

World Humanitarian Day: Learning about what it is to be human from humanitarian and community responders

As we commemorate World Humanitarian Day this year, the global community continues to witness geopolitical violence, resource conflicts, and climate-induced disasters that have displaced and structurally disenfranchised millions of people, disproportionately impacting women, children, and marginalised communities. These devastating crises rely heavily on external and grassroots humanitarian support to mitigate systemic suffering.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that over 1,000 humanitarian workers have been killed in the last three years. Against this backdrop of asymmetrical warfare and failing global institutions, we must ask what lessons these caregivers and advocates can teach us about collective solidarity, care, survival, and true human dignity.

In South Africa, the landscape of humanitarian work is profoundly redefined through the transformative praxis of Dr Imtiaz Sooliman and the Gift of the Givers Foundation. Their work embodies radical empathy, compassion, humility, relational care, and a disruption of systemic inequities through collective solidarity.

What is striking about the work of the Gift of the Givers and all humanitarian and community responders across the globe, is their profound commitment to restoring the dignity of all people, and by doing so, reject the oppressive, socially constructed identity markers used to codify, stratify, and compartmentalise humanity.

Humanitarian and community responders demonstrate that humanity is diverse and deeply resilient, and that local knowledge systems and belonging are paramount to survival. As they navigate diverse cultural contexts and systemic inequalities, they also illuminate the challenges that marginalised people endure.

The rights of marginalised people are often not protected due to systemic oppression and structural inequalities during crises. Women and gender diverse (LGBTIQA+) people face compounded dangers such as being excluded from accessing healthcare, including sexual and reproductive healthcare, gender-affirming healthcare, are targeted for violence, and are forced into a "double bind" of persecution and displacement.

In commemorating World Humanitarian Day, the Sexuality and Gender Division firstly honours the lives of the humanitarian and community responders – those whose lives were not protected and those who continue to offer their time and energy despite the inherent dangers of being in the field. Humanitarian workers show, through their actions, what it is to be human – community, collaboration, and a respect for human diversity.

Secondly, in commemorating World Humanitarian Day, we highlight that humanitarian support cannot be viewed as mere charity as this would simply reinforce the “saviour” trope in which a privileged group saves or rescues a marginalised group from a crisis. Humanitarian response must expose and dismantle the interlocking matrix of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism that actively manufactures the forced displacement and compounded exploitation of multiply-marginalised communities. For example, food aid directed toward populations across the African continent cannot be decoupled from historic and ongoing imperial land dispossession, ecological exploitation, the climate crisis and

neoliberal lending practices that entrap post-colonial nations in cycles of permanent debt and dependency, and severely hinder food sovereignty.

Finally, there are important lessons that psychologists can learn much from humanitarian and community responders in how we conceptualise and navigate our role and work as mental health practitioners. Lessons might include adopting more critical and reflexive praxis on our role within the therapeutic space *and* within communities; as well as embracing more culturally-sensitive, intersectional healing frameworks that honour human diversity, and hold space for indigenous and localised epistemologies.

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