

How to better understand the management of sexist and sexual violence committed by humanitarian aid workers

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To introduce this *Focus*, its joint editor Jan Verlin presents a non-exhaustive review of the academic literature devoted to the theme of gender-based and sexual violence in humanitarian work. The first observation is that while the subject has eluded practitioners in the humanitarian sector for too long, it is also almost absent from “humanitarian studies”. The author therefore proposes an analytical framework that makes possible to understand how organisations implement systems to combat this violence. While it offers to take stock of the potential of the reforms proposed by these organisations, it also highlights their limitations.

In February 2018, the former Belgian director of the British non-governmental organisation (NGO) Oxfam in Haiti publicly admitted to having had sexual relations with an “honourable, mature”¹ woman after the earthquake that struck the country in 2010. Barely a week later, Oxfam challenged his account into question and published an internal report based on an investigation conducted through more than forty interviews. It sought to respond to accusations that three of his employees had organised “orgies” with underage prostitutes at the organisation’s headquarters in 2010. The report also revealed that the people concerned had previously admitted, during an internal investigation in 2011, to having had sexual relations with Haitian prostitutes, who were possibly also underage.

The matter being settled by the token resignation of the main perpetrator was the main thrust of the media coverage. But the fact that the organisation had conducted an internal investigation following testimonies from two whistle-blowers, and that procedures to manage the accusations had previously been implemented did not arouse much public interest. It is also true that this enquiry, like all the procedures previously followed, failed to punish the accused – and this is what should really raise concerns.

For the same situation happened again in another case, revealed in 2020, of abuses committed by international aid workers (non-governmental and international organisations combined) during the fight against Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo². These revelations were then followed by further announcements made by international aid organisations that new mechanisms to fight against sexist and sexual violence would be implemented. Certain organisations targeted by the accusations – among them Oxfam or *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) – nevertheless had specific procedures and personnel in place to deal with victims and the struggle against abuse in the field. They had on occasion even been pioneers on the subject. These mechanisms had plainly failed to do their job in a sector which has systematically taken on board the fight against such violence and, more generally, against gender inequalities since the late 1980s.

It is therefore important to focus on the processes and tools that exist to handle victims in these

¹ “Ex-Oxfam official denies organising orgies as Haiti opens probe”, *France 24*, 16 February 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180216-ex-oxfam-official-denies-organising-orgies-haiti-opens-probe>

² Robert Flummerfelt and Nellie Peyton, “More than 50 women accuse aid workers of sex abuse in Congo Ebola crisis”, *The New Humanitarian*, 29 September 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2020/09/29/exclusive-more-50-women-accuse-aid-workers-sex-abuse-congo-ebola-crisis>

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organisations as well as on the specific context which led to the development of these tools and where their limits lie. We must also question why the sexist and sexual violence committed by humanitarian aid workers and the inefficiency of the mechanisms to fight against it have not already been the subject of multiple scientific studies.

However, the humanitarian and academic sectors are closely intertwined³ and there is a wealth of literature dedicated to humanitarian organisations, sometimes referred to as “humanitarian studies”. This article thus presents some analysis that have focused on the question of sexist and sexual violence by humanitarian aid workers. It then presents possible reasons to explain how this phenomenon has largely evaded scientific analysis. It concludes by suggesting a framework for the analysis of future research to be carried out on this subject.

How was sexist and sexual violence committed by humanitarians handled before the Oxfam scandal?

Before 2018, the few studies on exploitation and sexual abuse in humanitarian organisations were produced by humanitarian organisations themselves. A report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the NGO Save the Children presented an overview in 2002 in the wake of sexual abuses committed in West Africa⁴. Save the Children produced another report in 2008⁵. The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership also gathered witness accounts from beneficiaries in 2008. In 2019, the United Nations Population Fund released figures on sexual abuse in particular committed by humanitarian aid workers in Syria⁶. All of these studies focused on the form and frequency of the incidents and made proposals regarding the mechanisms to be developed to fight this kind of violence more efficiently.

Although the studies included humanitarian NGOs, the focus was on international organisations that were part of the United Nations (UN) system. For this reason, these studies did not factor in the specific nature of personnel management in the NGO sector, which is indeed subject to the laws of competition – urged to preserve its image so as not to jeopardise relations with donors – and governed by particularly fragmented standards. Although the attention paid to sexual abuse in the context of UN peace missions produced many analysis from 2004, it undoubtedly led to the perception that sexist and sexual violence in humanitarian aid was primarily a UN and military problem.

Moreover, we might ask whether the debate’s focus on the processes of psychosocial care for victims in conflict zones where the perpetrators are outside the international aid sector has not precluded researchers from considering the different forms handling this type of violence can take.

A more detailed analysis of the question, from the perspective of power relationships in the field, was carried out by Michel Agier and Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier⁷ in reaction to Save the Children’s first report on the issue⁸. Their work warned of the limits of the tools implemented in refugee camps as part

³ As will be reflected in our 17th issue (July 2020) dedicated to the topic “Research and humanitarian aid: the challenges of a collaboration” [Editor’s note].

⁴ “Note for Implementing and Operational Partners on Sexual Violence and Exploitation by UNHCR and the Save the Children-UK: The Experience of Refugees Children in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone”, February 2002: www.unhcr.org/3c7cf89a4.html

⁵ Corinna Csáky, “No one to turn to: The under-reporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers and peacekeepers”, London, Save the Children, 2008, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/no-one-turn-under-reporting-child-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-aid-workers-and-peacekeepers>

⁶ United Nations Population Fund, “Whole of Syria. Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility: Voices from Syria 2019-Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview”, 2019, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2009369/voices_from_syria_2019.pdf

⁷ Michel Agier and Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier, “Humanitarian spaces: spaces of exception”, in Fabrice Weissman (ed.), *In the Shadow of “Just Wars”: Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, p. 297-313.

⁸ Kirsti Lattu et al., “To complain or not to complain: still the question. Consultations with humanitarian aid beneficiaries on their perceptions of efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse”, Geneva, HAP, 2008, https://pseataaskforce.org/uploads/tools/tocomplainornottocomplainstillthequestion_hapinternational_english.pdf

of the struggle against sexual abuse, given the victims' situation of dependency. The two authors suggested an alternative of applying an international legal framework for humanitarian spaces such as refugee camps so as not to make victims dependent on the codes of conduct and professional standards of NGOs.

Other applied research that explicitly focused on NGOs effectively did so in the analytical framework of accountability or compliance with the sector's professional norms. A report by the Overseas Development Institute in 2005 therefore categorised humanitarian sexual abuse as a form of "non-financial corruption"⁹, as did a report by Transparency International in 2008¹⁰. Sexist and sexual violence was perceived as the symptom of an incompatibility between the sector's norms and practices. In short, the research denounced the fact that the norms, however voluntaristic they might be on the subject, failed to reflect the commitments of the organisations.

Another approach came from research that focused on psychosocial risks, concentrating on female humanitarian workers. Several studies carried out since 2012 therefore show that the exposure to risks of sexist and sexual violence is a factor of stress and trauma for some of them¹¹.

In other words, whilst there has been relatively little research on sexist and sexual violence committed within humanitarian NGOs, the research we do have makes a distinction between the victims according to whether they are beneficiaries or humanitarian workers. Most of this research sees the disconnect between norms and practices as the central problem. We will see below that although such analyses helped uncover this issue, it undoubtedly did not go far enough to explain all of its complexities.

From NGO headquarters to operational fields

The recent scandals concerning sexist and sexual violence appear as a moment of transgression with regard to the fundamental standards that underpin the sector. Of course, sexual violence as a manifestation of the power relationships at play between men and women affects every segment of society. However, the public revelation of this violence in the humanitarian sector, further relayed by advocacy groups defending women's causes, was all the more problematic given that the sector is associated with high moral standards.

These scandals made public also reveal how they have been framed as moments of social transformation for organisations. Indeed, since 2018, we have observed efforts by nearly all organisations, whether they are affected or not, to align practices by implementing, or building on, prevention, whistleblowing and sanctioning mechanisms.

These organisational reforms include both the management of the exploitation and sexual abuse of beneficiaries in the field and that of sexual harassment in the workplace. While the first phenomenon relates to practices in the field, the second happens in organisations' headquarters, mostly located in donor countries. This reveals a compartmentalised approach: whilst ethics departments deal with "incidents" in the field, it is the job of human resource departments to deal with those that occur at NGO headquarters. This distinction, dictated more by the status of the victims than that of the aggressors, also prevails in the literature on the subject, as illustrated by the few studies that are available.

The development of humanitarian professions – which involves the increasing integration of employees from "beneficiary" countries while reducing the workforce from "donor" countries and movement

⁹ Barnaby Willitts-King and Paul Harvey, "Managing the Risks of Corruption in Humanitarian Relief Operations: A Study for the UK Department for International Development", Overseas Development Institute, London, 31 March 2005, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/1977.pdf>

¹⁰ Daniel Maxwell *et al.*, "Preventing Corruption in Humanitarian Assistance", Transparency International, Berlin, 2008, https://www.transparency.org/files/content/pressrelease/Humanitarian_Assistance_Report.pdf

¹¹ For example, the study of Barbara Lopes Cardozo *et al.*, "Psychological Distress, Depression, Anxiety, and Burnout among International Humanitarian Aid Workers: A Longitudinal Study", *PLoS ONE*, 2012.

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between headquarters and the field – shows the limits of this distinction. Future analysis of sexist and sexual violence must consider the changing power dynamics between the North and the Global South in connection with the power relationships between men and women.

We will need to study how internal pressure (from employees, especially) and external pressure (from the press, for example) on the repression of violence – taking into account the transformations happening in the ecosystem – translates into new organisational reforms in the humanitarian sector. By advancing the theory that organisations in the sector will introduce effective and adapted mechanisms to fight against sexual harassment at work and against sexual exploitation and sexual violence against beneficiaries, it will therefore be important to focus on how these changes may reconfigure stakeholder dynamics in the humanitarian field.

Opportunities and limitations of organisational reforms

The conditions for studying these changes are already in place. The numerous studies on the connection between humanitarian aid organisations and their practices have focused for thirty years on the dynamics of professionalisation and bureaucratisation permeating the sector. Some have focused on the changes affecting the institutions and norms that govern these organisations, be it the political scientist Michael Barnett analysing the sector's governance systems¹² or, in France, Philippe Ryfman analysing the functioning of NGOs¹³.

Other research has chosen to approach the subject by way of humanitarian employees and their relationships in the field, like the research on the anthropology of humanitarian aid by Laëticia Atlani-Duault¹⁴ or the work of Johanna Siméant and Pascal Dauvin on employees' motivations for entering the profession and on the relationships between headquarters and the field¹⁵. Marion Fresia and Philippe Lavigne-Delville recently provided an ethnographic perspective on the relationships between humanitarian workers and beneficiaries in the field¹⁶, whereas Anne Le Naëlou has warned of the secondary effects of professionalisation in the sector¹⁷.

The increasing professionalisation of humanitarian action since the 1990s¹⁸ was reinforced by the UN's humanitarian reform. But it raised fresh questions regarding the consequences of systematising humanitarian practices and the growing competition between different humanitarian actors in complex emergency situations in the field. There was also the question of a transition from a Eurocentric North-South solidarity model to a multipolar conception of divergent interests carried by a wide variety of actors.

In the same movement, researchers became interested in the emergence of new management mechanisms for humanitarian employees, such as remote management¹⁹, as well as the emergence of new professions, such as those connected to humanitarian security²⁰. Other research, such as Elsa Rambaud's, focused on certain organisations – MSF, in this instance – characterised by their "critical" identity, in other words, highlighting the questioning of their practices and actions²¹. These analyses concern the ways in which these critical organisations, including Oxfam, handle the contradictions between professionalisation and

¹² Michael N. Barnett, "Humanitarian Governance", *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 16, 2013, p.379-398.

¹³ Philippe Ryfman, *Les ONG*, La Découverte, 2014.

¹⁴ Laëticia Atlani-Duault, *Au bonheur des autres. Anthropologie de l'aide humanitaire*, Armand Colin, 2009.

¹⁵ Johanna Siméant et Pascal Dauvin, *Le travail humanitaire : les acteurs des ONG, du siège au terrain*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2002.

¹⁶ Philippe Lavigne-Delville et Marion Fresia (dir.), *Au cœur des mondes de l'aide internationale*, IRD Éditions, 2018.

¹⁷ Anne Le Naëlou, « ONG : les pièges de la professionnalisation », *Revue Tiers Monde*, vol. 45, n° 180, 2004, p. 727-734.

¹⁸ See, in the current issue, the article of Rory Downham, "The professionalisation of humanitarian action: a work still in progress", p. 112-127 [NDLR].

¹⁹ Mark Duffield, *Post-Humanitarianism: Governing Precarity in the Digital World*, London, Polity, 2018.

²⁰ Monique Jo Beerli, "Saving the Saviors: Security Practices and Professional Struggles in the Humanitarian Space", *International Political Sociology*, 12/1, 2018, p. 70-87.

²¹ Elsa Rambaud, « L'organisation sociale de la critique à Médecins Sans Frontières », *Revue française de science politique*, 59 (4), 2009, p. 723-756.

engagement by combining increasingly routine aid with advocacy work to reduce inequalities between the North and the Global South.

All of these studies may seem far removed from the subject at hand, but let there be no mistake. The professionalisation approach enables us to understand what is happening inside these organisations, in the field and at headquarters. The increasingly competitive nature of the sector, the precarity of humanitarian contracts, the “complex” fields that include multiple actors, and the security norms that exacerbate the disconnection between expatriates and local populations provide so many avenues to better understand the sexist and sexual violence that takes place. These apparently “peripheral” topics tell us a lot about the specific power relationships that make assaults possible in this environment.

This research can also inform us about the opportunities and limitations of the initiatives that were launched in the wake of the Oxfam scandal. But they should be considered together with the literature on the institutionalisation of women’s causes in order to better understand the effects of these reforms. This literature notes the dual dynamic that arises when organisations adopt new tools to reduce discrimination against women. These reforms effectively produce an individual or collective politicisation of gender relationships within these organisations²², but also a depoliticisation of the struggle against sexist and sexual violence, inasmuch as it is subject to constraints (issues of legitimacy, competition between organisations, pacification of internal conflicts, etc).

The study of the connections between gendered power relationships and North-South power relationships, which is central to the literature on gender and globalisation, also enables us to understand current transformations at work²³. Indeed, sexual violence committed by white, male humanitarian workers was only addressed relatively recently by humanitarian organisations, even though the contractual termination of “local” male personnel’s work contracts as a result of formal and informal complaints had been going on for a long time. But the possibility of being recognised and listened to as a victim, and then benefiting from actions to combat harassment, on the one hand, and the risk of being sanctioned, on the other, depends on the position of the victim and the aggressor in the humanitarian field. In order to analyse the fight against sexist and sexual violence, humanitarian work must be understood as a system for dealing with relationships between the North and the Global South, which remains largely under-studied to date.

Understanding how North-South social relationships interconnect with gendered social relationships

We are currently in a better position to understand the opportunities, but also the limitations, of humanitarian organisations’ efforts to meet in practice the ideals that they promote. Sexist and sexual violence committed by certain humanitarian personnel will not disappear simply by reinforcing the tools in the fight against this violence. Clearer and more systematic sanctions for perpetrators and a more attentive ear to the victims will help reduce it. But the aggressors who enshrine their violence in a relationship of dependency with the victims, which is itself informed by gendered social relationships and social relationships between the North and the Global South, will always be able to adapt their behaviour. Redressing power relationships between humanitarian employees and beneficiaries, but also between humanitarian personnel, is a prerequisite in the battle to eradicate this violence.

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

²² Pauline Delage, Marylène Lieber, Natacha Chetcuti-Osorovitz, « Lutter contre les violences de genre. Des mouvements féministes à leur institutionnalisation. Introduction », *Cahiers du Genre*, 66 (1), 2019, p. 5-16.

²³ Jules Falquet et al., *Le Sexe de la mondialisation. Genre, classe, race et nouvelle division du travail*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2010.

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