Commentary

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Empowering Difference: Gender Equality and Culture in Humanitarian Action[1]

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Abstract

Despite increasing attention to gender issues in the humanitarian sector, the notion of gender equality as a humanitarian goal remains largely rejected, as some argue it would require interfering with cultural values and practices, and thus lie beyond the remit of humanitarianism. This paper questions this by examining the close relationship between certain humanitarian goals, and cultural values and practices. It ultimately calls for a gender-transformative humanitarian action that recognises and supports local feminist actors, in an effort to transform gender relations both in local communities and within humanitarianism itself.

Keywords: feminism, gender equality, humanitarianism, culture, colonialism, imperialism

Introduction

Despite increasing attention to gender issues in the humanitarian sector, the notion of gender equality as a humanitarian goal remains largely rejected. Some humanitarians argue that transforming gender relations goes against the humanitarian principles (see Fal-Dutra Santos, 2019 for a critique of this position). This is only part of the argument, which also emphasises the cultural nature of gender norms and the duty to respect local cultures.[2] Examples include discourses that portray gender-based violence (GBV) as cultural practice (Ward, 2002: 9) and gender equality programming as 'akin to "social engineering" and [going] against cultural norms' (IASC, 2006: 1). While acknowledging the importance of respect for the cultures and values of local communities when serving them, I argue that transforming certain gender norms and related cultural practices is essential to achieving humanitarian goals. However, gender-transformative humanitarian action must build on and support existing cultural values, practices and movements that challenge patriarchy. Finally, I also recognise that engaging in gender-transformative action requires humanitarian actors to challenge patriarchy within the sector itself.

Due to limited space, the references cited in this text may not do justice to the richness of existing literature, especially by feminist scholars. Moreover, important topics or questions remain to be explored by further research, including the practical ways in which humanitarianism can engage in gender-transformative action, its complementarity to the longstanding work of feminist activists, and the relationship between humanitarian action and other cultural identity factors, such as race, ethnicity, class, caste, age, disability and legal status.

Definitions

Building on Enloe (2004: 4), 'patriarchy' refers to a system of power relations based on gender norms, and which perpetuates the privileging of hegemonic masculinities, heteronormativity, cisgender-normativity and normative endosex bodies. Patriarchy is the foundation of gender inequalities, understood as the inequalities rooted in people's sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) and sex – and/or 'the degree to which they conform with gender norms and the patriarchal binary approach to gender and sexuality' (Fal-Dutra Santos, 2019). Gender-transformative action refers to efforts to challenge the norms that underpin gender inequalities.

'Culture' is defined as the social heritage, behaviour, values, habits, ideas and/or symbols, among other factors (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952) that characterise a social group. Despite the plurality of definitions of culture, it is generally agreed that gender (and sex) are cultural constructs (Butler, 2006: 8–10) – and so are gender norms and patriarchy more broadly. Therefore, gender-transformative action involves challenging cultural norms and practices.

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For the purposes of this article, humanitarianism, or humanitarian action, refers to the practices of institutionalised aid agencies and the modern humanitarian system they constitute, whose origins are commonly attributed to the creation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (Barnett, 2011: 1). This system is the sphere where the arguments about respect for other cultures have their most detrimental impact on the gender-transformative potential of humanitarian action.

Humanitarianism's Relationship with Cultures

Modern humanitarianism is bound together with colonialism and imperialism, shaped by Western, Christian values (Davey *et al.*, 2013). Early humanitarianism embodied the salvation mentality (Nader and Savinar, 2016: 53), or 'civilising ideology' (Barnett, 2011), of colonialism/imperialism, which sought *inter alia* to impose a specific set of (Western) values and practices on other cultures. The legacy of colonialism persists in the 'Occidental … thinking, finance, capacity and geographical origin' of many major humanitarian organisations (Slim, 2015b: 13). The humanitarian sector has grown increasingly aware of, and made significant efforts to overcome, its colonial and imperial roots. This includes changes in the way humanitarian actors interact with other cultures, especially since the 1990s. For example, the IFRC 1994 Code of Conduct states: 'We will endeavour to respect the culture, structures and customs of the communities and countries we are working in' (IFRC, 1994: 4). Later guidance documents, such as the UNHCR *Handbook for Emergencies* (UNHCR, 1999) and the Sphere *Handbook* (The Sphere Project, 2004), also included similar considerations, largely in view of ensuring culturally appropriate responses. Although recent, humanitarianism's attention to the respect for local cultures has been a welcome departure from its colonial origins and history of imposition of western values.

Nonetheless, humanitarian actors may face a dilemma when some cultures contradict the standards of humanitarian principles, ethics and international humanitarian, refugee and human rights law. In such situations, humanitarians may have to uphold their own values and practices, even if in contradiction with local cultures (Slim, 1998). This includes situations where humanitarianism's growing commitment to gender equality may be at odds with local cultural norms. This may occur when a culture 'only involves men in humanitarian decision-making', 'gives preference to male children in emergency food distributions' or deliberately discriminates against people of perceived or actual non-normative SOGIESC – in which case, such customs would conflict with fundamental rights and need to be challenged (Slim, 2015a: 77, 79).

Recent humanitarian policy also argues for *not* complying with local cultural values and practices when they 'violate the rights of women and girls' (UNHCR, 2007: 7) or are otherwise biased against 'girls, boys or specific castes' (Sphere Association, 2018: 61). The precedent of upholding human rights over respecting cultures is also featured in more recent codes of conduct, either explicitly (e.g. UNHCR, 2004: 4) or implicitly (e.g. Oxfam, 2018: 1), and specifically when 'local culture promotes gender inequality' (UNDP, 2017: 24). Thus, there are conditions when transforming certain cultural values and practices, especially gender norms and inequalities, may be necessary for the achievement of humanitarian goals.

The Cultural Side of Humanitarianism

To demonstrate that transforming certain cultural values and practices is essential to achieving humanitarian goals, I explore the cultural nature of three concepts: violence, vulnerability, and humanitarianism itself. I argue that the violence that humanitarianism seeks to prevent or mitigate, the vulnerabilities it seeks to reduce, and the values it seeks to promote, are also cultural. Therefore, pursuing these goals requires humanitarianism to transform cultural values and practices that justify violence, compound vulnerabilities and/or are incompatible with humanitarian values.

Violence as a Cultural Phenomenon

One of the goals of modern humanitarianism is to prevent or put a stop to the threats to which people are exposed during humanitarian crises. These threats are often linked to the harmful behaviour of weapon bearers and other actors, who may act as perpetrators of abuses (Slim and Bonwick, 2005: 52). Thus, in order to understand the role of humanitarianism in transforming cultures, we must also understand violence as a cultural phenomenon. Cultural norms inform the way fighting is conducted during conflict; making up different 'cultures of war' (Greenberg Research, 1999). Culture can also be invoked by weapon bearers to justify excessive violence (Slim, 1998), the extortion of civilians (Harroff-Tavel, 2007: 6–7) and child recruitment (Wessells, 2006: 5). Therefore, transforming cultures is essential to reducing threats, since it helps influence the behaviour of perpetrators of violence. This is reflected in the very history of modern humanitarianism, marked by the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross

(ICRC), originally conceived as 'the promoter of an idea' (Bugnion, 2003: xxvii), that 'even wars have limits' (ICRC, 2019). Humanitarianism, thus, can be understood as aimed at 'spread[ing] a culture … of restraint in war' (Slim, 1998).

Gender norms and inequalities play a role in shaping threats and the behaviour of perpetrators. Feminist scholarship has made significant contributions to our understanding of how gender norms shape – and are shaped by – wars. For example, images of heroic masculinities (i.e. the idea that men fight wars to protect vulnerable women and children – also constitutive of the 'myth of protection') motivate recruitment into military forces and help maintain their self-esteem (Tickner, 2001: 49, 57). These are complemented by images of 'innocent women' (Carpenter, 2006), crucial to the image of heroic masculinity and the 'myth of protection', or images of 'mothers-of-soldiering-sons' or supporting wives and girlfriends (Enloe, 2004: chapter 12). More relevantly, gender norms shape specific violent behaviour of concern to humanitarian actors, such as sexual violence during conflict (Enloe, 2004: chapter 7).

Despite the growing recognition of the impact of culture on the behaviour of primary duty bearers (e.g. Terry and McQuinn, 2018), humanitarian efforts remain confined to engaging primary duty bearers themselves, and to influencing specific forms of behaviour and cultures, such as the conduct of hostilities and cultures of war. Humanitarians largely fail to target wider social norms and values, including those of patriarchy, that influence the behaviour of duty bearers. They also fail to engage wider social groups, including civilians, who not only perpetuate such norms and values, but can also be sources of threats themselves, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Vulnerability as a Cultural Construct

Modern humanitarianism also aims to reduce people's vulnerability – i.e. their level of exposure to different threats (Slim and Bonwick, 2005: 53). In this sense, humanitarianism's goals include spreading not only a 'culture of restraint in war', but also a 'culture of disaster preparedness' and/or 'resilience' (e.g. Birkmann *et al.*, 2015). The social vulnerability paradigm used in disaster studies emphasises how vulnerability is impacted by social dimensions (e.g. Fordham *et al.*, 2013). These include cultural factors and, more specifically, gender norms and inequalities (e.g. Tobin-Gurley and Enarson, 2013; Enarson *et al.*, 2018), although also influenced by other power dynamics, such as those of race, class and disability. As Nadine Puechguirbal observes: 'Women [and other people marginalised by patriarchy] are not more vulnerable per se … ; they are made more vulnerable because of pre-existing inequalities in so-called peaceful societies' (2010: 176).

In certain contexts, some women may take longer to flee a threat (and thus have fewer chances of surviving) because they make efforts to protect their children, as well as the elderly and sick – a behaviour rooted in socially constructed ideas of motherhood and of women's roles as caretakers (Pincha, 2008: 21–2). Some people of perceived or actual non-normative SOGIESC may be forced into living conditions more vulnerable to disasters and other threats (Enarson *et al.*, 2018: 211–12); may refuse (Rumbach and Knight, 2014: 51; Gaillard *et al.*, 2017: 436) or be refused humanitarian assistance (Ritholtz, 2020); may be denied access to healthcare by their own family (Irani, 2018); or may have restricted access to formal economic activities, hampering their ability to cope with and recover from crises (Rumbach and Knight, 2014: 56–9). Even men of perceived or actual *normative* SOGIESC may be negatively affected by the image of heroic masculinities (Tobin-Gurley and Enarson, 2013: 147). Power imbalances, ideas of masculinity and femininity, homophobia and transphobia – all stemming from patriarchy – may also fuel GBV against women, men and people of perceived or actual non-normative SOGIESC (IASC, 2015: 5–6).

Gender norms and inequalities, rooted and expressed in cultural values and practices, underpin and exacerbate people's vulnerabilities – but also influence their resilience. For example, the 'ability [of some gender-fluid individuals] to shift from male to female tasks and responsibilities' can be an asset in responding to disasters (Gaillard *et al.*, 2017: 435). Similarly, women's roles of caretakers can have a positive impact on their capacity as first responders. Thus, transforming cultures is vital to reducing vulnerabilities and strengthening a 'culture of resilience'.

Humanitarianism as Culture

Understanding humanitarianism as a culture on its own is also essential to understanding its role in transforming (other) cultures. Though not homogenous (Barnett, 2011: 10–11, 21), humanitarianism builds on its 'humanitarian heritage', and stands for a set of humanitarian values (Walker, 2004; Wortel, 2009). Humanitarianism is a culture that values humanity in all its forms, that champions non-discrimination, that advances restraint in war and many other values codified in international law. 'Promoting' (Bugnion, 2003: xxvii) or 'spreading' (Slim, 1998) this humanitarian culture, therefore, inevitably requires transforming cultural values and practices that do not correspond to those of humanitarianism.

Humanitarian action has historically faced opposition to the ideas it sought to promote. For instance, in 1863, French authorities opposed the idea of an independent

body of volunteers to assist the wounded during conflict (Hutchinson, 1996: 32–3). The principle of protection of civilians, core to today's humanitarian action, is still challenged by 'sizeable minorities' who continue to accept military actions that pose risks to civilian populations, such as attacks in populated areas and sanctions (Greenberg Research, 1999). Humanity, the most widely accepted humanitarian principle, emphasises the need to address the suffering of *all* human beings. However, this may be challenged when belligerents define humanity as an exclusive characteristic of a group of people, and use it to enable violence against a dehumanised 'other' (Fast, 2016: 114). The principle of impartiality, also vital to humanitarian action, can also be challenged by cultures who may have diverging ideas of who deserves relief, as it was the case in Darfur (De Waal, 1989: chapter 8).

Humanitarianism is also a culture committed to gender equality, not only in its operations (e.g. IASC, 2017) but also internally (e.g. United Nations, 2017). Thus, its own values and practices may also be at odds with the gender norms and inequalities of other cultures. Gender norms and inequalities reinforce an oppression incompatible with the humanitarian principles of humanity and neutrality (Fal-Dutra Santos, 2019) and a marginalisation that hinders humanitarian impartiality – as evident in the ways gender norms and inequalities compound the vulnerabilities of different groups of people, discussed above. Therefore, transforming cultural values and practices, including gender norms and inequalities, is inevitable in the pursuit of spreading humanitarianism's own culture.

Nonetheless, humanitarianism is also a culture fraught with patriarchal values and practices, such as a hypermasculine working culture that may hinder the professional and personal lives of women working in the sector (Roth, 2015: 111–27), negatively impact the mental health of male and female aid workers (Gritti, 2015; Houldey, 2019), and embolden the kind of abusive and exploitative behaviour condemned by the #AidToo movement (Houldey, 2019: 350). Humanitarianism's working culture is also heteronormative and cisgendernormative, sometimes inciting homophobic and/or transphobic encounters and violent behaviour (e.g. Mizzi, 2013; Roth, 2015: 61–2, 104; Rengers *et al.*, 2019).

These patriarchal values and practices within humanitarian culture reflect the colonial/imperial, Western and Christian cultures after which it was shaped, and which helped shape patriarchy around the world – from furthering women's marginalisation in colonial and postcolonial states (e.g. Mama, 2018), through contributing to an aversion to, and criminalisation of, sexual orientations other than heterosexual (e.g. Han and O'Mahoney, 2018), helping build modern conceptualisations of masculinity (Thornhill, 2012: 95), and imposing a binary approach to gender and sexuality (Ihejirika, 2020).

Empowering Difference

Understanding humanitarianism as a culture itself also compels us to acknowledge its particularity. While humanitarianism – and the rights it seeks to uphold – may have been constructed around the idea of a universal subject, the practice of humanitarian action and international law 'is uneven because individual nations and groups of people within them are unequally positioned in relation to one another' (Hyndman, 1998: 242). What Fast observes about the principle of humanity also applies to humanitarianism more broadly: '[I]ts aspirations are universal yet its enactment is rooted in inequality and difference, which are invariably particular' (Fast, 2016: 120).

Nonetheless, acknowledging humanitarianism's particularity raises questions about the sector's role in transforming cultures. If humanitarianism is simply another culture among many, what legitimacy does it have to change other cultures? If humanitarianism itself is patriarchal, as discussed above, with what authority can it promote gender equality?

I believe this legitimacy and authority can only come from local feminist voices themselves. This includes local feminist and women's organisations such as the numerous grantee partners of FRIDA, the Young Feminist Fund (FRIDA, n.d.), as well as members of groups such as the Shifting the Power Coalition (StPC, 2020) and the Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN, 2019), who have been fighting the power inequalities within the sector and strengthening women's voices and leadership as humanitarian actors. Initiatives like FRIDA, StPC and FHN support local feminists through funding, collective action and advocacy, and testify to a shift in the sector towards locally led feminist humanitarian action – already supported by some Global North members of FHN and StPC. Local feminist voices also include those of women and men who may not be part of registered organisations, but who do speak up against gender inequalities in their communities. Such voices have also been supported by humanitarian organisations such as Oxfam and Action Aid (e.g. Fanning and Hastie, 2012; O'Leary, 2019).

Embracing humanitarianism's particularity, although seemingly contradictory, in fact helps the sector transform its attitudes towards these voices and adopt approaches such as those described above.

Humanitarian actors tend to essentialise local identities and cultures, a move that fails to acknowledge difference *within* social groups and cultures, often

subsuming them to an 'abstract, "race"-neutral, gender-blind concept of humanity' (Hyndman, 1998: 247). At the same time, a conceptualisation of humanitarianism as universal, supports the idea that humanitarian values and practices are superior to those of other cultures. Consequently, local cultures are essentialised as, and subsumed to, inherently vulnerable and incompatible with gender equality – which is presented as an external, Western value (Olivius, 2017: 60).

Feminist scholarship has made significant advances in both challenging the notion of feminism as a Western movement (see Ehlers, 2016: 354) as well as documenting the emergence of feminist movements in the Global South (see Mohanty, 1991: 43). However, the essentialisation of local cultures fails to acknowledge the existence and power of such feminist voices – which humanitarian actors continue to ignore (e.g. Lambert *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, it allows for cultural relativism to be used 'as a shield for oppressive or systematically abusive behaviour towards more vulnerable members of a specific culture' (Leiber, 2017: 1523) – thus overlooking how 'women [and other people marginalised by patriarchy] themselves may have a different perspective' (IASC, 2006: 1).

Therefore, a gender-transformative humanitarianism must be based on the recognition of its particularity, which counters the sector's sense of superiority and paternalistic attitude towards other cultures and local feminist forces. This recognition paves the way forward for a gender-transformative humanitarianism that comes from a position of humility, recognising and supporting local feminist actors, in an effort to transform gender relations both in local cultures as well as within humanitarianism itself.

It is not promoting gender equality that is the colonial act, but rather the assumption that local cultures do not support gender equality. Thus, a humanitarianism committed to moving past its colonial history must recognise the 'role of local actors as agents of change towards gender equality' (Olivius, 2016: 13) and support local feminist forces to transform gender relations in their own cultures and within humanitarian action itself. Rather than 'subsuming', humanitarianism must empower difference.

Conclusion

I have argued that transforming some cultural values and practices is vital to achieving certain humanitarian goals, such as reducing threats and vulnerabilities, and promoting humanitarian values. In fact, humanitarianism has long been challenging cultures, as it attempts to 'spread a culture of restraint in war', build a 'culture of resilience' or advance humanitarian culture itself. I also argued that the transformation of gender relations should be done through the empowering of local feminist voices.

I hope this article can contribute to the way humanitarian practitioners and scholars think of the relationship between humanitarianism, culture and gender equality, and open the discussion on gender-transformative action beyond the shield of cultural relativism. I also hope it can encourage further reflections, research and exchanges on the potential synergies between gender-transformative humanitarian work and wider efforts for gender equality, including by the development and peacebuilding sectors and wider feminist movements in their various forms. Finally, I hope this paper can stimulate further research on the relationship between humanitarian action, culture and other systems of power relations – such as, but not limited to, those based on race, ethnicity, class, caste, age, disability and legal status.

Notes

1 The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily correspond to those of his current or previous employers.
2 The term 'local' is used to indicate cultures, communities and feminist voices typical to a specific geographical area. However, the use of the term 'local' is not intended to diminish the wide reach some of these cultures, communities and, especially, feminist voices may have. I thank Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos, Program Coordinator and Policy Specialist at the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, for her insight on this matter.

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