

Gendering Humanitarian Knowledge

Global Histories of Compassion
from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present



Organised by

the Institute for Ethics, History, and the Humanities (University of Geneva),
the Institute of Gender Studies (University of Geneva)
and the Institución Milà i Fontanals (CSIC-Barcelona).
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Present humanitarian crises have increasingly led scholars to look back at the past in order to provide a long-term history of disaster relief work that would help us to track the empirical knowledge accumulated during wars, famines, epidemics and other natural disasters. Although this empirical knowledge produced by humanitarian workers in the field of operations is mainly rooted in medical practices concerning hygiene, epidemiology, psychiatry, nursing or nutrition, it extends historically beyond the borders of what we understand today as “humanitarian medicine” (Brauman, 1996).

In order to epistemologically approach all those relief practices as a whole body, including socio-cultural skills and competences that remain at the margins of science, we propose to use the term *humanitarian knowledge* in this conference, in accordance with recent studies on the history of science (Renn, 2016), the history of knowledge (Burke, 2016), and post-colonialist studies (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné, 2015). We invite scholars to think about this notion of *humanitarian knowledge* in a multidisciplinary way, by combining perspectives such as gender history, the histories of emotions and the body, literary and visual culture studies, global health history, as well as the history of institutions and their agents. All of them are useful to explore the transnational networks through which humanitarian practices and ideas have been promoted, disseminated and standardised.

Specifically, gender history is a promising way to complexify *humanitarian knowledge*, by shedding light on the construction of female and male subjectivities in relation to the sexual division of relief practices that have been implemented from the mid-nineteenth century to the present in particular spheres of aid: ambulances, field hospitals, sanitary trains, refugee camps, dispensaries, maternity hospitals and children’s colonies. Furthermore, gender history allows us to examine women’s participation in emergency relief operations in close connection with the production of what has been called a “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 1998), which does not represent the hegemonic knowledge represented by the experts, namely physicians.

Gender history also enables us to analyse women humanitarians’ knowledge in relation to a broader definition of care than that provided by nursing, according the work of feminist scholars like Carol Gilligan, Ariel Hochschild and Joan Tronto (2013). Moreover, gender history is a challenging way of examining “women’s caring power” (Drenth and Haan, 1999) by considering it altogether with race, class and religious identities within the histories of war and empires written from a global perspective (Midgley, Twells and Carlier, 2016).

Gender history seems, therefore, the right place to discuss the ways through which social ideologies have influenced male and female cultural conceptions and self-perceptions concerning what it means to feel other people’s suffering and to relieve it. This can be done by focusing on compassion, but also taking into consideration other affective experiences: sympathy, empathy, resentment or what has been called “the pornography of pain” (Halttunen, 1995).

Finally, studying the gendered meanings of compassion, the emotion that has been celebrated as the ultimate humanitarian feeling (Taithe, 2006), gives us the opportunity to interpret humanitarian practices as a material expression of emotions, by specifically thinking about the reasons that led women to claim their maternal love when they cared for the victims of disasters (Martín Moruno, 2017).

We invite scholars interested in working on the history of *humanitarian knowledge* from a gender perspective to submit a proposal that deals with stories of flesh and blood, which put women's and men's humanitarian experiences at their centre, in order to inscribe their local practices within a global history of compassion from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. For those who are interested in participating in this workshop, please submit a 300-word abstract and a brief CV in English or French by the 31st December, 2017 to genderinghumanitarianknowledge@gmail.com

A publication is planned resulting from the celebration of this conference, which is funded by the SNSF Professorship's project "Those Women who performed Humanitarian Action: A Gendered History of Compassion from the Franco-Prussian War to WWII".

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