
Humanitarian workers as Trojan Horses: Gender-Based Violence in times of crisis

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Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development, and peace.

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After two years of living with the coronavirus, much has changed worldwide. Words like social distancing, lockdown, and remote working became a part of our day-to-day vocabulary. Although more than six million people unfortunately died, more than half of the world is fully vaccinated. However, during these past years, there has been one silent pandemic: gender-based violence (GBV) in times of Covid-19.

During the first weeks of the lockdown, news outlets from different countries broadcasted the increase in domestic abuse reports. Hand signals to silently ask for help during zoom calls went viral (RYAN, 2021), and in France, the government even allowed victims to be settled in hotels for free to run from their abusers (FRANCE..., 2020). In its 2022 Global Humanitarian Overview, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator estimated that for every three months that Covid-19 lockdowns continue, roughly 15 million additional cases of GBV are committed (GRIFFITHS, 2022).

Figura 3: Domestic violence calls, April 2019 and April 2020



Fonte: Fairfax County Police Department (2020)

Still, not much is being said about who is committing such crimes. In domestic situations, usually, the victim's partner is the one assaulting them. What most people do not know is that many humanitarian workers also engage in such criminal activities, even though they were sent from organisations that believe in human rights to assist in times of emergency. Therefore, humanitarian workers turn into a trojan horse: the ones who are supposed to protect women and children actually exploit their trust and assault them, leaving life-long scars and contributing to the unstable situation of their environment and the mistrust of society in aid missions.

Given this situation, it is natural to wonder if the increase in cases is related only to lockdowns and situations of restricted movement or those are more generally present in times of crisis. The current analysis will answer the aforementioned question while presenting the case of the Ebola outbreak in Sub-Saharan Africa and projecting into what impacts of GBV of Covid-19 are still unseen.

The links between times of crisis and Gender-Based Violence

Unfortunately, the increase of GBV related to Covid-19 is not new or limited to the pandemic. Evidence acquired and analysed by the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault (LaFASA) & National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) after Hurricane Katrina showed that states of emergency – including natural disasters, active conflict, or health crises – increase rates of sexual violence. In the case researched, it was found that the crimes increased up to 45%, an extremely high and alarming figure.

According to the World Health Organisation (2002), “there is a pattern of gender differentiation at all levels of the disaster process: exposure

to risk, risk perception, preparedness, response, physical impact, psychological impact, recovery, and reconstruction.” What happens is that the stress, fear, and sense of helplessness associated with disasters and emergencies increase the risks for women and children. This is, of course, exacerbated by poverty, gender roles, and the burden of care-taking responsibilities. If, during regular times, there is already a culture that tolerates gender-based violence and sexual abuse at high rates, this issue seems to be the last thing people care about during difficult times.

Furthermore, this lack of attention is related to the feeling that reporting sexual violence during a crisis is an exaggeration or a luxury since 'bigger complications are happening'. Yet, as seen, the reporting rates tend to be way larger than in normal times. This is alarming since the already super-high rates are most likely even higher, revealing a huge issue that is overlooked by national and international society. The works of Palermo and Peterman (2011) shine a light on that, explaining that the current understanding of sexual violence dynamics is particularly poor. Firstly, it is still viewed as a "feminist agenda" or a "gender issue", not a broad security issue.

A great example is the DRC, the so-called "rape capital of the world". The numbers of cases available are the ones reported to United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in the country, which already account for tens of thousands of cases. However, a study using data from 2006 to 2007 showed that the rate of rape among women aged 15 to 49 years in 12 months was 26 times higher than the estimates based on reports to United Nations authorities (PALERMO; PETERMAN, 2011). The major concern is that since the numbers available to authorities are "low", they fail to induce actions from the international community, further allowing these criminal acts to continue.

The Ebola health crisis and exploitation by humanitarian workers

A sex scandal during the Ebola crisis response was brought to the media in 2020. The biggest shock of the revelations was the fact that most allegations were against workers from the World Health Organisation (WHO). More than 50 of the women interviewed WHO workers and men from Congo's Ministry of Health and several aid organisations, including UNICEF, Oxfam, Médecins Sans Frontières, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and others (FLUMMERFELT; KASONGO, 2021).

There were also claims in Burkina Faso, as eight women said men had requested sex in exchange for adding their names to government eligibility lists of food aid during the crisis (MEDNICK, 2021). All of these include contact with children, which elevates the relevance of the abuses. The clear exploitation of the position of power from the

aid workers is severely prejudicial to the well-being of the already torn nations and should be acted on immediately.

However, that is not the case. For example, WHO staff knew of the sexual abuse allegations in DRC in early May 2019, but it wasn't until October 2020 that an independent commission was established, just a month after a media vehicle published its first investigation (DODDS, 2021). Regarding claims in Burkina Faso, an inter-agency system to prevent and address sexual exploitation and abuse is not entirely in place nearly three years after the crisis escalated and aid efforts intensified (MEDNICK, 2021). That raises the question: are there any major concerns about GBV being hidden by the coronavirus pandemic?

Covid-19 and the silent pandemic

Given what was presented in this analysis, a conclusion that the humanitarian Covid-19 response since 2020 might have led to an increase of gender-based violence cases from humanitarian workers. An example is data on sexual abuse and exploitation (SEA) committed by UN Peacekeepers during operations since 2020. In 2021, which was also alarming in terms of cases due to new covid variants such as the Gamma and Delta, recorded the highest number of SEA allegations since 2016, an increase of 8% from 2020, both above the average from the last 10 years (GUTERRES..., 2022).

Indeed, peacekeepers are already living through several crises, but the increase in allegations even amidst lockdowns and movement restrictions shows a possible correlation between covid-related stress with higher numbers of GBV committed, even by humanitarian workers. Therefore, it is past the time to treat and analyse this issue more carefully as it impacts the functioning of the mission and the trust that the population has in aid workers in general.

Yet, as Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) already noted, sexual violence is one of history's greatest silences. As long as GBV is still a taboo topic, even in international organisations, women will be discouraged to report such cases, and most importantly, these will keep happening as the lack of attention and accountability regarding those crimes is low. Women's stories need to be heard and not sidelined, especially in times of crises, because they matter even during a global pandemic.

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