

# Confronting sexual violence and abuse in the aid industrial complex

Towards transnational feminist responses

Nancy Kachingwe<sup>i</sup>

In recent months, scandals have erupted around revelations of sexual abuse and violence among international aid and humanitarian agencies, prompting questions about how best to tackle cultures of exploitation in the sector. These questions have largely been met with technical responses like “safeguarding” policies, while feminist analysis of the roots of violence against women—or indeed the voices of women from the Global South themselves—has been sidelined. The sexual abuse crisis is fundamentally about women, whether as survivors, “beneficiaries” of aid programming, in-country NGO staff, or experts and activists in the field of violence against women and girls. Women, therefore, have much to offer in forging a path to a more inclusive, supportive and responsive development sector. In a small attempt to redress the glaring omission of Southern women’s voices, GADN has asked Zimbabwe-based feminist activist Nancy Kachingwe to share her thoughts in this thinkpiece.

Nancy argues that the current crisis around sexual violence and abuse in the aid sector reflects an entrenched heteropatriarchal hostility to women’s rights—and reveals that the sector’s apparent commitment to gender equality does not run deep. Feminists have been excluded from meaningful decision-making even while many international NGOs have instrumentalised the language of gender to access more resources from donors. What is missing is a response shaped by transnational feminist solidarity, going beyond safeguarding to tackle deeper and more pervasive problems of misogyny, race, class and imperialism that give rise to sexual misconduct and cultures of impunity. As Nancy argues, “Working both inside and outside organisational frameworks, it should be our mission as feminists to demolish

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**barriers of entrenched privilege, power and exclusion to open real debates about the sector, its frequently abusive culture, its politics of race and gender privilege, its denialism and its future.”**

## **Gender-based violence and sexual abuse at the centre of the struggle for women’s rights**

*“[The] ‘autonomous mobilisation of feminists’ has been at the heart of the strategic, legislative and policy changes that have occurred nationally and transnationally. This mobilisation should never be delinked from the services being provided (in many cases by volunteers) in women-led NGOs, for example counselling at rape crisis and other such centres, help-lines, housing and support in refuges and shelters, support groups, and community-based outreach and frontline advocacy services; given that many of the women involved in these services have helped to shape even our very analysis of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Yet women-led, independent VAWG services are often poorly funded. Indeed, while the mainstreaming of VAWG that has led to some improvement in state-led responses, such as policing, can be claimed as a success, in the post-Beijing era, it can also be argued that one of the consequences of this mainstreaming has been the sidelining of the very organisations that argued for it!”<sup>1</sup>*

These words, from Imkaan’s Marai Larasi, highlight a key problem: that feminists have been integral to putting women’s rights on international agendas—but, at the same time, shut out of the processes and decisions that shape what will be done to support women’s rights. Since putting the issue on the international development agenda three decades ago, the international women’s rights movement has made VAWG, gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) the leading gender equality/justice issues on the international development agenda. These issues remain at the forefront of women’s mobilisation and a continued terrain of contestation between women’s movements, the state and patriarchal social institutions. Furthermore, whereas gender inequality was once sidelined as secondary to other human rights struggles, it is now viewed as a core issue amongst the resurgent social protests happening globally against a long list of inequalities and injustice. Thankfully, there is much more clarity on the link between women’s oppression, state repression and violations of indigenous rights, racial discrimination, abuses against civic and political rights, economic and social injustice, environmental and land concerns, and religious fundamentalism.

Activist work on VAWG/GBV and sexual rights and freedoms is now well-established across the globe, covering policy and legislation, as well as protective, counselling and legal support services, not to mention the vast body of cross-disciplinary feminist research and theory in every social, cultural, political and economic context imaginable.

This wealth of practical and analytical experience is evidenced across the UN system, where activists and experts have ensured that VAWG/GBV and other gendered dimensions of global inequality are included in the work of all its agencies, processes for setting international norms and standards, reporting, reviews and resolutions.<sup>2</sup> In addition to gender-focused bodies like UN Women, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Committee on the Status of Women, there have also been ground-breaking initiatives on VAWG/GBV across other agencies such as the International Labour Organisation, the UN Population Fund and the World Health Organisation.

The question now is whether and how the aid sector—and, more specifically for this discussion, NGOs—can engage the knowledge, experience and practice of the hundreds and thousands of feminist activists, working in networks and communities on VAWG/GBV and sexual rights globally, and especially in the South. Are NGOs prepared to work together meaningfully, or have they rather taken on a siege mentality, closing themselves behind a wall of well-intentioned statements or revised HR and safeguarding policies in the hope that the crisis will pass and normal business can resume? Most importantly, has the sector understood in full the gravity of the problem of sexual harassment as part of VAWG/GBV and a fundamental violation of the human rights of women and girls, not simply a misdemeanour or bad behaviour?<sup>3</sup>

## The gender cash cow: feminism without feminists

Women's rights, gender equality and indeed feminism are now on the agenda, but this shift has not resulted in significant funding increases for women's rights organisations, raising questions about the sector's sincerity and approach on the issue:

*“Members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) provided USD 35.5 billion in aid to gender equality in 2014; this was an all-time high. Around 28%—nearly USD 10 billion—went to civil society organisations (CSOs). The majority of this aid supported international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) or CSOs based in the donor country. In 2014, 8% of gender focused aid to civil society went directly to CSOs in developing countries. Little was reported as going directly to women's rights organisations—USD 192 million in 2014.”<sup>4</sup>*

The development, humanitarian and rights sector comprises a wide variety of actors that occupies an increasing amount of space within development policymaking, financing and programme delivery. Some critics of the sector have coined the phrase “the aid industrial complex”, a term that might be harsh but also accurate in articulating the reality of the sector's racial and gendered hierarchy, as well as its often colonial and imperial characteristics.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the sector certainly resembles an industry

in its own right, worth tens of billions of dollars in grants, loans, contracts and investments, all of which can account for a significant part of some recipient countries' economies. If more donors and NGOs are putting money into women's and girls' empowerment, it is also because this work is generally viewed favourably by politicians and social commentators, even in a context of scepticism about aid.<sup>6</sup> So all in all, women's and girls' programming has been financially and reputationally lucrative in bringing in flows of aid money to organisations that are not themselves women's rights or feminist organisations.

Indeed, the many accounts of how the sector has responded to complaints of sexual violence indicate that the sector's new gender sensitivity does not go very deep. It is worth remembering that the introduction of gender mainstreaming into the work of many development and rights organisations over time has met great resistance, and often only transpired thanks to donor pressure. The current crisis around sexual violence and abuse in the aid sector confirms an enduring and entrenched heteropatriarchal hostility to women's dignity and gender equality. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. The sector remains the privileged domain of whiteness and maleness. Even as flying the women's rights flag has brought in increasing amounts of private and public funding, along with power and prestige for development organisations, feminist participation and influence continues to be contingent on accepting the terms of the sector's old boys' clubs—by permission rather than by right. Thus, sexual violence and abuse have been treated as a low-priority issue, something swept under the carpet, almost taboo, because it threatens the imperialist and patriarchal interests of men at the top across the value chain.

## Getting to the roots of abuse and impunity

The evolution of the VAWG/GBV agenda (including sexual violence and abuse) as it has been mainstreamed into international development may also explain how the sector has sleepwalked into its current sexual violence and abuse crisis. Many feminists have pointed out that VAWG/GBV is a structural political economy problem and not simply a behavioural or cultural problem.<sup>7</sup> Too often, INGOs have adopted a paternalist white saviour posture to VAWG/GBV and SRHR in developing countries, treating them as principally a problem of social norms and attitudes peculiar to the black and brown peoples of the Global South, with “their” harmful traditional practices, backward patriarchal cultures and failed states. By posing sexual violence and abuse in the South as a problem of the racialised other, and by contrast, presenting NGOs as white saviours, the sector has allowed itself to drift down a treacherously slow river of denial and obfuscation about its own sexual abuse problem until it has hit the fierce rapids of reality.

Pumla Dineo Gqola is correct in stating that society has to stop thinking “that men who rape women, children and other men are a small fringe minority of men we do not know.” She writes:

*“It is also important for men who choose not to rape to stop being complicit and sometimes directly undermining attempts to end rape culture. Men who are not violent need to stop responding angrily to those who seek to end rape, accusing us of blaming all men, and requiring that we start by saying “not all men”. Men who do not rape have nothing to be ashamed of when rapists are held accountable. And they need to direct their anger at the men who made all of them ‘look bad’”.*<sup>8</sup>

Not only is sexual abuse alive and well in our supposedly progressive and enlightened sector, but our organisations have sheltered and enabled predators; they have been exporters of sexual violence to the most traumatised regions under the guise of humanitarianism and they have nurtured cultures where, to quote Gqola again, “Men are routinely rewarded for being violent with better or unaffected career trajectories, loyalties and self-appointed armies coming to their defence”.<sup>9</sup> Now that these truths are being acknowledged, we have to bring back feminist movements’ politicised and post-colonial analysis of VAWG/GBV and sexual violence as part of a global system of reproduction of domination and inequality rather than a problem of those deemed barbaric with their implicit primitive social norms. As the Ethiopia-based writer and activist Billene Seyoum writes:

*“Some of us cannot count the times we have sat with an African woman working in the aid sector and heard the inequalities and abuse in the workplace. Sexual harassment in the sector is getting the attention it deserves but what makes up a toxic working environment includes bullying and the everyday micro-aggressions that are meant to put you in “your place”. Those that show you the old boys’ club is not old at all; it is alive and well. It is the realisation that your kind being in leadership positions in this sector is yet to transcend beyond symbolism and tokenism.”*<sup>10</sup>

What currently seems to be missing from many of the statements issued by NGOs and other aid institutions in response to the latest revelations is that sexual violence and abuse in the sector go far beyond a failure to apply established safeguarding measures: if the aid sector has a safeguarding problem, it is firstly because it has a misogyny problem—and a race problem, and a class problem, and an imperialism problem. That is what has made the aid sector a breeding ground for sexual misconduct and cover-ups thereof. An important task clearly remains for feminist activism: framing the women’s rights agenda to ensure that claims are not made invisible, instrumentalised within broader development goals or addressed in a tokenistic manner.

What do we do when some of our closest comrades, collaborators and colleagues witness the most damaging and traumatic rights violations against women—and for the sake of their own privilege and self-preservation, cover up these violations? These same colleagues who condemn the state’s closing of political space for civil society have themselves been hostile, exclusionary and grudging to feminist voices. Why should organisations that provide cover for rapists, abusers and bullies ever be allowed to receive one tenth of a cent for women’s rights work, or any humanitarian work at all? These questions might seem like heresy, but today there should be no sacred cows in confronting these realities.

Scholar and women’s rights advocate Srilatha Batliwala’s words, on the meaning of empowerment in development discourse, are useful here:

*“It is time to regroup, rethink, and engage the dialectic or else our movements will wither away and die. We may appear weak and marginal at the moment, but we must realise it is only a moment—and an opportunity—that is challenging us to come back, with more powerful strategies and a sharper, more relevant discourse, building on the learning of the past decades, and willing to jettison ideas and approaches (such as the focus on mechanisms of formal equality) to which we were wed in the past.”<sup>1</sup>*

## Transnational feminisms building new civil society futures

The crisis around sexual exploitation and abuse, in which we find ourselves ensnared as development workers and women’s rights advocates, comes at a time of global conflict, uncertainty and extremism, in which sexual violence will continue to be wielded as a weapon of political and economic domination. As feminist scholar Charmaine Pereira writes:

*“The present conjuncture is marked by crises of various kinds: deepening existential insecurity arises from intensified capitalist relations of extraction and exploitation that have left devastation in their wake. Facing the challenges ahead requires renewed determination to craft the theoretical frameworks for deepening our understanding of our varied contexts in order to dismantle existing relations of oppression and domination.”<sup>2</sup>*

Against that backdrop, tackling sexual violence and abuse in the aid sector will require a transnational feminist response for sustainable, locally grounded solutions. There is a need to come together across North-South divides because the sector’s actors, financing and spheres of action span vastly different contexts across the globe; secondly, such an approach would make the best use of our collective feminist expertise in the areas of VAWG/GBV and women’s empowerment. Most crucially,

however, transnational feminist solidarity can prevent a recurrence of the typical response when development and humanitarian sectors have faced similar sexual violence and abuse scandals in the past: the male-dominated leadership has given reassurances that they are serious about resolving a crisis, despite barely acknowledging it existed, and then proceeded to keep out the very voices that sounded the alarm.<sup>13</sup>

The opportunity of the current moment, painful as it has been, is that denial of something that was common knowledge is no longer possible. Leaders can no longer irritably swat aside accusations of sexual misconduct in their organisations with the habitual dismissal of “nothing to see here”. That much has been admitted, but whether or not NGOs will grapple with the problem the way it deserves is another question altogether. We should not be surprised, even in the present moment, that uncomfortable feminist voices are being resisted with the same labelling, ostracising, deflecting and silencing that has brought us to this point. Working both inside and outside organisational frameworks, it should be our mission as feminists to demolish barriers of entrenched privilege, power and exclusion to open real debates about the sector, its frequently abusive culture, its politics of race and gender privilege, its denialism and its future.

As global capital pushes forward its destabilising project of neoliberal structural adjustment, global civil society faces major challenges. Any notion that the development sector will not be affected, or indeed fundamentally changed in unexpected ways, is delusional. As the #MeToo movement shows, civil societies are also changing in ways that challenge the privileged position of the aid industrial complex, including NGOs, which will be under continued pressure to show they are fit for purpose. Feminists have crisscrossed the terrain between social movements, civil society, the state and intergovernmental organisations, sometimes in contestation and sometimes in alliances—but always aware that the structures of capitalist patriarchy will seek to either co-opt or subjugate women’s rights to reassert its economic and political hegemony, rather than to effect real change. Feminism does not owe the aid industrial complex anything. We must carefully exercise our options in deciding how and with whom we work, especially when it turns out our supposed allies are not our friends.

As feminists, our mission is to fight for the dignity, emancipation, liberation and humanity of every woman and every girl suffering from racial, imperial, hetero-patriarchal discrimination and oppression, even when this comes through the very institutional frameworks that we have sometimes made our political activist homes. Those homes have by and large failed us. We have to be prepared to step outside these spaces and lead transnationally to give the sexual violence and abuse in our midst the kind of concerted response it deserves.

## Learn more

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