

Press release

Geneva, 3 May 2022

Who cares?

Gender and humanitarian action

From 31 May to 9 October 2022, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum (MICR) will be taking a fresh look at the history of humanitarian action through the lens of gender in an exhibition called *Who cares?* This critical exploration of stereotypes in representations of humanitarianism aims to shed light on the complex lived experience of humanitarian workers past and present, and the diverse paths that brought them there. The exhibition is the result of a unique partnership between the MICR and the University of Geneva, with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation. An open day will be held on Saturday, 4 June, to mark the show's opening.

"Take care" is a deceptively simple phrase that evokes the principle of humanity and underpins all humanitarian action. In *Who cares?*, the MICR's latest exhibition, a question that is often intended derisively is instead an earnest enquiry into who tends to people's wounds and works to meet their needs. Who actually cares, in every sense of the word?

Who cares?, produced in partnership with the Institute for Ethics, History and the Humanities at the University of Geneva, invites visitors to consider humanitarian action through the lens of gender and diversity. The exhibition offers a fresh look at the experience of people who have been largely overlooked by history and encourages visitors to re-examine their own perceptions of humanitarian workers and of those who receive care, through a broad selection of objects and accounts that have been assembled and presented together for the first time.

Restoring forgotten figures in humanitarian history

Who embodies the world of care? In Western visual history, the provider of care has often been accorded characteristics perceived as feminine, such as devotion, attentiveness,

sympathy, empathy and compassion. Nurses are potent symbols of the provision of relief and healing, and the nurse seated at a wounded soldier's bedside became a prevalent stereotype starting in the late 19th century. However, this maternal or angelic imagining of the female humanitarian has all too often been restricted to white, Western women from privileged backgrounds.

This new exhibition draws from the history of medicine and gender, visual culture and the ethics of care to reveal recurring stereotypes in how humanitarians are represented, often based on rigid gender roles. Such representations, which divorce action and leadership from care and compassion, limit our understanding of humanitarians' lived experience and fail to account for the complexity of their work.

Who cares? provides keys to understanding how the history of humanitarian action has largely been written from a male point of view. But history can also be a tool for building a more inclusive and, thus, democratic society. As researchers Dolores Martín Moruno, Brenda Lynn Edgar and Marie Leyder at the University of Geneva's Institute for Ethics, History and the Humanities note: "*Who cares?* aims to re-examine the history of humanitarian action by focusing on how those providing care have been rendered invisible. Whether in terms of their lived experience, knowledge and technical know-how, or in terms of the power dynamics at play, these issues get to the heart of contemporary social questions. Debates around gender, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation are more ubiquitous than ever."

That deconstructive approach underpins the exhibition's constellation-style layout. For MICR curators Claire FitzGerald and Elisa Rusca, the exhibition "is an ecosystem made up of a large number of stories and objects – from textiles and medical instruments to photographs and film footage – that together embody the rich variety of care providers' experience and the diversity of humanitarian work. We have created a new form of multi-layered exhibition space that invites visitors to step away from dominant preconceptions and open themselves up to other points of view."

Advancing research and sharing it with the general public

Who cares? is supported by a grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation's Agora project, which aims to share research with the public. Dialogue, debate and public participation are given pride of place in the exhibition, which features spaces for reading and reflection.

Produced in partnership with the University of Geneva, *Who cares?* is emblematic of changes that began at the Museum before the pandemic, as the MICR strives to foster communication among the worlds of humanitarianism, culture and research, for the benefit of a wide audience.

The project also provides a new perspective on the Museum's permanent exhibition. A series of questions have been added to the displays to encourage visitors to consider *The*

Humanitarian Adventure through the lens of gender – questions to which *Who cares?* provides possible answers.

The MICR is deeply invested in including diverse voices in its programming as a way of better reflecting sea changes not only within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement but also in the cultural sphere and in everyday life. *Who cares?* was developed as part of the Museum's first annual theme, Gender and Diversity, launched in September 2021.

In the words of the MICR's director, Pascal Hufschmid: "Sharing cutting-edge, gender-oriented research on humanitarian action, conducted right here in Geneva, in an accessible and inclusive manner means inviting humanitarian workers and the general public to re-examine the history of humanitarianism and how it is represented today."

The MICR through the eyes of EPFL students

Alongside the *Who cares?* exhibition, the Museum has invited another set of academic voices to weigh in on the Museum's transformation into a space dedicated to serving the broader community. More than 120 architecture students from the ALICE laboratory at EPFL have been given carte blanche to create unique wooden installations in the Museum's gardens and reception areas. The project offers families, the local community, schoolchildren and passersby a new perspective and use for the site, inviting them to explore it and feel at home there. This initiative is part of the MICR's ongoing effort to provide a space for people to come together and share their knowledge and for young talents to blossom.

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Who cares?
Gender and humanitarian action

31 May to 9 October 2022
Tuesdays to Sundays
10am to 6pm

Open day on Saturday, 4 June, 10am to 6pm.

Who cares? is a co-production of the MICR and the University of Geneva, with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation.

International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum

Av. de la Paix 17
CH – 1202 Geneva

About the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum

The mission of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum is to promote understanding of the history, current events and challenges of humanitarian aid by a wide audience in Switzerland and throughout the world, by encouraging contemporary artistic creation and developing innovative content with public and private partners from very different backgrounds and cultures. It thus constitutes and enhances a unique heritage, while stimulating a broad social, cultural and economic ecosystem in which it plays a central role.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum asks a central question: how does humanitarian action affect us all, here and now? In order to reflect on this question with our visitors, we invite artists and cultural partners to examine the issues, values and the current situation of humanitarian action. It thus asserts itself, in an open, agile and warm manner, as a place of memory, creation and debate. Through the production of original artistic content and the development of ambitious partnerships in Switzerland and throughout the world, the Museum contributes to the outreach of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and of Geneva.

www.redcrossmuseum.ch/en

About *Beyond Compassion: Gender and Humanitarian Action*, a Swiss National Science Foundation Agora project led by Dolores Martín Moruno

In an era marked by public health crises and growing resistance in the face of inequality, injustice and exclusion, humanitarian action and the role of women are at the heart of current social issues. *Beyond Compassion* invites the public to consider the history of humanitarian action through the lens of gender by engaging in dialogue with researchers, people active in the humanitarian and cultural spheres, and active citizens. The project aims to draw lessons from little-known historical figures and events to enhance our understanding of current and future humanitarian action.

Beyond Compassion continues the line of study begun under a 2017–2021 SNSF professorial grant project, *Ces femmes qui ont fait l'humanitaire : une histoire genrée de la compassion de la Guerre Franco-Prussienne à la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* (“The Women Who Made Humanitarianism: A gendered history of compassion from the Franco-Prussian War to World War II”), and another SNSF project, *L'humanitaire vécu : Genre, expériences et savoirs (1853-1945)* (“Lived Humanitarianism: Gender, experience and knowledge (1853–1945)”).

www.unige.ch/medecine/jeh2/welcome