

Humanitarian aid and the challenge of gender-based and sexual violence

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In early 2018, several employees of a British non-governmental organisation (NGO) were accused of sexual abuse in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. What would become known as the “Oxfam scandal” shows that humanitarian aid is not immune to the scourge of gender-based and sexual violence. Other NGOs, as well as international organisations, took this opportunity to disclose instances of sexual misconduct that may have been committed in their midst against direct beneficiaries, vulnerable populations or other humanitarian personnel. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, the AidToo and ReformAid hashtags have emerged, becoming the banners rallying those determined to expose, combat, and punish the sexual abuse committed by international aid workers. In response, several humanitarian organisations have explained the measures already in place, or proposed reforming their recruitment procedures, expanding their training on gender-based and sexual violence, or reviewing the sanctions available to them.

In October 2019, a report published by the UK Parliament’s International Development Committee noted the limited progress made by NGOs in terms of transparency, with some still reluctant to publish the number of sexual abuse allegations they receive and the outcome of their investigations. A few months earlier, in France, *Coordination SUD* and its member organisations had adopted a charter under which they undertake to implement specific procedures to prevent and deal with physical and psychological harm to individuals, particularly gender-based and sexual violence. These procedures include transparency on confirmed cases, internal sanctions and reporting to the police. Other NGO platforms in Europe (VENRO in Germany, Partos in the Netherlands, and Bond in the United Kingdom) subscribe to this approach, while the ECHO and DEVCO Directorates-General of the European Union ask for identical assurances from their NGO partners. In short, the “Oxfam scandal” has become an issue for the international solidarity sector as a whole, providing the opportunity to unveil practices and possibly transform the sector.

There were concerns that the Covid-19 pandemic may undermine this salutary momentum, just as it has diverted attention from so many other major issues. One of its consequences has in fact been to push us to postpone this issue, which we had planned to publish in July 2020. In the meantime, we have had ample time to look for signs of how this subject is being prioritised or sidelined in this context. The “Ebola scandal” that broke in September 2020 will confirm both the enduring nature of this scourge and the attention it is now receiving. In an article published by our colleagues at *The New Humanitarian*, an employee of the World Health Organization accused United Nations and NGO aid workers of sexual abuse during the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo between 2018 and 2020. This new case only strengthened our determination to tackle this subject head-on – a subject that the humanitarian sector cannot ignore. In any event, the sector has taken it on board.

This issue therefore intends to examine how the moral condemnation of gender-based and sexual violence is translating (or not) into organisational reforms. The first step, therefore, and as far as this is possible, is to present an overview of this violence taking into account the specific characteristics of the humanitarian sector, not in an attempt to justify such violence of course, but to explain how the particular conditions of this environment can give rise to such excesses. It also aims to clarify why the fight against this violence has clearly been so ineffective thus far. The Ebola case attests to this.

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We start with an article by Jan Verlin¹, a researcher working on the subject who kindly agreed to act as joint editor. His article summarises various academic texts on the subject, pointing out that while it has escaped the attention of humanitarian practitioners for too long, it is also virtually absent from these ever-evolving “humanitarian studies”. He then proposes an analytical framework for understanding how organisations are implementing measures to combat the gender-based and sexual violence committed by humanitarian workers. This framework allows us to understand the potential but also the persistent limits of the reforms proposed by humanitarian organisations. The next five articles “plough” these furrows by mixing authors from the North and the Global South, stakeholders and researchers alike.

Segolen Guillaumat argues that the humanitarian sector is not immune to gender-based and sexual violence because it is subject to patriarchal male-female dynamics, as are so many other sectors of society, but also because some of its specific characteristics can facilitate violence against vulnerable populations whilst others allow it to “immunise” itself against their complaints. She thus refers to the “multicultural mix of humanitarian actors and teams [that is] perhaps totally unlike that in any other field” and to the fact that “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”. To counter the hold of the patriarchy in the humanitarian sector, she tells us, it would be necessary for the latter to take a “dominant position” on the subject and to help free speech, while taking into account the local context in which this violence is rooted.

Françoise Duroch and Emmanuel Noyer then review the measures *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) has taken since 2002 to combat sexual violence. From an analysis of the Mano River scandal to the revelations surrounding the “Ebola scandal”, the authors show the moral relativism that runs through humanitarian aid organisations keen to preserve their public image. Even though these organisations are increasingly aware of their obligation to monitor their employees’ behaviour, organisational progress is all too often made only because of pressure from scandals. Duroch and Noyer tell us, however, that the measures taken will only mitigate inequality (especially gender inequality) if they rely on intersectional approaches. Pragmatically, the authors conclude that, while “exemplary behaviour by aid workers is a difficult-to-achieve standard [...], 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.”

A good way to appreciate this investment is to follow Isabelle Auclair, Jade St-Georges, Stéphanie Maltais, Sophie Brière and Anne Delorme to Canada. In their article, they present the data gathered in 2018 from forty international cooperation organisations in Quebec with the aim of learning more about their procedures in this matter. While some already had tools to combat gender-based and sexual violence before 2018, their scope, and ultimately their incentive value, seems to vary. Only one organisation had allocated a specific budget for this subject. Similarly, most of the training courses offered in this area were for volunteers and trainees rather than for those in positions of authority while, as the authors remind us, “sexual violence is closely linked to power structures”. Without a shadow of a doubt, they conclude that “several challenges remain [...], especially in terms of technical and financial resources needed to establish a specific policy as required.”

It is to Cameroon that Jean Émile Mba takes us to learn about the efforts and limitations of the task force formed by an alliance of national and international NGOs to combat sexual abuse by humanitarian workers. Staff turnover, breaches of confidentiality within the very organisations responsible for gathering complaints and attempts at a cover-up by refugee-camp authorities all reflect the difficulty of implementing measures in fragile contexts. We also gain a better understanding of the silence to which too many victims condemn themselves: in the author’s investigation, “90% of the three hundred respondents mentioned the fear of losing their jobs, reprisals, or a negative impact on their image as factors explaining their decision not to report sexual misconduct”.

It is this same self-censorship that confronted our last author in her extensive work on sexual abuse. Using evidence gathered in the theatres of humanitarian operations such as the former Yugoslavia, Jasmine-Kim Westendorf analyses the political but also physical conditions that facilitate such abuse. She

¹ For a detailed presentation of Jan Verlin, see p.46.

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concludes that “a wide range of local, international, normative, and systemic factors contribute to creating the circumstances in which humanitarian perpetrators choose to abuse and exploit.” Recalling the complex nature of “transactional sex”, the author opens a path, almost a course of action, that could guide NGOs in their efforts: “ensure that personnel understand not only *what* rules govern their behaviour, but *why* they have been deployed, *how* their everyday behaviours affect the goals and outcomes of a humanitarian mission, and *to what end* certain behaviours have been proscribed”. In doing so, she calls for a holistic approach to sexual abuse.

These articles certainly do not exhaust every aspect of this difficult issue: difficult for the victims – obviously and especially so – but also for NGOs, the vast majority of whose staff feel betrayed and tarnished by the actions of a minority. These contributions demonstrate the scale of the task facing the humanitarian sector. To avoid a repetition of such acts in the coming years, new, more radical approaches must be developed to combat gender-based and sexual violence effectively. We can only hope that this issue will have a part to play in that development.

Translated from the French by Derek Scoins

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