

Introduction

Responding to a life in crisis¹

I started writing *The Vulnerable Humanitarian* in the second half of 2019, feeling fairly relaxed that the content and arguments were in the bag. After all, I had already spent five years studying the subject of stress and wellbeing in the aid sector for my PhD at the University of Sussex. All this book needed was a tweak here and there to the main findings of my research, and a slight change in writing style so that my target audience – practitioners and students in aid and development – would find it more compelling and accessible.

In March 2020 as my country rather reluctantly, and later than most others in Europe, prepared for lockdown in response to the spread of Covid-19 throughout the world, I was told by well-meaning friends and family that this would be the perfect opportunity to really knuckle down and write.

This is not what happened. I spent the next three months with complete writer's block, with each day presenting a series of challenging emotions: feeling lost, feeling full of doubts, feeling fearful, feeling agitated. A lot of feelings! There were other things going on in my life too. My business that I was just getting off the ground, running wellbeing and organisational change workshops for aid organisations, essentially ground to a halt as potential clients turned their attention to the impact of Covid-19 on their international operations. The man who established the yoga tradition to which I had committed through teacher training – now deceased – was found to have committed multiple abuses against various women since he brought this form of yoga from India to the western world in the 1960s. The initial revelations triggered a series of further allegations of abuse, bullying and corruption. These have left the yoga movement I aligned myself with and in which I had invested so much fragmented, conflicted and at risk of complete collapse, a situation not all that different from the scandals and fallout that emerged with similar allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation within the aid sector in 2018.

I went into lockdown with my partner of only a few months, at times feeling as if I was hanging on to the relationship and my own sanity by a thread – and indeed, the relationship was fraught with tensions and did not survive.

Writing under these circumstances became impossible, which in turn made me feel worse – disappointed in myself for seemingly not being able to achieve, or succeed, in anything. My whole identity and what I had imagined for myself as a writer, wellbeing advocate and yoga teacher appeared to be under threat, resulting in a loss of ‘selfhood’: of self-expression, of purpose, of inner knowing.

But at some point during this period I made a conscious decision to let go of expectations for myself. I recognised we were in unprecedented times, where our usual coping mechanisms and efforts to push on through regardless would not work. I also realised that, far from my emotional distress being a mere block to all my plans and aspirations, it was the raw material from which I could gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be human in this unique and uncertain period in history. And from that deeper understanding I could write this book in a way that captures this collective suffering, and our need as humans – perhaps now more than ever – to feel a sense of connection and belonging.

The Vulnerable Humanitarian has thus taken on a very different tone and approach from its original form contained within my 2019 doctoral thesis. But it is nevertheless still largely informed by my research participants in Kenya, and inspired by my own experience – of over 15 years working with international NGOs, local NGOs and social movements, mainly in Uganda, Kenya and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This has connected me with determined and passionate individuals whose belief in social justice and an end to poverty and oppression is enduring and remains a motivational force in all that they do. I have friends and colleagues who have risked their lives – remaining in rebel-held territories or areas subjected to armed attacks in order to protect innocent civilians – or have been imprisoned or separated from their families for long periods as part of this endeavour. They have often put their commitment to a safer and more equitable world above their immediate desires to maintain a relationship or have a family, or indeed to look after their own health.

And here is where we face the biggest challenge for people on the path of creating a brighter future for all. So many of us on this path veer towards putting the needs of others above our own; perhaps, this is giving us a sense of purpose and is a way out of what may be deeply rooted feelings of inadequacy or dissatisfaction with our lives. And whilst it may appear noble and even legitimate to pour our energies into helping others – particularly if we possess far more privileges than those to whom we offer our support and

solidarity – when this comes at the expense of us getting to know and take care of ourselves better, this attitude can come at a high price to our health. Alessandra Pigni, a humanitarian psychologist who sadly died from cancer in 2018, reflects on this in her book *The Idealist's Survival Kit: 75 Simple Ways to Avoid Burnout*:

Yes, what we do matters, our work matters; yes, it can be healing. But it can also be damaging, for ourselves and for others. When work is what's most fulfilling in our life, when it gives us a persona and an identity, taking a break – even when truly needed – is tough. While I'm inspired by people's bravery, determination, and resilience, I wonder if for some of us it takes more courage to call in sick at work than it does to show up when we should be resting and recovering.

(Pigni, 2016: 82)

Like many of the people described in Pigni's book, I was very much the idealist when I began my career in the aid sector. I entered the profession with a passion for the cause and an unshakable belief in my abilities to change things for the better. That faith became increasingly diminished when faced with obstacles with which many people in the sector can identify: the power and influence of state actors we were trying to challenge – particularly in protracted situations such as the ongoing Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories; the rigidity of institutional donors protecting their own interests; and the continuous struggle for financial resources to sustain projects and programmes, often leading to dramatic organisational change and staff cuts. I have been directly on the receiving end of what the sector often calls 'internal change processes' and the disruptive management and toxic atmosphere this produces. And as an international aid worker from a wealthy European country who has lived in Kenya, Uganda and Palestine, I have also navigated the huge socio-economic and cultural chasm between 'the field' and 'home,' and the implications this has for friendships, relationships and finding a sense of meaning and belonging.

My interest in studying a PhD about stress in the aid sector came from these recurring problems I'd witnessed in my professional life, and from my own emotional turmoil experienced after leaving a job with a local human rights NGO in Palestine in 2011. I had also witnessed several friends go through prolonged periods of mental and physical illness which they attributed to their work. My passion for understanding and responding to stress and burnout in my sector deepened when I worked on the East Africa programme of an international human rights NGO from 2013 to 2014. It was here that I was reminded again of some of the key problems that aid workers face: being plunged into insecure or remote environments of

widespread suffering, sometimes with little preparation or support; interacting with survivors of the most horrific crimes without being able to give them the assistance they need; working in an office where there is little opportunity or space in which to process or talk about the feelings arising from what one witnesses.

Whilst recognising that trauma and emotional distress arising from exposure to war, violence or acute poverty are part of the aid worker's experience – and were part of mine at times – I have also witnessed how much of the struggle in this sector relates to the everyday grind of trying to get the work done whilst maintaining a sense of purpose. The times when I have needed to take a break from the sector – what many may label 'burn-out,' a word I attempt to deconstruct in this book – were related to the pressures of living up to what I believed was expected of me and the difficulty of not feeling able to openly express my emotional pain. The sense of needing to get the job done and the job being to serve others whilst ignoring one's own problems are themes that emerge repeatedly in this book, as are the role of organisations and managers in exerting specific pressures concerning how staff should behave and what their priorities should be.

The Vulnerable Humanitarian is about my profession – aid work – and the systemic challenges to the mental health of staff that long preceded Covid-19 but are becoming ever more pronounced in the wake of the pandemic. These include organisational and institutional structures and processes which deny us our full potential – systems which can be at odds with the values that inspire us to be change-makers. And they include the pain and suffering that we are confronted with, among the communities we support and within ourselves, which can at times feel suffocating and paralysing. In this respect, this book reaches beyond the aid sector and addresses anyone striving to bring lasting social change, to end poverty, inequality and oppression, but who struggles with the day-to-day realities of what this entails.

The book's main ideas are drawn from my own experiences of working for different development, human rights and humanitarian NGOs; from my own personal story of struggle within this context and my recovery and healing; and from my doctoral research which investigated stress and wellbeing among national and international aid workers in Kenya. From 2015 to 2016 I conducted ethnographic research in the country's capital, Nairobi, and one of its poorest counties, Turkana, in the north. Over that period, I spoke to 125 people – roughly half and half men and women, and half and half Kenyan and expatriate (including aid workers from Africa and Asia as well as from Europe and America) – about their work as aid professionals, their everyday challenges, what motivates them and what leaves them feeling disillusioned, tired and unwell.

My research included many semi-structured interviews, sometimes squeezed into very little time in between my participant's other commitments; many false-starts and cancellations due to informants being ill, or busy with work; a lot of coffees, lunches and dinners, and the odd walk or yoga class with an informant – and in this context there were a few who became close friends; and quite a number of field trips – mostly in Kakuma refugee camp, and pastoralist villages, in Turkana – where I accompanied aid workers in their ubiquitous four-wheel drives to project sites or chatted to them in their compounds. You will be meeting many of these individuals throughout this book. They have all been given pseudonyms, and their employers and organisations anonymised.

Since that time, as well as completing my PhD, I have also kept up the conversation on this topic – engaging in debates and discussions on how we may reimagine aid so it is more caring and inclusive, and interviewing key thinkers on emerging and increasingly important issues such as sexual abuse and anti-racism. These key thinkers are referenced in *The Vulnerable Humanitarian* with their full names, apart from those who wished to remain anonymous.

Lessons from a pandemic

This book comes at a time of great potential, as much as a time of great crisis and uncertainty, for the aid sector. The realities of the Covid-19 pandemic have been horrifying for many. They have included the loss of loved ones, and the inability to be physically by their side in their last hours; and loss of livelihoods, and the collapse of industries upon which many depended for a regular income to feed themselves and their families. Low-income households face greater risks due to often living in cramped neighbourhoods and being unable to socially distance themselves.

In countries in the majority world, these realities are often magnified, suggesting that the toll on people's lives from the pandemic is likely to increase exponentially in the years to come. An estimated 235 million people will need humanitarian assistance in 2021 – up by 40 per cent since the previous year, and believed to be largely due to the effects of the pandemic (United Nations Security Council, 2021). It is aid workers who will be on the frontline of the response to this crisis. At the time of writing, as a result of Covid-19, humanitarian and development professionals and organisations are grappling with new work routines and pressures and a mounting chasm – due to travel restrictions – between the traditional decision-making hubs in the Global North and implementers based in the Global South. The unpredictable, and political, nature of funding in the aid sector, as well as recent scandals over sexual abuse and racism, heightens the sense

of existential threat – or at the very least of the need for a radical change in how aid is delivered.

Many of the sector's failings with regard to staff wellbeing were fully exposed in 2018 on the back of reports of sexual misconduct at multiple organisations including Oxfam, Save the Children and UNAIDS, and the suicide of two members of staff at Amnesty International, but they are not new problems. The sector has a history of responding to internal crises through perilous restructuring processes that often worsen rather than improve the situation, or through maintaining the proverbial stiff upper lip: carrying on regardless, and covering up the problem through opaque management and recruitment processes.

Business as usual?

'Business as usual' is a common term bandied about, debated and challenged following the impact of Covid-19 on living and working conditions. We use it so widely in capitalist societies because the pursuit of profit has taken precedence over everything else, with repercussions for how workers take care of themselves and their loved ones. In workspaces throughout the world, it has become normal to turn up at the office and leave your personal problems at the door; to take little interest in your colleagues who you spend more of your waking hours with than your own family; and to maintain a calm and capable attitude that hides any sign of struggle or vulnerability, for fear that this might lose you your job.

In the period of lockdown in the United Kingdom (UK) from March until June 2020, I talked to countless people – many of them aid workers – who told me they were more busy than ever. Unable to leave their homes or travel, they were spending each day glued to their computers in endless Zoom meetings, often whilst juggling child-care and home schooling and sharing their desk-space with other household members. 'Business as usual' indeed seemed very apt for many, and in fact entailed even more pressure to produce specific outputs with less support from colleagues and managers, and less interaction and exchange of ideas than occurs more casually when working physically close to each other in an office. One of the most challenging changes in circumstances expressed by people to whom I delivered wellbeing workshops within different charities was the inability to share lunch or have a more informal social interaction with their colleagues. Indeed, surveys within the humanitarian and broader charity sector suggest that the risks of burnout increased as a result of the added pressures, and loneliness, related to Covid-19 and lockdown (Alliance Magazine, 2020; CHS Alliance, 2020).

A feeling of a shared experience or struggle, and a sense of mutual support, often gets lost in particular organisational and institutional cultures – even before Covid-19 and the banishing of staff to their own homes away from the office. I can recollect many occasions where I found myself performing in front of my colleagues – not being fully myself, and instead either remaining silent and keeping my head down or plastering a smile across my face that concealed far more complicated emotions. Where there is no space for vulnerability, where ‘business as usual’ is the implied narrative and where there are no systems or regular practices in place to encourage a pause to breathe, to share and to be honest with each other, we learn to bury our emotions in order to get the job done.

I remember this when returning from a particularly difficult trip from Kenya where I’d been interviewing people back-to-back who’d been raped and abused, or lost family members, during two periods of post-election violence in 2007 and 2013. The main interest of my employers on my return was about what work I had produced and how quickly I could meet my deadlines so they could fulfil their obligations to end my contract, a contract that was uncertain from the start due to a messy restructuring process that meant many of us had our jobs relocated to countries in the Global South.

And I remember this dynamic also as I wrote the PhD that forms the basis of this book. Two months after I returned from a year-long stint in Kenya conducting research for the PhD, my mother died unexpectedly in January 2017. Plunged into shock and grief, whilst also trying to look after my Dad who suffered from multiple health problems after my Mum died, I nevertheless turned up at my University office three months later and resumed writing my thesis. Rarely was I asked by colleagues how I was doing, and rarely did I attempt a conversation that would reveal the truth: I was desperate, lonely and exhausted and my physical and mental health were suffering. We have become so used to burying our darkest moments of fear, sadness, grief and anxiety, and declaring ‘life goes on.’ Yet when we do this we are losing a part of ourselves, and we also lose our connection to others.

A new meaning for vulnerability

I gave this book the title ‘The Vulnerable Humanitarian’ long before any glimpse of Covid-19. Back in 2018 when I first came up with the title for my PhD thesis, I was wanting to acknowledge that humanitarians are not just heroes; they are human beings with hopes, desires, frailties and fears that are too often hidden away in the day-to-day context of trying to save

or improve the lives of others they see as far less fortunate. There was the risk back then that by using a word so often applied to the populations we serve to describe our own experiences may problematically centre our own stories whilst reinforcing the tendency within our sector to silence or generalise the experiences of the other – the people receiving our assistance.

That is a charge which arguably still stands in this book, focused as it is on the aid giver and not the aid receiver. Yet I would also argue that vulnerability has taken on a whole new meaning in light of Covid-19. This global pandemic, on a scale never seen in our lifetimes,² has shown aid workers that vulnerability does not just exist among people so casually named as victims, survivors or beneficiaries within aid interventions. If we view vulnerability through the lens of the famous scholar of this topic, Brené Brown, then our loss of control, of having the answers or being right, and our fears for ourselves and our families, for our security and our wellbeing, shows that none of us are free from vulnerability (Brown, 2013). Ultimately every human being on this planet fears harm that may be done against them. And whilst for some this fear may be more real than for others, it is the perception of external risk – to our safety, to our self-esteem, to our sense of belonging – that makes us adjust our behaviour, often causing us to flee from the problem or armour up and pretend it's not there (Brown, 2013: 113). In the aid sector, this armouring up seeps into the organisational culture to such an extent that vulnerability is replaced by certainty and control – in the form of our logical frameworks and theories of change – and by an expectation from ourselves and our colleagues that we must 'man up' if we're going to do this work properly.

This book is an attempt to lean in to, rather than run away from or fight back against, the vulnerability that makes us human – and indeed lies behind what drives many of us to do this work in the first place; motivations of care and compassion for others. In the aid and development sector we have suffered for decades from our assumptions that we know best – and given the dominance of white, western presence and thinking in decision-making, strategic planning and aid delivery, this has reinforced age-old hierarchies and inequalities as well as very often resulting in more harm than good being done for the populations we are assisting.

Leaning in to vulnerability means recognising that in spite of our good intentions, we can make disastrous mistakes. It means daring to pause and listen to criticism, and be willing to make a change that may eventually dismantle those hierarchies. But it also means understanding that our emotions are as legitimate as anyone else's; and indeed if we learn to be with them more, and to express them, then we are being human. And in so doing, we are bringing our humanness back into our work, in a way that helps us connect with the humanness of others – including those we are serving

in our aid programmes, so that they are no longer seen merely as victims or beneficiaries but as human beings with full and complicated personalities and lives. This book is thus an attempt to reframe, and reclaim, the term vulnerability – to connect to our human fears and frailties as well as our human strengths and hopes, in order to share and support each other in this current collective, global struggle – at a time when connection is needed more than ever.

Studying these topics is one thing, but I wouldn't be able to make this argument for reframing vulnerability if it wasn't for my own experience of emotional pain arising from my work. It is to this personal story of crisis that I now turn.

Learning vulnerability through inner crisis and healing

In 2012 something very strange happened. I was unemployed, after having left my job with a local NGO in Palestine at the end of the previous year, feeling unable to continue at that point in a career that had thus far lasted ten years. I was exhausted. I felt disillusioned by what I had seen and experienced, particularly powerless in what seemed to be feeble efforts to gather financial resources and design advocacy campaigns to end the Israeli occupation and its oppression of the Palestinians. I was tired of the endless uncertainty and bureaucracy surrounding each attempt to raise funds, or implement a project and assess its impact, or simply to secure my contract with my employers in NGOs often subject to precarious resourcing. By then in my mid-30s, I was living with my parents again, because the local salary I was receiving in Palestine made me ill-prepared financially for a life back in London.

On a whim I took up an offer for a discounted treatment at a Korean healing centre in London. And I was given an acupuncture treatment that seemed to crack me open. The next day, and for days upon days after that, I could barely stop myself from crying, over what I am not sure. But for a person who hitherto had been conditioned, particularly in my work environment, to hold it all in and get on with the work at hand, this was extremely unusual and unexpected. Not only for the depths I fell to – at times in fits of tears that felt uncontrollable and delirious, seeing my life flash before me as if it was soon to end; but also for my acceptance, perhaps for the first time ever, that this was something I needed to surrender to rather than suppress.

I did not seek help from a doctor – perhaps if I had done I would have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. There is no doubt that I had stored up some trauma and anxiety from the countless encounters

with Israeli military and security personnel when I was working in Palestine; or from my exposure – face to face and through media images and personal accounts – to the physical and psychological scars of people, including children, who had been subjected to the most horrific abuses in northern Uganda. I had attended a few counselling sessions previously, but on this occasion this was not what I felt was required; and indeed, the need for more holistic and inclusive healing and mental health care strategies is a topic that receives a lot of attention in this book. That experience in the Korean centre marked the beginning of a long journey of healing through embodiment practices: stillness and movement exercises that allowed me to observe and be with the thoughts in my mind or the sensations in my body, in a spirit of non-judgement and care. This has ranged from mindfulness practice, including an eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction course I completed in 2014 and numerous silent retreats; yoga, including the completion of a 200-hour yoga teacher training in 2020; training in process-oriented psychology (Processwork) in group settings; Trauma Release Exercises (TRE); Tai Chi; dance and singing. And quite a number of ‘alternative’ healing modalities that a few years previously I would have believed were way too hippy for me to consider.

All these practices, in different ways, have allowed me to confront, accept and release all the anger that I had stored in my body, much of it connected to my experiences as an aid worker, to lean into my emotional discomfort with interest and kindness, to discover what messages it was giving me. They are spiritual practices – a term that my former atheist self would have shied away from, but which I now see as essential to pursuing social justice. Racial justice advocate Layla Saad – whose work I’ll be returning to in Chapter 6 – captures this connection beautifully with specific reference to anti-racism work, which must be part of an aid worker’s growth and learning too:

It is my belief that this is soul work because it requires you to go deeply inside yourself and face your darkest shadows. It is work that will help you root out those parts of yourself that are harmful to you and to others. It is work that invites you to be a better person than you have been in the past. It is work that will bring up all kinds of challenging and painful feelings, and ask you to sit in those feelings and not run away from them [...]

It is work that requires depth of spirit, critical thinking, a heart of integrity and an empowering vision for a new world.

(Saad, 2018: 26)

This spiritual work has also opened up new collective spaces for me to voice and listen to stories about our deepest hopes, fears, traumas and desires for

ourselves and the future of our planet. Some of these spaces have, more recently, included groups and networks engaged in social change work. People who believe that we simply cannot continue as we have been, blindly adopting behaviours that follow the status quo, even in our activism: behaviours at best devoid of emotion, at worst emphasising hostility and an aversion to empathy, connection and meeting the other where they are. Whilst it has been deeply painful and unsettling at times, I have learned through these groups that in order for us to truly grow as change-makers – whether this be activists, charity workers, carers or the many others wanting a better world – we must connect with our own suffering as much as, or indeed in order to, connect with the suffering of others whom we wish to help.

Part of that suffering relates to who we are in the world: how we see ourselves, and how we are seen by others. It can mean hearing, and sitting with, uncomfortable truths about how our individual positioning within global hierarchies and systems of power is far more present – and damaging – than our desire to help others who are not as safe within the system as us. For me this has meant learning to acknowledge my privileges and how they may, against my good intentions, impact negatively against the very people I have sought to support.

But connecting with suffering in this way has also been about seeing how I too have felt excluded, unheard, under-appreciated and like I don't belong; and this has often been for the reason that what is expected of me is not what I am capable of, or feel comfortable, delivering. In a world where perfectionism is often aligned with endurance and 'manning up' in the face of difficulty, and where we are constantly told that our raw, complex emotions are a hindrance and a nuisance, many of us are in fact performing and not showing our real selves. The aid sector is, unfortunately, as big an arena as any other for this type of performance – as I will be showing in this book.

My healing has allowed me to make friends with those emotions, and consider how they may be useful in our work as change-makers: not only in how we look after ourselves and avoid burnout, but in how we may approach our activities, whether this be the provision of aid or our advocacy efforts, in a way that encourages greater connection with all those with whom we interact – colleagues, state authorities, so-called 'victims' and indeed so-called 'perpetrators.' In fact, my study of both feminist and postcolonialist theories and my journey of healing have taught me that we need a new language for our social change work, one that is less divisive, less 'othering,' less straitjacketed and less paternalistic. A language, an attitude, and an approach that has at its heart the intention to connect and understand, rather than fight against and divide. And to recognise that beneath the labels we give ourselves and others, there remains a shared

humanity – where, as I've remarked in relation to the global experience of Covid-19, we are all vulnerable.

What I have outlined above in terms of my own learning and development in this area is heavily influenced by feminist thinkers, idealists and change-makers who have been challenging the systems and structures that have silenced or suppressed us in our efforts to pursue equality and justice. This book is a coming together of these ideas and embodied practices, which bring awareness to our positioning in this world and how it affects us and others.

Theorising myself and my profession: critical reflections

In the last few years, as I studied my PhD and then went on to write this book, I have engaged more fully than ever before in critical thinking. Through the study of feminist and postcolonial theory I learned to examine and question assumptions and narratives, and explore alternative lived realities and world views, to such depths that no experience as a researcher within the humanitarian and human rights sphere had ever given me.

Feminist theory informs much of *The Vulnerable Humanitarian*, because it interrogates the problem of power and its effect on our minds and bodies. Feminist theory also exposes how systems and institutions built on patriarchal ideals reinforce inequalities and oppression. This is particularly problematic for aid organisations, where the hierarchies and divisions of power can be at complete odds with humanitarian aspirations for dignity, equality and justice. Feminist praxis offers us the opportunity to challenge and disrupt assumptions about wellbeing and care that have been dominated by white, western – and largely male – knowledge.

Many of the thinkers I refer to and who have inspired me in this book are both feminist and postcolonial scholars. They argue that the aid system's existence, in its current form, is built from and relies upon a white, male narrative: that of the white saviour, “the celebration and mythologizing of the great deeds that the white man/hero alone was to accomplish in the dark continent” (Baaz, 2005: 107). It is a conceptualisation that informs “contemporary expectations attached to the development worker role” (Baaz, 2005: 107).

Some of the scholars I reference in *The Vulnerable Humanitarian* are attempting to challenge and upend this narrative, and to reimagine aid and development in a way that de-centres the white gaze (Pailey, 2019) and has principles of decolonisation and an end to all forms of oppression at its

heart. Explaining how we decolonise our knowledge and actions, International Development scholar Olivia Rutazibwa writes:

Decoloniality asks: where do we start the story? Who has the microphone and who usually doesn't? What do we consider expertise? What are the implications of Eurocentric bias in knowledge production? Do our practices and knowledge systems contribute to the struggle against colonial power relations?

(Rutazibwa, 2019: 66)

Reforming and transforming aid practice also requires an approach that is intersectional: a term first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1990) to challenge feminist theory's habit of conflating or ignoring difference within women's experiences of oppression. Adopting an intersectional approach means recognising there can be multilayered oppressions against an individual, related to race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, religion and immigrant status among others.

Psychology Professor and social justice advocate Lisa Rosenthal provides some important insights on how Covid-19 can shine a light on how oppressive systems affect us all in different ways:

The current situation can be a catalyst for people that experience different forms of oppression but tend to accept hierarchy-enhancing ideologies and the status quo to liberate themselves from that false consciousness. Working both individually and collectively toward developing a more intersectional critical consciousness, or clearer understanding of the collective truth of interlocking systems of oppression, can help us seize the opportunities this pandemic offers to foster intersectional revolution: radical reorganization of our societal structures in ways that strive to dismantle all systems of oppression in order to support all people and the planet.

(Rosenthal, 2020: 15)

These efforts not only require a commitment to changing policies and systems that reinforce colonial, sexist and racist power structures in the aid sector. They also require introspection – a reflexivity that is accountable, whereby we take responsibility, individually, for our role in sustaining these oppressive structures. This reflexive process is largely non-existent in the profession I come from, and so it was only during my PhD that I really began to grapple with my positioning within the aid system and my responsibilities in dismantling that system.

I realised, as I went on, that the ideas I was wrestling with were no longer simply objective things that I had gathered over the course of my research and reading up of relevant literature, and which I could evaluate from the sidelines as an impartial observer. They were becoming part of my own identity; as a white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, cis-gendered woman who was, for the first time, explicitly seeing herself as a feminist. Perhaps I had always been, but it was through studying the PhD that I truly embraced that label, becoming what Sara Ahmed calls the “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed, 2017): a person who sees how, everywhere we look, we are dealing with age-old power structures and dynamics which maintain privileges and advantages for some groups of people whilst oppressing and silencing the experiences of others. A person who notices how this plays out not only in the arena of my own profession, the aid and development industry and its many tentacles including aid programming and staff structures, but also in my private life. And on noticing, feels a responsibility to call it out and remark on it – because social change depends on even these small actions; actions that will at times risk the harmony of a family meal or a long-held friendship or a romantic relationship being completely disrupted (incidents which did indeed occur, over the course of writing this book).

I have no regrets over this somewhat belated evolution in my life. It has helped me to become crystal clear on my values, as a cis-gendered woman, and to gain courage to own them, articulate them and apply them in all that I do. Feminism for me has been a gateway into not only respecting my own truth, but in doing so learning to use my own, privileged, voice, to question the truths of others that are problematically universalised. To borrow Sara Ahmed’s words: “Feminist theory taught me that the universal is what needs to be exploded. Feminist theory taught me that reality is usually just someone else’s tired explanations” (Ahmed, 2017: 29).

This continuous questioning of the dominant narratives and agendas of our society and wider global order, and the feminist effort to disrupt these and present alternatives – particularly those coming from marginalised groups – nevertheless brings challenges for someone like me: someone who remains fairly near the top of the hierarchy of privilege. If I remain an advocate for greater social equity, and to shifting the power of language, knowledge and voice – particularly within the aid sector – to these marginalised groups, then how do I square that with writing this book? In producing a book that evaluates the experiences of aid workers from the Global South, as well as those with whom I can more easily identify in the Global North, am I not simply reinforcing power imbalances that centre my ideas and voice above those to whom I supposedly wish to shift the power? Ultimately, PhD or no PhD, what gives me the right to be an

authoritative voice on the experience of others with whom I do not share the same history of oppression?

There are no easy answers to these questions. I could say, “Oh well I’m using my privilege to speak up in ways that are harder for those who do not have the same privileges.” Yet this is an all-too easy response that aid organisations have used since the beginning to justify maintaining a system that secures their role as saviours and those of aid recipients as voiceless victims: a system in which people in the majority world are merely ‘recipients’ or ‘beneficiaries’ of what people from high-income countries have to offer, not agents of change in their own right (Martins, 2020: 141). At a time when the Black Lives Matter movement is gaining prominence, we have to go beyond mere statements of solidarity and consider very carefully how our own language and behaviour, even in our acts of so-called solidarity, may be part of the problem.

At the same time, I know from my own experience how easy it is to tie oneself up in knots attempting to ‘get it right’ when it comes to anti-racism work or any other social justice efforts; to such an extent that we – and I mean the white, privileged ‘we’ – remain silent and do nothing at all. Ultimately, in order to move forward with some of the problems raised in *The Vulnerable Humanitarian* and elsewhere around decolonising aid work and removing it of racist, colonial structures and behaviours, we have to be prepared to get things wrong, to have our good intentions challenged, to have people disagree with us. Writing about how her anti-racist efforts in the United States (US) were challenged by some people of colour, in her book *Untamed* Glennon Doyle writes:

Every white person who shows up and tells the truth – because it’s her duty as a member of our human family – is going to have her racism called out. She will have to accept that others will disagree with how she’s showing up and that they will have every right to disagree. She will need to learn to withstand people’s anger, knowing that much of it is real and true and necessary. She will need to accept that one of the privileges she’s letting burn is her emotional comfort. She will need to remind herself that being called a racist is actually not the worst thing. The worst thing is privately holding her racism to stay safe, liked and comfortable while others suffer and die. There are worst things than being criticized – like being a coward.

(Doyle, 2020: 219)

What we need now is an open and inclusive debate around what we see as problematic within the aid sector, and so what I put forward here is one among many opinions contributing to that debate. It is informed by the

stories of my research participants, in an effort to challenge assumptions and beliefs originating from a dominant white culture. And it is informed by my own experience, as a white cis-gendered woman. It is easy to imagine that this experience matters less than those who experience oppression and discrimination explicitly, on a daily basis. Indeed, studying feminism has been a humbling process that has at times made me want to continuously critique and de-centre my own story. Yet what I have also learned is that whilst our experiences of injustice in this world may vary greatly, there is no hierarchy of suffering. If my increasing awareness of privilege only silences me and my suffering, then I am doing a disservice to myself and to principles of self- and collective care that permeate throughout *The Vulnerable Humanitarian*. As another feminist researcher in the development sphere reflects:

I am concerned then about how you can deny your own emotions in an effort to deal with the multifaceted power inequalities that mark themselves on your own body. In doing so, do you commit a form of violence against yourself?

(Bevan, 2014: 158)

My story of struggle does matter, if it contributes to a broader understanding of how within our sector there are problems and challenges shared by many, whilst at the same time acknowledging these problems are complex and apply differently according to who you are talking to. Covid-19 has been an opportunity to realise how, alongside the many systemic differences I highlight in this book, there are many human experiences we all share no matter who or where we are in the world: our sorrows, our fears, our grief, as well as our hopes and desires for happiness, connection and belonging.

How to use this book

It is my wish that *The Vulnerable Humanitarian* not only provides some helpful insights into the realities of aid work, and the effect those realities can have on the mental health and wellbeing of staff, but that it is a useful tool in personal and collective change. What I mean by this is that we go beyond talking about these issues as if they are someone else's problem, and explore how each and every one of us can take action. This may mean engaging in deeper self-reflection about internal biases and discriminatory behaviour and how this can be unlearned and overcome; or it may mean considering more radical working practices and methods of communication that challenge hierarchical and oppressive behaviours; or it might mean bringing in

new systems and policies that are fully committed to ending discrimination and shifting the power to the Global South. All of these suggestions are contained within this book.

The book is comprised of two parts. In Part I, Deconstructing stress and wellbeing in the aid sector, I discuss some of the main themes and findings emerging from my thesis and research in Kenya. Part II, Creating healthy, inclusive work environments, suggests ideas, questions and practices to generate inner, collective and systemic change that can transform the sector's organisational culture. The content of the chapters in Part I may feel very uncomfortable for aid workers who are close to the problems that I'm highlighting. If this is the case for you, reading Part II may be your starting point – particularly Chapter 6 – as it suggests practices that can support you to pause, to reflect and to become more familiar with your feelings and how to *work with them* rather than run away from them; this in turn will help you respond to the rest of the book from a place that is more centred, compassionate and hopeful. You may also want to consider reading some or all parts of this book with a reading group – with friends or colleagues – so that you can reflect together, supportively, on what is coming up for you as you read.

Part I comprises the following:

Chapter 1: The perfect humanitarian: what is expected of aid workers and why it's problematic presents some of the key systems and discourses that govern aid and development practice. It explores in detail the concept of white saviourism and what is meant by the accusations of colonialism and racism which have beset the sector for decades. I will argue that white saviourism not only affects how aid programmes are developed and implemented, it also leads to particular expectations about the preferred attributes and behaviour of staff. I introduce the archetype of the perfect humanitarian – an archetype that has partly evolved out of the professionalisation of the sector in recent years – to demonstrate an organisational culture that favours not only specific expertise and levels of commitment, but also an absence of vulnerability or wholeness. In this organisational culture, staff are unable to be fully human, or bring their full self into the workplace, with specific challenges for those who do not completely live up to the expertise and commitment that is expected within the sector. Ultimately the sector's drive for perfectionism, often fuelled by the scramble for funding from donors, is unsustainable and silences many different stories of abuse and marginalisation within the workplace.

Chapter 2: Stress? What stress? explores why it is that aid workers often avoid talking about the emotional challenges of the work. I suggest that speaking up on mental health and on other issues affecting the sector such as sexual harassment carries a considerable risk to job

security – particularly for national staff in the Global South whose contracts are frequently more precarious and who often have fewer opportunities for career progression than their expatriate counterparts. Unsympathetic management, as demonstrated through some of the stories I share from aid workers, results in further silencing, as well as a failure in duty of care. I will also show that part of the problem is our tendency to collapse mental health and wellbeing within the story of the dominant culture, whereby the experiences and specific challenges of marginalised groups, including national staff, are often overlooked in efforts by aid agencies to systematise staff care. Thus, there is a silencing on multiple levels that must be challenged if aid organisations are to respond effectively to problems of stress and trauma within the sector.

Chapter 3: Wellbeing: lost connections continues to interrogate some of our assumptions about mental health and wellbeing. I highlight the systemic blind spots that arise from the tendency within the aid sector and beyond it to focus solely on individual choice and responsibility in feeling well. And I discuss how the emphasis on the wellbeing needs of expatriate staff in aid organisations impacts on the health, happiness and security of their national counterparts. I will start to explore different interpretations of wellbeing that deviate from western, individualised interventions, and suggest an emphasis on inter-connectedness – to self, community and spirit. Ultimately, we must broaden our perspective on what it means to thrive in the aid sector, and consider the different lived experiences of staff, and how these may be negatively affected by a straitjacketed, one-size-fits-all approach to wellbeing. The chapter thus sets the stage for exploring what this means in practice – which is the focus of Part II of the book.

Part II will offer conclusions on some of the main themes covered in Part I, and recommendations on individual, collective and institutional change that support the wellbeing of all staff. It comprises the following:

Chapter 4: Making wellbeing inclusive and central to aid practice summarises some of the key problems that emerge from the stories and accounts I presented in Part I. These include processes of professionalisation and the drive for perfectionism – both of which create an environment where systemic flaws and personal grievances cannot be easily discussed; and a centring of whiteness in both aid practice and staff wellbeing, which leaves many people feeling marginalised, undervalued and mistreated. I explore some recent initiatives that have brought aid and development practitioners together to discuss these problems and how they may be overcome. And I introduce some of the key principles and ideas around wellbeing and self- and collective care that inform the recommendations that I present in the chapters to follow.

Chapter 5: Assessing your organisational culture presents a series of guideposts covering different thematic areas to support managers and staff in adopting more inclusive and caring working practices. The guideposts are presented as reflective questions to ask oneself, or one's organisation. At the heart of these guideposts is a feminist approach to power, which recognises how 'power with,' 'power within' and 'power to' can be cultivated to challenge hierarchies which exclude and marginalise particular groups and individuals. These systems of power will be fully discussed in the first part of the chapter. The guideposts cover some of the key requirements for change that have emerged in Part I of the book, namely: to reframe skills and competencies in recruitment processes; to evaluate staff compensation and protection mechanisms; to rethink leadership and hierarchy; to make staff care strategies more inclusive; to embrace wholeness and vulnerability; and to integrate staff wellbeing into programmes and fundraising.

Chapter 6: Welcoming the vulnerable humanitarian: practices for self- and collective care and transformation contains a series of practices to try out alone or with others, which can support deepening your awareness of the experiences of your own body, and of other bodies as well. They are practices that have been recommended and used effectively by individuals straddling the spheres of wellbeing and social change, and have a particular history within feminist movements. Whilst some may feel familiar – such as breathing and self-compassion exercises – they have been adapted to specifically address the need for change-makers to understand their own internalised oppressions and biases, so that they may be more present and more aware in their efforts to support others. It is through a personal culture of care that a wider culture of care can grow, and this is what the chapter is about. The practices are also designed to give readers a breathing space in which to reflect more deeply, and in a loving way, on their histories, motivations and experiences; and in doing so be more open and willing to address the guideposts suggested in Chapter 5.

A note on language

Debates and disagreements about language – how we describe the work we do and the people we support – are rampant within the aid and development sector. I do not claim to have found the solutions to these linguistic tensions, and so the language I use in this book will no doubt sit well with some and not at all well with others. However, it may help for you to know how I have come to use a particular phrase – particularly with regard to some obvious bones of contention. Here they are:

International non-governmental organisations (INGOs): Unsurprisingly, I'm going to use this term a lot. And yet the ease with which we use it hides the complexity of what actually constitutes an INGO. Some organisations still identify very strongly with the country where they were founded – for example, the International Rescue Committee, whose headquarters and senior management are based in the US, and who also have programmes there as well as in the Global South. Action Aid, although founded in the UK, has since 2004 located its headquarters in South Africa and as a federation has member offices in different parts of the world who share equal decision-making powers. And there are also INGOs that have all along been based in the Global South, such as Adeso based in Kenya, whose Director is from Somalia, and whose programmes support communities in Kenya, Somalia and South Sudan. I am recognising all these different structures here as, nonetheless, INGOs – because they operate in more than one country. Most of the INGO staff who participated in my research were from organisations whose headquarters were in Europe or the US and had regional or national offices in the Global South, or who had confederate structures with affiliate offices throughout the world (such as Oxfam).

Aid workers: I will be using this term broadly, to include any individual working for an international humanitarian, development or human rights organisation, and includes consultants as well as staff. This broad definition recognises what I have seen in both my research and my own professional experience, as someone who has worked in all three types of organisation: that whilst the content of the work can vary greatly, many of the day-to-day challenges are strikingly similar. Part I of the book will demonstrate this through the accounts of staff from a variety of different organisations, who have experienced similar struggles in spite of their job descriptions varying hugely.

Global North/Global South and minority/majority world: There is no conceptual term that everyone can agree on to describe the distinction between high-, middle- and low-income countries. Whilst low- to middle-income countries are generally situated in the southern hemisphere, so are Australasia and the Antarctic. My commitment to decolonising development includes a commitment to decolonising the language we use to describe the countries we work in, and it is ultimately up to people from those countries to decide how best their societies may be described; and this is likely to vary considerably from one person to the next. At best I can go with what feels less paternalistic and derogatory than the postcolonial air of the 'Third World' and 'developing countries,' although any term is likely to have a homogenising effect that ignores the very different realities of the millions of people living in each region. I use the terms Global North and Global South, and minority world and majority

world, interchangeably. The former term reflects more the geographical division between high-income and low- to middle-income countries (with the caveats I've already suggested with reference to northern and southern hemisphere). The latter term reflects a more stark social reality – that people from low- to middle-income countries actually make up the majority of the world's population. We perhaps need to be reminded of this more regularly when so much of the world's decision-making power rests within the minority world.

National/expatriate staff: In my PhD thesis, I actually avoided the term 'expatriate' altogether, replacing it with 'international,' because the former term has such problematic connotations with power and privilege. The assumption with the term 'expatriate' has traditionally been that it describes people from high-income countries who go to work and live in low-income countries, implying that this is not something available to people travelling in reverse. Indeed, we see this implication played out in real time with the ugly accusations made against 'immigrants' who come to work in the UK. However, I have maintained the word 'expatriate' in the book as it is these hierarchies that I am interrogating, through the stories of national and international staff I present in Part I, and which I seek to disrupt, through the recommendations I put forward in Part II. I also wish to recognise, however, that the terms 'national' and 'expatriate' remain derogatory for many people within the sector as they fail to acknowledge the diversity of people who are assigned these categories purely through their employment status. Where possible, I have therefore been specific about the actual country of origin of the aid workers I refer to.

My use of the term 'we': You will see that quite regularly I relate to particular problems and ideas by using the term 'we.' But who is this 'we' I am referring to? Given what I've discussed in this introduction, applying this word may appear to put me at risk of the very problems of white centring that I'm seeking to challenge. I understand that what I have to share may not be relatable for every person who reads this book. At the same time, *The Vulnerable Humanitarian* is a book about ending burnout culture. It is a book about challenging the systems that keep us down, that tire us out – and seeing how our own inner healing can help that process. That is where the 'we' lies; I am talking to all those who are on that path of inner, collective and systemic change.

I feel excited to be sharing with you the stories and ideas of so many committed, honest, *vulnerable* aid workers and change-makers; I hope that you are able to see yourself in these stories, in ways that can help you learn, heal and grow. It is my deepest desire that *The Vulnerable Humanitarian* may be a catalyst for change: for yourself, and for the environment in which you work. Perhaps it will be a particular anecdote from one of my research

participants, or a self- and collective care practice, or a suggestion for a new organisational process; they are all contained in this book, and they can all contribute to deepening your compassion for your own experiences and those of your colleagues. Let us never forget that compassion is, and should always be, at the heart of all that we do as humanitarians.

Notes

- 1 I cannot use this term 'life in crisis' without giving a nod of appreciation to Peter Redfield, whose book of the same name examined the realities of aid work within the context of one of the sector's most well-known international humanitarian NGOs, Médecins Sans Frontières.
- 2 Some may challenge this claim by pointing to the HIV/AIDS epidemic that became prominent in the 1980s and continues to this day. Yet that epidemic was for many years assumed – through the narratives and messages we received in the media – to affect only people on the margins: the LGBTQ+ community, heroin addicts, Africans. White people who did not identify with any of these groups believed (incorrectly) they were safe from harm. This presents a contrast to today's pandemic, where it has never been in doubt that everyone in the world, no matter their demographic, is at risk – with some at greater risk than others.

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