

Summary: Global evidence review of sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment in the aid sector

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Purpose and scope of global evidence review

This report presents a review of existing evidence about Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Sexual Harassment (SEAH) in the aid sector. It provides an overview of the evidence gaps and highlights areas for further research. It is intended for the global SEAH community, including safeguarding experts, organisations, and networks; frontline staff and senior leaders in civil society organisations, NGOs, and faith-based organisations at regional and country level; national and local government officials, and private sector companies.

This summary considers **the scale of SEAH in the aid sector; the factors which act to increase risk of SEAH in the aid sector; and the approaches which are effective to prevent and respond to SEAH in the aid sector.**

For more details, read the [*Global evidence review of SEAH in the aid sector*](#).



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Introduction

The evidence review focuses on eight research questions under three themes:

1. Scale

Q1: What evidence is there of the scale of SEAH in the aid sector?

Q2: What are the challenges in estimating the scale of SEAH in the aid sector?

2. Risk factors

Q3: What is the evidence on risk and protective factors for SEAH in the aid sector?

3. Effective approaches

Q4: What approaches have been used by organisations in the aid sector to prevent and respond to SEAH?

Q5: What evidence is there of the effectiveness of approaches by organisations in the aid sector to prevent and respond to SEAH?

Q6: What factors limit the effectiveness of approaches by organisations in the aid sector to prevent and respond to SEAH?

Q7: What evidence is there of effective approaches by organisations in the aid sector to ensuring a survivor-centred approach to prevention and response?

Q8: What evidence exists on the challenges organisations in the aid sector face in adopting a survivor-centred approach?

Methodology

An extensive document review was undertaken to map available evidence and research on SEAH in the aid sector between 2000 and 2020. This exercise was intended to give a comprehensive overview of the evidence available rather than a systematic mapping of literature. Evidence was not excluded due to quality to enable us to capture as wide a range of evidence and research as possible.

The following **limitations** and **exclusions** are worth noting:

- Only documents published in English and widely available online were included in this phase of the mapping.
- Non-sexual forms of exploitation, abuse and harassment, and wider forms of gender-based violence (GBV) were not included in the search terms.

We expect there is more unpublished evidence or evidence that is presented as part of project-based evaluations and internal reviews which we were unable to access.

Overall, **169 documents were identified that met the inclusion criteria.**¹

The majority of documents were focused on Africa, Asia and the Pacific. There was limited evidence available in English from Latin America and the Caribbean and the Arab states.

Box 1: Defining SEAH in the aid sector

We adopted the following definitions and understanding of SEAH in the aid sector:

- **Sexual Exploitation:** Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes - includes profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from sexual exploitation of another. Under UN regulations it includes transactional sex, solicitation of transactional sex and exploitative relationship (UN, 2017)
- **Sexual Abuse:** The actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions. It should cover sexual assault (attempted rape, kissing / touching, forcing someone to perform oral sex / touching) as well as rape. Under UN regulations, all sexual activity with someone under the age of 18 is considered to be sexual abuse (ibid.)
- **Sexual Harassment:** A continuum of unacceptable and unwelcome behaviours and practices of a sexual nature that may include, but are not limited to, sexual suggestions or demands, requests for sexual favours and sexual, verbal or physical conduct or gestures, that are or might reasonably be perceived as offensive or humiliating (UN, 2018).
- SEAH in the aid sector includes SEAH perpetrated against **'anyone involved in the delivery or receipt of humanitarian aid and development assistance'** and includes forms of SEAH perpetrated against **both children and adults**. This includes all forms of SEAH perpetrated by or against staff or associates involved in the delivery of humanitarian aid and development assistance, as well as communities.
- *A note on transactional sex. We have included evidence related to transactional sex, in line with the UN definition, and where the evidence points to this in relation to an imbalance or abuse of power based on socio-economic status or age. Many of these 'relationships' are driven by economic necessity, which can lead to adolescent girls and young women, in particular being take advantage of and exploited.*

¹ Detailed methodology is available in the main report.

Key findings

Scale of SEAH in the aid sector

Across the evidence base, it was widely accepted that there was widespread under-reporting of SEAH across the aid sector. While there is evidence that reporting of SEAH in organisations is increasing, this is still considered the 'tip of the iceberg' (DFID, 2019).

- For example, 58,000 women are estimated to have engaged in transactional sex with peacekeepers in Liberia in the period up to 2012. However, the UN's official reports include 1,367 cases of sexual exploitation and abuse involving peacekeepers globally between 2003 and 2012 (Beber et al., 2017; Grady, 2016).

No attempts were found to estimate the scale of SEAH in the aid sector as a whole.

There are several main sources of data available on the issue. They include SEAH complaint figures recorded by organisations working in the aid sector, collated reports from security organisations, and independent research into SEAH in the aid sector, including through focus group discussions and surveys.

- Reuters reported that 124 aid workers from 17 global charities were fired or lost jobs over sexual misconduct in 2017 (Bacchi, 2018).
- A 2018 survey of UN personnel on sexual harassment in the workplace found that one in three respondents had experienced at least one instance of sexual harassment in the previous two years (Deloitte, 2019).

Reports collated by the UN, donors and international bodies give evidence for the scale of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH).

- 260 safeguarding concerns were reported to DFID for the period 2018–2019. Of these concerns, 28% related to sexual exploitation and abuse of adults, 27% related to 'other safeguarding concerns', and 23% related to sexual harassment (DFID, 2019b).
- Insight into the scale of SEA is also provided in focus group discussions and interviews with community members. A 2017 study by the Whole of Syria Area of Responsibility (AOR) estimated that 40% of women and girls had

experienced sexual violence when accessing services and aid.

- In 2019, 80 allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeeping personnel were reported to the UN General Assembly (UN, 2019).

Despite the low number of allegations recorded, there is a long history of allegations of widespread SEA.

Numerous reports of SEA by aid workers and UN peacekeepers against beneficiaries and community members are documented. Perpetrators were typically male aid workers, or contractors, and senior community leaders associated with them. Reports of transactional sex, opportunistic attacks and sexual exploitation while accessing aid were commonly cited.

Challenges to estimating the scale of SEAH in the aid sector include under-reporting, inappropriate or inaccessible reporting mechanisms, and a lack of a consistent definition of SEAH, making comparison and collation difficult, as well as effecting reporting.

Evidence of factors which increase risk

Risks of SEAH are affected by a range of intersecting factors that relate to structural, community, organisational and individual factors.

Structural factors

SEAH stems from pervasive gender inequality, power disparities and harmful patriarchal norms. These factors shape how women and girls and other intersecting identities are perceived and treated (Anene and Osayamwen, 2019; DFAT, 2019; Ferstman, 2017; Fluri, 2012).

Power imbalances are a driver of harassment and abuse. Imbalances can be between local populations and peacekeepers or aid workers (Harrington, 2010 cited in Neudorfer, 2014), or between national and international staff and people of different ranks and genders within organisations (Mazurana and Donnelly, 2017; UNAIDS, 2018).

Poverty increases the likelihood of women and girls entering exploitative, transactional sexual relationships, of child and early marriage, and of exchanging sex for food or other resources.

- The abuse of power by aid workers in controlling the distribution and allocation of resources in exchange for sexual services from girls and young women has been widely reported, including in Afghanistan (Fluri, 2012), Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone (UNHCR and Save the Children, 2002).

High levels of sexual violence within a host country correlates with high numbers of SEA allegations against peacekeepers² due to levels of impunity.

- Where host countries are unable to maintain or enforce rule of law, local populations are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation as a result of the **impunity** that follows (Fluri, 2012).

Community factors

Disruption of livelihoods and potential breakdown of family protection and community support systems puts migrant and refugee populations at increased risk of SEA (Mazurana and Van Leuven, 2016). Risks are also likely to increase for **people with disabilities** who can be more reliant on family and community support systems.

Women and girls in particular, may **adopt negative coping strategies**, such as entering into exploitative transactional relationships as a result of becoming more reliant on aid.

An **influx of temporary workers** in humanitarian contexts may increase risks of both GBV and SEA against community members (IFC, 2019; World Bank, 2018). It may also increase the numbers of women and girls engaging in transactional sex work.

Factors linked to the **physical environment**, including poor lighting in camps near the toilets or other shared services, are cited as risk factors for SEAH in a number of studies in camp or refugee settings (Bramucci et al., 2015; Davey et al, 2010; World Bank, 2017).

Organisational factors

Organisational culture is as a critical factor in whether allegations or incidents of SEA or workplace harassment and abuse take place (Norbert, 2017).

- Studies highlight aspects and characteristics of organisational culture and leadership which can increase the risk of SEAH. They include organisations with high levels of fraud, corruption, or both or where there is no culture of accountability or transparency (Kangas, 2018).

An attitude and culture of **'boys will be boys'** is endemic in many institutions. It has been used as an attempt to explain accusations of sexual abuse of community members by peacekeepers (Mazurana and Donnelly, 2017; Neudorfer, 2015).

- A number of studies discuss a culture of 'rape myth' in organisations with strong male hierarchies. Such a culture normalises, condones or jokes about these issues (Norbert, 2016).

A **lack of gender and racial balance** has also been cited as a potential risk factor for sexual harassment in the workplace as well as SEA in humanitarian settings. Men in more senior positions may be more inclined to 'look the other way' when abuses take place (British Red Cross, 2018; Kangas, 2018; Norbert, 2016; Williness, 2007 in Fraser and Muller, 2018).

Working practices can also contribute to higher risks.

- Short-term contracts and lack of job security are also highlighted by Parker (2019) as contributing to a workplace culture where harassment (including sexual harassment) and bullying prevail.
- There are also risks associated with programmes, including large scale infrastructure projects, which are associated with an influx of workers to a community and changing power dynamics (DFID, 2019c; World Bank, 2018).

Individual factors

A number of groups are more vulnerable to SEAH where the imbalances of power tend to play out more and where the opportunities for abuses of power become more extreme.

- Girls and women generally - younger women and adolescent girls, female-headed households, single women, migrant women,

² Evidence presented by Neudorfer (2015) from three case studies in DRC, Liberia and Golan Heights.

women of colour, women and girls with disabilities, men and boys in conflict areas, people identifying as LGBTQI, ethnic minorities, and people in insecure employment, low paid, and early career positions are particularly vulnerable (Aziz et al., 2018; Mazurana and Donnelly 2017; Puri and Cleland, 2007).

Effectiveness of approaches

There is a lack of standardisation of what constitutes an effective approach, which limits comparison across studies.

Where organisations did attempt to measure effectiveness, it tended to be considered in quite limited ways. Organisations have measured the effectiveness of approaches to address SEAH in the following ways:

- **Improved knowledge and understanding of SEAH.** For example, the numbers of staff who have completed SEAH-related training
- **Changes in behaviours by survivors or witnesses.** For example, levels of confidence in relation to seeking help, reporting, and feeling able to say 'no'
- **Organisational responses to reports of SEAH.** For example, action taken to follow up on reports of SEAH, including through investigations, and levels of confidence in reporting mechanisms
- **Reductions in SEAH and improved outcomes for survivors.** For example, levels of concern about SEAH and perceptions of safety and survivors' psychological wellbeing

Leadership and organisational culture – what approaches work

- **Visible leadership by senior management** was found in several studies to be an essential aspect of effective safeguarding (Fraser, 2018).
- **Awareness among managers of the problem of sexual harassment and of workplace dynamics** is important (ILO, 2019).
- **An organisational culture which supports efforts to 'speak up' about SEAH without fear of retaliation.**

- **Greater diversity in the workplace** could work as a protective factor to increase accountability and challenge impunity. A number of sources highlight promoting diversity among leadership as an effective approach to addressing SEAH (DFID Safeguarding Unit, 2018; Fraser and Muller, 2018).

Training and learning – what approaches work

Training is most effective when it:

- is comprehensive, detailed, based on the local context and emphasises action accountability (Mazurana and Van Leuven, 2016³),
- uses inclusive, participatory approaches (Blakemore et al., 2019; Powell, 2018),
- provides consistent communication of core messages (Henry and Adams, 2018),
- involves senior leadership,
- is compulsory and repeated,
- requires and provides for follow-up,
- involves informal approaches to learning and one-to-one communication, rather than more formal training.

A 2018 VAWG Helpdesk report found that although training is one of the most commonly used approaches by organisations seeking to address sexual harassment, sessions can often be ineffective (Fraser and Muller, 2018).

The review found evidence that if designed and delivered poorly, trainings to reduce sexual harassment can actually be counterproductive and do harm.

This was found to be a particular risk with sessions which inadvertently reinforce gender norms or focus too heavily on legal liability. The report went on to caution against 'tick-box' training approaches (ibid).

³ The study reviewed pre-and-post-deployment training for military personnel, police officers and civilian members of peace missions in Africa.

Reporting Mechanisms – what approaches work

Reporting mechanisms are an essential element of addressing SEAH. These should enable incidents and concerns to be safely reported, and also signal that SEAH is not tolerated and perpetrators will be held to account.

The ineffectiveness or absence of complaints mechanisms was cited as a main obstacle to receiving sexual exploitation and abuse allegations (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children in Fraser, 2018).

Fear is an ongoing barrier to reporting SEAH, and therefore limits the effectiveness of reporting mechanisms.

- This includes losing one's job (Aziz, 2018), losing access to aid and services, social stigma (Lattu et al., 2008), and further violence and backlash.
 - A UN survey found that 19% of those who did not report an incident of sexual harassment feared negative impacts on their career, with a further 18% concerned that their complaint would not be taken seriously (Wahlén, 2019).

The effectiveness of community-based reporting mechanisms (CBRM) is related to a number of factors (DFID, 2018).

- **Survivors need to be able to report confidentially and in person** to a trusted member of the community. Ideally this person should be female.
- **There was mixed evidence related to digital reporting**, with no clear consensus on its effectiveness. Both digital systems and reporting boxes were viewed as additional reporting mechanisms rather than as an adequate substitute for reporting to a trusted, face-to-face community advocate.
- **Reporting mechanisms may be dysfunctional when they use existing structures which are implicated in the abuse** (Schauerhammer, 2018).
 - A 2006 study by Save the Children UK in Liberia found evidence of under-reporting of SEA, not only because beneficiaries did not know where to report but because senior staff who were perpetrating exploitation had control of the reporting mechanisms.

- **Inter-agency CBRMs can be more effective than mechanisms run by individual organisations** (Schauerhammer, 2018). Not only do they cut down on duplication of efforts, but they also allow staff and beneficiaries to submit their complaint or concern to an alternative which does not employ the perpetrator.
- **Reporting mechanisms need to be specifically accessible to children and young people.**
- **Consistent and prompt follow-up to reports** was highlighted as particularly important. It should include regular feedback and clear resolution so the process does not feel extractive or risk further traumatising survivors (DFID, 2018).
- Mechanisms which focus solely on encouraging and enabling women and girls to report may deter men and boys (All Survivors Project, 2018; Chynoweth, 2017).

A number of sources report evidence of dissatisfaction by a large proportion of people who do report SEAH in the aid sector (Fraser and Naidu, 2018; Ligiero et al., 2019; UNAIDS, 2018).

- The Report the Abuse survey found that, of the 53% of survivors who reported an incident, only 17% felt the complaint was handled appropriately (Norbert, 2016).

Survivor-centred approaches

General principles and parameters for what should be included in a survivor-centred approach are often based on feminist principles and adapted from other sectors, including GBV work (see Box 2).

Box. 2 Principles that guide a survivor-centred approach

- Safety
- Confidentiality
- Respect
- Dignity
- Agency and control
- The right to choose
- The right to information
- Autonomy

A 'survivor-led approach' requires the survivor to have total decision-making control over all aspects of the reporting and follow-up process, even where this may lead to disregarding normal reporting procedures.

A 'survivor-centred approach' is different. While it tries to maintain and protect privacy and confidentiality, the organisation must retain some degree of control over decision making to balance concerns about safety of the survivor versus others in the organisation and in the community.

These tensions are apparent when considering the issue of mandatory reporting, which can present challenges for organisations trying to comply with survivor-centred standards (British Red Cross, 2018).

A number of **recommended best practices** were identified in the literature:

- **Consultation**, especially when sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment is taking place at the community level (Lattu et al, 2018).
- **Regular feedback on the process**, including details of the outcome, and making sure that the process is not extractive or re-traumatising (DFID Safeguarding Unit, 2018).
- **Access to face-to-face reporting** with a trusted (and trained) individual, preferably a woman (DFID, 2018).
- **Individuals working with survivors need specialist communication skills** and good knowledge of the criminal justice and health systems in those contexts (Cole, 2019).
- **Organisations should establish a process for safe and effective voluntary reporting**, as mandatory reporting can undermine a survivor-led response and lead to re-traumatisation (British Red Cross, 2018; British Red Cross, 2020).
- **The approach must be tailored to the individual survivor.**
 - A report by UNICEF (2011) describes the approach taken in some South Asian countries to trafficking. It explains the tendency by agencies to address the needs of women and children together, which can be disempowering for both groups as well as ineffective in providing the support that they each require.

Challenges identified for organisations seeking to adopt a survivor-centred approach include:

- consultation being extractive and potentially re-traumatising
- mandatory reporting
- limited incentives for reporting
- the risks of adopting a 'one-size fits all approach'.

Community outreach and sensitisation approach – what approaches work

Outreach and sensitisation with local communities and the beneficiaries with whom they work is a key component of any effective safeguarding approach.

The following factors were found to improve effectiveness:

- **Clear communication of messages.**
 - local faith leaders in Malawi were effective in promoting safeguarding and protection of children through community outreach. This was a result of their ability to motivate and clearly communicate to community members and ensure individuals felt knowledgeable and mandated to act (Eyber et al., 2018).
- **Combining sensitisation with tangible support**
 - work to engage with young men in Jamaica led to an increase in practical knowledge and awareness, particularly in relation to what constitutes sexual abuse (Pawlak and Barker, 2012). The report underlines the importance of combining community sensitisation with approaches which offer support based on the needs of survivors.
- **Addressing persistent norms.**
 - Persistent social norms hinder reporting, support and demand for action. Some people in communities with high levels of gender inequality tend to be satisfied with ineffective responses (Csaky, 2008, examining under-reporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers and peacekeepers in Southern Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire and Haiti).

Gaps in the evidence base

1. **Preventing and responding to SEAH in the aid sector is under-evaluated.** This is perhaps because approaches to address SEAH are rarely project-based. They are more commonly part of longer-term processes of organisational change, which may not be evaluated. Data sensitivity and reputational concerns may also deter organisations from making evidence publicly available. The review found no longitudinal studies which aimed to measure lasting change.
2. **There is no standard way to collect data on SEAH** which would enable a consistent approach to measuring prevalence. There are no standard survey questions, core indicators or recommended measures which could be used to collect data across different locations over time to identify risks and compare or track trends.
3. **There is a lack of clarity around what constitutes an 'effective approach' to prevention and response efforts in the aid sector.** This hinders a consistent framing within research and evaluation and restricts scope for comparative analysis of approaches.
4. **There is a lack of evidence of prevalence and what works to address the needs and rights of people most at risk of SEAH in the aid sector.** Those people include adolescent girls, people with disabilities, national staff, people identifying as LGBTQI and different ethnic or religious groups. In particular, while some reports have discussed disability as a risk factor for SEAH, they provide little evidence about how organisations have worked to prevent and respond to SEAH among people with disabilities, including children.
5. **Evidence and voices from the Global South must be profiled and elevated more widely in this work.** There is a need to prioritise locating, identifying and integrating these 'non-traditional' evidence sources. Supporting and highlighting more contextual evidence and indigenous knowledge and expertise may also add to the limited evidence around SEAH perpetrated in communities by aid workers.
6. **There is limited evidence of how to improve leadership and organisation culture** to promote an environment where people feel safe and supported to report and respond.
7. **Gaps emerged around what works to shift social norms,** both at an organisational level and community level.
8. **How organisations navigate the tensions between supporting survivor-centred approaches versus mandatory reporting requirements** and their risk of wider harm is a gap worth exploring.

Image credit DFID Lindsay Mgbor

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A comprehensive bibliography is included in the Global Evidence Review of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in the Aid Sector

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