

Sexual abuse perpetrated by humanitarian workers: from moral relativism to competitive victimhood

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Drawing on the example of *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), Françoise Duroch and Emmanuel Noyer review the measures taken by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) to combat sexual violence. The authors show the moral relativism that runs through humanitarian organisations concerned with preserving their public image. Admittedly, the latter are increasingly aware of their obligation to monitor the behaviour of their employees, but the systems need to tackle inequalities, especially gender-based ones. For the authors, NGOs will only achieve this by integrating intersectional approaches.

Sexual abuse in wartime has long been regarded as the inevitable consequence of armed conflict. Sexual abuse frequently gave tangible form to the loser's humiliation¹ through the rape of women and girls or was seen, more prosaically, as a form of retribution for the military contingents.

Particularly widespread during the war in Bosnia and officially recognised by various United Nations (UN) resolutions in the 1990s, sexual violence in conflict has been made illegal², particularly in light of its massive scale and repetitive nature. A zero-tolerance policy on sexual abuse by UN peacekeeping forces was formerly established in 2003³.

The 1990s were marked by a raft of scandals that tarnished the peacekeeping forces, combining sexual exploitation of vulnerable people and sex scandals, at times involving UN managers, soldiers and civilians. It did not take long for humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to be implicated too.

The Mano River scandal: “big men” and “local girls”

In 2002, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Save the Children released a report detailing the involvement of some forty NGOs in the sexual exploitation of refugees in the Mano River countries⁴. The extreme destitution of the people living in these West African refugee camps at that time, particularly women, made them easy prey for a group of actors with much greater financial and

¹ Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin: Diary 20 April 1945 to 22 June 1945*, Virago, 2006.

² Claire Fourçans, « La répression par les juridictions pénales internationales des violences sexuelles commises pendant les conflits armés », *Archives de politique criminelle*, 2012/1, n° 34, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-archives-de-politique-criminelle-2012-1-page-155.htm>

³ UN Secretary-General's Bulletin, “Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse”, ST/SGB/2003/13, 9 October 2003, <https://undocs.org/ST/SGB/2003/13>

⁴ The report accuses dozens of NGOs of providing aid in return for sexual favours in refugee camps in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. “Note for Implementing and Operational Partners on Sexual Violence and Exploitation by UNHCR and the Save the Children-UK: The Experience of Refugee Children in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone”, February 2002, www.unhcr.org/3c7cf89a4.html

social power⁵. The UN would later relativise the conclusions of this investigation⁶, but the ensuing media scandal⁷ pushed several organisations, including MSF, to put in place mechanisms for handling cases of abuse perpetrated by their staff.

The fear of the organisation's reputation being tarnished, resulting in a potential drop in funding, was the driving force behind this decision. This initial ambi-valence will also be present later on. Two main and at times competing objectives in the fight against inappropriate behaviour could be identified: protecting the institutions' image versus the employer's duty of care towards their staff. Internal discussions at MSF in the early 2000s were imbued with moral relativism for some, while others raised culturalist notions about sexuality. However, everyone did agree that this abuse was arising in contexts in which populations were poverty stricken, and in which the extreme economic disparities between those involved fostered the sexual exploitation of the most vulnerable. It is worth noting that following this scandal MSF significantly stepped up its efforts to help victims of sexual violence⁸.

A new investigation has evoked the persistence of such practices almost eighteen years after the publication of the report on the Mano River scandal. In a press article, an employee from the World Health Organization flagged up sexual abuse perpetrated by UN and NGO aid workers during the Ebola epidemic in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 2018 to 2020⁹. The component parts of the Mano River affair can also be found in this particularly fragile region: poverty, impunity, and socio-economic inequality.

#MeToo and the Oxfam scandal

A series of scandals came to light in 2017 and 2018. These scandals were extensively covered by the media and on social networks. In the wake of the Weinstein affair which shook the film industry, the actor Alyssa Milano relaunched the hashtag MeToo¹⁰ started in 2006 by the activist Tarana Burke¹¹. #MeToo became an organised global movement denouncing the sexual abuse suffered by women in their private lives and in the workplace. Concomitantly, Oxfam had to contend with a slew of complaints about some of its staff, including one of its field managers, accused of having organised a sex party shortly after the earthquake hit Haiti in 2010¹². Already destabilised by a drop in funding, the UK NGO went on to lose several million pounds while Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg presented to the British prime minister a petition, signed by over 100,000 people, calling for cuts to the development aid budget. Megan Nobert, herself a victim of sexual violence when working for a humanitarian organisation, published an opinion piece in *The Guardian* warning against the temptation to demonise the entire aid sector¹³. Shortly afterwards, a BBC article published accounts from former

⁵ "Big men" was the name used by the children to refer to their "sexual exploiters" when questioned by the Save the Children investigators. Michel Agier, « 41. Le chaos et les camps. Genèse du gouvernement humanitaire », in Serge Paugam (dir.), *Repenser la solidarité, l'apport des sciences sociales*, Puf, 2007, p. 797-815.

⁶ Pierre Hazan, « L'ONU relativise les dérives de l'humanitaire », *Libération*, 25 octobre 2002, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2002/10/25/l-onu-relativise-les-derives-de-l-humanitaire_419611

⁷ Pierre Hazan, « L'humanitaire vire au sordide en Afrique », *Libération*, 28 février 2002, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2002/02/28/l-humanitaire-vire-au-sordide-en-afrique_395317

⁸ Françoise Duroch and Catrin Schulte-Hillen, "Care for victims of sexual violence, an organization pushed to its limits: The case of Médecins Sans Frontières", *International Review of the Red Cross*, 96/894, 2014, p. 601-624, <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/care-victims-sexual-violence-organization-pushed-its-limits-case-medecins-sans-frontieres>

⁹ Robert Flummerfelt and Nellie Peyton, "Power, poverty, and aid: The mix that fuelled sex abuse claims in Congo", *The New Humanitarian*, 29 September 2020, www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2020/09/29/Power-poverty-aid-sex-abuse-claims-Congo-Ebola-response

¹⁰ Pauline Croquet, « #MeToo, du phénomène viral au "mouvement social féminin du XXI^e siècle" », *Le Monde*, 14 octobre 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2018/10/14/metoo-du-phenomene-viral-au-mouvement-social-feminin-du-xxie-siecle_5369189_4408996.html

¹¹ Gurvinder Gill and Imran Rahman-Jones, "Me Too founder Tarana Burke: Movement is not over", *BBC News*, 9 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-53269751>

¹² « Oxfam : la presse britannique parle d'un scandale sexuel "plus important que l'affaire Weinstein" », *Le Monde*, 12 février 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/02/12/la-presse-britannique-s-interroge-sur-la-portee-et-les-consequences-du-scandale-oxfam_5255786_3214.html

¹³ Megan Nobert, "The Oxfam scandal does not justify demonising the entire aid sector", *The Guardian*, 17 February 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/feb/17/oxfam-scandal-does-not-justify-demonising-entire-aid->

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employees of MSF highlighting the organisation's tolerance of staff use of local sex workers and, more generally, the widespread nature of sexual harassment in their teams. Following these events, the organisation's management implemented a series of measures in order to take a more ambitious approach to preventing and sanctioning bad behaviour¹⁴.

Just like for the Mano River affair fifteen years earlier, ever sensitive to protecting its image, the organisation seems to be making progress in addressing abuse, advancing at the same pace as that of the various media scandals¹⁵. The conduct that it regards as unacceptable would gradually extend to other groups – locally employed colleagues and patients –, and to other types of behaviour, notably the use of sex workers. In 2018, the organisation adopted a set of behavioural commitments¹⁶, laying down a number of principles, including not making use of sex workers' services when on assignment abroad.

Moral leadership?

Still in 2018, Penny Mordaunt, a British Conservative MP, stated that Oxfam and the aid sector in general had failed in their moral leadership¹⁷. This was the starting point for a series of debates to determine whether international aid organisations should be paragons of virtue, while including the inherent ethical tension between the delivery of a social mission and inappropriate behaviour, particularly towards the most vulnerable. Among the latter, and for a medical organisation such as MSF, patients are a social group to be protected as a matter of priority, even though very few cases are being reported at the present time. Although the organisation has equipped itself with a set of tools and has increased its abuse management, prevention and detection capacity, the number of cases among its beneficiaries remains very low given the organisation's size (over 64,000 people¹⁸).

Furthermore, despite the measures taken, it is difficult to obtain information from locally recruited staff, who make up over 90% of the field teams. A fear of reprisals, a lack of confidence in reporting system confidentiality, barriers with regard to communicating in a foreign language, a lack of knowledge of the complaint submission procedure, difficulties for the organisation when trying to clearly distinguish between behaviour in people's work and private lives¹⁹, and cultural, political and legal contexts: these are all barriers that do not facilitate the reporting of abuse, particularly sexual abuse.

It is also worth noting that greater team diversity has been viewed by some managers as a way of limiting different types of abuse. Indeed, diversity would help restrict "cultural comfort zones", particularly when staff are from societies in which the issue of moral regulation remains a key value and in which social mixing and gender diversity are present. Operating as a counter-power in groups, the expat population's diversity of cultural reference points enables certain behaviours to be called into question; behaviours that may be deemed unsuitable based on the moral sensitivities of the people on the ground.

sector

¹⁴ "Behavioural commitments", MSF, June 2018. Creation of the Intersectional ethics platform on behaviours (IPOB) to prevent and manage abusive behaviour, 2018.

¹⁵ Laura Motet, « Violences sexuelles par des humanitaires : les ONG peinent à trouver des solutions », *Le Monde*, 1^{er} mars 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2018/03/01/violences-sexuelles-par-des-humanitaires-les-ong-peinent-a-trouver-des-solutions_5264401_3210.html

¹⁶ MSF, "Behavioural Commitments", <https://www.msf.ch/en/work-with-us/behavioural-commitments>

¹⁷ "Oxfam Haiti sex claims: Charity 'failed in moral leadership'", *BBC News*, 11 February 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43020875>

¹⁸ MSF International Human Resources Indicators 2019.

¹⁹ Erwan Queinnec, « Scandale Oxfam : peut-on vraiment contrôler la vie privée des employés dans les ONG ? », *The Conversation*, 20 février 2018, <https://theconversation.com/scandale-oxfam-peut-on-vraiment-controler-la-vie-privee-des-employes-dans-les-ong-92052>

Sexual abuse, racism and discrimination: towards an intersectional approach?

The Black Lives Matter movement has sparked much debate in society, including within the aid sector²⁰. As a result, the issue of racial discrimination prompted MSF to launch a set of initiatives aiming to combat racism²¹. However, the notion of intersectionality²² – the convergence of several types of discrimination, domination, and even violence towards particularly vulnerable population groups – has been belatedly taken into consideration. Internal discussions on the issue of race have been highly polarised and may have missed an opportunity to address the issue of stigma from a more global perspective, which would have identified people particularly at risk and enabled efforts to be focused on this priority group.

The existence of “glass ceilings” at the organisation’s head offices, manifested by the extremely small number of managers from the fields of intervention, has been common knowledge for some time. Similarly, while ambitious diversity and inclusion²³ policies have been implemented, they are inevitably coming up against the reality of social and political contexts marked by difficult if not non-existent female access to education²⁴, the presence of ostracised minority groups, the difficulty in some cases of having an alternative sexual orientation or accessing good career opportunities when an individual has a disability. All of these factors would seem, at first glance and at an early stage, to limit the diversity of professionals recruited to work on MSF operations. Consequently, these factors favour social reproduction mechanisms that benefit people from affluent social backgrounds, in which there are still few women, particularly in senior management positions. It comes as no great surprise then that the organisation is highly sensitive to the social and political movements in the countries where it works, and that it replicates, in its internal dynamics, the social characteristics of a given context or that it takes on board the terms of a social debate which it had hardly considered until that point.

Beyond the notion of vulnerability

Often under pressure from media scandals, MSF has put in place a raft of procedures and mechanisms to combat sexual violence in its midst, while struggling to balance safeguarding its image with effective protection of its staff as a responsible employer. Criticism has emerged of the effectiveness of some of these policies, which go hand-in-hand with a rise in the number of platforms and other entities tasked with dealing with abuse. However, it is clear that combating sexual violence ultimately amounts to each individual taking responsibility: the need to identify those at risk and a contextualised assessment of the nature of the specific vulnerabilities of each population group, while refraining from pre-established stereotypes and overly knee-jerk categorisations²⁵. Consideration of different types of discrimination, bringing together not only gender but also a set of distinctive regional factors, should fine-tune the organisation’s initiatives, even though the danger of the moral and political pitfalls of pitting the victims of abuse against one other remains an issue. A fragmented silo approach, which successively addresses

²⁰ Africa Stewart, “Standing in solidarity with our black colleagues and the black community in the United States”, Doctors Without Borders, 3 June 2020, <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/story/standing-solidarity-our-black-colleagues-and-black-community-united>

²¹ « L’ONG Médecins Sans Frontières en proie à des débats sur son “racisme institutionnel” », *L’Express*, 10 juillet 2020, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/l-ong-medecins-sans-frontieres-en-proie-a-des-debats-sur-son-racisme-institutionnel_2130575.html

²² Alexandre Jaunait and Sébastien Chauvin, « Intersectionnalité », in Catherine Achin, Laure Bereni (dir.), *Dictionnaire. Genre et science politique*, Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2013, <https://www.cairn.info/dictionnaire-genre-et-science-politique--9782724613810-page-286.htm>

²³ Maria Giuseppina Bruna, « Diversité dans l’entreprise : d’impératif éthique à levier de créativité », *Management & Avenir*, vol. 43, n° 3, 2011, p. 203-226, <https://doi.org/10.3917/mav.043.0203>

²⁴ Across sub-Saharan Africa, 4 million girls will never attend school compared to 2 million boys. In total, 32 million children between the ages of 6 and 11 are out of school across the region: Unesco, “New methodology shows that 258 million children, adolescents and youth are out of school”, Factsheet no. 56, September 2019, <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/new-methodology-shows-258-million-children-adolescents-and-youth-are-out-school.pdf>

²⁵ Ahmed Al-Dawoody and Saman Rejali, “Who are you calling ‘vulnerable’? Muslim women and inclusive humanitarianism”, *Humanitarian Law & Policy*, 17 December 2020, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2020/12/17/vulnerable-muslim-women-inclusive-humanitarianism>

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different types of abuse – historic violence against women, current racial discrimination – struggles to accurately portray the complexity of these phenomena, how they fit in with political and social balances of power, and their systemic dimensions. This sort of approach could result in divisive rhetoric, not liable to serve the interests of the victims of abuse while fostering the harmful emergence of competitive victimhood²⁶. Instead, the aim is to unite the teams around a shared goal, notably a quest for equality, above and beyond protecting the organisation's image. First and foremost, the objective is to avoid succumbing to the temptation of cultural relativism on sensitive issues, at the intersection of different ideas about the nature of gender relations or individual views on cultural, racial or social differences.

Exemplarity?

While no organisation can be a perfect role model, they should all be able to have their members take individual responsibility when gauging the abusive and sometimes contingent nature of a relationship, situation or behaviour. Although institutional policy is necessary in this area, it cannot under any circumstances replace this ethical priority of being able to prevent, detect, assess and resolve abusive behaviour at an individual level. Therefore, the fallacy of systematically questioning behavioural ambivalences in situations often marked by flagrant inequality should seek to avoid any paternalistic or intrusive tendencies. Prescriptive interference in the private life of a working professional remains a dangerous trend, particularly in contexts with a painful colonial history²⁷. Likewise, pigeonholing sections of the population as automatically vulnerable runs the risk of infantilising the adults in question, notably when characterising the type of relationships. Admittedly, there is a need to set boundaries for emotional and sexual relationships between national and international colleagues, or with people from the society in which the organisation is working, particularly for ethical or security issues. However, there is a need to be able to question the sometimes-heard premise that no relationships can be possible between people with widely different socio-economic statuses. The people in question may rightly feel that this is a denial of their free will and freedom, while others still remember a period of history in which moral regulation was essential and in which the coloniser assumed the role of imposing the moral rules. Finally, exemplary behaviour by aid workers is a difficult-to-achieve standard, particularly in light of the stress and exhaustion they frequently experience in dangerous or difficult settings. However, it should remain pivotal in a profession which cannot totally disassociate itself from its primary aim of assisting and helping populations in danger as effectively as possible, while at all costs trying to avoid harming them. In light of this, the priority for a humanitarian medical organisation such as MSF is still to invest heavily in detecting and dealing with any abuse perpetrated against its patients. This process promises to be a complex and vast undertaking, but it will produce more formative results if it takes place unfettered by media dynamics and public allegations.

The authors wish to thank all the members of the MSF abuse response committee in Geneva, as well as Duncan McLean, Sofia Mili, Stephen Cornish, Christine Jamet and Amy Mavor for their valuable comments.

This article commits only its authors and in no way the organisation to which they belong.

Translated from the French by Gillian Eaton

²⁶ Jean-Michel Chaumont, « Du culte des héros à la concurrence des victimes », *Criminologie*, vol. 33, n° 1, p. 167-183, <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/crimino/2000-v33-n1-crimino142/004712ar.pdf>

²⁷ Philippe Testard-Vaillant, « De la domination sexuelle dans les empires coloniaux », *CNRS Le Journal*, 3 décembre 2019, <https://lejournel.cnrs.fr/articles/de-la-dominance-sexuelle-dans-les-empires-coloniaux>

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Françoise Duroch and Emmanuel Noyer, "Sexual abuse perpetrated by humanitarian workers: from moral relativism to competitive victimhood", *Humanitarian Alternatives*, no. 16, March 2021, p.58-70,
<http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2021/03/24/sexual-abuse-perpetrated-by-humanitarian-workers-from-moral-relativism-to-competitive-victimhood/>
ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-784-0