Amnesty v JK Rowling points to wider malaise

Row over 'anti-rights' briefing on women's support service exposes the ideological capture of NGOs

Danielle Haas

Amnesty International's recent apology for an "anti-rights" briefing that drew legal threats from JK Rowling appears to close an embarrassing chapter for the global human rights organisation.

In July, Amnesty's map of Britain's "anti-rights ecosystem" identified 117 groups, including Rowling's Beira's Place, citing its gender-critical stance and female-only services. Faced with Rowling offering to fund legal challenges by others on its "blacklist" and denouncing it as "the tyrant that persecutes those who don't espouse what it decrees acceptable beliefs", Amnesty's initial "regret" melted into a full mea culpa.

On July 31 — Rowling and Harry Potter's shared birthday — the organisation said the briefing "should never have been published" after bypassing review, and announced internal and external reviews.

Amnesty no doubt hopes its procedural explanation will end scrutiny. It should invite more. How does a document naming over 100 organisations skip supposedly rigorous oversight? And if the process failed here, why assume it has not elsewhere?

As a former senior editor at Human Rights Watch (HRW) for 14 years, I saw the machinery of review at first hand: documents like this do not simply slip out. A less fantastical explanation is that the briefing was a legally exposed expression of a settled institutional view. In May, Amnesty's briefing *Like a Snowball* similarly characterised many of the same groups. It, too, was withdrawn, as was a parliamentary briefing labelling 51 gender-critical organisations "anti-trans".

Amnesty's response to Rowling followed an NGO playbook honed over decades: call the controversy a procedural lapse; promise investigation; wait for the news cycle to pass. But perhaps not this time.

The UK Charity Commission has opened a regulatory compliance case into Amnesty's handling of the affair, and public figures are challenging its direction. "I renounce the mob who have taken over Amnesty," comedian John Cleese, a former Amnesty fundraiser, wrote. Iseult White, granddaughter of Amnesty co-founder Sean MacBride, stated she "would not donate a single penny".

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Insiders are speaking out, too. I am one of them. After leaving HRW in 2023, I co-founded Geneva-based EiGHT with sector colleagues to press for accountability from a powerful industry where quality controls are mainly self-imposed standards and voluntary commitments.

In July, EiGHT published *Insiders Speak*, a 63-page report drawing on internal documents and the experiences of more than 70 current and former staff at nine leading NGOs: Amnesty, Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières-MSF), Greenpeace, HRW, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mercy Corps, Plan International, Save the Children and Unicef.

It identified the same problems exposed by Rowling's clash with Amnesty: ideological capture, compromised work, broken processes, weak governance and institutional deflection.

Among our findings: conclusions reached before research is complete. Amnesty's 2024 report accusing Israel of genocide was internally labelled the "genocide report" as research was supposedly under way. We also found work bent to ideological demands, delayed for political reasons and crises leveraged for fundraising. Amnesty's genocide report took a year; its October 7 report more than two; internal documents show staff were concerned that earlier publication might generate sympathy for Israel.

We also documented rhetoric and culture at odds with NGOs' professed values. Posts on MSF's internal "Souk" portal included "stop playing the Jewish card"; a Greenpeace forum carried video of militants entering Israel captioned "Enter ... you will be victorious"; an Amnesty staffer posted of Yahya Sinwar: "Legend!.". Dr Javid Abdelmoneim, MSF's incoming president, reposted material calling Israel a country of "child killers". Rasha Abdel Latif, an incoming Amnesty USA board member, reposted praise for an attack on Tel Aviv civilians; when staff objected, a manager declined to act, citing her "pain".

Staff repeatedly described unaddressed antisemitism, Holocaust trivialisation, self-censorship and retaliation for speaking up, alongside dehumanisation of Jews, Israelis and October 7 victims. At a 300-person HRW "Israel-Palestine" meeting after the attacks, Hamas's victims and hostages went unmentioned. At Mercy Corps, a post adding "Israel" to a support message for Gaza and Syria was removed as a code of conduct violation. MSF staff in Lebanon demanded managers "instantly stop" the narrative "adopted by the West framing Israelis as victims".

Then there is the tolerance for troubling affiliations. Former boycott activist Omar Shakir led HRW's Israel-Palestine work for a decade while a fellow at a Qatari university. Shawan Jabarin, convicted by Israel for membership and recruitment for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine served on an HRW advisory committee; then-executive director Kenneth Roth first denied the history, then dismissed it as "ancient history" if true.

One might expect the nine NGOs named in EiGHT's report to show concern about its evidence and testimony. None has. Few insiders will be surprised: the accountability they demand of others is rarely self-applied.

Rowling may have cracked open the bolted doors of human rights and humanitarian organisations. But whether change follows is up to donors, journalists, courts, policymakers and a public that has taken them on trust to demand answers to questions unasked for too long: Who are you, really? How do you work? And can you prove that what you say is true?

Danielle Haas is the executive director of EiGHT. A longer version of this article was published by Quillette.com