

# 'Stranger Danger' and the Gendered/Racialised Construction of Threats in Humanitarianism

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## Abstract

Humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work has become increasingly dangerous in recent decades. The securitisation of aid has been critiqued, alongside the racialised and gendered dynamics of security provision for aid actors. What has received less attention is how a range of intersectional marginalisations – gender, racialisation, sexuality, nationality and disability – play out in constructions of security, danger and fear in aid deployments. Focusing on sexual harassment, abuse and violence as threats to safety and security, the article examines how in training and guidance for deployment to 'the field' (itself a problematically securitised notion), danger is projected onto sexualised and racialised 'locals', often overlooking the potentially far greater threat from colleagues. Here, we employ a review of security guidance, social media groups, interviews with aid staffers and reflections on our own experiences to explore how colonialist notions of security and 'stranger danger' play out in training. We argue that humanitarianism is still dominated by the romanticised figure of the white, male humanitarian worker – even if this problematic imaginary no longer reflects reality – and a space where those questioning exclusionary constructs of danger are quickly silenced and even ridiculed, even in the age of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter.

**Keywords:** humanitarian, peacebuilding, development, gender, race, security

## Introduction

By its very nature – ostensibly, that of responding to natural and human-made crises – humanitarian, peacebuilding and (to a lesser extent) development work occurs in close proximity to potential danger. The degree of risk and danger to staff carrying out this kind of work in 'the field' has increased greatly over recent decades, due in part to the changing nature of conflict and in part to the rapidly increasing number of local and international staff deployed in crisis situations, making security incidents more likely purely for statistical reasons. At the same time, the aid sector has seen a marked increase in concern for staff security and

organisations' own 'duty of care' to ensure it. The increased risks, both real and perceived, have led the sector to devote more resources to the development of security guidance, pre-deployment training (commonly known as hostile environment awareness training, or HEAT)<sup>1</sup> and the provision of security in 'the field', though these have been mainly geared towards international staff rather than locally hired personnel.

As we explore below, the dominant approach to risk and security is premised on an imaginary of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work that goes back to its early years. This imaginary posits the work as performed mainly by white, able-bodied, heterosexual, male staff from the Global North who enter conflict- or

catastrophe-affected zones to selflessly carry out their noble humanitarian missions in a spirit of charity and even heroism – a hierarchical logic of white altruism that very much echoes the colonial mission (Autesserre, 2014; Chisholm, 2016; Smirl, 2008). Thus, the aid sector security apparatus sees dangers as emanating mainly from ‘the field’ itself and the racialised ‘locals’ who inhabit it, which is reflected in the design and delivery of security guidance and training. In these spaces, the intersectional threats – that is, compounding and distinctive forms of marginalisation and risk<sup>2</sup> – faced by non-white (especially local) staff, those of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) or those with disabilities are often not factored in. Conversely, threats to (white) women staff are cast as a kind of ‘stranger danger’ – emanating from non-white locals and militant actors rather than international colleagues. This, we argue, is all the more striking in light of the 2018 Oxfam scandal and resurgence of interest in preventing sexual exploitation and abuse (see GADN, 2019), as well as the rise of #AidToo and #AidSoWhite which saw aid workers share experiences of sexual violence and racism on social media as part of wider #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter phenomena since 2013.<sup>3</sup>

While the term ‘the field’ – and its more extreme sibling ‘the deep field’ – is commonly used across the aid sector as well as in academia, we want to highlight that ‘the field’ connotes an imagined dichotomy: a more developed, civilised and safer ‘here’ compared to a backward, diseased, barbarian and dangerous ‘there’, without modern conveniences and comforts, echoing colonial metropolitan disdain for the places aid’s intended beneficiaries inhabit and the lives they lead (see Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Jennings, 2019; Richmond *et al.*, 2015). In ‘the field’, expat aid workers joke about regressing in their dress and bodily hygiene and giving in to casual sex and substance abuse. Working ‘in the (deep) field’ becomes a badge of honour and credibility for aid workers, setting up internal hierarchies based on who has been to the ‘toughest’ places and lived to tell the tale, as evidenced by aid worker chat groups.<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, the field/non-field dichotomy also importantly obscures the dangers of the seemingly safe ‘non-field’, be it the office, the compound, the guest house, expat parties or the home.

Similarly, we want to problematise the dichotomy of ‘local’ and ‘international’ that characterises the aid world. The ‘international’, we argue, is a *normatively white space*. That is, expat aid workers are very often white and western, but even when they are not, expectations, concerns and assumptions (including those around security) are modelled on whiteness and westernness – on protecting not just white aid workers but the white

project of aid as it descends upon ‘risky’ non-western spaces. This criticism extends from how aid engages with local populations (see Benton, 2016; Jennings, 2019; Loftsdóttir, 2009) to the structures and ideologies of humanitarianism, development and international relations (see Anievas *et al.*, 2015; Rutazibwa, 2019). The aid sector and the environments in which it functions are often much more diverse in reality. Quite apart from ‘the locals’, a vast array of less-privileged foreigners (or ‘third country nationals’) play key enabling parts in the humanitarian industrial complex but are left out of heroic white saviour narratives.<sup>5</sup> Nationality effectively becomes a shorthand for race, and non-white aid workers and their experiences are invisibilised and marginalised (Redfield, 2012).

Here, we employ a review of security manuals,<sup>6</sup> aid worker chat groups,<sup>7</sup> interviews with aid workers<sup>8</sup> and our own experiences to explore how colonialist notions of ‘stranger danger’ play out in aid security. Thus, while people of diverse genders, racialisations, sexualities and (dis)abilities participate in aid in many ways (Fassin, 2013; Malkki, 2015; Redfield, 2012; Vaux, 2001), we argue that humanitarianism remains very much dominated by the romanticised figure of the white, male humanitarian – and a space where those questioning exclusionary constructs of danger are quickly silenced and even ridiculed, despite claims to inclusiveness. We begin by discussing the rising sense of risk in the aid sector in the last two decades and a number of responses to it, most notably HEAT training, before offering observations about how the sector conceptualises security and what that means for its efforts to prevent and mitigate sexual violence in particular.

## Aid Security and Securitising Aid

The foreword to *Save the Children’s* (2010: vii) guidance begins: ‘The tragic deaths of our aid worker colleagues in recent years highlight the unprecedented levels of hostility and violence to which we are increasingly exposed in the course of our work.’ Recorded attacks on aid workers nearly doubled between 1997 and 2005 and sharply increased between 2006 and 2009 (Stoddard *et al.*, 2009: 1). The year 2018 saw 405 attacks, the second-highest number on record (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2019b). By way of explanation, Eckroth (2010: 5) points to the increasingly ‘complicated’ post-Cold War and post-9/11 world, which has made aid work more ambiguous and fomented scepticism of humanitarian principles. It bears noting that data on aid worker security is limited, heavily dependent on the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD) and beset by persistent low reporting, particularly of incidents against

'local' staff or perpetrated by co-workers. What qualifies as a 'major' incident is contested, and aid organisations have been known to keep incidents, particularly gender-based violence (GBV), under wraps. Staff may also encounter barriers to reporting, like the threat of job loss, should their work come to be seen as too risky. What evidence exists, however, makes a strong case that aid is rapidly becoming more dangerous. Simultaneously, there has been a notable growth of interest in aid security, as evidenced by a number of key publications (Fast, 2014; Stoddard, 2020) and the advent of the AWSD in 2005. Among aid organisations, there has also been a proliferation of security guidance and training.

This perception of increasing risks has provoked two key responses: the securitisation of aid and the development of a 'duty of care'. The former has been analysed in depth by Duffield (2010, 2012), Autesserre (2014) and Smirl (2008), and has unfolded in parallel with the integration of security and development agendas (Stern and Öjendal, 2010). Here, *securitisation* describes the trend towards an ostensibly de-politicised (and de-politicising) militarised approach to what are cast as imminent threats that require immediate, hard responses and do not allow for debate (Aradau, 2004). In practice, this has meant changing the architectural footprint of aid installations – the 'bunkerisation' of aid compounds and operations, evidenced by high walls, razor wire and armed guards (Duffield, 2012; Neuman and Weissman, 2016; Weigand and Andersson, 2019). Securitisation is also evident in the professionalisation and privatisation of security staff in the aid sector (Chisholm, 2017; Beerli and Weissman, 2016). The sociopolitical and economic drivers that might underpin increased insecurity for aid organisations are mostly seen as beyond the remit of the 'apolitical' provision of security for 'apolitical' aid actors. Aid installations' often superior telecommunications, private transport and security practices position them as sovereign, state-like presences within host countries, further entrenching the colonial relationship between aid actors and beneficiaries (Edkins, 2003).

Alongside the securitisation of aid, a notion of 'duty of care' towards staff has emerged, transforming how organisations relate to their own staff – and conditioning both analyses of risks and the mitigation strategies proposed. This duty has arisen from a growing preoccupation with civilian safety at the UN (Eckroth, 2010).<sup>9</sup> The concept of 'duty of care' has created what one informant called a 'maelstrom' in the humanitarian world, as organisations attempt to fulfil it through training, guidance and everyday security practices that tend to apply primarily to 'international' (that is, overwhelmingly white) staff.<sup>10</sup> As we will discuss further, the prevailing sense among interviewees was that this was not necessarily out of concern for staff but

rather due to concerns about insurance policies and public perceptions – indeed, some prefer to credit a 2015 court case, where aid worker Steve Dennis sued his former employer, with the rise of 'duty of care' (see Merkelbach and Kemp, 2016).

A key area where the depth of commitment in the sector comes into question is sexual violence against aid workers, about which there are few meaningful analyses and limited training (Martin, 2012). Thus, the treatment of sexual violence in aid security mirrors how it is seen by wider society – a little-reported form of violence perpetrated by individuals unknown to the victim, i.e. 'stranger danger'. Ahmed (2000: 22) deploys this very image, describing the stranger as an unknown but nonetheless identifiable (read: racialised) figure who posits danger and transgression in his very being (see also Fanon, 1975). This figuration can be readily transposed to the colonial and patriarchal bases of the aid sector, structured by hierarchical and highly sexualised notions of both race and gender. Under this logic, colonised and non-white men have long been positioned as libidinous and violent, threats to the safety and honour of white women, while white men are legitimised as the archetypal explorers, colonisers, protectors and now humanitarians – effectively erasing any violence they perpetrate against non-white men and women alike (McClintock, 1995; Stoler, 2010). As Jennings (2019: 33–4) notes, such 'pathologising' ideas are not limited to white male interveners but may even be shared by their women and non-white colleagues.

GBV advocates have argued for decades against the twin assumptions that if GBV is not reported, it is not there, and that unknown outsiders are the likeliest perpetrators. Key documents like the Inter-Agency Standing Committee GBV Guidelines (IASC, 2015) push every sector to assume GBV is happening, even without data, due to known underreporting (Felson and Paré, 2005; Palermo *et al.*, 2013). Yet, this understanding has largely not permeated the mostly male, mostly white world of aid security. Our interviewees also noted this disparity; indeed, three security trainers described attempts to do better teaching about sexual violence – vulnerability, perpetration, threat mitigation – within their own companies, but noted with frustration that these efforts went very much against the grain of the aid security world and client organisations' expectations.<sup>11</sup> With only two exceptions, all of the HEAT trainings attended by interviewees and the authors were focused exclusively on external threats. One informant remarked that security staff 'do not see themselves or us as part of the threat, but they are'; another, a trainer, noted 'a lack of depth and scope of thinking about vulnerability and a vast underestimation along racial/caste/tribal lines but especially in gender, sexual orientation and disability.'<sup>12</sup>

Efforts to engender a more informed approach to GBV have yet to filter into practice or even into policy, leaving us with a model that positions sexual violence as an ‘over there’ problem perpetuated by racialised ‘others’ – a criticism also levelled at the international community’s focus on conflict-related sexual violence over much more prevalent intimate partner violence in conflict zones (IRC, 2017).

## Sexual Violence and Harassment in Aid

Against this securitised backdrop, sexual violence has largely been framed as a danger facing aid workers from outside the sector – that is, from the ‘other’, namely armed actors and the local population. The 2016 sexual assaults at the Terrain compound in South Sudan, described at length in Stoddard’s (2020) book, and attacks like them are indeed terrifying; however, the majority of GBV in the aid world, including much of the everyday abuse highlighted by testimonials on social media under the banner #AidToo, is far less sensational – and committed by aid workers themselves.

Recent research on aid worker security has noted the lack of engagement with sexual violence, which Stoddard (2020: 7) calls ‘the most challenging category to capture and reflect accurately in the global data’ due to various kinds of underreporting. The Humanitarian Practice Network’s *Good Practice Review 8: Operational Security Management in Violent Environments* discusses sexual aggression largely against a backdrop of cultural difference (HPN, 2010: 212), while Stoddard (2020: 87–97) discusses it in detail only relating to the Terrain attack – both squarely within the model of ‘stranger danger’. However, research on workplace sexual assault in the United States identifies working in isolated contexts, temporary work status, male-dominated jobs and settings with significant power differentials – all relevant to humanitarian work – as conducive to harassment and assault (see *Humanitarian Outcomes*, 2019b: 17n12).

Women aid workers especially face more quotidian forms of harassment and abuse, such as cat-calling and groping, perpetrated by locals or internationals (Appelby, 2010; Bevan, 2014). The Humanitarian Women’s Network, an informal coalition of women aid workers, conducted a survey with over 1,000 women, both expat and local, from 70 organisations. One-third of respondents who had experienced sexual aggression said it was from male supervisors; of those, 31 per cent had reported it while the rest (69%) did not because of concern for professional consequences, distrust in or lack of reporting systems, and shame, confusion or fear of reprisal (HWN, 2017: 2–3). Another small non-governmental organisation (NGO), Report the Abuse, was founded to raise the profile of sexual harassment and

assault in aid.<sup>13</sup> Mazurana and Donnelly (2017) found that the majority of perpetrators of GBV against aid workers (including some serial perpetrators) work in the aid industry, often as security providers and advisors – the very people charged with ensuring safety. The limited available evidence therefore suggests that humanitarian workers are more likely to be assaulted by their own colleagues than by outsiders (see Deloitte, 2019; HWN, 2017; Spencer, 2018).<sup>14</sup>

Notably, this violence also conforms to colonial narratives that position white male travel as ‘an erotics of ravishment’ replete with sexual adventures and conquests, in a kind of ‘porno-tropics’ where the mores and rules of the homeland need not apply (McClintock, 1995: 22). Such an attitude is evident in the testimonials of assault survivors (HWN, 2017; Mazurana and Donnelly, 2017; Spencer, 2018) as well as the common perception of ‘the field’ as a sexually charged space characterised by bacchanalian parties and casual sex – famously described in the much-criticised memoir *Emergency Sex (and Other Desperate Measures)* (Cain et al., 2006) – or what one informant wryly called deploying to ‘Shaghdad’ (see Appelby, 2010; Jennings, 2019).<sup>15</sup>

These gendered and colonial roots mean that violence within the aid industry weighs most heavily on those confronted with intersectional marginalisations. Thus, women of colour are particularly impacted yet are written out of narratives about it (see Kagumire, 2018; Namubiru, 2018). These experiences include being confronted with compounded and unwanted racialised and Orientalist sexual fantasies, projected onto them by white colleagues.<sup>16</sup> These women are likely to be further marginalised on account of their nationalities, as ‘local’ or ‘third-country nationals’ rather than expats or ‘internationals’:

[W]e are most times deployed in settings which [are] deeply patriarchal or where men do not respect women ... In general terms, yes, black women who report the case are not handled in the same way as a white woman ... So, these are privileges that, as black women, I think we do not have. (African woman aid worker quoted in Costello, 2018)

One interviewee described how African women live between worlds, excluded from some aid worker spaces for being ‘national’ staff but facing risks that are not acknowledged or addressed by aid security: ‘We don’t go to [aid worker] parties, we’re not in the guest house, but we have community safety issues ... because we go home.’<sup>17</sup> Partis-Jennings (2019) notes that while white women in the aid sector in socially conservative societies such as Afghanistan were regarded as having a ‘third gender’, to which local social expectations did not apply, Afghan women did not have the same luxury. Likewise,

an informant described how as a Black expat woman, she experienced an insider/outsider dilemma, allowing her to blend into some communities but posing other risks and challenges that were never covered in training.<sup>18</sup>

When it comes to aid workers of diverse SOGIESC, a 2016 survey of nearly 300 expat and local staff at Médecins Sans Frontières found that the majority of reported homophobic harassment was perpetrated by international staff against colleagues and beneficiaries. Forty-nine per cent (49%) felt unsafe to openly identify as LGBTQ+ (Rainbow Network, 2016). One respondent recalled frequently hearing ‘homophobic jokes, often justified as inoffensive banter, mostly coming from expat men’ (Rainbow Network, 2016: 3). Another reported ‘derogatory language’ used to describe a transgender colleague, including ‘mocking her passport photo, passport, and lack of clarity regarding her gender identity’ (Rainbow Network, 2016: 3). One interviewee commented that HEAT training does not reflect these realities, instead serving to exclude those with diverse SOGIESC: ‘The invisibility of LGBTIQ+ people ... means that some of the most vulnerable women will not be thought of, let alone their vulnerabilities addressed, in crisis situations.’<sup>19</sup> Another informant said of her four HEAT trainings, only once was sexual violence against LGBTQ+ individuals mentioned, and only because someone specifically asked.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, our experiences and those of informants show an incremental shift in how sexual violence against men is treated, which still leaves much to be desired.

It is clear from these experiences that aid security’s ‘stranger danger’ model does not speak to the reality of safety threats in aid work – that is, to everyday and internal threats – nor to the needs and risks faced by diverse aid workers who do not fit the white, masculine, heterosexual model. This glaring mismatch is all the more troubling for those facing multiple and compounded modes of discrimination based on gender, racialisation, disability or sexuality.

## Simulating Dangers in ‘The Field’

One of the most prominent responses to ‘duty of care’ has been the creation and proliferation of HEAT trainings as often-mandatory pre-deployment preparation – ‘no training, no fly’, as one informant noted.<sup>21</sup> These trainings comprise three-to-five-day residential courses to prepare participants to confront a range of threats in the discharge of their duties. They are often outsourced to private contractors – often European, North American, South African or Australian ex-military and ex-police, and predominantly male, white, able-bodied, middle-aged and enacting cis-gendered, heterosexual militarised masculinities.<sup>22</sup>

The first security trainings were developed in the mid-1990s, following on the heels of manuals like Save the Children’s *Safety First* (2010 (revised edition; first published 1995)) and ICRC’s *Staying Alive* (2006 (revised edition; first published as a series of pamphlets 1995, and as a publication 1999)). These early trainings informed *Good Practice Review* 8, which became an industry standard document that helped to codify many of the norms associated with HEAT training and shaped subsequent trainings (HPN, 2010; Beerli and Weissman, 2016: 72). By the early 2000s, the UN had introduced security training in 111 countries and launched the Minimum Operational Security Standards (Duffield, 2012: 24). Our informants described the ‘generalisation’ of such trainings, moving from the rarefied reserve of extraordinarily high-risk settings to the new norm within the aid sector.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, trainings draw on a ‘system-based security approach’ that is generic and standardised in approach (Bruderlein and Gassmann, 2006: 65).

While HEAT trainings themselves are diverse and subject to evolution, informants working as security trainers described ‘customs’ that have developed in the security training industry, from which deviation has become difficult.<sup>24</sup> First, their focus has tended to be on ‘hard’ threats like shootings and explosions, leaving out interpersonal conflict or harassment as questions of security. One trainer remarked:

People tended to focus on high-impact, low-likelihood threat events but ignored high-likelihood, low-impact (to the organisation) but high-impact to the individual threat events. Security training is there for the organization as a type of ‘duty of care’ measure.<sup>25</sup>

A second important ‘custom’ is that HEAT trainings must include simulations – that is, dramatic and realistic enactments of various security incidents complete with actors, crashed vehicles, simulated explosions and gunfire, smoke bombs and gory staged injuries. These simulations involve trainers and actors playing the roles of attackers, often in rag-tag uniforms, brandishing weapons and – not uncommonly – speaking in faux-foreign accents. (Interestingly, two of us and one informant described HEAT experiences eight years apart where trainers imitated Eastern European or Caucasian accents, suggesting an awareness that adopting African or Middle Eastern personas might be crossing a line.<sup>26</sup>) One interviewee, an Arab woman who acts in simulations, described being encouraged to ‘be more Arabic’: ‘It’s very stereotypical – woman in a scarf in a tent with a crying baby ... I thought it was so dehumanizing ... It just reeks of white saviourism and the white man’s burden.’<sup>27</sup>

According to the same informants, it has become ‘almost an expectation’ that these simulations should include a kidnapping, despite what one trainer

characterised as a lack of evidence that such re-creations are useful for such an eventuality; another trainer questioned the ‘layers of stress’ such simulations provoke that have ‘no place in a security training’.<sup>28</sup> This stress was palpable in other informants’ memories: one related how a gay friend was subjected to rape threats during a simulated kidnapping, which she called ‘cruel and unnecessary’.<sup>29</sup> Another was put through an exercise where a trainer shouted racial slurs including ‘dirty Chink’ and ‘the N-word’:

I said ‘time out – what is the point of this?’ And they said, ‘This could teach you when to shut up and it could save your life.’ Learning when to shut up could be a good takeaway but having racist abuse hurled at you feels more like hazing for a sorority or fraternity.<sup>30</sup>

These experiences paint a vivid picture of threat as ‘foreign’ (or rather, non-western) and difference as fair game for harassment, enabled and facilitated by these prolonged simulation events.

These factors together give rise to two core criticisms of HEAT training: firstly, by focusing on military models of threat and security, the trainings oversimplify and depoliticise security and overlook actual threats that humanitarians face, particularly women, non-white aid workers and those of diverse SOGIESC. Despite uncertainty about the nature of threats facing aid workers, or the motivations, security training ‘strips out all shades of grey’ by design and further normalises the securitisation of aid (Duffield, 2012: 25). At the same time, it arguably averts a wider conversation about what threats aid workers actually face, who receives training or other support, and how to reduce risks across the aid sector. This is especially problematic when aid workers are engaging in ever more political work, intertwining humanitarian and peacebuilding work with development and political affairs in the famed ‘nexus’. One long-time aid worker described two scenarios where aid workers had been shot while deployed – one who was sleeping with a married woman, and another who had favoured one ethnic group over another in his work. ‘The danger wasn’t *that*,’ he said, miming a military stance and cocking a rifle. ‘It was human. It’s more about navigating the social and political terrain.’<sup>31</sup> Another told us:

I worked in Iran and had to wear a headscarf there .... My scarf kept slipping and I was put under house arrest by the police because I wasn’t properly attired. Headscarf etiquette would have been handy knowledge to have in the security training. But I did learn how to operate a radio!<sup>32</sup>

Another concurred, noting that cultural norms around alcohol and recreational drug use would make more useful learning than handling weapons or radios.<sup>33</sup> Diverse aid workers’ experiences and perceptions of

risk, however, would seem to have little place in designing and delivering security guidance.

Secondly (and equally importantly), while HEAT trainings ostensibly set out to mitigate potential trauma, they are themselves the cause of anxiety and trauma among aid workers – trauma that is often itself gendered. One interviewee described her own training as ‘run by a bunch of ex-marines who just loved terrorising the shit out of us’; others (including one of us) experienced nightmares in the lead-up and after their trainings. A further interviewee remarked that trainers seemed at times to be living out fantasies of dominance and violence.<sup>34</sup> In a kidnapping simulation, one aid worker described being taunted: ‘Like, “where’s your husband? What would he think if I did X, Y or Z?” .... There was an assumption that you’d be taunted as a woman, for your position as a woman.’<sup>35</sup> Another aid worker mentioned a simulation where an actor told her: ‘I want to cut your stomach open and fuck your stomach.’<sup>36</sup> Others described being told to use a ‘safe word’, or experiencing the reliving of traumatic past experiences:

I was furious. I am not participating in BDSM – this is security preparedness. The least I can expect is not to be assaulted [or need a safe word]. And the next least thing is for trainers to be paying enough attention that if I come out of [my] role in any exercise, they notice and respond appropriately .... I really want these men to stop assaulting us and then telling us it’s for our own good.<sup>37</sup>

I am also a survivor of sexual violence. [Training] wasn’t triggering to me but I did think if someone else had experienced that and was struggling with that, it is a huge trigger! Go hide and pretend you are being raped! What kind of exercise is that?<sup>38</sup>

The need for security in the aid sector is real – in fact, two security trainers interviewed described their work as inspired by their own and colleagues’ experiences of trauma and subsequent lack of support in humanitarian deployment.<sup>39</sup> Our interviews, however, call into question whether these security practices actually address the threats that aid workers face if they are grounded in racialised and gendered logics of power and vulnerability. Several informants mentioned that some trainers have started to tone down the violent simulations, and trainers themselves reported efforts to engender change. Some HEAT trainings are also beginning to cover more ‘soft’ skills, with sexual violence awareness sessions often included alongside these, but this still maintains a division between it and ‘hard’ threats like firearms and explosives.<sup>40</sup>

With limited exceptions, HEAT trainings seem to ignore that for aid workers that do not fit the romantic aid worker ideal (cis-gendered, heterosexual, male, white, expatriate), the fortified compound can be as dangerous,

if not more, than ‘the field’. Efforts to change within security training itself, while commendable, would seem to be undertaken by a self-selecting few. Furthermore, the negative experiences reported here are far from unique and indicate problematic dynamics in the world of security training as well as the organisations that contract these services. Other informants expressed deeper cynicism about the depth of aid agencies’ commitment to staff security:

Duty of care itself is a cliché, I think. It always pops up after an incident or scandal, and it’s not awareness – it’s internal control. Tick the box: yes, I’ve had them sit in front of a screen for 45 minutes. In front of a screen, on your own ... it’s crap.<sup>41</sup>

To return to Ahmed (2012), then, HEAT trainings mirror institutional diversity trainings, where being seen to do *something* (implement trainings, produce guidance, enact policies) becomes a means of evading meaningful engagement – of actually doing nothing.

## The Call Is Coming from Inside the House

A number of positive developments have recently emerged in aid security, including the 2019 *Aid Worker Security Report* focusing on sexual violence (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2019a) and guidance from the Global (formerly European) Interagency Security Forum (GISF) in 2012 and 2019. Trainers interviewed for this article also mentioned recent efforts to cover sexual violence and emphasise ‘soft’ skills, although their agreement to participate in this research already indicates a level of engagement that may not represent the industry as a whole.<sup>42</sup> Our own interviews and experiences in the aid sector indicate that these advances mark the start of a long road ahead, and that problematic constructions of security exist not only among training companies but also among the aid organisations that hire them. (Indeed, two trainers mentioned offering bespoke sexual violence prevention and response trainings, but that these had not run in years due to employers’ and funders’ reticence to support non-HEAT trainings for their staff.<sup>43</sup>)

HEAT training has developed as a convention in the aid sector that institutionalises a particular understanding of threat, led by (predominantly male, white, able-bodied, cis-gendered) ex-military trainers and security officers, and conforming to aid organisations’ own preconceptions around fulfilling their ‘duty of care’. By leaning on ‘hard’ skills related to weaponry and militarised threats, it also devalues the ‘soft’ skills of negotiation and cultural awareness that are central to acceptance by local populations – and, notably, that women have long used to protect themselves from

everyday threats. It helps to position the aid worker as a macho, presumed white, heroic figure who must become invulnerable to a range of sensational threats posed by the savage ‘other’ around every corner. Part and parcel of the wider securitisation of aid, HEAT trainings are a microcosm of how the aid security architecture manages complex threats, allowing us to see how constructions of security, danger and fear are conceived by humanitarian actors broadly writ. Despite advances, this imaginary posits the threat as emanating primarily, if not exclusively, from the racialised ‘other’ of the ‘local’ man.

The ratcheting securitisation of aid has brought with it exclusionary security practices that serve to entrench boundaries between humanitarians and the local populations they purport to serve (Autesserre, 2014). Chisholm (2016) notes how whiteness is intimately intertwined with claims to authority in privatised security, which reinforces the colonial model of aid, with ‘international’ workers segregated in fortified compounds. By positioning local (racialised) ‘others’ as risky and dangerous to the safety of international staff and particularly (white) women – and reinforcing notions of ‘other-ness’ in accents and dress – the aid sector operates within racialised logics of (in) security and reproduces colonial power structures (Agathangelou and Ling, 2009; Said, 2003). Without downplaying very real risks, this narrow scope not only reproduces (neo-)colonial stereotypes and their harms but also invisibilises risks emanating from others (including colleagues) and the particular risks faced by women, those with diverse SOGIESC and racialised staff, as well as along axes of disability, socio-economic class and age, which we have not been able to cover here.

While data on aid security has advanced rapidly in the last two decades, troubling gaps remain and are often filled by assumptions that may not reflect aid workers’ realities and that problematically position the ‘home’ (compound, office, residence) as a safe haven, concealing the violence within it (Ahmed, 2000: 36). Little attention is paid to how ‘we’ as aid actors might perpetrate harm ourselves or to threats from within. The Oxfam scandal and subsequent cases at other prominent international NGOs, as well as the #AidToo movement, have highlighted some of these mostly unspoken issues (see Martin, 2018); the COVID-19 pandemic only underlines how humanitarians, in our certainty that we can be solutions to crises of all kinds, can exhibit an inability or indeed unwillingness to perceive our own position within matrices of colonialism, white saviourism and gendered power relations – we can literally become the problem, bringing sickness with us from abroad to areas previously not affected by it.

There is a clear need for a different framing of security threats based on a more diverse and less militarised analysis of insecurity, as well as a more inclusive training model. Diversifying the security field to include more

women, people of diverse SOGIESC, different nationalities and class backgrounds, and people with disabilities can help to deconstruct the predominant humanitarian security discourse. Drawing security trainers from the aid world itself or related fields, rather than from the military, could be another critical step.<sup>44</sup> In terms of content, a more feminist, inclusive and participatory framework might allow participants to identify their own boundaries, explore various responses to threats, share experiences of risk and mitigation, and address issues like shame and trauma. Such training models have yet to take shape, beyond conversations on aid forums and among colleagues; to bring them about will require consultation and openness to change, on the part of not only trainers and training companies but also aid organisations themselves and even funders – or, as one informant put it: ‘Don’t just say that women are more at risk of sexual aggression so therefore they just don’t travel. Talk to them! How can we mitigate this risk?’<sup>45</sup> The further promise of participatory approaches is the possibility of re-politicising security and threats through meaningful engagement with what these mean for people of different racialisations and genders, and how – whether we choose to be blind to it or not – aid is inescapably political.

## Conclusion

Over the course of careers in the aid sector, as well as writing this piece, we have been troubled by the way that race and gender shape working, travelling and living in ‘the field’. Our own experiences of security training have been varied, from highly militarised exercises inducing palpable anxiety to one more recent training that nodded to soft skills and varied risks. For one of us, HEAT training brought on panic and post-traumatic stress as simulations replayed real-life security incidents. In another instance, a fellow participant and GBV survivor was subjected to a simulated kidnapping that left her in need of specialist support that trainers were unprepared to provide. These experiences alone, while not representative of all trainings or indeed trainers, are indicative: much remains to be done in how seriously, sensitively and comprehensively the very real threat of GBV is managed in aid security.

Our concerns, however, extend beyond trainings and guidance themselves to what this notion of security demonstrates about the aid sector itself. Amid ongoing efforts to decolonise and rebuild a more just aid sector, everyone concerned – local and international aid organisations, security trainers, funders – must be willing to ask themselves whose security really matters, who gets to define security and how committed we are to achieving it. Aid as a project of solidarity with populations and places in crisis is critically important; the safety of those who work in and alongside it, and those who are

supposed to benefit from it, cannot be relegated to a mere box-ticking exercise.

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## Notes

- 1 We use HEAT throughout, but such trainings are also known as Safe and Secure Approaches in Field Environments (SSAFE), Safety and First Aid (SAFA) or other names.
- 2 On intersectionality, see [Hill Collins and Bilge \(2016\)](#).
- 3 These protest movements suggest a growing awareness of raced and gendered discrimination in aid and beyond and have been accompanied by statements of commitment from aid actors (see [Save the Children, 2020](#); [IRC, 2020](#)). Nonetheless, our experience and research – as well as the testimonials that continue to surface (see [Majumdar, 2020](#)) – indicate the depth of that commitment is still sorely lacking.
- 4 A competition on the Facebook group Fifty Shades of Aid claimed to determine the ‘worst airports’. Sudanese nationals who took umbrage at disparagement of their airport were removed from the group. Other groups like Humanitarian Clusterposting routinely mock countries where aid workers are posted.
- 5 Similar dynamics in experiences of non-white but non-local security providers can be seen in studies on peacekeeping and peacebuilding ([Chisholm, 2016, 2017](#); [Henry, 2015](#); [Mynster Christensen, 2015](#)).
- 6 Published manuals produced by humanitarian agencies ([Save the Children, 2010](#); [ICRC, 2006](#)), [GISF \(2012, 2019\)](#) and [HPN \(2010\)](#), as well as internal manuals produced by Médecins Sans Frontières.
- 7 Humanitarian Women’s Network, Fifty Shades of Aid, and Humanitarian Clusterposting.
- 8 Interviews were conducted with twelve women and three men. Eleven were white and from Europe, North America or Australia; two were Middle Eastern and Arabic; two were from Europe but biracial or Black. All are or have been aid workers. Four currently deliver security training and one was an actor in simulations. Two had worked with governments as donors for humanitarian programmes.
- 9 A parallel process can be observed in academic research, as [Peter and Strazzari \(2017: 1532\)](#) argue.
- 10 Security trainer, 19 February 2020.
- 11 Security trainer, 13 February 2020; security trainer, 19 February 2020; security trainer, 24 February 2020.



- 12 Humanitarian, 24 July 2020; security trainer, 4 March 2020.
- 13 One of the authors was a board member of Report the Abuse.
- 14 Security trainer, 24 February 2020; security trainer, 13 February 2020; security trainer, 19 February 2020.
- 15 Humanitarian, 14 January 2020.
- 16 Authors' informal discussions and observations.
- 17 Humanitarian, 25 July 2020.
- 18 Humanitarian, 25 July 2020.
- 19 Humanitarian, 22 July 2020.
- 20 Humanitarian, 29 July 2020.
- 21 Security trainer, 4 March 2020.
- 22 On western security contractor masculinities, see Chisholm (2016, 2017) and Higate (2012, 2016).
- 23 Security trainer, 19 February 2020; security trainer, 24 February 2020. One of the authors had to ask her employer to develop security guidance after near misses in Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Lebanon.
- 24 Humanitarian, 21 April 2020; security trainer, 19 February 2020; security trainer, 13 February 2020.
- 25 Security trainer, 4 March 2020.
- 26 Humanitarian, 16 January 2020.
- 27 Humanitarian, 29 July 2020.
- 28 Security trainer, 3 March 2020; security trainer, 19 February 2020. Neither of these trainers included kidnapping simulations in their HEAT offering.
- 29 Humanitarian, 29 July 2020.
- 30 Humanitarian, 27 July 2020.
- 31 Humanitarian, 14 January 2020.
- 32 Humanitarian, 21 April 2020.
- 33 Humanitarian, 27 July 2020.
- 34 Humanitarian, 3 March 2020.
- 35 Humanitarian, 14 January 2020.
- 36 Humanitarian, 21 April 2020.
- 37 Humanitarian, 21 April 2020.
- 38 Humanitarian, 27 July 2020. Several informants disclosed being GBV survivors; one disclosed this in training and received support from a psychologist. Our research suggests this experience was rare.
- 39 Security trainer, 13 February 2020; security trainer, 24 February 2020.
- 40 Security trainer, 19 February 2020; security trainer, 24 February 2020.
- 41 Security trainer, 24 February 2020; former donor, 3 July 2019.
- 42 Security trainer, 19 February 2020; security trainer, 24 February 2020.
- 43 Security trainer, 19 February 2020; security trainer, 13 February 2020.
- 44 Humanitarian, 29 July 2020.
- 45 Security trainer, 13 February 2020.

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