"Undermined, Exploited, and Undervalued":

The Realities of Women Humanitarians

International Humanitarian Day

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Introduction

Every year, the United Nations and the aid sector at large celebrates World Humanitarian Day, a day designated to pay tribute to those who dedicate their lives to the service of others. In 2019, World Humanitarian Day honored women humanitarians, the so-called "unsung heroes who are on the frontlines." The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) touted the "unparalleled uniqueness" of women humanitarians, saying they add to the "global momentum of female strength, power and perseverance."[1] Undoubtedly worthy praise. And yet, praise rings hollow without substantive change to a system that discriminates against and exploits those very women humanitarians it praises.

In the summer of 2019, an open-ended question was posted on a Facebook group for women in the aid sector, asking what challenges women faced in their work in the field. Responses were overwhelming and disturbing. After being inundated with responses, a group of women – all of whom were either current or former humanitarian workers, or senior gender experts with more than a decade's worth of experience in these fields – decided to try to collect this data in a more systematic way, with the aim to produce a report that documented the realities of working in the humanitarian sector as a woman. Together, they drafted a survey, which was later circulated across various media platforms, including the platforms of the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) and VOICE. Within five days, **600 people had responded**. It was clear that women were eager to share their stories.

Of the 600 women surveyed, **41% said they experienced sexual harassment in the field**. This has long been a problem in the humanitarian sector, one that surfaced prominently with the reports of Oxfam staffers' abuse of Haitian women in the response to the 2010 earthquake. These incidents were investigated and reported by the Charity Commission.[2] In 2018, around the

beginning of the #MeToo movement, another wave of sexual assault and misconduct accusations became public against Oxfam and Save the Children. This resulted in a mass call from those inside humanitarian industries for transformation, justice, and accountability, which was often referred to as #Aidtoo.[3] Patriarchal and imperialist structures are embedded in the design and fabric of aid agencies, which has created an environment rife with sexual abuse and harassment, racism, and the denigration of women workers – and aid beneficiaries – more broadly.

While no humanitarian organization – or country, for that matter – can claim full gender equality, it is ironic and hypocritical that the very institutions deployed to protect and empower women and girls living and working in humanitarian crises violate them. What hope do we have for global gender equality when the systems established to deliver equality remain vastly unequal?

This report is the product of the work of several researchers, writers, and advocates, many of whom are considered "lifelong humanitarians," an acknowledgement of their dedication to gender equality, and raising awareness on behalf of women and girls affected by humanitarian crises. The survey these authors produced in response to International Humanitarian Day 2019 is a reflection of their own positionalities in relation to the broader humanitarian sector, something we feel is important to reiterate to readers before they proceed with this report. While we wish we had the time and space to write about the many other important issues facing women humanitarian workers – specifically issues related to racism and discrimination against women living with disabilities – we hope that the findings of our report trigger an immediate response from other organizations and researchers in the humanitarian sector to develop our findings further, and to work toward producing more knowledge on these other forms of oppression and discrimination for the betterment of the field. It is our hope that this information can act as a meaningful catalyst

for discussion on World Humanitarian Day 2020, and can encourage tangible action towards a more equitable aid sector.

Literature Review

The history of sexual violence in the aid sector is not limited to violence against women humanitarians. On the contrary, much of the related literature is primarily devoted to sexual violence perpetrated by United Nations (UN) Peacekeepers against civilian aid beneficiaries. This area of literature dates back multiple decades, usually in response to whistleblower reports of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) against aid recipients. Academic and non-academic sources alike agree that SEA against aid recipients is "real and widespread."[4] Beyond obvious harm to survivors and their communities, there is extensive discussion about the harm this violence does to the UN's credibility. The unfortunate reality is that most policy change has been purely reactive to violence and is widely understood to be a way for the UN to "save face," rather than to pursue justice for SEA survivors.[5]

Much of the UN and international non-governmental organizations' (INGO) policies related to sexual harassment and violence against women humanitarians take their cue from policies against violence towards aid beneficiaries, usually referring to women and girls. The existing literature on both types of violence often reference a 2003 Bulletin from the UN Secretary-General, which outlines the definitions of sexual exploitation and sexual violence.[6] In Section 2.3, the Bulletin clearly states that UN and UN agency employees must have access to mechanisms to report instances of sexual violence. The document also repeatedly states that perpetrating sexual violence is grounds for dismissal. Later UN and INGO policies and recommendations build on this foundation and use similar "zero-tolerance" language.[7] Something that is notably absent from these policy documents is the discussion of pursuing justice on the survivor's terms.

The academic literature on violence towards women humanitarians is limited, though it is a growing area of discussion; almost all research on the topic has been conducted within the last five years. Perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence towards women humanitarians are overwhelmingly male colleagues, usually in positions senior to survivors.[8] Additionally, there is evidence that suggests that there are serial perpetrators in the sector.[9] Some argue that this is correlated with how men dominate senior positions across the sector; as of 2011, 70 percent of senior positions were held by men.[10]

While academic literature on sexual harassment and violence perpetrated against women humanitarians is limited, non-academic sources abound, including countless media reports and first-person accounts of sexual harassment and violence perpetrated by colleagues. A common thread throughout these reports is that survivors are often unaware of mechanisms to report abuse and/or do not trust the mechanisms that exist. In one opinion piece, a veteran humanitarian and rape survivor explicitly says that she had never received training about preventing sexual violence and had "never been told about any policies or procedures" for reporting such violence.[11]

A review of security training manuals of various aid agencies done by Tufts University found that agencies provide trainings on the incorrect assumption that the greatest threat of sexual assault towards aid workers comes from armed groups.[12] This fails to identify the group most likely to be perpetrators – fellow aid workers. This assumption protects those in power and mitigates any sense of urgency and action to create systems of accountability. As we continue to understand the sexist culture women are fighting inside the industry, we should be wary of training programs as cure-all solutions.

The risk of sexual harassment, assault, abuse, and exploitation is heightened in the context of humanitarian work culture, which is described as a "macho environment" couched in "male

domination of power, space, and decision-making."[13] Pervasive microaggressions, as shown in our findings, are commonplace and are of equal concern when it comes to identifying the factors that normalize toxic masculinity and patriarchy instead of the protection of women humanitarian workers. Instances that organizations may be consider "less severe" – such as sexual jokes, unwelcome sexual comments, offensive remarks, uncomfortable touching, and sexual gestures – though often downplayed, are a significant risk factor for the increased prevalence of more sexual harassment and violence. The impunity enjoyed by male colleagues who are guilty of these "less severe" violations leads to the normalization of sexual harassment and assault more broadly.[14]

According to the 2019 Aid Worker Security Report from Humanitarian Outcomes, between 2014-2018, the incidents of violence against national aid workers increased while international aid worker numbers have remained relatively the same, bringing them to the same overall prevalence rate. Despite being at equal rates of violence (approximately 71 attacks per 100,000), national workers experience higher fatality rates in comparison with little to no change over time for international workers.[15] These numbers are attributed to the "risk-transfer to local partners and personnel in a distorted, unintended form of 'localization'."[16] These findings contribute to the growing evidence that there is a divide between national and international aid workers. This divide in safety and support is reiterated in some of our survey responses that allude to experiencing different forms of treatment based on national origin, race, ethnicity, and employee status.

Survey Objectives

In conducting this small survey, we hope to use our network of women humanitarians to contribute to the proliferating research around sexism in the humanitarian sector. As we continue to investigate and report abuse and violence between industry workers and host communities, so

too should the workplace be equally held accountable for its limited protection of women humanitarians against violence, harassment, abuse, and all forms of discrimination.

Our report contributes to this growing body of research by providing first-hand narrative accounts of women across the humanitarian industry in relation to the rampant patriarchal and misogynistic culture that characterizes the industry. By including both multiple-choice and short answer questions, we hope to humanize women's experiences while identifying thematic issues that link these women's responses to give a more holistic account of everyday life as a woman humanitarian worker. While our survey does not, and cannot – as no single survey can – identify every type of discrimination facing women humanitarian workers, we feel that the information we have collected from 600 respondents can speak to broad patterns throughout the industry, and some of the most pressing issues facing women humanitarians today.

Survey Findings

Respondent Demographics

Four of the survey questions, all multiple-choice, were designed to offer a better understanding of respondents' demographics. These questions included the following:

- What region best describes your cultural background?
- How long have you been working in the humanitarian sector?
- What kind of organization do you currently work for?
- What is your age?

Cultural Background
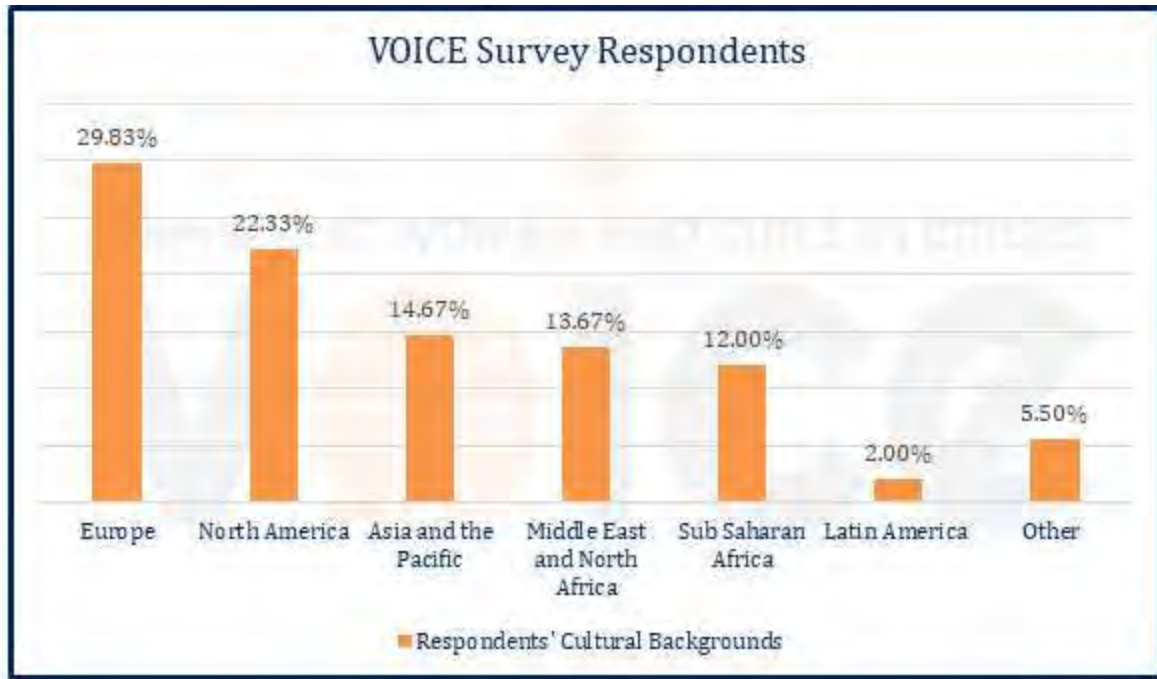
It is clear that the humanitarian aid sector has significant room to improve to become more representative of the global population. According to the World Population Review, Europe and North America represent about 15% of the world's population, while they represent over 50% of women humanitarian workers.[17] This is tied to the missionary roots of the aid sector as a whole, compounded by the dominant colonial ideology that countries in the global South are "unable" to develop and to become more "civilized" without support and direction from the already-civilized powers of the global North, specifically North American and European powers. This racialized history of aid work is unsurprisingly reflected in the employment practices of these global organizations, which hire predominantly white men and women from the global North to oversee projects and staff in a context that they have little knowledge about, "to fill the 'gaps in experience' that can't be filled by recruiting locally."[18]

Experience in the Humanitarian Sector

The breakdown of respondents' time working in the humanitarian sector is as follows:

- Less than five years - 27.67%

- 6-10 years - 36.67%

- 11-20 years - 29.17%

- More than 20 years - 6.00%

- Other - 0.67%

The survey represents women with a range of professional experience, from those new to the field to well-established professionals. There was no discernible difference noted between the answers of survey respondents between these categories of various work experience, though more research is needed to confirm such findings.

Respondent Ages

The breakdown of respondent ages, shown below, is relatively representative of professionals across all ages globally.

- Under 25 years of age - 3.50%

- 26-40 years - 66.00%

- 41-60 years - 27.83%

- 60+ years - 2.50%

- Other - 0.17

Type of Organization

The breakdown of organization types where respondents work includes:

- United Nations (UN) - 22.83%

- International non-government organization (INGO) - 53.50%

- Local NGO/Civil society organization - 9.00%

- Donor - 5.00%

- Academia - 2.50%

- Other - 7.17%

This data references the organizations that currently employ respondents; it is likely that respondents with more experience have moved between various organization types. Again, with regard to other survey responses, it is noteworthy that no type of organization has managed to improve conditions for their women employees.

Similar to the data representing respondents' years of experience in the aid sector, this is relatively representative of professionals across all ages.

Multiple-Choice Responses

Q1: Choose the top three issues that are most important to you.

1. Sexual Harassment – 41.17%

2. Harassment and bullying – 28.67%

3. Pay discrepancies – 24.67%

4. Denial of opportunities because of being a woman – 33.33%

5. Demeaning treatment and comments – 17.5%

6. Discrimination and/or unwelcomed comments based on physical appearance and clothing – 18.67%

7. Dismissed and minimized for your work on gender equality and women's empowerment – 23%

8. Work culture that is unfriendly and unsupportive to women – 26.83%

9. Mansplaining – 22.5%

10. System/culture that rewards sexism and discrimination or hides the abuses 35.33

11. Emotional labor of supporting other women when HR and other mechanisms are unsupportive – 16.33%

12. Unsupportive environment for mothers and would-be mothers 27.33%

13. Other 5.67%

The three most-chosen responses included sexual harassment, the denial of opportunities because of being a woman, and a system/culture that rewards sexism and discrimination or hides abuses. It is also worth noting that the least chosen response – performing emotional labor for colleagues in the absence of substantive human resources – still counts for 16%, or almost one-fifth of all responses. The majority of these responses resonate with each other, evidence gender-based discrimination against women in the aid sector is widespread and deep-rooted. For example, the three most-chosen responses all clearly stem from the same root problem: a culture of sexism.

Arguably, the sexist system and corresponding culture of impunity is the root of all other discriminations listed above. The men in this industry need to be held, and need to hold themselves,

to a higher standard. These toxic levels of complicity and perpetration that are pervasive in humanitarian culture dehumanize the women working in the industry.

Q2: Did you experience multiple forms of discrimination, where gender together with other diversity factors compounded your experiences? If Yes, please specify.

1. Sexual identity – 14.5%

2. Disability – 1.83%

3. Age – 40.67%

4. Language – 11.17%

5. Ethnic background – 26.33%

6. No, I did not experience multiple forms of discrimination – 34.17%

7. Other – 7.67%

As systems of oppression, and therefore forms of discrimination, are intertwined and co-constitutive, it should come as no surprise that many respondents experienced multiple forms of discrimination. Interestingly, nearly half of all respondents – approximately 40% – reported experiencing discrimination based on age, while 14.5% of respondents reported facing discrimination based on their sexual identity. Alarmingly, approximately 26.33% of all respondents identified facing discrimination based on ethnic background, which broadly supports the claims regarding racism within the humanitarian sector made earlier in this report.

Finally, it is very important to note that 34% of respondents identified that they did not experience multiple forms of discrimination. This, we argue, is most probably a reflection of the significant lack of diversity in the aid sector more broadly, and a reflection of the identity of our respondents, about half of whom identified that they were from North America or Europe. Much more additional research is needed to address the ways that racial and ethnic discrimination

operates within the humanitarian sector, and the ways that these sources of discrimination interact with and compound gender-based discrimination. While it is beyond the scope of this study to attend to this discussion in-depth, we hope that our initial findings encourage others to take up the mantle and further investigate structural racism within the humanitarian sector.[19]

Short Answer Responses – Personal Stories

One survey question asked respondents to share their personal experiences, asking the following:

> *If you are comfortable, and feel safe to do so, you can tell us one story/experience that represents the challenges you have faced as a female working in humanitarian action (75 words max). No identifying information will be used in future sharing of the stories for advocacy purposes. This question is optional, and you are not obligated to share any examples.*

As part of our analysis, we separated respondents' experiences into a number of thematic subcategories: discrimination (133 responses); harassment (91 responses); family and childcare support (29 responses); unsafe environments (26 responses); "boys' club" culture (22 responses); other gender biases (16 responses); rape and sexual assault (14 responses); and other/unspecified (see the graph below). These categorical experiences are not isolated from one another. Women experience many of these simultaneously in their workplaces within the humanitarian industry. On a larger scale, there are actions, patterns, systemic behaviors, and institutional norms that coexist to create, support, and protect a patriarchal, misogynistic, toxic culture.

Other
4.1%

Other Gender Biases
4.6%

Boys Club
6.4%

Unsafe Environments
7.5%

Family & Childcare
8.4%

Discrimination
38.6%

Harassment
26.4%
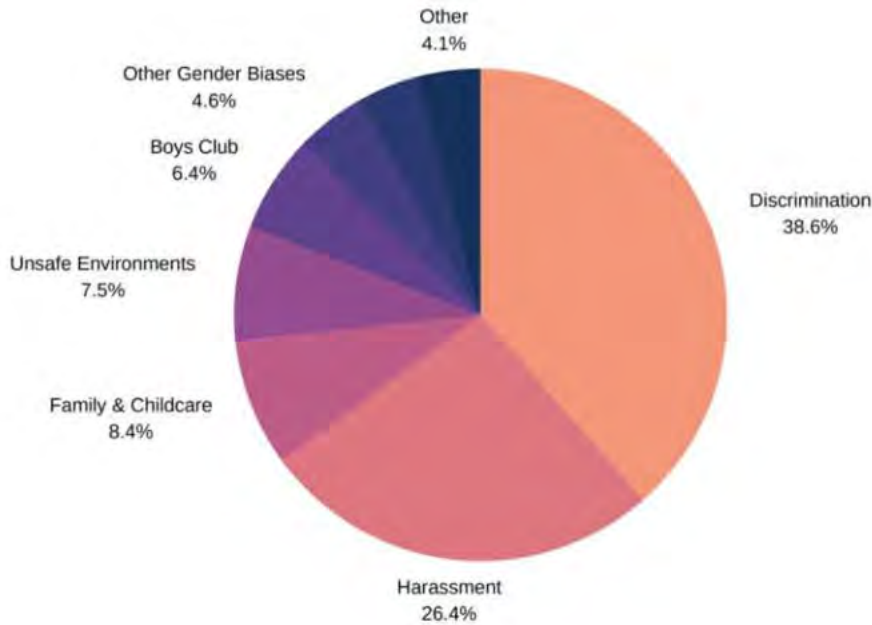
One of the respondents concisely explains this phenomenon:

"It's been a strange and gaslighting trip to grow in an industry increasingly cloaked with prioritizing "gender equality," "women's empowerment", etc., while coming to terms with how much females are patronized, abused, undermined, exploited and undervalued in humanitarian action. Sexual harassment and abuse is pervasive, and abusers protected."

In reading the reports from approximately 600 women, the power dynamics become evidently clear. A large number of people directly responsible for either committing abuses, or enabling the actions of those committing abuses, are in senior positions of power. Any misconceptions about who is perpetrating this behavior must be cleared up. It is coming from "inside the house," from within our own organizations, directly (and mostly) from men who act as the arbiters of the humanitarian industry, creating and sustaining its norms and codes of conduct. A culture that, as it stands, is running rampant with misogyny, abuse, and silence. The industry must do better in holding individuals accountable. The survey data from the Humanitarian Women's Network's 2016 report reiterates our findings. Of the women who reported experiencing harassment in their workplace (whether once or repeatedly), 51% of them report that the acts were

perpetrated by a male supervisor.[20] Of the women who reported experiences of sexual aggression and assault while on mission, 33% said it was done by male supervisors.[21]

The only responses our findings count in regards to senior level perpetrators are the ones that explicitly state it. If a higher-up individual is explicitly described in survey answers as ignoring, accepting, or encouraging the behavior, those instances count towards enabling.

Discrimination

"A unique anecdote would not reveal the problem (men colleagues don´t let me drive our car, or get aggressive when I do so, they get pissed when I talk about gender issues in a meeting, etc.). At the beginning you would not even notice it, the problem is to face this each day on each different topic, each time you take an initiative. The problem is the pervasiveness of the way my colleague can prevent my empowerment as a woman."

According to survey responses, women repeatedly describe having their authority, professional legitimacy, or ideas constantly dismissed or ignored (73 respondents); experience discriminatory/stereotypical gender roles (16 respondents); unequal pay (4 respondents); promotion and job security struggles (26 respondents); and other forms of discrimination (14 respondents).

All of these experiences – whether blatant, measurable sexist practices like pay inequality, or more insidious, a product of the misogynistic work culture – lead to the continued denigration of women humanitarians. Women are backed into resignation, face a systemic lack of access to job promotions (often after working harder to overcome gender bias and double standards), and endure constant attacks on their mental health.[22]

"Men in the office simply [are] given more respect and space to actually do their jobs than women in the same position (i.e. women in the same position are not

enabled/allowed to take decisions within their JDs in the same way as the men),
leading to eventual resignations of all the women and promotions of most men over
the years."

Countless women describe not being taken seriously in their roles or for their ideas simply because they are women. Many describe having their comments ignored in meetings (sometimes then to be parroted by a man in the room and recognized positively), being overlooked when raising their hands, and being talked down to or infantilized. Discrimination also looks like a work culture that actively dismisses women as human beings with equal access to decision-making processes, or contenders in leadership positions.

Discrimination cannot be relegated to a question of gender alone. Women describe feeling discriminated against or harassed based on their race, ethnicity, and country of origin.

"I was also subjected to ridicule because of my ethnicity and the country where I
come from. Bad publicity about my country was hurled against me. I had to leave
the organization."

"I have felt discrimination and experienced bullying by my colleagues who are
white women. I've been intentionally left out of conversations and
attacked/questioned about my credentials."

Other women describe being called "a national" rather than being referred to by their official title.

Impenetrable Double Standards

Many women describe being given 'secretarial work' in an ad hoc fashion when situations arise that require menial or administrative tasks, often when these tasks have nothing to do with their official positions. These kinds of gendered expectations are creating a pattern of favoring

men to be the thinkers, the leaders, and the primary actors in any given room in direct contrast to their women counterparts.

>*"I have faced recurrent sexism like being told I had a strong personality and it could be problematic...I have also always had the impression that [I] had to tune down my femininity to be respected."*

Women describe maneuvering through spaces that often treat or describe them as either too feminine or too masculine. These are impossible standards to meet and they are deployed as a tool to delegitimize women in their professional roles. Women describe being called "power-hungry, angry, authoritative, aggressive, defensive, bossy, and overbearing," in contexts where men would be complimented and rewarded for showing initiative or leadership qualities. These gendered views of behavior pushes women further into the margins where they are reprimanded instead of supported and encouraged.

Lack of Promotion, Support, and Male Allies

Women describe being overlooked for promotion opportunities despite being (over)qualified, especially in relation to their male peers. Beyond the issues of unequal pay and discriminatory promotion practices, misogyny plays a role in the ways in which women are scrutinized in their positions – whether in a managerial position or not. The margin of error is minimal to non-existent for women, whereas men are often treated with a much larger degree of flexibility. Instead, women are trapped in cycles of sexism where they find themselves having to constantly prove their worth, autonomy, and authority.

>*"Females always put extra effort to be accepted and acknowledged by others. Even a small mistake [by a] female is highlighted while big ones of males are ignored generally."*

"I had proven myself extensively to colleagues - putting in more hours than male colleagues in the same role, and never making any mistakes."

Exclusion becomes cyclical, whereby women are not taken seriously in their professional capacity, written off with the first mistake, and rarely promoted - all in stark contrast to men where mediocrity and sexist denigration continues to be rewarded.

"[I] was hired for a leadership role but always questioned, doubted and not trusted that I could actually do it. Was offered no support, yet both micromanaged from above and questioned from below. It was a job to fail because the environment was not conducive to success."

The gender division of labor within the humanitarian sector functions to benefit the patriarchal and misogynistic culture dominant in the industry. One woman describes women being expected to manage colleagues' trauma acquired on the job because "that's what women do." Responses allude to a systematic devaluing of women's labor when it comes to promotions and being put into leadership roles. There is a trend in survey responses that points to women being put in roles (officially or unofficially) to do a majority of the technical work that is required to implement projects and actualize the work, all while struggling to be given consideration for promotions.

"[I've watched] male colleagues head to senior decision-making, strategic positions readily while female[s]/myself included remain in the technical role with lots of grunt work."

"Highly competent extremely hardworking women are given invisible, time consuming, low-reward roles, while less competent men are given far more visible roles that are more frequently rewarded."

In conjunction with (mostly male) colleagues diminishing their work around gender-based violence (GBV) in the humanitarian sphere, women have encountered a culture devoid of responsibility for employees' mental health. When women come forward to address these concerns, they are met with verbal abuse, disbelief, and overall dismissiveness.

"[I was] not allowed to join humanitarian meetings as gender as an issue [is] not seen as important. Gaslighting, trying to destroy my career. Because I'm a feminist and called out a system of harassment by RC/HC."

Sexist behavior is rewarded as long as women are being subjugated within the humanitarian industry. The discrimination women are experiencing inside the industry excludes them from professional legitimacy, workplace mobility, and a healthy, supportive work community. When men fail to speak up when they see sexist behaviors, they are enabling a structure of power that prioritizes men's success and belonging over their women counterparts. Patriarchy within the industry will never be dismantled as long as men continue to be committed to inaction. Many of our respondents speak to this complicity:

"I was speaking with the head (my boss) when a male colleague interrupted and loudly and seriously stated to me that I should get down the other end of the table and talk about women's stuff instead of security up hear the other end of the table. The entire table went quiet, my colleague and I had both been insulted and dismissed in front of everyone and no one said a word."

"Mansplaining is the story of my life. I am a young woman and in almost every meeting, a man (who sometimes is new to the organization) decides to explain to me how to work on gender or feels threatened and interrupts me continuously. This is rarely noticed or stopped by other male leaders in the room."

Harassment

The specific categories parsed from anecdotal responses that describe harassment fall into the following: 46 sexual harassment claims, with 19 describing senior level perpetrators and seven detailing senior level enablers; 14 bullying/threatening behavior, where seven were explicitly from senior perpetrators and one involved a senior enabler; 24 verbal or emotional abuse claims, with 14 coming from senior level perpetrators, with three detailing a senior enabler; and nine otherwise unspecified types of harassment, where five included senior level perpetrators and four were senior level enablers.

Out of the 91 responses highlighting harassment, 44 responses explicitly point to senior level employees as the perpetrators and 15 point to senior level enablers.

Sustained, sexist harassment is perpetrated and enabled by a patriarchal and misogynistic culture in the humanitarian industry. Though not asked explicitly asked in the questionnaire, many women spoke directly to a lack of recourse, a fear of coming forward, and direct encouragement to exist in silence – often by their own superiors. These experiences have highly detrimental effects on personal and mental health, job security, and the ability to work professionally and effectively. These cultures and workplace aggressions combine to create an unsafe environment for women, clearly pointing to a lack of regard, and protection, for women's humanity and autonomy.

Responses detail a variety of problematic, violent, and abusive behaviors – unwelcome sexual advances, soliciting sex in exchange for career opportunities, sexist comments, verbal assault and abuse, inappropriate comments both in private and in groups, bullying someone after they report harassment and mistreatment, and consistent reports of actions not being taken when harassment and abuse were reported. An underlying consistency in many of the anecdotes reported

by the women in the survey highlights that both harassment and reports of harassment are ignored, if not seen as an inevitable culture that rewards the (mostly) men behind the behavior.

Perpetrating and Enabling

"I once had a boss who sexualized me in the office and outside as a result of which he didn't treat me as a professional at work, but this dynamic spread across the other male managers who, even though not part of the initial sexual harassment, still treated me the way he did, even in front of my supervisees, which became accepted in the office."

The superiors who enable a culture of harassment, but are not the perpetrators behind the behavior directly, do so in a multitude of ways, mostly by ignoring reports of harassment, gaslighting women accusers into feeling responsible for their own abuse, or denigrating the seriousness of the inappropriate behavior and accusations.

In one case, after being harassed by a staff member and reporting the incident to her boss, he replied, "you are going to have to learn how to deal with this." Another woman described her boss's response after she was verbally assaulted with sexual language in a meeting by a project manager, in front of her boss, who was the country director: "oh please excuse him, he is so stressed and tired." The instinct and the protocol is not to advocate on behalf of the woman experiencing the abuse but rather to make excuses for the person exhibiting what is clearly inappropriate, sexist, harmful behavior.

In many abusive relationships and environments, gaslighting is a common technique deployed to belittle a victim, turn culpability onto the abused, and negate the actions of the abuser.

"In a work setting, I was SCREAMED at to the point of getting saliva on my face by a male colleague. Although he got a verbal warning from a boss, I was told that this was an

example of me being poor at 'collaboration'. As if I am somehow responsible or it is my fault that I provoked this appalling behaviour."

Disregard for Gender-Based Violence

Some women describe experiencing an overall lack of regard for GBV and harassment as a real occurrence and a legitimate form of abuse.

"In a previous job, the executive director of my organization would consistently demean and belittle me because I worked on GBV prevention/response. He saw it as unimportant/not a priority. He also would stare at my body, make inappropriate comments about it, and found opportunities to touch my knee, put his arms around me, etc., which he obviously never did to male colleagues."

"In an NGO coordination meeting surrounded by men only, having comments and laugh on the fact that I would not last very long in such hard and insecure context (remote location in CAR); at the same meeting, jokes being said when one NGO staff mentioned cases of rape or other GBVs being addressed by his organization."

These instances illustrate a misogynistic culture: one that women have known to disregard GBV prevention and response as a legitimate professional pursuit, uphold rape culture and sexist jokes, and treat women as targets for inappropriate advances. While categories are helpful for reporting specificity of abuse, the culture is upheld by a multitude of overlapping factors. When GBV itself is blatantly delegitimized, so too is the need for women's protection against abuse in the humanitarian industry workplace.

Threats & Backlash

It was fairly common for women to describe threats, coercion, or direct repercussions, for either turning down an unwanted sexual advance or reporting an incident of harassment or abuse.

"A security advisor for my organization made a sexual advance that I turned down. He later ignored security incidents I reported (e.g. I was physically assaulted immediately outside our office and our office guards did nothing to intervene). He also spread rumors that I had violated security regulations to undermine my authority in our organization and laughed it off as an 'inside joke'."

"My manager shared the issue with the man who harassed me and hence they all come together and start bullying me."

Both instances speak to the risks that women face when they stand up for themselves in an inappropriate situation or seek support and/or repercussions for harassment they have experienced. Women are facing an initial form of harassment and then, as they come forward, face re-traumatization or punishment for being harassed. In these examples, the lines between perpetrator and enabler become blurred. The humanitarian industry has a perpetrator-protection culture that must be upended.

Impact and Culture Creation

In many survey responses, there is a perceived inevitability of all categories of harassment – an understanding that it is part of the culture. When harassment is treated as inevitable, recourse is seen as unnecessary and even taboo, and an upset to the workplace culture, particularly by those who are unaffected as non-victims and/or are the individuals who would be the ones facing repercussions. When individuals with relative power make excuses for perpetrators or minimize their behavior, the impetus of innocence is always with the accused, and never the accuser. In the face of inevitability, the impetus for response and reaction remains the responsibility of the person experiencing the harassment. This is in lieu of institutional support for the protection of the victim, accountability for wrong-doing, and systemic policy changes in regards to justice.

These factors have worked together to create an undeniable culture of silence, gaslighting, enabling, abuse, unjust punishment, and perpetrator protection. Many of these experiences will be familiar to women reading this report, though they may work in different industries. In demanding action, we clearly demarcate the impact these abuses have on women - a cycle of denigration, job precariousness, and a lack of safety.

Victim blaming and punishment and the protection of perpetrator reputations often go hand-in-hand – at the intersection of "boys' club" and emotional abuse.

> "After reporting two separate incidents of harassment or mistreatment to my male manager, I was told by him in my appraisals that I was 'too emotional' at work, and need to take things less personally. I have never again brought issues to him for fear of not being believed, and not wanting to fuel this 'emotional' reputation."

One woman described reporting sexual harassment to her HR department with five other women staff members who experienced the same abuse by the same person and HR told them, "you women have imagination." Nothing happened to their perpetrator; he kept his job and this woman resigned due to the complete dismissal of her report. Some women describe watching their harasser get promoted. In one case, a woman details how a male superior began giving false reports to her supervisor after she turned down his sexual advances. He even showed up to her home once without her provision of her address or her consent. After coming forward, he was eventually transferred to a promoted position in a different location.

> "[A] virulently anti-feminist colleague came back to the shared house drunk one night very abusive and intent on breaking into my room. Let go at [the] end of contract as a result, he was re-hired elsewhere in the system within 6 months."

"An SMT (Senior Management Team) staff once told me that he had feelings for me, when I politely turned him down he made my job and my position a living hell the last 2 months of my contract. No one I told about it did anything and when I complained to HQ they not only did not do anything but offered him a contract extension. I felt so let down, unsupported and not listened to."

In these instances, sexist and abusive behavior is being rewarded. These individuals could also be serial harassers and abusers. Without investigation and accountability, the industry continues to put women directly in harm's way and disregards the health and safety of women working in this field.

Juxtaposed with the mostly men perpetrating and enabling a culture of sexist abuse and harassment who have been able to count on protection and promotion, are the women who experience the constant feeling of job precariousness on top of duress resulting from harmful work environments.

"[I] had to resign from [my] position after facing multiple sexual harassment situations (from supervisors mostly). Harassment [was] established but remedies were not implemented (mediation with no result except "sorry, we know it [was] hard, removal from position instead of removing abuses etc.) Resulted in retaliation."

Women humanitarians seem to be in an abusive relationship with the humanitarian industry, all while working within it as change-makers and solution builders. Responses by people in positions of power make it clear that women are expected to manage their own reactions when faced with demeaning, unprofessional, and abusive behavior. The casual inevitability by which perpetrators are protected and the silencing culture perpetuated speaks to a larger issue: women's

safety, security, mental health, professional pursuits, and dignity are being devalued and sacrificed in the humanitarian industry.

While there were no questions explicitly asking respondents to discuss the impact of these instances on their mental health and well-being, people describe being "utterly devastated," "traumatized," feeling "so let down and unsupported." They "carry deep scars" and "fell into depression." One woman describes her constant experiences as culminating in, "a year of hell."

In an industry dedicated to providing relief, support, and life-saving services, this kind of behavior and lack of punitive measures is an unacceptable underbelly. There is an obvious need to practice principles of dignity, autonomy, and care both externally in policy and internally for the people carrying out the work. Beyond these clear and basic demands being paramount to a healthy and professional work environment, work itself suffers when the workers – already pushed to the brink of emotional, mental, and physical limitations due to the nature of humanitarian work – are not respected and protected as humans and employees.

Maternity, Family and Childcare Policies

The 29 women who chose to speak about their experiences surrounding family, motherhood, and childcare describe two sub-categories: (1) workplace norms and policies that are unsupportive of women with families (15 responses) and (2) discrimination against mothers (14 responses).

Women describe a "lack of support during pregnancy," having work hours changed without consultation, "no support for family leave," denial of extensions on maternity leaves, and a lack of spousal support, particularly when relocation is a job factor. One woman explained the financial strain she experienced:

"I gave birth shortly before taking up a regional position which required frequent travel. I wanted to take my baby with me whenever possible but also needed to take the nanny which made missions very expensive. It was impossible to get any financial support for this."

Discrimination looks like limited opportunity to advance in your career due to being a mother. It looks like hiring panels writing you off as a viable candidate for new positions. One woman described an opinion given by a recruitment manager: "we shouldn't hire a mother, you can never get enough work out of them." Women are having their potential and value as employees policed by superiors simply because they are mothers.

"I was refused deployment because I was a young mum at the time and my supervisors were worried about the impact the deployment would have on my children."

"My HR focal point told me that I could not apply to manage a structure now that I have a baby and that I would need to look for other types of positions, less demanding."

The double standard for men and women with families and children is glaring. Sexist double standards prove that women, in comparison with their male counterparts, are the ones who will experience discrimination solely based in their identity as a parent. One woman explains: "[a] woman is still considered the pillar of the family while the man can live freely."

Women who have experienced either of these forms of sexism and lack of support are put under great stress trying to maintain a work-life balance, experience a strain on their mental health, and struggle to succeed in their work life. Some have lost their jobs. One woman describes men commenting on her looks and body while she was pregnant, returning to work from maternity leave and not being taken seriously, and being harassed for having to leave early to pick up her baby. These events had long terms repercussions:

"After 6 months I burnt out and had to quit the job. It took a long time to recover my confidence and I did not go back to [the] humanitarian sector since then."

Hostile and Unsafe Work Environments

Twenty-five responses indicated hostile and/or unsuitable work environments that lacked proper safety policies for women. Of the 25 responses, 17 refer to poor environments lacking safety and security. Nine women specifically mentioned a lack of women's spaces and facilities, potentially leading to unsafe scenarios that disproportionately affect women.

"I find that the personal safety and security of lone female humanitarian travelers is not taken seriously enough by INGOs."

Women describe inadequate security measures on their compounds, a lack of safe transport services, and gender-blind security trainings. Women-only facilities and spaces, including bathrooms, are sometimes "considered an unnecessary luxury."

"I find that female humanitarian workers have to go out of the way to advocate for their own safety and to make sure that specific safety concerns of women are considered"

These policy considerations must be done at the institutional level. Women should not be in the position to stand alone as their own safety advocates.

Rape, Sexual Assault, and Exploitation

Rape culture exists in humanitarian professional environments. 14 respondents reported being the victim of rape or sexual assault by colleagues, or witnessing male coworkers engage in sexual exploitation, even prostitution, while on assignment. Out of those 14 responses, 4 of the women report the perpetrator as a senior level official or direct boss and 2 survey respondents indicated the involvement of senior level enablers. Most of the women who characterized one of their worst experiences in the industry as rape or sexual assault on our survey described a "lack of

support," having "zero recourse," being penalized by not having their contract renewed after reporting abuse, or declining to report the abuse at all, out of fear.

"I work[ed] with a colleague who support[ed] [me] at work and then gradually victimiz[ed] [me] for sexual violence and abuse."

"A big issue is when the people in positions of power who decide whether something is/isn't sexual discrimination or abuse are the ones who have little awareness of what constitutes sexual discrimination/abuse. This happened recently during a disciplinary, where behaviour which is widely regarded as sexual abuse was deemed to be a case of "communication style" by senior management."

Stories and personal narratives indicate a general fear of coming forward, due to the culture of management that assumes the innocence of male perpetrators. Furthermore, the dismissal of GBV as a priority in humanitarian response indicates that the industry does not take violence against women as seriously as it should - in the field or in their workplaces. Once more, women are pointing to an overall lack of safety and protection in their industry. This directly enables violence against women.

The "Boys' Club" and Gender Bias

Some women directly reference a dominant "boys' club" which is intimately intertwined with a process of gaslighting women in the industry. This culture silences women, especially when they are trying to speak out about discrimination or abuse. Twenty-one of the survey responses fit in this category. Most of the examples given could also be counted as discrimination, though they speak more directly to the experience of women being told that they are unequipped to work in the humanitarian space. Specifically, we see gender biases built on patriarchal foundations and a pattern of victim blaming that is fueled by a "boys' club."

Women report being told they are "too emotional," "too soft," or "not tough enough" to exist in this professional world. These are problematic insults held solely for women, within a framework of false gendered binaries that seek to paint women as being incapable of managing their emotions, thus deeming them unqualified for professional spaces. The double standard is glaring, as two women recounted: "countless times being told that I or other women are too emotional while the same men yell and swear at their staff" and "being told that I'm too emotional / passionate – when other men in my organization can have full on temper tantrums and get held up for having "strong convictions."

In these instances, victim blaming removes the focus on toxic culture and systemic sexism, further protecting a misogynist culture.

"Anytime I've raised my voice to argue against any form of discrimination or unfair treatment, it is met with the refrain that if I'm not "tough enough" to handle it, I should find a job in headquarters. The sense that "this is how the field is" makes for an easy excuse to perpetuate a culture that actively harms female humanitarians and a way for organizations to avoid doing the hard work that will lead to real (and long-overdue) change."

These manifestations of a "boys' club" build an industry culture that values the men and delegitimize women, in part by weaponizing their emotions against them. Serious concerns and reports of inappropriate behaviors are discounted and victim-blaming becomes a work culture norm.

"Any attempt to seek changes in the organization is seen as emotional and rarely perceived from a professional perspective."

"A female who complains about harassment can be treated as if she is precious, immature or unable to solve her own issues, which can result in the complaint not being taken seriously."

These microaggressions not only create a toxic environment for women, but point to a weaponizing of gendered discrimination that prevents women from receiving the protection and support they need to stay physically and mentally safe.

"I was told that because I advocated for mental health resources to be shared with aid workers who followed me, that I was not cut out to work in the field and should reconsider career paths."

"After experiencing a security incident that left me shaken and fearful for my life, I was reminded by senior male management, that this is "what I signed up for." I was not offered any support or counseling, only a few days off. I was left to feel like I was not "tough enough" when raising any security concerns or uneasiness in traveling to insecure locations."

Of the 21 responses in this category, three respondents explicitly point to senior level managers as the perpetrators of these actions and comments.

Other Gender Barriers

The 16 responses in this category refer mostly to difficulties engaging with community members and leaders as a woman. This included facing challenges in being taken seriously in professional contexts, feeling unsafe walking the streets, and struggling to get access to funding.

Solutions and Demands

We asked survey respondents to share ideas about changes they would like to see in the aid sector, asking the following:

If humanitarian organizations could make ONE IMMEDIATE CHANGE to improve the situation for female humanitarian aid workers, what would it be?

Despite the question being open-ended and the lack of a template response, solution suggestions were similar and seamlessly categorical. Out of the 600 responses, these were the foremost solutions:

1. ***Hire more women into the humanitarian industry, especially into leadership positions. This includes career support and development for women in the industry.***

    Throughout the 184 respondents in this category, there were a range of suggestions including "equal opportunity for advancement," "active sponsorship of women," instituting on a "quota system" for gender equity in upper management, "better recruitment," and "establishing mentorship programs for women." All with the intention of recruiting, hiring, retaining, empowering, and promoting women within the industry – ideally into greater positions of power and influence.

Out of the 184 responses in this category, 16 (8.7%) explicitly referred to the need for prioritizing racial, national, and ethnic equity immediately. Responses in this category house 16 of the 21 total times this issue is mentioned in the solutions survey question. People speak to the need for "women of color in leadership positions," "diversity," addressing the "exclusion of women […] of the developing world and particularly Africa." Calls are made for "population-based representation" and "hiring local women" to break down the "exclusiv[ity] to white upper middle-class folks" undermining the equity of the industry.

2. ***Strict and enforceable mechanisms for both reporting and accountability in instances of harassment, assault, and discrimination.***

The 105 women who wrote under this category are demanding a culture of zero tolerance when it comes to harassment, assault, and discrimination in the workplace. This includes holding perpetrators to full account for their harmful and sexist behaviors, ideally leading to the eradication of a culture that emboldens them. Many point to a need for a stronger HR department or new internal policies and mechanisms to create a "supportive environment" for women and "real mechanisms to report and track" cases "with full transparency." Reprimands, sanctions, firings, and black-listing are all suggestions to end the "impunity" of perpetrators of sexism, abuse, and discrimination. "Protection," "support," "quick action," and "accountability" are all being clearly demanded.

3. ***Changes in workplace culture in support of equity and valuing women.***

The 105 women's responses that fall into this category speak less directly about the mechanisms or policies themselves, but rather the pervasive sexist culture that is predominant in the humanitarian industry. "Take female voices seriously." "Create a culture of respect." "Be serious about addressing gender (and ethnic) parity." "Give women higher priority and a sense of

belonging." "Take sexual harassment seriously." "Stop mansplaining." "Stop [the] culture of abuse." "Empowerment." These responses function in unison with the sentiment of the previous category as they call for a serious commitment to creating cultural shifts that require institutional, systemic approaches.

4. *Stronger maternal and family policies in support of working mothers.*

The 72 suggestions from this category call for a work environment that understands the needs of single mothers, pregnant women, and people with families. Some immediate fixes are directly related to a woman's ability to care for her child, including: "more childcare options and support, including extending maternity leave to care for our own children," "workplace childcare," "nursing rooms in every organization," "coverage of child support costs," and "have baby-friendly areas." Beyond requiring assistance for children, humanitarian women are imploring their workplaces to eliminate discrimination against pregnant women and women with families. In some cases, demands are policy related:

"Eliminate old school policies that discriminate against parents by saying you need to first do 12 months of unaccompanied missions before you can take an accompanied/ family post."

In other instances, women are calling for supportive environments that ensure a lack of discrimination against women when they are on maternity leave. More women with children and families need to see promotions to higher levels within the industry.

"It can be hard to advance in our industry once you have kids if you no longer want to go to the field."

Cultural improvement suggestions include "improving work-life balance," "more supportive work environments," and "flexible hours."

5. *Stronger safety measures and security protocols*

The 31 respondent recommendations in this category are speaking to the "safety and protection" of women in the humanitarian industry, ranging from the provision of mental health services to more robust physical security operations.

"Put them in charge of their own risk assessment and security arrangements locally and link them to a wider group of women for support."

"Better health care check upon return or special leave to deal with women health issues worsened by living conditions in humanitarian locations."

"Provide "safe-space" networks within the organization."

6. *Ensuring equal pay*

Alongside the calls for equal pay across gender are demands for transparency around pay salaries within the workplace. In this survey response, 29 respondents fall in this category. Further research must also be done on pay discrimination at the intersection of race, class, and national origin, an issue that is alluded to throughout our survey responses.

"Close the pay and benefits/entitlements gap. That includes reducing the disparity between 'local,' 'national,' and 'international' staff."

7. *Organizational changes that reflect workplace support and flexibility*

Organizational demands call for "well-trained survivor advocates," a "gender audit in all humanitarian organizations," "flexible work hours," a "dedicated budget in proposal to ensuring women have female translators," and "offer/have offerings of] comprehensive information on each duty station about services and assistance available".

8. *Workplace trainings on gender discrimination, harassment, and abuse*

The calls for training in the workplace are centered around creating a culture of support for women, in part shifting the impetus of responsibility onto men to change their behavior. Some call for "frequent capacity building workshops" and "intensive, effective feminist training for men". These women hope for the trainings to also teach "what constitutes harassment [and] how to report it."

"Brief men about their possible unbearable sexist behaviors and communication styles."

It is important to note here that gender and harassment trainings, though necessary in any workplace to educate and set the tone of accountability, are not enough to fix this issue. A failure of the trainings would be to treat misogynistic and patriarchal work culture as a securitized, outside threat instead of working to eliminate power dynamics and an abusive culture being created by the people working within it.[23] There have been some efforts by organizations to implement trainings on harassment, assault, discrimination, and sexist work cultures. While this is a positive advancement, instituted trainings lack all effectiveness as a potential solution without institutionally mandated, punitive measures in place for perpetrators.

9. *Legislative policy changes*

Legal protections would make the protection of women against discrimination and abuse an imperative rather than suggestion.

> "Create and implement legislation or similar enforceable requirements that managers are responsible for ensuring that workplaces are free from discrimination, bullying and harassment."

Conclusion

The nature of this sexist culture, abuse, and discrimination against women humanitarians is perpetual, and so too must be the response. A single rupture in one piece of the cycle of

patriarchal culture and the rewarding of abusive behavior is not enough. We need a humanitarian system designed with feminist, inclusive principles, both in internal and external practices.

It is not enough to change the culture with workplace trainings, nor to promote more women to positions of power – although those efforts are an absolutely necessary component of the larger response. We need accountability and justice. One element that was rampant throughout the survey responses was the clear lack of punishment, retribution, and accountability measures to the myriad of misogynistic, violent, denigrating, and harmful actions or behaviors directed at women humanitarians. Yes, changing the culture is critical – no matter how slow the process might be. However, so too is the demand to make women humanitarians feel safe and supported in their own work environments. Holding people accountable for their actions means removing people from the organization if they have violated the safety of another human being, and especially their women colleagues. The focus should be less on the more palatable solution of providing gender-sensitivity training – something many perpetrators have already listened to or attended many times before – and should focus more wholeheartedly on removing any immediate threats to the safety of women humanitarians. This does not simply mean firing these perpetrators, but ensuring that they are unable to continue their pattern of exploitation and abuse without consequences at another organization in the humanitarian sector.

Future Research

Further research must be done on the relations and power dynamics between national and international staff. Considering the many criticisms about the humanitarian industry and its links to imperialism and white supremacy, the workplace hierarchies of international humanitarian structures must be examined for structural racism and the ways in which gender, ethnicity, race, and national origin interact.[24] While many of our survey respondents did mention issues related to

racial or ethnic discrimination, it is beyond the scope of this report to investigate in-depth the ways that race and ethnicity are implicated alongside gender biases to produce a hostile working environment for women humanitarians. Due to the short form nature of the survey answers, the face and direct impact of racist behaviors and actions from work structures, fellow employees, and superiors is not consistently explicit in respondent responses. We need studies on racial and ethnic inequality within the humanitarian industry, leading to insecurity and contributing to greater systems of economic inequality and the continued dominance of colonial systems that position the global North – ideologically and materially – in a superior position to the global South.

A Feminist Humanitarianism

Women humanitarians are suffering in a patriarchal, misogynistic culture that consistently undervalues, excludes, disrespects, patronizes, abuses, and dehumanizes them. Women are being denied professional opportunities and long-term success in the industry as a result of the constant battle to assert and protect themselves against patriarchal violence without the necessary organizational structures to support them. This toxic humanitarian industry, one that is increasingly focused on gender equity and fighting violence against women, will never be efficient in its work on these issues until they are addressed from within. A feminist humanitarian culture must first listen and believe the voices and experiences of women, then adopt their demands. A feminist humanitarian culture would hold all humanitarians accountable not only for their individual actions, but for the actions of the entire organization and the collective environment in relation to gender equality. Justice, accountability, and equality must be at the foundation of the humanitarian industry, both in its internal and external work.

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