Editor's Introduction

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While issues of 'gender', notably 'gender programming' and 'gender mainstreaming' have been prominent in the humanitarian sector for some time, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the ways in which the sector itself is gendered. Gender is often seen as an operational problem and much of the humanitarian literature which deals with this is, thus, problem-solving in nature. Critical approaches which interrogate and question the ways in which gendered logics structure the sector are still the minority of research into gender and humanitarianism (see, for example, [Ticktin, 2011](#); [Martin de Almagro, 2017](#); [Houldey, 2019](#); [Partis-Jennings, 2019](#)). The articles in this special issue seek to contribute to this growing body of critical research and reflection. Though each of the contributions offers distinct insights, a number of important cross-cutting themes emerge from the issue as a whole.

A key focus throughout this issue is on the need to move beyond thinking about gender as a 'women's' issue to take account of the ways that gender is a structuring concept which impacts all and has complex and intersectional effects. The focus on sexual violence against men in two of the pieces is a timely reminder to think about the gendered nature of violence and the gendered nature of humanitarian responses to it. Catherine Akurut reviews the current literature on conflict-related sexual violence against men, importantly calling into question the ways in which the humanitarian sector has responded. She invites us to consider how programming designed for women who have experienced conflict-related sexual violence has been extended to men and what the limitations of this approach might be. In doing so, she challenges assumptions about who is seen to be a victim of conflict-related sexual violence in ways that require humanitarians and researchers to think about how the violence is gendered and the need to be sensitive to this in responses. Heleen Touquet and colleagues, drawing on their extensive experience as researchers and practitioners, also highlight the importance of challenging assumptions about sexual violence against men. They tackle ten common misconceptions, seeking to bring a

more rigorous engagement with evidence and research in this area in ways which refuse to allow feminist analyses of conflict to be undermined or that risk 'undermining hard-won gains in programming for women and girls' ([page 31](#)). Together, the two pieces speak to the importance of reviewing the connection between knowledge and practice, a theme that runs through this issue and is at the heart of the *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs (JHA)* as a project. This kind of collaborative approach is one for which feminist approaches are well suited ([Holvikivi, 2019](#); [Lokot, 2019](#)).

The contributors themselves are modelling how research and practice can be brought into a more productive conversation. The articles by Touquet *et al.* and Daigle, Martin and Myrntinen showcase the potential for important research to emerge when academics and practitioners collaborate meaningfully. The feminist ethos at the heart of these collaborations showcases what more explicitly feminist approaches to humanitarian research and practice can offer. Ricardo Fal-Dutra Santos tackles this question explicitly, offering a thoughtful and insightful commentary on the compatibility of feminism and humanitarian principles. He questions the idea that gender equality as a goal runs counter to humanitarian principles because it requires interfering with culture. He argues that humanitarians have long been in the business of challenging cultures of violence and that addressing vulnerability always involves changes to culture, as vulnerability itself is culturally constructed. Importantly, he also highlights the need for the sector to address its own culture and the 'patriarchal values and practices within humanitarian culture [which] reflect the colonial/imperial, Western and Christian cultures after which it was shaped, and which helped shape patriarchy around the world' ([page 45](#)).

The patriarchal nature of humanitarian culture, and its colonial roots and legacies, is also at the heart of Charlotte Lydia Riley's commentary on #AidToo. Riley explores how the sector's power hierarchies serve to facilitate an environment in which it is hard to call out sexual abuse, harassment and assault, an environment in

which ‘powerful men are protected by their image as humanitarian saviours and enabled by organisations that rely on public goodwill for funding and support’ (page 49). She highlights that the risks of speaking out are compounded by racial hierarchies in the sector which mean some women are less likely to be believed. The recent investigative reporting by The New Humanitarian and the Thomson Reuters Foundation on the sexual abuse experienced by women in the Democratic Republic of Congo during the humanitarian response to the Ebola crisis has yet again illustrated the sad truth of this (Flummerfelt and Peyton, 2020).

Picking up on questions around humanitarian security which were explored in *JHA*, 1:2, Megan Daigle, Sarah Martin and Henri Myrntinen also address how gendered, racialised and colonial logics impact on the operation of the sector today in ways that mean certain people are made more vulnerable. Looking at security manuals and trainings, they question the way that dominant approaches to risk and security are premised on an ‘imaginary of humanitarian, development and peace-building work’ carried out by ‘white, able-bodied, heterosexual, male staff from the Global North’ (page 4) that no longer reflect the realities of the way this work is done, if it ever did. They note, reinforcing the points made by Riley, that for many the threat comes from within the sector itself, something security training fails to take account of. They call for more inclusive representation in the humanitarian security sector to ‘help to deconstruct the predominant humanitarian security discourse’ and suggest feminist practice frameworks may offer useful ways forward in this deconstruction effort.

Humanitarian security is not the only theme from earlier issues which is revisited in this special issue. Catia Gregoratti and Annika Bergman Rosamond’s research article picks up on conversations about innovation and liberal order explored in our first and third issues (*JHA*, 1:1; 1:3). The authors show what a feminist analysis can contribute to this conversation by highlighting how celebrity and corporate humanitarian initiatives focus attention on women and girls in ways that not only reproduce neoliberal individualist logic but also reproduce harmful gendered and racialised humanitarian saviour/saved logics. By turning their attention to success stories of female empowerment in the humanitarian sector, Gregoratti and Bergman Rosamond use post-colonial feminist analysis to reconsider unintended consequences of particular programmes and initiatives that claim to help and empower women.

This issue offers a rich contribution to our understanding of humanitarianism and the ways in which it is structured by gendered logics and power relations, as well as exploring how those gendered logics intersect with other power hierarchies, such as race and sexuality.

Elsewhere, feminist and gender-focused approaches to studying humanitarianism have helped us better understand aspects of the sector, such as the gendered concept of ‘care’ (Turner, 2019); militarised and romanticised representations of aid workers (Taithe, 2020); embodied and affective experiences of both aid workers and aid recipients (Read, 2018; Thorpe & Chawansky, 2020); and how the sector may be implicated in the maintenance of gendered power structures (Martínez and Libal, 2011; Repo & Yrjölä, 2011), to cite but a few examples. But there is much work still to do, especially to ensure a more global conversation around gender and humanitarianism (Medie and Kang, 2018).

It would be remiss of me not to mention the context in which this issue was put together. Many have highlighted the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Azcona *et al.*, 2020; Parry and Gordon, 2020; Wenham, Smith and Morgan, 2020; Wenham *et al.*, 2020), and the pandemic has also impacted this issue. Contributions which would have further enhanced this issue were delayed by the pressures of responding to the pandemic, whether in a professional or personal capacity. I hope to see these contributions in future issues, and hope they are an important move towards making the gendered dynamics of the humanitarian sector a more central aspect of humanitarian research and practice moving forward.

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