Abusing power: exploring root causes and issues for safeguarding – power, privilege, gender and intersectionality

Q & A

The questions below were posed by participants during the webinar on Abusing power which took place on 11 August 2020.

Three questions were answered by the panellists. A summary of their responses are described here.

1. **What can we learn from the failures of gender mainstreaming when it comes to integrating safeguarding into organisations?**

Some of the failures of gender mainstreaming were due to the lack of analysis of power dynamics. Gender mainstreaming became a set of tools or approaches overlaid on existing power inequities, which were not examined or challenged. The takeaway from this, is that tools and approaches are only helpful if they support and enable the right discussions and help address the fundamental issues at the root of the problem they are trying to address. They are not of themselves, a magic bullet. This is true of safeguarding approaches. An emphasis on policies and procedures and training and so on, will only have limited success unless the root causes of abuse and exploitation within and by aid organisations are tackled.

2. **What impact do colonial dynamics and white saviour narratives have on our ability to safeguard?**

Recent discussions on the colonisation of aid are exposing fundamental issues with how aid and development is structured which impact adversely on safeguarding. For example, the premise of aid and development has its roots in the notion of helping people 'over there', including dealing with gender issues 'they have' without necessarily considering how those in power within the sector contribute to the problem and reinforce inequality. Again, power and privilege are at the root of this and 'exporting' bias and discrimination from societies and organisations based in the global north-dominated aid sector only adds to the problem: those with power need to give up some of that power. And that will be uncomfortable.

3. **And if safeguarding is a journey where does culture change fit in that journey and how long does it take?**

We often talk of safeguarding as a journey but there are not a set number of steps that need to be taken in a particular order, which will inevitably lead to becoming a safe organisation. It is a journey of many steps, frequent adaptation, learning and continuous improvement. Often, the journey requires working on different aspects of safeguarding in parallel. Culture change does take time, but we can fall into the trap of over complicating things. Much of this is something we can easily do – in small steps and everyday - and we should all seek to live out basic principles and values that will make our organisations safer for everyone.

The following questions were not answered during the webinar. The Resource and Support Hub has formulated responses.

4. **How does unconscious bias influence power, especially the hidden & invisible power?**

Unconscious bias does influence power. We all carry unconscious biases and we all have power in certain situations, and not in others, as Geeta Misra described. Sometimes we make assumptions about people and situations based on our own background, personal life experiences, social norms and outlook on life. There is also the "halo effect", where our overall impression of a person influences how we feel and think about his or her character, ability or attitude. Unconscious bias further complicates our ability to identify and change hidden or invisible power – as both operate in ways that are often unexamined, ignored and not well understood. There is a need therefore for each of us to be aware of and acknowledge that we do have unconscious biases and try to understand these better to reveal hidden and invisible power at work and avoid misusing power which could either harm someone or prevents us from making the right decisions when responding to harm that is being experienced by others.

5. How can those at lower levels in an organisation start these conversations?

There are many ways in which those with less power can start conversations and influence others; the key is to tap into your power with. Start these conversations with peers and colleagues. Look for allies, including those in more senior positions, and opportunities within the organisation to have these discussions more generally. Safeguarding trainings are often a good vehicle for raising issues around power and privilege and challenging organisations on what they want to do to address these. Team meetings and management 121s also can provide opportunities to regularly discuss power and privilege and how these impact on decisions, relationships, team and organisational cultures. Look for ways to enter into or create spaces to influence decision making and questions the processes and systems that limit inclusion and consultation.

6. Any advice on how we can build a safeguarding culture in conflict contexts where violence is normalised?

The focus of organisations must be to build a safeguarding culture first and foremost within their own organisation. When working in areas where violence is pervasive and normalised, the opportunities for further violence and violations are often rife and social sanctions can be eroded. As such it is even more important that our organisations seek to build cultures and systems internally that set these behaviours norms and expectations and enforce them. Furthermore, as staff of organisations we bring with us to work our own norms and these are impacted by the societies within which we live as well as our own individual experiences, including experiences of violence; acknowledging and addressing these experiences is critical to setting new positive norms and expectations. It is important for organisations to make a commitment to building a safeguarding culture: agree on what this could look like, how far this is from the current culture of the organisation and then develop strategies and plans for moving in that direction. Leaders should model the behaviours that are required for a safeguarding culture, demand continuous improvement in this space, and create ways for staff to hold all leaders and managers to account.

There is a lot of interesting work being done by organisations on helping staff, leaders and managers understand better, not only the role of power and privilege, but their own biases, their power and privilege and how that impacts on building a safeguarding culture. These conversations are proving valuable in making changes. Look out for our **podcast on Transforming Organisational Cultures for safeguarding**. Articulating leadership behaviours that create those cultures are also useful in changing individual and organisational performance.

7. **It would be great to hear more about feedback mechanisms and particularly how this intersects with unequal power relationships. What is best practice to encouraging people to come forward?**

A Question and Answer spot cannot do justice to this question. It can be complex and challenging. We know that mechanisms work better when they are designed together with those we hope will use them. Organisations need to understand better the local mechanisms typically used by communities to address grievances or complaints and explore how these can be used or built on by organisations. More work is needed to overcome unequal power relationships and encourage people to report concerns. Control over resources such as aid and assistance and other power differences are major obstacles to beneficiaries feeling able to speak up.

DFID conducted a listening exercise with survivors includes a section on power imbalances as a barrier to reporting https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/749741/Listening-Exercise1.pdf

A number of lessons around what works and doesn't work in terms of establishing effective reporting systems are highlighted in the recently completed RSH Global Evidence including:

- Ensuring survivors are informed of the process, outcome and follow-up – high levels of dissatisfaction was noted in the review due to people reporting rarely receiving follow-up or feedback.
- Putting in place different ways to report that are safe, confidential and accessible. Reporting to someone face to face appears to be important
- There are a number of barriers to reporting, including social norms related to SEAH, fear of shame and stigma that comes from speaking out. Organisation need to think through how to address these fears to encourage reporting.

The full evidence review is published on the RSH.

8. **What safeguarding indicators should we include in our M&E systems to ensure we are learning and feeding these insights into organizational improvement?**

The RSH Global evidence review did not find any examples of standardised ways to collect data on SEAH that would enable a consistent approach to measuring prevalence. There was also a lack of clarity with regards what constitutes an 'effective approach' to safeguarding to aid measurement. There are some common indicators that organisations use such as:

- Numbers of staff that have been trained, and outcome of the training on behaviours and attitudes
- Numbers of staff that have signed the code of conduct

- Number of safeguarding reports received and responded to
- Outcomes of safeguarding investigations
- Staff and communities' knowledge of safeguarding and organisational commitments, and knowledge of reporting mechanisms and processes.
- Feedback from survivors / people making reports – *where appropriate and consent is given, ensuring anonymity and safety of any respondents.*

Sector programmes also benefit from indicators that can be used to measure how 'safe' particular programmes are, or how well they have been designed to prevent SEAH. There are a few resources that include some of indicators described above. Take a look at the safeguarding journey which has just been published on the Hub. There is a stage which looks specifically at safe programmes and M&E.

Moving forward we hope to be able to engage in further discussions around ways to effectively measure the outcomes of implementing both organisational approaches and community level approaches to prevent and respond to SEAH.

9. What is driving changes and new conceptualization of safeguarding in the sector?

Primarily recognition that many organisations have been working for a number of years with robust policies and codes of conduct and training staff, and so on, but have still found challenges in preventing SEAH as well as other forms of harm. Sally Proudlove discussed this during her presentation at the webinar. This has challenged the sector to deepen our understanding of why different forms of harm still take place and particularly to look at how power and privilege are root causes of harm. The #MeToo, #AidToo and Black Lives Matter movements have really shone a light on the role of toxic masculinity and racism in the sector remaining unsafe, particularly for those with less power or privilege.

10. What should be the role of Government to address/overcome the invisible power?

Governments play an important role in holding organisations to account. In the international aid and development sector, accountability is a very clear commitment, but it remains challenging. The aid and development sector's 'customers' do not have the power to refuse or walk away from a service or look for an alternative. Donors, of course, demand a significant level of accountability and many, including DFID, have increasingly focused on ensuring aid organisations are operating with enhanced safeguarding measures in place. However, donors and their grantees are still the ones with power, providing money, not those for whom the service needs to be both effective and safe and it is incumbent on them to challenge themselves and each other on how to ensure power is not abused in the aid process. Countries that have introduced charity or NGO regulators as well as stringent due diligence and monitoring regimes have

strengthened the role of government in scrutinising the way in which (I)NGOs and civil society operate.

11. **Can grassroots and developing organizations afford the cost for maintaining a safeguarding friendly office premises? Is it that simple for these organization? How can we do that?**

It is not always the case that larger organisations are safer. Many small organisations can provide good examples of teamwork and leadership which lend themselves to safer workplace environments. These examples can be lost sometimes within much larger organisations where maintaining consistent good practice is more difficult. Smaller organisations, however, do need resources to support staff and communities in understanding safeguarding and need the flexibility to design and deliver programmes which are safe and prevent SEAH. Costs for this need to be built into all programmes and projects so it can become more sustainable. Look out for our upcoming **webinar on Are smaller, less resourced civil society organisations really the riskiest?** where we'll examine good practices from smaller organisations and challenge assumptions that they are the riskiest because they are smaller. This question goes to the heart of the importance of culture and compliance: bigger organisations may have the resources to do compliance but might not be investing in changing culture, whilst smaller organisations may start with a stronger safeguarding culture upon which they can build with safeguarding systems and processes.

12. **Finding it difficult in practice to shift cultures in some of our programmes and with partners as often told this is part of our culture... so how without appearing as a new colonial power holder, do we support better this culture change?**

The role of safeguarding is to create safe *organisational* cultures. It is not about changing local cultures or norms although, of course, as highlighted above we all come from local cultures and norms which influence and impact our behaviour. We need to recognise that often hanging onto 'the way we do things here' is itself about maintaining power for the powerful. Sally Proudlove and Everjoice Win in response to a participant's question said those with power need to give some of it up, and this is uncomfortable. It is critical to work with local gender and leadership consultants or experts who can frame culture much better within local contexts.

A number of trainings on safeguarding help participants understand culture, power, and what it means to hold onto something that is harmful for certain groups, as well as focusing on the positive aspects of change. We will showcase some of these trainings in due course.

13. **What does looking into culture rather than compliance mean? We feel that the culture and beliefs on zero tolerance to SEAH does not exist across all levels in the organisation, including the highest level.**

Compliance refers to meeting certain requirements, zero tolerance of SEAH in this case. An organisation might state explicitly it has zero tolerance towards SEAH and might enshrine this commitment within policies which the organisation then uses to demonstrate compliance. However, if the leadership doesn't really believe in or practice zero tolerance, and if incidents of SEAH or associated misconduct are not responded to appropriately, people within the organisation will feel they can get away with SEAH, or other patterns of behaviour that are harmful. So, although the policy states 'zero tolerance', in reality the organisation is tolerant of harmful behaviour! The culture of the organisation – the way people behave - doesn't uphold zero tolerance. That is why it is important to get beyond policies and procedures – they may seem to demonstrate compliance, but looking at behaviours, including leadership behaviours, and organisational culture are crucial to understanding real levels of compliance.

14. **Have you seen a shift in the organisational culture from use of the Leadership Tool? Have you surveyed staff about their perception of these changes?**

The tool hasn't been used widely enough yet to provide the evidence of culture shift. It has only been used as part of a piloting process and has been very successful in helping organisations to have the right conversations to start this process off. We have spoken to DFID and others about the opportunity this Tool potentially provides for research into the impact of the Tool and how is supports positive cultural change. Our hypothesis from the piloting process is that it will but we would like robust evidence to this effect and would also like to be able to learn from the process of organisations applying the Tool to their organisation. Staff surveys is recommended a number of times in the Tool as a way to gauge organisational cultural change.