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Reflections on patriarchy and the fight against gender-based and sexual violence in the humanitarian sector

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If the humanitarian sector is not immune to gender-based and sexual violence, it is because it is subject to patriarchal male-female dynamics, as are so many other sectors of society. Some of its specific characteristics can facilitate violence against vulnerable populations whilst others allow it to "immunise" itself against their complaints. To counter the patriarchy's grip within the humanitarian sector, the author advocates for it to take a "dominant position" on the subject and urge free speech, taking into account the local context in which this violence is anchored.

The humanitarian ecosystem is intrinsically associated with a high degree of moral, ethical and even spiritual or religious values. This means that collective thinking often sets the sector "apart" from all others, potentially considering it out of touch with reality.

To speak of gender-based and sexual violence in the humanitarian sector[1] is to affirm both its existence and the need to discuss the sector's specific characteristics. To speak of gender-based and sexual violence in the same breath does not mean that they are equally serious or equally prevalent, but that they should be understood as a whole, and that the normalisation of the former constitutes a risk and a predisposition to the latter. Nor is it simply a matter of looking at individuals, but at what society as a whole is capable of engendering. Simply put, while the fight against these scourges is obviously necessary, it must address both aspects of this violence.

In recent years, and as the media regularly attests, many sectors have been encouraged – willingly or not – to take a good look at themselves. The silence is slowly being broken and we are seeing an increasing number of revelations in the media, literature, cinema, sport and even the video-game industries. The humanitarian sector is no exception, and for good reason: it is part of this whole and governed by the same patriarchal systems, at the root of power and gender-based violence. Yet even though it is part of this whole, the sector has its own specific characteristics so that consequences are even more painful for those who are victims and survivors. It is precisely because the humanitarian sector is expected to lead by example that the struggle against gender-based and sexual violence within it might contribute to deeper transformations in our societies. This article will therefore be structured around three trains of thought.

A chain of violence: at the roots of patriarchy

Even though it is driven by powerful principles and values, humanitarian action is not set "apart" from or above society but is deeply entrenched in it. As is the case elsewhere, the humanitarian sector is structured around human relations and power(s). This social contract is unconscionable when applied unevenly, "to the detriment" of others. Such relationships provide fertile ground for sexual and gender-based violence as extreme manifestations of these "masculinities of domination" that underpin patriarchy[2]. In the

[1] See the author's notes at the end of this article [Editor's note].
[2] Patriarchy: "A form of social organisation in which men exercise power in the political, economic and religious spheres or

humanitarian sector, as elsewhere, there are perpetrators of violence, and as elsewhere, there are victims and survivors, mostly women, although children and other gender minorities are also affected.

The testimonies converge to denounce the immediate and lasting consequences for those brave enough to speak out and denounce this violence: denigration, belittlement, injustice, health and psychological consequences, individual or even fam-ily shame, and banishment from the family circle or even from the community. Speaking out, far from being liberating, leads to further violence, on top of that which has already been endured. The voices of the victims and the survivors are indeed being heard, but not yet enough, thereby consolidating the power imbalances that exist and fuelling the distrust of established systems. The cost of freeing these voices is still far too high, as demonstrated by recently published victims' accounts[3].

This explains why the victims and survivors of gender-based and sexual violence, regardless of their background and sector, largely remain silent. The shame and fear of not being heard or believed, losing their job or not finding one at all, or finding their career trajectory if not blocked then stalled also extends to the witnesses. These obstacles are all the more oppressive when the perpetrators are on the top rung of the power ladder.

Until very recently, those who dared to speak out were rarely heard, let alone supported. On the contrary, in the corporate sectors – and almost all of them are – the act of publicly denouncing such incidents could backfire on those who had the courage to do so. Strangely, they became guilty of slander or denunciation, especially if the public consequences were detrimental to the institution's image, reputation, funding or profits. The perpetrators most often escaped sanctions and legal action. And, even though internal sanctions have indeed gradually been better defined and framed, the sexist remark is often still seen as a cultural joke or even the expression of the "freedom to annoy"[4].

The role of the State must now be questioned since, country after country, legislators are now seizing upon the issue, to varying degrees. Rarely setting a dissuasive example for perpetrators, they also pay precious little attention to the expectations and needs of victims and survivors. The very composition of parliaments throughout the world attests to this: patriarchal social norms reflect a biased and unbalanced relationship of human interactions. And, because gender-based violence exists everywhere, one can hardly be surprised – whilst still being outraged – to see that it also exists in the humanitarian sector. In the absence of figures compiled on a global scale, nothing allows us to say whether or not it is more or less widespread than elsewhere, but we must commend other sectors for paving the way and freeing voices. In this regard, the scale and international visibility of the movements speaking out on behalf of the victims and survivors of sexual violence in the wake of the Weinstein scandal that broke in October 2017[5] certainly had a major impact in the case of the humanitarian aid workers in Haiti, which *The Times* reported in February 2018[6]. There had been other scandals[7] since the early 1990s, but none had such a major impact as this one. And it has probably been since this affair that, under pressure from the media and public opinion alike, the specific characteristics of the humanitarian sector have been questioned[8].

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have a dominant role within the family, in relation to women", Larousse. See also Ivan Jablonka, *Des homme justes. Du patriarcat aux nouvelles masculinités*, Seuil, 2019.

[3] 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

[4] Tribune, « Nous défendons une liberté d'importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle », *Le Monde*, 9 janvier 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html [text published in the French national press, signed by 100 public figures, all women, which sparked controversy].

[5] For example #MeToo (an intersectional women's movement launched by Tarana Burke in 2007. The hashtag was then adopted by Alyssa Milano in 2017 when what would become known as the Weinstein scandal broke out), #BalanceTonPorc, #QuellaVoltaQue, etc., were subsequently founded.

[6] Sam O'Neill, "Oxfam in Haiti: 'It was like a Caligula orgy with prostitutes in Oxfam T-shirts'", *The Times*, 9 February 2018.

[7] Robert Flummerfelt and Nellie Peyton, "Timeline: UN and NGO sex scandals from 1990 to 2020", *in* "More than 50 women accuse aid workers of sex abuse in Congo Ebola crisis", *The New Humanitarian*, 29 September 2020.

[8] Panel "The humanitarian #MeToo moment: where do we go from here?", *The New Humanitarian*, 23 March 2018, available on *YouTube*: https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2018/03/23/humanitarian-metoo-moment-where-do-we-go-here

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Specific characteristics of the humanitarian sector: from distrust to awareness

If the humanitarian sector is "like other sectors" in the sense that it is not immune to patriarchal reality, its distinctive features distort the consequences of that reality. Humanitarian action operates in situations of great complexity if not chaos. Conflict, natural disaster or pandemic, these theatres are conducive to individual episodes of "going off the rails" because the ground is more fertile. The vulnerability of some people is exacerbated, while the power of others grows exponentially. The other specific characteristic relates to people: the primary human principle underpinning humanitarian action is to relieve the suffering of "beneficiaries" or "affected populations" – responding to their "needs" is the raison d'être of humanitarian actors. It has already been said that there are victims and survivors in all areas, but this imbalance in human relations takes on a darker hue in this sector when power and gender-based violence are exercised over those whom the sector is supposed to be helping. There is an ethical, moral, and intellectual contradiction in the humanitarian system here which increases, rather than mitigates, the suffering of others.

The multicultural mix of humanitarian actors and teams is perhaps totally unlike that in any other field. International staff bring their own set of standards without having the will, or the time, to put it into perspective through contact with the host society. National workers sometimes play indiscriminately on the power of their institution and their own duties to gain the upper hand over others. And when abuse occurs, victims find themselves confronted with a plethora of complaint mechanisms that all too rarely involve the very people they aim to defend, fuelling a lack of understanding and distrust. Very few complaints are filed with the public authorities in the host states – which are often fragile – and when the "investigators" are called in, they are called in by the institution for which the alleged perpetrator is working. Even though such "investigations" are, without doubt, conducted professionally, there is reasonable cause for suspicion. In any event, the legitimacy and biases of those who will determine what is true or not are hereby called into question. A conflict of interests is possible when an investigation is conducted in a neutral and impartial manner, but which may also have a negative impact on the institution. The victims and survivors can do very little to reverse this state of affairs, which is far removed from the reality of their situation.

Since 2018, the sector has undoubtedly been making sweeping changes. The "Haiti affair" highlighted the humanitarian system's failures in terms of gender-based and sexual violence. Since then, denial has not been an option. In the early 2000s, the United Nations (UN) defined the concepts of sexual exploitation and abuse[9], concepts which have gradually been refined. Since then, the UN has regularly (re)asserted its "zero tolerance"[10] approach to all forms of gender-based and sexual violence and implemented a standardised policy for the entire UN system. For their part, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have formalised or strengthened their sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) policies and, in their codes of conduct in particular, set out[11] the framework for sexual harassment in the workplace. Statements by national NGOs tend to be heading in the same direction, but at a slower and less formalised pace[12], often lacking resources and support from their international partners, and despite the localisation principle of the Grand Bargain launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016[13], whose implementation should now incorporate this requirement. Perhaps it will be necessary to count on the impetus of donors: in October 2018, twenty-two donor states[14] signed and published their commitments, which include consideration for victims and survivors,

[9] 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

[10] António Guterres, « Le chef de l'ONU réaffirme la politique de tolérance zéro envers le harcèlement sexuel », *ONU Info*, 2 février 2018 ; Fadéla Chaib (WHO spokesperson, DRC), *in* "More than 50 women accuse aid workers of sex abuse in Congo Ebola crisis", *The New Humanitarian*, 29 September 2020.

[11] For example, SEA policies feature a range of actions including awareness and training of staff (in-house or by experts), information sessions in the field (including mechanisms for gathering complaints), measures for dealing with complaints, support for freedom of speech and investigations, guidance and/or compensation for victims and survivors, prosecution, etc.

[12] Mirela Shuteriqi, "Systems in place", in *The Long Run to Protection Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)*, ICVA, 1 June 2018, p.6.

[13] Inter-Agency Standing Committee, « Qu'est-ce que le Grand Bargain ? », juillet 2017.

[14] Department for International Development and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, *Commitments made by donors to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment in the international aid sector,* Policy Paper, 18 October

transparency and accountability,common minimum standards and the development of organisational leadership and capacity within the sector.

In addition to these normative ap-proaches, other initiatives are also being undertaken. Even though it no longer exists as such (lack of funding), the "Report the Abuse" experiment[15] is still enlightening about gender-based and sex-ual violence suffered by humanitarian workers. Although the analysis cannot be extrapolated to the victims and survivors of SEA, it nonetheless speaks of entrenched realities and practices. The idea of a supranational mediator for the sector has also been mooted but without success[16], just like the recommendation to set up an independent body for the entire UN system[17]. All these examples reflect awareness, but the transformation process remains slow. The humanitarian sector could be at the forefront by being, in a way, exemplary.

Towards transformation and trust?

Transforming our societies, and their most fundamentally entrenched ideas, requires mutual recognition and respect. These changes, however, will come about by transforming the way in which victims and survivors of gender-based violence are viewed, and by enabling them to move from denial to recognition, from invisibil-ity to existence. The point is not to unravel the system that has been built up in recent years, but to explore things as they currently stand and the progress made, to encourage and welcome the testimony of victims and survivors, and to support their place at the very heart of the system.

Promoting holistic action, more respectful of the rights of women and other gender minorities, may help break the silence. This involves not accepting indifference or the rejection of victims and survivors and changing the target and societal weight of shame and opprobrium. It also involves proximity, accounting for local realities (the cultural and social context, the workings of state, health, psychological and judicial infrastructures, social bodies etc.) so as to adapt measures whilst avoiding standardisation.

Transformation requires time and money. It requires humanitarian actors to adopt – beyond the news headlines – a dominant position, and internatio-nal organisations and donors to join forces in the fight against all forms of gender-based violence. To do this, they must factor in the specificities of the contexts, with donors being called upon to allocate dedicated and sustainable financial resources. They must also be able to count on States to ensure that victims and survivors are effectively and better cared for, and that the alleged perpetrators are held accountable for their actions before recognised and legitimate authorities. Finally, there must be a more central place for local actors who hear the voices of victims and survivors and work to provide them with care. In a transformative effort tackling the violence entrenched in patriarchal systems, in a humanitarian sector whose specific characteristics bring additional challenges, each and every actor can be a valuable sounding board.

Translated from the French by Derek Scoins

2018.

[15] Megan Norbert, *Humanitarian Experiences with Sexual Violence: Compilation of Two Years of Report the Abuse Data Collection*, Report the Abuse, August 2017.

[16] Mirela Shuteriqi, *Enhancing accountability SEA: Is a Sector Ombudsperson the next step?*, ICVA, September 2018, https://www.icvanetwork.org/system/files/versions/180908_NGO_Sectorial_Ombudsman_DiscussionPaper.pdf

[17] Anders Kompass, "Why the UN must set up an independent body to tackle sexual abuse", *The New Humanitarian*, 8 October 2020, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/10/08/UN-sexual-abuse-exploitation-investigation

Author's note

This text addresses "gender-based and sexual violence" in the broadest sense of the term within the humanitarian sector. The term covers sexual harassment in the workplace between colleagues, or sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)* when the survivor is a third party and not a member of the institution where the perpetrator works.

Whilst the legal corpus varies with regard to sexual harassment in the workplace, some national legislations make no mention of it. The reference norms and humanitarian standards for sexual exploitation and abuse are those set out in the United Nations Secretary-General's bulletins; they are standardised yet have no legal value of their own. This complicates the recognition of this type of incident, the support and compensation for survivors, and even the conviction of the perpetrators.

The author uses the term "perpetrator" to refer to males, on the basis of the available and searchable records all of which refer to violence committed by men; the term "survivor" largely refers to women and children (girls and boys alike) and more broadly to gender-based violence as a whole.

In the United Nations' *Glossary on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse* (2017 edition), "victim" is the generic term preferred by the legal and medical sectors, while "survivor" is the term used by the psychosocial sectors as it implies resilience. The author decided to use both terms interchangeably.

**With regard to the distinction between sexual harassment in the workplace or exploitation and sexual abuse, see: Cornerstone OnDemand Foundation, "Responding to Sexual Violence in the Aid Workplace", 2019.*

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