

CfP Conference

“Gender & Humanitarianism. (Dis-)Empowering Women and Men in the Twentieth Century”

IEG Mainz, June 29 – July 1, 2017

Conveners: Esther Möller, Johannes Paulmann, Katharina Stornig



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This conference will discuss the relationship between gender and humanitarian discourse and practice in the twentieth century. Although the history of humanitarianism has recently attracted attention from scholars working in a variety of fields, surprisingly little has been said about the workings of gender in this globalizing enterprise. To fill this gap, this interdisciplinary conference will analyze the ways in which constructions and ideologies of gender shaped and were shaped by humanitarian practices, interactions, ideas, and bodies. We invite innovative contributions from historians, anthropologists, social scientists and from the humanities discussing twentieth-century humanitarian actors (organizations, movements, and individual activists), discourses and practices in the context of gender. The conference particularly emphasizes the time between the First World War and the end of the Cold War, with a special focus on the (re)production of humanitarian structures, organizations and orders in both post-war periods and in the context of heightened colonialism and decolonization. It thus concentrates on a period that not only witnessed a great expansion of humanitarian action worldwide but also saw fundamental changes in gender relations and the gradual emergence of gender-sensitive policies in humanitarian organizations in many Western and non-Western settings.

By introducing the analytical category of gender into the historical study of humanitarianism, we aim to go beyond the attempt to analyze the multiple ways in which women contributed to this enterprise on various levels. Rather, we aim to study how (hierarchical) relations between men and women, social and cultural constructions of masculinity/femininity and gendered conceptions of human bodies worked out in the various types of humanitarian organizations (e.g. IOs, NGOs, networks, aid agencies, churches) and

impacted on processes of institutionalization and professionalization. Moreover, we are interested in studying organizational structures, asymmetries, and divisions of labor in humanitarian organizations. In doing so, we look to develop a gender perspective on issues such as fundraising/promotional campaigns, media work, leadership, care work, law, human resources, humanitarian law etc. From a different perspective, we further seek to give prominence to the beneficiaries by investigating the effects of humanitarian activities on existing gender relations in the respective societies. Considering actors and theoretical positions from the global North and South, we also seek to illuminate the impact of feminist theory and second-wave feminism on the history of global humanitarianism. Starting from a broad understanding of humanitarianism, we encourage case studies that analyze when and how practical engagement for others victimized or empowered (particular groups of) men and women.

This leads to the following guiding questions:

- When did issues of gender (in-)equality emerge and fuel debates on gender roles in various (e.g. state/non-state, religious/secular, formal/informal etc.) humanitarian contexts in Western and Non-Western societies?
- What were the links between gendered practices and representations in humanitarian work?
- How did gender relations and ideologies of gender affect humanitarian careers and biographies?
- What role did gender play in the strategies of beneficiaries of humanitarian aid?
- How did gender (and gendered bodies, sexuality etc.) work out in mobilizing campaigns?
- Did gender affect the adaptation and exchange of different models of humanitarianism (e.g. Western/Non-Western, religious/secular)?
- When were gendered constructions of need, vulnerability, violence, and agency referenced as a case in point for explaining, refusing or legitimizing humanitarian aid or even intervention?

We invite proposals for papers. Please send an abstract of no more than 300 words and a short CV by June 5, 2016 to

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The conference will take place from June 29 to July 1, 2017 at the Leibniz Institute of European History (IEG) in Mainz, Germany. Travel and accommodation will be covered. The proceedings of the conference will serve as the basis for a peer-reviewed publication.