



# **ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR COVERING REPATRIATION AND REINTEGRATION OF CHILDREN RETURNED FROM CONFLICT ZONES**

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This manual provides ethical standards for media coverage of the repatriation and reintegration of children and women from Syria and Iraq under the framework of humanitarian missions of the Kyrgyz Republic, carried out with support of UNICEF and other international partners.

The manual was prepared by Prevention Media for UNICEF in Kyrgyzstan, and for a wide range of readers.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The repatriation of children affected by conflict often sparks significant public interest and debate. Coverage in media outlets sometimes resorts to headlines, illustrations, videos and comments that undermine children's rights, deepen stigma and can hinder community reintegration.

The repatriation of children from conflict zones is a complex humanitarian, legal and social undertaking. It is based on a recognition that these children are often survivors of egregious violations of their rights. They face profound and overlapping vulnerabilities stemming from their experiences of loss, conflict, displacement, and prolonged detention.

Media professionals have a vital role to play in building public understanding, reducing stigma, and supporting the successful reintegration of returnees. Reporting on the process in a fair, ethical, but informative way that keeps children safe, and their privacy protected, is highly challenging – and, given these children's vulnerability, extremely important.

Following the decision of the Kyrgyz Government to undertake repatriation campaigns of its nationals from Iraq and Syria, UNICEF, with the financial support of the EU Foreign Policy Instrument and the US Bureau of Counterterrorism, has taken steps to capacitate media professionals to report ethically and sensitively on issues related to repatriation.

Drawing on UNICEF's experience, this manual provides recommendations to the media – including press services, content creators for social media platforms, representatives of public organizations and employees of government and social services – for how to do so. The manual will:

- *Explain the principles and standards of the ethical reporting of children and their families repatriated to the Kyrgyz Republic.*
- *Prevent common mistakes such as sensationalism, breaches of confidentiality and the use of stigmatizing language.*
- *Recommend best practices to create materials that are informative to the public yet keep children safe.*

In providing these guidelines, this manual will help develop professional standards in journalism and public communications, raise awareness about the importance of ethical standards, contribute to effective coverage of children and families' reintegration experiences, and, ultimately, help to stimulate public participation and support.

## 2. BACKGROUND ON THE REPATRIATION OF CHILDREN

Between March 2021 and July 2024, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic repatriated 541 citizens from Iraq and Syria across eight operations, including 396 children. These children are victims of armed conflict and had been detained following the fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Many were born or raised in ISIL-controlled areas or in detention camps where they endured harsh and inhumane conditions, were deprived of their liberty, exposed to violence and exploitation, and denied access to basic services, including education and healthcare.

The Kyrgyz Republic's decision to become one of the few countries globally to implement large-scale repatriation efforts drew considerable national and international media attention. While the government has led these humanitarian operations, UNICEF - supported by the European Union's Foreign Policy Instrument (EU FPI) and the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism (USBCT) - has provided ongoing technical and operational support throughout the process.

Children repatriated to Kyrgyzstan from Iraq and Syria may carry several vulnerabilities stemming from their experiences of conflict, displacement, and prolonged detention. Nearly all have witnessed violence and lost loved ones. Many have sustained physical injuries or health issues related to the inhumane living conditions they endured. Most lack formal education, resulting in substantial learning gaps - particularly among older children.

Upon return, these children face additional challenges related to reintegration. Misconceptions and stigma surrounding their background—often linked to fears of exposure to violent ideologies—can hinder acceptance by their communities. Girls may encounter additional layers of vulnerability, including gender-based violence, harmful social norms, and risks related to early or forced marriage. Children with disabilities may face even greater barriers in accessing essential services and support systems.

Family and community support play a vital protective role in facilitating reintegration. When children return to welcoming and informed communities and caregivers, they are far more likely to recover, heal, and thrive. As President Sadyr Japarov of the Kyrgyz Republic emphasized:

*"These children of Kyrgyz citizens, who for various reasons left for Iraq, experienced the consequences of military action in a foreign land, so they need to be shown that they will always find shelter, care, and protection in their homeland."*



### 3. ACCURATE, ETHICAL REPORTING ON CHILD REPATRIATION: WHY IT MATTERS

The media plays a key role in shaping public opinion on the repatriation of children from armed conflict zones. Inaccurate reporting can stigmatize children, distort public perceptions of reality and even create broader social tensions.

Ethical reporting that follows the guidelines laid out in this manual can have several positive impacts, including:

- *Preventing further stigma and discrimination against repatriated children and their families*
- *Promoting a factual and compassionate public discourse that frames these children as victims of conflict, not perpetrators*
- *Helping to reduce social tensions by separating humanitarian concerns from political narratives*
- *Ensuring accuracy by relying on official, verified sources when reporting on reintegration, rehabilitation, and support programmes*

Respecting children's privacy and avoid exposing them to re-traumatization or public scrutiny

## 4. MEDIA GUIDELINES

Constructive coverage of the repatriation of children plays a key role in their successful integration. Journalists must be careful to adhere to ethical standards and present information objectively. UNICEF and the Office of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic have developed recommendations for covering the repatriation of children returning from war zones. Above all, media coverage of children must not lead to any negative consequences such as discrimination, psychological suffering or harm.

### **In general, media coverage of the repatriation and reintegration of women and children should:**

- ▶ *Promote understanding of children's rights, including recognizing children as holders of their own rights.*
- ▶ *Inform the public about what constitutes violence against children.*
- ▶ *Respect children's right to privacy, prioritizing their individual best interest as central to decision-making.*
- ▶ *Consider the experiences of repatriated children when producing any informational material, including news reports.*
- ▶ *Acknowledge how girls and boys may have distinct experiences and vulnerabilities to violence and exploitation.*

## 4.1. PROTECTING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND DIGNITY IN MEDIA COVERAGE

The Ethical Code of Journalists of Kyrgyzstan, Article 12, states: "A journalist must be especially careful when covering issues related to children. To cover the personal life of a minor or minors, a journalist must have permission from his/her parents, guardians or other legal representatives.

Names of minors (or indicate signs by which they can be recognized) who were involved in illegal actions – must not be disclosed. This includes those involved in events related to violence.

The public interest in covering issues related to children in vulnerable situations must be satisfied based on the interests and rights of the child."

Article 18 of the Civil Code of the Kyrgyz Republic states: "A citizen has the right to demand in court a refutation of information that discredits their honour, dignity or business reputation, and a legal entity of information that discredits its business reputation. If information that discredits the honour, dignity or reputation of a citizen, or information that discredits the reputation of a legal entity, is disseminated in the media, it must be refuted in the same media. The procedure for refutation in other cases is established by the court. A citizen in relation to whom the media has published information that infringes on their rights or legally protected interests has the right to publish their response in the same media."

### *To report ethically and in alignment with Kyrgyz law and international child protection principles:*

**Remember that a child is a child.** In all coverage, children must be regarded first and foremost as children, and their treatment must be determined taking into account the best interests and protection of the rights of the child.

Emphasize that children are victims of the conflict, not participants in it.

**Ensure confidentiality.** Failure to protect a child's anonymity puts the child at risk. Do not disclose any information that could be used to identify children and their families, including where children will be temporarily accommodated (location of the transit centre), the location of families (including districts and villages), or the children's ethnicity and/or regional origin.

Furthermore, do not disclose any other personal data related to the child or family. According to the legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic, personal data includes biographical and identifying data about citizens and their personal characteristics, information about family and financial status, health status, and so on.

In photographs and video, always hide the faces, and any other identifying details, of children and women who have returned from war zones. Think carefully about not sharing other details that could serve as identifying factors.

**Avoid re-traumatizing a child** who has already experienced distressing events. Children can be re-traumatized if they are interviewed for a story, or in the way that they are covered in the published article. In interviews:

- *Avoid questions that induce painful memories.*
- *Do not ask children to talk about events that may be distressing for them.*
- *Maintain a respectful tone when communicating and show empathy, taking into account the child's age.*

**Avoid heroizing or demonizing people in programmes and stories.** Avoid descriptions or language that may make children targets of discrimination. Do not use hate speech, stereotypes and negative generalizations.

## 4.2. PROTECTING PRIVACY AND THE RIGHT TO ONE'S OWN IMAGE IN MEDIA COVERAGE

Article 19 of the Civil Code of the Kyrgyz Republic states: "No one has the right to publish or distribute a published image of any person (such as a painting, photograph, or film) without the consent of that person."

Article 20 of the Civil Code of the Kyrgyz Republic states: "A citizen has the right to privacy: privacy of correspondence, postal, telegraph, electronic and other messages, telephone and other conversations, diaries, notes, memos, intimate life, birth, adoption, medical or attorney confidentiality, privacy of deposits, and so on."

Publication of diaries, notes, memos, and so on is only permitted with the consent of their author, and of letters with the consent of their author and addressee. In the event of the death of any of them, the said documents may be published with the consent of the surviving spouse, children of the deceased and other heirs, and subsequently with the consent of other descendants."

**To report ethically and in alignment with Kyrgyz law and international child protection principles:**

**Do not publish or distribute images (including photos or videos) of minors without the written permission** of parents or guardians.

**Hide the faces of children and women** who have returned from war zones. Avoid direct filming of children's faces. Avoid any photos or videos that could identify children or the area in which they currently live.

If shooting photos or videos is impossible due to various reasons and circumstances, **use only verified sources for illustration**. These can include:

- *The official photo and video archives of government agencies, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Migration of the Kyrgyz Republic.*
- *Provide captions for photos or videos with all relevant details. Do not forget to indicate authorship and respect copyright.*

Provide captions for photos or videos with all relevant details. Do not forget to indicate authorship and respect copyright.

**Avoid images that may incite hatred or violate the privacy of repatriates.**



### 4.3. REPORTING ACCURATELY, FAIRLY AND NEUTRALLY

The Ethical Code of Journalists of Kyrgyzstan, Article 9, states: “During editorial processing of photographs and captions to them, texts, headlines, distortion, inconsistency and falsification of materials are unacceptable. Texts of materials, inter-noises, interviews (soundtrack) must correspond to the video sequence of the shooting.”

**To report ethically and in alignment with Kyrgyz law and international child protection principles: Avoid unnecessary dramatization and sensationalism.** While emotions and personal experiences can add an extra element to stories, everything within a story must be accurate – with the story driven by facts, not emotion.

**Give the floor to experts,** including psychologists, social workers and law enforcement officers.





**Rely on official and verified sources** when discussing rehabilitation, recovery and reintegration programmes.

**Provide the whole picture – including examples of successful reintegration,** not just problematic cases.

**Separate humanitarian issues from political disputes.**

**Assess the actions of all parties objectively,** without bias, and without succumbing to propaganda narratives.

### 4.4. MISTAKES TO AVOID

-  **Sensational headlines.**
-  **Use of generalizations.**
-  **Reliance on anecdotal evidence,** especially in matters of identification and potential risks.
-  **Ignoring the voice of children themselves.** It is important to show their real experiences.

**The professionalism of journalists and other content producers determines not only the public perception of the problem, but also the fate of children, whose future is largely shaped by public opinion.**

## **5. SUPPORTING ETHICAL STORYTELLING: UNICEF'S WORK WITH KYRGYZ MEDIA ON REPORTING THE REPATRIATION AND REINTEGRATION OF CHILDREN FROM IRAQ AND SYRIA**

With support from UNICEF, made possible through funding from the EU FPI and USBCT, the Kyrgyz Republic demonstrated strong commitment in proactively preparing for the return and reintegration of children from Iraq and of children and their mothers from Syria.

In partnership with the Kyrgyz Government's Information Department, UNICEF facilitated targeted training sessions to strengthen the capacity of media professionals to report ethically and sensitively on issues related to repatriation. These sessions emphasized the importance of child rights, ethical reporting, confidentiality, and the need to counter harmful stereotypes and stigma surrounding returnee children and their families.

Capacity-building efforts with national media outlets specifically focused on the protection of children's identities and the responsible handling of sensitive information. Journalists were equipped with practical guidance on avoiding the publication of personal details or imagery that could compromise the safety, dignity, or privacy of repatriated children - principles firmly grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As a result of these efforts, national media coverage has markedly improved. Reporting has shifted toward neutral, child-sensitive narratives that preserve the privacy and dignity of returnees, contributing to a safer and more supportive reintegration environment.



