

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Critical Perspectives on Accounting

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/cpa

In the spotlight: Rethinking NGO accountability in the #MeToo era

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 September 2019

Revised 2 March 2021

Accepted 4 March 2021

Available online 27 March 2021

Keywords:

NGOs

Accountability

The #MeToo movement

Sexual exploitation

Social media

ABSTRACT

Emphasising the need to rethink accountability in the light of the #MeToo movement, this study examines how public discourses on sexual misconduct in the non-profit sector have transformed societal perceptions of NGO accountability. The study contributes to research debates about the underlying principles of the NGO social contract, the intellectual problematics of accountability and the role of ‘the Other’ in accountability conduct. The analysis of social media and investigations related to sexual scandals in thirteen organisations reveals how access to social media and hashtag activism in the midst of the social movement provided visibility to the cases of misconduct, gave rise to accountability forums and empowered calls to hold organisations to account. The study shows how the spotlight of public attention has gradually shifted the perception of sexual misconduct as an occasional, but inevitable, sectoral malfunction towards a widening debate over the moral basis of NGO activism and the impacts on the lives of vulnerable NGO beneficiaries. This development has then amplified the escalated demand to transform approaches to NGO accountability from pragmatic procedures of increased control and demonstrable measures of quality assurance to more reflective methods of intellectual accountability and critical self-assessment, emphasising the behavioural consciousness of accountable actors. Finally, the study reflects on how the lessons learned from the #MeToo movement impact NGOs in their capacity to exercise holistic accountability.

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1. Introduction

On 17 February 2018, Oxfam, one of the largest international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), released a statement that simultaneously appeared on the doors of its offices and charity shops and various social media channels worldwide (Sampson, 2018):

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WE ARE SO SORRY

We are so sorry for the appalling behaviour that happened in our name ... The sexual misconduct of former Oxfam employees ... should never have happened. We should have been more explicit in our reporting of these incidents. ... As an organisation that supports women's rights, these events are particularly hard to bear. We know that you put your trust in us and that these devastating reports will have damaged this trust.

NGOs occupy a special niche of serving the most vulnerable, who are often not reached by governments (Chynoweth, Zwi, & Whelan, 2018; Kilby, 2006; Unerman & O'Dwyer, 2006). This essential role they play is accompanied by strong public perceptions that associate missionary activism with trustworthiness, altruism and care (Dhanani & Connolly, 2015; Keating & Thrandardottir, 2017). The traditions of humanitarian activism provide contemporary NGOs with a legacy upon which to mobilise public support (Candler, 2001; Dhanani, 2019). NGOs have also shown themselves to be transformative and adaptable to fast-moving social, economic and political agendas (Cordery, Belal, & Thomson, 2019; Martinez & Cooper, 2017), delivering their aid to new groups of beneficiaries (Dewi, Manochin, & Belal, 2019; O'Leary, 2017), emphasising engagement with a broad range of stakeholders (Bellucci & Manetti, 2017) and improving their performance (Cordes & Coventry, 2010).

Nevertheless, financial and managerial scandals in the non-profit sector have prompted public awareness that even NGOs are not immune from acts of fraud and misconduct (Gibelman & Gelman, 2001). While increased public scrutiny of NGO financial integrity facilitated improvement of the technical procedures of NGO accountability (Cordery, Sim, & Ziji, 2017; Hall & O'Dwyer, 2017), disclosures of assault and sexual exploitation in the sector have drawn public attention to its ethical aspects (Scurlock, Dolsak, & Prakash, 2020; Veissière, 2018). Sexual violence by NGO and aid personnel against beneficiaries had allegedly been reported over the past decades (Inness & Barling, 2006). Eventually, the combined efforts of 'watchdog' organisations and the media stimulated several waves of public awareness of the issue in the 1990s and 2000s (Ndulo, 2009; Simić, 2010). However, once the issue was removed from the public eye and the sector was left to deal with the problem itself, the position deteriorated, making situational violence an inevitable outcome of power disparity in humanitarian activism (Al-Hussein, 2005; Csáky, 2008; Gillespie, Mirabella, & Eikenberry, 2019).

A new surge of attention to this issue has been triggered by massive disclosures in the midst of two nearly concurrent events: the investigation into the Oxfam Haiti mission misconduct (Bruno-van Vijfeijken, 2019) and the #MeToo social movement (Gillespie et al., 2019; Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright, 2019). In the digital era, hashtag activism added to the earlier discourses the first-hand testimonies of abuse survivors, who confronted the challenge of "standing in the public eye and speaking about an experience of assault" (Zarkov & Davis, 2018, p. 4). This compelling agenda, supported by NGO stakeholders, activated broad discussions in online spaces about behavioural discipline and workplace morality in NGO headquarters and field missions and caused the emergence of new accountability demands on NGOs (Carolei, 2018; Scurlock et al., 2020; Zarkov & Davis, 2018).

The discourses catalysed by the Oxfam investigation and the #MeToo movement are momentous in initiating the re-assessment of NGO accountability. This study aims to examine the transformative impact of the #MeToo movement, and the corresponding disclosures, on the empowerment of public accountability discourse, shifts in societal perceptions of NGO accountability and the larger implications for the non-profit sector. To fulfil this objective, the study reflects on the contemporary mandate of NGO activism through the lens of the social contract theory and the rights-based approach to development (Hortsch, 2010; O'Leary, 2017). It then engages with research on the moral problematics of accountability (Butler, 2005; Roberts, 2009) to understand the role of 'the Other' in framing accountability demands and facilitating the self-assessment of accountable actors (Bovens, 2007; Mulgan, 2000, 2003). Considering NGOs as 'collectives of individuals' formulating and exercising organisational accountability (Boomsma & O'Dwyer, 2019), this study refers to both the individual and the organisational actors of NGO accountability. Finally, the study mobilises social movement theory to discuss how social movements use online spaces to vocalise and empower accountability demands (Neu, Saxton, Rahaman, & Everett, 2019).

Recognising the psychological sensitivity of the topic (Ho & Pavlish, 2011; Lopez, Hodson, & Roscigno, 2009), the study acknowledges duty of care in research (Hillier, Mitchell, & Mallett, 2007; Richards & Schwartz, 2002) and employs the non-interventional methodological approach. The methodological instruments included social media analysis or netnography (Jeacle, 2020; Kozinets, 2002, 2015a), which provided the background for a purpose-built database of the scandals in thirteen NGOs and humanitarian organisations where, according to the revealed disclosures, sexual misconduct took place. This was supported by documentary analysis of secondary data related to the scandals. The study does not generalise across the population, but reveals distinctive patterns drawing on the knowledge generated in naturally evolving discourses on online platforms. This analysis enables the examination of how such discourses empowered accountability demands and facilitated the calls for the transformation of NGO accountability approaches.

The study contributes to the research on the problematics of NGO accountability and its holistic strands (Agyemang, O'Dwyer, Unerman, & Awumbila, 2017; Goddard, 2020; Yasmin & Ghafran, 2019) and the power of accountability forums and conversational accountability (Bellucci, Simoni, Acuti, & Manetti, 2019; Cooper & Johnston, 2012) in multiple ways.

Firstly, the paper emphasises the role of ‘the Other’¹ in the fluid conceptualisation of NGO accountability (Dhanani, 2019; O’Leary & Smith, 2020) by demonstrating how concentrated public attention shifted the discourse from the technical and pragmatic aspects of procedural accountability to its moral, ethical and intellectual core (Messner, 2009; Roberts, 2009). Secondly, the study strengthens the argument for a holistic approach to NGO accountability (O’Dwyer & Boomsma, 2015; O’Dwyer & Unerman, 2007) by evidencing the rationales for the increasing importance of ethical accountability for NGO stakeholders. Thirdly, the paper contributes to the research on online accountability discourses (Duval & Gendron, 2020; Jeacle & Carter, 2011, 2014; Neu et al., 2019) by revealing how social movements facilitate the formation of digital accountability forums and empower public demands to hold organisations to account. Finally, the study gives visibility to the psychologically sensitive topic of sexual abuse and reflects on the lessons to be learned from the #MeToo movement for the development of more reflective NGO accountability practices.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the literature review contextualising the phenomenon under study. The third section discusses the research approach and methods mobilised in the study. The fourth section presents the findings by analysing how the discourses of the disclosed sexual misconduct prompted shifts in perceptions of NGO accountability and resulted in a variety of organisational responses to the public. The fifth section discusses the implications of the findings and concludes the paper.

2. Literature review

This section outlines the analytical background of the study mobilised to explore how the #MeToo social movement impacted the transformation of public discourse to rethink NGO accountability. The section interlinks and gradually builds on three different streams of knowledge. The first sub-section outlines how NGO accountability is affected by the need for NGOs to retain a social contract and reflects on the problematics of procedural accountability. The second sub-section discusses how the presence of ‘the Other’ and social control impacts self-accountability of accountable actors. The third sub-section highlights how social movements utilise online arenas to manifest and empower accountability demands.

2.1. Social contract and the problematics of NGO accountability

The conceptualisation of NGO accountability progressed in line with the development of the non-profit sector (Cordery et al., 2019; O’Dwyer & Boomsma, 2015). As a socially constructed phenomenon, NGO accountability is relational (Agyemang, Awumbila, Unerman, & O’Dwyer, 2009; Bovens, 2007) and context-specific (Höhn, 2012; Martinez & Cooper, 2017) and appears in various forms (Candler, 2001; Mulgan, 2000). Reflecting on the problematics of NGO procedural (functional) accountability and the need to emphasise its moral aspects, this study begins by analysing the fundamental mandates of NGO activism grounded in the implicit social contract (Bukanya, 2016; Candler, 2001; Goddard & Assad, 2006).

The societal existence of the state and its distinct institutions, such as governmental bodies, corporations and NGOs, is based on the reciprocal exchange of rights and duties between the state and its citizens (Ellis, 2006; Sulkunen, 2007). NGOs’ social contracts are based on their ability to successfully fulfil the needs of beneficiaries not addressed by government and business (Chynoweth et al., 2018; Scobie, Lee, & Smyth, 2020). Even though the non-profit sector is extremely diverse (Agyemang et al., 2009; Cordery et al., 2019), these foundation principles assure legitimate social contract in return for performance at a certain professional level (Cruess & Cruess, 2008; Jos, 2006). At a minimum, society expects NGOs to act in the best interests of their beneficiaries (Dewi et al., 2019), to protect the innocent, and to operate by the principles of a no-harm policy and duty of care (Bruno-van Vijfeijken, 2019; McGann & Johnstone, 2005). However, despite the essential nature of these principles for any NGO, they might be downplayed or neglected in situations when opportunistic interests prevail over mission achievement (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014; Yasmin & Ghafan, 2019).

Progress in accountability conceptualisation improved NGO accountability conduct (Boomsma & O’Dwyer, 2019; O’Leary & Smith, 2020). In addition to the recently emphasised aspects of financial integrity, transparency and efficiency (Cazenave & Morales, 2021; Cordery et al., 2019), accountability conduct also acknowledges less measurable aspects of authenticity, identity and trustworthiness (Keating & Thrandardottir, 2017; Yates, Belal, Gebreiter, & Lowe, 2020). The emphasis on moral accountability is mobilised to identify and prevent a broad range of misconducts and corresponding organisational complicity that cannot be captured by traditional forms of regulator- and donor-imposed reporting (Kilby, 2006). The need for a sophisticated social contract in the situation of increased social expectations encourages NGOs’ careful management of their public image (Agyemang et al., 2017; Conway, O’Keefe, & Hrasky, 2015; Dhanani, 2019).

As the social contract is dynamic, fluid and responsive to socio-political changes (Giovannucci & Ponte, 2005), NGOs’ social role has shifted from needs-based and generosity-based (charitable) approaches to a rights-based approach to development (Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003). Through the rights-based lens, NGOs are considered as ‘duty bearers’

¹ In this study, ‘the Other(s)’ is understood as an assemblage of stakeholders, including abuse survivors, NGO beneficiaries, donors and supporters, local communities, regulators, media and wider society congregated in accountability forums.

bound to protect the human rights of the 'rights holders' represented by NGO beneficiaries (O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008; O'Leary, 2017; Scobie et al., 2020). The rights-based approach presumes the securing of not only the fundamental rights of beneficiaries, such as life, liberty, and protection from physical violence (Arnold, 2010), but also more comprehensive rights to dignity and psychological safety (Pocar, 2015). In particular, it acknowledges the vulnerability of NGO-beneficiary relationships to abuse due to a power asymmetry between NGO personnel and the beneficiaries they serve (Lebovic & Voeten, 2009; Simić, 2010).

Despite the sectoral commitments to a rights-based approach and a no-harm policy (Darrow & Tomas, 2005), the enforcement of these principles has always been challenging due to sectoral diversity, reliance on local workforce, legislation breaches (Kelley & Mullen, 2006; O'Leary, 2017) and the limitations of available procedural mechanisms of accountability (Levin, 2003; Simić, 2010). The declared zero tolerance of misconduct, the hotlines and safeguarding systems, and the codes of conduct and training practices were unable to tackle impunity for power misuse amplified by the vulnerability of beneficiaries, cultural suppression and gender stereotyping (Gillespie et al., 2019; Inness & Barling, 2006). Ndulo (2009) emphasised the underreporting of sexual abuse in the sector thus: "victims ... [felt] frightened and intimidated at the prospects of being confronted by investigators [and]... the ... [fieldworkers did] not view the acts they engaged in as wrong or ... fear ... serious negative repercussions for their actions" (pp. 143–144). This confronted the ability of NGOs to exercise holistic accountability in its full complexity while simultaneously revealing the significant power they hold over the beneficiaries (Dewi et al., 2019; Goddard, 2020; Yasmin & Ghafan, 2019).

Therefore, while the contributions of the non-profit sector towards balancing social imperfections may be acknowledged, NGO activism is considered legitimate only when societal expectations are met and NGOs perform in line with implicitly established agreements of reciprocal exchange of duties and privileges. The rights-based approach to development amplifies the service-orientation in NGO performance, linking it to the human rights held by even the most disadvantaged and deprived beneficiaries and communities. Recognising the limitations of procedural accountability mechanisms to tackle sexual misconduct, the next sub-section reflects on the power of accountability forums to enhance the natural ability of actors to advance and discharge their (self)-accountability.

2.2. The role of 'the Other' in discharging accountability

Accountability has both rational and emotional roots, which manifest in a dual discourse of opportunistic and moral drivers behind someone's actions (Butler, 2005; Roberts, 2009). The comprehensive mechanisms of organisational (procedural) accountability are often challenged by the limits of consciousness of individual actors (Jory, Anderson, & Greer, 1997; Locke & Edwards, 2003). Internalised beliefs, empathic biases, personal engagement, memory limitations and emotional blindness could significantly limit the capability of accountable actors to exercise critical judgement, professional ethics and (self)-accountability (Banks, 2013; Blader & Rothman, 2014).

In such situations, an established accountability forum, i.e. an assemblage of 'the Other(s)' (Locke & Edwards, 2003; Mulgan, 2000), has power to "pose questions and pass judgement, and [make] the actor ... face consequences [when] ... the actor [fails in] ... an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct" (Bovens, 2007, p. 447). Accountability forums usually escalate their demands in situations of conflict, scandal or crisis when those impacted by the actor's actions experience collective emotions of blame, frustration, resentment and anger (Cooper & Johnston, 2012; Goncharenko & Khadaroo, 2019; Skaerbaek & Christensen, 2015). To make their demands heard, accountability forums actively occupy whatever arenas are available to vocalise calls directing and persuading accountable actors to reflect on their actions, emphasise self-assessment and provide an account (Butler, 2005; Neu et al., 2019; Roberts, 2009).

This makes the role of forums crucial for setting the standards for appropriateness and accountability conduct (Butler, 2005). Actors consider themselves accountable only for the activities that are assumed to be important and visible to 'the Other(s)' and disregard accountability for actions that are less noticeable by forums (Frey-Heger & Barrett, 2020; Ho & Pavlish, 2011; Messner, 2009). For instance, to maintain an appropriate public image (Conway et al., 2015), NGOs tend to strategise their accountability commitments by prioritising donors' demands and interests above those of other stakeholders (O'Dwyer & Boomsma, 2015). In addition, the exaggerated focus on business-like performance targets have reportedly shifted NGOs' focus towards institutionalised pragmatic goals (Goncharenko, 2019; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008) with a risk of turning their attention away from their values and ethical standards (Boomsma & O'Dwyer, 2019; Kilby, 2006).

Accountable actors might hesitate to engage with accountability forums as it might reveal a side of themselves they might not be prepared to admit publicly (O'Leary & Smith, 2020; Roberts, 2009). This leaves the actors confronted with whether they prefer "to suffer criticism for not meeting the demand for accountability or to make up a story to provide an acceptable account" (Messner, p. 927, 2009; Unerman, O'Dwyer, & Assad, 2006). For instance, despite sexual misconduct being an unwelcome behaviour in any organisation, the organisational actors in power might rationalise secrecy, silence and complicity in organisational responses to situations of harassment and abuse (Jory et al., 1997). As those with managerial power have the privilege of defining normality for others (Persson, Roland, & Tabellini, 1997), this affects how the survivors of misconduct, (potential) perpetrators, witnesses and bystanders approach and contextualise the cases of abuse (Clair et al., 2019; Veissière, 2018). This would then determine whether abusive practices are normalised and tolerated or rejected and stigmatised in organisational and social settings (Hernandez, Almeida, & Dolan-Del Vecchio, 2005; Kelley & Mullen, 2006).

Accountable actors can mobilise different response strategies while dealing with explicit and tacit accountability demands imposed by 'the Other(s)' (Cooper & Johnston, 2012; Messner, 2009; Yates et al., 2020). Both an opportunistic approach of emphasising demonstrable openness and a deep moral self-assessment would be available in the actors' toolkit (Butler, 2005; Perkiss, Bernardi, Dumay, & Haslam, 2020; Yasmin & Ghafran, 2019). The opportunistic approach can be referred to as 'accountability as transparency' and the self-reflection approach as 'intellectual accountability' (Roberts, 2009). The first approach is grounded in externalisation, with priority given to "repairing or defending the self-image [and managing impressions] ... over learning and communication" (Roberts, 2009, p. 966). In contrast, intellectual accountability appears as "not a mere ... making visible of the self against a pre-determined set of categories, but ... involves active enquiry ... to question and challenge ... [oneself] and the system of relevancies within which [one acts]" (Roberts, 2009, pp. 966–967). Once undertaken, it activates the actors' self-identification and equips them with a moral barometer and a sense of responsibility even when the direct surveillance imposed by the forum is not present (Greiling & Spraul, 2010; Messner, 2009).

The intellectual forms of accountability are proposed as "the possibility of ... doing accountability differently" (Roberts, 2009, p. 968). The effective discharging of accountability requires consensus on common values, cognitions and expectations and strengthens by continuous self-assessment of all individuals representing the organisation (Tregidga, Milne, & Kearins, 2014). It seeks a solution to organisational problems beyond enforcing additional regulations, control procedures and reporting standards by amplifying "the importance of the personal encounter with the other ... on the basis of close proximity" (Messner, 2009, p. 923). The present study takes this perspective to analyse NGO accountability for sexual violence, paying attention to the aspects of visibility imposed by accountability forums and NGOs' public responses. The next sub-section reveals how digitalisation equips accountability forums to expand the circle of NGO stakeholders, acknowledging the role of social media and hashtag activism in facilitating discourses and empowering accountability demands.

2.3. The power of social media and hashtag activism to create accountability

Digitalisation has brought changes to all aspects of life, including the interactions between accountable actors and accountability forums (Andrew & Baker, 2019; Bellucci et al., 2019). Social media amplifies, disseminates and facilitates debates and gives visibility to matters of public interest (Fu & Zhang, 2019; Jeacle & Carter, 2011). As a nurturing nest for hashtag activism, social media provides fertile ground to construct calls for accountability from naturally evolving dialogues (Duval & Gendron, 2020; Neu et al., 2019).

By analysing the patterns of collective behaviours, social movement theory explains how the snowball effect of individual activism forms a movement out of flows of singular claims, calls and actions when "external ... opportunities provide openings for challenging groups to initiate ... action" (Morris, 2000, p. 452). Individuals join a social movement when their personal narratives, identities and viewpoints ally with the notion of collective identity the movement creates (Della Porta & Diani, 2015; Gahan & Pekarek, 2013). Contemporary social movements aim for increased social accountability, setting it as an agenda priority (Catchpowle & Smyth, 2016). The last few years witnessed powerful examples of how social movements deploy social media to mobilise citizens for collective actions and escalate accountability discourses via hashtag activism, including #OccupyWallStreet, #MeToo and #ClimateStrike (Regulska, 2018; Xiong et al., 2019).

The role of NGOs in digital social movements is ambivalent, as they frequently appear on the side of agents imposing greater accountability demands on others, but can also end up in the spotlight if their own accountability is in question (Islam & van Staden, 2018; Martinez & Cooper, 2017). On one hand, NGOs actively engage with social media (Bellucci & Manetti, 2017), using its power for knowledge generation and exchange (Goncharenko, 2019), fundraising and crowdfunding (Kshetri, 2015), coproduction practices (Thomas, Ott, & Liese, 2011) and accountability dialogues (Unerman & Bennett, 2004). They effectively collaborate with traditional and online media while advocating for human rights and raising awareness of social imperfections (Lück, Wozniak, & Wessler, 2016). On the other hand, as public scrutiny of NGOs is considerable, any revealed misconduct could potentially attract significant media coverage and lead to campaigns against NGOs (Scurlock et al., 2020).

The power associated with Internet access makes an important impact on the aspects of downward accountability in the non-profit sector, emphasising the rights of beneficiaries to raise their voices and articulate concerns (Dewi et al., 2019; Duval & Gendron, 2020; O'Leary, 2017). Access to social media empowers individuals, even in the most deprived environments and challenging circumstances, with an instrument to impact contemporary societal agendas and control the narratives affecting them (Manetti & Bellucci, 2016; She & Michelin, 2019). The social media arenas significantly democratise the process of demanding accountability by overcoming the bureaucratic barriers associated with traditional accountability channels (Neu et al., 2019).

In addition, social media intensifies the continuous presence of 'the Other' by extending the scope of scrutiny and allying the physical presence of forums with their virtual manifestation. The power of a massive accumulation of synchronised calls for accountability and justice leads to a stage when claims can no longer be ignored and must be addressed by accountable actors (Bertels, Hoffman, & Dejorjy, 2014; Gahan & Pekarek, 2013). This explains why the power of social movements manifested in hashtag activism and online discourses is capable of synergising voices, creating accountability forums and empowering demands to hold actors to account (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Jeacle & Carter, 2011, 2014; Kavada, 2015).

Overall, this theoretical reflection enables the study to approach the question of how the sexual exploitation revelations facilitated by the #MeToo movement and the corresponding online accountability discourses transformed public perceptions of NGO accountability. The study connects three aspects of accountability conceptualisation to answer this question. Firstly, it employs the theory of social contract to reflect on the fundamental roots of NGO activism determining the understanding of NGO accountability beyond pragmatic procedures and functional mechanisms. Secondly, it reflects on the essential role of 'the Other' congregated in accountability forums for enhancing the (self)-accountability of actors by imposing scrutiny and specifying demands. Thirdly, the study engages with social movement theory to discuss how the deployment of social media and hashtag activism facilitates public discourses and strengthens accountability demands. The analysis aims to extend understanding of the phenomenological complexity of NGO accountability challenged by the visibility provided to sectoral misconduct and of corresponding implications for the relationships between NGO actors and accountability forums. Before presenting the study findings, the next section outlines the methodological approach used.

3. Research design

Social media arenas amplified stakeholders' access to speaking platforms and framed the landscape where the scale and complexity of the studied phenomena had been revealed. The study utilised social media analysis to construct its own database and supported it by the analysis of the relevant document artefacts. This section discusses the rationale behind the research approach and the method of data collection and analysis.

3.1. Research approach

The phenomena of sexual harassment and assault are psychologically complex and ethically sensitive (Blader & Rothman, 2014). The abuse of power for sexual misconduct is often conceptualised through the contexts and settings of situational incidents (Hunt, Davidson, Fielden, & Hoel, 2010) with some account given to the routinised and institutionalised aspects of domination and victimisation (Hernandez et al., 2005). As even the least severe incidents of sexual misconduct can cause psychological injuries to survivors and witnesses of abuse (Lopez et al., 2009), the nature of human consciousness tends to abate the psychological trauma (Ilic, 2004; Richards & Cross, 2018). However, there is a risk that involvement in participatory research could bring distress and re-open psychological wounds (Newman & Kaloupek, 2009; Salter, 2013), even when the research settings ensure all aspects of psychological safety during and after research interventions (Gil, Santos, & Kislaya, 2015; Mueller, De Coster, & Estes, 2001). In addition, as some survivors might fear to express themselves fully and freely, the informative value of data obtained as a result of such interventions might also be compromised (Kelley & Mullen, 2006).

At the same time, informants who are ready to speak up have the courage to utilise various speaking channels including online platforms (Bellucci & Manetti, 2017; Deegan & Islam, 2014). Online communities tend to cultivate the notion of comfort, reciprocity and togetherness and empower participants to communicate experiences (Goncharenko, 2019; Jeacle & Carter, 2014). Moreover, as qualitative research requires a multiplicity of opinions and perspectives (Lapsley, 2004), virtual discourse arenas provide access to an assemblage of viewpoints of survivors, accused predators, NGO management, NGO staff, local communities and regulators. Giving attention to these aspects and acknowledging the research duty of care (Hillier et al., 2007; Richards & Schwartz, 2002), the study mobilised the non-invasive method of social media analysis strengthened by the analysis of document artefacts.

Recognising the powerful outcomes of digitalisation (Duval & Gendron, 2020; Jeacle & Carter, 2014) and the informative value of online spaces, accounting research shows increasing interest in social media data and the corresponding methods of analysis (Jeacle, 2020; Manetti & Bellucci, 2016; Neu et al., 2019). The qualitative methodology where "research ... originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the Internet" (Kozinets, 2015b, p. 79) goes by many names, including social media analysis and netnography (Bellucci & Manetti, 2017; Jeacle, 2020). The method relies on the traditions of ethnography and cultural anthropology (Hine, 2000) and provides an opportunity to analyse content created by an unlimited number of contributors regardless of their physical location, as they voluntarily enrol in online discussions driven by their own interests and intentions (Jeacle & Carter, 2011; Kozinets, 2015b). Netnography preserves the authenticity of discussions without the need for a researcher to interfere (Jeacle, 2020; Kozinets, 2015a).

In this study, netnography assisted in constructing a database structured around the scandals in thirteen organisations, whose members of staff had been accused of sexual misconduct (see Table 1). To reflect on meanings attributed to specific settings and contexts, the study also employed the analysis of document artefacts. It corroborated data from different sources to observe the evolution of the dynamic narratives and ensure the validity and credibility of the arguments made (Lukka & Modell, 2010). The approach aimed to seek comprehensive understanding of the sensitive phenomena under study without a potentially harmful intervention. This allowed the creation of informative settings to capture the overview of the impacts of the #MeToo movement and associated revelations on the perception of NGO accountability.

Table 1
Sexual scandals in the non-profit and aid sectors.

Organisation	Country	Type of organisation ²	Year of accusation	Nature of accusation	References
<i>Staff-to-beneficiaries sexual misconduct³</i>					
Oxfam	International	Confederation of humanitarian charitable organisations	2018	Allegations of paying earthquake survivors for sex against Oxfam's staff in Haiti in 2011	INEQE (2018), O'Neil (2018a), O'Neil (2018b), CHS (2019), IDC (2018), DfID (2018)Hurst (2020) and Preston (2019)
Red Cross	International	Humanitarian aid charity	2015–2018	Cases of paying for sexual services and sexual misconduct during fieldwork	IFRC (1994) and Greenfield (2018)
Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)	International	Humanitarian medical NGO	2018	Allegations of paying for sex and bartering medication in exchange for sex	Adams (2018) and Baker (2018)
Weisser Ring	Germany	Victim support NGO	2018	Allegations of sexual misbehaviour against a branch head (2016)	Jamann (2018) and Hruby (2019)
Mehak	Pakistan	Empowerment NGO	2018	Allegations of sexual harassment against a founder	PakistanToday (2018) and Toppa (2020)
<i>Staff-to-staff and staff-to-volunteers sexual misconduct</i>					
Climate Action Network International (CAN-I)	International	Umbrella group of environmental NGOs	2018	Multiple allegations of sexual harassment against an executive director (one of the victims committed suicide)	Darby (2019) and Rogers (2018)
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change	International	Intergovernmental agency of the UN	2016	Allegations of sexual harassment against a former chairman (2013)	Safi (2018) and Menon (2015)
Beijing Fengtai Origin Enthusiast Environment Research Center	China	Environmental charity	2018	Allegations of sexual harassment against a founder of both organisations	Jianhang, Suwen, and Xuan (2018) and Yan (2018)
Ai You	China	Hepatitis charity	2018		
COVA	India	Confederation of voluntary associations	2001 (disclosed in media in 2018)	Sexual harassment of a founder was reported to police	Thekaekara (2018)
Video Volunteers	India	Media and human rights NGO	2018	Allegations of sexual harassment by a founder	Wire (2018) and FII (2018)
<i>Staff-to-beneficiaries and staff-to-staff sexual misconduct</i>					
United Nations (UN) ⁴	International	Intergovernmental agency	2002, 2018	Allegations of sexual misconduct; allegations of sexual abuse, exploitation and sex trafficking during peacekeeping operations in Kosovo (1999) and Syria (2018)	Sen et al. (2018), GBV (2018) and Roth (2019)
Save the Children	International	Humanitarian association (fund)	2018	Allegations of sexual misconduct	BBC (2018b), Csáky (2008) and UNHCR and Save the Children (2002)

² Based on the information provided on the organisational webpages.

³ This classification is indicative and is based on publicly available information.

⁴ Even though the UN is not an NGO, but an intergovernmental agency, it was included in the dataset due to the similarities of the UN humanitarian fieldwork with the fieldwork of humanitarian NGOs. The power dynamics in interactions of fieldworkers representing the UN and humanitarian aid NGOs with aid beneficiaries has similar origins and nature.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

On the data collection side, emphasis was given to the specially created database developed by utilising data from social and traditional media and speaking platforms and supplemented by the analysis of sectoral reports, governmental investigations and legislation. On the data analysis side, the study focused on the identification of patterns and corresponding meanings and emphasised the tone and content of the analysed textual materials.

Netnography does not aim for systematic sampling or statistical generalisation, as both are neither possible nor desirable in this methodological paradigm (Goncharenko, 2019; Jeacle, 2020; Kozinets, 2015b). In contrast, the method is “based primarily on the observation of textual discourse” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 64), and the revelation of thematic patterns and larger scientific propositions about the phenomena under study. It mobilises the principles of theoretical sampling (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Jeacle & Carter, 2011) by choosing those samples in which the research interest is ‘transparently observable’ (Eisenhardt, 1989; Robinson, 2014; Thompson, 1999).

By analysing social media content and related documents, a database of the sexual misconduct scandals in the non-profit and aid sectors was created. The author screened the discourses available on three major speaking platforms, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, using various combinations of keywords such as 'NGOs', 'sexual misconduct' and '#MeToo'. Guided by the principles of theoretical sampling, the author identified and selected only the artefacts observably related to sexual misconduct and exploitation at NGOs. Once a scandal was traced within active online forums and discourses, an additional search was performed based on the names of organisations and personalities involved in order to corroborate evidence and enrich the database with additional discourses. [Table 1](#) provides an overview of the scandals included in the database.

The dataset contains the disclosures and discourses made publicly visible from January 2018 to June 2019. The database consists of 75 artefacts (480 pages), including Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn posts, articles from the English-speaking press and media channels (such as the BBC, CNN, the *Guardian*, the *Telegraph*, the *Times* and *Pakistan Today*), audio and video podcasts and documentaries, together with the NGOs' web content and press releases. The database materials cover thirteen sexual scandals in NGOs and humanitarian organisations, in which, according to the revealed disclosures, allegations of sexual misconduct were made against personnel. In addition, to understand how sexual misconduct had been approached by the sector prior to the #MeToo movement, the study analysed ten sectoral reports ([CHS, 2019](#); [Csáky, 2008](#); [GBV, 2018](#); [Hallman, Kelvin, Ozler, Seban, Kuhlik, Alton, & Goodman, 2016](#); [IASC, 2016](#); [IFRC, 1994](#); [INEQE, 2018](#); [Lattu, 2008](#); [Mazurana & Donnelly, 2017](#); [UNHCR & Save the Children, 2002](#)) and six investigations ([Al-Hussein, 2005](#); [Charity Commission, 2019a, 2019b](#); [DfID, 2018](#); [IDC, 2018](#); [Security Council Report, 2006](#)) produced by governments, international institutions, monitoring bodies and policymakers. This data contains approximately 350 pages of textual material.

The study database provides a comprehensive overview of NGO sexual scandals revealed or reassessed in the midst of the #MeToo movement. At the same time, the research is aware of possible limitations of social media data collection associated with keyword search assumptions and the features of search engines ([Belz & Baumbach, 2010](#); [Jeacle & Carter, 2011](#)). In addition, even very rigorous media coverage and the corroboration of different sources might not be able to reveal all details, such as the precise number of victims and accused offenders and their organisational roles, as this information would be protected by the secrecy of investigations. The related challenges have also been reported by prior studies, which claimed that "the exact number of individuals in the sector who have been sexually violated is difficult to quantify, as many agencies are unable or unwilling to provide figures" ([Gillespie et al., p. 2, 2019](#); [Ndulo, 2009](#)). However, the primary focus of the present research is the qualitative implications of the studied events on the NGO accountability discourse. Therefore, theoretical saturation ([Modell, 2015](#)) and assurance of "considerable analytic depth and insight" ([Kozinets, 2002, p. 64](#)) has been achieved by determining a unit of analysis to be a single textual artefact (a social media post, blog, newspaper article, press-release) to reveal the contextual richness of the assemblage of voices and opinions.

The study approached data analysis in a multifaceted way. Firstly, the accumulated empirical data was taken through the stages of data reduction, display and verification ([Miles & Huberman, 1994](#)). Secondly, each artefact was analysed separately with the emphasis on classification, coding and searching for themes, patterns and the meanings attributed to the patterns ([Langer & Beckman, 2005](#)). In addition to the content, the deployed discourse analysis paid attention to the tone expressed in the artefacts in order to recognise the relationships between the semantics being used and the sentiment (emotional colourisation) of the statements ([Maurer & Diehl, 2020](#); [Scurlock et al., 2020](#)). The tone was acknowledged only in those statements where emotions were explicitly named by the authors of statements (for example, '*absolutely shocking*' or '*I am devastated*'). Other statements were considered emotionally neutral. Thirdly, the relevant patterns extracted from various artefacts were compared through several rounds of analysis ([O'Dwyer, 2004](#)) to achieve plausibility of interpretations ([Kozinets, 2015a](#); [Lukka & Modell, 2010](#)). Finally, the extracted patterns and meanings were inspected within the context of the studied social phenomenon and "supplemented with ... identity information about ... contributors" ([Langer & Beckman, 2005, p. 197](#)) to relate the acquired meanings with the representation of 'the Other'.

To examine the longitudinal development of the studied discourse, the author structured the acquired empirical evidence and then the findings of analysis within three major categories. The first category, 'the NGO discourse on sexual misconduct prior to #MeToo', examined sectoral reports published before 2018. The main themes found here included '*sectoral thinking*', '*fragmental statistics*', '*lack of awareness*', '*technical malfunction*', '*pragmatic accountability*', '*quasi-assessment*'. The second category, 'NGO accountability forum during the #MeToo movement: vocalisation of concerns', analysed the evidence from social media and press listed in [Table 1](#), focusing on public reactions of NGO stakeholders to the revelations of sexual misconduct. The statutory investigations published during 2018–2019 have also been analysed here. The main themes found included '*sudden visibility*', '*the domino effect of revelations*', '*discourse escalation*' and '*emotions underneath accountability demands*'. The third category, 'NGO actors: public responses and commitments', analysed press releases and NGO reports published during 2018–2019 in response to sexual allegations, media coverage of NGOs' viewpoints and social media blogs of NGO professionals speaking on behalf of the sector. The themes found here included '*pressures to respond*', '*apologies and commitments*', '*demonstrative resignations*', '*quick fixing*', '*the "old" toolbox of pragmatic accountability instruments*', '*deep ethical reflections*', '*lessons to be learned*'. This approach to the organisation of findings revealed the multifarious accountability disputes between the forum and the actors taking place in social arenas.

All thirteen scandals included in the database laid the groundwork for the empirical analysis of this study. However, within each of the three categories of analysis, the starting point was the scandal receiving the most extensive stakeholder attention and detailed document coverage, i.e. the Oxfam investigation. [Table 2](#) outlines the scandal's

Table 2
The timeline of the Oxfam scandal.

Year	Events
2004	The head of Oxfam missions in Chad (2006) and Haiti (2011), Roland Van Hauwermeiren, was investigated by the British health charity Merlin after allegations of using prostitutes in Liberia before he was employed by Oxfam, as disclosed by the parliamentary investigation in 2018 (IDC, 2018).
2011	Allegations of paying earthquake survivors for sex against Oxfam's staff in Haiti. Oxfam's internal investigation. Roland Van Hauwermeiren resigned before the end of the investigation. Three members of Oxfam staff accused of sexual misconduct physically threatened witnesses, as disclosed by the parliamentary investigation in 2018 (IDC, 2018).
October 2017	An American actress Alysia Milano posted a Tweet message: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" (Sayej, 2017) triggering the #MeToo movement.
February 2018	The <i>Times</i> newspaper published its investigation accusing Oxfam in covering up the scandal (O'Neil, 2018b). The Charity Commission for England and Wales opened a statutory inquiry into Oxfam in order "to examine the charity's governance, including leadership and culture of safeguarding matters" (Charity Commission, 2019a). Oxfam issued its 'WE ARE SO SORRY' press release (Sampson, 2018).
July 2018	The International Development Committee appointed by the UK House of Commons issued the report <i>Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector</i> , which concluded the 'endemic' nature of the problem of abuse and exploitation in the non-profit and aid sectors (IDC, 2018).
2019	Oxfam withdrew from making bids for funding from the UK government during financial year 2018/19 as it was "a subject of a statutory inquiry" (Oxfam, 2019, p. 32). Oxfam reported firing 43 members of staff based on 294 safeguarding claims in the year to March 2019 (Preston, 2019). Oxfam remains in the public eye as more allegations of sexual misconduct against the NGO's members of staff continue to be disclosed (Hurst, 2020).

timeline. The Oxfam scandal is indicative for multiple reasons. Firstly, Oxfam is one of the largest NGOs, with a strong brand name and wide international recognition (Boomsma & O'Dwyer, 2019; Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003). Secondly, this is one of the few scandals which received statutory investigation throughout. Thirdly, the Oxfam investigation triggered the revelation and escalation of many other scandals listed in the study database. Therefore, as the available textual coverage of the other cases was less systematic and more situational, the analysis used them to emphasise the contextual richness of the discourse under study.

The analysis enabled the author to obtain empirical insights into the transformations of NGO accountability for sexual misconduct and violence. It was done by contrasting the approach to the issue expressed in the sectoral reports before #MeToo with new accountability demands imposed by the forum that prompted NGOs to respond. Approached through the applied analytical lenses, these findings prompted deeper reflections on the lessons the sector could learn from the #MeToo movement to engage in a dialogue with stakeholders and exercise accountability in a truly holistic manner.

4. Findings

This section presents the study's findings on the shifts in societal perceptions of NGO accountability impacted by the disclosures of sexual misconduct in the non-profit sector. The analysis begins with the first sub-section examining the sectoral rhetoric around sexual misconduct prior to the #MeToo movement and Oxfam investigation. The second sub-section exposes how social media shone a spotlight on the cases of abuse and how the movement empowered accountability forums to accelerate demands for holding NGOs accountable for sexual wrongdoings. The third sub-section analyses the NGOs' publicly vocalised accounts and commitments in response to the escalated accountability demands revealing the deployment of both pragmatic and ethical approaches.

4.1. Before the lights were on

The year 2018 could be considered as a starting point for massive revelations of sexual violence in the non-profit sector synchronised by the social movement (Bruno-van Vijfeijken, 2019). However, sexual misconduct by personnel in NGOs and aid organisations has been a sectoral issue known about long before #MeToo (Levin, 2003; Ndulo, 2009; Simić, 2010). According to *The Times* investigation (O'Neil, 2018a), staff at major aid charities were identified as exchanging food for sex as far back as 2001. The investigation referred to the evidence collected by research teams working in West Africa for Save the Children and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).⁵ The document revealed 40 NGOs whose workers had been suspected of having "sexually exploitative relationships with refugee children" (O'Neil, 2018a). The

⁵ *The Times* does not name the report, but based on its description, the author assumes that it refers to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Save the Children UK *Sexual Violence and Exploitation: The Experience of Refugee Children in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone*, Report (2002). Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/international-development/2002-Report-of-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-Save%20the%20Children.pdf>; last accessed: 09.06.2020.

report was shared with NGOs for them to scrutinise themselves but was concealed by Ruud Lubbers, the then high commissioner of the UNHCR. Lubbers was then himself dismissed over allegations of sexual exploitation in 2005.

This sub-section examines the sectoral rhetoric by assessing the content and sentiment of analytical inquiries (Csáky, 2008; Hallman et al., 2016; Lattu, 2008) produced by international monitoring institutions prior to 2018. The analysis focuses exclusively on the patterns of sectoral thinking in its attempts to address sexual misconduct. It reveals that despite the NGOs having been reportedly aware of the field mission personnel's sexual misconduct against beneficiaries, the sector tended to view them as technical rather than system-threatening matters.

The study findings show that the statistics presented in the analysed inquiries were fragmented, signalling the absence of a systematic and effective approach to quantify and evidence the true scope of sexual violence at the sectoral level. This corresponds with a previously reported "lack of appreciation for the seriousness of the problem" in the sector (Levin, 2003, p. 840). Back in 2008, the Save the Children investigation (Csáky, 2008) was predominantly focused on under-reporting of sexual violence and its cultural and procedural roots. The inquiries used survey-based evidence to support their claims (see, for example, Hallman et al. (2016) report on the International Rescue Committee survey of 190 respondents claiming more than 40 per cent of women and girls in southern Syria had experienced sexual violence while accessing aid services). The reports usually strengthened survey data by corroborating it with evidence indirectly signalling the tendency of sexual violence to increase. For instance, Csáky (2008) reported that during humanitarian missions in Cambodia "the number of [adult and under-age] prostitutes rose from 6000 to 25,000" in one year (p. 10).

The analysed inquiries demonstrated the sectoral propensity to address sexual violence by mobilising pragmatic accountability procedures, i.e. boosting reporting, increasing control and accumulating resources for surveillance and for human rights education. For instance, Csáky (2008) largely promoted the increased control of abuse as "a stepping-stone towards greater transparency and public accountability" (p. 24) and encouraged "UN agencies and NGOs ... to significantly increase their willingness to share overall statistics on reported allegations of abuse" (p. 24). Even though the report of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) (Lattu, 2008) was grounded in a beneficiary perspective and named sexual exploitation as "a failure of accountability to beneficiaries" (p. 49), it used a very similar rhetoric of control and normativity, highlighting that abuse is caused by "the asymmetrical principal-agent relations that characterise most 'humanitarian' transactions" (p. 52).

As the analysed inquiries frequently referred to the establishment of HAP International in 2003 as a sectoral response to the studied matter, this research has traced the activities of HAP but did not identify any substantial actions undertaken by the partnership to affect the patterns of predatory behaviour in the sector. In 2015, HAP International merged with People in Aid to form the Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS) Alliance, a conglomerate of 150 NGOs, aiming to certify the quality assurance of humanitarian services of its members. According to the organisation's webpage, the Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative (HQAI) is the main activity of the CHS Alliance implemented in the provision of two types of paid services to its members: quality verification in the form of self-assessment and quality certification 'undertaken by HQAI-approved auditors'. However, as Fig. 1 shows, for instance, Oxfam International, was a full member of HAP/CHS Alliance from 2010, was successfully self-assessed in 2017 and received its quality assurance certificate in 2018 shortly before the *Times* investigation, which caused the UK government statutory inquiry into Oxfam. Therefore, as with other types of traditional safeguarding procedures (Gillespie et al., 2019; Levin, 2003; Ndulo, 2009), this self-established sectoral practice of quality certification did not appear effective in tackling sexual misconduct.

When it comes to assessing the ethical responsibilities of the sector, the analysed inquiries did not demonstrate sufficient reflection on the psychological implications of abuse or the traumatic damage it caused. Instead, the main attention of the Csáky (2008) report is given to the "chronic lack of awareness of rights" (p. 13), emphasising a need for increasing the education of beneficiaries as a mechanism of self-defence and empowerment by informing them about "alternative survival tactics" (p. 5). In Lattu (2008), there was also no explicit emphasis on responsibilities of 'duty bearers', nor deeper reflection on ethical matters that caused abuse in the first place, except for a vague statement that "NGOs must keep ... reminding staff of their obligations not to commit sexual exploitation" (p. 24). Moreover, some of the report's conclusions provided rather compromised views on the rights-based approach. For instance, it discussed the issue of (financial) compensation as "a desired response [of accountable actors]" (p. 43) by revealing that survey respondents "did not know nor had heard of any victim who had received special assistance for mental or physical damage ... [because] abused ... women wanted compensation which diverges completely from how outsiders are trying to respond to sexual exploitation" (p. 43).

Therefore, the findings revealed the pragmatic approach undertaken by the sector or, utilising the conceptualisation of Roberts (2009), the understanding of accountability as transparency when more control is praised as a solution for any malpractice. Despite the revelations of sexual misconduct in the sectoral reports, these analytical inquiries were unable to create high public visibility of the matter. Even though the violation of beneficiaries' rights was acknowledged, no deep reflection on the role of 'duty bearers' had been undertaken. This also explained why sexual misconduct seemed to be 'hidden' from the general public, as the sector preferred to deal with the technicalities rather than to engage in a wider dialogue about ethical and moral accountability for the misconduct. In addition, even though some sectoral initiatives to tackle the issue had taken place in the past, it ended up with a commercialised process of quasi-assessment in the form of self-examination, verification and certification. It appears that without public attention and interference from wider accountability forums, the systemic sectoral patterns causing sexual exploitation of the vulnerable remained largely unquestioned and unchallenged.

Oxfam International

COUNTRY	WEBSITE
United Kingdom	www.oxfam.org
DATE JOINED	MEMBERSHIP STATUS
2010	Full
ASSESSMENT STATUS	
18 Jun 2018 - Certification	
5 Feb 2017 - Self-Assessment	

Fig. 1. The membership of Oxfam International in the CHS Alliance. Source: CHS Alliance⁶

4.2. Sudden visibility, social media empowerment and calls for accountability

This sub-section reveals how the evolving #MeToo movement gave new visibility to the scale of sexual misconduct in the non-profit sector, mobilised accountability forums to vocalise disapproval of the sectoral approach and empowered calls for accountability and intellectual reflections on the misconduct outcomes. The analysis begins with the examination of the scandal exposing that senior Oxfam staff in Haiti had allegedly paid earthquake survivors for sex in 2011 (O'Neil, 2018a).

It is particularly important to acknowledge the context of the analysed outcomes, as the series of reports in *The Times* accusing Oxfam of covering up “the use of [underage] prostitutes by senior aid workers in Haiti” (O'Neil, 2018b) were revealed in February 2018 during the climax of the #MeToo movement expansion (see Table 2). This ‘sudden’ visibility caused immediate reactions. In February 2018, shortly after those media revelations, the International Development Committee (IDC) appointed by the House of Commons of the UK and the Charity Commission for England and Wales initiated their separate investigations and inquiries into Oxfam. The investigations took another four months to be completed under continuous media pressures and the attention of NGO stakeholders. In July 2018, the IDC concluded that sexual exploitation and abuse was “endemic”⁷ in the humanitarian non-profit and aid sectors (IDC, 2018). The report stated:

The delivery of aid ... can ... be subverted by *sexual predators* into a channel through which they can magnify their power ... to exploit and abuse ... the most vulnerable ... *We must not turn away from the horror of it. We have a duty to confront it...* Having understood *the length of time that the sector has been aware* of these issues, we reflect with confusion on the *apparent shock* of those we spoke to ... This has been a *known problem* in the international aid sector for years (p. 75; italics added).

A comparison of the tone and sentiment of the IDC report with the sectoral inquiries of Csáky (2008), Lattu (2008) and Hallman et al. (2016) highlighted a dramatic shift in the rhetoric vocalised in powerful expressions of disapproval, such as ‘*sexual predators*’, ‘*the horror*’ and ‘*apparent shock*’. The report also emphasised the responsibility of accountable actors, expressed in such locutions as ‘*a known problem*’, ‘*a duty to confront*’ and ‘*the length of time the sector has been aware*’. The uncommon amount of emotionally connotative expressions used in this statutory report reinforced the discordance and rejection of the sectoral approach undertaken in the past.

During and after the statutory investigations, the engaged NGO stakeholders carried forward the accountability agenda in social media by expressing opinions and feelings about the revelations of sexual misconduct. The social media discourse exposed the reactions of disgust from powerful NGO supporters, collating them with the opinions of multiple individual donors into a synergised assemblage of voices. A British actress, Minnie Driver, stood down from her role as a celebrity ambassador for Oxfam (Carolei, 2018) and published on Twitter:

All I can tell you about this *awful revelation* about Oxfam is that I am *devastated*. *Devastated by the women who were used* by people sent there to help them, *devastated by the response of an organisation* that I have been raising awareness for since I was 9 years old #oxfamscandal (BBC, 2018a, italics added).

The next day, an Oxfam private donor posted on Twitter:

This stuff makes me *feel physically ill*. That this *has been done with money I may have donated* ... *absolutely shocking* #oxfamscandal (Gharib, 2018, italics added).

⁶ (<https://www.chsalliance.org/about/our-members/oxfam-international/>); Accessed on 01.03.2021.

⁷ The word was used four times in the report.

Analysis of these statements showed not only the stakeholders' intentions of disconnecting themselves from the NGO they supported, but also a deep distress, a feeling of betrayal and a loss of faith in the charity. Both statements expressed the emotional roots of accountability demands (Banks, 2013; Hernandez et al., 2005; Jory et al., 1997) and the connectivity between the feeling of disgust and disappointment (expressed in the phrases '*awful revelation*', '*feel physically ill*' and '*absolutely shocking*') and the desire to hold the organisation to account ('*devastated by the response of an organisation*' and '*done with money I may have donated*'). In addition to the vocalised condemnations, more than a thousand Oxfam donors took action by cancelling their direct debits, withdrawing financial support and stopping the employment of children as volunteers in Oxfam shops (Carolei, 2018). This synchronous donors' movement communicated the scale and power of their disapproval, aiming to encourage the sector to move from the pragmatism of technicalities and demonstrability towards moral accountability for the damage of revealed wrongdoings (Butler, 2005; Roberts, 2009).

The observed snowball effect of hashtag activism supported by the offline actions raised public interest and encouraged the development of NGO accountability discourse beyond the Oxfam scandal. The forum expressed its clear interest in listening to the abuse survivors and encouraged them to speak up as this empowerment was manifested in the increased number of new disclosures (see Table 1). Revealing the profound impact of the social movement, such prominent names as the Red Cross, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Save the Children were publicly accused of covering up the cases of sexual misconduct. This caused MSF and the Red Cross to engage with the accountability forum promptly by, for instance, disclosing that 19 and 21 of their members of staff respectively were fired for the sexual abuse of beneficiaries in 2015–2017 (Baker, 2018; Greenfield, 2018).

Despite this not being the first movement addressing sexual exploitation in the sector (Levin, 2003; Ndulo, 2009; Simić, 2010), this time social media empowerment allowed grassroots voices to be connected with other NGO stakeholders worldwide. The continuity and tone of public discourses began to unpack the systemic nature of the problem as abusive and predatory patterns became linked to the operational settings and power asymmetry in NGO and aid activism. This can be illustrated by the statement of a Liberian NGO activist, Naomi Tulay-Solanke:

The world is *shocked that aid workers are sexual abusers. I'm not*. Growing up in Liberia, I've seen *countless men behave like Oxfam Country Director* ... That's because the aid world has long been a *boy's club*... The *privilege* of their colour... position, *the superficial power* they have means that *everybody forgets that this is abuse, that this is harassment* (Tulay-Solanke, 2018, italics added).

The voices of NGO members of staff revealing their own experiences of sexual harassment at work added new contextual flavours to the studied discourse reflecting on the patterns in occupational culture and workplace environments. The study database contains the cases of eight NGOs where allegations of staff-to-staff sexual misconduct have been reported (see Table 1). On 12 October 2018, a well-known Indian NGO activist, Mari Marcel Thekaekara, disclosed her experience of sexual harassment in 2001, accusing a founder of a prominent Indian NGO network COVA, Mazher Hussain. In her statement on the Indian digital media platform, The Print, she reflected on co-workers' reactions to her reporting the case to the police:

Many of my male colleagues *avoided eye contact*. I was not really surprised. This is why it's so hard to fight sexual abuse. Because *the old boys' network* always comes together to shut you out. *They make you feel that there's something wrong with you for blowing up a 'trivial' incident out of proportion* (Thekaekara, 2018, italics added).

This testament resonates with another case of sexual misconduct that unfolded in the Indian non-profit sector as a result of the #MeToo movement. The discourses on Facebook and Twitter revealed the discussions of workplace attitude of a founder of an Indian NGO Video Volunteers (VV), Stalin Padma, and prompted his resignation. Two statements from an anonymised survivor and a witness, both of whom are Indian NGO activists, were disclosed in the local media inquiry (Wire, 2018):

For most of us who come to this organisation without the knowledge of Stalin's *predatory behaviour*, he is a *very respectful figure*. ... VV generally is a very informal space. When *he keeps hugging you and patting you*, you feel that perhaps this is the way he functions until *his behaviour gets completely uncomfortable* (italics added).

I was working in another human rights ... organisation in Ahmedabad in 2008. He used to visit our office regularly and *I was warned of his predatory behaviour* and *to stay away from him* by female co-workers. *I have sent an email* to ICC [Internal Complaints Committee for Prevention of Sexual Harassment] at VV (italics added).

The four statements presented above evidence how social media disclosures attempted to challenge the systemic secrecy of the historical sectoral approach to handling breaches in workplace ethics and attitude. This is expressed in locutions such as '*predatory behaviour [of]*' ... *a very respectful figure*' and '*blowing up a 'trivial' incident*'. The statements' emphasis on the male domination moulding the sector into '*a boy's club*' or '*the old boy's network*' acknowledged the patterns of privileged power impunity (Hernandez et al., 2005), institutionalised abuse and gendered domination and victimisation in the sector (Hunt et al., 2010; Lebovic & Voeten, 2009). Finally, as the social movement created an environment of trust and togetherness among the participants, these statements also demonstrate how reflective public discussions about abuse trauma and the need for safety in NGO operational settings impacted the tone of the transformed public views on NGO accountability.

The empirical evidence presented in this sub-section shows how social arenas were mobilised to give visibility to the problematics of sexual abuse and exploitation in the non-profit sector, facilitate accountability discourses and empower new disclosures of abuse. The narratives and tones of expression manifested a strong public interest in engaging in the debate about morale and ethical aspects of NGO activism. The synchronised and synergised views expressed by various members of accountability forums, including NGO activists, regulators, a broad range of donors and supporters and the general public, vocalised disapproval of the previous sectoral approach and extensive demands for NGO accountability. In contrast to the sectoral approach, the transformed perception of NGO accountability anticipated by NGO stakeholders (or 'the Other(s)') originated from a wide spectrum of emotions, such as empathy for abuse survivors and a sense of betrayal by NGOs they used to support, and stimulated deeper reflections on more intellectual and thoughtful approaches to accountability conduct.

4.3. From procedural narratives towards intellectual accountability in NGOs' public responses

The escalated level of public scrutiny and accountability demands, accompanied by a substantial reduction in donors' funding, pressured NGOs to step into the discussion arena and respond (Carolei, 2018; Scurlock et al., 2020). This sub-section analyses the sectoral contribution to the studied accountability discourse through the lens of ethical problematics of accountability (Roberts, 2009; Yasmin & Ghafan, 2019) and NGO impression management (Conway et al., 2015; Unerman et al., 2006). Acknowledging the primary focus of this study on public perceptions of NGO accountability, the analysis examined only the organisational responses given on media platforms, i.e. NGOs' public engagement with the questions and concerns raised by accountability forums (Bovens, 2007).

The development of the analysed discourse revealed how NGOs, pressurised by the unprecedented attention from media and NGO stakeholders, had to acknowledge publicly their responsibility for systemic ethical malpractices and problematic behaviours in their headquarters and field missions. Several organisations provided public apologies for the disclosed cases of sexual misconduct. The Oxfam's 'WE ARE SO SORRY' press release was disseminated by the organisation with impressive synchronicity, as its physical copy appeared on the front door of each building associated with the NGO and at the same time was conveyed in newspaper advertisements:

To Oxfam supporters... we are so sorry for the appalling behaviour that happened in our name... The sexual misconduct of former Oxfam employees in Haiti during 2011 and in Chad during 2006 should never have happened. We should have been more explicit in our reporting of these incidents... We know that you put your trust in us and that these devastating reports will have damaged that trust. We want you to know that we are working hard to rebuild it... Right now, and every day, this work continues - and it couldn't do without you. The scandal that has hit Oxfam... has been shocking, but we are determined that it must not stop the world's poorest people getting the help they need... Private donors who wish to remain anonymous have kindly paid for this message (Sampson, 2018, italics added).

The content and tone of this statement reveals several important patterns. The carefully chosen wording expresses an attempt by the organisation's management to distance themselves from the traces of abuse and violence. This is expressed in the locutions 'the appalling behaviour... in our name' (i.e. this was not 'us', but someone else in our name), 'sexual misconduct of former... employees' (i.e. those employees are no longer with us), and 'these... reports... damaged [your] trust' (i.e. again it was not 'us', but the reports). The attempt at disassociation is also signalled in the expression that private donors, who paid for the distribution of this statement 'wish[ed] to remain anonymous'. The tone changes drastically when the statement aimed to reassure its addressees, for example, 'we are working hard to rebuild [trust]' and 'we are determined'. However, as the message is specifically targeting 'Oxfam supporters [and donors], friends and volunteers' rather than abuse survivors or beneficiaries, this might be interpreted as underlying opportunistic strategies (Messner, 2009; Roberts, 2009) having prevailed over moral drivers in this public declaration of accountability (Conway et al., 2015).

Apologies by NGOs were followed by the public resignations and suspensions of the accused members of staff to demonstrate NGOs' responses to the imposed accountability pressures. The resignations usually took place as a result of reported internal tensions, with NGO management urged to reassure non-tolerance of sexual misconduct to avoid further damage to organisational reputations (O'Neil, 2018b; Scurlock et al., 2020). For instance, during the investigations into Save the Children in 2018, three senior members of staff, including the Chief Executive and the Chairman, resigned after being accused of sexual misconduct or attempting to diminish the scandal (BBC, 2018b). Resignations of some NGO leaders were attended by controversy. The prompt resignation of the accused founder of VV Stalin Padma in October 2018 (Wire, 2018) was challenged in an open letter from 60 NGO activists in December 2018 (Fil, 2018), who questioned whether he was still engaged in organisational activities in the capacity of managing trustee as explicitly stated on the NGO's webpage.⁸

To strengthen the impression that public concerns were taken seriously this time, NGOs rapidly announced a wide range of measures to tackle sexual misconduct in the sector. In addition to the public declaration of zero-tolerance of sexual exploitation and predatory behaviours, NGOs proclaimed the simplification of the reporting of sexual abuse and

⁸ Source: <https://www.videovolunteers.org/about/teams/staff/>; Accessed on 18.06.2020.

commitments to address future allegations proactively and robustly (Charity Commission, 2019a). However, the measures announced, such as new hotlines, improved complaint mechanisms, increased funding for safeguarding systems and more transparency in reporting (Oxfam, 2019; Preston, 2019), could be viewed chiefly as rushing to the 'old toolbox' of procedural accountability mechanisms (Levin, 2003; Ndulo, 2009; Roberts, 2009). The proposed regulatory measures included the establishment of an independent aid ombudsman and adoption of an international criminal records check system (a global register) to provide details of past allegations against prospective NGO employees and aid workers (Charity Commission, 2019b; O'Neil, 2018b), but the public is yet to see the practical implementation of these initiatives.

The demonstrable acts of accountability (Conway et al., 2015; Cooper & Johnston, 2012; Yasmin & Ghafran, 2019), such as public apologies, resignations and declared commitments to operating differently, aimed to create an impression of rebuilding public trust and convincing 'the Other' that the social contract was still in place by transmitting tightened control and increased transparency. Nevertheless, as the analysis in sub-section 4.1 of the sectoral discourse prior to the #MeToo movement demonstrated, this familiar obsession with the demonstrability of control and safeguarding procedures might again be utilised opportunistically, bringing into question NGOs' ability to eradicate sexual violence from the relationships of their personnel with their beneficiaries, volunteers and less powerful members of staff.

Taking these concerns into account, the study also examined more contemplative sectoral reflections on the moral aspects of accountability that appeared in the public domain. Such attempts at self-accountability and self-assessment (Butler, 2005; Roberts, 2009) were manifested in organisational acts to increase the understanding of the operational conditions that might have been conducive to predatory and abusive behaviours. Save the Children reported on its internal survey revealing that 28 per cent of the 700 current employees had experienced harassment, humiliation or aggression from their more senior colleagues (BBC, 2018b). The UN's report on its internal survey (Sen, Borges, Guallar, & Cochran, 2018) focused on understanding the different forms of sexual misconduct displayed in the organisation. The UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, stated:

The results [of the survey] confirm that these have a *debilitating effect on staff morale* and on work performance and there [is] continued ... *fear ... that perpetrators ... enjoy impunity* (Roth, 2019, italics added).

As intellectual accountability is expected to manifest in self-analysis (Roberts, 2009), the contribution of prominent members of the NGO professional community to the public accountability discourse enhanced the sectoral debate and shifted it towards a collective reflection on the execution of holistic accountability. This is illustrated by the blogs of Catherine Powell (the Council on Foreign Relations, USA) and Wolfgang Jamann (the International Civil Society Centre, Germany):

It is ... the *responsibility of humanitarian aid organizations* to develop processes that prevent such sexual crimes and to *hold future perpetrators accountable* for their acts (Powell, 2018, italics added).

We naturally place *high expectations on moral authorities* such as ... NGOs that support the weak of this world. Much like doctors, *they should aim to do no one any harm, comply with high ethical standards and set an example in doing so* (Jamann, 2018, italics added).

These statements show a reflective attempt to ally with the narratives of NGO stakeholders, linking accountability for power misuse and sexual misconduct to the fundamentals of humanitarian activism. This is expressed in locutions such as '*a debilitating effect on staff morale*', '*high expectations on moral authorities*', '*to do no one any harm*' and '*set an example*', accentuating the ethical aspects of NGO accountability through empathy, duty of care and no-harm policy. Understanding the fragility of the NGO social contract in the midst of the widespread public criticism of the sectoral failure to prevent damage, the public statements of NGO professionals created an impression of leaning towards the stakeholders' claims for '*responsibility of humanitarian aid organizations*' '*to hold ... perpetrators accountable*'. As those who hold power in organisations have the privilege to define normality in organisational settings (Clair et al., 2019; Kelley & Mullen, 2006), this could be interpreted as the public commitment of sectoral leadership to facilitate intellectual accountability by building on stakeholders' expectations and core values of humanitarian activism.

Concluding this section, the findings reveal the transformative impact of the #MeToo movement on public perceptions of NGO accountability manifested through the development and facilitation of corresponding discourses in social arenas. The analysis showed that prior to the discourses associated with the movement, the sectoral approach to the problem of sexual violence has been largely based on the pragmatic mechanisms of internal control, reporting and formalised rituals of quality assurance. The visibility given to the sexual exploitation in the sector was met by a high level of public disapproval and criticism of the sectoral failures to prevent and penalise abuse and vocalised stakeholders' demands to deepen the understanding of the problem and discharge moral accountability. In response to these escalated demands, NGOs urgently announced a wide range of accountability actions, including public apologies, resignations, and demonstrable measures of even tighter control and safeguarding. But they also communicated reflective attempts to explore the particular elements in the occupational settings that might predetermine predatory behaviours and signalled some acquiescence to the concerns of the public and willingness to engage in accountability dialogues. This observed trend of aligning pragmatic measures of procedural accountability, aiming for a quick reparation of reputational damage, with more intellectual long-lasting aspects of organisational and individual self-assessment might prompt a momentum and rationale for NGOs to discharge accountability in a truly holistic manner.

5. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine the shifts in societal perceptions of NGO accountability impacted by the visibility given to cases of abuse and sexual exploitation and by accountability discourses mobilised on social media in the midst of the #MeToo movement. The study contributed to the debates on the holistic strands of NGO accountability (Agyemang et al., 2017; O'Leary, 2017; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2007), the role of 'the Other' in accountability conduct (Messner, 2009; Roberts, 2009; Yasmin & Ghafran, 2019) and the role of social media and hashtag activism in constructing accountability and vocalising demands (Duval & Gendron, 2020; Jeacle & Carter, 2011, 2014; Neu et al., 2019). The study enhanced these debates by providing a critical reflection on NGO accountability for sexual violence and by examining how accountability forums activated changes and demanded transformations in the sectoral responses from pragmatic procedures towards more intellectual approaches. This section discusses these contributions in greater detail and reflects on the wider implications of the study findings.

Taking into account the great number of NGO stakeholders engaged in accountability dialogues within the #MeToo movement, this study emphasised the importance of reflecting on the sensitive and multifaceted phenomena of sexual exploitation within the domain of accountability research. The findings revealed the challenging relationships of the sector with the studied phenomena and the need to reflect on the lessons learned from the movement that impact our understanding of the conceptualisation and assessment of NGO accountability. The multiplicity of views expressed in the analysed discourses on the moral basis of the NGO social contract allowed exploration of the complexity of NGO accountability for sexual exploitation. This enabled the study to contribute to research on dialogic and conversational accountability (Bellucci et al., 2019; Cooper & Johnston, 2012) by evidencing how the persistence and strong emotional tone of stakeholders' demands persuaded the sector to reflect on the necessary transformations in accountability conduct.

The synergy of the digital revolution and social movements created online platforms for continuous accountability discourses (Manetti & Bellucci, 2016; Xiong et al., 2019). The study demonstrated how 'the Other(s)' who felt a need to express their opinions about revelations of sexual misconduct used social media channels to empower and escalate accountability demands. The research mobilised a method capable of capturing stakeholders' viewpoints and the organic nature of the discourses, while simultaneously acknowledging the research duty of care. The detailed record of netnography deployment allowed the study to contribute to the advancement of netnography methodology in accounting research (Islam & van Staden, 2018; Jeacle, 2020).

The study revealed the important role of 'the Other(s)' (Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009; Roberts, 2009) congregated in forums in imposing accountability demands. It demonstrated empirically how persistent mobilisation of online discourses enabled NGO stakeholders to articulate their disapproval of the earlier sectoral tactics and pointed the sector towards the need to transform its approaches. By deploying the analytical lens of Roberts (2009), which conceptualised the dualism of opportunistic and intellectual accountability, the study evidenced how prior to the #MeToo discourses the sectoral approach was largely grounded in pragmatic and demonstrable technicalities of control and formal attributes of quality assurance, avoiding wider stakeholder dialogue on the problematics of sexual violence. The accountability forums signalled to NGOs that their approach was inadequate because it lacked deeper intellectual reflections on the duty of care and no-harm policies of humanitarian activism and the understanding of the psychological nature of abuse.

The online accountability discourses also exposed strong sentiments of distress, betrayal, and devastation expressed by NGO stakeholders, revealing deep emotional textures underlying accountability demands (Banks, 2013; Hernandez et al., 2005; Jory et al., 1997). The emotional patterns in stakeholders' motivation had been previously acknowledged in relation to fundraising and upward accountability (McDowell, Li, & Smith, 2013; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008). The present study extended this knowledge by demonstrating how stakeholders' expectations and emotional reactions could trigger strong calls for accountability if underestimated or ignored by NGOs. Empowered with new channels and instruments of mobilisation, NGO stakeholders redirected accountability discourses towards the morality of NGO operationalisation by encouraging the silenced to speak up and by discussing the wider consequences of abuse and the need to advance NGO accountability practices.

Reflecting on the wider implications, the study acknowledged the potential of this momentum to advance the full holistic manner of NGO accountability conduct. Holistic accountability has been viewed in accounting research as an ideal equilibrium requiring functional (pragmatic) accountabilities to be enhanced by the greater social impact of organisational activities, i.e. intellectual accountability (O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008; O'Leary, 2017; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2007). The findings of this study showed that pragmatic procedures of transparency and control do not lead to long-lasting structural improvements because of their obsessive focus on demonstrability. Simultaneously, moral and intellectual approaches, while stimulating reflectivity and self-assessment, still need to be supported by accountability in action (Ahrens, 1996; Parker, 2014). This creates an opportunity to synergise both approaches for NGO accountability conduct.

At the same time, the inherited complex problematics of sexual violence creates a substantial challenge for attempts at NGO holistic accountability. This complexity is grounded in the polymorphic nature of abuse (Lopez et al., 2009) and the exposure of the sectoral operational settings to various forms of predatory behaviours (Csáky, 2008; IDC, 2018). For

instance, in addition to the three major types of sexual misconduct in the sector (staff-to-beneficiaries, staff-to-staff and staff-to-volunteers) indicated in this study, each case of abuse is also rooted in its specific social, institutional and cultural pre-conditions with unique power dynamics and implications. To overcome this, the sector will need to develop a systematic and effective approach to recognise, evidence and tackle abuse, in order to provide tailored accountability responses. A possible pathway towards the transformation of NGO accountability for sexual misconduct on the grounds of social contract might begin from a thoughtful dialogue and greater engagement with affected NGO stakeholders, who, as the study showed, are willing to provide valuable insights.

The present study revealed how the disclosures of sexual violence and the corresponding public accountability discourses caused shifts in societal perceptions of NGO accountability and persuaded NGOs to give account and commit to rethinking their accountability practices. Acknowledging the psychological sensitivity of the phenomenon of sexual abuse, the study deployed the non-interventional research methods of netnography and document analysis with corresponding limitations in their ability to penetrate specific organisational and individual settings. Moreover, the study has given priority to capturing the broad range of viewpoints of NGO stakeholders congregated in online accountability forums, rather than NGOs' internal rationalisation. However, the insights presented in this paper offer a fertile background for future research on the impact of the sectoral crisis on individual NGOs and their accountability practices. Future studies might also analyse whether the declared core changes in NGO operational settings have been made and investigate the impacts of different social, institutional and cultural contexts. However, a higher level of research interaction with the field on this sensitive topic needs to assure the psychological safety of individual respondents. Finally, as time passes it would be of research interest to revisit this topic and to examine whether and how the imposed demands and corresponding organisational commitments impacted longitudinal sectoral transformations and NGO accountability for sexual misconduct.

Acknowledgements

This study is dedicated to all the voices that made themselves heard to strengthen the calls for accountability for abuse of power, sexual misconduct and exploitation. A special thanks to Carolyn Cordery, John Burns and Peter Skærbæk for their valuable comments on the earlier versions of this paper. The author also appreciates comments from participants at the Research Day 'Critical Perspectives on NGO Governance and Accountability', held at the University of Sheffield in May 2019, and the 12th Workshop on the Challenges of Managing the Third Sector. The author acknowledges with great gratitude the helpful comments and encouragement provided by the special issue editor Aatur Belal and two anonymous reviewers.

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