Safeguarding

In the wake of the Oxfam scandal in Haiti, in which the organization is perceived to have failed to act on and then attempted to cover up sexual misconduct by staff after the 2010 earthquake, the aid sector has been engaged in “safeguarding” exercises (BBC 2018). The term was initially based on a United Kingdom (UK) legal definition that applied to vulnerable adults and children. However, more recently, safeguarding has acquired a broader meaning to include all actions by aid actors to protect staff from harm (abuse, sexual harassment, and violence) and to ensure staff do not harm beneficiaries (Hoppe and Williamson 2018). Nevertheless, safeguarding has already been strongly criticized for being a buzzword largely confined to specific humanitarian policy arenas in the Global North, for its lack of inclusiveness, and for being yet another costly top-down initiative (Bruce-Raeburn 2018).

At its core, the safeguarding concept aims to reinforce the humanitarian imperative to do no harm by preventing sexual abuse and exploitation, and is part of the broader struggle for humanitarian accountability that emerged in the 1980s. Since this time, sexual exploitation has been considered the very worst kind of humanitarian worker behavior, but the parameters of what constitutes exploitation have been contested. Safeguarding means different things to different people in the aid sector, depending on how they are situated within the sector, and varies based on gender, nationality, geographical location, and age.

Today, the work of preventing sexual exploitation and abuse is commonly known by the acronym PSEA (protection from sexual exploitation and abuse) and is led by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. Safeguarding has emerged at a very specific historical moment for women's rights, and indeed for the humanitarian sector itself. The current “safeguarding crisis” comes after the global #MeToo movement that has had particularly significant impact in some of the largest donor countries in the Global North. (The movement highlighted the prevalence of sexual exploitation and harassment and also of impunity.) Safeguarding is also shaped by the professionalization and legalization of aid work and the emergence of a duty of care standard for humanitarian workers, with respect to humanitarian organizations' responsibility for the well-being and safety of their staff.

The interpretation of what safeguarding means is shaped by the changing cultural perceptions of transactional sex and prostitution, primarily in the Global North. Whereas codes of conduct have been promoted as a

key mechanism for governing the sexual behavior of humanitarian workers (Matti 2015), there appears to be an emergent assumption that paying for sex, anywhere and at any time, is incompatible with being a “good” humanitarian worker and dependable employee. In practice, this means that the distinction between paying for sex and exploiting someone for sex is erased.

As part of the ongoing push towards digitization and datafication, efforts are being made to “technologize” safeguarding responses. The UK government has launched a new Interpol/Save the Children-coordinated vetting project, Soteria, which will provide criminal record checks and improve information sharing (Gov.UK 2018). The push for quantification and “evidence-based approaches” engender a framing of social life—and its problems—that lends itself to a focus on aspects of “the social” that can be (or be made) classified/classifiable or counted/countable. However, this also links to surveillance as an increasingly common technique of humanitarian governance. How remote control strategies will correspond meaningfully to the need to reduce power imbalances and empower those in precarious positions, be they beneficiaries or staff, remains to be seen (Sandvik 2019).

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