

The place of women in humanitarian work: a question of equity and quality

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In this article, Miren Bengoa makes a plea to strengthen the position of female humanitarian workers to ensure that the needs of women in vulnerable situations are better met.

Humanitarian work is seen as both a risky career path and a very strong personal commitment. It combines the strong demand for technical professions requiring field expertise with the cross-disciplinary skills of adaptability, interpersonal qualities and stress management. The various professions are often associated with gendered profiles: male, for example in logistics and transport, water and sanitation engineering, or reconstruction; and female for the medical and paramedical professions, psychosocial support, coordination and administration. In fact, these stereotypes are not unfounded in terms of the roles assigned, but the proportion of women involved in humanitarian aid remains largely underestimated: in 2019, for example, the United Nations (UN) estimated that 43% of humanitarian posts were occupied by women.¹

At the same time, we know² that humanitarian crises affect women and men equally, each accounting for 50% of the people affected. This distribution is slightly different if we only consider adults, with a slightly higher proportion of women affected by crises (53%) than men (47%).³ Whilst the most recent data on UN-coordinated humanitarian appeals are disaggregated by gender and age, this is not always the case. With better knowledge of the target populations, humanitarian responses should be better calibrated and adapted. In particular, it is essential to understand that half the people in distress are children under the age of eighteen (49%, or 90.3 million). In 2022, women and children combined accounted for a total 76% of all those affected by humanitarian crises.

Gender mainstreaming within organisations

International non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local humanitarian organisations and UN agencies with operational branches have made a huge effort in this area. Firstly, with the aim of increasing the number of women in the workforce in crisis situations in order to cover technical requirements and ensure socio-cultural understanding and adaptation; and secondly, to include diversity and inclusion in their human resources policies. Despite major progress in recent years, there is still considerable disparity between the genders: while women account for over 40% of the global humanitarian workforce, they are largely under-represented in management posts, with just 20-25%

¹ ONU Info, *Dix choses à connaître sur les travailleurs humanitaires*, 19 août 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/dix-choses-conna-tre-sur-les-travailleurs-humanitaires>

² Development Initiatives, *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023*, 20 June 2023, <https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2023>

³ *Idem*.

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of them occupying senior positions.⁴ In many respects, the presence of qualified women at all levels of the humanitarian aid system is an essential lever for a quality response.

Even though all humanitarian workers are concerned, the ever-increasing security risks⁵ have a greater effect on women who, in crisis-hit areas, are more exposed to certain types of gender-based violence. A study by the Humanitarian Women’s Network showed that 48% of the women humanitarian workers surveyed⁶ had been the victim of sexual harassment during their career.⁷ These specific risks compound the difficulty of retaining women humanitarian workers who often leave their jobs because of a lack of career-development opportunities and inadequate support for a work-life balance. The turnover rate for women in the sector is 10-15% higher than for their male counterparts.⁸

Report from Hayastan Issa, protection officer in Syria for the US NGO Blumont

“Women are a critical part of our humanitarian teams, and many are working in extremely difficult situations. ‘We have to pair encouraging women to do humanitarian work on the ground with providing what they need to feel safe’. We actively request feedback from our female aid workers who work directly with communities and know their own safety situations best. They receive additional security at times, and in the hardest moments, teams have shifted to working remotely to stay safe”.⁹

The best practices introduced into the sector to deal with these difficulties include the following. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has introduced a comprehensive training course on security and support systems for its female staff in high-risk areas. This includes establishing confidential reporting mechanisms and providing psychological support. As a result, the IRC has seen a 30% reduction in the turnover rate of female staff in conflict areas.¹⁰ CARE International launched the “Women in Leadership” initiative which offers training courses in mentoring and leadership for women at all levels. This programme has allowed the percentage of women in managerial posts to increase from 22% to 35% in the space of five years.¹¹ Lastly, *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) offers flexible working hours and supports distance working when possible. MSF also offers on-site childminding services in some of its larger field offices. These measures have led to a 25% increase in job satisfaction among women employees.¹² By adopting these best practices, humanitarian aid organisations can significantly improve the recruitment, retention and well-being of women humanitarian workers, which in turn will lead to more effective and fairer humanitarian responses. At local and international level, the active participation of women in the design, distribution and assessment stages of humanitarian aid is therefore more widely recognised by institutions.

⁴ Humanitarian Women’s Network, *2023 Annual Survey on Women in Humanitarian Work*.

⁵ Meriah-Jo Breckenridge, Monica Czwarno, Mariana Duque-Diez *et al.*, *Aid Worker Security Report 2023. Security training in the humanitarian sector: Issues of equity and effectiveness*, Humanitarian Outcomes, August 2023, https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/ho_aidworkersectyreport_2023_d.pdf

⁶ The study sample comprised 83% international and 17% national women humanitarian aid workers.

⁷ Humanitarian Women’s Network..., *op. cit.*

⁸ InterAction, *Gender Equality in Humanitarian Organizations: Current Trends and Future Directions*, 2023.

⁹ Blumont, *Supporting Our Aid Workers, No Matter What*, August 18, 2023, <https://blumont.org/blog/humanitarian-day-aid-workers-2023>

¹⁰ IRC, *2023 Annual Report*, 31 May 2024, https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/PO2404_Annual%20Report%202023_No%20Donors-DIGITAL-Spreads%20%282%29.pdf

¹¹ CARE International, *Women in Leadership Initiative: Progress Report*, 2023, <https://www.care-international.org/what-we-do/gender-equality/womens-voice-and-leadership>

¹² MSF, *MSF Human Resources Report*, 2023.

Solidarity and sisterhood: a guarantee of fairer and more effective humanitarian aid?

Echoing the work carried out by Caritas,¹³ it should be remembered that women and girls face specific challenges during disasters and crises that other women may be in a better position to understand and manage. The presence of women humanitarian workers as close to the communities as possible in all the key functions plays a vital role in helping women affected by humanitarian crises. In particular, they have a better understanding of matters relating to women's sexual and reproductive health. Women humanitarian workers may even be better at providing emotional support to other women and helping them overcome some of the obstacles they encounter when accessing healthcare. Stigmatisation and lack of information can be limiting factors in conflicts and humanitarian emergencies.

The active participation of women from the same communities also brings a unique perspective and understanding of local cultures, traditions and social customs. In many societies, women can access spaces and populations that may be inaccessible to men because of cultural or social norms. Women humanitarian workers can reach out to women and children who may otherwise be neglected, and provide them with basic services and protection. In addition to access and socio-cultural sensitivity, women humanitarian aid professionals can act as positive role models for other women and help combat stereotypes and conservative norms which, in turn, helps facilitate access to services.

Furthermore, it is clear that within civilian populations, women are disproportionately affected by violence during humanitarian crises which may include human trafficking, sexual harassment and domestic violence. In times of crisis it is therefore essential to include women in humanitarian aid teams who are trained to detect, support and mitigate the trauma that these situations can generate for women.

Sometimes these situations can even be life-threatening. Since the change of government in Afghanistan in 2020, the situation of women employed in social and humanitarian aid has taken a dramatic turn for the worse, as witnessed by the sudden curtailment of their right to access public spaces and work. In order to keep women active in this sector, numerous organisations have introduced recruitment strategies and specific working conditions,¹⁴ the creativity of which would suggest that the challenges are enormous. In no particular order, these may include guaranteeing a job for a couple, advertising jobs exclusively for women, or creating safe working environments and appropriate conditions for the advancement, continuing education and family balance of staff.

Clearly, calling for parity in all humanitarian jobs would be unrealistic given the considerable security and appeal challenges of these posts in the most complex situations, especially for expatriate staff. Nonetheless, it is still essential to recognise and promote the exceptional work done by women in all intervention areas, foster the funding of local women's organisations, and ensure that women have equal access to senior positions. Humanitarian teams are, and will continue to be, more effective when they are diverse and inclusive. Women humanitarian workers bring a unique perspective to humanitarian aid and development. It is therefore important that they are involved in the decision-making process when humanitarian and development projects are being prepared. This way they can contribute to a comprehensive approach to providing aid to people affected by crises. These mixed

¹³ Caritas République tchèque, *6 reasons why women are important in humanitarian aid*, 6 March 2024, <https://svet.charita.cz/en/news/6-reasons-why-women-are-important-in-humanitarian-aid>

¹⁴ UN Women, *Promoting the Recruitment and Retention of Women Humanitarian Workers in Afghanistan*, August 2022, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/af-four-pager-summary-women-humanitarian-workers.pdf>

teams must be provided with an appropriate framework in terms of recognition and pay, guarantees, and protection against physical and sexual violence and harassment.

Beyond the current practices of NGOs, these considerations are becoming pivotal at the highest level. In any case, this is what the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) says in its most recent framework document: “The IASC commits to the goal of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in humanitarian action as one of its core priority areas. By identifying and addressing the specific needs of women, girls, boys and men in all their diversities, by promoting and protecting their human rights, and by redressing persisting and even deepening gender inequalities – including through the promotion of women’s leadership and contribution across the humanitarian response – [the IASC] will ensure more equitable and effective humanitarian outcomes for all crisis affected populations.”¹⁵ The presence and effective participation of women are more strongly recognised as a guarantee of quality and equity in humanitarian programmes. It is now a question of implementing policies and best practices aimed at gender equality in the humanitarian aid-development and peacekeeping nexus.

Translated from the French by Derek Scoins

Biography

Miren Bengoa • Originally from Geneva, Miren Bengoa has a degree in international relations from Sciences Po in Paris, a certificate in economic development from EPFL and a Master’s degree in public health from the University of London. She has worked with MSF-CH and Terre Des Hommes, and spent eight years as Programme Manager for maternal health at UNFPA and Programme Specialist for monitoring and evaluation at UNICEF’s Child Survival Unit. She has undertaken numerous assignments in Africa and Latin America on community health, child protection and HIV prevention projects for young people. Miren led the Fondation CHANEL for nearly ten years in the fight against gender inequality. In 2013 she founded and chaired the UN association ONU Femmes France of which she is now Honorary Chair. In 2021 she joined Groupe SOS, the European leader in social economy, as Managing Director for International Action. Miren is currently Director of Swiss Solidarity, the independent Swiss foundation for humanitarian aid donations established by a Swiss public radio station in 1946.

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¹⁵ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), *Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action*, Updated 2023-27, p. 65, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/%28ENDORSED%29%20IASC%20Policy%20on%20Gender%20Equality%20and%20the%20Empowerment%20of%20Women%20and%20Girls%20in%20Humanitarian%20Action.pdf>