

Powerful Men, Failing Upwards: The Aid Industry and the 'Me Too' Movement

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Abstract

In 2018, the global #MeToo movement turned its attention to the aid industry, after scandals at Oxfam and Save the Children highlighted the sexual harassment, abuse and assault prevalent in the sector. This article explores #MeToo in the context of the aid industry (informally known by many participants as #AidToo), particularly within a British context. The article argues that the aid industry exists in a historical, social and political space that is particularly volatile. The abusive behaviour of men in the sector is shaped and enabled by race, class and gender inequalities, which undermine many of the stated aims of international aid programmes. The humanitarian and development aid sector will not eradicate this behaviour until it recognises how it is enabled and encouraged by these inequalities. The article argues that the aid sector needs to develop an ethical code of conduct around sexual relationships, harassment and abuse that recognises power inequalities within the sector and seeks to protect vulnerable individuals.

Keywords: aid, patriarchy, aidtoo, abuse, feminism, Oxfam, Save the Children

Me Too, Aid Too

The 'Me Too' movement was started in 2006 by Tarana Burke, who used the phrase to describe her internal, silent response to a thirteen-year-old girl who had come to her with a story of sexual assault (Garcia, 2017). Burke encouraged women to stand in solidarity against the pervasiveness of sexual assault, abuse and harassment in patriarchal culture, and to show victims that they were not alone. In October 2016, the actress Alyssa Milano created a twitter hashtag, #MeToo, to encourage women to respond to the accusations against Harvey Weinstein by sharing their own experiences of assault and abuse (Khomami, 2017). Since the Weinstein accusations – and through his trial and subsequent conviction – journalists, academics, politicians and activists have spoken of a MeToo moment, as women across many different sectors vocalise their experiences of sexual assault, abuse and harassment at the hands of powerful men, and how these experiences have historically been covered up or denied. This has led to individual men making apologies for past behaviour, and organisations committing themselves publicly to a lack of tolerance for this behaviour in the future, and countless more women speaking up only to have their experiences and their histories dragged open and pored over to achieve little tangible change.

This article explores #MeToo in the context of the aid industry (characterised by many participants as #Aid-Too), with a focus on British organisations. I argue that the aid industry exists in a historical, social and political space that is particularly volatile when it comes to sexual abuse, harassment and assault. The power hierarchies of the industry make it difficult to call out this abuse and easy to cover it up – powerful men are protected by their image as humanitarian saviours and enabled by organisations that rely on public goodwill for funding and support. Moreover, the particular racial and gendered dynamics of the aid industry mean that some groups are more at risk of abuse and less likely to be believed if they try to speak out. Women of colour working within organisations, women in the global south (including both recipients of aid and women working on-the-ground in international non-governmental organisations [INGOs] and local partner organisations), and especially recipient women who have been associated with sex work are all vulnerable to abuse. All women, in short, are at risk in the aid and development sector whether they are working for INGOs or recipients of aid, in all areas of the aid industry, both in Britain and overseas; but some women are more vulnerable than others.

The aid industry's uncomfortable relationship with its own imperial past also enables this abusive environment.

This relationship has been explored as part of the new humanitarian history approach, which seeks both to set humanitarianism within a longer context of imperial and neocolonial histories, and to explore how these histories framed humanitarian and development action (Hilton *et al.*, 2018). This conversation has an importance beyond historiography – for example, in the increasing focus on the idea of a ‘white saviour complex’ among humanitarian actors, and the way that humanitarianism is impacted by racism and the associated prioritising of the desires of the global north (Lemma, 2018; Kagumire, 2018; Nabumira, 2018). Indeed, the public conversation around the 2018 Oxfam scandal on Twitter was shaped by Mary Beard, the Oxford classicist, musing that ‘I do wonder how hard it must be to sustain “civilised” values in a disaster zone’; after she was criticised for seemingly excusing the rape and abuse of women and girls in Haiti, she posted a picture of herself crying with the statement that ‘I am really not the nasty colonialist you say I am’ (Ramaswamy, 2018). Yet, as Priyamvada Gopal pointed out, the use of the term ‘civilised’ in the original statement implied that some global spaces are less ‘civilised’ than others, without interrogating the clearly colonial tensions at the heart of this assertion, and also that moral values ‘understandably disappear in spaces where people struggle with the worst things that can happen to human beings’ (Gopal, 2018). White women’s tears – and the affective response more broadly of the global north – have historically often shaped the actions of INGOs, in humanitarian emergencies, more effectively than the testimonies and lived experience of people of colour themselves.

Speaking Out and Being Silenced

This topic is difficult to write about: even when investigations are conducted and reports written, organisations still seek to control the narrative and hide as many details as possible. Writing reports about sexual harassment, abuse and assault is in fact a way to stop conversations about those topics; as Sara Ahmed says in her work on university statements of regret (in this case, about racism) and commitments to future action, these documents “work” precisely by not bringing about the effects that they name’ (Ahmed, 2006: 105). These reports are a performance of openness and honesty, that serve to elide the extent of the untruths and the stories being covered up. These organisations operate in a patriarchal society; it is not surprising that they seek to protect male protagonists of abuse over female victims, nor that the exposure of sexual abuse, harassment or assault should be thought about primarily as a problem for the organisation rather than a problem of the organisation.

The increasing corporatisation of the humanitarian aid sector, as INGOs have increasingly become what Wootliff and Deri characterised at the turn of the century as ‘the new super brands’, has also shaped the treatment of this issue (Wootliff and Deri, 2001). As INGOs are increasingly ‘super brands’, with global recognition and power, and budgets to match, it is unsurprising that their corporate instinct is to protect their ‘brand’ at all costs. This is compounded by the fact that INGOs gain their authority and agency not only through their perceived expertise – which might be very significant – but also through a sense that they are principled, or more simply morally ‘good’ organisations: ‘their claims to serve others underpin their legitimacy in the eyes of global audiences’ (Stroup and Wong, 2016: 138, 140). As Amanda Murdie has argued, the fact that some INGOs are unprincipled does not mean that all INGOs, or the aid sector itself, are without principles (Murdie, 2014: 239). Nevertheless, INGOs gain power from the projection of moral authority, not necessarily by actually abiding by those moral values; the threat of reputational risk might often mean that an organisation has more to gain from covering up a problem than by uncovering it effectively.

Given all of this context, it is unsurprising that sexual abuse, assault and harassment are seen as a problem that has to be dealt with as quickly and as secretly as possible, rather than as a cultural and systemic issue that has to be acknowledged, owned and brought to justice. This is made more likely when the perpetrators of this behaviour are themselves powerful or public figures. Alexia Pepper de Caires, who spoke out about a culture of abuse at Save the Children, has argued that many men are seen as ‘too well-connected’ to be properly held to account, even when accused of acts as serious as rape; many INGOs would prefer to help these men to ‘fail upwards’ into better jobs at different organisations, rather than to fire them or publicly shame them (Cooney, 2019).

Libel laws in Britain also make it difficult to write about the #MeToo movement: it is difficult to name perpetrators, even if they have been forced to resign, or to report on rumours or commonly-known accusations, because of the fear of litigation. Women in INGOs, as in other industries, rely on whisper networks to stay safe and avoid abusers, but these whisper networks are necessarily kept closed and quiet (Jaffe, 2018: 81). Faiza Shaheen, a former employee of the UK branch of Save the Children (SCUK) speaking in an interview on *BBC Daily Politics* in February 2018, said that many people at SCUK ‘knew about these rumours and for the most part, people knew them to be true’ which ‘made a lot of women feel unsafe, not just the ones who were directly assaulted’; in fact there was a culture of ‘predatory behaviour’ in which women had to work to ‘keep safe’ despite being in the majority in the organisation (Shaheen, 2018).

It may not be that much easier for historians to write about this, even with the benefit of distance in the archives; it is difficult to believe that many of these stories will make it into the archive unredacted, or with the necessary contextual information to be interpreted and analysed. As Emily Baughan and Juliano Fiori have shown with their work on Save the Children, INGOs construct and control narratives around their own histories, to justify the work that they are doing and to hide the politics of the positions that they occupy in contemporary society (Baughan and Fiori, 2015). An internal safeguarding report carried out by Oxfam concluded that there was ‘no evidence of an organisational attempt to cover up past failings’ (Oxfam, 2018). This may be true on a day-to-day institutional level, but it does not mean that these stories are easily brought into the open, or that they will survive the construction of the histories of these organisations.

There are other reasons, too, that these stories are often hard to uncover. Whistleblowers working in organisations to which they have a significant emotional attachment, or in sectors which they believe have a strong moral mission, find it hard to come forward and expose bad behaviour, because of the perceived risk of undermining that mission. As Faiza Shaheen said about her own experiences, ‘Save the Children do amazing work ... and you don’t want to go against that good work, but there is a cultural problem there’ (Shaheen, 2018). There is also a resistance to hearing these stories in organisations that believe themselves to be inherently ethical: as William Anderson, the first person to hold a dedicated safeguarding role at Oxfam, told a House of Commons Select Committee, there was an ‘institutional blindness’ around abuse because ‘Oxfam was OXFAM and the belief was that that sort of thing was unlikely to happen in such a moral, professional organisation’ (Anderson, 2017).

Many whistleblowers are only able to justify speaking out by arguing that the behaviour they are exposing is undermining and corrupting the mission that they are working towards. Women like Alexia Pepper de Caires at Save the Children made an ‘informed decision’ to speak out about their experiences of harassment and abuse, in a lonely and demoralising process, because they believed that an ‘environment in which men mistreat women at any level will never beget a development programme where the poorest women are empowered’. Although these women believed that it was ‘morally wrong’ for anti-aid campaigners to twist their stories ‘to argue that aid should be scrapped or charities abolished’, they were also angry that NGOs’ responses to these accusations often used their moral mission to tell women ‘to be quiet’ about their experiences (Phillips, 2018).

This anxiety among whistleblowers about being able to control the narrative is amplified by a wider anti-aid

British political agenda. Historically, the Conservative Party has seen overseas aid spending merely as part of Britain’s foreign policy; the agency in charge of aid has been repeatedly rolled up into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office under Conservative governments, and this was floated as a potential policy in the 2019 election, before being enacted by Boris Johnson in June 2020 (Riley, 2017, 2019). Further to the right, UKIP has frequently campaigned on removing the aid budget altogether (Riley, 2015). Meanwhile, right-wing UK newspapers, notably the *Daily Mail*, but also the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sun* among others, share an editorial line that is sceptical of both government aid spending and INGO fundraising and spending (vanHeerde-Hudson, 2014; Scott, 2017; Anders, 2018). In fact, the women involved in the Save the Children stories of 2018 had originally tried to approach the *Guardian*, but the paper had essentially declined to run the story ‘after some weighing of pros and cons’. Instead, they had been forced to approach newspapers with a pronounced anti-aid agenda to get their story reported, knowing that this would affect the way that their message was communicated (Francis, 2018).

In this context, it is understandable that INGO workers might be anxious about further undermining the reputation of the aid sector by reporting these abuses, given the seemingly low chance that their abuser will actually be brought to justice. It is unsurprising – although unacceptable – that INGOs themselves might conclude that covering up these scandals is the correct course of action to protect themselves as organisations and the aid industry more broadly. In fact, when the 2018 Oxfam story initially broke, Mark Goldring, the Chief Executive of Oxfam GB, claimed that reports of sexual abuse in Haiti were exaggerated and motivated by an ‘anti-aid agenda’: ‘What did we do? We murdered babies in their cots? Certainly, the scale and the intensity feels out of proportion’ (Aitkenhead, 2018). In contrast, Winnie Byanyima, the head of Oxfam International, warned that what had happened in Haiti was ‘a stain on Oxfam that will shame us for years’ (*Guardian*, 2018). It is not that everyone within NGOs refuses to accept that this problem exists or its potential severity, but Goldring’s comments demonstrate a tendency among white, male, middle-class figures who are senior in these organisations – who are unlikely themselves to be the target of sexual harassment, abuse or intimidation – to downplay the risk of this occurring and to respond to accusations slowly and reluctantly.

British NGOs and MeToo

The Oxfam scandal provides a clear case study for how this behaviour might manifest itself and how institutional responses often fail. In February 2018, a series of

allegations surfaced about the behaviour of Oxfam employees in Haiti during the 2010 earthquake. *The Times* broke the story, reporting bullying, sexual misconduct, the downloading of pornography and intimidation of more junior staff (O'Neill, 2018a). There were widespread reports that staff had paid sex workers, many of whom might have been underaged, and that local Haitian aid recipients had been encouraged to exchange sex in return for food; the accusation that received the most coverage was that Oxfam officials had hired Haitian sex workers for 'orgies' that took place in a house funded by the charity (O'Neill, 2018b). Oxfam had dealt with this crisis by trying to make it go away, mainly by allowing the key actors – three men – to quietly resign, sacking another four men for gross misconduct, and hoping that the story would go unnoticed.

The three men who were allowed to resign from Oxfam included Roland Van Hauwermeiren, the Belgium country chief, who had been paying women for sex at a villa paid for by Oxfam. Van Hauwermeiren was allowed to resign because of the 'potentially serious implications' for 'the programme, affiliate relationships and the rest of the investigation if he were to be dismissed on these charges' (Oxfam, 2011). Two days after the initial story broke, the charity faced further accusations that Oxfam employees had paid sex workers in Chad, in 2006, when Van Hauwermeiren had been in charge of operations in that country. It then emerged that he had agreed to resign from Merlin, the healthcare INGO, in 2004, after accusations that he and other men had been employing sex workers in Liberia; in this instance, four men were asked to resign, and one was asked to apologise, but was allowed to keep his job (Parker, 2018). The woman who had raised these concerns, Amira Malik Miller, had been subsequently working for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) when she saw Van Hauwermeiren's name listed as the Oxfam country director in Chad; she had raised concerns both with Oxfam and with SIDA, who were an Oxfam funder, but these had been ignored (Ratcliffe, 2018). Astonishingly, Oxfam, when confronted with this, argued that 'the sheer numbers of NGOs operating meant that it was not possible to prevent those found guilty of exploitation from finding jobs elsewhere', although the chair of Oxfam GB's council of trustees also said that the organisation 'must and will learn from it and use it as a spur to improvement' (Ratcliffe, 2018). After Van Hauwermeiren had been allowed to resign from Oxfam, he had moved to a new position working for Action Against Hunger (Action Contre La Faim/AAH) as Country Director in Bangladesh from 2012 to 2014; a statement from AAH in 2018 said that the charity had 'received no information regarding any inappropriate or

unethical behaviour by Roland van Hauwermeiren while he was with Oxfam in Haiti, or any warning on the risks of employing him' (AAH, 2018).

The Charity Commission, the British regulatory body that oversees charitable organisations, launched an inquiry and issued an official warning to Oxfam on 7 June 2019, which stated that they had failed to 'take appropriate decisions during 2015–17 in relation to safeguarding', to adequately monitor or provide assurance regarding safeguarding risks, or to handle staff misconduct adequately. This had exposed the charity 'to scrutiny and adverse criticism about its handling of events, damaging public trust in it' (Charity Commission, 2019). Oxfam commissioned its own independent safeguarding review, focusing on 146 cases between 2011 and 2015 that had been assessed as requiring a serious incident report. The 'most common allegations contained a sexual element'; the vast majority of victims were female and the majority of subjects of concern were male. Fifty-one of the victims were members of Oxfam staff, with 16 beneficiaries of aid; in 27 incidents, the victim was under 18 years old. The review concluded that the charity's safeguarding arrangements had 'historically been inadequate' and that there was not a 'consistent delivery of basic standards', with the management of some cases possibly having 'exposed people to an unnecessary risk of harm' (Oxfam, 2018).

These problems go beyond Oxfam. Save the Children had its own problems, although rather than happening in the field, the abuses at Save the Children were perpetrated within the centre of the organisation (Segal, 2018). Brendan Cox had left his role as director of policy in November 2015 amid accusations of sexual assault and more generalised inappropriate behaviour, including harassment, towards junior female colleagues. Cox had been suspended but had been allowed to resign while under investigation. Meanwhile, the CEO of Save the Children, Justin Forsyth, had been the subject of numerous complaints by women in the same period, including accusations of sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour towards more junior women (BBC News, 2018). Forsyth moved on from Save the Children in January 2016 to become Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF; he left UNICEF when the accusations came to light in February 2018, although in a statement maintained that this was not because of 'mistakes' he had made at Save the Children, which had been 'dealt with through a proper process many years ago', but to avoid 'damaging both Save the Children and UNICEF and our wider cause' (Sharman, 2018). In this way, his resignation was cast not as the admission of bad behaviour but as a further humanitarian act. An independent review uncovered an unhealthy workplace culture in the SCUK offices – there was a pronounced gender pay gap, 17 per cent of women reported

harassment, 26 per cent of women reported discrimination; there were also a number of reports of gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention in the workplace (Save the Children, 2018). In 2018, there had been 31 accusations of sexual abuse against Save the Children staff, ten of which had been reported to the police and civil authorities (Gillespie *et al.*, 2018).

Meanwhile, the ICRC completed an internal investigation in which it discovered that since 2015, twenty-one members of staff had either been fired for, or had resigned during an investigation into, paying for sexual services, which the ICRC Code of Conduct has forbidden, even in countries where this is legal, since 2006 (Daccord, 2018). The British Red Cross also admitted ‘a small number’ of sexual harassment or abuse cases in the UK (Gillespie *et al.*, 2018). This sits in a longer international context, including the controversies around UN peacekeeping forces, starting with Cambodia in 1993, encompassing Bosnia and Herzegovina, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, DRC and Haiti, which led to the UN concluding in 2013 that the biggest risk in peacekeeping missions is the threat of sexual abuse by peace keepers (Westendorf and Searle, 2017: 365–8). Research carried out by the Women’s Humanitarian Network and the NGO Report the Abuse (established to draw attention to sexual violence in the aid industry in 2015, but forced to close in 2017 due to lack of funding) found that ‘male colleagues within humanitarian aid agencies perpetrated the largest proportion of the reported sexual harassment and assault’ of female aid workers (Mazurana and Donnelly, 2017).

Conclusion

The House of Commons International Development Committee introduced their report into sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid industry by explaining that:

When we launched our inquiry, the primary focus was the sexual exploitation and abuse of the intended beneficiaries of aid... Within the aid sector, aid workers have reported sexual harassment and abuse ranging from unwanted sexual comments to rape. The victims and survivors are predominantly women, the perpetrators predominantly men. Most of the aid workers whose harassment and abuse cases have been brought to our attention are from donor countries: little is known about the experiences of locally-engaged aid workers in this context. (House of Commons International Development Committee, 2018)

This complexity is central to any understanding of the issue of sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation in the humanitarian and development aid sector. It is important to acknowledge the ways in which certain voices continue to be elided from this conversation – not just locally engaged aid workers, but the recipients of aid, who were

supposed to be at the heart of this investigation but whose direct testimonies are noticeably absent.

The case of Van Hauwermeiren hit the headlines because it was salacious and shocking, but it also illustrates the systemic nature of abuse within the aid sector. As a humanitarian actor, Van Hauwermeiren moved from Liberia, to Chad, to Haiti, to Bangladesh; from Merlin, to Oxfam, to AAH. This is not uncommon: the networks of humanitarian organisations working on overlapping causes in similar regions means that the number of employees, contractors, consultants and specialists moving between different NGOs is high. But it means that this behaviour is relatively easy to cover up – actors moving on from jobs or countries is not unusual – and that it must be treated as a problem endemic to the sector, not any one organisation or NGO.

Aid agencies and NGOs could do worse than to revisit the Red Cross principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality – and to examine how these relate to sexual misconduct, abuse, harassment and assault. These principles form an ethical code for the operation of NGOs on the ground. But there needs to be more work to think about how these principles apply to the realm of sexual abuse, harassment and assault. In particular, organisations and individuals should be aware of the inherent power imbalance between senior and junior members of staff, between donors and recipients, between aid workers and the people they are helping.

Aid operates in a world that is shaped by race, gender and class – by racism, patriarchy and inequality. But humanitarian actors should be held to high standards, because they derive their power from their claims to uphold higher values. The Charity Commission report into SCUK starts by saying that ‘[w]e trust in the selfless motive behind charity, a motive that encourages us to think about the needs and interests of others and not just ourselves’ (Charity Commission, 2020). But this assertion – these good intentions – cannot be allowed to stand in for critical analysis of the power imbalances in charities and NGOs that allow abuse to take place. As the House of Commons report made clear, a ‘reactive, cyclical approach, driven by concern for reputational management has not, and will never, bring about meaningful change’ (House of Commons International Development Committee, 2018). The humanitarian and development aid sector will not eradicate sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation until it recognises how and why these behaviours flourish in the sector in the first place.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Róisín Read for her patience and support in bringing this article to fruition and the other

editors at *JHA* for their helpful editorial suggestions; I would also like to thank Phil Child and David Hudson, with whom I discussed these issues at the ‘Responding to the Oxfam Scandal’ seminar at the University of Birmingham in May 2018. Additional thanks as always to Emily Baughan, who organised the Save the Children Centenary conference at LSE in April 2019 at which this work was first presented, and has been a continual sounding board for these ideas about patriarchy, gender and men who fail upwards.

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