

GADN'S WOMEN OF COLOUR FORUM

JUNE 2020

COLLECTIVE STATEMENT ON SYSTEMIC RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY IN THE UK INTERNATIONAL AID SECTOR

Summary

As part of its commitment to a more critical understanding of race, post-colonialism and intersectionality within international development discourse and practice, the Gender and Development Network (GADN) supported the creation of the Women of Colour (WOC) Forum in 2019. The Forum is an autonomous body that brings together more than 100 self-identifying WOC who work in the UK international aid sector. In addition to providing a space for healing and joint solidarity, the Forum also works to highlight the racialised and gendered nature of the UK international aid sector and seeks to make it more equitable, representative, and accountable. Its members seek more than just 'diversity and inclusion' policies or changing recruitment processes. Instead, the Forum actively explores structural change.

The collective statement below is from WOC across GADN's member agencies and speaks to our own lived experiences. It sets out the Forum's key concerns about how systemic racism and White supremacy manifest within the UK international aid sector and concludes with a set of nine recommendations for the senior leadership and boards of UK INGOs and development organisations.

As a Forum, we believe these recommendations are a critical part of understanding and addressing long standing structural concerns, both within the organisations in which we work and across the sector. We believe these are important steps in beginning to reimagine a sector that is no longer shaped by its colonial past but by the need for reparations for injustices, past and present.

Introduction

The recent mass Black Lives Matter protests, following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and many others in the USA, have brought to the fore long-standing feelings of anger, hurt and frustration about the global state of racial injustice. These events have been unfolding in the midst of a global pandemic which has cruelly exposed the ways in which systemic racism manifests globally, with Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) being disproportionately impacted by its effects.

Despite the ongoing focus on recent events in the USA, it is important to recognise that systemic racism and White supremacy are also the very foundation upon which modern-day Britain is built, and the UK international aid sector is no exception.

Time after time, the international aid sector has failed to make the space for rigorous discussions about systemic racism and White supremacy and the ways in which they work to uphold structures and authorities – international, national and local – that perpetuate the racism and paternalism of international aid and development. As members of the WOC Forum, we can no longer be silenced about this continued harm. At this historic juncture, we are faced with a critical opportunity to be genuinely transformative and reshape as well as lay the groundwork for a decolonised and anti-racist international aid sector. However, we are yet to see adequate reflection and action from the organisations in which we work. This includes organisations that brand themselves as ‘intersectional’ and/or ‘feminist’ and as proponents of dismantling systemic power, who also benefit from the funding streams and reputation that such branding affords them.

As a sector, we claim to speak truth to power, but when Black women and women of colour do so we are systematically ignored, rebuked and hindered from reaching leadership positions because of the different standards to which we are held by comparison to White colleagues. The discomfort you may feel in response to this statement is important. So, we urge you to sit with it, listen, reflect, and then take action to help dismantle structural racism.

The colonial legacy of aid

The international aid sector is born out of a racist colonial history; an inconvenient truth which is routinely erased from how the sector understands itself and the work it does. While many aid organisations have examined the role of international financial institutions and the multilateral system in exacerbating inequalities between the Global South and North, this analysis is often whitewashed. Critically, it has failed to interrogate the violent colonial history which enabled the creation of these institutions for the explicit benefit of White people in the Global North, at the expense of BIPOC in the Global South. The racialised nature of this history cannot be ignored as it is an integral part of understanding how our current multilateral system functions, how the global majority is systematically silenced within it and the international aid sector’s complicity in this.

As international aid organisations, our branding, communications and ‘development’ propositions call for structural change as a prerequisite for empowerment and sustainable change at all levels of society. Yet we repeatedly fail to reflect on the sector’s long-term role and purpose as part of this change. This has had the effect of creating the aid industrial complex that we now work in; a sector driven by White-Saviour thinking and organising, riddled by White fragility, corporate interests, justice framed through a donor lens, and an unwillingness to critically challenge power in order to deliver meaningful structural change. It is imperative that we live by the values we call for, and review as well as reform the aid industrial complex to ensure that it is oriented towards delivering intersectional justice. Without this deeper introspection, it is impossible for the sector to learn, adapt and grow alongside a changing global landscape.

A reimagined aid sector

With the increased global demands for racial justice, now is a critical time to reimagine what a reformed international aid sector could look like. However, a real commitment to this work requires imagination, determination, the reallocation of resources and confronting as well as addressing difficult realities which have long plagued the sector. Just as emancipation from enslavement, independence from colonialism, all women’s right to vote, and LGBTI+ rights may have appeared too radical a shift in the socio-economic, cultural norms and interests of the day, so may such a change in the international aid sector seem impossible. However, history has shown us, such things are possible.

In the coming months, many of our organisations will be responding to the UK government’s recent decision to merge the Department for International Development (DFID) with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). As part of its collective response to this announcement, the UK international aid sector should continue to defend the UK aid budget but must be cautious about maintaining a blind allegiance to DFID as an institution as this runs the risk of further entrenching historic problems with the concept of aid itself. UK aid has always been intimately tied to British interests abroad and this merger threatens to make this even more explicit. If the sector is to be radically reimagined, this must be challenged and halted.

The recent public debates sparked by the Black Lives Matter protests have brought to the surface uncomfortable truths about the role of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and the British Empire in the making of modern-day Britain. This has squarely brought into focus the work and demands of reparatory justice advocates, and organisations. They have long called for Britain and other colonial powers to acknowledge, and compensate for, the horrors of the slave-trade and colonialism. Britain and other colonial powers acquired wealth and power at the expense of billions of BIPOC in the Global South. As such, Britain has a historic responsibility to all of its former colonies and so UK aid should be understood as the first step in trying to remedy both past and current ills – thus it is not charity, but a form of justice.

As part of its colonial legacy, the international aid sector's work has contributed to systematically undermining the role of national governments. Although the language of "national and local ownership" has become institutionalised within donor programming, this same language has now come to be used against countries and citizens in the Global South for their failure to 'develop' amidst the shackles of neo-colonial development dynamics. These words have become hollow: entire sectors like education and health are being driven more by INGOs and development organisations than by indigenous bodies. Entire canons of critical research in such sectors remain the intellectual property of donor agencies as opposed to the respective national Ministries and local people. A reimagined aid sector must recognise the hypocrisy of its past rhetoric, stop creating justifications for not "shifting power", and work with local organisations, networks and movements on a framework of ownership that is divested from the paternalism of aid. Thus, the international aid sector must actively talk about and plan exit strategies for its entire operation.

Systemic racism in the UK aid sector

In recent weeks, large parts of the international aid sector have rushed to produce solidarity statements in response to the global Black Lives Matters protests. While this initially suggested progress, there is still a lack of understanding across the sector about how its work is intrinsically tied to the same history which deliberately denigrated BIPOC. Further still, there is a clear lack of awareness about the ways in which the sector continues to uphold systemic racism and [White supremacy culture](#). Indeed, the terminologies themselves, whether BIPOC or the more mainstream 'BAME' (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) put 'Whiteness' at their centre, the norm or default against darker-skinned 'others'.

Rushed statements of solidarity, particularly without tangible commitments, are not enough. The international aid sector continues to be driven by a White-Saviour complex which prioritises and privileges the knowledge and experience of White people which in turn shapes job titles (such as experts and advisors held mostly by White people based in the Global North), pay structures, hiring practices and decision-making across organisations. Funding proposals are developed with budgets that allocate a disproportionate amount of funds to support Northern-based office staff (or its "decentralised offices" in the Global South) with a minimum percentage being transferred to local organisations and communities. At the same time, marketing and communications departments continue to dehumanise and disempower Black and brown bodies (often children) in their efforts to elicit support from generous White benefactors. This cannot be divorced from how, even unconsciously, Black and brown staff members are seen and understood by White colleagues.

Organisations need to go beyond rhetoric and initiate an ongoing process of assessing their own attitudes and practices through an intersectional lens, including ones that are gendered and racialised. The leadership within the UK international aid sector is predominantly White including a sizeable percentage of White women who have often weaponised White liberal feminism against Black women and women of colour within the organisations in which we work.

BIPOC CEOs alone cannot fix systemic racism within the organisations they lead and whose structures give them less power than their White predecessors. [A recent report by ACEVO](#) also identified that 68 percent of respondents had experienced, witnessed or heard stories about racism in their time in the charity sector. The very way in which the sector operates dehumanises BIPOC staff. This may be even more acute for BIPOC colleagues working in country programmes – outside the nucleus of power and decision-making in the UK.

Unchecked White supremacy culture has become a staple within many of the organisations that we work; promoting a toxic work culture which does untold harm to BIPOC in particular. Efforts to address this much needed change must trickle down to senior leadership and middle management, and not remain the unpaid responsibility of junior BIPOC staff, as is too often the case. Of course, concerns still remain that most senior leadership teams and middle management within the international aid sector are predominantly White and lack the lived experience or expertise to meaningfully work on such issues. There is a further risk that senior White staff will frame the issue through a White lens that fails to be nuanced and does not centre the experiences of Black and brown members of staff. This is why it is imperative that these issues are addressed by experienced BIPOC professionals with expertise in racial justice work. This must be part of longer-term strategies and actions geared at actively addressing the challenges outlined above.

Recommendations

Below is a list of nine recommendations about how the UK international aid sector can meaningfully address systemic racism and White supremacy that underscores so much of its work. There is an urgent need for **committed, resourced and measurable approaches** for the long-term structural changes required to tackle systemic racism in the sector.

This will require: recognising the colonial legacy which continues to shape the way aid is understood and given; confronting racism within our own organisations with budgets and expertise; valuing the knowledge of those in the Global South, shifting power towards organisations and governments in the Global South; and finally recognising that resource transfers to the Global South are needed as reparations for injustices, both past and present, rather than aid as a form of charity.

1. Acknowledge the sector's colonial legacy and set the intention, publicly, to decolonise the sector and your organisation's practise. In order to achieve this:

- Produce a public position paper which examines what a decolonised international aid sector looks like and your organisations role in achieving this. This paper should cover all areas of your organisation's work, from programming to procurement, human resources to the focus of your policy and advocacy work.
- Work in collaboration with professionals, particularly those in Higher Education, who have been developing their experience on decolonising university curricula.

2. Invest in mandatory, annual training and reflection sessions - designed and led by paid, expert, BIPOC - on race, power and privilege. It is critical that the unpaid labour of BIPOC staff is not relied upon to do this critical work. Training and reflection sessions should be for all staff, especially those in leadership positions, and must address:

- The colonial history of the aid sector, White supremacy culture as well as tackle systemic racism and overlapping systems of oppression. It is important to understand that the international aid sector's work cannot and should not immunise it from all forms of systemic racism – especially anti-blackness.

3. Introduce publicly available ethnicity pay gap reporting, with an assigned budget, and commit to conducting ex ante and ex post race and gender impact assessments on all large scale organisation-wide decisions. In order to achieve this:

- Ensure that pay gap reporting differentiates between ethnicities and does not collectively document the experiences of all 'BAME' staff as this blanket term erases differences.
- Organisation-wide race and gender impact assessments should be conducted on all decisions including, but not limited to, organisational restructures and furlough as well as redundancy schemes.

4. Make a strategic and public commitment, with a deadline and budget, to diversifying and making representative boards, leadership and management teams. In order to achieve this:

- By 2025, ensure that a minimum of 50 percent of your boards, leadership and management teams are made up of BIPOC, particularly those from further minoritised groups with different life experiences. This is particularly important because the overwhelming majority of our stakeholders in the international aid sector are BIPOC. This requires amending selection criteria that unconsciously favours White applicants – from education, to seeing lived experience as a valuable asset and instituting positive action measures.
- Develop mechanisms to prioritise the voices and influence of BIPOC, especially staff members in the Global South, as well as the people and communities you aim to serve - on organisational commitments like structure, strategic outcomes, board recruitment, funding, programme design and delivery.

5. Develop mandatory, anti-racist communications guidelines. In order to achieve this:

- Deconstruct and forbid the use of language and images - internally and externally - with colonial connotations and references. This language and these images serve to exoticise and dehumanise BIPOC especially when the same words and images are not used to describe Western countries and White people.
- Communicate to all your staff and supporters how such racially motivated words and images are part of a neo-colonial and racist discourse that shapes structure, thoughts, behaviours and actions.

6. Value the knowledge, lived experience and expertise of actors in the Global South. In order to achieve this:

- Consistently co-create work and design programmes and solutions collectively; do not relegate Global South actors into frontline implementers of what you think works.

7. Put words into actions by shifting power and resources to local organisations, movements and communities in the Global South, in-line with localisation commitments many UK international aid organisations have made. The international aid sector must move away from a traditional grant-making model which has allowed asymmetrical power dynamics between INGOs and local organisations to go by unchecked. In order to achieve this:

- Stop using your resources and influence to compete with local organisations for limited funding.
- Use what resources and influence you do have, to ensure that donors increase direct funding opportunities to local organisations whilst also requiring them to simplify onerous application and reporting processes which place immense bureaucratic burdens on small organisations.
- Ensure that any core grants you provide to local organisations from your unrestricted funds has limited reporting requirements. Trust that local organisations know where to prioritise spending.

8. Make a commitment to refuse funding that includes justifications and conditionalities that undermine the decision-making power of recipient countries.

In order to achieve this:

- Review and revise existing procurement conditionalities, trade-related backdoor agreements, or programming that has been designed primarily or secondarily for furthering UK business and security interests. All exploit the existing power imbalances and racial hierarchies between Southern and Northern countries.

9. Reimagine a new international aid sector. The recent DFID/FCO merger will require INGOs and development organisations to rethink their new role and purpose. It is imperative that the sector does not simply adapt to the model of the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which will be working to further entrench unequal power relations between the UK and the Global South.

- In order to reimagine the UK international aid sector in the age of Black Lives Matter, start by centering the issue of reparations and acknowledging how global systems of capitalism and colonialism have withheld and restricted power and resources to countries in the Global South.

Signed by,

The Gender and Development Network's *Women of Colour Forum*

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Anti-Blackness

A system of beliefs and practices that erode, and denigrate the humanity of Black people.

Decolonising Development

Decolonisation - or the study of postcolonialism - aims to examine and challenge the knowledge about the world produced through White colonial logic, which has marginalised BIPOC as well as the knowledge, experiences and practices from the Global South. In turn, decolonising development approaches seek to tackle these highly unequal structures and dynamics within the international aid sector whose work is intimately tied to the Global South.

Intersectionality

A term originally coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw - a Black US civil rights advocate and legal scholar - to describe the experiences of people living at the intersection of multiple and overlapping systems of oppression, including race, gender and class, amongst others.

Reparations

Political demands that entail repairing, healing, restoring and compensating a people injured by governments or corporations because of their group identity.

Systemic Racism

A complex interaction of culture, policies and institutions that disadvantage people based on their racial identity and ethnicity.

White Privilege

A political and socio-economic system in which White people enjoy structural advantage, both collectively and individually across a broad array of institutions and social settings, that other racial groups do not.

White Supremacy

An ideology which positions White people and their ideas, beliefs, and actions as being superior to people from all other racial groups.