

A (MORE) FEMINIST APPROACH TO PRINCIPLED HUMANITARIAN AID



Refugee families from Gambella refugee camp in Ethiopia walking home after spending the day working at the market. Petterik Wiggers/ Oxfam

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ABSTRACT

Historically, there has been very little discussion of feminism within the international humanitarian system. In recent years, some donor governments – such as Canada, Mexico and Germany – have adopted overtly feminist foreign policies¹ which have been applied to their strategies and guidance around humanitarian assistance. At the same time, aid actors have started to reconfigure their ways of working, visions, goals and conceptualizations of humanitarianism in the light of decolonization, anti-racism, local humanitarian leadership and gender justice in the aid system.

This discussion paper explores what a feminist approach to principled humanitarian aid might look like in practice, and what aid actors and the humanitarian system can do to bring it closer to reality. It intends to prompt discussion and debate. However, what this paper doesn't do is debate the existence and relevance of the humanitarian principles themselves, although they face continual challenges², not least of which is the question of whether they are a manifestation of a patriarchal and colonial system.

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THE PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE HUMANITARIAN WORK

The humanitarian principles exist to express an existing or aspirational norm that we should apply to our humanitarian work. The core of all humanitarian action is based on the four principles of humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality.³ Other sets of principles are layered upon these four, including the eleven feminist principles that underpin Oxfam's feminist approach.⁴

As well as creating norms, these principles reflect our perceptions and beliefs; guide how we work, behave, and make decisions; and determine the practical rules we follow. They are often enshrined in codes of conduct or technical guidance and can define an organization's humanitarian culture, identity and personality. They are therefore of immense use to humanitarians, particularly in planning strategies, and when making decisions or developing policies at points of crisis or in relation to a particular issue or dilemma.

Humanitarian principles work together as a set of interrelated concepts that may contradict or sit in tension with each other in real life situations, requiring us to give greater weight to one or another based on specific circumstances or factors.

However, these principles are not absolute values and need to be interpreted in a particular context – which can itself be a highly subjective process, one not immune to political influence. **Furthermore, humanitarian principles work together as a set of interrelated concepts that may contradict or sit in tension with each other in real life situations, requiring us to give greater weight to one or another based on specific circumstances or factors.** This balancing act informs how humanitarians negotiate for humanitarian space and define what – at that point in time and in that specific context – is not negotiable or constitutes a red line. Arguably, the notion of green lines – actions that a principled humanitarian actor must take to uphold the humanitarian principles – should also be incorporated or promoted as an alternative to red lines, one that is more consistent with a feminist approach.

A commitment to specific principles is a fundamental expression of the vision and values of an organization, which play a central role in defining its identity – both for members of that organization, and for how it is perceived externally. This goes beyond transactional concepts of branding and marketing and speaks to the moral power of a group of people coming together with a shared vision and desire to bring about change, however challenging it may be to do so.

Oxfam aims to uphold humanitarian principles in all its humanitarian responses, while simultaneously using a feminist approach characterized by eleven feminist principles. **The**

feminist lens adds depth and value to the practical interpretation of humanitarian principles, recognizing both pre-existing and new inequalities among those in need of protection and assistance, as well as their rights. It marks a shift away from seeing humanitarianism solely as a top-down enterprise of global actors. It requires the humanitarian system to acknowledge and critique its own problematic power dynamics and discriminatory practices, as well as cultural, economic and political influences, and to recognize and support the work of national and community-based humanitarian actors.

This paper examines the relationship between a feminist approach and humanitarian principles at an operational level.

The paper's feminist approach is intersectional, where race, gender, disability and other markers of identity overlap shaping the way in which individuals, groups and communities experience systems of privilege and oppression and how these systems also overlap establishing power structures and hierarchies. The approach is also anchored in antiracism as it acknowledges the systemic and structural nature of racism and its manifestation within the humanitarian architecture itself and the world it operated within. Racism has been constructed as the corner stone for colonialism and its impact remains pervasive to the present. Ultimately, by using a feminist framework, this paper is explicitly attempting to unpack power and the systems and structures that have shaped and burdened the humanitarian sector. Therefore, an intersectional and anti-racist feminist lens becomes necessary tool to challenge the status quo and address the longstanding contradictions and issues of our sector.

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OUR SHARED HUMANITY

Humanity is considered the fundamental humanitarian principle, and the source of the humanitarian imperative that ‘human suffering must be addressed wherever it may be found’⁵ in order to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings. The concept of our shared humanity embodies the value placed on all lives, and the need for humane behaviour towards one another, characterized by empathy, compassion, care and solidarity, as well as action and activism. It also recognizes the dignity of those we work with, and our accountability towards them.

This concept sits in diametric opposition to the dehumanization of specific individuals and groups of people. Dehumanization is recognized as the main driver of human rights abuses and mass atrocity crimes in which deliberate suffering is underpinned by systems, social norms, cultures and the belief that some humans have fewer rights than others and are less deserving of humane treatment. In mass atrocity situations, such as genocide, dehumanization is highly racialized and often has strongly gendered aspects and links to religious identities.⁶ **Similarly, colonialism, whose legacy remains embedded within the humanitarian system⁷, is rooted in the premise of difference: of the superiority of some human beings and the subjugation of others on the basis of race and nationality.⁸**

Human lives: Equal value in an unequal world

Although the principle of humanity places equal value on all human lives in theory, like all principles it is subjectively interpreted in specific contexts. The reality of humanitarian crises involves pre-existing inequalities relating to multiple intersecting aspects of identity, such as gender, race, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, (dis)ability and age. **This means that humanitarians work in spaces where some human lives are given more value than others – an inequality that is both structural and cultural, and deeply embedded in all aspects of life. The people most in need in times of crisis are often those whose rights are already unfulfilled, abused and disrespected.**

THE PEOPLE MOST IN NEED IN TIMES OF CRISIS ARE OFTEN THOSE WHOSE RIGHTS ARE ALREADY UNFULFILLED, ABUSED AND DISRESPECTED.

A feminist approach ensures that, in a highly unequal world, we place equal value on the lives of women, girls, and people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics, regardless of nationality, race and ethnicity. It requires us to understand structural, social and cultural power dynamics; to seek out those whose needs, capacities and resilience may not be visible due to their marginalization; and to understand how abuses of rights create and exacerbate vulnerability during crises. While humanitarianism is not necessarily designed to deliver comprehensive solutions and resolve conflicts, it can support feminist goals of transformational power shifts – including at critical junctures such as humanitarian crises.

These inequalities and patriarchal power dynamics are also present within the global humanitarian sector that will always – to an extent – reflect the unequal and discriminatory world in which it was established. A hierarchical, patriarchal and colonial system cannot effectively work to address and overturn external discrimination and abuses of power until it also changes itself.⁹ **We must consciously tackle the inequalities and discrimination within the humanitarian system, and the first step is acknowledging that alongside the commitment, innovation, care, and bravery of humanitarianism, prejudice, inequality and discrimination also exist.**¹⁰

Addressing long-term inequalities and facilitating social change has traditionally been seen as out of the scope of humanitarian action, where short-term needs – especially those judged as life-saving – have been the primary determinant of how assistance is prioritized. But all people have human rights – including those experiencing humanitarian crises. A rights-based approach seeks to address inequalities relating to women’s rights¹¹, the rights of people with disabilities¹² and racial discrimination¹³. **Addressing immediate needs while supporting longer-term rights is entirely consistent with the ethos of our shared humanity, and in fact is the only way to truly uphold the principle.**

The humanitarian system still does not adequately take into account these pre-existing inequalities and struggles to understand and meet the needs of those who are marginalized due to ethnicity, race, gender, age and (dis)ability.¹⁴ For example, the specific needs of women and girls, such as those relating to sexual and reproductive health, are still not adequately acknowledged or addressed¹⁵ despite decades of initiatives and lobbying.

Box 1: Oxfam International feminist principles

Oxfam International Feminist Principles

1. Power sharing
2. The personal is political
3. Feminism is a local-global movement
4. Nothing about us without us
5. Engage whole communities, including men and boys
6. There is no justice without gender justice
7. Diversity and inclusion
8. Safety
9. Care and solidarity
10. Development as freedom
11. Elimination of all forms of gender-based violence

The feminist principles of equality, diversity, inclusion and working towards gender justice strengthen existing efforts by humanitarians to take inequality into account when preventing and alleviating suffering, as well as supporting the capacity of national, local and community actors. They can also inspire humanitarians to actively make sure their responses, and the humanitarian system, contribute towards ending the inequality and injustice which lie at the root of many conflicts and disasters.

This is in line with the Code of Conduct,¹⁶ which states that ‘aid must strive to reduce future vulnerability to disaster.’

The humanitarian imperative

The principle of humanity is also the source of the humanitarian imperative: ‘the right to receive humanitarian assistance’ and to ‘provide assistance wherever it is needed’.

¹⁷Inherent in this imperative – and concepts of humanitarian space – is a sense of urgency and the need for ‘accesses. This is predominantly understood as international humanitarian access to people in need (with less emphasis on people in need’s access to humanitarian assistance). **As a result, the narrative primarily frames international humanitarian actors as the central protagonist – and often as the ‘hero’ of the story. In doing so, it risks neglecting the work and positioning of local, community and national actors,**¹⁸ despite 93% of humanitarian staff being nationals of the country where they work.¹⁹ Survivor-led and community-led responses are often perceived as existing outside of the humanitarian system – primarily because conventional data and evaluation systems ²⁰struggle to capture and quantify these humanitarian actions, impacting the level of recognition and support for their work.²¹

Feminist humanitarianism is a local to global movement, not solely the remit of outsiders to deliver driven by their ‘right to offer assistance’, as concerns about ‘white saviourism’ have highlighted. **International aid actors do not have the prerogative over ‘humane behaviour’ towards those in need and feminist humanitarianism recognizes the need to understand privilege and power dynamics and hierarchies as they play out within the humanitarian system.**

This imbalance means that some forms of humanitarian response themselves may interplay with inequality and discrimination in a manner that reinforces rather than redresses. For example, the use of digital tools which may exclude large swathes of a population in crisis, or of biometric systems that entrench racial and gender biases.²² Conversely, the use of cash and voucher programming modalities may enable more relevant and appropriate aid and give greater dignity to people who are otherwise marginalized and excluded.²³

Although gender inequality and other types of discrimination significantly increase the vulnerability of marginalized groups both to and in crises, as well as their ability to recover, historically the emphasis has been on saving as many lives as possible, as quickly as possible. At times, this has resulted in a prioritization of the most visible and easiest to reach people, not necessarily those most in need of life-saving assistance, who may be harder to reach, or require complex or costly support. Timeliness is undoubtedly a critical factor in humanitarian responses, in protecting people in imminent danger, and in meeting lifesaving or life-sustaining needs such as provision of water, food, medical care and shelter, but it has at times been misappropriated as a get-out clause for neglecting the impact of inequality and discrimination in crisis situations. Certain types of humanitarian work, including those relating to gender, gender-based violence (GBV) and protection, are not always recognized as lifesaving despite reducing risks from unexploded ordinance, detention, torture, sexual violence and other clearly life-threatening issues.

Shifts towards a more nuanced understanding of vulnerability have only taken place relatively recently, and there remains little recognition of the capacity and agency of the most marginalized people, even though their survival has often depended on their own efforts, innovation, courage and tenacity in the face of tremendous challenges.

Humanitarians must ensure that the lives of women; girls; people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression; and other marginalized people are given equal value to other human lives – the core of the principle of humanity.

To do so, the types of violence and suffering that disproportionately affect women and girls – especially those from marginalised ethnic or racialised communities, or with disabilities – such as **gender-based violence (GBV), must also be recognized as life-threatening and in need of immediate action. This must be the case even if less visible than other forms of suffering, even where it is tolerated, and even where social and cultural norms place blame upon survivors, rather than perpetrators.**²⁴ Eliminating GBV in all its forms is a core part of an intersectional feminist approach. We must balance the need to acknowledge how patriarchal systems create threats and vulnerabilities, and how inequality and discrimination disproportionately affect some women and girls, with a recognition of the capacity and agency of those same women and girls.

IMPARTIALITY: WHOSE NEEDS COUNT?

Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions based on nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.²⁵ When there are inadequate resources, those suffering most must be helped first, and aid provided proportionate to needs. However, defining what is a legitimate need is a subjective act, as is prioritizing those needs and deciding how they are best met. Humanitarians must place equal value on all human life while accounting for the vast inequalities that drive much human suffering and operating within a system that reflects the discriminatory and unequal world in which it exists.

Challenges to impartiality include where (both international and national) humanitarian actors can only access areas that are under the control of a specific authority (state or non-state). This may also affect perceptions of their independence and/or neutrality. However, some national organizations will choose to focus on or prioritize groups whom they feel are most in need, or that they are best placed to assist, such as women, young people, pastoralists or children. Some national organizations may represent and support particular ethnic groups (such as Roma people), and others may consider their humanitarian action an act of solidarity with an oppressed or marginalized group, including where this effectively aligns them to a political position or conflict actor.

Box 2: Global impartiality^{26 27}

Global Impartiality

While few organizations outside of the UN system have a global reach, and will therefore need to consider true global impartiality, most international humanitarian actors work in multiple countries and regions. By comparing their global portfolio against humanitarian needs, they can assess their impartiality across all operations, as well as identify and acknowledge what other factors, pressures and influences determine their presence and ability to respond impartially to all human need.

Impartiality among those in humanitarian need at regional, national or sub-national level is more relevant to many humanitarians. Collectively, the humanitarian system identifies global priorities through the Global Humanitarian Overview. The Inform Severity Index is more nuanced and responsive, but all systems are vulnerable to influence and instrumentalization, especially where political actors control or manipulate assessments of needs.

Where organisations operate in a limited geographical area (as do many local humanitarian actors in an inclusive local to global humanitarian system) or have a particular specialism such as child protection, they will seek to be impartial within the bounds of their area of operation or organisational mandate. **The humanitarian system, as a whole, must ensure that a collective humanitarian effort can maintain impartiality across all people in need in any particular crisis, and globally despite the multiple counterforces.**

In highly patriarchal societies, an objective assessment of needs can be challenging. It requires diverse humanitarian capacity and access to generate evidence, upon which decisions will be made that may well be life-changing for those affected. Similarly, reaching people who may be the most vulnerable in a humanitarian crisis due to their social exclusion and/or discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, race, gender, (dis)ability or age – given that they are often already marginalized and discriminated against – requires special efforts and great care. In some cases of human rights abuses and mass atrocity, their lack of visibility may be a self-protective mechanism. Nobody is inherently vulnerable to crisis; they are made vulnerable.

It is widely recognized that understanding the needs of a diverse group of people is best done by organizations that are themselves diverse.²⁸ Gender and race are two important factors that shape the needs of people and their experience of systemic inequality. Practically, female staff of the same racial, ethnic, or community groups are better positioned to fully assess the understand the needs of women and girls of that community and the best ways to meet those needs taking into account that the manner in which they receive assistance, and protection must ensure their safety and dignity.²⁹ There is ample evidence that **humanitarian responses have not always met the needs of women, girls, disabled people and older people due to a lack of adequate understanding of their needs by a system in which they remain an underrepresented minority** and are unlikely to hold decision-making and leadership positions.³⁰ In some contexts, restrictions on the ability of female staff to work and requirements for a male family member (mahram)³¹ to accompany them creates very specific challenges³², but the majority of barriers that prevent women from being active members of a humanitarian workforce and progressing in their careers are internal. Requirements such as the ability to work part time, access to affordable childcare, flexible hours, safe work environments and sanitation facilities to manage menstruation are often not in place, and there is considerable pushback on making humanitarian work environments enabling for women, especially in the first phase of a response.

Empathy is fundamental to our shared humanity and recognition of suffering and need, but it is also subject to bias and prejudice when those in control of humanitarian action, or able to influence it – including the public constituencies of aid actors – identify and empathize more strongly with some crisis-affected people over others. The exercise of our humanity, first and foremost, requires us to recognize and empathize with those who are suffering.³³ As humans often feel empathy to those closest and most similar to themselves, **the humanitarian system must counter bias and prejudice relating to gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexuality and religion by ensuring it is truly diverse and inclusive, representative of the people it exists to assist, and has structural checks and balances to ensure impartiality** and alignment with feminist principles. It must recognize the capacity and agency of all people affected by the crisis – seeing beyond their vulnerability to the full potential and richness of their lives now and in the future.

Understanding needs

How aid is targeted is a significant issue for communities experiencing crisis, with concerns about the cultural premise that underpins decision-making, and equity in the system³⁴, at a time when the gap between what communities in crisis want from the humanitarian system and what they actually receive is widening.³⁵

Objectively assessing needs and prioritizing which human lives are most in need of assistance and protection is often done through targeting based on specific criteria. Typically, criteria might include female or child-headed households; pregnancy or breastfeeding; very young or old age; and disability as vulnerability factors. By actively involving diverse members of affected communities, targeting criteria can be nuanced, taking into account existing cultural or ethnic factors or community mechanisms such as the practice of sharing food, gendered roles and ethnic diversity. A feminist approach emphasizes an understanding of intersectional identities in determining vulnerability and suffering, as well as the need for participation and the principle of 'nothing about us without us' – acknowledging the agency of those people affected, and their existing or potential capacity to shape and deliver a humanitarian response that is appropriate and relevant.

Community engagement and community-based and community-led humanitarian work all speak to this principle. They help humanitarians be more objective in how they understand needs and prioritize assistance, as well as how to work with – or at least not undermine – existing and Indigenous support and crisis-response systems, which may factor in issues such as sharing, equality and managing inter-tribal relationships and social cohesion. There is also the need for continuous examination of the inherent power imbalances and systemic inequalities that characterise the global humanitarian system and deepens this gap. Feminism requires us to break down the structures and systems that reproduce patriarchy, and then rebuild them to ensure equality and equality.

A feminist approach means that humanitarian assistance not only responds to needs, but also supports the realization and fulfilment of rights. There is a growing recognition of the protection needs of people in crisis situations, which is indicative of the increasing acceptance of rights-based humanitarianism.³⁶ The definition of what constitutes a legitimate humanitarian need, and who has such a need, is an act at risk of political manipulation. This political manipulation may include the deliberate creation of humanitarian needs to achieve a political goal, including the use of starvation as a weapon of war.³⁷ These independent assessments of needs cannot be divorced from (individual and collective) rights – including the right to self-determination – and must take place within a politically astute contextual analysis to avoid humanitarians becoming unwittingly complicit in an erosion of rights. The principle of independence is discussed in more detail below.

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An overly simplistic conception of impartiality can easily lead to generic assumptions about need based on stereotypes about the inherent vulnerability of some people, such as a blanket targeting of women and girls. The targeting of female-headed households

inherently recognizes that in a patriarchal system a male head of household is of great value, and households without one are more vulnerable. Yet the humanitarian system often fails to recognize the positive role some men play, and risks perpetuating stereotypes, both of feckless men and of vulnerable women lacking in agency. There are inherent risks in such gender stereotypes as they can lead to homogenization and further render marginalised and minority groups invisible. People in crises, their families and their communities are diverse, and patriarchal systems also harm men and boys. This is especially true in conflicts where hyper-aggressive masculinity is prized and men and boys who do not confirm to this, including members of sexual and gender minorities, are subject to deliberate and targeted violence. Engaging with men and masculinities, understanding their needs and providing assistance and protection to them is an important feminist principle. It often requires concerted efforts to hear the unheard voices and tell the untold stories. Examples include research on how the queer community was impacted by the Beirut blast³⁸, or how masculinity is constructed in highly militarized and patriarchal contexts, such as Iraq, and the consequent impacts on women and girls.³⁹

While humanity and impartiality are often described as ethical principles, independence and neutrality are generally considered operational or instrumental principles, outlining the means by which the end goal – of impartially addressing human suffering – is met. They are considered necessary to create humanitarian space and enable access to civilians in need regardless of their political affiliation or identity, although in some complex contexts they can be perceived as a hinderance to saving lives.⁴⁰

However, these principles are much more than a means to an end: their enactment builds the identity, reputation and character of humanitarian organizations, both for those within the organization and how it is perceived externally. There is tremendous power in the act of holding out a hand to help one's enemies as well as one's friends, as Oxfam did during the Second World War in its controversial campaign for support to civilians in enemy-occupied Greece, and after the war to German civilians – acts integral to the ethos and character of Oxfam as an organization.

INDEPENDENT HUMANITARIAN ACTION

The principle of independence requires that humanitarian action be 'autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented'.⁴¹ The logic lies in the theory that, by ensuring independence, humanitarian assistance will be perceived as an apolitical act, creating the space for humanitarian action.

Humanitarians usually operate with the consent or permission of the relevant authorities⁴², managed through processes such as registration and relevant national legislation and policies.⁴³ National authorities have both a responsibility to ensure civilians on their territory can access aid (either by providing it directly themselves or enabling it by not impeding impartial humanitarian actors) and a responsibility to oversee the actions of foreign and national humanitarian organizations, many of which will work in some of the most politically sensitive areas, such as conflict zones. **A feminist approach is fundamentally about power: the way that humanitarians engage with state and non-state power and structural power systems, as well as how they use – and share – their own power.**

Principled humanitarian decision-making also requires an understanding of the consequences of decisions, including the longer-term impacts of what is compromised and for whom. The sharing of people's data, for example, is something humanitarian agencies have power over, yet the longer-term effects will be felt by the individuals whose data are shared, who may not – even if they give consent at a particular point in time – have access to the full information and knowledge about how that may impact them in future. Such decisions can also create a precedent that affects all humanitarian actors and proves difficult to reverse in future.

Relations with governments and military actors

In practice, humanitarian action takes place within highly complex contexts where both local political issues and geopolitical influences play out, meaning humanitarian actors and the donors that fund them are frequently perceived as political. Over recent years, concerns about the increasing political control over aid have escalated, with government-imposed restrictions being the greatest concern⁴⁴ and humanitarians perceived as compromising their principles in return for access. In a steady trend since the Government of Sudan expelled 13 humanitarian agencies in 2008, and the Government of Sri Lanka imposed strong restrictions in the final days of its conflict with the LTTE in 2009, governments have taken an increasingly strong-handed approach to managing humanitarian actors and civil society. More recently, the State of the Humanitarian System report in 2022 found that some restrictive governments are tactically 'co-opting decolonisation and localisation narratives to close down humanitarian space'.⁴⁵

Bureaucratic impediments⁴⁶ – the collection of practical tactics, processes and rules used to exercise unnecessary control or politically instrumentalize humanitarian actors and action – have increased exponentially over the last decade, including being used to control aid as a reward or punishment for communities based on their affiliations, and to

enable involuntary returns or facilitate a population's movements. These constitute a direct challenge to the independence of humanitarian actors; their ability to carry out basic functions such as recruit staff, open bank accounts and move internally; and critical actions that strategically determine a humanitarian response, such as needs assessments or speaking directly to people affected by a crisis. Certain types of humanitarian action that are considered fundamental to a feminist approach may be more vulnerable to such impediments, such as protection work that focuses on upholding rights, support on women's rights and for survivors of gender-based violence, and advocacy and campaigning, particularly relating to breaches of international humanitarian law by parties to the conflict.

Highly militarized contexts

The spaces where humanitarians work is often highly militarized. This may include the presence of parties to the conflict, including non-state armed actors, who exercise a degree of control over humanitarian action; the direct or indirect presence of third-party military actors, including peacekeepers and foreign military forces; and areas under states of emergency, with measures such as control of movement enforced by military actors, martial law (e.g. in Ukraine) or military rule (e.g. in Myanmar). In many such contexts, gangs, organized criminal groups and private enterprises may also exercise control over territory (e.g. in Haiti) and civilian populations and may have close links with military and political forces. These powerful entities may carry out what they describe as humanitarian work themselves, sometimes as part of their control over a population. Such highly militarized contexts often become extremely hostile spaces for women, girls and LGBTQIA+ people, sometimes as a deliberate and conscious strategy. Highly racialized processes – such as the externalization of migration management – themselves create humanitarian needs, with women and girls frequently disproportionately affected, especially those from ethnically marginalized groups.

The independence of humanitarian actors in militarized contexts is both critically important and an extremely challenging balancing act.

The independence of humanitarian actors in militarized contexts is both critically important and an extremely challenging balancing act. Firstly, militarization may have impacts for how local, national and international humanitarian actors work together. Under a state of emergency or martial law, additional controls may be placed upon civil society actors, particularly those who aim to hold duty bearers to account for their actions, receive foreign funding or engage foreign personnel. This may include limiting the activities of, or closing, civil society organizations (CSOs); vetting and additional reporting or evidence of the nature of activities; investigation of links to foreign individuals or entities; surveillance by intelligence services; and a suspension of approvals or authority for the work of certain organizations.

Applying a feminist approach to working in heavily militarized contexts – such as Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan – can also be extremely challenging. Militarized contexts are characterized by authority, domination and control; violence is accepted or even valued; there is a proliferation of arms; hyper-masculinity is idealized, and toxic masculinity normalized and celebrated; stereotypes of femininity are constructed; and power is

concentrated among men and male-led hierarchical and control-driven structures. Working on women's rights issues is often challenged by state and non-state authorities adhering to traditional patriarchal norms. The goals of women's rights organizations and groups representing marginalized people may be seen as lesser or unnecessary priorities at a point in which they are perhaps more relevant than ever, and organizations representing and supporting people who do not confirm to stereotypical ideals of masculinity may come under direct threat. Other **humanitarian activities that focus on upholding the rights of marginalized groups, or those perceived as taking a particular political stance, may not be accepted as humanitarian and effectively blocked.** For example, facilities, equipment and enabling aids for disabled people may be redirected to support injured servicepeople; shelters for GBV survivors may be repurposed to house displaced people or military personnel; GBV services may be closed and medically trained staff relocated to support military hospitals.

Some political and conflict actors, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, have policies that overtly sit in opposition to a feminist approach. The ability of humanitarian actors to assert some independence while being able to operate in a country now under Taliban control has been constrained, and they report unreasonable interference in their operations from the Taliban authorities, including the closure of GBV services and shelters for survivors and reduced support for women's rights organizations.⁴⁷ Humanitarian actors have had to develop strategies for managing such interference, balancing the need for access with the compromises demanded in return for that access, all in the face of extreme humanitarian need – in 2021, more than half the Afghan population was affected by acute food insecurity,⁴⁸ with women and girls having severely limited access to basic needs such as food and health care.⁴⁹

Conversely, civil society organizations and NGOs that work in support of military goals may experience preferential treatment, waived registration fees, fast-tracked registration processes, tax benefits, and the relaxation of certain controls such as financial auditing and criminal record vetting of leadership staff. The idea that humanitarian organizations can work in a partisan manner in solidarity with a side in a conflict – a type of resistance humanitarianism – has most recently been raised in relation to Ukraine, with some predicting the Ukrainian humanitarian response will force a significant change in the humanitarian system in this respect.⁵⁰ Certainly, this form of resistance and social activism is consistent with a feminist approach that includes explicitly challenging structural injustice and discrimination; however, whether it is accepted within the scope of what is considered humanitarian action may be debated.

Negotiation with authorities in power – whether they be internationally recognized governments or de-facto authorities – puts both humanitarian and feminist principles to the test and requires humanitarian actors to make decisions that will have knock-on impacts for people suffering the impacts of conflict and crisis. **At times, humanitarian actors may need to weigh options that provide immediate life-saving aid and thus meet the basic purpose of humanitarian assistance – to save lives and alleviate unnecessary suffering – against the need to work in a manner that upholds human rights and reduces vulnerability to further suffering over the longer term.**

'Counterterrorism' measures

Evidence seems to indicate that populations under the control of non-state armed actors are less well served by humanitarian actors for several reasons, one of which is the

impact of what are described as counter-terrorism measures and sanctions.⁵¹ Inadvertent and/or deliberate harm caused by counter-terrorism measures are considered one of the most serious legal and financial risks to humanitarian actors and can result in entire communities or geographical areas losing access to humanitarian assistance. In 2022, the UN Human Rights Council identified the very high risk of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion and political opinion in the enactment of counter-terrorism measures, as well as the way in which such measures have been used as reprisal against human rights defenders and civil society organizations, or to target specific religious and ethnic groups.⁵²

The culture and implementation of such measures can implicitly – and explicitly – determine who is considered a worthy recipient of aid.⁵³ They not only mean international humanitarians avoid working in areas deemed at high risk for terrorist activities but reduce access to funding for national and community humanitarian actors in these areas.⁵⁴ These measures are also instrumentalized by some sub-national authorities to apply further politicized controls on local civil society actors, many of whom in times of crisis are important sources of humanitarian support to their communities. Counter-terrorism measures are also believed to have a disproportionate impact on women's rights organizations, due to the nature of their work in promoting long-term social change and challenging patriarchal authorities and power structures; their financial vulnerability, lack of capacity to deal with complex compliance requirements, and reliance on foreign funding and networks; and the need for confidentiality in their service provision, especially for survivors of GBV.⁵⁵

Challenging unnecessary and discriminatory counter-terrorism measures that have a disproportionate impact on and wider repercussions for both the most vulnerable people and the organizations that support them, including by pushing for pragmatic solutions that protect those most in need of humanitarian assistance, is part of using a feminist approach. International humanitarian actors must not only invest in a better understanding of the impact of 'counterterrorism' measures such as bank de-risking, sanctions and the criminalization of humanitarian workers, but also build collective means to support and protect the least supported humanitarian actors⁵⁶, those operating at community, local and national levels.

Financial independence and the influence of donors

Funding acts as both an obstacle and an enabler of principled humanitarian action.⁵⁷ In 2022, just 1.2% of humanitarian funding went directly to national and local actors (almost half of which went to national and local governments).⁵⁸ Humanitarian funding has always been highly concentrated, both in terms of the main donors – until 2025 at least 50% of funding came from the five largest donors, with the US being the single largest donor – and in terms of the recipient agencies, with nearly half of all humanitarian funding going to three UN agencies (WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF).⁵⁹ This concentration in funding effectively concentrated power and influence over humanitarian action both globally and at the country/crisis level.⁶⁰ However, this changed in January 2025 when the US Government issued an executive order imposing a 90-day freeze on all US foreign development assistance. Multiple other donors – the UK, France and Germany among them - announced cuts in aid budgets triggering questions as to the validity and sustainability of the aid system.⁶¹

In a humanitarian system where power and resources are still overwhelmingly controlled by the Global North, this concentration can result in a racialized and discriminatory focus on crises closer to its interests and public constituencies. With several donors publicly stating that aid will be much more closely linked to national interests, this trend is likely to continue.⁶² Conversely, underfunding of other humanitarian crises, combined with the pressure to reach higher numbers of people, has reportedly driven a reduction in the quality of aid as agencies resort to cheaper options, such as the provision of less nutritious food.⁶³ It is well recognized that women and girls are disproportionately affected by food crises⁶⁴, and therefore by this reduction in the quality of food aid.

The political capture of aid funds – especially where there is no structural protection between departments managing aid budgets and those delivering on foreign policy and security goals – has led to some humanitarian actors declining funding on a crisis-specific basis, particularly where linked to a belligerent in a conflict⁶⁵ or where it is perceived as intrinsically linked to a policy, as in the case of MSF rejecting EU funding in 2016.⁶⁶ This can be a particularly stark and polarized discussion when humanitarian funding is granted to support women's needs, while the same government's defence resource provides support to the military action that is largely responsible for creating those needs.⁶⁷

The securitization of aid has seen a multiplication of funding channels that seek to build in or enhance the monitoring of specific populations deemed at risk of extremism. These funding sources are often available in otherwise resource-scarce environments, may target youth and women's rights organizations and may require individual data collection and transfer to donor governments under the guise of aid. The targeted and deliberate co-optation of women's rights activists and organizations under a security and intelligence agenda puts them at greater risk⁶⁸ and is an exercise in power and control by a larger political and security agenda.

It is hard to predict what the humanitarian system will look like after the seismic impacts of the 2025 US aid freeze, combined with an accelerating global trajectory towards reducing aid budgets, tying aid to national security interests, and rhetoric questioning the impact and legitimacy of aid. Perhaps most disturbing is the targeted attacks on aid programmes linked to gender, diversity and inclusion which threaten to erase hard won progress over the last decade.

Partnerships

In 2021, the humanitarian system was estimated to be composed of around 5,000 organizations, of whom 3,900 – 78% – were national or local NGOs.⁶⁹ A genuine partnership between organizations must be based on a shared vision and values, such as a belief in human rights and commitment to gender equality.⁷⁰ While much discussion among international humanitarian actors focuses on protecting their independence from political and economic interest, there is less emphasis on what independence means within the relationships between international humanitarian actors and the national and local organizations with whom they partner. Oxfam's partnership principles seek to balance a shared vision and values with autonomy and independence,⁷¹ although challenges do arise and need to be worked through in an open and transparent manner.

Independence – the power to choose and act for oneself – carries connotations of liberation, self-determination and autonomy, all core elements of the movement to decolonize aid.⁷² National and local NGOs may view their independence from INGOs and

the foreign powers that fund them as of greater importance than independence from their own state authorities.⁷³ Studies show that national humanitarian actors have concerns about how donors influence INGO decisions in the areas where they work; impartial needs assessments; and how aid is targeted and would like greater autonomy from INGO partners and more substantive involvement in such processes.⁷⁴

The relationships between international and national humanitarian actors are recognized as having been dominated by a partnership culture of sub-contracting, with current efforts – mobilized by the Charter for Change⁷⁵ – to shift to a more equitable and transformative model seen as slow and ineffective. Predictions that the COVID-19 crisis would accelerate transformative change have not materialized, with donors and funding mechanisms identified as obstacles.⁷⁶

Many humanitarian organizations have developed value-driven principles and approaches to partnership, but there remains an internal schism between the rhetoric of transformative partnership and how it operates in practice. International actors place a strong emphasis on compliance and risk in the underlying philosophy and culture of partnership processes, such as due diligence and risk management. Despite the increased costs of compliance and the bureaucratization of aid, which are passed down within partnership agreements – and particularly those relating to counter-terrorism measures which see national organizations operating where many INGOs are unwilling to – national and local NGOs do not receive adequate core funding to help them manage these costs and build the necessary capacity for managing compliance. Of particular concern – and within the power of INGOs – is the issue of sharing indirect cost recovery (ICR) funds, with criticisms that international humanitarian organizations are ‘low-balling’ their national partners.⁷⁷ This carries implications for the employment of women (for example in covering costs of maternity leave) and ultimately for their ability to be principled humanitarian actors.

Bureaucratic systems

The humanitarian enterprise has gone through a process of professionalization in recent years, aimed at improving the quality, efficiency and efficacy of humanitarian action. With this has come increased investment in systems, especially in the light of increasing compliance requirements –and controls– driven by donors requiring value for money; ‘counterterrorism’, anti-fraud and corruption controls; and so on – and to a lesser extent, quality-driven indicators such as the Core Humanitarian Standard.⁷⁸ Donors’ insistence on working with ‘professional’ INGOs has shifted aid delivery into being a technocratic system that prioritizes results and value for money over wider structural and transformational changes.⁷⁹

Furthermore, organizational systems, processes and cultures have invisible norms and values embedded within them. Humanitarian systems have been criticized for replicating and reinforcing colonial structures and mindsets⁸⁰ – a colonial wolf in the humanitarian sheep’s clothing, or a continuation of the colonial enterprise by other means.⁸¹ The gap between the power brokers of the humanitarian system and the people it exists to support is deeply ingrained and furthered by the increasing bureaucratization of the system. It can only be reduced by a sustained effort to retain the human connection, the direct and meaningful engagement of individuals and organizations, and to push back against aid’s tendency towards becoming a bureaucratic process and impersonal transaction. **There’s also the need for continuous examination of the inherent power imbalances and**

systemic inequalities that characterise the global humanitarian system and deepens this gap. Feminism requires us to break down and resist these structures and systems of power that reproduces patriarchy and coloniality and then rebuild them to ensure justice and equality.

Despite this shift, some governments are taking forward a 'localization of aid' agenda that is forcing the international humanitarian community to reassess how the humanitarian system works. Following the earthquake in Central Sulawesi in 2018, the Government of Indonesia prohibited direct aid delivery by international humanitarian actors. The response was coordinated by the Indonesian authorities and aid delivered through Indonesian organizations and institutions.⁸²

Whose decides on impact?


The technical approaches for designing aid responses are strongly based on 'theories of change', 'logical frameworks' and 'programme cycles'. Some of these tools were originally developed for military use and brought to the humanitarian sector to add extra rigour and upwards accountability.⁸³ These approaches are imbued with Western values and knowledge systems, with an emphasis on inputs and linear concepts of change⁸⁴, and heavily weighted towards the needs of donors, focusing on efficiency and effectiveness or value for money, a trend likely to gather pace in 2025 as multiple countries cut their foreign aid budgets.

As large humanitarian agencies and donors develop formulaic tools for programme management based on standard formats, pre-set objectives and indicators, it becomes easier for them to collect and analyse data about their work on dashboards or in graphs and charts, but arguably less clear as to what real impact they have had on the lives of people affected by crisis and conflict. Too often, the voices of the recipients of aid are silenced, especially the voices of women and girls and other people who are socially marginalized or harder to reach. This evaluation – of the impact aid has had on people's lives and the way they are affected and able to cope with crises – is perhaps the area where communities receiving humanitarian assistance are least empowered.

Recently, feminist approaches to monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning have proposed new ways to envisage what is considered evidence, how it is captured and who gives knowledge meaning and power.⁸⁵ The focus of a feminist approach is to explicitly shift the power balance while making all participants in such processes aware of, and able to reflect on, their own power and how they use it. The best people to judge whether a humanitarian response has adequately addressed their suffering is surely the affected people themselves – and not just their most vocal and prominent representatives, who themselves are often privileged power holders, but women, girls, children, elderly people and disabled people, as well as those who are discriminated against because of their race, ethnicity, caste, sexuality or gender identity. Given that such evaluations influence future allocations of funds, the types of responses and the way that aid is delivered, it seems absurd that the very people targeted by humanitarian aid are relatively voiceless in this process.

NEUTRALITY

Neutrality is one of the most hotly debated and contentious humanitarian principles. It has two interrelated components. First, what is often described as military neutrality, which requires humanitarian actors not to take sides with one conflict party over another – in practical terms, not to give material benefit or advantage that would further the interests of one or other conflict party. Material benefit might include direct assistance, ranging from food to military equipment and even weapons, but also allowing – or taking insufficient measures to prevent – the diversion of aid to military actors. It can also encompass other less tangible forms of benefit or advantage, such as making statements, providing information and engaging in communications that may give advantage to one conflict actor over another, or even having a presence in a certain location, which may be seen as giving some kind of legitimacy to one or other party to a conflict.



“THE HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLE OF ‘NEUTRALITY’ IS ONE OF THE MOST HOTLY DEBATED AND CONTENTIOUS PRINCIPLES.”

The second aspect of neutrality requires humanitarians to avoid engaging in political controversies. This is largely understood to be specifically in relation to the conflict, although defining what is a political controversy and what relates to a conflict is unclear and subject to geopolitical context. For example, engagement in issues of women’s rights may be perceived as a politically charged controversy in Afghanistan or Yemen, where Western powers and belligerents may have co-opted debates on women’s rights to justify military actions. As such, establishing what neutrality means in any specific context or moment in time is a difficult task. Neither the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief⁸⁶ (often referred to simply as the ‘Red Cross Code of Conduct’) nor the Humanitarian Charter in Sphere⁸⁷ specifically reference neutrality in the delivery of principled humanitarian assistance. The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS)’s⁸⁸ interpretation of neutrality does not prohibit rights-based advocacy.

Box 3: Oxfam and neutrality⁸⁹

Oxfam and Neutrality

Oxfam does not take sides in hostilities or align itself with political parties or parties to a conflict. Nevertheless, Oxfam does not claim to be a neutral organization: Oxfam is a humanitarian organization. The Oxford English Dictionary defines neutrality as 'The state of not supporting or helping either side in a conflict, disagreement, etc.', and to this extent Oxfam does behave in a neutral way. However, the formally accepted definition of neutrality in the context of humanitarian principles is different. As set out by OCHA, neutrality is defined as: 'Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature'. It is this second half of the definition that Oxfam cannot abide by and is why it is not a neutral organization. The most vulnerable people in any disaster are the least powerful and the poorest. As a rights-based organization, Oxfam believes that it is vital both to help people meet their immediate needs and to address the underlying causes of vulnerability.

In the global humanitarian system, it is believed that being perceived as neutral by duty bearers, such as governments, state and non-state armed actors, is essential to gain access to communities in crisis. This concept of what neutrality should achieve was originally developed in the context of inter-state conflicts, and where humanitarians aimed to work with those in need on both sides of an international armed conflict. This commitment to neutrality continues, although the majority of conflicts are intra-state and at times there have been calls for humanitarians to take sides, for example, in relation to Ukraine in 2022 following the full Russian invasion, when some parties had expectations that humanitarian efforts would support the military defence of Ukraine, and some humanitarian commentators even proposed a model of partisan 'side-taking' humanitarian action.⁹⁰

Even within humanitarian organizations, certain situations such as occupation or invasion raise concerns about being on the 'wrong side of history' and prompt a multitude of calls for a more solidarity-based humanitarian response. Where widespread and systematic human rights abuses take place, humanitarian organizations agonize over whether and how to speak out, and how to balance the imperative to speak truth to power with the idealistic notion of a neutrality that allows an organization to set itself apart from politics, despite the political roots of every humanitarian crisis.

Neutrality is largely a matter of perception, and in considering the perception of an organization as neutral, the distinction between the organization and the individual worker is unclear. In general, international workers are cautioned not to express partisan support in order to ensure perceptions of neutrality. For national staff, especially when their country is under attack, occupation or invasion, they must find a balance between their right to freedom of expression and their responsibility as visible representatives of their organization. **The global aid system often questions whether national organizations can ever be truly neutral, applying a standard far higher than that to which it submits itself, resulting in criticisms of double standards.**

Feminism, social justice and neutrality

Feminism is primarily about power and requires a direct engagement with, and at times challenge of, power. The principle of neutrality is primarily conceived as being about how international humanitarian organizations position themselves in relation to that power. Like the humanitarian principles, which operate as a set, feminist principles have complex dynamic interrelations that combine to create a philosophical approach to aid. They can also, in their application, create challenges and dilemmas, requiring each principle to be given different weighting in a particular situation at a particular point in time.

The response to calls for the decolonization of the humanitarian system, while embraced by some, have also met resistance from powerful elements within that system – especially where such decolonization requires them to practically enable the agency and leadership of local actors and to recognize and address structural racism within the aid system.⁹¹ Promoting rights and social justice is an inherent part of a feminist approach. Therefore, neutrality is not only about not taking sides or engaging in political controversies, but also about navigating the inherent biases and power dynamics within the humanitarian system. No action or inaction is without consequence. Choosing not to engage in contexts of injustice contributes to maintaining a status quo that can privilege one party over another.⁹²

The humanitarian system is built on several bedrocks: that humanitarian action can be apolitical; that neutrality is necessary to work effectively in a conflict zone; that outsiders are neutral and hold no partisan beliefs or preconceptions; and that national actors by their very nature cannot be anything but partisan. But examinations of the colonial footprint in the humanitarian system⁹³ point out that neutrality is intrinsically associated with foreign-ness, and particularly whiteness, which fails to acknowledge the bias and inherent partisanship in the aid system and the political structures within which it sits. These critiques argue that neutrality privileges Western aid systems and leaders – promoting the idea that only foreigners can be fair and even-handed – and devalues national and community systems.⁹⁴

Neutrality – and what it is supposed to achieve in terms of proximity and access – can render national and local humanitarians as of lesser value, or even as actors to be treated with suspicion and distrust.⁹⁵ There is little recognition of the colonial footprint on the aid system, nor of the deep-seated and often invisible prejudices and discriminatory beliefs held in Western systems and individuals that colour the approach to any specific context of crisis.⁹⁶

The Western dominance in the aid system has led local and national actors to be undermined by what is their greatest asset – their proximity to people in crisis.⁹⁷ Should national humanitarian actors, whose country is involved in an international armed conflict, may have been invaded, or be under occupation, be expected to be neutral – to not take sides? **It is not reasonable, ethical, or even necessary to expect or demand this of them. Instead, the emphasis should be on aid actors to act impartially, and shared values of non-discrimination and inclusion – including of those in need who have different political opinions and allegiances.** It is possible for humanitarians to hold what can be described as political opinions and still act humanely in an impartial way – if this weren't the case, there would be no humanitarian system at all.

Neutrality speaks to the political complexities of working in conflict situations, where intra-state conflicts are often internationalized and where humanitarian actors have at

times faced allegations of being agents of foreign powers, or of furthering a political agenda. Some humanitarian actors, such as Oxfam, who also carry out development and influencing work, do not subscribe to the requirement not to engage in political controversies.⁹⁸ In fact, for those using a rights-based approach and committed to social justice, women's rights and anti-racism, engaging in political controversies is at the core of what they do. This is important when it comes to using humanitarian principles to guide decision-making and actions, where – in extremis – the immediate saving of lives may be at the expense of the rights and freedom of those same people, and potentially cause greater suffering or loss of life over the longer term.

Women's rights and not taking sides

Although 'not taking sides' is often seen as conceptually clearer and easier to demonstrate than not engaging in political controversy, some political and conflict actors simply do not accept the concept of neutrality within humanitarian action at all,⁹⁹ invoking a 'with us or against us' ideology. The concept of neutrality has also been set back by statements from belligerent actors describing humanitarian action as a 'force multiplier' and 'part of our combat team'.¹⁰⁰ When the US invaded Afghanistan, Laura Bush, then the US first lady, announced that the invasion would liberate Afghanistan's women.¹⁰¹ Gender and women's rights are co-opted by war makers and politicians to justify cold, hard political decisions, and often used selectively. The unintended consequence of this promotion of feminism was a pushback against a perceived Western-imposed feminism by certain conflict actors to justify their own positions. This is despite a long history of women fighting for their liberation in many cultures around the world.¹⁰²

Independence from politics is considered essential in creating humanitarian space and being perceived as a non-partisan or neutral actor in that space. Yet a feminist approach calls for rights as well as needs to be addressed – and rights-based humanitarian action is purposely and consciously socially activist. **Organizations that adopt an explicit feminist approach therefore actively participate in what can be termed political controversy. This is a fundamental requirement of feminism: there is no justice without gender justice; freedom and recognition of all peoples; and the elimination of gender-based violence.** In some cases, this approach may require active support for women's rights organizations in a context where the repression of women's rights is a specific part of the political goals of conflict actors.

Speaking out and silence

Humanitarians may see their role as bearing witness to, and speaking out on behalf of, those who are suffering in conflict to improve their condition. In fact, as much as we talk of red lines that must be crossed to remain principled, we should also consider green lines – the things we must do or say to uphold the principles that underpin humanitarianism. The rationale and forces that drive humanitarians to speak out about abuses of rights and violations of international humanitarian law matter. Their actions cannot be self-serving or selective, and must be driven, above all, by a belief that they will reduce human suffering.

As the risks of political co-option – especially by parties to a conflict and their power bases – are high, the act of speaking out cannot be party political, but must be politically-savvy. Humanitarians must build on alliances and networks and an understanding of both where opportunities for change lie, and how to use them effectively. Speaking out cannot

be performative – it must be strategic, tactical, nuanced and intelligent, involving genuine collaboration between those who are suffering and those who seek to help alleviate their suffering. **Being on the side of those who suffer in conflict requires courage, but also political awareness and an equity in speaking out as much in situations that garner little popular support as those that make the headlines.**

Silence can itself be powerful at times – a refusal to endorse or engage can speak volumes – but not speaking out can also be viewed as complicity. Civil society in Venezuela and Myanmar has questioned whether neutrality is being used as an excuse for silence in the face of abuse, especially as international humanitarians worked closely with the very authorities responsible for those abuses.¹⁰³ **The greatest dilemma for humanitarian actors is often presented as a simplistic choice between speaking out and being denied access to help people in need, or staying silent and continuing to deliver aid, even if the lives saved are lived under oppression and abuse.**

So, what might a feminist approach to neutrality look like? It would require the diverse field of humanitarian actors to recognize their own biases, political drivers and the colonial roots of the humanitarian system; it would require engagement in some controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature, where ‘controversy’ equates to violence and abuses, unnecessary suffering, racial injustice, violence against women and girls, deliberate deprivation of the means to sustain life, and systematic abuses of rights and freedoms. It would require speaking out where the other option is silence or co-option, and it would continue to be as difficult, controversial and hotly debated as it always has been. Most of all, it would need to break down the false perception that humanitarianism can be entirely divorced from politics and would value and embrace those who carry out the most immediate, proximate humanitarian acts in times of crisis.

PRINCIPLED DECISION-MAKING AND ACTION

The humanitarian system was created in a particular historical, cultural and geopolitical context – and has inevitably replicated some of the values, behaviour, and culture of colonial and patriarchal systems. Feminism explicitly seeks to dismantle patriarchal power structures, to promote anti-racism and to deconstruct colonial ideologies¹⁰⁴– to decolonize the aid system. Therefore, **a feminist approach to humanitarian aid is as much about changing the system as it is about how it delivers humanitarian action.** The internal workings of the humanitarian system are as important as its outward-facing actions and engagement with external power structures.

Understanding how the humanitarian principles guide responses is challenging – very few studies¹⁰⁵ have focused on this subject, and there is limited practical support within the humanitarian sector on ethical decision-making in line with the principles we hold so dear. These shortcomings offer an opportunity, however, to bring a feminist approach to our contemporary understanding of principled humanitarian aid: one characterized by power sharing; meaningful engagement of the communities affected by humanitarian crises; a focus on care and solidarity, as well as activism when needed; and a local to global movement, all built on a foundation of upholding the rights of all peoples equally.

Some humanitarian organizations are taking this opportunity and starting to examine what a feminist approach might look like in practice. There is discussion and debate between writers, commentators and critics, much of it outside the large body of formal humanitarian literature: the most interesting and radical views are found on YouTube, in blogs, or in small networks and groups. Feminist humanitarianism is not something applied systematically across all the humanitarian work of an organization, and the humanitarian system itself has embedded power dynamics and relationships that are very hard to shift in order to enable a more feminist, equitable and inclusive system. Nevertheless, with many countries reducing their aid budgets, and a strong negative rhetoric about aid from one of the world's biggest humanitarian donors, there is more discussion and debate than ever about the future of the humanitarian aid system. Some of the views expressed here are not yet fully formed: they will change, evolve and develop, be challenged and contribute to our ideas on what the humanitarian world of the future should look like.

Notes

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