

ACCOUNTABILITY FAILURES

Human rights and humanitarian organizations are often seen as synonymous with accountability, largely because they regularly call on others to answer for their actions. In practice, however, accountability is frequently projected outward – toward governments and other actors – rather than applied internally.

In fact, not all organizations explicitly claim accountability as one of their own core values.[\[1\]](#) Even when they do, it is often framed in terms of broad “commitments,” without clear definitions of accountability for what, or to whom. In most cases, accountability is also entirely self-managed. Few, if any, binding mechanisms require human rights and humanitarian organizations to demonstrate meaningful organizational accountability, whether for field practices or toward their own staff.[\[2\]](#)

Beneath banners promoting “Accountability” and “Transparency,” closer examination often reveals self-reporting that is vague, inconsistent, and insubstantial.[\[3\]](#) As a result, public claims of accountability can function less as evidence of genuine oversight and more as a smokescreen for the absence of clear standards, enforcement, and consequences.

This pattern becomes especially visible when human rights and humanitarian organizations are embroiled in scandals related to their own conduct and practices. Closer analysis of their responses reveals three recurring strategies: 1) ignoring the issue; 2) attacking the source of the complaint, either personally or by questioning motives; and 3) offering vague assurances of rigor or internal review.

Occasionally, organizations promise new mechanisms or processes to address their failures. However, these measures are typically internally managed and often lack meaningful transparency, independent oversight, or verifiable evidence of implementation.

The following examples illustrate how human rights and humanitarian organizations have responded to criticism, revealing a troubling lack of accountability.

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SELECT CASE STUDIES

1. 2005 – American Red Cross: Hurricane Katrina Response Controversy

What Happened:

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (August 2005) – one of the deadliest and costliest natural disasters in U.S. history – the American Red Cross faced widespread public and governmental criticism for its response and disaster relief efforts. Although the organization provided millions of overnight stays, meals, and financial assistance, critics alleged significant systemic failures in coordination, staffing, and delivery of aid. Government and watchdog reports concluded that misunderstandings and system failures involving public and private actors – including the Red Cross – contributed to ineffective evacuation support and resource provision.

Investigations highlighted specific operational problems: the Red Cross relied heavily on unpaid volunteers rather than sufficient trained disaster staff; rotation of response personnel every few weeks meant institutional knowledge and local contacts were repeatedly lost; and coordination with government and local agencies was inconsistent, leading to delays in basic services reaching survivors.

Institutional Response:

The American Red Cross publicly defended its efforts, highlighting the scope of its work: millions of overnight stays in more than 1,000 shelters, emergency financial assistance to over one million families, tens of millions of meals served, and collaboration with faith-based and community partners to support survivors.

Red Cross leaders acknowledged the immense scale and unprecedented nature of Katrina, emphasizing the organization's logistical challenges and the complexity of coordinating with multiple levels of government and partner groups. Official statements framed operational difficulties as part of the broader chaos following the disaster and underscored the organization's commitment to helping affected communities.

Summary of Response:

The response combined emphasis on the magnitude of services delivered and contextualization of challenges rather than accepting responsibility for systemic shortcomings identified by independent critics.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns:

The Red Cross did not conduct or publish a detailed, fully transparent internal review widely available to the public and survivors. Operational weaknesses – over-reliance on volunteer staff, rapid rotation of personnel, and coordination breakdowns – were not directly acknowledged as systemic failures in its public narrative.

Aftermath:

The Red Cross's handling of Katrina contributed to broader scrutiny of disaster relief systems. Leadership changes followed, and reforms aimed at improving disaster readiness were announced, but without sustained independent monitoring.

2. 2009 – Human Rights Watch: Marc Garlasco Controversy

What Happened:

Marc Garlasco was a senior military analyst at Human Rights Watch from 2003 until early 2010 and was widely cited in the organization's investigations of armed conflict. In September 2009, controversy erupted when it became public that he was an avid collector of World War II-era German military memorabilia, including items from the Nazi period. Critics focused on one online post in which he wrote:

“the leather SS jacket makes my blood go cold it is so COOL!”

Opponents argued this language was highly inappropriate for a human rights investigator and raised concerns about judgment and credibility.

Institutional Response:

Human Rights Watch initially defended Garlasco, stating that allegations he was pro-Nazi were unfounded. HRW said the accusation:

“is demonstrably false and fits into a campaign to deflect attention from Human Rights Watch’s rigorous and detailed reporting”

and that Garlasco had:

“never held or expressed Nazi or anti-Semitic views.”

HRW later suspended him with pay pending an internal inquiry, stating the suspension was not a disciplinary measure and that it:

“stands behind Garlasco’s research and analysis.”

Summary of Response:

The response combined institutional defense, framing of the controversy as politically motivated, and a procedural internal review while publicly maintaining confidence in his professional work.

Failure of Accountability:

HRW did not provide clear information about the scope, findings, or independence of the internal inquiry. Broader issues of professional standards, reputational risk, and vetting were not transparently addressed.

Deflection:

By describing the accusations as part of a “campaign to deflect attention,” HRW framed the controversy as an external attack rather than an internal governance issue, heavily insinuating it was to deflect attention on its Israel work (At the time (late 2009), Garlasco had been one of HRW’s lead authors on reports accusing Israel of violations during the Gaza war).

Emphasis and Narrative Redirection:

HRW emphasized that it “stands behind Garlasco’s research,” focusing on its substantive work rather than engaging deeply with concerns about conduct and perception.

Aftermath:

In early 2010, HRW confirmed Garlasco resigned. No public findings from a formal independent investigation were released.

3. 2009 – Human Rights Watch: Robert L. Bernstein Criticism

What Happened:

In October 2009, Robert L. Bernstein – the founder and first chair of Human Rights Watch – published a high-profile op-ed in *The New York Times* sharply criticizing the organization’s priorities and methodology. Bernstein argued that HRW had “lost its way” in the Middle East by focusing disproportionate attention on Israel at the expense of serious abuses in more repressive contexts, undermining its original mission. He wrote that HRW had:

“cast aside its important distinction between open and closed societies”

and had

“written far more condemnations of Israel for violations of international law than of any other country in the region.”

Bernstein noted that when he stepped down as chair in 1998, HRW was active in about 70 countries, “most of them closed societies,” suggesting a shift in focus that, in his view, weakened its impact and consistency.

The critique drew significant attention inside and outside the human rights community and became a focal point of debate over HRW’s strategic choices and credibility.

Institutional Response:

Human Rights Watch responded publicly in a statement titled “*Why We Report on ‘Open’ Societies*,” in which it rebutted Bernstein’s claims without directly engaging his methodological concerns. HRW stated it was:

“saddened... that its founding chair, Robert L. Bernstein, feels he must ‘join the critics’ of our work on Israel.”

The organization rejected the notion that it improperly prioritized certain cases, asserting:

“Human Rights Watch does not believe the human rights records of ‘closed’ societies are the only ones deserving scrutiny.”

In defending its focus, HRW also claimed that its reporting on Israel and related issues constituted only:

“a tiny fraction of Human Rights Watch’s work as a whole.”

HRW further noted that its Board of Directors had “expressed its full support for the organization’s work,” framing the disagreement as a difference of perspective rather than a substantive methodological problem.

Summary of Response:

HRW’s response relied on rebuttal and reframing strategies, defending its overall portfolio and asserting its willingness to criticize open societies. However, it did not substantiate key claims (e.g., that Israel-related reporting was minimal) with verifiable data, nor did it engage directly with Bernstein’s core arguments about how priorities are set, how countries are selected for investigations, or how internal review processes guard against strategic drift.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Unsubstantiated Claims as Defense Tactics:

HRW’s assertion that its work on Israel made up only “a tiny fraction” of its total output functions rhetorically to minimize Bernstein’s charge but was not accompanied by clear evidence (such as published reporting counts or contextual analysis). Without transparent data to back up this claim, the statement risks appearing as a defensive talking point rather than a rigorous response.

Redirection Instead of Methodological Engagement:

Rather than addressing Bernstein’s substantive critique – specifically how HRW chooses

what cases to prioritize, whether it maintains consistent criteria across geopolitical contexts, and how it evaluates trade-offs between reporting on open versus closed societies — HRW reframed the issue as one of whether it is willing to criticize Israel at all. This shifts the focus from methodological transparency and internal oversight to a politically charged question that tends to polarize debate and deflect scrutiny from institutional practices.

Opaque Prioritization Processes:

The response did not clarify how HRW sets priorities or balances its workload across regions with varied levels of repression. There was no public explanation of internal review mechanisms, benchmarks for determining research focus, or how concerns raised by a founder would be incorporated into procedural reflection or reform.

Lack of Independent or Verifiable Follow-Up:

While HRW mentioned board support for its approach, there was no independent review, external audit, or publicly available evaluation launched in response to Bernstein's critique. The lack of third-party assessment or transparent reporting on internal deliberations limits the ability of external audiences to assess whether the concerns were taken seriously or whether any internal adjustments followed.

Aftermath:

The public dispute underscored ongoing debates within the human rights community about organizational focus, strategic balance, and the role of leading NGOs in politically sensitive environments. HRW continued its global reporting without publicly committing to procedural changes in response to Bernstein's critique. The episode remains referenced in discussions about accountability, transparency, and methodological consistency in human rights advocacy.

4. 2009 — Human Rights Watch: Saudi Fundraising Event Controversy

What Happened

In May 2009, Human Rights Watch held a fundraising dinner and receptions in Saudi Arabia to build support for its Middle East and North Africa division. The events took place against the backdrop of HRW's active reporting on human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, including restrictions on women's rights, repression of dissent, criminal justice issues, and other limits on civil and political freedoms.

The event drew criticism on multiple fronts. Critics — including pro-Israel commentators and watchdog groups — charged that HRW had pressed wealthy Saudi donors for money by *emphasizing its criticisms of Israel and framing itself as resisting the “pro-Israel lobby”*, thereby using contentious political language to appeal to a host audience likely to be hostile toward Israel. This interpretation was based in part on an account of the event in *Arab News* in which HRW's Middle East director Sarah Leah Whitson discussed HRW's reporting on

Israel's use of white phosphorus and subsequent resistance from pro-Israel pressure groups — remarks that critics said were used to solicit funds in Saudi Arabia, a country where state and societal attitudes are often hostile to Israel.

Observers argued the context created at least the *appearance* of a conflict of interest: inviting donations from wealthy Saudis while highlighting critical reporting on Israel's actions risked aligning HRW's fundraising overtures with political messaging rather than strict and neutral human rights advocacy. Critics claimed this could compromise HRW's independence and perception of impartiality in the Arab-Israeli sphere.

Institutional Response

HRW strongly rejected allegations that it had solicited donations to "counter the Israel lobby" or in exchange for political concessions. Executive Director Kenneth Roth told *The Forward* that "nothing like that happened" and that HRW would *not* solicit funds on the basis of opposing Israel's supporters.

In public statements, HRW clarified that:

- It does not accept government funding from any country and relies entirely on private individual and foundation contributions.
- The Saudi receptions were part of efforts to diversify its donor base globally, not a transactional appeal tied to any single political agenda.
- At the events, HRW discussed its human rights work in Saudi Arabia alongside broader regional issues, including abuses by Israel and Hamas, arguing that this was part of explaining its overall mission rather than political fundraising.

HRW also emphasized that no government officials were solicited for funds, although some attended as part of engagements about human rights conditions in the kingdom.

Summary of Response

HRW's response focused on reaffirming its policy of financial independence and its right to discuss its work publicly in various regions. It framed criticism as based on *misconceptions* about its funding model and denied that political framing played any role in fundraising.

However, HRW did not release detailed information on donor identities, how invitations were extended or vetted, or how it mitigated potential perceptions of political influence or bias — leaving external observers to weigh the optics and implications largely on their own.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Use of Political Messaging in a Fundraising Context

Critics pointed out that if HRW's presentation in Saudi Arabia *emphasized its criticisms of Israel* — as the *Forward* reported Whitson doing — then the organization risked creating an appearance that its human rights messaging was being deployed as a fundraising tool tied to

specific geopolitical disputes. This risk is exacerbated when raising funds in environments where political sentiments run strongly against the target of criticism. ([The Forward](#))

Limited Transparency on Donor Safeguards

HRW did not provide a detailed public accounting of how potential donors were vetted at the Saudi events or what internal discussions assessed reputational risks associated with fundraising in a politically sensitive setting. Without such transparency, external critics had less basis to evaluate whether safeguards were sufficient to uphold the organization's independence.

Reputational Risk Framed as Misperception

HRW largely characterized criticism as a misunderstanding of its operations and funding policies rather than engaging substantively with questions about whether the combination of event strategy and communications created *perceptions* of partiality. While it is true that HRW does not take government funds, the absence of detailed discussion of private donor affiliations means concerns about appearances of influence remain unresolved for some observers.

Broader Debate on Neutrality and Outreach

The Saudi event controversy contributed to ongoing debates about how human rights NGOs should balance fundraising outreach with perceptions of political neutrality, especially when speaking to audiences with strong preexisting views on contentious international issues.

5. 2010 – Amnesty International: Gita Sahgal Suspension and Internal Criticism Controversy

What Happened:

In February 2010, Gita Sahgal – head of Amnesty International's Gender Unit and a respected women's rights advocate – was suspended and later left the organization after publicly criticizing Amnesty for its association with Moazzam Begg and the organization Cage/Cageprisoners, which represented men detained at Guantánamo Bay.

Sahgal argued that Begg was:

“Britain’s most famous supporter of the Taliban”

and that Amnesty's public partnership with him undermined its work on women's rights, gender equality, and universal human rights principles. She said she had raised these concerns internally over several years but felt they were ignored, prompting her to go public.

According to Sahgal, Amnesty's relationship with Begg – whose past statements on jihad and gender roles had drawn controversy – risked legitimizing individuals whose views were in tension with Amnesty's stated values.

Institutional Response:

Amnesty suspended Sahgal shortly after her comments became public. The organization framed her actions as a breach of internal process, emphasizing that staff should not air internal disagreements publicly. Amnesty defended its position by stating that:

“defending the rights of detainees does not equal endorsing their personal views”

and reiterated its commitment to defending human rights “without discrimination,” including for individuals with controversial or objectionable views.

Amnesty also stated it did not share Begg’s ideology and argued that engagement with him had been intended to highlight abuses such as unlawful detention and torture, not to endorse his broader positions.

Summary of Response:

Amnesty’s response was defensive and procedural. It focused on Sahgal’s decision to go public rather than engaging with the substance of her critique about the implications of partnering with a figure she considered ideologically opposed to core human rights principles.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Defensive Reframing:

Rather than publicly engage with Sahgal’s substantive concerns about the reputational and ethical implications of Amnesty’s alliances, the organization reframed the issue as a matter of internal discipline and staff conduct. This shifted attention from the merits of her critique to the appropriateness of her speaking publicly.

Lack of Substantive Policy Explanation:

Amnesty did not release a detailed public rationale explaining why it considered its relationship with Begg consistent with its values, nor did it clarify what internal standards govern partnerships with controversial individuals. Without such transparency, external audiences could not assess the ethical framework behind the decision.

Retaliation and Chilling Effect on Internal Critique:

Sahgal’s suspension and eventual departure raised concerns about Amnesty’s tolerance for internal dissent, especially when that dissent relates to strategic partnerships and reputational risk. The episode suggested that raising substantive policy disagreements publicly could result in professional consequences.

Opaque Internal Review Mechanisms:

There was no publicly documented process showing how Sahgal’s concerns had been evaluated internally prior to her suspension. The absence of visible internal review or independent assessment limited confidence that her critique had been meaningfully considered.

Aftermath:

Sahgal's departure sparked a significant debate within the international human rights community about NGO alliances, ideological boundaries, and internal governance. Many commentators criticized Amnesty for silencing a respected internal voice rather than addressing legitimate concerns about credibility and consistency.

The episode remains a reference point in discussions about how large human rights organizations handle internal dissent and whether internal accountability mechanisms are robust enough to accommodate principled disagreement.

6. 2010 – International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC): Haiti Cholera Accountability Debate

What Happened:

Following the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti, a major cholera outbreak killed more than 10,000 people. Although the outbreak was ultimately traced to UN peacekeepers, the broader humanitarian response — including major actors such as the ICRC — came under scrutiny for coordination gaps, sanitation failures, and lack of clear accountability mechanisms in large-scale emergency operations.

While the ICRC was not responsible for introducing cholera, critics and Haitian civil society groups questioned how major humanitarian actors operated in an environment where large-scale aid delivery proceeded with limited community consultation, weak oversight, and minimal transparency about decision-making processes. The controversy contributed to wider debate about humanitarian accountability to affected populations rather than only to donors and institutional mandates.

Institutional Response:

The ICRC emphasized its neutral humanitarian mandate and its role in providing emergency medical care, water, and sanitation services in the wake of the earthquake. Public communications focused on operational achievements and lifesaving interventions rather than on systemic critiques of coordination or community accountability.

The organization framed its work as part of a massive emergency response under extremely difficult conditions and did not publicly position itself as responsible for broader systemic failures in the international response architecture.

Summary of Response:

The response emphasized humanitarian output and operational necessity while avoiding deeper engagement with structural critiques about accountability to affected communities and transparency in large-scale emergency governance.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Output-Focused Narrative:

ICRC communications centered on the scale of assistance delivered rather than on lessons learned about coordination, local participation, or accountability mechanisms. This mirrors a broader pattern in humanitarian crises where performance is measured in services delivered rather than in governance quality.

Limited Transparency on Internal Learning:

There was little publicly accessible detail about internal reviews examining how coordination, sanitation strategy, or accountability to Haitian communities could be strengthened. Institutional learning processes remained largely internal.

Accountability to Affected Populations:

The episode highlighted a structural accountability gap common in humanitarian operations: organizations report primarily to donors and governing boards, while affected communities have limited mechanisms to influence decisions or seek redress for systemic failures.

Aftermath:

The Haiti crisis intensified global discussion about “accountability to affected populations” within the humanitarian sector. While frameworks and commitments emerged in subsequent years, independent monitoring of how organizations implemented these principles has remained limited.

7. 2012 (Revealed 2020) – Human Rights Watch: Saudi Restricted Donation Scandal

What Happened:

In 2012, Human Rights Watch accepted a \$470,000 donation from the Saudi-based MBI Al Jaber Foundation, linked to billionaire Mohamed bin Issa Al Jaber. At the time, HRW had previously criticized labor rights abuses connected to companies associated with Al Jaber. Part of the donation came with a restriction that the funds not be used to support HRW’s work on LGBT rights in the Middle East and North Africa.

The restriction raised serious concerns about a conflict with HRW’s independence and values, particularly because LGBT rights are a core component of its global human rights advocacy. The details of the donation were not publicly disclosed at the time.

The arrangement became public in 2020, not through self-disclosure, but after media reporting revealed both the existence of the gift and the restriction attached to it.

Institutional Response:

Human Rights Watch issued a public statement acknowledging the error, saying:

“In 2012, Human Rights Watch made a deeply regrettable decision to accept a donation that included conditions that the funds not be used to support HRW’s work on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights in the Middle East and North Africa... This decision

stood in stark contrast to our core values and our longstanding commitment to LGBT rights as an integral part of human rights.”

HRW stated that it had returned the donation and emphasized that it had since strengthened its internal fundraising policies to prevent similar situations.

Summary of Response:

The response combined reactive accountability, containment of the issue as an isolated lapse, and a strategic pivot toward values and reform to regain credibility.

Failure of Accountability

HRW addressed the controversy only after the donation became public and drew criticism. The organization had accepted funds with restrictions that conflicted with its own advocacy priorities, indicating weaknesses in internal vetting and oversight. That the decision was later described as “deeply regrettable” underscores that the issue was not identified or corrected through internal accountability mechanisms.

Deflection

In its response, HRW framed the incident as a past, isolated mistake, emphasizing that the donation dated back several years. This temporal distancing shifted attention away from broader structural questions about how such a decision passed internal review and what safeguards had been lacking at the time.

Emphasis and Narrative Redirection

The statement focused heavily on remedial steps – returning the donation, reaffirming commitment to LGBT rights, and promising stronger fundraising policies. By closing on these corrective actions and restating its core values, HRW redirected the narrative toward its principles and future reforms rather than sustained scrutiny of institutional responsibility. The emphasis on forward-looking improvements functioned to re-center the organization’s moral authority while limiting deeper examination of past accountability failures.

Aftermath:

HRW returned the funds and announced tighter fundraising rules. However, no independent external review of its fundraising oversight was made public, leaving questions about how internal compliance systems failed and how reforms would be monitored over time.

8. 2015 – Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF): Kunduz Hospital Airstrike and Accountability Asymmetry

What Happened:

On October 3, 2015, a U.S. airstrike destroyed an MSF trauma hospital in Kunduz,

Afghanistan, killing 42 patients and staff. MSF stated that it had repeatedly shared the hospital's GPS coordinates with U.S. and Afghan authorities and that no fighting was taking place in the compound at the time of the strike.

MSF described the attack as a grave breach of international humanitarian law and a possible war crime. It demanded an independent investigation under the International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission (IHFFC), a mechanism established under the Geneva Conventions but never previously activated.

Institutional Response:

MSF forcefully condemned the strike and rejected the U.S. military's internal investigation as insufficient. It insisted that a self-investigation by a party to the conflict could not provide credible accountability and called for an independent international inquiry. MSF framed the incident as part of a broader erosion of respect for medical neutrality in armed conflict.

Summary of Response:

MSF's response was a strong example of outward-directed accountability advocacy, focused on demanding independent investigation and responsibility from a state actor.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Asymmetry Between External and Internal Accountability:

While MSF pressed vigorously for accountability from the United States, it did not publicly provide comparable transparency about its own internal review of security protocols, communications, or risk assessment processes related to operating the hospital in an active conflict zone. This created an asymmetry: robust demands for external accountability, but limited public disclosure regarding internal operational decision-making.

Limited Public Detail on Institutional Learning:

MSF did not release a detailed public account of lessons learned, procedural changes, or revised risk-management practices stemming from the incident. Without such information, it is difficult for external observers to assess how the organization adapted its security or coordination policies following the strike.

Reliance on Institutional Credibility:

MSF's moral authority and long-standing reputation for neutrality were central to its advocacy. However, the absence of transparent reporting on its own internal assessments left accountability largely one-directional – focused on state conduct rather than institutional self-scrutiny.

Aftermath:

The U.S. military conducted an internal investigation and described the strike as a mistake caused by equipment failures and human error, but MSF rejected this as inadequate. The IHFFC was not ultimately activated. The incident became a defining moment in debates over

medical neutrality and the protection of healthcare in war, while MSF's internal institutional learning processes remained largely opaque to the public.

9. 2016 – World Vision: Gaza Funding Diversion Allegations

What Happened:

In 2016, Israeli authorities arrested Mohammad El-Halabi, World Vision's Gaza director, accusing him of diverting up to \$50 million in humanitarian funds to Hamas over several years. The allegations stated that aid money intended for civilian humanitarian projects had instead been redirected to support militant activities.

World Vision strongly denied the accusations, stating that the scale of the alleged diversion exceeded the organization's entire Gaza budget during the period in question. The case became highly politicized and unfolded over years in Israeli courts, with proceedings that were largely closed to the public due to security claims.

Institutional Response:

World Vision categorically rejected the allegations and emphasized its financial compliance systems, internal controls, and audit procedures. The organization commissioned external audits, which it said found no evidence of diversion of funds.

World Vision framed the case as based on false accusations and maintained that it had robust oversight mechanisms in place. It also suspended operations in Gaza for a period following the arrest.

Summary of Response:

Firm institutional denial supported by reference to internal and commissioned external audits, combined with an emphasis on procedural compliance and financial controls.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Competing Claims Without Transparent Resolution:

The legal process unfolded largely behind closed doors, limiting public access to evidence or detailed proceedings. As a result, outside observers were left with sharply conflicting narratives: Israeli prosecution claims versus World Vision's audit-based denial. The absence of a transparent, publicly accessible evidentiary process made independent assessment difficult.

Reliance on Internal and Contracted Audits:

While World Vision cited multiple audits clearing the organization of wrongdoing, these were either internal or commissioned reviews rather than independent investigations with full public disclosure of methods and findings. This reliance on internal accountability mechanisms limited external confidence in the conclusiveness of the findings.

Operational Transparency in High-Risk Contexts:

The case highlighted the difficulty of demonstrating accountability in conflict zones where

oversight is complicated by political control, security restrictions, and limited external monitoring. Even strong compliance systems may not be sufficient to convince external audiences without transparent third-party verification.

Aftermath:

The case dragged on for years, with El-Halabi ultimately convicted in an Israeli court in 2022, a verdict World Vision said it was “deeply disappointed” by and continued to dispute. The controversy remains emblematic of the accountability dilemmas faced by humanitarian agencies operating in highly securitized and politicized conflict environments, where legal, political, and reputational risks intersect.

10. 2018 – Oxfam: Haiti Sexual Exploitation Scandal

What Happened:

In February 2018, *The Times* (UK) published revelations that some Oxfam staff had sexually exploited survivors of the 2010 Haiti earthquake. A confidential 2011 internal report documented what it described as a “culture of impunity” among aid workers in Haiti, including senior staff admitting to using prostitutes paid for with charity funds. The report also noted that:

“it cannot be ruled out that any of the prostitutes were under-aged.”

Oxfam did not report these incidents to Haitian authorities at the time, arguing that prosecution was unlikely, and initially disclosed only limited information to regulators. The scandal also revealed that some implicated staff were allowed to resign quietly rather than face formal dismissal, raising concerns about accountability and safeguarding practices.

The story rapidly drew global attention, prompting criticism from governments, donors, and the wider humanitarian community, and leading to a loss of thousands of regular supporters.

Institutional Response:

Oxfam’s initial public response emphasized that the organization treated allegations of misconduct “extremely seriously” and had launched an internal investigation as soon as it became aware of the issues in 2011, with staff suspended pending the outcome. Oxfam stated that the allegations that under-age girls may have been involved “were not proven.”

In subsequent statements, Oxfam emphasized that it was “deeply hurt” by the abuses and committed to:

“real change in the way we handle cases of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse.”

The organization highlighted steps including the creation of a dedicated Safeguarding Team, a confidential whistleblowing line, and strengthened global policies. It also supported a sector-wide approach to safeguarding.

Oxfam's Executive Director, Winnie Byanyima, later announced the creation of an Independent High-Level Commission on Sexual Misconduct, Accountability and Culture Change to review Oxfam's culture and practices, with findings and recommendations intended to guide reform.

Summary of Response:

Oxfam's response combined acknowledgment of wrongdoing by staff, promises of improved safeguarding measures, and the establishment of independent review processes. At the same time, it included elements of damage containment and minimization of earlier reporting failures.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Initial Lack of Transparency:

The 2011 internal investigation report was not made public until years later, following media pressure. Early disclosures to regulators omitted key details, including the possibility that minors may have been involved. This suggested a reluctance to fully disclose the seriousness of the incidents at the time.

Minimization and Damage Control:

Public statements emphasized internal procedures that had been followed and what "was not proven," rather than directly addressing why detailed reporting was withheld or why implicated staff were permitted to resign without clear consequences. This framing risked appearing more concerned with institutional protection than with full accountability.

Deflection Through Emphasis on Reform:

Oxfam's focus on new safeguarding structures, policies, and an independent commission helped shift attention toward future reforms. While these steps were significant, they also redirected public debate away from scrutiny of past leadership decisions and reporting failures.

Gaps in Monitoring and Follow-Through:

Although Oxfam accepted numerous recommendations from internal and regulatory reviews, there was no comprehensive, sustained external oversight mechanism to ensure reforms were fully implemented or independently verified over time. Accountability for long-term cultural change remained largely internal.

Aftermath:

The scandal led to a statutory inquiry by the UK Charity Commission, which found that Oxfam GB's behavior and culture had been poor and that its reporting to regulators and donors had not been as full and frank as it should have been. Leadership figures resigned, many donors withdrew support, and the episode sparked wider sector-wide debate about safeguarding, organizational culture, and accountability in international aid.

11. 2018–2020 – Save the Children: Sexual Misconduct and Workplace Governance Controversy

What Happened:

Save the Children UK became embroiled in a high-profile scandal over its handling of sexual harassment and misconduct allegations involving senior staff, including then-CEO Justin Forsyth and former policy director Brendan Cox. Allegations dated back to 2012 and 2015 and included inappropriate behavior toward female staff and failures to address complaints in a consistent, formal, and transparent manner.

In 2018, the UK Charity Commission opened a statutory inquiry to examine how the organization had handled complaints and whether it had reported incidents appropriately to trustees and regulators. The inquiry later found serious weaknesses in workplace culture and governance, concluding that Save the Children had failed to follow its own disciplinary procedures, handled complaints informally, and provided inconsistent or incomplete information to trustees and regulators.

The episode unfolded in the broader context of increased scrutiny of safeguarding practices in the aid sector following the Oxfam scandal.

Institutional Response:

Save the Children's early public responses were described by the Charity Commission as "unduly defensive" and "not wholly accurate." The Commission found that the organization had given the impression it was downplaying the seriousness of the allegations and had not dealt with the issues responsibly or openly.

As scrutiny intensified:

- Justin Forsyth resigned from his subsequent role at UNICEF, stating he stepped down to protect both organizations but denied wrongdoing, saying earlier issues had been "dealt with through a proper process many years ago."
- Brendan Cox also left his role after further allegations of sexual assault emerged.

Save the Children acknowledged shortcomings in its handling of complaints and committed to strengthening safeguarding systems. It appointed an independent ethics reviewer, expanded safeguarding teams, and implemented mandatory training. The organization also voluntarily withdrew from bidding for UK government funding until the Department for International Development (DFID) was satisfied that its standards had improved.

Summary of Response:

Save the Children's response combined early defensiveness and limited transparency with later acknowledgment of failures, leadership departures, and commitments to reform. Significant reforms were introduced, but largely in response to regulatory scrutiny rather than proactive internal accountability.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Defensive and Inaccurate Early Messaging:

The Charity Commission concluded that Save the Children's initial public statements were defensive and not always accurate. This limited transparency at a crucial moment and eroded trust, particularly given that complaints had initially been handled informally rather than through established procedures.

Reframing Toward Individual Behavior Rather Than Institutional Failure:

Public narratives often focused on individual resignations and apologies rather than on systemic governance and cultural failures. This personalization of the issue diverted attention from institutional responsibility for ensuring robust safeguarding systems.

Delayed Disclosure and Weak Internal Reporting:

The inquiry found that key details had not been consistently shared with trustees or regulators and that internal processes were not followed. The delay in full disclosure meant that meaningful accountability only emerged after external regulatory intervention.

Reform Driven by External Pressure:

Although Save the Children later introduced independent reviews and strengthened safeguarding policies, these changes followed regulatory scrutiny and funding consequences. There was no standing independent mechanism to monitor long-term implementation of reforms once immediate scrutiny subsided.

Aftermath:

The controversy significantly damaged Save the Children UK's reputation and finances, including a drop in income and suspension of government funding applications. Leadership changes and structural reforms followed, and the organization was eventually allowed to resume bidding for government contracts after improvements were recognized. The case became a prominent example of how safeguarding failures and defensive institutional responses can undermine public trust in humanitarian organizations.

12. 2019 – Amnesty International: Workplace Bullying and “Toxic Culture” Controversy

What Happened:

In 2019, Amnesty International faced a major internal crisis after an independent review found that the organization's international secretariat had a “toxic” workplace culture marked by bullying, harassment, discrimination, and abuses of power. The review, conducted by the KonTerra Group, was commissioned following the suicides of two staff members in 2018: Gaëtan Mootoo, a long-time Amnesty researcher in Paris, and Rosalind McGregor, a young intern in Geneva.

The report described an adversarial “us versus them” culture between management and staff, widespread mistrust, and patterns of public humiliation and intimidation by senior leaders. It documented examples of staff being belittled or threatened by managers and found that a significant proportion of employees reported mental and physical health problems linked to workplace stress. The findings raised serious questions about Amnesty’s internal governance, management practices, and duty of care toward staff.

Institutional Response:

Amnesty’s senior leadership publicly apologized and offered to resign collectively, acknowledging that mistakes had been made. In a statement, leaders said:

“We are truly sorry that a majority of colleagues feel undervalued and unsupported, and we are willing to do whatever is possible to change this.”

They accepted shared responsibility for a “climate of tension and mistrust” and stated that, although it had never been their intention to cause harm, it had nonetheless occurred.

Secretary General Kumi Naidoo described the findings as revealing an “alarming trust deficit” and said bullying, discrimination, and abuse of power were “profoundly troubling.” Amnesty committed to developing an implementation plan, increasing staff support, and improving internal systems related to wellbeing, complaints, and management culture.

Summary of Response:

The response included public acknowledgment of wrongdoing, apologies, leadership accountability gestures, and commitments to reform workplace culture. However, much of the emphasis was placed on forward-looking improvements and internal processes rather than on a transparent, detailed public accounting of how systemic problems would be corrected and monitored.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Acknowledgment Without Clear Structural Roadmap:

Although Amnesty accepted the report’s findings and leadership offered to resign, public communication focused more on expressions of regret and commitment to change than on specific, measurable structural reforms. There was limited publicly available detail on timelines, benchmarks, or independent oversight of the promised changes.

Reframing Toward Reform Rather Than Responsibility:

The crisis was often framed as a painful but transformative moment for the organization. While this forward-looking framing emphasized growth and improvement, it also risked shifting attention away from accountability for past managerial behavior and systemic failures.

Limited Transparency on Implementation:

Amnesty stated that it would develop an implementation plan with staff consultation, but it did not publish a detailed, externally verifiable roadmap at the time. Without clear metrics or

external monitoring, it remained difficult for staff and observers to assess whether reforms were fully implemented or effective.

Internalization of Accountability:

Responsibility for addressing the crisis remained largely within Amnesty's own governance and management structures. There was no standing independent body tasked with monitoring long-term progress on cultural reform, leaving accountability largely internal.

Disparities Between Public Image and Internal Experience:

The episode highlighted a sharp contrast between Amnesty's external advocacy for human rights protections and its internal workplace realities. This dissonance raised broader questions about how well major advocacy organizations apply human rights principles within their own institutional practices.

Aftermath:

Several senior leaders left Amnesty's international secretariat in the wake of the crisis, and Kumi Naidoo later resigned as Secretary General, citing health reasons. Amnesty initiated a series of internal reforms related to staff wellbeing, complaints mechanisms, and management practices. However, the long-term impact of these reforms has been difficult to evaluate externally, and the episode remains a key example in debates about internal accountability and organizational culture within human rights NGOs.

13. 2020 – Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF): Institutional Racism and Discrimination Controversy

What Happened:

In 2020, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) faced significant internal and external criticism alleging that the organization was affected by institutional racism and systemic discrimination. More than 1,000 current and former MSF staff signed an open letter accusing the organization of perpetuating racism, colonial power dynamics, and white supremacy in its humanitarian work, hiring practices, and internal culture. The letter described MSF as being run by a:

“privileged white minority workforce”

and alleged patterns of racial discrimination, unequal pay, limited advancement opportunities for locally hired staff, and dismissive treatment of complaints from non-Western employees.

Additional reporting and internal documentation indicated that MSF had received hundreds of reports of abuse and discrimination over time but that such complaints – particularly from local staff – were often underreported and not adequately addressed. The controversy

unfolded amid broader global conversations about racism and structural inequality within international institutions.

Institutional Response:

MSF's international leadership publicly acknowledged the problem and committed to addressing discrimination and racism within the organization. The Core Executive Committee pledged to:

“lead the way for the radical action sought after and demanded by our associations”

in tackling racism and inequity.

MSF outlined an action plan identifying priority areas for reform, including management of abuse and inappropriate behavior, recruitment and career development, governance structures, and equitable remuneration. The organization said it would publish progress updates to demonstrate transparency and accountability. It also reported that in 2020 it received hundreds of abuse reports, including dozens related to discrimination, and highlighted training programs and behavioral initiatives as part of its response.

Summary of Response:

MSF's response combined public acknowledgment of the criticism, commitments to reform, and publication of action plans and progress reports. The organization framed the issue as part of an ongoing effort to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion rather than as a discrete scandal.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Delayed Recognition of Systemic Problems:

Although MSF publicly addressed racism and discrimination in 2020, internal accounts suggested that concerns had existed for years. The organization itself acknowledged that discrimination complaints were underreported, particularly among locally hired staff and community members – indicating weaknesses in reporting systems and accountability mechanisms.

Broad Commitments Without Clear Benchmarks:

MSF's action plans identified multiple areas requiring reform but did not consistently include time-bound targets, measurable benchmarks, or clearly defined accountability structures. Without such metrics, it is difficult for external observers to evaluate progress or effectiveness.

Limited Independent Oversight:

While MSF stated it would publish updates on its diversity and anti-discrimination efforts, there was little indication of sustained independent external monitoring of reforms. Most reporting and evaluation remained internal, raising questions about whether oversight mechanisms were sufficiently robust or transparent.

Structural Power Imbalances:

The controversy highlighted longstanding disparities between internationally recruited staff and locally hired personnel. Although MSF acknowledged these inequities, public communication often framed them as challenges to be addressed over time rather than as structural accountability failures requiring urgent, externally verifiable correction.

Underreporting as a Sign of Systemic Barriers:

MSF's admission that many incidents went unreported points to deeper issues of trust, safety, and accessibility within internal complaint mechanisms. Without transparent data on outcomes, disciplinary measures, and reform effectiveness, it remains difficult to assess whether reporting systems have become more credible and protective.

Aftermath:

MSF continued to update its anti-discrimination and equity initiatives in subsequent years and reiterated its commitment to reform governance, pay equity, and workplace culture. However, critics inside and outside the organization have continued to call for deeper structural change, clearer accountability metrics, and stronger independent oversight to ensure that commitments translate into sustained improvements in practice.

14. 2021 – International Rescue Committee (IRC): Safeguarding and Sexual Misconduct Accountability Concerns

What Happened:

In the wake of sector-wide scrutiny following the Oxfam scandal, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) – one of the world's largest humanitarian NGOs – faced internal and external criticism over how it handled sexual misconduct and safeguarding allegations involving staff in field operations. While IRC was not implicated in a single defining scandal of the scale seen at Oxfam, reporting and sector reviews indicated that IRC, like many peer organizations, had struggled with consistent safeguarding implementation, survivor-centered reporting systems, and transparency about disciplinary outcomes.

Critiques centered on how large humanitarian organizations, including IRC, managed allegations in remote and high-risk environments where power imbalances between aid workers and local communities are pronounced. Questions were raised about whether internal investigations were sufficiently independent, whether survivors were adequately protected, and whether disciplinary actions were consistently enforced and reported.

Institutional Response:

IRC publicly emphasized its safeguarding commitments, pointing to strengthened policies, mandatory staff training, survivor support mechanisms, and internal reporting channels. It highlighted its participation in inter-agency safeguarding initiatives and sector-wide reforms

aimed at preventing sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). IRC framed its efforts as part of a broader push toward higher standards and zero tolerance.

Summary of Response:

The response emphasized policy commitments, training, and alignment with sector-wide reform initiatives, presenting safeguarding as a systems-improvement issue rather than addressing specific case-level transparency or independent oversight.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Limited Case-Level Transparency:

IRC, like many large NGOs, did not routinely publish detailed information about individual cases, outcomes, or disciplinary measures. While confidentiality is essential in safeguarding work, the absence of aggregated, independently verified reporting limited public visibility into whether accountability measures were consistently applied.

Internal Handling of Complaints:

Safeguarding systems remained primarily internally managed. There was limited independent external review of how cases were investigated or resolved, raising questions about impartiality and survivor confidence in reporting mechanisms.

Emphasis on Policy Over Proof of Implementation:

Public communication focused on policies, procedures, and training programs rather than on demonstrable outcomes or measurable indicators of cultural change. Without transparent benchmarks or independent audits, it remained difficult to assess the effectiveness of reforms.

Aftermath:

IRC continued to participate in sector-wide safeguarding initiatives and publicly reaffirmed its commitment to zero tolerance for abuse. However, as with many humanitarian NGOs, long-term monitoring of safeguarding reform remained largely internal, reflecting broader structural accountability gaps across the sector.

15. 2021 – CARE International: Safeguarding and Workplace Culture Accountability Concerns

What Happened:

CARE International, a major global humanitarian and development organization, also faced scrutiny in the late 2010s and early 2020s over safeguarding practices, workplace culture, and the handling of harassment and misconduct complaints. Reviews and internal reporting highlighted concerns similar to those across the aid sector: inconsistent reporting mechanisms, fear of retaliation among staff, and uneven application of disciplinary measures.

Although CARE did not experience a single defining scandal of the magnitude of Oxfam's Haiti case, it was drawn into broader donor and regulatory scrutiny regarding how international

NGOs prevent sexual exploitation and abuse, support survivors, and ensure safe working environments.

Institutional Response:

CARE emphasized its safeguarding reforms, including strengthened codes of conduct, confidential reporting channels, mandatory training, and dedicated safeguarding teams. The organization highlighted its commitment to transparency and participation in inter-agency efforts to raise sector standards.

CARE framed safeguarding challenges as systemic issues facing the humanitarian sector and presented itself as an organization actively working to improve internal systems and accountability mechanisms.

Summary of Response:

The response focused on reform, policy strengthening, and sector collaboration, emphasizing forward-looking improvements rather than retrospective examination of specific failures or structural power imbalances.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Systemic Framing That Dilutes Institutional Responsibility:

By emphasizing that safeguarding problems are sector-wide, CARE's messaging positioned the issue as a collective challenge rather than clearly delineating its own institutional accountability for past shortcomings.

Limited Public Disclosure of Outcomes:

As with many NGOs, CARE did not routinely publish detailed information about investigations, sanctions, or patterns of abuse. This limited the ability of external stakeholders to assess whether accountability measures were consistently enforced.

Internal Monitoring Dominates Oversight:

Safeguarding oversight remained largely within CARE's own governance and compliance structures. There was limited evidence of sustained independent external monitoring to verify the effectiveness of reforms over time.

Aftermath:

CARE continued to strengthen safeguarding policies and reporting systems and remained active in sector reform initiatives. However, as with peer organizations, accountability for implementation of reforms remained primarily internal, leaving persistent questions about transparency, survivor trust, and long-term cultural change.

16. 2021–2022 – Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC): Leadership Conduct and Governance Accountability

Concerns

What Happened:

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), one of the world's largest humanitarian NGOs, faced internal criticism and reputational strain linked to leadership conduct, organizational culture, and governance oversight during the early 2020s. Staff surveys, internal discussions, and sector reporting pointed to concerns about management style, decision-making centralization, and whether internal feedback mechanisms were safe and effective.

Questions were raised about how senior leadership behavior, workplace culture, and internal dissent were handled within the organization. Some staff described a climate in which criticism of leadership decisions was not always welcomed and where internal accountability mechanisms appeared opaque. These concerns emerged during a period when the humanitarian sector more broadly was under scrutiny for workplace culture, power dynamics, and governance standards.

Institutional Response:

NRC emphasized its commitment to staff wellbeing, safeguarding, and ethical leadership. The organization pointed to internal reviews, staff engagement processes, and governance reforms aimed at strengthening oversight and internal accountability. Leadership framed the challenges as part of broader organizational growth and transformation in a complex humanitarian operating environment.

Public communication focused on values, mission, and continued operational effectiveness in crisis zones, while acknowledging the importance of maintaining a healthy workplace culture and strong governance systems.

Summary of Response:

The response emphasized internal review processes, staff engagement, and governance reform, while maintaining a focus on operational delivery. It framed the issue as an organizational learning and improvement process rather than as a crisis of leadership accountability.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Limited Public Detail on Leadership Review:

While NRC referred to internal reviews and governance processes, there was little publicly available information about the scope, findings, or independence of any leadership or culture assessments. Without transparent reporting, external stakeholders could not easily evaluate the seriousness of the concerns or the adequacy of corrective measures.

Internalization of Accountability Processes:

Oversight and review mechanisms appeared to remain largely internal, managed through boards and internal governance structures rather than through independent external

evaluation. This limited the visibility of how leadership accountability was enforced in practice.

Reframing Toward Growth and Complexity:

Public messaging framed governance and culture concerns within the broader narrative of organizational growth and complex operating environments. While this contextualization may be valid, it also risked downplaying specific accountability questions about leadership behavior and internal power dynamics.

Staff Voice and Safe Dissent:

As in other humanitarian organizations, the episode highlighted structural challenges in ensuring that staff can safely raise concerns about leadership conduct without fear of professional repercussions. The absence of transparent mechanisms demonstrating how dissent is protected or acted upon reinforced perceptions of opacity.

Aftermath:

NRC continued its global humanitarian operations and maintained its public commitments to governance reform and staff wellbeing. However, as with many sector peers, independent verification of leadership accountability measures and cultural reform outcomes remained limited, reflecting wider systemic challenges in NGO governance transparency.

17. 2022 – Amnesty International: Ukraine Fighting Tactics Report Controversy

What Happened:

In August 2022, Amnesty International published a report titled *“Ukraine: Ukrainian fighting tactics endanger civilians.”* The report documented cases in which Ukrainian armed forces had positioned troops and weapons systems in populated residential areas, including schools and hospitals. Amnesty argued that such practices could violate international humanitarian law by placing civilians at risk.

The report triggered immediate international backlash. Ukrainian officials, human rights advocates, and conflict analysts argued that the report created a misleading moral equivalence between Ukraine’s defensive military actions and Russia’s unlawful invasion. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the report “shift[s] the responsibility from the aggressor to the victim.” Amnesty’s Ukraine country office publicly distanced itself from the report, saying it had not been meaningfully consulted before publication and warning that the findings could be weaponized by Russian propaganda.

Institutional Response:

Amnesty International issued a statement saying it “deeply regret[s] the distress and anger that our press release... has caused,” while maintaining that it stood by the core findings. The organization emphasized that the report was focused on civilian protection and added, *“Nothing in these findings justifies Russian violations.”*

Amnesty later announced an independent review by external legal experts to examine the methodology, legal analysis, and communication of the report.

Summary of Response:

The response combined partial rhetorical concession (regret over reactions), defense of the report's substance, and a promise of independent review. The organization framed the issue as one of communication and interpretation rather than acknowledging potential analytical or contextual shortcomings.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Regret Framed Around Reaction, Not Analysis:

Amnesty expressed regret for the “distress and anger” caused, but did not initially acknowledge flaws in framing, contextual balance, or the risk of misinterpretation in a highly politicized war context. This positioned the problem as one of audience response rather than internal methodological judgment.

Limited Transparency Around Independent Review:

Although Amnesty announced an external review, it provided limited public detail about who selected the reviewers, the full scope of the mandate, or how conclusions would be implemented. Without structural transparency, the review risked being seen as a reputational repair tool rather than a fully independent accountability mechanism.

Internal Dissent Marginalized:

The public distancing by Amnesty's Ukraine office suggested breakdowns in internal consultation and raised questions about how field expertise is integrated into conflict reporting. Amnesty did not publicly explain how disagreements between central researchers and country staff were handled procedurally.

No Clear Reform Roadmap:

Even after the review, Amnesty did not publish a detailed action plan outlining procedural reforms, timelines, or benchmarks for improving conflict reporting practices. Follow-through remained largely internal and not externally verifiable.

Aftermath:

The independent review later concluded that while parts of the report were factually supported, the language was “ambiguous, imprecise, and in some respects legally questionable,” and that Amnesty had failed to adequately communicate the asymmetry of the conflict and Russia’s primary responsibility. The episode became a touchstone in debates about conflict reporting standards, internal consultation, and NGO accountability, but the extent of lasting procedural reform has remained unclear.

18. 2023 – Human Rights Watch: Qatar Funding Allegations

What Happened:

In late 2023, media outlets and advocacy commentators circulated allegations that Human Rights Watch had received funding from the Qatari government. The claims were based on a leaked document reportedly originating from Qatari government sources that appeared to outline a plan to provide several million euros to HRW under a category described as “humanitarian aid.” Critics argued that if such funding had been accepted, it would raise serious concerns about HRW’s independence, given Qatar’s documented human rights record, including labor abuses involving migrant workers and restrictions on civil and political freedoms.

The allegation gained traction in part because Qatar had recently been linked to broader corruption investigations in Europe and had faced sustained international scrutiny over labor conditions tied to major infrastructure projects. Against this backdrop, any suggestion of undisclosed state funding to a prominent human rights organization drew heightened attention.

Institutional Response:

Human Rights Watch publicly and categorically rejected the allegation. Its press office stated: *“HRW never solicited or accepted any money from the Qatari government or any other government. We do not accept money from governments.”*

HRW pointed to its long-standing financial policy that it does not solicit or accept donations from governments, directly or indirectly, including government-controlled foundations or officials. In related contexts, HRW has emphasized that its independence is safeguarded through diversified private funding and internal review procedures for major donations.

Summary of Response:

The response was firm and categorical, relying on HRW’s stated policy and a blanket denial rather than engaging publicly with the specific contents of the leaked document or explaining in detail how its internal compliance systems would detect or prevent such funding.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Denial Without Independent Verification:

HRW’s statement rests on its policy and institutional assurance, but no independent external audit or third-party verification was publicly presented in response to the specific allegation. Without such verification, outside observers are left to rely solely on the organization’s word in a situation involving a purported leaked government record.

Policy as Substitute for Proof:

By emphasizing that it “does not accept money from governments,” HRW framed the issue as one of principle rather than practice. While a clear policy is important, citing policy alone does not demonstrate that the policy was followed in every instance, particularly when confronted with a concrete allegation tied to a specific document.

Reframing Rather Than Investigative Transparency:

HRW did not publicly address the details of the alleged document – for example, whether it had investigated the claim internally, reviewed financial records in light of the allegation, or invited external scrutiny. The response thus closed the issue rhetorically rather than opening it to transparent verification.

Lack of Proactive Disclosure Mechanisms:

The controversy highlighted broader structural questions about how major human rights organizations demonstrate compliance with their own funding rules. HRW publishes general financial information, but there is no routine, independently verified, donation-by-donation transparency that would allow the public to conclusively assess claims of prohibited state funding.

Aftermath:

HRW's denial remains its official position, and no publicly available independent investigation has conclusively confirmed or disproven the allegation. The episode has continued to be referenced in discussions about NGO funding transparency, the limits of self-regulation, and the challenges of demonstrating financial independence in highly politicized environments.

19. 2023 – Human Rights Watch: Danielle Haas Internal Criticism of Israel–Palestine Work

What Happened

On her final day at Human Rights Watch in late 2023, longtime senior editor Danielle Haas – who had worked at the organization for more than 13 years – circulated a detailed internal email sharply criticizing HRW's editorial direction and institutional culture, particularly regarding its work on Israel–Palestine.

Haas wrote that “years of institutional creep culminated in organizational responses that shattered professionalism, abandoned principles of accuracy and fairness, and surrendered its duty to stand for the human rights of all.” She argued that HRW’s initial public reaction to the October 7 Hamas attacks “failed to condemn outright the murder, torture, and kidnapping of Israeli men, women, and children,” and instead led with contextual political language such as “apartheid” and “occupation,” which she said appeared before “blood was even dry on bedroom walls.”

She described these problems not as isolated messaging errors but as symptoms of a broader politicization that, in her view, compromised editorial rigor, balance, and internal debate. Haas also recounted instances where she said factual and framing concerns she raised internally were dismissed or resisted before later being corrected, suggesting breakdowns in editorial process and professional standards.

Her email was later reported in media outlets and became one of the most widely cited insider critiques of a major human rights organization's conflict reporting in recent years.

Institutional Response

Human Rights Watch did not issue a formal public rebuttal directly addressing Haas's detailed editorial and methodological criticisms. However, in a public discussion on Israeli radio, HRW's Israel–Palestine program director referred to Haas as a “disgruntled employee,” a characterization that framed her critique as stemming from personal dissatisfaction rather than engaging with the substance of her claims.

In a broader public statement responding to criticism of its work, HRW said it “has worked on abuses in Israel and Palestine since 1991, often in partnership with Israeli and Palestinian groups, and we stand by the integrity of our work.”

It added:

“We apply the same standards of rigor and dedication to our work on Israel-Palestine as we do to other conflict areas, working to protect all civilians in conflict zones and bringing to account those who violate international humanitarian law.”

These statements emphasized institutional consistency, long-term engagement, and adherence to global human rights standards. However, they did not directly address Haas's specific concerns about internal editorial culture, evidentiary thresholds, framing decisions, or the handling of internal dissent.

Summary of Response

The response combined non-engagement with the substance of the critique, personalization of the critic as a “disgruntled employee,” and reaffirmation of institutional principles. This shifted attention away from questions about editorial process and internal standards toward questions about the critic's motives and the organization's stated values.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Personalization as Deflection

Labeling Haas a “disgruntled employee” functions rhetorically to undermine the credibility of the critic rather than address the substance of her arguments. This redirects attention from structural editorial concerns to presumed personal motivations, sidestepping methodological and professional issues raised by a senior insider with long institutional tenure.

Lack of Substantive Public Engagement

HRW did not publicly respond to Haas's specific claims regarding professionalism, balance, or the framing of October 7. There has been no transparent explanation of whether her concerns were formally reviewed, whether editorial processes were reassessed, or whether reforms were considered as a result. The absence of visible follow-up limits external evaluation of institutional accountability.

Reframing Toward Principle Rather Than Practice

By emphasizing its general commitment to neutrality, rigor, and universal human rights standards, HRW's messaging pivots the discussion from **specific editorial decisions** to **abstract institutional values**. This rhetorical shift reinforces mission credibility but does not clarify whether the practices Haas criticized aligned with those stated principles in this instance.

Limited Specificity and Supporting Evidence in the Defense

HRW's public defense asserted that it applies consistent standards of rigor across all conflict areas, but it did not provide concrete examples, internal review findings, or methodological clarifications that would allow observers to assess that claim in relation to the October 7 coverage. The absence of case-specific explanation, documentation of editorial review, or engagement with the factual disputes Haas referenced leaves the defense at the level of institutional assurance rather than demonstrable accountability.

Opaque Internal Accountability Mechanisms

There is no publicly available information explaining how HRW evaluates internal editorial disagreements, how senior staff critiques are formally assessed, or how concerns about bias or framing feed into institutional learning. Without transparency around these mechanisms, it is difficult to determine whether insider criticisms trigger structured review, independent oversight, or policy revision.

Aftermath

Haas's email contributed to wider debate within the human rights community about politicization, editorial balance, and internal dissent in international NGOs. HRW continued its reporting without publicly announcing procedural changes linked to the concerns she raised, leaving open questions about how internal methodological disputes are handled and whether such critiques produce institutional reflection or reform.

20. 2024 – Amnesty International: AI-Generated Images in Colombia Campaign

What Happened:

In 2023–2024, Amnesty International used AI-generated images in social media posts promoting a report on police violence during Colombia's National Strike protests. The visuals

depicted scenes of Colombian riot police violently confronting protesters. They were not real photographs from documented events but synthetic images created to illustrate patterns of abuse described in Amnesty's research.

Photojournalists, digital rights experts, and human rights observers criticized the decision. They warned that using fabricated imagery in connection with real-world abuses risked eroding trust in documentation and could blur the line between verified evidence and illustration. One critic said the approach could:

"undermine trust in your findings"

by making it harder for audiences to distinguish between authentic documentation and generated visuals. Others warned that such imagery could be exploited by denialists to cast doubt on genuine photographic evidence of abuses.

The controversy arose in a broader global context of concern about misinformation, synthetic media, and the evidentiary standards of human rights documentation.

Institutional Response:

Amnesty defended the decision, saying the images were used deliberately to protect the identities of protesters who could face retaliation if real photographs were published.

In a statement, Amnesty explained:

"Many people who participated in the National Strike covered their faces because they were afraid of being subjected to repression and stigmatization by state security forces... Those who did show their faces are still at risk and some are being criminalized by the Colombian authorities."

Amnesty added that it had included a clear note indicating that the visuals were AI-generated and stated that:

"our intention was never to create photorealistic images that could be mistaken for real life."

The organization emphasized that its findings were based on verified research, witness testimony, and traditional documentation methods, and that the visuals were supplementary and clearly labeled.

Summary of Response:

Amnesty's response emphasized protection of vulnerable individuals, transparency about the use of AI, and separation between visuals and evidence. At the same time, it sought to contain the criticism by framing the decision as protective and ethically motivated, and by distancing the controversy over imagery from the substance of the documented abuses.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Failure to Acknowledge Possible Misjudgment:

Even after widespread criticism, Amnesty did not publicly acknowledge that the decision to use synthetic images might itself have been a misjudgment in terms of credibility, evidentiary culture, or public trust. The response framed the choice as justified rather than as a decision warranting institutional reflection or reassessment.

Deflection Toward Protection Rationale:

By centering its defense on the need to protect protesters from retaliation, Amnesty shifted the conversation from whether the use of AI imagery was appropriate in a human rights documentation context to a moral justification based on safety. This deflected deeper scrutiny of whether alternative visual strategies could have protected identities without introducing synthetic content.

Blurring Communication vs Documentation Standards:

Although Amnesty stressed that the images were labeled and not presented as evidence, critics argued that public audiences may not consistently distinguish between advocacy visuals and documentary proof. Amnesty did not provide a detailed explanation of internal standards governing when synthetic media is acceptable in human rights communication, or how risks to credibility are assessed.

Limited Transparency on Internal Review:

There was no publicly described internal review process assessing the controversy after it arose. Amnesty did not outline whether internal policies on imagery, digital ethics, or documentation standards would be revised, or how similar decisions would be evaluated in the future.

Aftermath:

In response to the backlash, Amnesty removed the AI-generated images from its social media accounts. (The Guardian) The episode sparked broader debate in the human rights and journalism communities about the ethics of using synthetic media in advocacy, especially in contexts where credibility, documentation, and evidentiary standards are central. Critics warned that such practices could: “undermine trust” in human rights reporting more broadly if not governed by clear, transparent standards.

21. 2024–2025 – Amnesty International: Internal Dissent Over the Gaza “Genocide” Report

What Happened:

In late 2024, Amnesty International released a major report concluding that Israel’s conduct in Gaza amounted to genocide under international law. The report generated immediate global controversy – not only from governments and outside critics, but also from within Amnesty’s own movement.

Amnesty International Israel publicly rejected the genocide determination, stating that it did not accept that the legal threshold for genocide had been met, even while agreeing that grave violations and possible crimes against humanity had occurred. Members of the Israeli section described the genocide conclusion as legally unsound and methodologically flawed, arguing that the evidentiary standard under the Genocide Convention is exceptionally high and requires proof of specific intent.

Some members characterized the report's legal reasoning as an "artificial analysis" that stretched doctrine beyond established jurisprudence. The dispute was not simply political disagreement but a professional, legal challenge from within Amnesty's own network regarding methodology, interpretation of law, and evidentiary standards.

Institutional Response:

Amnesty International's international leadership did not publicly engage in a detailed legal rebuttal of the Israeli section's concerns. Instead, it moved to disciplinary action.

The Israeli section was suspended within Amnesty's global structure. Amnesty leadership justified the move by citing internal values violations and alleged racism, stating there was evidence of:

"endemic anti-Palestinian racism within AI Israel"

and asserting that the section had:

"sought to publicly discredit Amnesty's human rights research and positions... threatening our credibility, integrity and operational coherence."

The framing focused on organizational cohesion and values compliance, not on the substance of the legal dispute over genocide standards.

Summary of Response:

The response emphasized discipline, institutional unity, and values enforcement, while reframing methodological dissent as disloyalty and reputational harm. Rather than treating the disagreement as a legitimate internal legal debate, Amnesty characterized it as behavior undermining the organization.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Reframing Methodological Critique as Misconduct:

Instead of publicly addressing the legal arguments raised — such as whether genocidal intent had been sufficiently demonstrated — Amnesty leadership reframed the dispute as a matter of racism, internal misconduct, and damage to organizational credibility. This shifted the focus from evidence and legal methodology to character and compliance, effectively deflecting from substantive accountability over the report's analytical foundations.

Lack of Transparent Due Process:

There was no publicly detailed explanation of the suspension process:

- What internal review procedures were followed
- What evidence supported the allegations of racism
- Whether independent mediation or peer legal review was considered
- How dissenting members were heard or represented

Without procedural transparency, external observers cannot assess whether the disciplinary action met standards of fairness, proportionality, or independence.

Avoidance of Open Legal Engagement:

The genocide determination is among the most serious legal conclusions an organization can make. Yet Amnesty did not publish a point-by-point engagement with the Israeli section's legal objections, nor did it open an external legal review panel to address the dispute. This limited opportunity for **methodological accountability** on a question of exceptional gravity.

Deflection Through Organizational Unity Language:

By emphasizing threats to "credibility" and "operational coherence," Amnesty's response framed dissent as an institutional risk rather than a professional disagreement. This rhetorical shift moves scrutiny away from whether the genocide analysis withstands rigorous debate and toward whether internal actors are sufficiently aligned with leadership.

Opaque Follow-Through and Monitoring:

Amnesty did not outline any independent monitoring or structured reassessment of the genocide report's methodology in response to the internal dispute. Nor did it describe how future disagreements over major legal determinations would be handled to ensure transparent, evidence-based resolution rather than disciplinary closure.

Aftermath:

The suspension of Amnesty's Israeli section became a flashpoint in debates about governance, dissent, and methodological rigor inside international human rights organizations. Supporters of Amnesty's leadership argued that unified positions are necessary in high-stakes advocacy. Critics argued that the move signaled suppression of internal legal debate and weakened transparency around how the organization reaches its most consequential findings.

The episode reinforced broader concerns about how human rights organizations handle internal methodological dissent, and whether accountability mechanisms prioritize institutional reputation and cohesion over open, evidence-based scrutiny of their own work.

22. 2023–2025 – International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC): Hostage Access Controversy

What Happened:

Following the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel, more than 200 Israeli civilians and soldiers were taken hostage into Gaza. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), whose mandate under the Geneva Conventions includes visiting detainees and monitoring detention conditions, faced sustained criticism in Israel and internationally for failing to secure access to the hostages.

Families of hostages, Israeli officials, and advocacy groups argued that the ICRC did not fulfill what they saw as its basic humanitarian responsibility to verify the welfare of captives, deliver medicine, or press publicly and forcefully for access. As months passed without confirmed ICRC visits to hostages, public frustration grew.

The ICRC was also criticized for participating in hostage release handovers brokered during temporary ceasefires. Images of ICRC vehicles transporting released hostages alongside armed Hamas fighters circulated widely. Critics argued this made the organization appear to be facilitating Hamas propaganda events rather than acting as an independent humanitarian monitor. Some Israeli commentators derisively labeled the ICRC a “glorified taxi service” — suggesting it was present for transfers but absent when sustained humanitarian oversight was needed.

Institutional Response:

The ICRC defended its role by emphasizing the limits of its mandate and the requirement of consent from parties to a conflict in order to access detainees. It stressed that it does not have enforcement power and cannot force entry to detention sites.

In public statements, the ICRC said that criticism was based on:

“misleading information”

and pointed to a broader environment of hostility and misinformation about its work. It reiterated its neutrality and impartiality and stated that it was in dialogue with relevant parties seeking access to hostages and advocating for humane treatment.

Regarding handovers, the ICRC said its role was to help ensure safe and dignified transfers when releases were negotiated, and that security conditions were determined by the parties to the conflict. It emphasized that its presence aimed to reduce risks to released hostages, not to legitimize the captors.

Summary of Response:

The response centered on neutrality, limited mandate, and operational constraints, while characterizing criticism as based on misunderstanding or misinformation. It emphasized what the ICRC *cannot* do, rather than providing detailed public evidence of what it *did* attempt to do to secure access.

Accountability and Transparency Concerns

Limited Public Evidence of Efforts:

While the ICRC stated that it was seeking access to hostages, it did not publicly provide detailed information about what steps were taken, how often access was requested, what responses were received, or whether alternative channels were pursued. This lack of transparency left families and observers unable to assess the intensity or effectiveness of its efforts.

Deflection Through Mandate Language:

By emphasizing that it requires consent and cannot compel access, the ICRC framed the issue primarily as a structural limitation. While legally accurate, this explanation functioned as a deflection from questions about advocacy intensity, public pressure, or whether stronger diplomatic or public measures could have been used to press for humanitarian access.

Reframing Criticism as Misinformation:

Describing criticism as based on “misleading information” shifts focus to the motives or accuracy of critics rather than addressing their core concern: the absence of visible, verifiable access to hostages over an extended period.

Reputational Risk From Handover Participation:

ICRC participation in highly choreographed release ceremonies created perceptions that it was present when releases served the captors’ interests but absent when sustained monitoring was required. The organization did not publicly outline clear criteria or safeguards explaining how it balances humanitarian facilitation with reputational neutrality in such politicized settings.

Opaque Internal Review:

There has been no publicly described independent review of the ICRC’s handling of hostage-related access efforts in this conflict. Without transparent evaluation, it is difficult to determine whether lessons have been learned or whether operational strategies have been reassessed.

Aftermath:

The controversy significantly affected the ICRC’s public standing in Israel and among hostage families, some of whom organized protests outside ICRC offices. Political figures proposed legislative and diplomatic pressure in response to perceived failures.

The ICRC has continued to assert its neutrality and mandate, stating that it will keep seeking access and assist with releases when possible. However, the episode has become a prominent example in debates over the limits of neutrality, transparency in humanitarian diplomacy, and accountability when access is denied but expectations remain high.

[\[1\]](#) For example, while accountability is central to HRW’s mission and advocacy, it is not explicitly listed as a standalone core value on its official values page. Instead, it is reflected through HRW’s focus on justice, responsibility, and ending impunity and embedded in how HRW describes its goals – particularly in its commitment to holding perpetrators of human rights violations responsible and advancing justice through rigorous research and advocacy.

[\[2\]](#) In its 2020 report, Amnesty International Secretary General Agnès Callamard identified “accountability and transparency” as core values (see EiGHT’s Resources section). Human Rights Watch emphasizes accountability – but for others. In its *World Report 2025*, HRW highlights the vital role of civil society in defending rights, protecting minorities, holding governments accountable, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and bringing rights abusers to justice. “Civil society organizations are more important than ever and can play a critical role in defending everyone’s rights, protecting minorities, and holding governments accountable, ; to reinforce the architecture and effectiveness of accountability and to bring rights abusers to justice” <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025>.

[\[3\]](#) The “Accountability and Transparency” page of Doctors without Borders (MSF) for example is actually a mixture of “ policies, reports, guidance and plans on how we tackle themes, such as addressing racism and mitigating our carbon footprint, on holding to the highest standards of ethics and values in our actions.”