



5-1-2023

## #AidToo: Analysis of Sexual Violence and Power Structures in the Global Aid Sector

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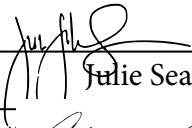

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Thesis title **#AidToo: Analysis of Sexual Violence and  
Power Structures in the Global Aid Sector**

Intended date of commencement **May 2023**

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**#AidToo: Analysis of Sexual Violence and Power Structures in the Global Aid Sector**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Anthropology

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

And

The Honors Program

Of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Caitlin N. McEvoy

May 4th, 2023

## **Abstract**

The global aid sector is meant to serve the world's most impoverished, exploited, and vulnerable peoples by providing assistance to those in poverty, internally displaced persons, refugees, and victims of natural disasters, wars, and famines. Aid organizations have been afforded a moral status as crucial entities for humanitarian crises, but they operate in patriarchal, oppressive structures that perpetuate gender inequality, neocolonial mentalities, and sexual violence. This paper will focus on atrocities involving sexual violence. As sexual violence scandals from aid organizations increasingly emerged in 2018 alongside the height of the #MeToo movement, the global aid sector developed its own hashtag, #AidToo, to bring awareness to these issues. While #AidToo did help publicize these scandals and create a conversation, numerous reports unfortunately continue to arise about further issues with sexual violence and prominent aid organizations. The ongoing sexual violence within the global aid sector, despite #AidToo's call for change, demonstrates the deeply embedded power structures that allow these issues to continue. To improve the global aid sector, it is necessary to recognize the structures and mentalities that exist in aid organizations to inform future change and operations.

## **Introduction**

The global aid sector is meant to serve the world's most impoverished, exploited, and vulnerable by providing assistance to those in poverty, internally displaced persons, refugees, and victims of natural disasters, wars, and famines. The United Nations has four entities that have a humanitarian focus: the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Food Programme (WFP). In addition, various non-governmental organizations including

Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), Oxfam, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies give crucial medical assistance, housing, food security, disaster relief, and other forms of aid. Many operate out of the Global North (countries including the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Japan) to provide aid to countries in the Global South (mostly in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania). Aid organizations respond to natural disasters such as the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia, war and post-war environments including Ukraine and Syria, and other places where the necessary services to provide for human well-being are lacking.

Aid organizations appear to act with good intentions and have been afforded a moral status as crucial entities that address humanitarian crises, however, these organizations have never been free from corruption or scandal as they operate in patriarchal, oppressive structures that perpetuate gender inequality, neo-colonial mentalities, and sexual violence. Attention to these scandals have slowly become more prominent starting in the 1990s and increasing in the late 2010s. This paper will primarily focus on sexual violence perpetrated by aid organizations. Numerous scandals have emerged from within these organizations, including the trafficking of young women and girls in wartime post-war Yugoslavia at the hands of United Nations peacekeepers and top NGO officials (Mendelson 2005), sexual exploitation of women and children by officials in Oxfam after major natural disasters (Kagumire 2018), and the sexual harassment of female humanitarian workers onsite by male colleagues (Gillespie 2019). With the #MeToo movement becoming more prominent in 2017, those impacted by sexual violence followed suit in sharing their stories on social media and attempting to hold organizations accountable, leading to the creation of the hashtag “#AidToo” to focus on the global aid sector (Kagumire 2018). While #AidToo played a part in publicizing scandals in aid organizations and

bringing a voice to survivors, it did not put an end to the ongoing sexual exploitation by aid workers. Numerous reports unfortunately continue to emerge about sexual violence and prominent NGOs and top organization officials.

This paper intends to look the #AidToo movement to scrutinize the operations and structures of aid organizations to understand why sexual violence has a space to occur, who has the power to perpetuate these atrocities, and why any accountability and oversight has failed. Much emphasis will be placed on examining the effectiveness of #AidToo, understanding how people used this movement to draw attention to issues in the global aid sector, and if it created any change. The primary purpose of this paper is to look at why #AidToo– despite its meaningful work– ultimately did not bring an end to the atrocities that exist in the global aid sector due to the overbearing power structures and lack of oversight within aid organizations.

This paper will start by stating the methods used to conduct research before providing a background on aid organization scandals and #MeToo. Three main sexual violence issues will be explored: 1) sexual harassment and assault against female aid workers; 2) sexual exploitation and abuse; and 3) sex trafficking by aid workers. Significant emphasis will be placed on the emergence of #AidToo and– through digital ethnography– I will examine how activists and survivors used the movement to reveal the realities of sexual violence within aid organizations. To analyze why sexual violence has a space to exist and why #AidToo could not completely change the issues within the global aid sector, this paper will examine the underlying power structures and operations in aid organizations and lack of any substantial accountability or oversight.

## **Research Methods**

This research addresses the complex intersections of aid organizations, sexual violence, power structures, and activist movements. I use mixed methods to examine these complex intersections. I have compiled outside research for two years— beginning in Fall 2020— drawing on scholarly work, media reports, previous statistical research on reports of sexual violence, and social media sites. My literature review drew from scholarship on sexual violence, exploitation, human and sex trafficking, whistleblowing culture, and power relations in aid organizations in the fields of international studies, anthropology, gender studies, and political science. This research helped to build the context in which the #AidToo movement exists and provides a necessary background of the actors, organizations, cultures, and groups that are involved in the overall issue. Research on #AidToo was conducted through media reports and scholarly literature. I looked at major news agencies and blog reports on Oxfam, UN sexual scandals, and whistleblowers in the aid industry. I paired this research by looking at statistical reports on sexual exploitation in the aid industry through organizations like the UN, and aid organizations annual reports to get to a scope of the scale.

I then conducted digital ethnography on Twitter, using the hashtag #AidToo as this is the primary platform used by the movement. Digital ethnography allowed me to trace the networks posting about #AidToo, to examine who was talking about this issue, and what and how the conversation around these scandals intended to create change.

For clarity within this paper, it is necessary to denote the differences between types of sexual violence. There are various understood legal, cultural, and social definitions of sexual violence, but this paper will use the definitions outlined by the United Nations in the *UN Glossary on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse* that are regularly used in the global aid sector (United Nations 2017). Sexual violence is an umbrella term that refers to an array of sexual-

related acts. Sexual harassment involves “unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature” intended to cause offense often happening in school or workplace environments (10). Sexual assault is more specific and refers solely to unwanted, coerced, and forced physical acts. Sexual abuse is mainly used to refer to sexual violence perpetrated against children and includes both “actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature” (5). Sexual exploitation refers to “any actual or attempted abuse of position of vulnerability, differential power or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another” (7). Trafficking involves the “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons” with the intention of sexual exploitation (7). International aid workers have perpetuated all these types of sexual violence against other workers within their organizations and the people they are meant to assist throughout their international operations.

### **Background on Aid Organization Scandals and #MeToo**

On February 9th, 2018, a front-page report emerged in the *Times of London* exposing Oxfam - a British-founded global charity which focuses on ending poverty - “of covering up an investigation into the hiring of sex workers for orgies by staff working in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake” (Gayle 2018). The emergence of this scandal led to the deputy chief executive resigning from the Oxfam GB, withdrawal of celebrity and donor support for the charity, and investigation by the UK government into the charity’s operations (Gayle 2018). The day after the *Times* article was published, *Mail on Sunday* released “revelations about alleged abuse and harassment by senior executives at Save the Children UK’s head office” (Cooper 2020, 747). By



February 20th, a UK government committee on international development proceeded to hear “26 new cases of sexual harassment and assault at Oxfam,” while funding for the charity was pulled by the UK government, European Commission, and private donors (*Civil Society* 2019) On June 14, 2018, Haiti withdrew Oxfam GB’s right to operate in the country for violating Haitian law and “the principle of the dignity of the human beings” (Gayle 2018).

The original 2018 Oxfam scandal sparked heightened publicity of and attention towards sexual violence in the global aid sector. Sexual violence, scandals, and corruption in aid organizations that were exposed in the months after the #MeToo movement went viral in 2017-2018. Founded in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke, MeToo is a social movement that aims to address sexual violence, abuse, harassment, and rape culture by empowering survivors and calling for accountability (Gillespie 2019, 1). Through solidarity and empathy, the movement intends to demonstrate the unfortunate prevalence of sexual violence in society; it initially focused on women of color from low wealth communities but since has transformed.

In 2017, MeToo transitioned to “#MeToo” with a viral Twitter post from actress Alyssa Milano commenting “Me too” in response to if she has ever experienced sexual harassment or assault. Several high-profile women in Hollywood, news organizations, and sports subsequently took to media reports and social media to publicize harassment and assault they experienced from prominent figures including producer Harvey Weinstein, actor Kevin Spacey, and ex-chairman and CEO of Fox News Roger Ailes (Gordon 2023). As one woman would speak out about her experiences, it would spark a succession of “me too” as other women- and sometimes men- would share their stories involving sexual violence. #MeToo’s viral status in 2017 caused the movement to gain widespread traction on social media and activist circles worldwide, leading to many social and legal changes that continue today (Gordon 2023).

When the Oxfam story broke, the humanitarian world had already begun to connect #MeToo to their own environment with the creation of “#AidToo” to bring awareness to the sexual violence that exists in the global aid sector. Sexual violence in aid organizations has been rampant since the 1990s and occurs in various forms; three main forms in the global aid sector: sexual harassment and assault against female aid workers, sexual exploitation and abuse, and sex trafficking by aid workers.

### **Sexual Harassment and Assault Against Female Aid Workers**

Most cases of sexual harassment and assault in the global aid sector involve female aid workers reporting unwanted sexual advances or acts from their colleagues, primarily “men working in the aid industry, often those in supervisor/higher-level positions than their victims, or men employed by aid agencies as security providers” (Mazurana and Donnelly 2017). Although all forms of sexual violence against female aid workers are widespread in the sector, it is “grossly underreported and under-acknowledged” (Mazurana and Donnelly 2017). Most investigation into sexual violence in aid organizations workspaces has been reported in the media by female aid workers or conducted by informal advocacy organizations, including the Humanitarian Women's Network (HWN), a network of over 11,000 women in 75 countries aimed at creating a “a work environment where women are able to work in the humanitarian industry free from discrimination, harassment and abuse” (HWN 2017).

HWN conducted a survey of female aid workers between 2016-2017 aimed at capturing the experiences of women working in the humanitarian field. From the 1,005 women representing 70 aid organizations, figures on sexual harassment indicate that 69% report male colleagues making comments about their physical appearance, 55% “were subjected to persistent

romantic or sexual advances from a male colleague,” and 42% have heard male colleagues discussing sex at least once in their presence (HWN 2017). Regarding sexual assault, 48% of have experienced “being touched in an unwanted way (i.e. touched hair, massaged shoulders, embraced) by a male colleague,” 20% have been physically threatened by a male colleague, and 4% report “having being forced to have sexual relations (i.e. oral, vaginal, anal, and/or penetration with hands or objects) by a male colleague” (HWN 2017). Of the female humanitarian workers surveyed, 26% report that these experiences had a “medium to strong impact on the course of their career” in the global aid sector, while “23% changed missions, 16% quit, and 7% left the humanitarian field” (HWN 2017). The survey additionally found that 69% of respondents who experienced sexual violence did not report their experiences through any official channels.

Shaista Aziz, a former aid worker turned politician, comedian, and activist, wrote several articles for *The Guardian* newspaper in the wake of the 2018 Oxfam scandal stating her opinion on the situation:

When I read the revelations that Oxfam workers had paid for sex in Haiti, perhaps from underage girls, while the country was trying to recover from an earthquake, I wasn't surprised. Nor was I surprised when it became clear that it had been covered up, and that further allegations of sexual abuse, bullying, harassment and intimidation in the aid sector soon followed. Don't get me wrong – these stories are sickening – but most people in the industry will have at the very least heard rumours of this kind of behaviour. (Aziz 2018a)

Aziz, who spent more than 15 years as a communications specialist in the global aid sector, divulged that aid organizations maintain a “culture where bullying was rife, women were

frequently belittled and racism was casual” (Aziz 2018a). After her initial article for *The Guardian* in February 2018, Aziz followed with a subsequent article in August of that year and reported being “inundated with emails from people across the world, mostly women, about their own experiences” of sexual violence (Aziz 2018b). However- similar to what the HWN survey data indicated- the “vast majority... had never reported to their employer what had happened” (Aziz 2018b).

### **Sexual Exploitation and Abuse**

During the height of the Oxfam scandal in 2018, the UK government released a sixteen-year-old report, co-written by UNHCR and Save the Children UK, investigating sexual exploitation in the global aid sector: “Sexual violence and exploitation: the experience of refugee children in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone” (UNHCR/STC-UK 2002). The second page of this report includes a powerful quote from a refugee child, “You people should have taken care of me. Instead you abandoned me.” The report examines the sexual exploitation and abuse that refugee children in these countries faced, the perpetrators, and socio-political context of the situation, future recommendations to amend the issue, and more. The document names men as the “principal sex exploiters,” notably those with “power and money:”

[A]gency workers from local and international NGOs as well as UN agencies are among the prime sexual exploiters of refugee children often using the very humanitarian assistance and services intended to benefit refugees as a tool of exploitation. (UNHCR/STC-UK 2002, 9)

Military forces such as UN peacekeepers and teachers from agency-run educational programs were also named as sexual exploiters. Their primary target were girls between the ages of 13-18,

although the children were sometimes as young as 5 (UNHCR/STC-UK 2002, 10). The “especially vulnerable groups” included children from single-parent households, those separated from their parents, and orphans. The report acknowledges that while there were a few cases of boys being sexually exploited, most cases involved young girls in the above demographics.

Humanitarian camps are particular spaces for the sexual exploitation and abuse of children. Camps established by aid organizations are usually in poor conditions and do not provide adequate environments for people recovering from wars or natural disasters. The report indicates that there was “compelling evidence of a chronic and entrenched pattern of this type of abuse in refugee camps” in the countries researched (UNHCR/STC-UK 2002, 9). As refugees’ home governments have failed to provide the services necessary for their well-being,

...humanitarian assistance and workers take on an unprecedented importance.

They begin to symbolise life and sustenance for the refugee population, to the point of refugees believe that they are not able to survive without their assistance.

(UNHCR/STC-UK 2002, 32)

The structural inequality between aid workers and those they serve— who are far from home, often destitute, and at their most vulnerable— creates an unequal power dynamic that is easy to exploit. Refugees are not citizens of the country they are “temporarily” held in and do not have the rights or access to jobs, education, or resources, creating more risk; these circumstances places them in a holding pattern in the camps that can extend decades long. Another report concerning the prevention of sexual violence by UN peacekeepers emphasizes that “sexual coercion exacerbates human rights abuses for victims and survivors in communities that are already struggling with violence and poverty” (Anania, Mendes, and Nagel 2020, 3).

Children who face sexual exploitation are constrained by the refugee camps environment as their livelihood depends on the very workers who perpetuate abuse against them; their need for survival often supersedes the need for justice (UNHCR/STC-UK 2002, 72). While in these camps, an abuse of power occurs where aid workers force children into a “sex to survive” situation. Aid organizations provide necessary food, water, clothing, medicine, and more to refugees; most cases of sexual exploitation involve workers withholding these items from children unless they provide sexual favors. There are reports of male aid workers trading “humanitarian commodities and services... in exchange for sex with girls under 18” (UNHCR/STC-UK 2002, 9). In refugee camps where resources are scarce, girls often have no choice but to comply with the sexual exploiters to support “themselves, their parents and their siblings” (UNHCR/STC-UK 2002, 40). Besides struggling to meet their basic human needs, survivors of this form of sexual violence will likely face “severe physical and psychological trauma and injury, social stigma and isolation, forced marriages... and loss of long-term opportunities and prospects” (UNHCR/STC-UK 2002, 14). Although in 2003 the United Nations implemented a “zero tolerance” policy for sexual exploitation and abuse in their operations, sexual violence continues and is usually unreported (Anania, Mendes, and Nagel 2020, 5). The purpose of refugee camps is to provide immediate protection and assistance for vulnerable populations, but their underlying operations “threaten the process and outcomes of peace operations on multiple levels” (Anania, Mendes, and Nagel 2020, 3).

### **Sex Trafficking by Aid Workers**

Kathryn Bolkovac, a human rights advocate, former police investigator, and former monitor with United Nations International Police Task Force (ITPF)- a force deployed to

enhance peace and security in conflict and post-conflict environments- was fired from her job in 2000. She attempted to inform her employers of sex trafficking perpetuated by the company's military personnel and UN Peacekeepers in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina during the late-1990s and early 2000s (Bolkovac and Lynn 2011). While working as a "investigator in the UN Gender Affairs Office," Bolkovac discovered that UN monitors, peacekeepers, and DynCorp employees in Bosnia were involved with brothels and "buying, selling, and transporting women and girls, most of whom came from the former Soviet Union." Attempts to report the issue to ITPF's upper management were ignored and her case files were removed by military commanders (Hond 2011). After being fired from both the ITPF and DynCorp, Bolkovac exposed her case to the BBC and eventually received damages from her employer. Her story is outlined in a book and movie both titled *The Whistleblower*, which outline the situation that occurred in Bosnia and the connections between aid organizations and sex trafficking.

Trafficking involves the "recruitment, harboring, and movement of people through the use of force, fraud, coercion, or deception for the express purpose of enslavement," and in the case of sex trafficking, for the express purpose of forced prostitution and sexual exploitation (Mendelson 2005, 1). The primary perpetrators of the sex trafficking that occurs within the global aid sector are agency workers, notably male UN Peacekeepers and other organizations' personnel. Human rights groups, activists, and other humanitarian organizations "have documented a disturbing correlation" between operations within the global aid sector and sex trafficking, as- for example- "spikes in the number of trafficked females followed the deployment of United States, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the United Nations forces in Bosnia and then later in Kosovo:"

[T]rafficking—especially the enslavement of women and girls for forced prostitution—follows market demand and, in post-conflict situations, that demand is often created by international peacekeepers. (Mendelson 2005, 1)

In the late 1990s Bosnia was a recovering war zone that had experienced “rape camps and mass slaughter,” left its population vulnerable, and was in desperate need of humanitarian assistance to provide peace and resources; “[I]t was unthinkable, then, that UN peacekeepers in Bosnia, there to help bring order to a country...could be involved in human trafficking” (Hond 2011).

However, similar to cases of exploitation and abuse of girls in refugee camps, the demand for sex trafficking is created due to an unequal power dynamic that exists between peacekeepers and women and girls.

Despite a case like Kathryn Bolkovac’s bringing attention to this situation, few peacekeepers and aid workers faced repercussions for their involvement in sex trafficking. Although some workers were fired and returned to their home countries, many personnel with the United Nations and DynCorp had international diplomatic immunity (Hond 2011). Although they had committed crimes in Bosnia, their status as a peacekeeper for the UN granted them diplomatic protection and exempted them from legal repercussions in any foreign country. Additionally, the efforts by the United Nations and other organizations to bury these issues made it impossible for the perpetrators to be held accountable in their home countries. A report on victims of sex trafficking in the Balkan region determined that “the minimum number of victims of trafficking is 5,203 for the period from January 2000 through June 2003,” which includes the time after Bolkovac reported (Mendelson 2005, 9). However- due to a lack of reporting and data on the situation- “15,000 females may have been trafficked” in that time (Mendelson 2005, 9). Even after Bolkovac exposed UN peacekeepers in 2000, sex trafficking continued.



## **Digital Ethnography of #AidToo**

Kathryn Bolkovac's case was one of the first to expose the underlying atrocities of the global aid sector. Despite the issues that she helped publicize, it would be almost 17 years until a similar movement occurred with #AidToo. Attention on sexual violence in the global aid sector was already established, but the 2018 Oxfam scandal was the first prominent humanitarian case during the height of #MeToo from 2017-2018. #MeToo targeted sexual violence in all arenas from sports to corporations to Hollywood; #AidToo operated in the same way for the global aid sector. Participants of the #AidToo movement used it to raise awareness about the prevalence of sexual violence and take "action against power structures that uphold abuse" (Kagumire 2018). While #AidToo specifically targeted aid organizations, this also meant that participation in the movement was limited to figures within the global aid sector.

The first documented use of #AidToo was by Devex, an independent news organization focusing on critical issues relating to the global development and aid sectors. In November 2017, during the start of the organization's initiative to "deepen" its "investigation into sexual violence in global development," Devex launched #AidToo as a "digital conversation about the breadth of — and solutions to — sexual harassment and assault in our industry" (Midden and Deshmukh 2017). The first use of "#AidToo" was on the Devex Twitter account publicizing a "tweet chat" that the organization would hold on December 6, 2017 to address how organizations can "respond to sexual violence in the aid industry" (Devex 2017b).



Figure 1: First use of #AidToo by Devex on Nov. 29, 2017.

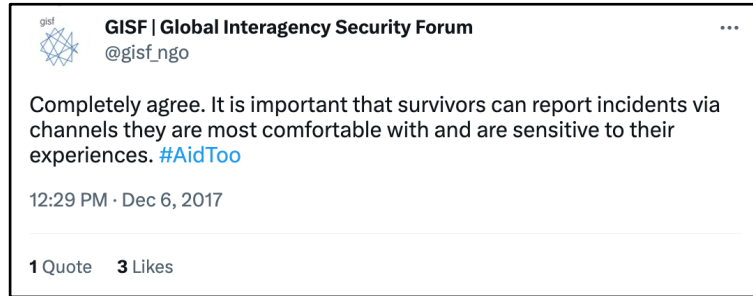


Figure 2: The digital conversation hosted by Devex on Dec. 6, 2017.

Those engaged in Devex’s digital conversation were mostly connected to the global aid community, and each of the 8 questions only received about 2-5 responses each. The interactions include other, but smaller, aid organizations and NGO community groups such as GBCHHealth and the Global Interagency Security Forum and people who are employed at aid organizations. Accounts that responded to Devex’s questions would include #AidToo in their answers or repost the question tweet from Devex with their input.



*Figures 3 & 4: Response from Patty Swahn McIlreavy, President and CEO of the NGO Center for Disaster Philanthropy, to Devex’s digital conversation.*



*Figures 5 & 6: Response from GISF, an NGO forum, to Devex’s digital conversation.*

Those who responded to or reposted the digital conversation provided their input on the questions that Devex posed and recommended actions for aid organizations to take to prevent further sexual violence. For example, in response to Devex’s Question 5 [H]ow do you make an environment conducive to reporting?, @McIlreavyP reposted the question tweet and answered,

A5: Too often sexual violence is the hidden embarrassment of security. Orgs must have better training, stronger analysis & openness re sexual violence risks. We must build trust by shining a light on its existence, stop it from happening & support those who come forward. #AidToo. (2017)

The few responses that Devex received in their comments of the questions were along similar themes to the example above; they focused on creating better training within organizations and support for those who report sexual violence.

While #AidToo first emerged before the 2018 charity scandals with Devex’s digital conversation, it began to have more use on Twitter in the aftermath. Here #AidToo transformed

from a conversation hosted by Devex to a hashtag used to accompany retweets of articles about scandals, express outrage over the situations of sexual violence, and promote events and conferences hosted within aid organizations or by figures in the humanitarian world to address sexual violence. People with direct connection to the global aid sector such as Shaista Aziz used #AidToo in tweets that reposted articles about organization scandals (Aziz 2020).



*Figure 7: Tweet by Shaista Aziz using #AidToo while reposting a news article.*



*Figures 8 & 9: Tweet from Sarah Noble, director at the non-profit news agency New Humanitarian, using #AidToo to promote a discussion concerning #MeToo in the humanitarian sector.*

Unlike the original and most popular #MeToo tweets, #AidToo does not have any posts that reach the same viral status. Figures 1, 2, 3, and 5 show how posts responding to Devex’s conversation using #AidToo did not engage with many people, often receiving few, if any, retweets and usually never more than 4 likes. Actress Alyssa Milano is credited with sparking the #MeToo movement on Twitter with an original tweet from October 15, 2017 encouraging her followers to reply to the post with “me too” if they have experience sexual harassment or assault.

The post reached thousands of users through retweets, likes, and comments, eventually leading to the widespread use of the hashtag within the MeToo movement (Milano 2017).



*Figure 10: Original viral tweet by Alyssa Milano on Oct. 15, 2017 that sparked #MeToo on social media.*

Participants of #AidToo did not use the hashtag in the same way as #MeToo; there was not a post like Alyssa Milano's that directly encouraged people to share their stories and connect with other survivors. While Devex did encourage people to engage with their #AidToo digital conversation, the questions did not specifically indicate for people to share their stories but rather asked how aid organizations can respond to sexual violence. Additionally, from analyzing posts using #AidToo, it appears that the movement was limited to those who worked in aid organizations, had some sort of connection to the global aid sector, or were journalists covering the scandals. #MeToo originated mainly in Hollywood, where survivors—often celebrities with

access to social media—established worldwide reputations, and networks of fans/followers shared their experiences of sexual violence from other celebrities and notable figures. The celebrities at the center of #MeToo have the influence, international presence, and power to allow their stories to be publicized and followed.

#AidToo does not address or amplify voices of survivors from Global South where aid organization operations are largely present. The movement could allow aid workers who experienced sexual violence to share their experiences since they work in the environment that where it was limited to, but many survivors are left out. Celebrities involved in the heightened wave of the #MeToo movement are figures we see on televisions, in movies, and on social media, and their lives can easily be read about with a quick search of their name on the Internet. Many people have personal investment in the lives of the women impacted by sexual violence in Hollywood, sports, or media, but the public is very much detached from aid organizations. Refugees who are, for example, living in humanitarian camps in the Global South do not have the same opportunities or networks as celebrities to share their #AidToo. Above all, survivors of sexual violence from aid workers could face extreme repercussions simply for reporting their situations in the refugee camps. As discussed before, aid organizations hold utmost importance as entities that provide basic human needs, and people may be dependent on the very aid workers who sexually exploit them. They do not have the option or opportunity to speak out about sexual violence nor are their voices heard by people in the Global North. When sexual violence occurs in aid organizations, the “cost falls most heavily on the populations they aim to serve, but accountability to aid recipients is often missing aside from these isolated incidents incurring heightened public scrutiny” (Worden and Saez 2021, 1).



While #AidToo operated as a digital space for some aid workers to publicize their thoughts about the movement and engage with others in the global aid sector, its efforts do not involve the majority of those impacted by sexual violence. Similar to Bolkovac's case, #AidToo brought some attention to this problem in aid organizations, but it was short-term in its impact. Sexual violence cases have continued to emerge without any indication that the global aid sector is working to stop the issue in the long-term. In April 2021, Oxfam workers were suspended from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) following claims of their involvement in sexual exploitation (Landale 2021). During the same year, the World Health Organization released a report detailing allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse during the 2018-2020 Ebola outbreak in the DRC (Beaubien 2021). In September 2022, the *New Humanitarian* published an article detailing accounts of sexual abuse starting in 2015 by aid workers at a United Nations camp in South Sudan, and the abuse has only increased over the past seven years (Mednick and Craze 2022). Despite some prominent cases emerging in the late 2010s,, the majority of sexual violence cases in the global aid sector continue to remain unreported. Despite the efforts of #AidToo and the broader #MeToo movement in the context of the global aid sector, the structure of the global aid sector was and is too established and powerful to be dismantled by a social media campaign such as #AidToo.

### **Power Structures and Accountability in the Global Aid Sector**

As essential entities for geopolitical structures, the United Nations' aid-focused branches and other transnational aid organizations are crucial for international development. However, aid organizations exist in an “environment where the first priority is to protect the names and brands of aid institutions” rather than sexual violence survivors and those who speak out about their

experiences (Aziz 2018b). This is in tension with the moral authority that the global aid sector has been granted in the public eye. Any destruction of the organizations come with a cost for aid recipients; the global aid sector does necessary work to protect and assist vulnerable groups despite the sexual violence issues that continue. As large, international entities, aid organizations have established structures that allow aid organizations to operate despite sexual violence issues.

“Institutional power disparities” are the primary factors that have allowed sexual violence to continue in the global aid sector (Gillespie, Mirabella, and Eikenberry 2019, 2). These power imbalances contribute too both sexual harassment and assault by high-level male organization personnel against their female colleagues and sexual exploitation, abuse, and trafficking by aid workers against the people they are intended to assist. A 2017 article by Devex interviewed four women who experienced sexual harassment or assault in their respective aid organizations to understand the “fundamental problems within the humanitarian sector” (Edwards 2017). A primary factor they identified was the “abuse of power” by senior-level male executives:

If the survivor is in a lower [position] of power, they have less control of the situation, less voice. The accused, if they have more power, can better control the narrative. This logically results in situations where survivors will either be afraid to report...or the creation of a hostile situation if they do report. (Edwards 2017)

Despite women being the majority of employees in aid organizations, they are underrepresented in powerful leadership positions which puts them at greater risk for sexual violence (Gillespie, Mirabella, and Eikenberry 2019, 2). According to the HWN survey data, the ratio between men and women in “senior management teams” at the aid organizations 1 to .69 (HWN 2017). For women “trying to break into the sector” refusing sexual advances from a high-level colleague, “can seem impossible” (Edwards 2017). This is unfortunately similar to most sectors and large

organizations. Few women report the sexual harassment and assault they experience, and even fewer would be enticed to share their stories through a movement like #AidToo where they could face professional blowback for exposing top male staff members. The article from Devex states that survivors who reported sexual violence were dismissed early from organization projects or fired from their jobs and returned to their home countries.

Similarly, in the Global South where aid organizations operate humanitarian missions, they exist in “patriarchal societies where men wield undue influence over women’s lives” (Mednick and Craze 2022). As women and child refugees are forced to rely on aid workers to receive food, clothing, medicine, and other necessary resources, it “deepens the existing power imbalances and gender dynamics, especially when men often fill the majority of decision-making roles in aid work” (Mednick and Craze 2022). In a sex-to-survive environment, male aid workers can use their power to withhold aid if women or children fail to provide sexual favors. The structure of aid organizations has created a “conducive environment” where sexual violence has thrived and “the way in which humanitarian assistance has been given has served to render the refugee community...powerless” (UNHCR/STC-UK 2002, 41). The United Nations has implemented their “zero tolerance policy” against sexual violence. It declares any violations as “serious misconduct warranting disciplinary measures,” prohibits sexual activity with a person under the age of eighteen regardless of local laws and any other form of sexual relationship between UN staff and local populations and obligates staff to report concerns and create an environment that prevents sexual abuse. However, it fails to “address systemic factors that underpin sexual exploitation and abuse” (Anania, Mendes, and Nagel 2020, 17). Despite the declarations made by the UN, the zero tolerance policy similarly has “been criticized for...burying the underlying structural inequalities that lead to abuse in fragile contexts”

(Anania, Mendes, and Nagel 2020, 5). As much as the United Nations can declare their intolerance for sexual violence, policies such as these do not directly change the inherent power structures of aid organization operations.

Global aid sector operations primarily are a “formalized system of governments, agencies, and organizations largely based in and led by the Global North” providing assistance to areas in the Global South, which can perpetuate neo colonial mentalities and preestablish notions about the benefactors of humanitarian aid (Aloudat and Khan 2021). This idea is established in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* which explores the perceived separations between the Global North and South. Said focuses on the fabricated differences between the “Orient” (Global South/East) and the “Occident” (Global North/West) that were created during heightened colonization in the 19th and 20th century– but does continue today– where “poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators” have

...accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, epics, social descriptions and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, “mind,” destiny, and so on. (1978, 20)

While the global aid sector is not necessarily a form of colonization, the power imbalances that exist within it reflect colonial practices and the power dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized, or the aid organization and the aid benefactor (Khan 2021). Colonialism of the Global South by the Global North perpetuated the idea of the “Other,” an anthropological concept that recognizes this power dynamic. The “Other” is a member or a group of people from a marginalized group often viewed as inferior, helpless, and suffering by another group- one that embodies the norm and preferred identity. Built upon ideas from the “Othering” of people from the Global South, humanitarian interventions reflect orientalism. Furthermore, the mentality of

aid beneficiaries as “helpless” and “vulnerable” prompt sexual exploitation and abuse. In their report on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeepers, Anania, Mendes, and Nagel recognize that on the structural level, sexual violence

...normalizes the behaviors related to sexual exploitation of vulnerable populations by powerful actors...[T]hese violations build on and entrench heteronormative, racist, colonial, and economic power dynamics that foster insecurity and contribute to a culture of violence. (2020, 3)

The UNHCR report indicates that “the way in which humanitarian operations are managed is clearly a contributing factor” to sexual violence that exists (2002, 11). A 2021 study on the leadership within NGOs found that there is a “representation gap” in most organizations as “[A]id recipients...lack effective representation in the governance of the organizations they rely on to meet their basic needs” (Worden and Saez 2021, 2). While “direct representation of aid recipients on governing boards might not be realistic,” it is necessary to scrutinize who has the power in aid organizations to “impact how boards strategize, carry out financial and administrative functions, raise funds, and interpret their missions” (Worden and Saez 2021, 3). Those with power at the top of aid organizations influence how they address and handle sexual violence in their organization (Worden and Saez 2021, 3). Less than 2% of board members of NGOs “had experience as a refugee or had been otherwise impacted by a humanitarian crisis” (Worden and Saez 2021, 5). Those with power to make decisions about how aid organizations operate have little direct connection or lived experience to understand the crises that their organizations address. This lack of representation at top level means aid organizations are structured in ways that end up exploiting the most vulnerable and fail to consider the opinions, wants, and needs of those receiving aid.

A key problem for the global aid sector is the lack of oversight and “limitations of available procedural mechanisms of accountability for handling cases of sexual violence (Goncharenko 2021, 5). No government or governing body regulates the operations of aid organizations, or holds them responsible, or is directly involved in their actions or decisions. While the United Nations exists as the largest international organizations, numerous UN agencies are a part of the problem. However, sexual violence does not persist due to “lax rules, ethical codes, or lack of reporting” but because aid organizations “exist within a larger context that oppresses women, people of color, and other marginalized groups” (Eikenberry and Mirabella 2020, 1). With no current governing body or regulator, even if an organization would implement stricter standards, their effectiveness and enforcement depend on internal efforts. After the 2018 Oxfam scandal, the organization said that it would work to improve measures to “strengthen the prevention and handling of sexual abuse cases” (Radojev 2018). However, the measures announced including “new hotlines, improved complaint mechanisms, increased funding for safeguarding systems and more transparency” could be viewed as maintaining the “old toolbox of procedural accountability mechanisms” (Goncharenko 2021, 21). Accountability in the global aid sector is very much reactive; once a scandal emerges the organization claims that it will implement changes, but in the long-term the environment allows sexual violence to continue. The industry has yet to create proactive policies to “tackle the root causes of these endemic problems” (Aziz 2018a). Simplified reporting mechanisms do not address the deep-rooted power dynamics that exist within aid organizations, nor do they directly stop sexual violence in the Global South; simply firing a senior-level executive or an aid worker after they are found guilty does not dismantle the entire structure of the global aid sector.

## Conclusion

While #AidToo and the larger #MeToo movement did not completely solve the issues of sexual violence, they showed the need for “broader systemic change in our thinking, culture, and practice” (Eikenberry and Mirabella 2020, 1). Sexual violence in aid organizations exists in the wider context of gender inequality, rape culture, and victim-blaming. Future approaches to combating this issue indicate that “[A]pproaching sexual violence merely through a set of organizational reforms or tightening up ethical codes is inadequate” (Eikenberry and Mirabella 2020, 1). Rather it is necessary to recognize the inherent power dynamics and legacy of colonial mentalities that exist and place them at the forefront of global aid sector reform: “[P]revention efforts must also engage with inequalities linked to gender, racism, colonial legacies, and global economic and power relations” (Anania, Mendes, and Nagel 2020, 18). This paper reveals the difficulties that movements such as #AidToo have in creating substantial change within the global aid sector due to uneven power structures and lack of regulation. Aid organizations are necessary to provide support and resources, but they cannot continue to operate in ways that perpetuate any form of sexual violence, and the atrocities of this issue cannot be overlooked or limited to select reports or scandals. Just as aid organizations have a duty to help refugees and other vulnerable populations, they also have a duty to ensure aid recipients are not placed in further danger by their own staff. The conversation created by #AidToo provides a sufficient starting point for the global aid sector to consider where adjustments need to be made. While the nature of global aid may always create power dynamics between male and female humanitarian staff, aid workers and aid recipients, and the Global North and Global South, some moral authority can be returned to aid organizations if their inherent structures are considered when transforming future operations.

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