

Is ActionAid's gender-specific fundraising campaign progressive?

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In September 2013 international NGO **ActionAid** launched a new fundraising campaign in the UK that aimed to raise awareness of the plight of women in refugee camps. The campaign poster features a black-and-white image of a Congolese woman, accompanied by the heading “The worst period of her life.” Underneath this statement is written:

Imagine you've fled your home. You've lost everything. And then it gets worse: you get your period and you can't afford sanitary towels. Women fleeing conflict in war-torn countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Syria suffer this terrible humiliation, month after month after month. Will you donate £3 to help give one more woman a little bit of dignity?

The poster, first promoted in women's public washrooms before being rolled out across British train network media in early 2014, may well succeed in establishing empathy and willing among UK-based women. Yet the extent to which ActionAid, a rights-based organisation committed to advocating consciousness-raising and mobilising voices in civil society, broke free from the discursive structures of inequality, that posit African women as silenced, passive victims is questionable.

To a degree, this latest strategy to generate interest and engagement with UK publics represents a reassuring break from the relentless images of helpless Congolese women 'rape victims' that have pervaded NGO and human rights campaigns since the 2000s, though still continuing to feature in 'western' media. Critics (myself included) hold this image as central to the new, feminised Congo atrocity narrative.^[1]

Sanitation is also a major concern for refugee women. Rwandan Marie Beatrice Umetesi, who experienced life in a Goma refugee camp following the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, recounted in her book *Surviving the Slaughter* the trauma and insecurity women faced because 'those in charge of humanitarian aid had not thought of feminine hygiene'.^[2] More than one hundred people shared one toilet and women were forced to wash in the dark, covering themselves with a towel or clothing if someone passed by. Women had limited access to soap, washing their clothes was difficult and during menstruation, women were required to use old rags or skirts. There were other practical issues to deal with. Umetesi writes, 'If you had the misfortune of having to move around during your period, you became chapped' and 'since men ran the camp, there were no private spaces where women could wash their laundry'.^[3]

She continues, 'We had to wash [clothes] late at night or early in the morning in front of our blindés [tents]. The bloody water snaked in rivulets between the blindés...and made bloody little puddles. To add to the discomfort of the situation, many women were obliged to wash these bloody rags in the same pots in which they prepared food for their families'.^[4]

A **recent report** article by Sarah House *et al.* of WaterAid suggests that, in addition to feelings of shame and a loss of dignity, 'poor access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), whilst not the root cause of violence, can exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls to violence'.^[5] ActionAid's campaign corresponds with an acknowledgement among NGOs dealing with complex emergencies of the need to better understand 'the connections between violence and WASH and

develop practical guidance' for practitioners.[6] House *et al.* note that 'staff within WASH organisations may also be the perpetrators of violence, or may face violence because of their gender' and call for increased coordination between WASH organisations to overcome these issues.[7] Recognition among NGOs that gender-specific sanitation needs should be prioritised is largely due to increased engagement and consultation with women who experience life in refugee camps. Oxfam GB maintain they 'developed insight' into menstruation issues by 'talking to the women in Pakistan IDP tented villages'.[8] Therefore, at face value, a fundraising campaign to raise awareness of gender-specific sanitation concerns in order to provide simple and practical solutions for women in refugee camps, may appear to be positive and progressive.

A question of dignity



That said, a closer analysis of the campaign poster reveals that ActionAid's attempt to break from the colonial legacy is not quite achieved. The visual image of the woman, posing sideways, is a reproduction of the old colonial images of African women in nineteenth century ethnographic science and travel magazines such as *National Geographic*. The dramatic photograph and red text printed on a black background emphasises bleakness and helplessness, thereby serving to represent the woman in the poster as a victim.

The discursive structures of inequality that posit African women as silenced, passive victims are present in more nuanced ways. Like the images of Congolese rape victims, the association of Congolese women with their reproductive cycle reminds us of the colonial obsession with African women's reproductivity. Colonial ethnographic science depicted African women as either hypersexual (the 'grotesquely' disproportionate Hottentot), or a-sexual and lacking sexuality. Some colonial ethnographic scientists went further to dissect the reproductive parts of women, with one doctor in Uganda even unearthing their skeletons to ascertain why obstructed labour in African women occurred more frequently.[9] These practices demonstrate a lack of regard historically for African women's dignity. Supporting, rather than challenging the stereotypes, ActionAid maintain the idealised 'western' dignified superiority as dominant over the imagined, subordinate African 'Other', in need of salvation. This 'us v. them' rhetoric reinforces Spivakian ideas of 'white woman saving brown women from brown men', strengthening the victim/hero binary.

In the poster, there is no sense of the woman's resilience and strength. We do not hear her voice – rather, the voice of ActionAid, telling us that this woman is experiencing the 'worst period of her life', and advising on how we (the 'western' audience) can and should save her. For ActionAid to raise funds, the Congolese woman is required to publically lose her dignity in the campaign advert, before it can be restored with the help of 'western' women (and men).

This leads us to question why the image of a Congolese woman was used by ActionAid, rather than a woman from Syria. ActionAid maintain that the photo of the Congolese women was taken when they were 'distributing sanitation kits in the DRC', although their 'most recent "worst period of her life" appeal distributed these kits to the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan' in late 2013 and early 2014.[10] Women from the Middle East, because of a different set of orientalist stereotypes, are often portrayed as more 'politicised' subjects (for example, as female suicide bombers or supporters of Islamic extremism), than their African counterparts. On the whole, African women are considered 'a-political'. [11] Perhaps ActionAid used the image of the Congolese woman because it is safer – and because UK publics are more comfortable with, and more willing to respond to a new 'shock' episode in a much longer story about African woman's struggle to survive and the West's attempts to save her.

[1] See Hunt 2008, and Holmes 2014

[2] Umetesi 2004, p 76

[3] Ibid., p 76

[4] Ibid., pp 76-77

[5] House, Ferron, Sommer and Cavill 2014, p 27

[6] Op. cit. House, p 27



[7] Ibid., p 28

[8] Nawaz *et al.* 2010, p 84

[9] Hunt 1999, p 1

[10] Email with ActionAid spokesperson, 17 February 2014

[11] See Holmes 2014

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