

Opinion Piece

Blurred Images Do Not Protect Victims: A Call to Stop Using Images of Victims in Child Sexual Abuse Reporting

It is deeply disturbing that even today, news organisations publish photographs and stories of victims without their consent in articles on child sexual abuse (CSA), often with nothing more than a blurred face as supposed protection. While this may appear to satisfy legal requirements, the emotional and psychological damage it may cause to the victim is rarely considered.

Let's be clear: **a blurred image does not protect the victim from harm and threat**. The general public might not recognise the person in the image, but the victims **always recognise themselves**, exposing them to severe distress and trauma. Many victims and survivors of CSA report a compulsive need to search the internet for information about their case; this is neither vanity nor curiosity but a trauma response. Victims and survivors often search to **regain a sense of control**, monitor what has been said about them, and manage the overwhelming anxiety that someone might identify them and find out about their past. Seeing a poorly blurred photo of their face only increases that anxiety.

It is important for journalists to understand the serious consequences of publishing victims' images and stories without their consent. This practice deprives them of agency over their own narratives and personal privacy, further fuelling the cycle of retraumatisation.

Moreover, there is always a **risk that someone may recognise the victim** even from a blurred image. With technological advances, it is now possible to reverse blurring effects, posing a significant risk to victims' privacy and safety. Imagine the crushing moment when a child victim finds their own blurred face attached to a news article about their abuse, something they had no say in and no control over. In cases of CSA, where trauma is long-lasting, trust in others is destroyed, and identity deeply fractured, this can be devastating and retraumatising. Publishing blurred images may additionally impose a severe negative impact on the victim's family, simultaneously obstructing the path to healing for numerous people.

While images can add authenticity to a story, in cases of CSA they can take away the victim's **right to privacy, safety, and healing** – rights that must be respected and protected in media coverage and public discourse. **There is no need to use victims' images without their consent**, blurred or not. It adds no journalistic value, but it **does add risk, shame and lasting harm** to child victims, who have already experienced more than most of us can imagine. This ethical principle should guide all media organisations and journalists.

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but what message are media organisations and journalists sending to victims when they choose to publish their images without their consent? The message from Protect Children together with child victims of CSA is clear: if a child victim can recognise themselves in the photo – don't use it!

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Child Victim of Child Sexual Abuse