

Chapter 7

THE FEMINIST APPROACH APPLIED TO HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a political, economic and social movement with multiple definitions and facets. It is a term that provokes suspicion, concern and denial in certain spaces, including the humanitarian field, which is not surprising as it advocates a transformative change in the patriarchal system that perpetuates inequalities and privileges hegemonic masculinity.¹

The Feminist Humanitarian Network, a network that brings together local and international women's organisations and academic institutions, proposes a feminist humanitarian system that is accessible and responds to women and their organisations, in all their diversity, and that challenges and does not perpetuate structural inequalities. They propose the creation of safe spaces, through coordination mechanisms, in the belief that there is no single approach for everyone involved, which ultimately guarantees that no one is left behind.²

Feminist issues have increasingly been on the agenda in international forums, particularly the generalisation of the gender approach. Both at this level and in field work, there has been some progress, although it is insufficient and not very ambitious because there are multiple forces and interests at work that make the path problematic. On the one hand, there is the refusal to introduce real changes to the status quo and, on the other, the adoption of a Western and predominantly binary concept of gender that is considered universal and that often reinforces gender and neo-colonial stereotypes. It is also important to take into account the risk of institutions and

¹ *Challenging patriarchy: gender equality and humanitarian principles.* (2021, 7 septiembre). Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog. https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2019/07/18/gender-equality-humanitarian-principles/#_ftn2

² Algunas de estas ideas están basadas en los principios de la “Feminist Humanitarian Network”. A feminist humanitarian system. (s. f.) de <https://www.feministhumanitariannetwork.org/a-feminist-humanitarian-system>

governments co-opting the issue of defending women's rights to advance certain political agendas.³

For this reason, it is essential to consider what is understood as feminist humanitarian action and how international institutions and organisations have applied it, and to reflect on the steps to take for such action to be considered truly feminist and not as just another add-on at the end of the drafting of projects and programmes.

2. WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND BY FEMINISM IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION?

To talk about the feminist approach means adopting critical thinking regarding structural transformation of our models of cooperation and humanitarian action, generally based on patriarchy, racism and neo-colonialism. However, what has been introduced in international documents as a gender approach in the international political sphere is limited to evaluating the relationships between women and men.⁴ Gender is presented as an identity separable from other elements such as race, age or ethnicity, as a fixed identity and not as a constant process.⁵ Feminism goes further, since it implies a radical change that transforms the power structures that have traditionally marginalised the most vulnerable groups. One of the usual mistakes is to reduce the gender focus to women or to include this expression as a symbolic reference in the programme documents, without there being any substantial change in focus. It is fundamental that gender work draws from feminist thought.

The humanitarian field, designed by the North, suffers from multiple weaknesses inherited from the patriarchal neo-colonial system in which it has been developed. Feminism is seen, then, as the social and political movement with the necessary strength and capacity to destabilise the system, and to make the humanitarian ecosystem turn towards an inclusive, collaborative and intersectional perspective.⁶

³ Otto, Dianne. 2009. The Exile of Inclusion: Reflections on Gender Issues in International Law Over the Last Decade. *Melbourne Journal of International Law*. 10.

⁴ ECOSOC, Naciones Unidas. (1997). Resoluciones y decisiones del Consejo Económico y Social (Suplemento No. 1). <https://undocs.org/es/E/1997/97%28SUPP%29>

⁵ Cohn, Carol. 2008. "Mainstreaming Gender in UN Security Policy: A Path to Political Transformation?" In *Global Governance: Feminist Perspectives*, edited by Shirin M. Rai and Georgina Waylen, 185–206. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁶ Para una mayor profundización sobre esta nueva perspectiva, se puede consultar el artículo de nuestra compañera Atria Mier en el informe anual conjunto de MSF y IECAH de 2019-2020 titulado "Subversión o necesidad: ¿sigue siendo la acción humanitaria relevante? algunas reflexiones."

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Informe_IECAH_MSF-2018-2019.pdf

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit discussed the need to establish more inclusive and efficient humanitarian action between humanitarian organisations and donors. As a result, the *Grand Bargain*⁷ was reached, an international agreement that aims to put more resources in the hands of people who are rights holders. However, the text does not explicitly mention gender issues. But UN Women quickly made up for this omission by creating the informal *Friends of Gender Group* (FoGG), as a tool for "the integration of gender equality and the empowerment of women" in individual and collective efforts to implement the commitments.⁸

Over the last two years, the precept of leaving no one behind has been compromised by the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects have aggravated pre-existing inequalities and exposed system vulnerabilities at different levels. It has put on hold progress on fundamental agendas such as the fight against the climate emergency or gender equality. And in particular, these impacts on gender inequalities have been amplified in fragile contexts of conflict where public services are limited and where already weakened institutions struggled to respond to the health emergency.⁹

3. SOME PROGRESS IN THE INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Over the last 20 years, different governments and international organisations have taken steps in favour of gender equality, even adopting the term, 'feminist' in international strategies and foreign policy. Here are some brief examples:

- Some governments, such as those of Sweden, Mexico, France and Spain, have launched feminist foreign policy plans. In 2019, the Spanish Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation] launched the Feminist Foreign Policy¹⁰, which incorporates gender equality

⁷ Inter-Agency Standing Committee. About the Grand Bargain. Disponible en:

<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/about-the-grand-bargain#:~:text=The%20Grand%20Bargain%2C%20launched%20during,efficiency%20of%20the%20humanitarian%20action.>

⁸ Humanitarian Policy Group & Overseas Development Institute (ODI). (2021, junio). The Grand Bargain at five years: An independent review. Disponible aquí:

<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2021-06/Grand%20Bargain%20Annual%20Independent%20Report%202021.pdf>

⁹ United Nations. 2020. Policy brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women. Disponible aquí:

<https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>

¹⁰ Disponible en

http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/es/SalaDePrensa/Multimedia/Publicaciones/Documents/2021_02_PO LITICA%20EXTERIOR%20FEMINISTA.pdf

as a distinctive element, and the objective of which is "to contribute to advancing towards real and effective equality at the international level".¹¹

- In 2005, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) drafted the Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action 'whose objective is to mitigate and prevent gender-based violence throughout the humanitarian response with the implementation of action aimed at coordinating, planning, monitoring and evaluating'.¹²
- Various international commitments incorporate a gender approach: the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015) and, of course, the Sustainable Development Goals (2015). On the other hand, the United Nations (UN) Security Council adopted what is known as the UN Women, Peace and Security agenda, 10 resolutions that promote the rights of women in conflict and post-conflict situations.
- In the Spanish humanitarian field, the Estrategia de Acción Humanitaria de la Cooperación Española 2019-2026 [Humanitarian Action Strategy of Spanish Cooperation]¹³ incorporates, as one of its proposed results, the aim to consolidate a feminist and transformative agenda in humanitarian action at the end of the implementation period of the Strategy .

While these frameworks are necessary and a first step, in practice the humanitarian system has not effectively incorporated gender or introduced feminist ways of working and, as a result, the needs, capacities and rights of women and the dynamics of gender are not adequately taken into account in the planning and implementation of humanitarian response.¹⁴

4. CHALLENGES OF INTRODUCING THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

A. Alleged incompatibility of humanitarian principles and the gender approach

¹¹ All About Feminist Foreign Policies. (2021). WILPF. <https://www.wilpf.org/all-about-feminist-foreign-policies/>

¹² Disponible en: https://gbvguidelines.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2015-IASC-Directrices-VG_version-espanol.pdf

¹³ Disponible en: <https://www.aecid.es/CentroDocumentacion/Documentos/Divulgaci%C3%B3n/Comunicaci%C3%B3n/EAH%20CE%202019-2026%20v3.pdf>

¹⁴ Fawzi El-Solh, C. F. E. (2015, junio). Review of IASC 2008: Policy Statement on Gender Equality in Humanitarian Action. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2._review_iasc_gender_policy_final_report_narrative_repo

In the humanitarian context, there is an old internal debate about the compatibility of humanitarian principles, in particular the principles of impartiality and neutrality, and the inclusion of the gender approach in humanitarian action. These principles, although originally coined by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, have a conventional use and are included in Resolution 46/182 of the UN General Assembly¹⁵ that established the foundations of the humanitarian system. As a result, they are accepted by the vast majority of humanitarian organisations as guiding principles for their actions. On the one hand, the principle of impartiality establishes that "no distinction of nationality, race, religion, social condition or political creed" be made¹⁶, so the gender approach ensures that this principle is respected, since it implies that humanitarian aid is not influenced by pre-existing gender inequalities. Likewise, gender equality is implicitly included in the principle of humanity and a refusal of humanitarian actors to accept it as an ideal would mean violating humanitarian principles.¹⁷

On the other hand, it is argued that neutrality understood as "refraining from taking part in hostilities and, at all times, in political, racial, religious and ideological controversies"¹⁸ is at odds with action in favour of gender equality, since it seeks to overthrow an ideological system, that is, patriarchy.¹⁹ This position can be disputed, since patriarchy is not only a more underlying reason for the conflict, but is present before, during and after it. Likewise, this perspective of neutrality could be considered patriarchal in itself if the existing gender inequalities that also influence humanitarian aid are not questioned.²⁰ However, it is important to point out that the discussion about what is meant by neutrality in the humanitarian field is not a settled debate and is subject to interpretations and a detailed analysis of the elements that comprise it.

In the face of initial resistance in the humanitarian field to include a gender approach in humanitarian action under the pretext of the risk that it would "contaminate" the principle of aid neutrality, the introduction that has been made of the feminist perspective is not absent from controversy. The incorporation of the gender approach by humanitarian actors has been timid and insufficient in its adoption of institutional mechanisms. The challenges can be summarised in three areas: a limited understanding of the gender approach, a Western understanding of the

¹⁵ General Assembly resolution 46/182, Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations A/RES/46/182 (19 December 1991)

¹⁶ Comité Internacional de la Cruz Roja. 1976. Comentario sobre los principios fundamentales de la Cruz Roja. Artículo, Revista Internacional de la Cruz Roja

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hans Haug. 1996. La neutralidad como Principio Fundamental de la Cruz Roja.

¹⁹ Challenging patriarchy: gender equality and humanitarian principles. (2021, 7 septiembre).

Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog. <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2019/07/18/gender-equality-humanitarian-principles/>

²⁰ Ibid.

gender perspective and a deficient feminist culture within the humanitarian organisations themselves.

B. Limited understanding of the gender approach

Faced with the criticised welfare perspective present in humanitarian action, this angle is intensified in the monolithic majority perception of women as victims and mere recipients of aid and protection, ignoring their agency and autonomy. The anti-militarist academic Cynthia Enloe coined the term "womenandchildren" to refer to the expression used repeatedly in the field of international relations in which both groups are included, equating them in their needs and level of autonomy.²¹ This reductionist perspective on the part of international organisations and states regarding the experience of women in the context of emergencies forms part of humanitarian policies that neglect their participation in decision-making that directly impacts them.²²

Although progress has been made in recognising the serious violations of women's rights in contexts of war, including sexual violence used as a weapon of war and the creation of the 2015 IASC Guidelines on Gender-Based Violence (GBV)²³, the understanding of their experience in this situation cannot stop there.

On the one hand, the idea that women only suffer violence in these contexts ignores the fact that they are exposed to what Cockburn termed a "continuum of violence", that is, a continuous and structural violence that transcends the catastrophic, pre- and post-conflict context.²⁴ The data shows that, in post-conflict contexts, GBV²⁵ increases, which means that the end of a conflict does not imply the end of violence for women.²⁶ On the other hand, establishing the focus solely

²¹ Enloe, C. 2014. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (2nd Revised, Updated ed.). University of California Press.

²² Swaine, Aisling, 'Enabling or Disabling Paternalism: (In)Attention to Gender and Women's Knowledge, Capacity and Authority in Humanitarian Contexts' (November 01, 2016). *Paternalism Beyond Borders*, ed. Michael N. Barnett. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2978113>

²³ Disponible en https://gbvguidelines.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2015-IASC-Directrices-VG_version-espagnol.pdf

²⁴ Cockburn, C. 2004. "The Continuum of Violence: A Gender Perspective on War and Peace." In *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, edited by Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

²⁵ Manjoo, R. y McRaith, C. 2011. "Gender-Based Violence and Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Areas."

²⁶ Ibid.

on protection against violence as a priority humanitarian need for women ignores other needs that exist.

Another criticism of this concept is that it establishes a binary perspective of gender, men and women, that ignores diversity in gender identities and sexual orientations, assuming that all people in the humanitarian context are cisgender and heterosexual.²⁷ This perspective has an exclusionary impact and discriminates against population groups whose needs are not addressed, which places them in a position of greater risk and discrimination.

C. Western understanding of the feminist perspective

Another fundamental challenge is the Western feminism perspective applied to humanitarian action that ignores the specific gender dynamics in the places where humanitarian crises occur. The main recipient countries of humanitarian aid in the last 20 years have been regions of the Global South - Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, the Caribbean and Southeast Asia.²⁸ However, the predominant gender approach has been the Western one, understood to be "universal", in local contexts external to these Western paradigms. This north-south imposition perpetuates the neo-colonialist system and reproduces the idea of the "white saviour", where Western women - in this context, humanitarian workers - travel to countries of the South to impose what they consider to be "equality", "empowerment" and even the very concept of feminism. Likewise, the belief in the existence of a feminist universality and the disdain of diversity within feminism maintains the condition of women who are recipients of humanitarian aid as passive entities in the humanitarian context. A clear example of this mismatch between feminist plans drafted in the global North and their application elsewhere on the planet, from a top-down perspective, is that even the very term "gender" does not exist in some of the local languages.²⁹ Moreover, the implementation of initiatives that a priori may seem to Western eyes to be a step towards greater equality, for example the abolition of non-mixed spaces, can have perverse effects in terms of destruction of the social fabric and disruption of cultural practices.

²⁷ *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity as Part of the WPS Project – Jamie J Hagen (2/2016)*. (2020, 2 septiembere). LSE Women, Peace and Security blog. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2017/01/10/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-as-part-of-the-wps-project/>

²⁸ *History of DAC Lists of aid recipient countries - OECD*. (2021). OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/historyofdaclistsofaidrecipientcountries.htm#former>

²⁹ Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis. 2003. "Beyond Gender: Towards a Feminist Analysis of Humanitarianism and Development in Sri Lanka." *Women and Development: Rethinking Policy and Reconceptualizing Practice* (Fall - Winter, 2003), pp. 212-226.

The propensity for this *glocalisation* takes away a leading role from those local organisations that are capable of providing a response adapted to the context and, therefore, transforming these processes linked to decolonial visions and deconstruction of oppressive powers that have been perpetuated over time.³⁰

D. Deficient internal feminist focus of the humanitarian organisations themselves

Finally, it is particularly paradoxical that the same humanitarian organisations that apply feminist approaches to their work strategies lack organisational cultures that are aware of and sensitive to this perspective. At the organisational level, the incorporation of the gender approach or the feminist approach is usually added at the end as a formal requirement in order to, among other elements, comply with the financing conditions and, in some cases, there is only one person in the team with knowledge about the gender approach.³¹ Likewise, although the funds in humanitarian programmes allocated to programmes with gender equality and the empowerment of women as main objectives have been increasing in recent years, they still represented only 5% of the total humanitarian aid in 2018 and 2019 according to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).³² It is therefore essential to dismantle and review the existing power structures and subordination dynamics in the organisations themselves, and adopt cross-cutting measures that have an effect not only at the organisational level, establishing more women in leadership positions, but also on the methodology and forms of feminist work (greater spaces for dialogue and debate, mainstreaming of the democratic spirit and representation, recognition of care inside and outside the organisation, among others).

With regard to the efforts to prevent and prosecute cases of sexual abuse in the humanitarian context, the wide rejection and public exposure they receive from the media is positive. It wasn't like that two decades ago. In the 1990s, these behaviours were tolerated under the pretext that sexual misconduct was part of "being a man", such as the shameful "*boys will be boys*"³³ response delivered by the UN Special Representative on Cambodia Yasushi Akashi when he was asked about the sexual abuse of women and girls by blue helmets in refugee camps in the country. In

³⁰ ¿Agenda feminista en la acción humanitaria? (2021, mayo 26–27). [Taller de especialización]. Madrid, España. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sfy4RtGfTI0>

³¹ Shahra Razavi and Carol Miller, 'Gender Mainstreaming: A Study of Efforts by the UNDP, the World Bank and the ILO to Institutionalize Gender Issues' (Occasional Paper No 4, UN Research Institute for Social Development ('UNRISD')), Geneva, 1 August 1995) 67–9.

³² OECD (2021) "Development finance for gender equality: the Generation Equality Forum Action Coalitions", OECD Development Co-operation Directorate, Paris. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/financing-for-the-gef-action-coalitions-web-june.pdf>

³³ United Nation's Secretary-General's Bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (ST/SGB/2003/13). 2003

2002, the IASC created the PSEA (Protection against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse) Technical Expert Group to "protect affected communities from sexual exploitation and abuse in all humanitarian response operations."³⁴ Likewise, in 2003, the UN, faced with public outrage at these "scandals", particularly the cases uncovered in West Africa in 2002, introduced what is known as the Zero Tolerance Policy³⁵, which mandates the reporting of any suspicion of sexual abuse or exploitation and commitment by organisations to investigate such allegations.³⁶ Unfortunately, this policy has produced scant results, there are high levels of underreporting, and its implementation has been criticised by different sectors, including feminist academics, in the absence of a true cultural change.³⁷

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A FEMINIST FUTURE FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

By way of closing, we would like to present some of the progress achieved to date, as well as propose some issues that we consider key to moving towards a truly feminist humanitarian system. Recommendations, in our opinion basic, but not exhaustive, since we recognise our limitations as researchers, being white and European, despite the effort made to analyse references and consult networks from countries in the South.

From a more hopeful outlook, tentative progress can be seen on the part of institutions and governments towards the implementation of the feminist perspective, such as the introduction of a greater number of women within humanitarian organisations, where they now represent over 40% of the half a million humanitarian staff³⁸, the creation of feminist foreign policies, or the inclusion of feminist approaches in humanitarian programmes.³⁹

³⁴ Desde el IECAH hemos participado en el seguimiento de los progresos del *Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies*, en el marco del consorcio INSPIRE. <https://iecah.org/del-call-to-action-on-protection-from-gender-based-violence-in-emergencies/>

³⁵ *UN will enforce 'zero tolerance' policy against sexual abuse*. (2007, 5 enero). UN News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2007/01/205142-un-will-enforce-zero-tolerance-policy-against-sexual-abuse-peacekeeping>

³⁶ Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. Disponible aquí: <https://pseataaskforce.org/en/tools/search/--5-.html>

³⁷ Martin, Sarah. 2005. *Must Boys Be Boys? Ending Sexual Exploitation & Abuse in UN Peacekeeping Missions*. Washington DC: Refugees International., Otto, Dianne. 2007. "Making sense of zero tolerance policies in peacekeeping sexual economies." In Vanessa Munro & Carl F. Stychin, eds. *Sexuality and the Law: Feminist Engagements*. Abingdon: Routledge-Cavendish

³⁸ Tasci, Z. (2021, 19 mayo). Women are at the forefront of humanitarian aid. *Creating Hope in Conflict*. <https://humanitariangrandchallenge.org/women-are-at-the-forefront-of-humanitarian-aid/>

³⁹ *Ibidem* pág.7.

These steps are, however, insufficient if they are not accompanied by a feminist rethinking of the system and the dynamics within the field of humanitarian action. Case studies, such as the one developed by Oxfam in Ethiopia for the institutionalisation of the gender approach in humanitarian action, demonstrate the importance of increasing funds for the introduction of the gender approach, developing technical assistance for teams and opening communication channels between different humanitarian actors to ensure an inclusive humanitarian response.⁴⁰

Regarding local organisations in the South, the efforts of women's organisations in the fight for their rights, as well as the support given by organisations in the North, are valuable, although the inertia of the system is difficult to overcome and in order for the changes to be effective and far-reaching, they must include powerful stakeholders from the traditional humanitarian system.

As researchers in the humanitarian field, we share the approach proposed by the Feminist Humanitarian Network on the elements and commitments that a feminist humanitarian system should include, among other things:⁴¹

- Commit to achieving gender equality, using emergencies and crises to advance the rights of marginalised people and communities. Recognise that there is no single way of understanding the world and of working, and that the different approaches that can be used are valid. This strategy will attempt to ensure that no one is left behind.
- Be aware and provide the necessary means to fight against the patriarchal dynamics that permeate the entire system and have shaped it the way we know it today.
- Question the extent to which humanitarian action serves as a tool, whether consciously or unconsciously, to spread existing patriarchal structures globally.
- Work to decolonise the existing system and paternalistic attitudes that deprive local populations and organisations of dignity and capacity. It is necessary to question the usual structures of existing aid, assessing to what extent they do not tend to represent an unfair system where capacities are undervalued and the population is infantilised.
- Ensure that women's organisations and LGBTQIA+ groups working in humanitarian contexts can access the funding and circuits necessary to work autonomously.

⁴⁰Avis, Steph, Hilton, Eliza, Petros, Ankets. 2017. Institutionalizing Gender in Emergencies: Case study of Ethiopia. Disponible aquí: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/institutionalizing-gender-in-emergencies-case-study-of-ethiopia-620216/>

⁴¹ Ibid.

- Facilitate safe spaces where women's organisations, as well as other traditionally vulnerable groups, are heard and taken into account.
- Involve women as leaders and agents of change, and create economic, political and social conditions so women can have full participation.
- Ensure that the leadership of women-led organisations working in humanitarian contexts is recognised and that they are engaged, at all levels, in shaping the humanitarian system and its current possibilities.

In our opinion, it cannot be accepted that feminism is reduced to a limited conception of the gender approach that does not pose a challenge to established power structures. Humanitarian action and the environments in which it takes place need this feminist transformation to guarantee the rights of the populations and communities receiving aid.