

Humanitarian CSOs face sexual abuse scandal

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The #metoo social media storm of exposure, testimony and accusations of sexual abuse has reached the charity sector in Western Europe. Time for humanitarian CSOs to clean up and increase their accountability.

Oxfam (UK) has been [caught covering up for a handful of senior managers who organised sex parties](#) with prostitutes in all the catastrophe-stricken countries where they worked. Other prominent humanitarian civil society organisations (CSOs) are facing difficult questions: how many complaints do they receive? How do they respond? What ethical standards do they require from their staff and how do they enforce them?

Humanitarian and international development charities are a natural target for public outrage over accusations of sexual misconduct by men in positions of authority. They actively promote themselves as moral paragons and saviours. Their image is essential to the success of their public fundraising, their grant applications to governments and corporate foundations, and their lobbying work on human rights and global justice themes. Like any high profile corporation, they prefer to deal with management misconduct internally and discretely. Problematic charity managers are quietly moved sideways, or invited to resign without publicity. No wonder these individuals turn up later in another country accused of the same exploitative behaviour and betrayal of ethical values.

Charities are quicker than Hollywood companies or the Catholic Church to make all the right promises. They immediately promise to listen to the victims, reinforce internal controls, and enforce an organisational culture of zero tolerance. Oxfam (UK) has also proposed that the UK charity sector more systematically verifies candidates' work history and reputation before employing them. This is all very good. But it doesn't go far enough.

"Listening to the victims" means working differently in humanitarian disaster areas. Recognising the centrality of sexual violence, exploitation and prostitution as part of the crisis, and focusing the charity on short- and long-term solutions.

"Listening to the victims" also means that complaint procedures must be credible and effective. Not controlled or influenced by the same managers who face accusations. [The British left faces the same challenges](#), with accusations of rape and harassment by leaders of left currents inside the Labour Party as well as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the country's biggest anti-capitalist party.

In Haiti, Oxfam more or less ignored the scandalous exploitation of prostituted and other vulnerable women and children by international peacekeeping groups. Like other big charities it was obsessed with implementing its own projects on time. Good relations with the authorities and the UN agencies was more important than the complaints of poor women and children. The organisation and other international humanitarian CSOs were criticised by locals and [part of the international solidarity movement](#)

Humanitarian civil society organisations (CSOs) have moral and ethical credibility, technical skills and the ability to mobilise financial resources quickly. Turning the spotlight on their cynical public relations and management practices should help improve transparency and accountability: to the 'northern' public that funds their work, and to the 'southern' communities in whose name the humanitarian CSOs collect funds.

Are the Oxfam orgy-managers only a small proportion of a highly committed team? Of course! Is the British government exploiting this crisis to weaken the centre and centre-left CSOs that have exposed the worst consequences of neoliberal globalisation? Of course! Is Oxfam the worst offender among the humanitarian CSOs? Probably not.

But these aren't the most important questions. More important is to ask: how can humanitarian CSOs and other civil society groups increase their accountability and legitimacy to their members and to the communities where they work? A short-term decline in fundraising and grants for a few of the most famous European charities would be a price worth paying for that.

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