

Feminist approaches to the governance of everyday humanitarian action in Colombia

Abstract

Humanitarian action, understood as the activities and systems put in place by international actors, is a framing within the classical paradigm that privileges top-down, internationally driven responses guided by universal principles and standards.

This dissertation challenges this narrow framing by examining how feminist approaches contribute to shaping alternative forms of humanitarian action in Colombia, a context characterised by prolonged internal armed conflict, disasters, and mixed migration flows. This research centres on the unrecognised or actively refused everyday practices of diverse actors, particularly women and feminists.

Drawing on 11 months of ethnographic and interactive research conducted across Bogotá, Norte de Santander, Cauca, and Putumayo departments between 2022 and 2023, this dissertation uses multiple qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured dialogues, collective discussions, and storytelling circles with 108 research participants. The study examines three distinct but interconnected domains: self-declared feminist international humanitarian organisations, women-led grassroots organisations and collectives, and crisis-affected women's own organising initiatives.

Integrating critical humanitarian studies with feminist scholarship, the research reveals how ethics of care and situated knowledge generate alternative humanitarian logics that prioritise relationality, political agency, and long-term commitment over technical interventions and standardised responses. The findings challenge assumptions about who counts as a humanitarian actor, what constitutes legitimate humanitarian practice, and how responses can address structural causes of vulnerability rather than merely manage symptoms.

This research advances three alternative and interconnected dimensions of humanitarian action. First, it shows how contextual and historicised perspectives on humanitarian governance expose power imbalances, social embeddedness, and unevenness, challenging universalist humanitarian standards. Second, it shows how feminist ethics of care, characterised by attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, and competence, operate as both an analytical framework and a transformative practice, rejecting deservingness frameworks and positioning care as political resistance to structural neglect. Third, it illuminates tensions between aspirational feminist commitments and implementation constraints, documenting the gap between organisational rhetoric and field-level practice while revealing how grassroots organising transcends victim-beneficiary frameworks through collective advocacy that demands both material support and structural transformation.

This research contributes to humanitarian studies by making visible the plural forms of humanitarian action that exist at the margins of, and sometimes in opposition to, the dominant international humanitarian system, demonstrating that affected populations, particularly women, are not passive recipients but political actors creating transformative alternatives to classical humanitarian paradigms.

The research recommendations include a necessary redistribution of power and resources toward grassroots actors and a policy shift toward long-term relational engagement that addresses structural causes of vulnerability rather than just managing symptoms. Humanitarian reform must focus on replacing technical emergency imaginaries with situated, care-based responses that recognise the political agency of crisis-affected populations and address the structural roots of suffering.

