interviews with care. Be clear about time limits, signal when you are closing, and give space for final words. Never end abruptly as this can be hurtful
- Offer the chance to review the final product before it is published or shared, so the storyteller can ensure it accurately reflects their story
- Inform people when their media piece will be released and where they will be able to find it

VISUAL STORYTELLING GUIDELINES

KEY CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHING UNDOCUMENTED PEOPLE

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- **Have a conversation about anonymity!**

Always discuss the risks of peoples' images being shared. Photos can spread quickly online, and have a degree of online permanence. Pictures might capture moments that people would not want to face later.

- **Ask the person if they have ideas of what they would like their photos to like!**

Ask people if they have ideas for photos. Perhaps they have hobbies or a favorite place they like to go, that you could include in your shots.

- **Explain how the images will be used and for how long!**

Explain how long you expect the images to be used for and whether the images will be used in print, on websites or on social media.

- **Explain who you expect to see the images**

- **Make a written agreement about how the images will be used**

A consent form clarifying image use is strongly recommended, particularly when photographing minors.



KEY PHOTOGRAPHY STYLE CONSIDERATIONS

- **Ensure that the person in the picture is recognizable, if they do not wish to stay anonymous**
- **Photograph from an eye-level perspective**
This avoids creating a feeling of superiority from the viewer.
- **Avoid photographing from a distance**
This helps to avoid creating distance between the person in the image and the viewer. Photos from up close allow a more personal and empathetic viewing experience.
- **Capture people in active and empowered postures!**
Standing upright and tall, rather than sitting and looking down



- **Your photos should represent people in everyday situations**
- **Avoid capturing people in vulnerable or embarrassing situations**
Avoid capturing people in depressing or stereotypical surroundings, such as shelters, charity surroundings or kitchens.
- **Edit wisely**
Dark and high-contrast images can come off as more negative, while bright and colorful ones feel more positive.
- **Be mindful of skin tone**
When taking and editing photos, avoid backgrounds or lighting that cast shadows, distort natural skin color, or make people appear in a negative light. Choose settings that highlight individuals with dignity and authenticity no matter their skin tone.
- **Avoid making changes that could distort the original mood or authenticity of the photo**



PHOTOGRAPHY & ANONYMITY

When it is needed to keep people's identities anonymous, the previous tips are easily contradicted. The following tips aim to inspire photography that ensures anonymity and empowerment at the same time.

- **Anonymize with objects that give people power**

Instead of having people cover their face with their hands or slouch in disempowering ways, anonymizing people with objects such as flags or flowers can be a creative solution. See the examples on the next page!

- **Use illustrations**

Illustrations can be a creative way to anonymize people, while still having imagery to accompany their story. See an example on the next page!

In Limbo Exhibition in Brighton and Hove by
Photographer Natasa Leoni and activist
Hermione Berendt



One World Magazine Photoshoot
Photographer Lin Woldendorp



Trust-based banking project by
Here to Support
Illustrator Vivian Mule



PHOTO EXAMPLES BEFORE AND AFTERS

THE KITCHEN SETTING

Before

Before:

In the first picture we only see a close up of a person's hands. This essentially means nothing, from a storytelling point of view, because the subject is unrecognizable.

After:

A better alternative is shown in the second picture, where the person's face is recognizable, they are smiling and shown in an empowering pose.



THE SHELTER SETTING

Before

Before:

In the first picture we see an unrecognizable person lying down. This type of image can often imply an individual has nothing to do, is lazy and transmits pity.

After:

A better alternative is shown in the second picture, where the person's face is recognizable, they are smiling and shown in a similar shelter setting, but while doing an activity. An activity that in this case the individual who is portrayed shared she actually used to do to keep herself busy while she resided in an asylum seekers' centre.

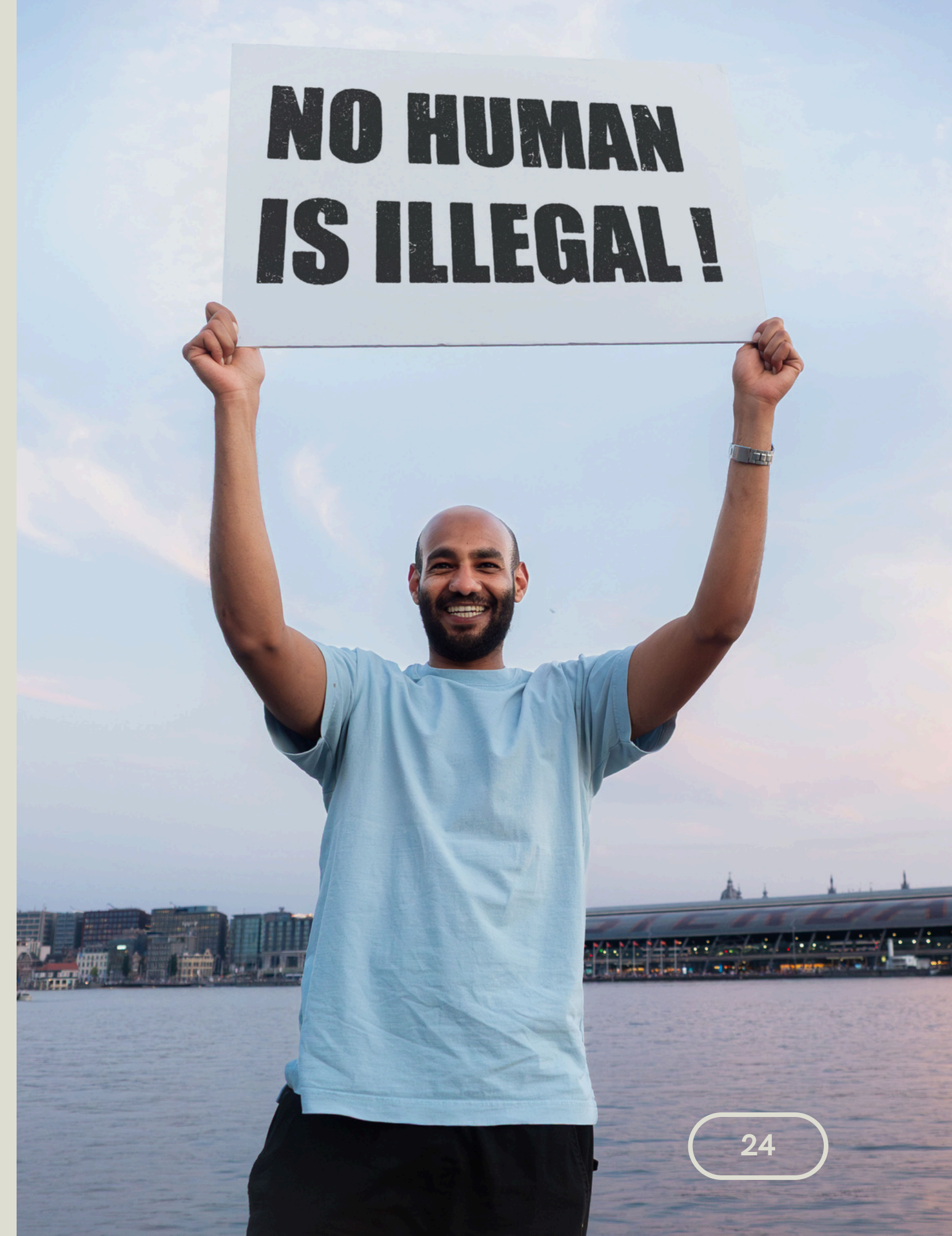


After



THE PROTEST SETTING

Protest settings can easily produce images that highlight anger, aggression, or conflict. While these moments may occur, relying on such images risks portraying undocumented people in a one-sided and negative light. Journalists should take care to capture the dignity, solidarity, and collective strength present in protests, rather than reducing participants to stereotypes of hostility.



THE PORTRAIT

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Before:

In the first picture we see an unrecognizable person sitting on a bench in a pitiful position. This type of portrait is disempowering and says little about the individual being photographed.

After:

A better alternative is shown in the second picture, where the person's face is recognizable, they are looking into the camera lens and the picture is taken from eye level.

Before



After



SELF- REPRESENTED STORYTELLING

THE OPPORTUNITIES OF SELF-REPRESENTED STORYTELLING

Instead of writing about undocumented people, offering the community the opportunity to tell their own stories through self-representation can allow individuals to share their own authentic stories and perspectives

- **Self-representation can capture details that outside perspectives might overlook**
- **Self-representation can provide storytellers with increased empowerment, as they can freely decide WHAT, HOW, and HOW MUCH they want to share**

This shifts the power dynamic, giving undocumented individuals control over how they are portrayed and the freedom to share the experiences that matter most to them.

- **Self-representation decreases incidents of stereotypical framing and presents more diverse narratives**

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESOURCES, TOOLS, AND MEDIUMS IN SELF-REPRESENTED STORYTELLING

To truly empower self-representation, outside actors should focus on providing the resources that make self-represented storytelling possible. Platforms and channels must be built with undocumented people, not for them, and they should be led by the community itself. Most importantly, these platforms should center the community's needs so that their storytelling can be sustained over time.

Practical tools that can be provided include:

- **Digital devices for writing, photographing, recording or filming**
These can allow for the creation of high-quality, self-represented content.
- **A physical space for production**
It is important to offer a supportive environment where individuals can work freely and creatively.
- **Practical trainings in storytelling, photography, video editing, or social media**
Trainings can strengthen people's skills allowing them to control their own narratives, engage audiences, and create lasting impact.



EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL SELF-REPRESENTATION PROJECTS

Magazine Issue

A magazine issue led by undocumented storytellers can feature personal essays, photo stories, and interviews, offering readers direct insights into their lives and perspectives. This approach brings together powerful, authentic voices, letting individuals share their stories on their own terms.

Social Media Page

Showcasing real-time posts on platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, allows authentic content and connection with supportive communities.

Collective Blogs and Podcasts

With blogs and podcasts, people can open up about their lives, sharing real stories, challenges, and wins, directly with listeners or readers. It can pose as a way to connect, make people's voices heard, and build alliances among wider audiences.



SUMMARY OF DO'S AND DON'TS

THE DON'TS

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of storytelling about undocumented people

Written Stories

- Avoid stereotypes and prejudices
- Avoid “Us and Them” terminology
- Avoid harmful terminology such as “illegal”
- Avoid pitiful framing

Visual Stories

- Avoid harmful imagery that shows people in moments of distress or desperation
- Avoid depressing and stereotypical surroundings such as shelters and kitchens
- Avoid high angles and angles that hide people’s faces
- Avoid dark editing

THE DO'S

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of storytelling about undocumented people

Written Stories

- Emphasize agency
- Use respectful terms like "community members" or "individuals"
- Obtain consent
- Prioritize autonomous voices
- Support self-represented storytelling
- Provide the resources and tools needed for self-represented storytelling

Visual Stories

- Empowering poses
- Photos shot at eye level where people appear clearly
- Welcoming, positive, open surroundings
- Images that reflect on personal strengths, hopes, and dreams
- Imagery that shows individual in everyday moments, working, learning and participating in family and community life

RESOURCES

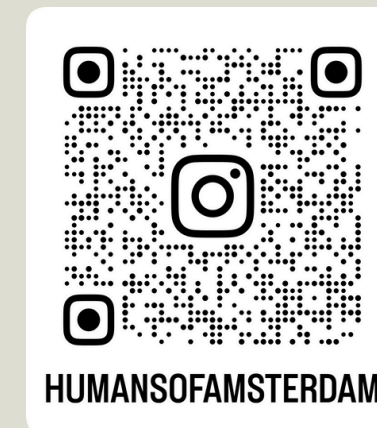
HUMANS OF AMSTERDAM STORY EXAMPLES

At the end of August 2025 the stories of 4 individuals, who are connected to Here to Support, all of whom have either been or still are undocumented appeared on the social media platforms of the account Humans of Amsterdam. These stories attracted the attention of over 10 million people.

Debra Barraud, the photographer and storyteller behind the account did a fantastic job in properly representing the individual power and autonomy undocumented people possess to shape their own lives and communities. For this reason these stories and media representation are taken as a positive example within this toolkit.

Follow the account of **Humans of Amsterdam** on instagram: https://www.instagram.com/humansofamsterdam?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==

- Read Marion's story here: https://www.instagram.com/humansofamsterdam?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==
- Read Hidayat's story here: https://www.instagram.com/humansofamsterdam?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==
- Read Patrick's story here: https://www.instagram.com/humansofamsterdam?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==
- Read Isaac's story here: https://www.instagram.com/p/DNxaeP42K2E/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==



Marion



Isaac



Patrick



Hidaya

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When I was thirteen, my father wanted to marry me off. It was my mother who fought to keep me in school. And she was right. I loved to learn and eventually I became an electrical engineer.

Leaving Uganda was the hardest decision I have ever made. But I'm queer, and in my country, that's illegal. People don't live openly, and if you do, you pay the price. After one activist who was publicly gay was murdered in broad daylight, I knew I had to leave.

I came to the Netherlands expecting to receive asylum. But during the interrogation process, when I told them I was queer, they didn't believe my story. For the first five months, they kept relocating me from one place to another. Then, after my application was rejected, I ended up on the streets.

I didn't know where to go. I was crying all the time. A contact person from COA (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) had given me a list of eighty organizations I could try for help. I called so many of them, but most had strict conditions. Only in Amsterdam was I finally able to find support.

Here, I found an organization that could help me prepare for the second procedure, and through them, I also found a shelter. That first night, when I was given a bed, a blanket, and the certainty of food, it felt like the best day of my life.

It was a night shelter, so during the day we had to find somewhere else to go. I found a day shelter. There they had yoga classes, music, and meditation. That place became really important to me. That is where I found my community of other undocumented people.

The activities helped us avoid getting lost in everything that was going wrong in our lives. It helped us focus on something positive. I even got to host my own computer classes. I started with eight students, and by the end, I had thirty.

There, I learned that I have a talent for connecting with people. I gained self-confidence, and that is what I tried to give to my students too. I stayed there until I tried again to get my documentation, and after seven and a half years of being undocumented, I finally received it."

"I still have so many questions that nobody can answer. Why did it have to take seven and a half years to get my permit? Nothing in my story changed. It is the same story. The only thing that changed is that I lost a lot of time that I can never get back. I missed out on so many opportunities. I could have gone to school and learn Dutch, but I was not allowed to. I would have been in a much better position."

ONE WORLD MAGAZINE PHOTO EXAMPLES

These photos were taken for a One World magazine publication about undocumented people and are again good examples of empowering photography.

- One World magazine: <https://www.oneworld.nl/>
- Photographer Lin Woldendorp: <https://www.linwoldendorp.com/>





CONSENT FORM EXAMPLE

If the person you are interviewing or taking pictures of is not fluent in English consider translating this form to their native language

- **PDF version**

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tj-Qff_cxPZol74icEINW_UjBQ0Eu_EO/view?usp=sharing



- **Word version**

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DT-pHX8dHV6t0YPdgCH0rEW2IpNLkka-/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=116885480436039415745&rtpof=true&sd=true>



Media Consent Form

Purpose of this form
This form ensures that you understand and agree to how your story, image, or voice may be used in the media. You have the right to ask questions, refuse, or withdraw consent at any time before publication.

- Personal Details**
- Name (optional) _____
 - Pseudonym (if preferred) _____
 - Contact (optional, but recommended for media to be shared before publicaition) _____

- Consent Options**
- (Tick the boxes that apply)*
- ☐ I consent to being interviewed.
 - ☐ I consent to my words being quoted in print/online media.
 - ☐ I consent to my photo being taken and used.
 - ☐ I consent to my voice being recorded and used.
 - ☐ I consent to my video being recorded and used.
 - ☐ I prefer my identity to be hidden (face blurred / name changed).

- Conditions of Use**
- I understand that once published, materials may be shared online and could be permanent.
 - I have been told how and where this story will appear.
 - I know I can refuse to answer questions or stop the interview at any time.
 - I have had the chance to speak with a case manager, lawyer, or trusted person before signing.

Signatures

Interviewee's Signature: _____ Date: _____
Interpreter (if used): _____ Date: _____
Journalist/Reporter: _____ Date: _____

MEDIA PARTICIPATION CHECKLIST FOR UNDOCUMENTED PEOPLE

If the person you are interviewing or taking pictures of is not fluent in English consider translating this form to their native language

- **PDF version**

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mC0GQ9755uylh1h9NoT1c-zw5B4-Sxk-/view?usp=sharing>

- **Word version**

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tkiB8V9XjAaI0uqH-CrXsQAz0hMMJHZH/edit?usp=sharing&oid=116885480436039415745&rtpof=true&sd=true>



Media Participation Checklist for Undocumented People

Before You Agree, Ask Yourself:

- Do I feel comfortable sharing my story publicly?
- Am I clear on which parts of my story I want to share?
- Am I clear on which parts of my story I do not want to share?
- Have I spoken with my case manager or lawyer about possible risks?
- Could appearing in the media affect my legal situation or immigration case?
- Am I okay with this interview being online permanently?
- Have I given (or refused) consent for my image to be taken?
- Have I given (or refused) consent for my name to be used?
- Do I know how my photo, video, or words will be used?
- Do I understand where my story/photos will be published?
- Do I understand why the person interviewing me or taking my photo wants to do so?
- Do I understand the role of the person wanting to interview me/take my photo?
- Do I understand whether I'll have the chance to review or approve what is published?
- Do I have someone I trust to talk to before and after the interview if needed?
- If the interview makes me upset, do I know where to find support?
- Does sharing my story feel empowering or harmful to me right now?

Remember:

- You can set the agenda of the conversation!
- Do not be afraid to interrupt the person interviewing you. They might be missing interesting perspectives!
- Talk about what you feel is important to be represented!

It's your story. You have the right to say **yes**, **no**, or **only on your terms**

