



# Toward Inclusive Security Risk Management: the impact of 'race', ethnicity and nationality on aid workers' security

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## Executive Summary

'Race', ethnicity and nationality are key factors influencing the safety of aid workers, operations and organisations. However, their interconnection has not been investigated in depth and conversations on the topic often remain sensitive, if not taboo. This article seeks to encourage further discussions, by identifying key issues and highlighting some of the ways in which these factors, alongside racism, affect the security of staff and organisations. It looks at three main areas:

1. The relation between 'race', ethnicity, nationality and security;
2. The impact of racism on the security of aid workers and organisations;
3. NGOs' practices regarding 'race', ethnicity, nationality and security.

'Race', ethnicity, and nationality affect aid workers' security in very different ways depending on the specific context in which the aid operation takes place, and the profile of the staff involved. In some contexts, having the 'right' skin colour and ethnicity will be a decisive factor in the security of staff, beyond their status as international or national staff. In others, sharing an ethnicity and being perceived as 'closer' to the local community might place staff at higher risk. The varying impact of 'race', ethnicity and nationality on security highlights the importance

of involving staff with diverse profiles in the security management process to adequately address the risks they face, but also highlights the importance of unpacking existing assumptions that influence risk assessments. Several interviewees shared that they had been deployed to contexts in which it was assumed they would 'fit in' more easily as aid workers of colour, although, in reality, this was far from being the case.

The security risks faced by aid workers of colour relate to racism in its different forms (internalised, interpersonal, institutional, structural). Despite their significant impacts on aid workers and organisations, it seems that the security risks generated by racism are not adequately acknowledged nor understood within most NGOs. Racism within the organisation threatens the psychological and physical integrity of aid workers and affects organisations' security and effectiveness. Racial biases can lead to security managers' authority being unfairly questioned, prevent the sharing of security information, and also increase turnover. Conscious and unconscious biases often influence whether the security concerns of aid workers of colour are heard or dismissed, the work they are expected to do, and also whether security plans include measures adapted to their profiles. Moreover, racism against external stakeholders may lead to misunderstanding contexts, prevent the establishment of sound relationships, damage

acceptance with communities or even create direct security threats to operations and staff.

While many NGOs have not yet fully integrated 'race' considerations into their security processes, they are increasingly considering and using the profiles of the aid workers they hire and deploy to maximise acceptance and mitigate risks. When NGOs use staff profiles to better understand the risks individuals face and to develop adequate measures to mitigate them, such practices can be very helpful to improve access and keep staff safe. However, in many cases, it seems that organisations consider identifying staff profiles as a risk mitigation strategy in and of itself, without creating adapted security measures for the selected staff. The current practices have many shortcomings, as profiles do not protect staff against various risks including aerial bombing, the detonation of IEDs, or indiscriminate shooting at convoys. Furthermore, profiles do not predict staff behaviours, although the way staff behave is probably the greatest determinant of their security and the success of operations.

Nevertheless, considering the profiles of aid workers remains essential to ensure their security. While all the security managers interviewed in this research recognised the importance of creating inclusive security risk management (SRM) processes, more than fifty per cent of the interviewees felt there is an implicit hierarchy of humanitarian staff, which leads to prioritising the security of international aid workers over national aid workers, and in addition, prioritising white staff over staff of colour. To address this situation, some security managers shared how they adapted security training to include diversity and inclusivity components and others mentioned the support they received from their organisation, which provided training on power, privilege and biases.

Despite some progress, many spoke about their wishes for more resources (time, funding, staff, knowledge) to develop person-centred SRM practices and better address 'race', ethnicity, and nationality in security. As they acknowledged the importance of these issues, some also confessed feeling ill-equipped to deal with them. A few interviewees were also afraid of talking about them, fearing negative repercussions against them or fearing saying the 'wrong thing' and offending others.

Adopting an intersectional approach to security is necessary for organisations to fulfil their Duty of Care and mitigate risks for all staff. In many cases, national and international staff of colour continue to be exposed to significant security risks due to power imbalances, system inequalities, and racial dynamics and do not always access adequate security measures. To make sure staff and organisations stay safe, security managers must address the impact of 'race', ethnicity and nationality on security, and the conclusion of this article suggests a few steps in this direction.

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## Note from the authors

The topics addressed in this article are linked to many other discussions and concepts (around decolonisation, empowerment, allyship, etc.) that could not be explored in the limited scope of this piece. Writing this article proved to be particularly challenging as its first readers reacted very differently to its content. Some felt uncomfortable about the terms we used, while others encouraged us to use language that could be considered to be more radical. Similarly, some thought the article was going too far and others that it was too timid. We have welcomed and learned from all these critiques and nuanced our writing to address them wherever possible. The topic of racism is complex and emotional,

and we acknowledge that this article does not answer all questions nor unpack all the connections between 'race', ethnicity, nationality, and security. We hope that readers will read the piece with a curious and open mind, and to challenge and enrich their own perspectives.

## Introduction

'Race', ethnicity and nationality are essential elements of security risk management (SRM) in the humanitarian world (EISF, 2018). The majority of non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) security managers believe these characteristics to be amongst the most important risk factors to consider for aid workers' security (Kelleher, 2020). Despite this recognition, there is limited research or guidance on the specific risks faced by aid workers of colour and how racism can affect them. Over the past decade, conversations on the risks related to gender, disabilities, and sexual orientation<sup>[1]</sup> became more mainstream in the humanitarian security sector, but issues of 'race', ethnicity, and nationality have often been left off the table.

This article seeks to bring these issues into current conversations and encourage security managers to discuss, reflect, and question how 'race', ethnicity and nationality affect aid workers' security. Building on a literature review and twenty interviews with a range of humanitarian actors (security advisors at the global and regional levels, anti-racism consultants, policy advisors, programme staff and other aid workers)<sup>[2]</sup>, this article lays out some of the key

security issues related to racism that organisations must consider if they are to fulfil their Duty of Care<sup>[3]</sup> obligations. Given its limited scope, this article does not provide definite answers, but rather identifies links that provide the basis for further conversations and investigations. Through discussions in the course of researching and drafting, the article has already started debates with different actors in the aid sector.

## Key Concepts

### About 'race'

In this article, we recognise that the concepts of 'race' (including the terms 'white', 'black', 'brown'), 'ethnicity', 'nationality', and many others are socially constructed. Because the term 'race' is controversial in some languages and many are unaware that the term does not reflect any biological reality, we decided to emphasise the artificial nature of this concept. In this paper, therefore, the term 'race' will be shown within quotation marks.

**Ethnicity:** term ascribing individuals to a certain group that are considered to share elements including a language, religion, tribe, history, but also a culture and an ancestral territory (Adams et al., 1997; Varshney, 2003, p. 4-5). It is important to remember that the criteria included

[1] Gender and Security (EISF, 2012), Managing the Security of Aid Workers with Diverse Profiles (EISF, 2018), Managing Sexual Violence against Aid Workers (EISF, 2019), creation of the Inclusive Security Special Interest Group (ISSIG) by the Security Institute.

[2] All interviews were conducted remotely. Interviewees included 45 per cent of women and 55 per cent of men, 70 per cent of people of colour and 30 per cent of white people. All interviewees were offered the opportunity to review the article to ensure their perspectives are adequately reflected.

[3] Duty of Care is understood as the legal and moral obligation of an organisation to take all possible and reasonable measures to reduce the risk of harm to those working for, or on behalf of, the organisation.

[4] The terminology of 'constructed race' was contextualised and promoted by Saara Bouhouche, who is an anti-racism and minority rights activist, as well as an expert in humanitarian action, peace and security. The term aims at emphasising the socially created nature of the concept.

in 'ethnicity' can vary and that the boundaries between ethnic groups can be blurred.

**Nationality:** the state of being a citizen or subject of a particular country. In SRM, nationality matters as it can influence the security measures that apply to staff, often differentiating between staff who are citizens of the country of operation (national staff) and staff who have a different nationality (international staff)<sup>[4]</sup>.

**'Race':**<sup>[5]</sup> 'race' is a social construct that seeks to divide humans into racial categories. These

categories do not reflect any biological or scientific realities but are based on certain physical characteristics (i.e. skin colour, facial features).

**Racism:** prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different 'race' based on the belief that one's own 'race' is superior. Racism is founded on a historical power relationship and includes certain ideologies about 'races'. It is operationalised through forms and practices of discriminations (Garner, 2009).

Four dimensions of racism<sup>[6]</sup> are explained below:

<b>Racism</b>	<b>Internalised</b>	The private racial beliefs held by individuals, which can include racist stereotypes, prejudice, internalised oppression or privilege.
	<b>Interpersonal</b>	A set of behaviours, attitudes and actions which are based on one's internalised racial beliefs and come up in interactions with others.
	<b>Institutional</b>	Organisational programs, policies or procedures that work to the benefit of certain people and to the detriment of other people based on 'race', usually unintentionally or inadvertently (for example, the unequal opportunities offered to people of different 'races' at school).
	<b>Structural</b>	Racial bias present across institutions and society which is created by the interplay of policies, laws and practices, which support and perpetuate inequalities between different groups based on 'race' (for example, the wealth gap reflects the cumulative effect of racial inequities).

[4] The differences between 'national' and 'international' staff are further nuanced in Section 1.

[5] Another useful terminology is that of 'constructed race' was contextualised and promoted by Saara Bouhouche, who is an anti-racism and minority rights activist, as well as an expert in humanitarian action, peace and security. The term aims at emphasising the socially created nature of the concept.

[6] Definitions and graph based on Race Forward, 2015 and resources from Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative, 2021.

These different forms of racism can express themselves as conscious or unconscious biases, which influence the way risk assessments are conducted, security plans are developed, and how incidents or staff are managed.

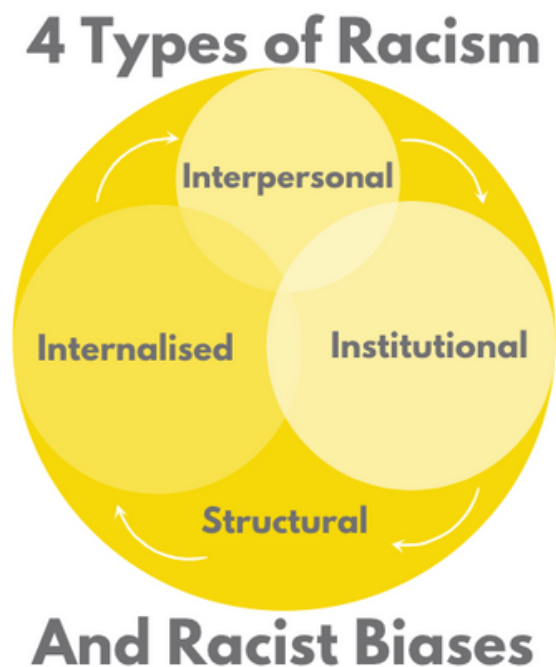


Figure 1: Four types of racism and racist biases.

### Intersectionality:<sup>[7]</sup>

an analytical framework which is used to understand and explore how the different parts of one individual's identity ('race', gender, wealth, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) influence their experience of the world. An individual's intersectional identity impacts how they are perceived, the vulnerabilities they have and the risks they may face. Adopting an intersectional lens is, therefore, an essential part of SRM and forms the foundation of a person-centred approach.

## Section 1: The relation between 'race', ethnicity, nationality and security

### 1 a) The impact of 'race', nationality, and ethnicity on the assessment of security risks'

'Race', nationality and ethnicity affect the way aid workers are perceived, the assumptions made about them, the prejudices they are exposed to, and the way they are treated by others, both within the organisation and outside of it. Therefore, they impact the security risks aid workers face and the way their security is managed. In some contexts, being a person of colour might place aid workers at a higher risk of being robbed, kidnapped, and attacked, while in other contexts the risk is reduced. In many contexts, having the 'right' ethnicity or belonging to a specific community will be a decisive factor in the risk of being attacked, rejected, or harassed. This means nationally relocated staff from certain ethnic groups who are deployed to a different part of their country can be perceived as outsiders to the same extent as international staff. They may also be perceived as direct enemies if a conflict with underlying ethnic tensions is dividing the country.

It is important to note that the external perceptions of an aid worker's racial, national, or ethnic identity may not match the way an aid worker self-identifies. The perceptions of different 'races' or simply 'skin colour' will depend on an individual's biases as well as on the context in which they live or grew up in. To manage their safety, aid workers can emphasise or hide certain aspects of their identity to manipulate stakeholders' perceptions (James, 2021). This can include changing their accent, sharing only certain aspects of their upbringing, or highlighting common cultural traits.

[7] The concept was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé W. Crenshaw.

Aid workers and security managers can hold various assumptions about the way 'race', nationality and ethnicity affect security. Almost all interviewees mentioned that aid workers of colour were often assumed to fit in more easily in countries of operations whose population is not white in majority, an assumption which can lead staff to misjudge or downplay the risks they face. If held by security managers, this assumption can become shared by the individual themselves and influence their behaviours. For instance, one interviewee found that being black gave them the feeling that they could move around in a community more safely than their white colleagues and thus they were freer in their movements. However, another interviewee shared that 'when you are the same colour as [local communities], or when they perceive you as one of them, [...] they can more easily attack you. But if you are a white person, you have more respect'. In this example, the aid worker perceived that being 'closer' to the local community generated additional security risks. Depending on their profiles and experiences, security managers may be oblivious to these dynamics, which is why involving staff with diverse characteristics and backgrounds is essential to develop adequate security plans.

These two examples demonstrate that it is essential to deconstruct the assumptions held by security managers and aid workers themselves to adequately assess risks. Within an organisation, conscious and unconscious biases about 'race', nationality, and ethnicity, as well as any institutional racism, will manifest themselves in the security measures accessed by aid workers. Organisational or interpersonal biases might influence the work they are expected to do, whether aid workers' security concerns are heard or dismissed and if security plans include measures adapted to their profiles.

These racial biases can also intersect with other forms of biases against individuals of a specific gender, age, religion, socioeconomic background, dis/ability or sexual orientation.

This is why using an intersectional lens and considering all these factors together is essential to SRM. This person-centred approach relies on the intersection of four elements (EISF, 2018):

- The intersectional identity of an individual;
- The behaviours of an individual;
- The context in which the individual is working;
- The organisation the individual works for and their role within it.



Figure 2: an intersectional approach to security risks (adapted from EISF, 2018)

The person-centred approach is explained at greater length in the EISF publication *Managing the Security of Aid Workers with Diverse Profiles* (2018), which presents ways to apply an intersectional lens to SRM practices and balance staff security with Duty of Care obligations.

### **1 b) The intersection of racial dynamics and international vs national staff security**

This section explores how the experiences, biases and risks encountered by aid workers due to their 'race', nationality and ethnicity intersect with the risks they experience as national or international staff. This exploration is especially relevant considering that the vast majority of aid workers are national staff, and that in 2020, they

represented ninety-five per cent of the total number of aid workers who were victims of incidents (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2021).

### **National, international, or local staff?**

The boundaries between the different categories of staff can be complex. It is, generally, preferable to refer to the specific situation of an aid worker and for instance differentiate between 'locally hired' staff, who are hired and work in the same region they come from and 'nationally relocated' staff, who work in their country of origin but in a different region than the one they grew up in.

Other situations can blur lines between the national and international staff categories, for example, staff who hold different or dual citizenships. If an individual with dual citizenship is contracted as a national staff member, they may be perceived differently by security managers, and they may not be able to access certain security measures, such as evacuation, in case of an emergency.

### **The security risks faced by national staff of colour**

Most of the experiences and dynamics described in this section are shared not only by national staff of colour, but by all national staff. Therefore, the issues identified below should be considered by all organisations seeking to improve the security of national staff regardless of their 'race', ethnicity or nationality.

As they usually carry out more frontline and mobile work, national staff are more exposed to travel-related risks (IEDs, carjacking, shooting, accidents) but also to risks related to interacting with various stakeholders including armed groups (kidnapping, harassment, assaults). While they might have a better understanding of the country of operation and its dangers, national staff face a range of specific risks due to their proximity to the context (Haver, 2007; James, 2020 and 2021b). They can suffer various pressures from peers (blackmailing, intimidation), and are more exposed to sanctions or violence from authorities with generally less protection in case of incidents (arbitrary detention, kidnapping). On top of the risks related to their nationality, their ethnicity and 'race' can expose them to racist incidents outside and within the organisation from other national or international staff (see Section 2). Due to the power imbalances between international and national staff, but also due to racial dynamics, they can be more vulnerable to internal threats (abuses of power, bullying, etc). A lack of job security and the fear of facing repercussions might explain why national staff might be more reluctant to refuse to travel to high-risk areas and more likely to ignore their own risk threshold (EISF, 2017). These behaviours may also be influenced by national staff's greater proximity to the context and affected communities. This proximity can mean they may be more willing to take risks as they feel they have a duty to continue operating and to support their fellow citizens, regardless of the dangers that may be involved. These different factors help to shed light on why national staff can be more reluctant to report incidents and voice complaints about the security measures covering them.

Given their different vulnerabilities and positions with regard to the context of operation, different security rules often apply to national and international staff in their day-to-day work life or in situations of emergencies (e.g. different

security briefings, restrictions on movements, the type of transports used, access to evacuation, etc.). While some differences seem justified and are commonly accepted, others are less so. Among them is the fact that national staff usually 'receive less training, livelihood benefits, security provisions, and psycho-social support compared to their expatriate colleagues' (Bian, 2022, p. 7). Several interviewees questioned the absence of rest and recuperation (R&R) time for national staff, highlighting that the pressure, stress, and trauma they experience is often underestimated: 'like all other local staff, I live the Syrian conflict twice: once as a humanitarian worker, and another as a Syrian national. [...] My family depend[s] on me; if the conflict escalates, the expats get to go home to somewhere safe, but I have no other choice but to live through it' (Bian, 2022, p.7).

In some situations, the lack of attention given to national staff's mental health can also be linked to the racial and colonial biases that tend to portray people of colour as being particularly 'resilient' and therefore able to endure more (Srivastava, 2021). Besides the assumptions that may come from the organisation, staff can also fear stigmatisation from their peers, particularly when mental health issues are not commonly discussed in their country.

## **The security risks faced by international staff of colour**

As already highlighted, international staff of colour may suffer from assumptions that they will face fewer risks than white staff as they are considered to 'fit in' better in different countries of operations. The lack of nuanced analysis on how their profiles might be perceived can affect their ability to operate, as demonstrated in the example below:

'Many of the negotiators interviewed, specifically in relation to experiences in the MENA region,

agreed that the colour of one's skin can influence counterparts' perceptions. One interviewee mentioned that dark-skinned staff had to be 'the right colour of dark' from the perspective of the counterpart. Interviewees also noted that counterparts all too often assume that negotiators with darker skin are the more junior members of the team.' (Alsalem & Grace, 2021, p. 7).

The international staff of colour interviewed in this research explained that they were rarely prepared to manage the racist prejudices and violence they faced in the regions they were deployed in. The examples provided in interviews included the difficulties faced by Middle Eastern staff in France, but also racist incidents faced by black African staff in India and Afghanistan. Structural and institutional racism within the country of assignment may expose staff to various forms of violence, including harassment and police brutality, as well as discriminatory treatment in medical facilities and governmental institutions. For both national and international staff, using an intersectional approach and considering other personal characteristics (age, disabilities, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression [SOGIE]) is essential to assess the type of risks they will encounter. For instance, in many contexts female staff of colour are more likely to be in the lowest-paid jobs, which increases their general job and livelihood insecurity and thus may discourage them from voicing complaints or refusing to take risks, despite being more exposed to gender-based and sexual violence.

The examples above suggest NGOs need to put in place all the necessary safeguards and ensure security measures reflect the needs of aid workers of colour. Many of the risks faced by staff of colour remain misunderstood and are under-analysed.

It is only within the last decade that incident reports have recorded specific information on the



staff involved, including their gender and whether they are national or international staff. Capturing these elements make disaggregated information available for analysis, however incident reports rarely - if ever - include a field for ethnicity or 'race', thus preventing further study on these traits.

The different attention dedicated to the security of aid workers of colour can be explained by several factors, including the lack of participation of people of colour in completing risk assessments and security plans, the underreporting of security and racist incidents by staff of colour, but also the lack of diversity in leadership positions. The combination of these factors eventually creates a bias that can over-emphasise the perception of risks faced by some staff compared to others. As one interviewee puts it, it seems that 'most of the things we currently do in security are for white, middle-aged men [...] which represents not even one per cent of the staff we are supposed to protect.' (INGO Security Advisor).

More than half of the interviewees, without being prompted, described an implicit hierarchy in arrangements for staff security which reflects this bias; a hierarchy that prioritises the security of international staff over that of national staff. Furthermore, among both international and national staff, the security of white aid workers appears to be prioritised over that of aid workers of colour.

The statistics on national staff security incidents, the testimonies collected, and the interviews conducted in this research, all question whether the risks faced by national staff, and especially staff of colour, are taken as seriously as those faced by white staff. More generally, the examples observed also raise questions of whether NGOs meet their Duty of Care toward aid workers of colour.

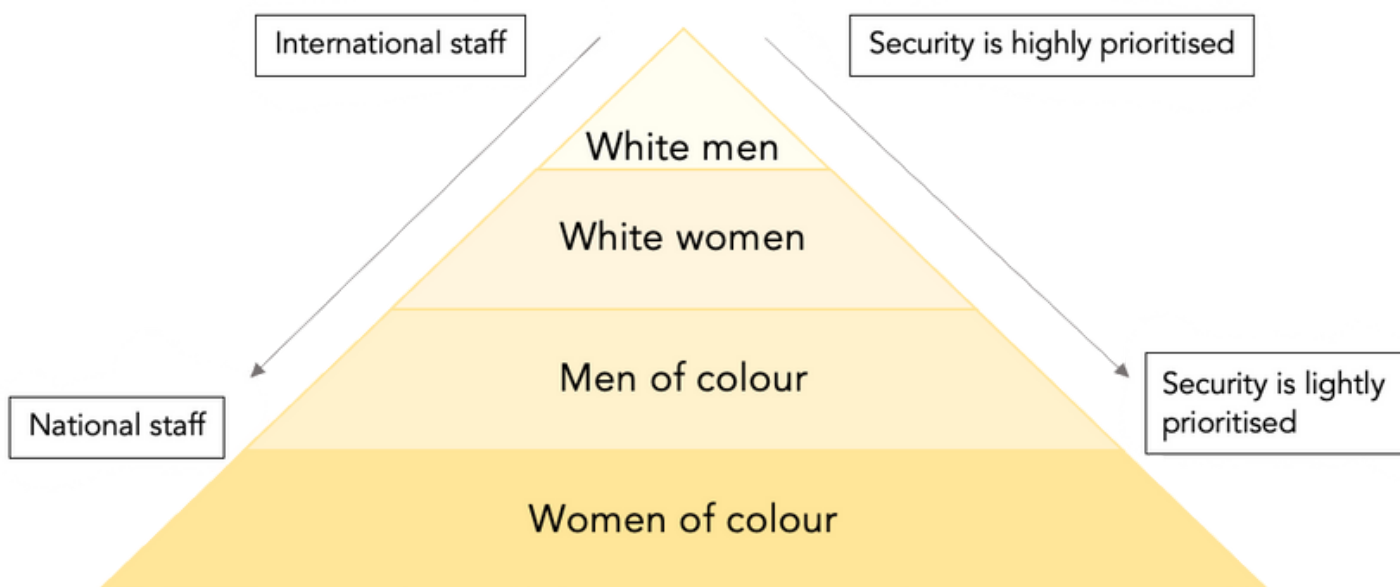


Figure 3: Perceived hierarchy between humanitarian staff

## Section 2: The impact of racism on security

'Does racism affect security? Every day.'  
(INGO regional security advisor).

### 2 a) Racism towards aid workers and security risks

Whether they are international or national staff, working at the HQ or country level, aid workers of colour must deal with security risks related to the racism they encounter within and outside the organisation. In this article, racism is understood as expressing itself in four main dimensions (internalised, interpersonal, institutional and structural racism - see the list of key concepts on page 3 for the complete definition), which all contribute to affecting the security of aid workers of colour. The violence resulting from racism can be seen as occurring along a continuum, which is described below:

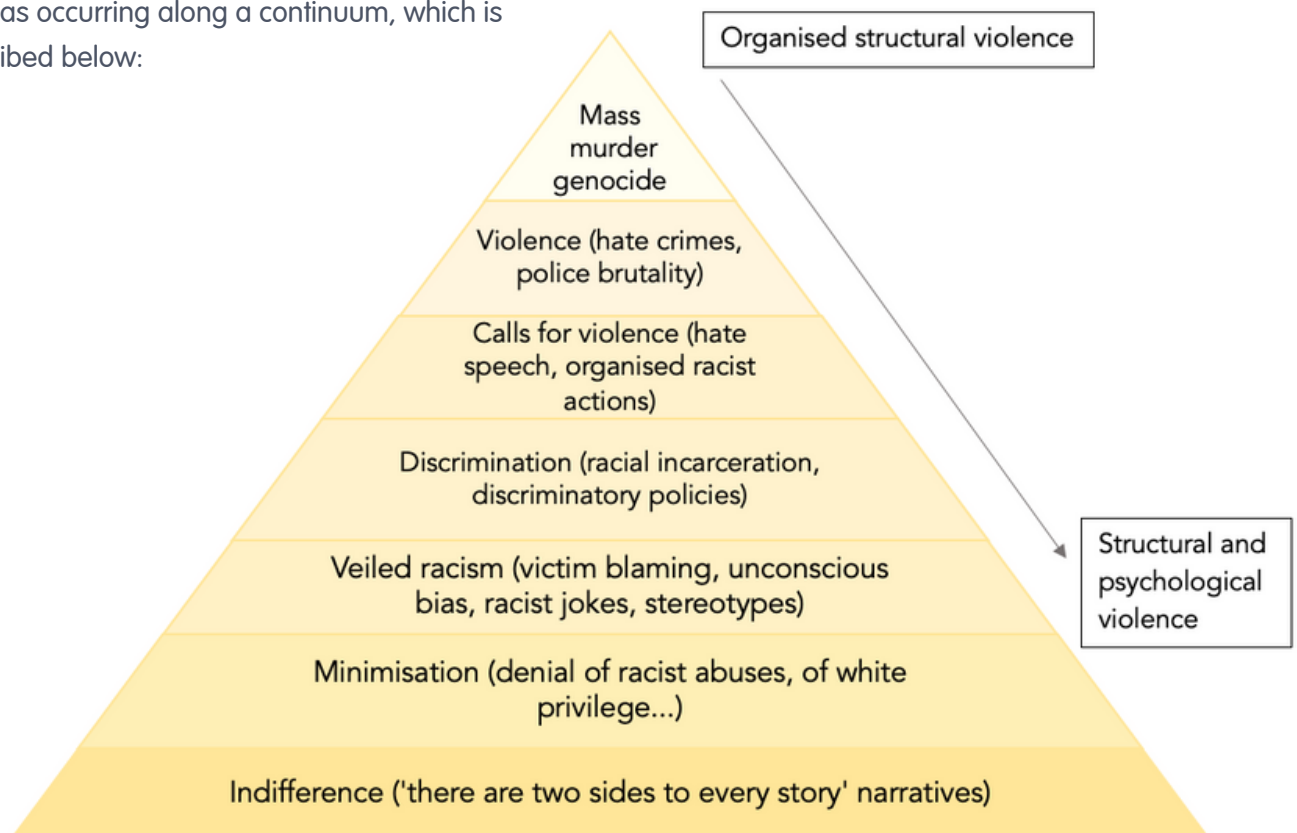


Figure 4: Continuum of racial violence (the concept of a 'pyramid of white supremacy' informs this widely shared diagram showing the continuum of racial violence)

### Racism within the organisation

Many surveys and research papers<sup>[8]</sup> highlight that racism is widespread within the aid sector. This section explores the security implications that racism against aid workers of colour can have for individuals, operations and organisations.

It should not be forgotten that racial biases, racial discrimination and racist incidents can be perpetuated by individuals of different 'races', ethnicity and nationality and not only by those considered as belonging to the 'dominant group' in the context of operation. They can affect staff at all levels and take place among national staff, international staff, as well as between international and national staff, local partners and other stakeholders.

[8] See for instance Bheeroo et al, 2021; Elks, 2020; Majumdar & Mukerjee, 2021; Paige, 2021; The Racial Equity Index, 2021.

- **Interpersonal racism:** interpersonal racism can take different forms, including microaggressions<sup>[9]</sup>, bullying and harassment, which affect the psychological and physical integrity of aid workers. Racist interactions can heighten the risk of burnout, depression, and self-harm of staff. They can also affect an organisation's ability to operate by increasing staff turnover, jeopardising an organisation's reputation, and ultimately affect the security of entire teams and operations. Several interviewees shared examples of situations where they had resigned after facing racist abuse that was poorly handled. 'Often times these incidents are happening in a short timeframe. A person can only manage a few weeks or months before they resign' (INGO program manager).

- **Racial bias against security managers of colour:** racial bias against security managers of colour can lead individuals and organisations to unfairly question security managers' authority, preventing good teamwork, and leaving their expertise and resources untapped. Such behaviours not only put staff at risk but also undermine the legitimacy of security managers' advice within their team, thus increasing risks for the entire operation and organisation. An 'unwarranted lack of trust and consideration' (Alsalem & Grace, 2021, p. 8), has been observed in the case of both national staff of colour and international staff of colour, as illustrated in the example below:

'I went to open a new mission in Yemen, at a time in which the context was very volatile. One day, a young white male refused to follow my security rules [...]. When I reported this, I was asked not to make a case out of it. I got told [...] to lower my head and work to make

sure that my staff, my team, and this person in particular would accept me more as a security focal point. I thought - I am the one who leads security. Why do I have to prove to this staff that he needs to respect me? I knew management would have reacted differently if I had been a white man. The response I got was different because I am a woman and a woman of colour. During my entire contract with this organisation, I kept being stereotyped, seen as 'hot blooded' and suffered the weight of so many false assumptions.' (INGO humanitarian advisor).

- **Inadequate security support to aid workers of colour:** the security concerns of aid workers of colour are often more easily dismissed than those of white staff. In the long term, if management repeatedly neglects the concerns of staff of colour, it may influence the staff member to distrust their individual perception of risks, ignore their risk threshold, and discourage them from reporting incidents. Interviews more generally highlighted that the security risks faced by aid workers of colour were often misunderstood and, therefore, were inadequately mitigated:

'If I review the way I have done things in the past, I can see how [racist bias] impacted my work [in security], for instance when I was more listening to one complaint and not another one.' (INGO global security advisor).

## Racism from outside the organisation

- **Racial violence against aid workers of colour:** the security of aid workers of colour is impacted by the external threats and racial or ethnic violence they face outside of the organisation. This violence can take many forms, such as physical assaults, verbal abuse, or daily

[9] Microaggressions include the statements, actions, or incidents constituting and perpetuating indirect, subtle, or unintentional discriminations against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority. To see further resources on this topic, see the Organizations in Solidarity's [microaggressions and the workplace working group](#).

discrimination stemming from interpersonal, institutional or structural racism, or contextual norms. These security risks should be considered through an intersectional lens to correctly understand how staff's different identities can heighten their exposure:

'During travels, we had people who were detained for weeks without any judgment, any access to a lawyer, and we are talking about country directors [...]. I attribute this to racism because they had all the documentation certifying what they were doing and still they faced more problems than any other [white] counterparts would' (INGO Regional Security Advisor).

- **Reduced security collaboration:** racism can prevent effective security coordination and networking, and the sharing of security information between NGOs and other stakeholders. Two interviewees mentioned instances in which they stopped engaging in security coordination mechanisms, and thus benefitting from the support they offer, after having repeated racist interactions with certain staff participating in those mechanisms.

## 2 b) Racism towards external stakeholders and related security risks

Just as racism against aid workers can affect organisations' ability to safely operate, racism from aid workers against external actors can also increase security risks.

- **The security impact of racial prejudices against external stakeholders:** racial assumptions about external actors can prevent staff from understanding the local context and lead them to miss or misunderstand security information. These prejudices can also affect risk assessments, the relationships aid workers develop (or not) with stakeholders and communities, and the way they lead access negotiations (Alsalem & Grace, 2021).

- **Racist incidents against communities and stakeholders:** racist incidents and behaviours against affected communities and external stakeholders can seriously damage an organisation's reputation and acceptance. By creating tensions and conflict, they can increase security risks for entire teams and prevent the implementation of operations.

'There [was] a case in which an international staff [member] acted in racist ways towards a certain nationality among the communities we were working with. This became viral and the person was threatened to be beaten [...]. This put [the NGO] under the spotlight of the government and community leaders, but also affected the organisation's performance because this person had a critical role in the operation [and they] couldn't safely work anymore. Eventually, the NGO had to dismiss the individual for his own safety but also to save [the NGO] name in the community' (INGO Regional Security Advisor).

## The security implications of racial and sexual violence:

in recent years, various scandals revealing sexual exploitation and abuses perpetrated by NGO staff have seriously damaged organisations' reputation, acceptance, and security. These incidents are usually linked to abuses of power, in which staff (whether they are white or not) use their position of authority and their control of resources to prey on vulnerable individuals and populations. This situation can be exacerbated by the racial and gendered power imbalances existing between white expatriated, usually wealthier (or assumed so) men and national women of colour living in the context of operations. To some extent, these incidents reflect the fetishisation, assumptions, and hyper-sexualisation of women of colour that have been inherited from colonialism.

## Section 3: NGO practices regarding 'race', ethnicity and nationality

### 3 a) NGOs' intentional use of diverse profiles and its security implications

'Does profiling [staff] effectively reduce risks? Or is it simply transferring risks from Westerners to Africans?' (Duroch & Neuman, 2021)

Over the years, NGOs have increasingly considered and intentionally selected the 'profiles'<sup>[10]</sup> of the aid workers they hire and deploy. While taking into account that the intersectional identity of aid workers can be positive for both staff and operations, these practices can also be harmful. Two different approaches can be identified:

1. One, in which organisations use staff profiles as a risk mitigation strategy in and of itself, without developing adequate security measures to address the remaining risks staff may face (harmful).
2. Another, in which organisations use staff profiles to better understand the risks different individuals face and develop adequate measures to mitigate them (useful).

In practice, the situation is not as clear-cut: some organisations select staff based on their profiles to mitigate risks, and at the same time put in place measures to address the residual risks they will still face. However from the interviews conducted and other articles (Agaba & Anonymous, 2018; Duroch & Neuman, 2021; Haver, 2007), this does not seem to be the norm. Staff of a certain ethnicity, nationality or 'race' may be deployed with the (sometimes correct) assumption that they are, for example, less likely to be kidnapped than white westerners. However, these identity traits do not mitigate the risks of a terrorist

attack, an aerial bombing, the explosion of IEDs, or indiscriminate shooting at convoys, which are likely to exist in the contexts where kidnapping is a viable threat. In many cases, security plans may not effectively consider nor mitigate these other threats to the same extent as they would if white westerners were part of these operations.

The interviews spotlighted a range of different issues within current organisational practices with regards to deploying staff with certain profiles, which deserve to be further investigated. Selecting aid workers with only specific profiles can reduce team diversity in operations, creating very homogeneous - and often very masculine - environments, which may impact operations' quality and acceptance strategies. For instance, when organisations only recruit national staff from a specific ethnicity, this can create tensions with local communities and jeopardise access as NGOs might be perceived to be partial towards certain ethnic groups. Moreover, while visible identity characteristics inform, to a certain extent, the risks aid workers face, they do not predict behaviours. The way staff behave can be the greatest determinant of their security and the operations' success and these cannot be determined solely based on aid workers' profiles. Finally, there are also issues around the lack of transparency with which this selection may be carried out, and therefore, a lack of informed consent from the staff being deployed. One interviewee shared the example of a black Kenyan staff member who kept being sent to different African contexts, as the NGO that employed him assumed he would fit in more easily and be more familiar with African countries. Beside the limited deployment opportunities that were offered to this person, he was not adequately briefed on why he was being sent to some contexts and the security risks he might encounter there.

[10] In this article where possible we avoid using the word 'profiling' as the term has often been linked to racial discrimination.

### 3 b) A person-centred approach towards the security of aid workers of colour

All security managers who were interviewed recognised the importance of diversity for implementing effective SRM. They highlighted how having a diverse team is key to adequately assessing risks, understanding threat sources and how they affect staff with different profiles. Running collective risk assessments and involving staff with diverse profiles at each step of the SRM process were also seen as the centre of modern and person-centred SRM.

A few interviewees shared that they were working with staff holding diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) responsibilities, including HR, to improve their SRM practices. This collaboration has encouraged the adaptation of security training to ensure staff understand profile-specific risks. In general, interviewees mentioned that it was easier to consider ethnicity, nationality, and racism within the SRM structure when their organisation showed a strong commitment to diversity and anti-racism. One interviewee explained that all staff members in their organisation had access to training on power, privilege, and bias, which helped foster a more positive culture and made it easier to speak about these issues. This organisation also had dedicated groups in which staff of colour could share their experiences and discuss measures to address the barriers that racism creates in their workplace. Where these groups exist, they provide an opportunity for staff responsible for security to tap into staff who may be reluctant to engage in security discussions, as well as to learn how to improve their engagement strategies.

None of the organisations interviewed were able to disaggregate data by 'race' or ethnicity, as these factors were not captured in their incident reports. This was usually explained by issues surrounding data protection, but also by a reluctance - or refusal - to categorise staff according to these elements.

Interviewees explained that when the racial or ethnic dimensions of security incidents are captured, they are usually mentioned in the incident description, thus enabling them to address these dynamics. However, some questions remain as to whether these reports are sufficiently - and effectively - capturing the impact of 'race' and ethnicity on security incidents, and whether this impact is adequately addressed.

While the positive practices described in the above section should be celebrated, most interviewees felt that more could be done to ensure staff of colour can access equitable security measures. Almost all of them wished they had more resources (time, funding, staff, knowledge) to develop person-centred SRM practices and better address 'race', ethnicity, and nationality in security. A few interviewees (both white and of colour) confessed to feeling uncomfortable talking about racism and being afraid to 'say the wrong thing'. Those who were comfortable speaking about these issues still highlighted that it was difficult to bring up such discussions within their organisation. Many staff of colour feared that they would be ostracised and isolated if they brought up the topic of racism in general, also in relation to their security. This fear was well-founded, as most of the aid workers of colour interviewed shared that they faced repercussions for voicing complaints about racism, which sometimes led to their resignation. Beyond racism, this fear of speaking up can be shared by staff who are in more junior positions or belong to non-dominant communities.

A certain lack of diversity was also observed in security roles. Interviewees shared that while many regional and national level security managers are people of colour, this is definitely not the case at the global security level. For NGO security risk management to be truly diverse,

[1] In this article where possible we avoid using the word 'profiling' as the term has often been linked to racial discrimination.

inclusive, effective and sustainable, we have [...] to truly diversify the aid sector. It is not just a "nice to have" it is a "must have".' (INGO Global Security Advisor).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Aid workers' 'race', ethnicity and nationality affect the security risks they face and how their security is managed. Adopting an intersectional approach is essential to understanding this reality and ensuring that organisations take all the necessary steps to fulfil their Duty of Care and mitigate risks for all staff. While a growing number of security managers promote inclusive SRM and are taking steps in the right direction, more needs to be done. In many cases, national and international staff of colour continue to be exposed to greater security risks due to power imbalances, system inequalities, and racial dynamics, and cannot always access adequate security measures because they are either inappropriate or non-existent. The current use of specific profiles for SRM by NGOs further raises questions around the transfer of risks towards specific members of staff. The impacts of racism on aid workers, operations and organisations' security also deserves further exploration. Whether targeted at aid workers of colour themselves or external stakeholders, racism affects organisations' ability to operate safely and effectively. Racial bias and actions can lead to the unfair treatment of security managers and aid workers of colour, influence risk analysis and acceptance from local communities, as well as preventing information-sharing and increasing the reputational risk for organisations.

Adopting a person-centred approach to SRM, creating more inclusive security training and

encouraging greater diversity in security and leadership roles can all contribute to improving inclusive SRM practices and outcomes. To ensure that the security risks related to ethnicity, nationality and 'race' are addressed by NGOs, further conversations need to be held to facilitate deeper understanding, and this article hopes to encourage them. Ultimately, security managers should adopt an intersectional approach<sup>[13]</sup> and thus implement security processes using a person-centred approach, that offers equitable risk mitigation for all staff.

The following recommendations incorporate insights from the interviews and suggest steps that can be taken to strengthen inclusive practices and promote the security of all staff.

## Recommendations

### Improving SRM practices in the short-term:

- 1. Develop SRM frameworks collaboratively:** individuals that reflect the full diversity of the staff covered by the SRM policy and plans should always be included in the development of frameworks at the global and national levels. This ensures diverse perspectives are reflected and risks are understood more holistically.
- 2. Review and question existing SRM measures:** security managers should review the current SRM measures accessed by different categories of staff (international, national, aid workers of colour, female aid workers, LGBTQI+ aid workers, etc.) to identify gaps and areas for improvement of current SRM frameworks. This review could, for instance, involve focus groups, group discussions, or an anonymous survey.

[12] In this article where possible we avoid using the word 'profiling' as the term has often been linked to racial discrimination.

[13] Intersectionality, video resource <https://gisf.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/intersectionality-1-1.mp4>

### 3. Include diversity and inclusivity in SRM

**training and briefings:** SRM training (HEAT, crisis management, humanitarian negotiations, etc.) should be developed with an intersectional lens that seeks to raise staff awareness of the risks different individuals will face depending on their personal characteristics. SRM training and briefings should also highlight the impact that discriminatory and disrespectful behaviours, as well as conscious and unconscious biases, can have on the security of staff, operations and organisations.

### 4. Ensure incident-reporting mechanisms

**have an intersectional lens:** incident reporting mechanisms should capture the racial, ethnic, gendered and religious dimensions of an incident. The incidents involving such dynamics should be reviewed holistically, and inform changes in SRM frameworks.

For additional guidance on developing inclusive SRM, please see the recommendations and tools included in *Managing the Security of Aid Workers with Diverse Profiles* (EISF, 2018)

## Creating organisational and cultural change in the long term:

#### 1. Promote conversations on diversity and security:

organisations should encourage conversations about diversity and security (including racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination), and ensure staff raising these issues feel empowered to speak up. These efforts can include conducting surveys or audits on inclusivity and diversity among staff.

### 2. Provide training on power and

**privilege:** training on issues such as power, privilege, anti-racism, inclusion and biases should be provided to aid workers, including security managers and leadership. Such training is essential to ensure staff understand the various impacts of racism and thus enable them to apply an intersectional lens to all their policies, plans and activities.

### 3. Address racism among aid workers:

mitigating the security risks stemming from racism requires organisations to adequately prevent racist incidents and adequately address any that occur. Developing intersectional cultural briefings, putting in place clear sanctions against racism in the workplace and protecting those speaking up against it is key to tackling racism and the security risks it generates.

### 4. Diversify security leadership:

increasing diversity amongst security managers, especially at the global level, is a key component to gaining a rounded understanding of aid workers' experiences. A more diverse security team will also be better able to comprehend the diversity of impacts of different security threats. To promote diversity, organisations should provide training, mentoring, and networking opportunities for under-represented staff profiles (people of colour, women, LGBTQI+ staff, etc). Security managers can also support and engage diverse perspectives through the creation of advisory groups on security that include staff from under-represented profiles.

### 5. Invest in lasting cultural change:

leadership should demonstrate a real commitment to inclusivity and diversity. They



must engage in effective work to address all forms of discrimination, including racism, sexism, and ableism in the workplace. This implies leading by example and making the necessary investments that can lead to deep positive change within organisations, including for SRM.

**6. Support research on 'race', ethnicity, nationality and security:** further investigation is needed to adequately understand how these issues impact aid workers' security. The lack of qualitative and quantitative data on this topic currently prevents deeper analysis. Understanding the experiences of aid workers of colour, both national and international staff, as well as the impact of ethnicity, would help organisations develop adequate security measures.

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