

Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment in humanitarian action

Humanitarian Exchange



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About HPN

The Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) at ODI is an independent forum where field workers, managers and policy-makers in the humanitarian sector share information, analysis and experience. The views and opinions expressed in HPN's publications do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Humanitarian Policy Group or ODI.

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Cover photo: Humanitarians speak with displaced persons in Bria, Central African Republic about rights and responsibilities.
Credit: Wendy Cue, OCHA

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Tongana a sara ye ti ngangou na tere ti a zo ouala
 a sara lissoro ti koubou na ngangou, ala lingbi ti
 fa na guigui na pikango singa sengue sengue na :
 Signaler tout abus ou exploitation en appelant en
 toute sécurité la ligne verte au numéro :

4040



Task Force
 contre
 l'Exploitation
 et les Abus
 Sexuels
 (EAS) en
 République
 centrafricaine

A poster to raise awareness on reporting sexual exploitation and abuse in the Central African Republic. Credit: Mattia Villa/OCHA

Editorial

The theme of this edition of *Humanitarian Exchange* is protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (PSEAH) in humanitarian action, co-edited with Wendy Cue, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Senior Coordinator on PSEAH. It has been 20 years since the shocking West African sex-for-food scandal came to light. Since then, humanitarians have made considerable efforts to address such abuses and support victims and survivors by creating policies, tools and guidance, including codes of conduct and complaint channels, and improving investigative approaches and procedures. But have we made as much progress as we should have and what more needs to be done? Contributors to this edition critically reflect on measures taken so far, what other changes are necessary, and share country-level experience of how principles and policies are being interpreted and implemented in practice.

In the lead article, Martin Griffiths, Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, outlines the three priority commitments of the new multi-year IASC PSEAH strategy. Moira Reddick, author of the 2021 PSEAH 10-year review, follows with a discussion of the review findings and recommendations. Andrew Morley, the 2022 IASC Champion for PSEAH, calls for a culture change that recognises that the absence of reports of abuse may be a cause for concern. Asmita Naik, a member of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Save the Children team that uncovered the 2002 West Africa abuse, argues that to achieve cultural and behavioural change the sector must set standards, enforce them and create deterrents. Drawing on his leadership experience across a range of crises, David Gressly makes the case that humanitarian operations need formal structures with full-time staffing to address sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) effectively, rather than relying on focal points and goodwill. Based on their experience as safeguarding incident investigators, Hannah Clare and Carolyn Bys challenge humanitarians to stop producing more tools and guidance and focus instead on investing in the right expertise. In a related piece, Carolyn Bys interrogates the Western ‘feminisms’ that are driving approaches to addressing sexual misconduct.

Gang Karume Augustin and Thérèse Mapenzi explore the potential role of national and local non-governmental organisations in safeguarding efforts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Irene Coello and Maria Alvarez compare and contrast their experiences working as PSEA coordinators in Mozambique and Venezuela, while Husni Husni reflects on lessons from collective PSEA and accountability to affected people initiatives in Ethiopia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Jane Connors explains the roles of Field Victims’ Rights Advocates in high-risk contexts, a cornerstone of the UN strategy to give voice to victims. Diane Goodman, Blanche Tax and Zuhura Mahamed tell the story of UNHCR’s journey towards adopting a victim-centred approach. Laurens Kymmell and Taryn Kurtanich share recommendations from a global Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment Community of Practice initiated by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2020. Heike Niebergall-Lackner and Paulien Vandendriessche explain how the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) ‘bystander conversations’ are helping to instill confidence in staff to speak up and raise concerns. The edition ends with an article by Clara Satke, Madison Jansen, Nina Lacroix and Noor Lakhdar-Toumi, which focuses on the ways in which the IASC’s Six Core Principles relating to SEA are adapted, interpreted and applied by IASC members.

PSEAH in humanitarian action

Doing the right thing: protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian action

Martin Griffiths

We will never be able to fully eradicate the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian action. It's not unique to aid operations (but that's not an excuse); it's a grim reality of the contexts we work in. Even so, we can, and must, do better at preventing it from happening. Efforts to prevent and protect across our operations have not been timely, consistent or sufficient. And when abuse happens, we must be more sensitive to the needs and the wishes of the victims. It shouldn't need to be said, but that's the priority, not protecting the reputation of humanitarian organisations.

Sexual abuse and exploitation by aid workers is an absolute betrayal of the trust placed in us and the values we say we live by. And it's a sign of a deeper malaise: if this most grotesque abuse can occur, other forms of misconduct are likely too. Conversely, if there is fraud or bullying, there may be an organisational culture that tolerates sexual misconduct and abuse of power.

We are still too reactive when it comes to incidents of sexual abuse. Rather than systematically identifying the risk factors, learning from cases, and building upon experience, the community too often has reacted in haste to exposure by international media coverage. These reactions have, by definition, tried to compensate for failures that have already happened. But rushing into action in the glare of negative publicity may not result in the desired impact or provide a better foundation for the future.

That's why it's useful to look into the experience of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to understand where humanitarian agencies should put their energies to improve prevention and focus their responses. In 2021, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), as the IASC Champion for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment,¹ commissioned a review of 10 years of collective action on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. The findings, when compared with a similar review from 2010, demonstrate that recommendations had not been systematically implemented. The sum of our actions was unfortunately less than its parts.

¹ See articles about the IASC Championship and the IASC Review included in this edition. The role was filled in 2021 by Natalia Kanem, UNFPA's Executive Director and in 2022 by Andrew Morley, Chair of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response and CEO of World Vision International.



A woman – a survivor of sexual violence – holds a flower to her face in the Elinya site for displaced persons in Democratic Republic of Congo. Many survivors do not speak up about what happened to them, fearing the reaction of their husbands and that of the community. The TPO NGO (Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation) offers psychological support to help them recover from the trauma. Credit: UNOCHA/ Alioune NDIAYE

As a result, I led the IASC in endorsing a multi-year strategy with measurable targets. The aim is to leverage the best of individual and collective initiatives from the IASC members. The strategy focuses on collaborative efforts that will have the most impact and are most in need of improvement.

We have made three major commitments. The first is to be more attuned to the needs and vulnerabilities of potential victims and, should an incident occur, to shift from a concern for our reputations to providing support and assistance to the victim. We will measure our future efforts against an agreed victim-centred approach.

The first tenet of a victim-centred approach is, of course, to reduce the number of victims from the outset. As we said in the [IASC Principals statement on Accountability to Affected People](#), we commit to enabling affected people, including women and girls, to effectively shape the humanitarian response. We will promote authentic ways to listen to and act on the feedback from the communities we serve, so that assistance is delivered in a way that reduces risk of abuse.

We will also ensure that both responders and communities receiving assistance are aware of the rules and expectations around safe programming and standards of conduct among all partners in humanitarian response. We will make it possible for people to report sexual exploitation and abuse through safe, accessible and locally tailored complaint channels.

Placing the rights and dignity of victims at the forefront of our response means providing assistance that goes beyond immediate medical services. It demands a comprehensive approach that includes psycho-social care, ensuring protection from retaliation, and communication and information about the investigative process.

Our second commitment is to change organisational culture on the front lines of emergency response. The World Health Organisation (WHO) mandated [Independent Commission on SEA](#) during the Ebola response in the Democratic Republic of the Congo insisted that, in the urgency of setting up life-saving support, we must also put in place the right safeguards. This includes gender balance in leadership, with women equally represented in frontline teams, and measures of performance that focus on how a programme has been delivered, not only on what the programme has achieved.

Our third commitment is to increase the ability to prevent and protect from sexual exploitation and abuse in high-risk contexts. The IASC is creating [a tool that gauges the risk of SEA](#) in countries with active international humanitarian operations. It will provide a common, shared and informed baseline to compare risk across countries and over time. This will help us make the most strategic use of resources by prioritising issues and countries of concern.

We are increasingly investing in identifying, selecting and training field leaders to understand and prioritise their responsibility to foster a safe and respectful workplace. Managers will understand the need to change culture and attitudes and to bolster common values that could prevent abuse, including the responsibility of bystanders to intervene.

The IASC strategy represents the collective commitment of the humanitarian community to make humanitarian action better. We cannot tackle all areas that need improvement, but the IASC Review brings focus to areas of greatest impact and leads us to prioritise and sequence our investments.

As the volume and reach of humanitarian assistance expands, the risk of exploitation and abuse grows. During my recent visit to Afghanistan, it was heart-wrenching to see the assault on girls' education, further limiting their livelihood options and rights in a country in the grip of a dire crisis, with half the population acutely food insecure amidst economic collapse and a record drought. These restrictions on rights are major setbacks for those directly impacted, and also for the country. I am deeply concerned that curtailing women's and girls' rights increases the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse and potentially undermines the response by constraining the ability of female aid workers to operate.

I am also very concerned about the crisis in Ukraine, a context where there was already high incidence of trafficking of women and girls. Collectively, through the IASC, we are putting specialist staff on the

ground in support of field leadership. The Ukraine Humanitarian Fund, a multi-donor fund managed by United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), has earmarked at least \$5 million for projects that support an accountable and dignified response. That includes supporting local NGOs and interagency projects on PSEA and accountability.

While we rush to scale up response in a new operation and help millions affected by the war, we must recognise the high risks the operation presents. I am keenly aware of the painful lessons of the past and conscious that we have a major test of our PSEA approach before us. We have the evidence, a shared understanding of the priorities, and an agreed strategy. We can and must do this right. Our credibility, legitimacy and values are on the line.

Martin Griffiths is the United Nations Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

The 2021 IASC External Review of PSEAH

Moira Reddick

Background and purpose²

A priority of United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)'s tenure as IASC Champion for PSEAH was to deliver the first external review of the IASC members' inter-agency approach to PSEAH in a decade. The 2010 Review had considered the global policies and practice of individual agencies as well as to what extent inter-agency practice was established at country level. In 2010 OCHA had been responsible for leadership and coordination of inter-agency PSEA, but following the 2010 Review the IASC assumed collective responsibility.

The 2010 Review concluded that:

- collective inter-agency prevention and response to SEA would benefit communities, victims, and survivors
-
- 2 The 2018 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Championship Strategy sought to promote long-term cultural and attitudinal change towards all forms of sexual misconduct, and it systematically outlined how prevention and response to both sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment are top priorities and commitments of the IASC. This decision did not apply to the country-level activity of the PSEA Network and inter-agency activity. Therefore, for this review, the term protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH) will be used in reference to global-level initiatives from 2018 onwards, such as the IASC PSEAH Championship. The term protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) will be used in reference to global-level IASC initiatives prior to 2018 as well as all IASC activities at country level from 2011 to 2021, such as PSEA Coordinator and PSEA Network.

- without senior leaders and managers visibly committing to action, promoting PSEA policies, proactively supporting PSEA activities, and holding staff accountable for the implementation of these measures, action at country level would not occur.

An advisory group comprising IASC members worked to identify priorities for the 2021 Review. This was challenging given the breadth of PSEAH activity in which IASC members engage. The advisory group finally asked that the 2021 report be structured around four main headings: evidence of a victim-centred approach (VCA) being applied; evidence of an inter-agency community-based complaints model (CBCM) being effective; evidence that leadership, coordination and accountability was effective on PSEAH; and that progress was being made on the IASC Principals 2018 global commitments to address sexual harassment.

The leaders of the IASC member agencies have made a series of ambitious commitments over the past decade, yet verifiable evidence or monitoring data is limited and mostly dates from 2018 onwards.³ It quickly became apparent that extensive interviews with staff and partners of IASC members would be necessary to understand why the barriers to implementation of PSEAH mechanisms had apparently proved challenging to overcome.

In total, 159 interviews were conducted at the global and country levels. Findings drew heavily on the experiences that were shared in these confidential interviews, and these findings led to the conclusion that progress and change at country level had been limited. This, in turn, explained why victims/survivors, communities, and staff and partners continue to express low levels of trust that humanitarian agencies would deliver on PSEAH commitments.

Good intentions are not enough. Here in 2021, we have probably bought into the fact that the problem exists and that we have a responsibility, but we don't have anything in the outcome box yet. We don't have a sustainable way of dealing with the problem (Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator).

Repeatedly stating that humanitarian agencies will show zero tolerance to SEAH can no longer be a sufficient principle to demonstrate IASC members' commitment. It will not result in the desired zero cases. Instead, operationalising the commitments already made and the mechanisms already agreed upon will allow humanitarian agencies to demonstrate that the principle going forward will be zero tolerance of any agency or management inactivity on SEAH. This operationalisation includes acknowledging that PSEAH activity will continue to be needed in every response, and that it must be continuous and resourced.

3 The IASC Global Dashboard is a record from 33 IASC humanitarian countries from 2019 to 2021. This is largely quantitative data that is currently collected via a range of methods, making it challenging to use comparatively. Work is currently underway to further improve this system based on country level experience (<https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org/dashboard>).



PSEA poster Haiti widely distributed after the 2021 earthquake. Credit: MINUJUSTH Conduct & Discipline Team (2019)

A commitment to building trust⁴ in the transparency and accountability of IASC members and the humanitarian system requires the fulfilment of a VCA and, critically, a demonstrated respect for complainants and whistleblowers. The need to focus on the (re)building of trust was therefore placed at the very top of the list of recommendations to the IASC leadership.

4 Trust of victims and survivors, trust of vulnerable communities, trust of our own staff members and partners.

IASC strategy and the pace of change

While there are examples of progress made in individual contexts, the overall pace of progress has not been steady or systematic. IASC activity has often been siloed or project-based. Although IASC Principals have specified the change – the strategic outcomes – that they want to see in place, timelines were not articulated, measurable targets were not set and budgets were not prioritised. While individual IASC agencies have made valuable contributions that are recognised in the Review report, the IASC Secretariat is clearly under-resourced to deliver the breadth of coordination required. This must be addressed.

Interviewees at country level attributed progress, or positive examples of inter-agency action, to the commitment of individual leaders or to PSEA coordinators rather than to predictable resourcing or the application of IASC models or procedures.

Working on PSEAH in the system is not an area to build a career. PSEAH is still driven by committed individuals resulting in a proliferation of mechanisms rather than predictable systems. The proliferation of mechanisms and ad hoc approaches means we don't apply learning. My organisation contributes to this proliferation and the resulting fragmentation of focus and systems (Senior Manager at global level).

Demonstrated inter-agency progress only visibly accelerated after 2017. It is, however, already clear that the allocation of inter-agency PSEA responsibility to Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) and Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) is not resulting in fully resourced PSEA country action plans and activities. It is increasingly common for PSEA to be included in Humanitarian Response Plans and budgets but not yet common for resources to follow. There is no predictable resource to be drawn upon at global level, even for contexts considered to be high risk; this indicates that the humanitarian system is accepting inactivity on PSEA. Recommendations made in 2010 regarding predictable funding have not yet been implemented and no alternatives have been found. Placing responsibility on the HC or HCT without either offering support or ensuring accountability when that responsibility is not met will not provide a resolution. The absence of predictable funding is proving to be a significant barrier to change.

The systems are not yet clear. Setting them up takes a long time if they are to be sustainable and there are not enough experienced human resources available to draw on. The global level should have teams ready to come in and set this up at the start of responses. In the humanitarian sector the necessary significant action has not yet happened (Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator).

While the IASC has no theory of change in place, the strategic outcomes in the 2018 and 2021 IASC Championship PSEAH Strategies are appropriate levers for change and they should be retained and delivered upon. Previously, the IASC members did not sufficiently detail the change that was required to meet strategic outcomes and did not set time-based targets or monitor the progress or the

effectiveness of PSEAH investment or activity. This includes the commitment to deliver according to a VCA. These recommendations have now been addressed by the IASC Principals who, in May 2021, approved a new five-year IASC PSEAH Vision and Strategy⁵ focused upon the operationalisation of a VCA and with clear targets specified.

PSEA coordination

There are currently no predictable mechanisms at the global level for the deployment of inter-agency PSEA coordinators or resources to support activities in what are held to be the highest-risk contexts for SEA. Significant efforts have been made by many IASC members to support positions, to gap-fill, or to initiate rosters resulting in multiple ad hoc systems. There is no coherent performance evaluation system for postholders. The mechanisms do not support rapid selection and deployment or prioritisation to locations considered to be high risk. The 2021 Review recommended that a mechanism be put in place to ensure deployment to high-risk contexts where the HC requests support and that the effectiveness of supplying such capacity should be carefully assessed. It was recommended that donors should be approached to support such a mechanism, although some IASC members believe that such a proposal would be rejected and regarded as not value for money by donors. Making progress on the modalities for a deployment mechanism is a priority for the 2022 IASC Champion.

Victim-centred approach

There is currently no shared understanding of what fulfilling a VCA would mean in practice for IASC agencies globally and at country level, and therefore no shared agreement on how to measure accountability to victims. IASC member representatives, at all levels, expressed uncertainty about the full nature of the responsibilities and the changes that would be required to fulfil them.

Everyone knows that there should be a VCA but they don't know what it means. We haven't even thought about measuring what we do against VCA commitments. Also, it isn't about writing a manual as each country is different. It is about making ourselves accountable to victims (Senior Manager at global level).

A dialogue involving all IASC members is now underway to understand where individual IASC members may have constraints or experience barriers to compliance with an IASC VCA. These factors may not be the same for international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) as for UN agencies. IASC members must make explicit the minimum responsibility at country level and consider how this will be delivered in a variety of contexts. This should include frank discussion of the extent to which current commitments to service provision are resourced and met, how to ensure that the community engagement and

5 <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-champion-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-and-sexual-harassment/iasc-vision-and-strategy-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-and-sexual-harassment-pseah-2022>

complaints mechanisms are contextualised and staffed by trained personnel, and how to ensure that IASC members' investigation mechanisms are victim- and survivor-centred. Clarity on what is expected of partners and how they may be supported to comply with the VCA will also be required.

Unless you have a strong investigation mechanism you will never get on top of it. Zero tolerance doesn't mean no cases, it means acting and being seen to act when cases occur (Resident Coordinator/ Humanitarian Coordinator).

How many complaints mechanisms are we going to fund until we admit that they do not work? We still sit in air-conditioned offices expecting survivors to come to us (Senior Manager at global level).

Resourcing and responding to victim and survivor needs must be understood to be a shared responsibility across IASC members and cannot, as now, be the sole responsibility of service providers.

Planning and applying an IASC VCA must include consideration of sexual harassment as part of the 2018 commitment by IASC Principals to sustain their focus on changing the culture of the humanitarian sector, to address the inherent power differentials that enable SEAH and the delivery models that do not adequately challenge gender inequality.

In summary, the establishment of an IASC-wide VCA, one that can be delivered by all IASC members, was agreed to be a critical first step in providing the necessary detail for a renewed IASC PSEAH strategy. Articulating targets and timelines to support the existing strategic outcomes and ensuring that the monitoring framework and indicators mirror the commitments in the VCA will reinforce this focus.

Conclusion

Many of those interviewed felt that the reporting to senior global leadership on PSEAH progress over the decade had routinely been too reassuring. The reporting was overly focused on activities and not sufficiently centred on the challenges of ensuring predictable systems or humanitarian sector cultural change. In the future, the focus should be on monitoring, including qualitative and real-time monitoring, instead of a singular reliance on quantitative reporting.

Work to adequately mainstream PSEA risk assessment and mitigation responsibility across all clusters and sectors systematically has not yet been undertaken. This is required to ensure that identified risks are addressed in the design and monitoring of programmes and to reinforce the principle that PSEA is a responsibility of all humanitarians and that zero tolerance on inactivity is now expected.

The extent and depth of change still needed and the imperative to finally deliver on previously agreed priorities made it critical that the IASC members move to a five-year IASC Strategy and planning cycle. This is because the previous practice of planning for PSEAH at project level and on an annual

basis has not leveraged the investment and accountability required to make the necessary progress over the decade. In endorsing the new IASC Strategy the IASC member agencies are agreeing to work systematically over the medium- to longer-term to ensure and resource the change required.

Moira Reddick is an independent consultant who conducted both the 2010 and the 2021 External IASC PSEAH Reviews.

A challenging journey: from systems change to culture change

Andrew Morley

Box 1 The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Championship

The **IASC Championship** was established in 2011 to provide political leadership at the highest level on the issue of preventing sexual exploitation and abuse, with a more recent extension to cover the harassment that is often an enabler of abuse. Since then, the post has been held by four UN chief executives, William Swing (2011–2017), Henrietta Fore (2017–2019), Filippo Grandi (2019–2020) and Natalia Kanem (2021–2022).

The 2021 IASC External Review of Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment⁶ identified the critical importance of ‘a sustained focus on changing the culture of the humanitarian sector’. In February 2022 the IASC Principals agreed that one of the Championship priorities would focus on culture change, specifically ‘ensuring that the sector actively evidences a zero-tolerance approach for inaction on SEA’. Progressing towards this formal prioritisation, in November 2021 the the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) convened a small group of SCHR and IASC Principals to challenge each other to go radically further on preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

The meeting was not about the progress the sector has made, which is significant, but about how we could further challenge ourselves as leaders in terms of changing the culture of the humanitarian sector to dramatically improve the prevention of abuse in the sector. This article explores one of those critical shifts: our assumptions about abuse and the practical ways we, as humanitarian leaders, can counter these assumptions.

6 <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-champion-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-and-sexual-harassment/2021-iasc-external-review-pseash>. This global review provides an independent assessment of progress since the IASC Review of PSEA in 2010 and considers the impact and effectiveness of the IASC approach to PSEAH.



PSEA awareness raising. Credit: Lotus Flower

Despite some high-profile failings, there have been significant efforts aimed at preventing abuse in the sector, particularly around the introduction of broadly agreed codes of conduct and the development of tools such as the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme⁷ and agreed inter-agency policies to ensure perpetrators are unable to work in the sector.

Box 2 The Inter-Agency Misconduct Disclosure Scheme

The Inter-Agency Misconduct Disclosure Scheme facilitates the sharing of misconduct data between employers in compliance with data protection and privacy laws and without a central database. Since it was set up by SCHR in 2019, it has prevented the hiring of 144 known abusers by humanitarian organisations.

However, we believe that it is possible to go much further. We think that, with many of the systems in place, we now need to step up our investment in the much harder job of changing our underlying culture, the customary beliefs and social norms of our sector that guide how we work in crisis situations around the world.

7 You can find out more about the MDS at <https://misconduct-disclosure-scheme.org>

What's the problem?

A key, though inadvertent, flaw in our approaches to date has been a collective reliance on victims/survivors, overwhelmingly women, to drive accountability. Despite being some of the least powerful individuals in humanitarian contexts, we have expected them to not only survive abuse, but also to report what they have experienced or witnessed.

Those that choose to do so have to take the difficult step of formally reporting to our organisations or to local authorities, despite us knowing that, even with recent improvements in reporting mechanisms, the barriers to reporting remain daunting, as are the potential risks of doing so.

As a result, we know that reports represent only the tip of the iceberg and that most cases of exploitation and abuse, like other forms of gender-based violence, go unreported.⁸ This feeds into a humanitarian culture which, despite increasing awareness that abuse happens – a big step forward from two decades ago – still sees abuse as rare and exceptional.

Too often, humanitarians assume abuse is not happening unless we have reports to the contrary. This justifies a minimal level of preventive action, particularly when humanitarian organisations are stretched to deliver lifesaving aid across multiple crises. In the past, such relative inaction has been justified by the low number of abuse reports received globally, and the tiny number that received substantial media coverage.

However, to drive the culture change that we think necessary, we collectively need to recognise that abuse is, sadly, universal. It happens in every society, from the most to the least developed. In times of war, displacement and disaster, the extreme gender and power imbalances between those receiving and providing aid make it extremely likely that it will occur in large humanitarian responses.

Driving a shift in perceptions

Given the global prevalence of gender-based violence, with 35% or at least one in three women experiencing physical or sexual violence in their lifetime,⁹ we can safely infer that sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment is happening in our sector and organisations, even if we have limited or no reports. Even in a stable environment with strong rule of law, more than 80% of sexual offences are never reported to authorities, so it's highly unlikely that they aren't happening where women are compelled to rely on aid workers for life's essentials.

Acknowledging that we've made erroneous assumptions about abuse in the past provides us with an opportunity. If we are open with ourselves and others about the reality – and in recent months humanitarian leaders *have* been, particularly with regard to the Ukraine response – we no longer make

8 Palermo, Tia et al. "Tip of the iceberg: reporting and gender-based violence in developing countries." *American journal of epidemiology* vol. 179,5 (2014): 602-12. doi:10.1093/aje/kwt295

9 World Health Organisation, 2018: <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

the mistake of assuming that no reports means everything is fine. Making this leap means we can't take the stance that responding to reports received is enough. We must err on the side of safety and assume that no reports *is an issue in itself*, and therefore not a good indicator.

This is important, because it lifts the burden of triggering action from victims/survivors – those least able to and most at risk – to humanitarian organisations, their leaders and staff – those with the most power to prevent abuse.

This supports a genuine move to the system-wide safeguarding culture that we seek, and multiplies the impact of the systems and policy actions that have already been put in place. It's what zero tolerance to inaction could look like in practice. The implication is that inaction is *never* acceptable, because we're starting from a point where we understand that, without proactive efforts, abuse *will* be occurring.

This doesn't mean we're assuming this is inevitable, or that we can't do anything about it. The important thing is to make it clear that these wrongs are not the behaviour of 'bad apples', but are systemic and inevitable unless the root causes are addressed both by managers and the wider staff body.

Informed by this mindset shift, we can then tackle the why, and address it: if abuse is happening, why isn't it reported and what can we do to encourage reporting? Underreporting may be caused by a number of factors, including a lack of appropriate complaints mechanisms and knowledge of available services, fear of retaliation, a culture of impunity or stereotypical attitudes to survivors within law enforcement or courts.

Learning from experience

In 2021, World Vision International conducted a lessons learned process to identify strengths and areas for improvement in safeguarding, particularly in programmes located in fragile contexts or during emergency responses. Discussions focused on leadership, prevention, risk mitigation, reporting, proactive detection of violations and response to allegations. The most significant lesson that came out of this process was the need to address underreporting, and how to do so.

In order to increase reporting the sector needs to do two things proactively:

Build a humanitarian system-wide safeguarding culture and address staff behaviour

Leaders must regularly and repeatedly share and reinforce messaging from the top that the organisation has a culture and policy of zero tolerance for any form of sexual misconduct, sexual harassment or sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), and considers it unacceptable behaviour at any level.

Organisations must promote awareness among leaders that increased reporting is a sign that systems are working, and reward it when it happens. We must combat the mistaken belief that reporting is a bad sign in order to support strong, level-headed crisis and incident management. One option is to conduct

‘safeguarding awareness weeks’ and other leadership-led conversations at regular intervals, including when senior leadership team members and safeguarding focal points visit field offices. Leaders must remember to emphasise the need to report even unconfirmed information. In World Vision’s experience, when country directors speak often and repeatedly about zero tolerance and celebrate and acknowledge reporting, more reporting will occur.

Even with this in place, however, it is likely that the number of reports humanitarians get will still not accurately reflect the reality of abuse.

Prevention and action

Even once we have a culture that acknowledges the realities of abuse, reports will still be important because they move us from a general awareness that abuse is happening, to a specific awareness – where, to who and by whom. To prompt reporting of possible past incidents and determine barriers to reporting, a multi-disciplinary approach and corresponding engagement is needed.

Leaders, accountability and monitoring and evaluation teams, along with safeguarding specialists, should flag instances of little or no reporting to determine whether the organisation should conduct proactive targeted enquiries to detect and enable reporting of safeguarding violations. They should identify and collaborate with survivor-focused partners and service providers to conduct detection outreach and so enable communities to report safeguarding violations, and support managers to identify ‘moments’ in the programme cycle for proactive detection and discussion on safeguarding violations.

Humanitarians must expand the role of gender-balanced, field-facing and community engagement teams, including monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning, to include safeguarding detection, such as posing specific safeguarding questions during focus group discussions (FGDs) with the community that can elicit reporting. The purpose is to normalise discussions of safeguarding, underline zero tolerance policies and promote the use of confidential complaints mechanisms. In World Vision’s experience, FGDs with local women’s groups and faith leaders have proved to be a critical entry point for additional confidential reporting in high-risk environments.

It is also essential to introduce ‘spot checks’ during field visits (e.g. by calling in test complaints to ensure systems are working, and by discussing with community leaders their understanding of SEA and how to report it) to ensure the fulfilment of safeguarding focal point and field responsibilities. While organisational policy states zero tolerance and senior leaders in organisations such as World Vision are dealing with staff that do abuse community members, staff or beneficiaries, spot-checks help ensure that weak systems and abuse are detected at any level.

Country teams should set up and/or participate in interagency teams that proactively engage the community, talk about safeguarding and (in safe, gendered and appropriate ways) ask if violations have taken place. Some organisations, particularly local women’s organisations, will be more trusted than others, and interagency work can build on these strengths. Managers should request safeguarding

‘peer reviews’ or ‘health checks’ of programming from third parties (e.g. local women’s groups, health clusters, protection clusters, gender-based violence (GBV) clusters, PSEA networks, faith leaders and government ministries).

Conclusion

Collectively, aid leaders and humanitarians have made, and are making, good progress on instituting policies, systems and procedures (such as the MDS, ClearCheck, organisational safeguarding policies, reporting and complaints management systems and codes of conduct) and on requiring and measuring compliance against them.

These are essential, but not sufficient, for us to get ahead of the problem.

This article has covered just one of several shifts that humanitarian leaders have acknowledged need to be tackled and offers leaders and practitioners practical solutions in order to address under-reporting. While not the subject of this article, accountability must follow. Following robust investigations and adherence to due process, perpetrators must lose their jobs and if appropriate be prosecuted when abuse or exploitation occurs.

Most recently, in the Ukraine conflict response, despite no public cases of abuse by aid workers being reported, high-level leaders from the UN and NGOs, under the auspices of the IASC and UNHCR, have already met in Geneva to review risks and identify actions, and speak regularly with frontline coordinators in the response.

Moving forward, humanitarians must: (1) assume that, even with safeguards in place, abuse will continue to happen; (2) assume that underreporting exists; and (3) implement vigorous and proactive prevention and detection. These three actions will be key to establishing a culture of zero tolerance to inaction. Changing culture is not an easy task but, guided by the experience of victims/survivors and affected people, it’s one we need to rise to.

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Tackling sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers: what has changed 20 years on?

Asmita Naik

Over 20 years ago, in response to the first global scandal on sex-for-aid in West Africa in 2002, I argued that a humanitarian watchdog was the only way of providing redress for victims of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by aid workers. Today, following the resurgence of the issue with the 2018 Oxfam scandal, the need for independent accountability remains as high but the likelihood of it happening, ever more remote.

In 2001, I was part of a team comprised of staff from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Save the Children, which unexpectedly uncovered allegations of **sexual exploitation of refugee children by aid workers in West Africa**. The scale was truly shocking, implicating some 70 perpetrators, 40 child victims and 40 aid agencies, and involving the most egregious abuses – humanitarian workers demanding sex from children in exchange for desperately needed aid supplies, such as biscuits, soap and medicine. The allegations spanned several refugee camps hundreds of miles apart in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone.

When the story came to light in February 2002, it prompted a frenzy of media attention. Donor and aid agencies alike expressed horror. On the one hand, there were genuine efforts to address these abuses; for example, the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC) set up the Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises in March 2002. But there was also a darker side to the response, a denigration of the victims by some in the humanitarian community, with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees at the time, Ruud Lubbers,¹⁰ going on public record to **disparage these claims**. Despite this backlash there was eventually a sound policy response due to pressure from some in the donor and aid community. The 2003 **UN Secretary-General's bulletin** set out the first ever global policy on this issue, which continues to apply today. However, there was little in the way of **practical change**: the allegations were not promptly or adequately investigated, perpetrators were not sanctioned, no one in management was held accountable and the victims did not achieve redress.

When the Oxfam case came to light in 2018, it brought a strong sense of déjà vu to those of us involved in the earlier scandal, alongside renewed hope that finally something would be done. In the intervening years, stories about peacekeepers occasionally made headlines but sexual exploitation by aid workers still simmered below the surface of humanitarian operations. The IASC and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) (predecessor of the Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance) continued to quietly develop policies and guidelines on SEA that were poised and ready for implementation by 2018. Those of us who had been watching this space for years were optimistic that the time for action had come.

¹⁰ Lubbers **left office in 2005** following allegations of sexual harassment.



Victims receive psychological support from the TPO (Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation) NGO to recover from trauma and resume their daily activities. Credit: OCHA/Alioune NDIAYE

The Oxfam UK and Save the Children UK scandals of 2018 brought unprecedented attention to the issue of sex abuse in aid; on the back of the Me Too movement, and powered by the British media, the stories rebounded globally. The policy response was swift and assertive, with UK aid in the dock; the British government was central to the response and convened a [global safeguarding summit](#). Much [activity followed](#) at policy level, with new strategies, multilateral coordinating mechanisms, and agreements such as the Development Assistance Committee's [Recommendation on Ending Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance](#). There was investment in new initiatives, with millions spent on employment cycle schemes aimed at preventing perpetrators from acquiring jobs in the sector;¹¹ capacity-building hubs and training schemes; programmes for victims and survivors; and efforts to strengthen investigations, oversight and data collection. There was also independent scrutiny from the [UK Parliament's International Development Committee](#), which provided real-time accountability for decisions and actions taken.

With all this energy and activity, one would hope for evidence of impact three years on, but the signs are not promising. The New Humanitarian exposed extensive [sexual abuse by aid workers from the World Health Organization and other agencies in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#) in late 2020 – a sure

¹¹ See, for example, discussion about Interpol's Project Soteria; the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme; the Aid Worker Registration Scheme; and the UN [Clear Check system](#).

sign that the high-level activity was not translating into real change. Moreover, two recent reviews find inadequate progress. The [IASC external review](#) finds that despite standards and guidance being in place, the ‘pace of progress has not been steady’ with particular gaps relating to accountability to victims and communities. It concludes by calling for an investment in and scaling up of actions at country level. The [Independent Commission for Aid Impact \(ICAI\)](#), a UK body which oversees UK aid, is similarly critical of a lack of accountability to affected populations, a ‘top-down approach’ and an ‘imbalance in favour of global, high-level initiatives, with less focus on the grassroots and operational levels’.

These are damning conclusions given the widespread [commitments](#) made in 2018. What has gone wrong? Above all, there has been a fundamental failure by those leading the charge to build on what had come before; the standards, policies and practices developed under IASC, HAP and the like were ripe for implementation, there was no need to reinvent the wheel with new high-level strategies, coordination mechanisms and talking shops.

Yet there was still a desperate need to invest in actions on the ground, to inform affected communities of their rights, to enable them to raise concerns, to investigate their complaints and to provide redress. These are the key steps in achieving any kind of cultural change: set standards, enforce them, create deterrents and thereby change behaviour. I advocated for this [back in 2002](#); first-hand experience of the West Africa scandal had shown me the difficulties in reporting and the sheer happenstance and unknown ripple effects that led to a global news story sufficient to prompt action. In 2018, I and other seasoned experts made renewed calls for mechanisms to give victims a voice,¹² an approach which resonated with the Dutch government’s response to this issue and led to a [feasibility study on an international ombudsman for aid](#) but regrettably little else other than [more research](#).

Instead, the early and heavy investment by leaders in the aid sector was in employment cycle schemes, based on the naive assumption that all would be well if organisations could avoid hiring perpetrators – disregarding the fact that perpetrators have to be identified first, which requires functioning complaints mechanisms and investigative and disciplinary processes. This approach put the cart before the horse. The ICAI review concludes that such schemes ‘have inherent limitations’ and calls for a cost-benefit analysis. This is a finding echoed by the IASC review, which shows little difference being made as of mid-2021. For example, the UN Clear Check system has only screened out one individual as compared to 75 by the NGO MDS. Both figures raise concerns about the capacity for and standardisation of investigations and disciplinary processes across organisations.

The sector was likewise taken down other futile and ineffectual paths that did not help to focus on the SEA of beneficiary victims by aid workers, through the introduction of the hitherto unused and nebulous

12 See Hilhorst, D. (2018) ‘Aid agencies can’t police themselves. It’s time for a change’, *The New Humanitarian*, 22 February (www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2018/02/22/aid-agencies-can-t-police-themselves-it-s-time-change); Naik, A. (2018) ‘Trial by media not the answer to safeguarding concerns’, *Civil Society*, 17 May (www.civilsociety.co.uk/voices/asmita-naik-trial-by-media-not-the-answer-to-safeguarding-concerns.html); and expert testimony to the UK Parliament International Development Committee, ‘[Progress on tackling the sexual exploitation and abuse of aid beneficiaries](#)’, 15 December 2020.

concept of ‘safeguarding’; the conflation of traditional protection programming aimed at addressing external threats with the internal risks posed by organisations and their staff; the fusion of abuses against beneficiaries with abuses against staff resulting in a detraction in focus from those most vulnerable and lacking in recourse; the pursuit of criminal justice solutions for behaviours that either do not reach the criminal threshold or do not have a realistic prospect of criminal conviction; and the blind transference of approaches used in stable Western democracies for tackling child abuse and sexual violence into war-torn contexts without any semblance of the rule of law.

These approaches were driven by new and influential players lacking in experience and a willingness to listen. But fundamentally, the lack of progress points to insufficient political will and reluctance by donors to move beyond rhetoric and bureaucracy to actually funding operations on the ground. The UK government, likely one of the donors that has invested the most in this area, has nevertheless not provided sufficient funds to national and local organisations for implementation activities, according to the recent ICAI review. These findings have been echoed [elsewhere](#).

The investment choices also reveal a good deal of self-interest on the part of aid organisations. Flagship initiatives, such as the impractical and ethically questionable [global aid worker register](#) are being pursued whilst the ombudsman proposal that sought to hold organisations to account has been [shelved](#). This is likely for the same reason it was abandoned back in the early 2000s, when it was explored following the Rwandan genocide; namely, the resistance of aid organisations to [external scrutiny](#) and the complicity of donors in allowing them to be unaccountable, presumably because other common interests take precedence. The IASC review, too, found that UN member agencies preferred to handle their own complaints rather than participate in joint and more transparent efforts to respond to concerns from affected communities. Whilst there has been funding for victims and survivors (alongside, for example, investigations), these are comparatively smaller scale and have come too late to effect change. Instead, initiatives aimed at protecting the reputation of aid organisations or tackling other societal problems (such as terrorism or organised crime) under the guise of tackling SEA, appear to take priority.

Whilst the progress at systematic level is disappointing, the heightened attention to SEA has brought about some welcome changes. Coordination efforts have brought in a wider range of players than were involved before, including the private sector and bilateral donors. It has prompted some organisations to take their own concerted action, for instance, by strengthening investigations systems or setting up their own ombuds-type mechanisms for beneficiaries. Some donors, such as the [US](#) and [UK](#) have increased oversight of their own programmes, and thus provided some level of recourse for complainants who have nowhere else to turn. Most importantly, the renewed attention on this issue has led some to explore what the implementation of SEA standards means in practice. The [Girls’ Education Challenge](#), for example, has an operating model that consists of very hands-on support to partners on the ground, making them aware of standards, building their capacity and helping them with the management and investigation of complaints. This encouraging experience shows that ‘[protection is possible](#)’ but that it requires serious investment.

The past three years have reinforced what we already know is necessary to making a difference – operational action to raise awareness of rights, to provide mechanisms for complaints and to carry out robust investigations and follow-up. This requires donors to turn away from partisan interests and misguided initiatives that do not work, and to be willing to genuinely stand on the side of beneficiaries, to provide implementing organisations with the funds they need to take action (rather than simply setting standards for them) and then be ready to hold them to account. The global media spotlight has moved on and is unlikely to visit again until there's a new generation ready to be shocked by the incongruity of aid workers causing harm to those they are supposed to help. Without this, it falls on the integrity of the aid sector, donors and implementers alike, to do what's needed to ensure beneficiaries of aid are protected from aid organisations themselves.

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Humanitarians need a systemic approach to addressing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment

David Gressly

Twenty years ago, I had to deal with a sexual exploitation scandal involving UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations in Guinea, which was receiving tens of thousands of refugees fleeing Liberia and Sierra Leone. I came to Guinea in 2001 to scale up UNICEF's emergency operation. By 2002, dozens of aid agencies in the three affected countries were implicated in horrendous misconduct, including trading food rations for sex. The perpetrators were both national and international staff.

Having just started to scale up, UNICEF was not implicated in the scandal and therefore the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator asked me to lead a task force to manage our collective response in Guinea. I received the full cooperation of all the other agency heads. They were equally appalled by the behaviour and very much focused on fixing it.

We set up a collective system to manage cases, reach out to the community and provide victim assistance. Today these are part of our toolkit to deal with exploitation and abuse. At that time, what we were doing was new, certainly in Guinea. We educated our staff and communities and put in place codes of conduct.



At a womens support center in Al Turbah, women make clothes and jewelry that they can then sell at the shop in the building. The center provide support to women who have undergone emotional trauma from the six year old Yemen war. Credit: Giles Clarke for UNOCHA

I learned that codes of conduct can go a long way in changing behaviour in situations where staff may not understand what constitutes sexual exploitation. Many staff simply did not understand that marrying a girl under 18 is a violation of UN values that all staff must adhere to. Codes of conduct and education also remind potential perpetrators that someone is watching. Community outreach focus groups discussions helped us find out what was happening under the radar. If you're not aware of issues, you cannot act to manage and improve the situation.

Disciplinary action is also required as a deterrent, but even then some staff will continue to perpetrate abuse. Guinea reinforced for me that zero tolerance does not mean zero cases. It means we refuse to tolerate the cases that come to our attention. More importantly, we must be proactive in trying to identify cases to limit the problem to an absolute minimum to the extent possible.

The team response we implemented in Guinea rapidly reduced incidences of abuse. Guinea showed me that the humanitarian community can address this problem when there is unity of purpose and commitment.

We have been surprised by scandal after scandal after scandal

In the 20 years since Guinea, we have been surprised by scandal after scandal after scandal. Horrendous cases over the past decade underscore how aid workers remain part of the problem. In my view, one reason we continue to grapple with the issue is that humanitarian operations rely on focal points and goodwill, rather than a formal structure with full-time staffing. That makes it difficult to apply the systemic approach required.

My thinking on addressing sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) evolved when I was the Deputy Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in charge of operations in South Sudan, which was part of Sudan when I joined in 2004. Because of my experiences in Guinea and the major fallout from sex scandals involving the United Nations Mission in Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) at the time, it was imperative to get ahead of the issue before the major scale up in South Sudan of both the UN peacekeeping mission and humanitarian operations, which had largely been working across the border in Lokichogio in Kenya. This still provided opportunities for abuse, but it was not the day-to-day contact that would come with a large number of people on the ground.

I reached out to major donors who contributed funds to set up a small unit tasked with the prevention of SEA in the humanitarian operation. That had not been done proactively before. We worked with everyone on the same issues and set up the same structures that we had in Guinea. Our initiative worked well. We had a strong team that did a lot of community work. There were cases even at the leadership level of the UN Country Team. Importantly, we were able to act quickly and take corrective action. The cases we became aware of were promptly dealt with by the agency concerned.

I was also fortunate to have a conversation with the journalist who broke the scandal in MONUC. She explained that brigade and whole battalion deployments are mostly in barracks and reasonably controlled. That is less true of smaller military deployments at the company level. She said you really have to focus on the individual police and the military observers living in the community because there's no monitoring of their behaviour. This was true. Personnel in communities are in the best position to exploit people if they choose to do so. The same applies to humanitarian workers in similar frontline positions.

Some UN agencies and international NGOs have over the years developed robust systems for dealing with SEA. By themselves, they would not need a system-wide approach to deal with the problem because it is ingrained in their work culture. But not all UN agencies and NGOs have strong internal systems, which is why a strong inter-agency system is required.

Scandals such as the ones in Haiti and in eastern DRC in 2020, when I was serving as the Emergency Ebola Response Coordinator, show that SEA is still pervasive and is not dealt with in a proactive way. The scandal in DRC was on a scale I had never seen before. It showed the underlying weakness in agencies and NGOs addressing abuse and exploitation of the very people we are sent to the field to help. What

was surprising was that, after massive humanitarian efforts over 25 years, there was still no systemic approach to preventing SEA. Neither the ethos nor the systems were present to detect the massive exploitation taking place.

Learning lessons from UN peacekeeping

For years, many humanitarians viewed SEA as a problem principally with peacekeepers. There are still cases, but a lot of commendable work has gone into addressing this issue in peacekeeping and not tolerating this behaviour. The assessed budget and a unified command structure in peacekeeping helps, and there is a team in every peacekeeping mission that is there to address this problem. The ethos says, 'we will not tolerate this'. This is a career-ending issue if it happens on your watch. While there are still cases, the approach is working. Contingents that were abusive in 2005 have really come around and understand that this is unacceptable. We get far fewer cases, and they are dealt with systematically and transparently.

When I was with the UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC (the follow-on to MONUC), we brought in a new contingent that quickly became involved in SEA, particularly in villages. Complicity from people in the villages resulted in silence around the abuse, because communities wanted the troops to remain to protect them against attack, and because they benefited economically from their presence. As a result, it took longer to uncover the abuse.

On learning of the scandal, I briefed the country's ambassador to the DRC as a courtesy, while formal notification went to the permanent mission. I explained to him what was about to happen. He was furious, saying 'how dare you impugn our troops. This is unacceptable'. I explained that there was a protocol where his country would be requested to send a team to do the actual investigation. The military team his country sent to investigate found that the allegations were true. A couple of months later, the same thing happened with the same contingent. I went to see the ambassador. This time he remained calm and said 'we need to deal with it together'. The allegation was again proved true. The third time it happened, he knew immediately why I had come to see him. He bowed his head and said, 'I'm ashamed for my country'.

That's the evolution you can get with a systemic approach. You have to get to the point where people accept that everyone on their team is not necessarily good. Organisations are a collection of human beings with a collection of behaviours. It is shameful when it happens, and we need to find a way to solve it.

Humanitarians are not yet at that level. We do not have a systematic approach and we are not transparent. Peacekeeping will notify the public of each allegation, while keeping confidential information confidential. But the world is alerted. We don't do that in the humanitarian sector. We may deal with cases internally, but where is the transparency? While many agencies and INGOs now have robust systems for the prevention of SEA, not all do. The result is that we are all tarnished when there is a case. There is no systemic assurance that the broader humanitarian community is capable of preventing SEA.

That is where we are in 2022 – more than 20 years after the scandal in West Africa.

To change our culture we need the support of donors – not merely financial support, but a shared accountability. There are three important ways we can partner with donors to address this issue properly.

1. **Ensure that every major humanitarian operation sets up the inter-NGO/UN systems required to manage this problem.** This includes everything from community outreach and victim assistance to ensuring transparency. It also requires a dedicated team of senior staff experienced and trained in this area to deploy at the very start of the operation.
2. **Apply measures so that every organisation in the operation and those supporting it buy into the system.** That includes everyone from the smallest NGO up to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Principals. We have to do this collectively. Donors need to say: ‘if you are not part of that collective, we are not funding your work’.
3. **Create a compact between donors, UN agencies and NGOs that requires us to tackle the problem systematically, and that it be funded upfront.** Otherwise, time and resources are wasted chasing funding while the problem has the opportunity to assert itself at the start of each operation.

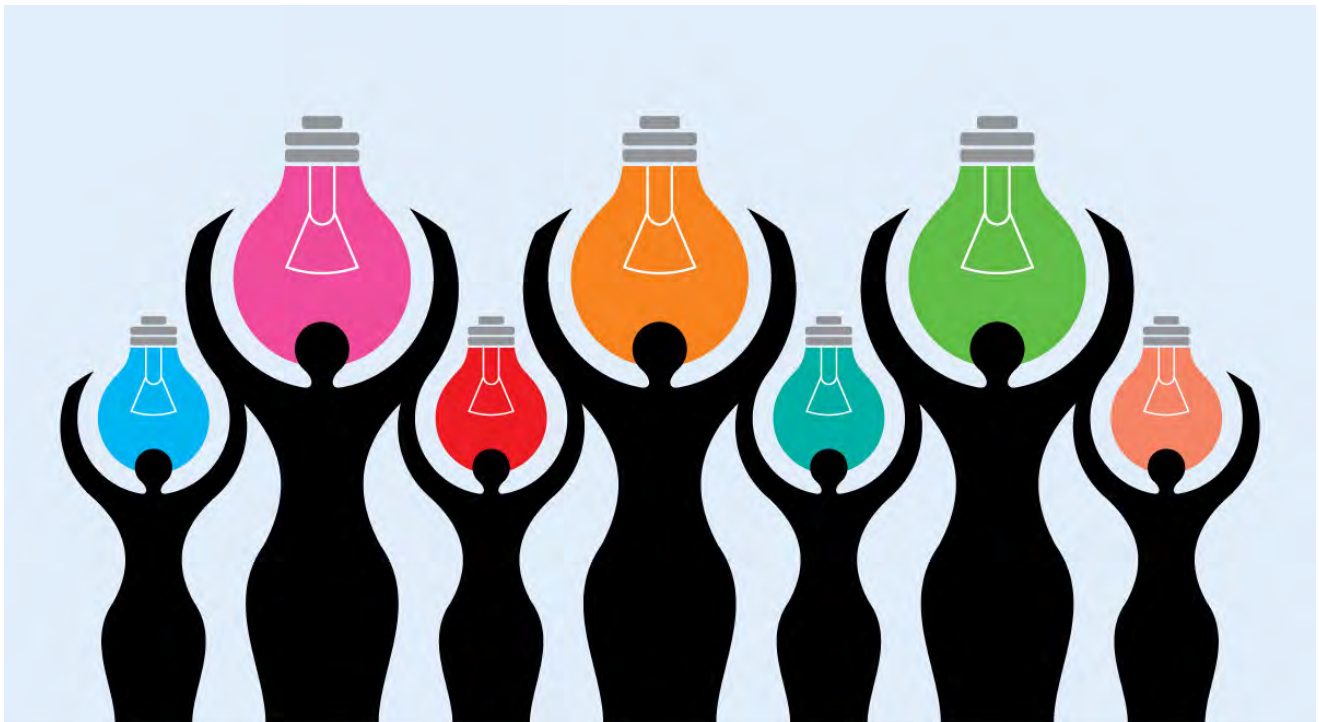
We have learned costly lessons over the past 20 years. There is no excuse for not applying them.

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Post-#aidtoo: are we setting ourselves up to fail?

Hannah Clare and Carolyn Bys

As Safeguarding practitioners focused on preventing and responding to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH), we often forgo critical reflection on what works and what doesn’t in a constant push to ‘do something’ in response to #aidtoo. Many would agree we are yet to see meaningful impact from the significant attention to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) since 2018. And questions are now being raised about how new resources are being used. A recent [Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(IASC\) Review](#) of progress on PSEA 20 years on from the report on the [2002 West Africa food aid for sex scandal](#) concluded that ‘the IASC has not clearly articulated the change that was desired, set measurable targets, or monitored the effectiveness of activities. IASC activity has been siloed’.



‘Are we ready to act on solutions?’ Credit: Adobe Stock Photo / artqu

Are we repackaging tools instead of investing in qualified people to execute them?

Meanwhile, an abundance of new, heavily branded tools have flooded the aid world in the rush to be seen to be doing something about the problem. But what is remarkable about many of these products is actually how unremarkable they are. One would be hard-pressed to find more comprehensive technical guidance on how to carry out a PSEA investigation, or on what constitutes a ‘safe’ complaints mechanism, than in the pioneering [Building Safer Organisations \(BSO\) Handbook](#) published by ICVA in 2007. The BSO handbook is much easier to use than the [IASC 287-page behemoth on inter-agency complaints mechanisms](#) published in 2016, and provides a more appropriate checklist within a much more comprehensive toolkit than the 2020 UNICEF PSEA Toolkit for partners, or countless other [similar attempts](#). It’s taken more than seven years for practitioners to make the case that the IASC should have focused on enforcing BSO standards at the individual agency level instead of creating new tools.

A [2019 Oxfam case study](#) listing community barriers to reporting in Myanmar repeats [familiar findings first raised from work on the Thai-Myanmar border between 2007 and 2010](#), as if it is saying something new. And PSEA standards, although now helpfully simplified and [translated](#) into dozens of languages, still contain the same wording more or less unchanged since they were first drafted 20 years ago. One could be forgiven for losing interest.

A lack of political will to change is scarcely better evidenced, though, than in the narrative that it is too difficult to find people with the relevant skills and experience to do this work. This statement is not only untrue, but it has also made it easier for leadership to avoid more meaningful change by justifying a

general failure to hire or listen enough to practitioners who could get results (including higher reporting rates). High turnover among practitioners plays a significant part in weakening enforcement systems that take time to set up.

Instead, the sector has favoured experience in aid (often in bureaucratic programme management positions) over experience and solid understanding of sexual violence, case and investigation work. Experience in these areas is probably easier to adapt to aid than the other way around, but we lack competent recruitment and talent retention strategies to back this up. Subsequently, it is usually investigators who are last on the scene after managers or human resources have already taken action, often failing to follow proper procedures. Common examples include prematurely informing the accused they are under investigation (in some cases to warn them), appointing investigators who have conflicts of interest to lead case work and carrying out preliminary ‘fact finding’ before investigation planning thereby ruining the possibility of protecting affected parties and evidence (and in some cases rendering it impossible to investigate because it is poor practice to investigate the same case twice).

The recent [ICAI review](#) into UK safeguarding investment found that, despite strengthening FCDO’s internal investigation capacity, significant barriers to conducting fair investigations persisted inside the organisation, including failure to protect whistleblowers from retaliation or to enforce disciplinary processes for those found guilty of wrongdoing. Investigatory work still hasn’t been recognised as the highly skilled and risky work it is.

Are we avoiding accountability because we are still grappling with the basics?

It seems we still have a long way to go before meeting the recommendations of the original IASC PSEA Plan of Action, when the UN first coined the term ‘PSEA’. That report highlighted the importance of creating an environment that prevents abuses of power through ‘enhanced beneficiary participation in all aspects of humanitarian programming’, including ‘dissemination of information on beneficiary rights, entitlements, responsibilities and complaint procedures’. Yet, little has changed in our approach over the last two decades, even though [we now know more](#). Meaningful community participation in both the design and the delivery of assistance is key to safe aid work. The ICAI review also highlighted these deficiencies, noting that, while FCDO requires aid organisations to consult with populations and respond to feedback, there is no systematic oversight over whether this is done, or how well. Without accountability or quality measurements, it becomes yet another box-ticking exercise, rather than a meaningful effort to engage with affected populations.

It is not only in design that we meet dilemmas: it is also in structures and practices. Despite an obvious conflict of interest, for example, it is still commonplace to find that humanitarian agencies responsible for camp management (and residency permits) also have responsibility for camp complaints mechanisms by default. This is not considered a conflict, and yet complainants, just like whistleblowers inside agencies, can suffer severe consequences for reporting abuse, including forced repatriation, because they report against someone who is well connected in the agency. Abuse of power thrives in environments lacking information and transparency.

There are also issues with how we learn of SEA and sexual violence in communities. Unlike in academia or other sectors, we aren't asked to follow **strict ethical guidance**, and it shows. We often raise expectations and carry out unnecessary focus group discussions in protection programming, or re-question people who have already reported abuse. We are usually unprepared to respond to disclosures when they happen, and veer close to voyeurism which quickly lends itself to irresponsible interactions. Although it is good practice not to invite disclosures of sexual violence without being prepared to offer access to quality-assured services, in aid work this is often done as a general 'point of interest' rather than being viewed as a specific type of programming (requiring a responsible approach and planning) in and of itself.

Also concerning is the fact that, rather than aligning with movements like decolonising aid and localisation, which seek to deconstruct the same structural power imbalances and inequality that facilitate SEAH in the first place, the sector seems to favour **siloeing into Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)** and 'organisational culture change' initiatives – both of which run the serious risk of performatism if not accompanied by a genuine commitment to sharing and distributing power fairly.¹³

None of this is surprising when we consider that aid has historically been resistant to adopting systems which could promote external accountability. The Dutch government commissioned a **scoping exercise** which led to recommendations for an international ombudsman in 2018, but this has disappeared from discussions. Recognising that NGOs can also harm human rights, existing business and human rights instruments (written by several NGOs) have already been suggested as a '**moderate avenue for NGO accountability**'.¹⁴ But aid has been too slow to find value in risk management and external scrutiny, even where functional systems already exist.

Are we borrowing from GBV case management to avoid organisational responsibility?

Prior to #aidtoo, sexual misconduct investigation experts were few and far between, although gender-based violence (GBV) programmes were becoming more common thanks to **Sustainable Development Goal 5** on gender equality. This led to an infusion of GBV principles from the case management context into workplace sexual misconduct investigations, causing much confusion about obligations and best practices.

The crux of the GBV approach is reflected in the mantra-like invocation of the term 'survivor-centred', and its four key principles – safety, confidentiality, respect for self-determination and non-discrimination. Keep in mind that the term 'survivor-centred' has largely emerged from a body of work addressing GBV case management in humanitarian and other settings, especially where NGOs fill in the gaps where

13 For a discussion about the importance of shifting power in Safeguarding, see, Nour Abu-Assab, N. and Nasser-Eddin, N. (2021) **Organisational Safeguarding Best Practices and Procedures: A Toolkit Towards Transnational Intersectional Feminist Accountability Frameworks to Respond to Exploitation, Assault, Abuse, Harassment and Bullying**. (CTDC and WILPF), pgs. 22-23.

14 Carolei, D. and Bernaz, N. (2021) 'Accountability for Human Rights: Applying Business and Human Rights Instruments to Non-Governmental Organizations' *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Volume 13, Issue 3, Pages 507–528, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huabo42>

government-offered services aimed at healing and recovery are absent. The survivor-centred approach was first promoted by those ‘engaged in violence against women programming’, and international GBV guidance highlights the need ‘to prioritize the rights, needs, and wishes of the survivor’.

Those key principles are highly relevant to the goals of case management – to connect a survivor with healing and recovery support services and resources (mental health, medical, legal or other emergency support) and follow up in a coordinated way. When addressing the needs of any survivor of violence, safety should always be the leading principle. There must be informed consent (respecting confidentiality) when sharing a survivor’s personal information to access support services. The role of the case manager is to inform and support, with the adult survivor exercising self-determination regarding whether they access support services or report crimes to law enforcement. Consistent with anti-discrimination laws, case managers must not discriminate in their service work based on a survivor’s identity, which includes characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, disability, race/ethnicity or religion.

SEAH and GBV may overlap conceptually as both address sexual harms. However, GBV programmes are directed at sexual violence that generally occurs in communities. SEAH violations focus more narrowly on staff misusing their positions of authority and causing harm through the scope of their employment; this is reflected in the prohibitions on creating hostile working environments through sexual advances and comments, and trading organisational jobs, resources or aid for sex. These types of violations directly affect organisational legal responsibility and liability for ending harms caused by their staff and for the safety of both the targeted individual and others.¹⁵ ‘Survivor-centred’ principles, especially confidentiality and self-determination, are increasingly being interpreted in this context to disavow any of the exceptions enumerated in GBV guidance, together with the IASC Six Core Principles that require humanitarian workers to pass on reports they receive to those in their organisations properly trained to handle them. Indeed, these principles are often invoked by managers as a way to avoid having to respond to reports. Rather than holding organisations to greater account, these principles are being used to deflect organisational responsibility, which is antithetical to their legal duty of care to both current survivors and those who could be harmed by staff.

While the terms ‘survivor’ or ‘victim-centred’ are used in a myriad of ways in connection with investigation and response,¹⁶ there is little operational guidance on what this means in practice.¹⁷ Even the recently updated [investigation guidance from the CHS Alliance](#) endorses a survivor-centred approach but does not specify which ‘extreme circumstances’ would allow an investigation to continue

15 See the article in this issue ‘[What kind of feminism is behind efforts to address sexual exploitation and abuse?](#)’ for an additional discussion on employer liability for sexual misconduct.

16 See usage of the term/concept in connection with SEA responses from [Bond](#), in the [UN Protocol on Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Involving Implementing Partners](#) para. 5, in the [UK Strategy on Safeguarding Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment within the Aid Sector](#), pg. 14; [USAID’s PSEA Policy](#), pg. 3.

17 For instance, [UNHCR policy on ‘victim-centred approach’ to sexual misconduct](#) seems to focus on the case management aspects of the report– connecting a victim with services and keeping them informed of the process.

when a survivor does not consent, or describe other ways to continue an investigation without the survivor's participation in order to meet an employer's obligations to prevent and correct harm. Similarly, USAID's [Office of Inspector General](#) noted in its audit of the USAID PSEA policy the lack of guidance on survivor-centred investigations or 'on how to balance the survivor's interests with the Agency's need to take action to prevent specific perpetrators from working on USAID awards'.

We can appreciate that past results from investigations led by under-qualified people have left many with little confidence in the process. However, rather than trying to shut down investigations entirely as a means to 'protect' survivors from re-traumatisation, we should be insisting on professionally led investigations by trauma-informed investigators and demanding that organisations take seriously their obligations to stop harm through a safe process.

Trauma-informed approaches are evidence-based and build on more than 30 years of research that help us to understand ways of interacting with a survivor that can contribute to, rather than detract from, their healing and recovery. The objective is to examine policies, procedures and practices and identify how they may negatively impact people who have experienced trauma.¹⁸ Using this approach is a better way to address the legitimate concerns that some survivor advocates have for a survivor's physical and emotional safety in an investigation or accountability process. We also know that given their experience with sexual violence (and research which suggests that 70% of people experience trauma in their lifetimes), there is a high likelihood that in dealing with reports of SEAH, we may encounter survivors impacted by trauma.

Trauma-informed approaches also have guiding principles which are more consistent with employer obligations in relation to harm caused by their staff. The first is safety, and the most significant overlap with survivor-centred principles: it means organisations have to fully acknowledge the breadth of their safety obligations to both end harm by staff and ensure they are not creating new harm in the process. Second is transparency – being open about the organisation's responsibilities and obligations, as well as its limitations.

Third is collaboration and voice, where survivors are given space, within a fair and objective process that is transparently explained, to provide input on the actions an organisation proposes to take, especially with regard to survivors' own physical and psychological safety. This approach should facilitate more harms being reported at earlier stages, with a corollary need to expand processes beyond the investigate/do not investigate binary, which can be a huge barrier to survivor participation. This in turn should allow more space for survivor choice on meaningful options to stop and correct harms, such as [restorative practices](#). At their core, restorative practices focus on harms and centre the needs of the individuals involved, recognising that wrongs result in obligations to repair harm through a participatory and engaged process. Last is cultural humility, where we defer to the survivor's lived experience to help us understand how we can best address barriers to their participation in the investigation process.

¹⁸ For a further discussion on the trauma-informed approach, see [SAMHSA's Concepts of Trauma and Guidance on a Trauma-Informed Approach](#).

‘Survivor-centred’ is a term used to advocate for individual survivors during case work. In the investigation process we advocate the use of ‘trauma-informed’, which encourages investigators to examine processes and practices through a trauma lens to generate system-level change and improve reporting and investigation practice at all levels. We should be drawing on the plethora of similar applications, including investigations of sexual violence, that already exist.¹⁹

Despite sometimes heavy criticism, our goal here is to bring more consciousness to the choices that have been made in establishing the PSEAH agenda, from its inception to the latest push post-#aidtoo. Progress is slow because we have invested effort in reinventing the wheel rather than delivering better aid, investing in the right expertise or solving conundrums like those presented here.

Is it possible that, four years on, we are better able to evidence what the problem looks like and less willing to act on the solutions? If so, we run the serious risk of squandering any trust we already have in the systems we have already built.

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What kind of feminism is behind efforts to address sexual exploitation and abuse?

Carolyn Bys

What brand of feminism is driving efforts to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), and is it helping us to achieve desired change? When we proclaim affinity with Black Lives Matter and decolonising aid, does that also require re-examining the feminism being used to tackle Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)?

19 Trauma-informed approaches are being adapted and applied to a wide variety of related contexts, including investigating sexual misconduct on [university campuses](#) and in [workplaces](#), as well as in [criminal anti-trafficking prosecutions](#), [criminal investigations of sexual violence](#), and integrated into [model policy for law enforcement response to all crime victims](#). At the international level, UNITAD published a [Trauma-Informed Field Investigations Guide](#). It is likewise being applied in all sorts of similar contexts in which we work more generally, in educational school settings, international [development projects](#), [peacebuilding activities](#), [workplaces](#) and in [organisations](#).

This article traces the feminist impulses behind the United Nations (UN) standards on PSEA promulgated nearly 20 years ago, and the current trends behind #aidtoo. It asks what feminisms are being left out of the discussion on approaches to sexual misconduct, often referred to as ‘safeguarding’, especially those emerging from a bottom-up, Global South perspective.



‘What kind of feminism?’ Credit: Adobe Stock Photo / melita

Mainstream feminism and its punitive or ‘carceral’ tendencies

The ‘governance feminism’²⁰ project traces the inclusion of feminist ideals that ‘walk the halls of power’ and have shaped advocacy strategies, policies, laws and treaties within governments and international institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In looking at what types of feminisms have been included, it also examines what feminist approaches have been put aside in that process and the unintended consequences.

Governance feminism has noted that increased prosecutions and convictions, both domestically and internationally, have largely been the measure of success in addressing gender-based violence.

20 The term was coined by the editors of two volumes of collected essays on tracing the role of feminism in influencing political and legal agendas. See: Halley, J., Kotiswaran, P., Rebouché, R. and Shamir, H. (2018) ‘Governance Feminism: An Introduction’. University of Minnesota Press: Minnesota, USA.

‘**Carceral feminism**’ is used to define this increasing turn by feminists to the criminal justice system as the means to end violence against women. While the radical feminism of the 1970s was grassroots, it found its way into power by connecting with the ‘tough on crime’ approach of the 1990s, and faced little resistance from right-wing politics.

Those carceral trends show up in many different violence against women projects, including the criminalisation of buying sex in an effort to eradicate ‘commercial sex’ as inherently exploitative, stricter standards for **establishing consent** in sex crime prosecutions, ‘no drop’ prosecution policies in intimate partner violence cases²¹ and an increased focus on prosecutions of conflict-related sexual violence in domestic and international courts.²²

Little has been written about the carceral feminist tendencies in the PSEA agenda.

What are the carceral tendencies in PSEA?

SEA is an umbrella term coined by the UN in order to address the fallout from the ‘sex for food’ scandals from 2002 and to address the sexually exploitative and abusive conduct committed by aid workers against aid recipients. Through the IASC Six Core Principles, the term has come to reflect prohibitions against paying for sex, soliciting sex, trading aid or jobs for sex, sexual activity with someone under the age of 18, sexual assault and includes attempts to regulate sexual relationships between workers and community members. Although the large majority of cases I have investigated involve employer code of conduct violations, not criminal conduct, the PSEA agenda has a strong thread of carceral-like punitive and exclusion measures as the solution to sexual misconduct that are further exacerbated by overly broad rules of sexual behaviour in codes of conduct. It generally fails to consider transformative, reparative and restorative models.

Punish-and-exclude regimes disproportionately affect national staff and local workers

The **Interagency Misconduct Disclosure Scheme (MDS)** creates a standardised format and platform for international NGOs (INGOs) to exchange reference checks, including specific disclosures of ongoing investigations or findings of sexual misconduct. The **Aid Worker Registration scheme** is exploring ways of ensuring all aid worker assignments are recorded (possibly with biometric data), to ensure no previous employers can be left off of reference checks. These efforts aim to stop ‘perpetrators of sexual misconduct from moving between organisations undetected’. Others have previously raised concerns about these schemes citing the lack of consistency across the sector in defining and applying sexual misconduct provisions and corollary concerns about fair processes, supported by proper investigative capacity, as well as privacy concerns for collecting aid worker biometric data when organisations have

21 Goodmark, L. (2019) ‘The Unintended Consequences of Domestic Violence Criminalization: Reassessing a Governance Feminist Success Story’ in: Halley, J., Kotiswaran, P., Rebouché, R. and Shamir, H. (eds.) *Governance Feminism: Notes from the Field*. University of Minnesota Press: Minnesota, USA.

22 Engle, K., Nesiya, V. and Otto, D. (2020) ‘Feminist Approaches to International Law’ in: Dunoff, J. and Pollack, M. (eds.) *International Legal Theory: Foundations and Frontiers*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK.

had **aid recipient data stolen**. While these reference checking schemes seemed to respond to the ‘Oxfam scandal’, where **one of the identified problems** was that a white, male international country director was able to move around to different postings and organisations after separating from an organisation in relation to allegations of buying sex from local women, this has had a disproportionate impact on national and local staff who make up **90% of aid workers**. As one commentator put it, excluding people who cause harm may not be the radical politics we think it is, and that it only ‘moves the problems around rather than addressing them...outsourcing our harassers to women in lower-status, lower-paid economic sectors’.²³ For INGOs, that likely means exporting harassers to local organisations or companies that don’t require (or local labour law won’t allow) the same sharing of personal data.

Perhaps no programme is more reflective of current carceral tendencies than **Project Sorteria**, run by Interpol and funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). With a strong emphasis on building capacity of local law enforcement to investigate criminal conduct and create better criminal checks, it seeks to secure criminal convictions and keep convicted sex offenders out of the aid sector.²⁴ Yet the **Independent Commission for Aid Impact** noted that most of the cases being disclosed to the FCDO ‘are workplace misconduct issues between staff including, but not solely comprising, sexual harassment’.

Prohibitions on transactional sex and policing sexual relationships of aid workers with locals

The **IASC Six Core Principles** are the foundation for PSEA rules of conduct. Everyone will likely agree on the core prohibitions on sexual conduct that directly relate to abuse of position or authority (trading jobs or aid for sex) or sexual abuse and assault. However, two of the standards – complete prohibition on transactional sex outside of trading organisational resources and the permissibility of sexual relationships generally between aid workers and community members – should be up for renewed debate.²⁵

A prominent coalition within the anti-trafficking movement is actively anti-sex work,²⁶ seeking to eliminate all forms of prostitution through criminalisation. These anti-sex work, carceral-like impulses have become the foundation of the PSEA agenda. Both the **UN definition** of ‘sexual exploitation’ for PSEA and the UN definition of **trafficking in persons from the Palermo Protocol that supplements the**

23 Phipps, A. (2020) *Me, not you: the trouble trouble with mainstream feminism*. Manchester University Press: Manchester, UK.

24 We have to question whether that is the best investment, considering that even in countries with longer histories of funding sexual assault prosecutions, there has not been the corollary increase in reporting or conviction rates, despite increased awareness and protections in law. For example, using 2020 crime data, Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network estimates that out of every 1,000 sexual assaults in the U.S., only 31% are reported to police, only 5% result in arrest, less than 3% end in conviction and 2.5% result in incarceration.

25 These arguments are not new, but perhaps now with our emphasis on actively becoming anti-racist, decolonising, and non-hegemonic, we are more ready to acknowledge the problems inherent in this approach, what values we are promoting and the unintended consequences that result. See the writings from **Diane Otto**, **Olivera Simic**, **Jasmine Kim Westendorf**, and more recently from **Guilia Piccolino** and **Kristin Bergtora Sandvik**. Other researchers are also commenting on how the aid sector should **reconsider its policies and programmes around transactional sex** rather than continue its stigmatisation of it.

26 As identified in the study by Elizabeth Bernstein that originated the term ‘**carceral feminism**’.

[UN Convention Against Transnational Crime](#) include language around the means of commission involving ‘abuse of position of vulnerability’ or power. While there is disagreement within the anti-trafficking movement over whether ‘sexual exploitation’ includes all sex work,²⁷ the PSEA standards go even further down the carceral path and inherently define all transactional sex, and all sex work, as sexual exploitation. It does so by drawing on the definition of sexual exploitation from the Palermo Protocol and pairing it with [IASC Principle 3](#), which includes an absolute prohibition on the exchange of money, services or goods for sex. Thus, in the context of PSEA, ‘sexual exploitation’ has become shorthand for ‘commercial sex’.

IASC Principle 4 goes even further towards re-entrenching ‘unequal power dynamics’ by trying to govern the realm of permissible relationships between aid workers and community members. It is the only principle that has changed since they were initially released in 2002. Originally, it stated that sexual relationships between humanitarian workers and ‘beneficiaries’ should be [strongly discouraged](#). In [September 2019](#), this was changed to prohibit sexual relationships ‘between those providing humanitarian assistance and protection and a person benefitting from such humanitarian assistance and protection that involves improper use of rank or position’. Neither the original nor the revised standard lend themselves to easy comprehension or objective enforcement. And in a post-#aidtoo world, many INGOs, in an attempt to seem ‘tougher’ on SEA, strengthened their interpretation by prohibiting all relationships between their workers and aid recipients or members of communities where they work.

[InterAction’s short videos](#) on the IASC principles state that ‘humanitarian and development workers are not allowed to have sexual relations with anyone receiving assistance or services, even if they are willing’. This reading seems to presume that one’s status of employment necessarily means improper use of rank or position if one has sex with anyone in the community being served.

We know that, in the calls for localisation, more jobs are going to national staff, partner staff and community members themselves as short-term workers or casual labourers – and all are expected to abide by these policies equally. Were there any discussions to consider the inordinate burden placed on local staff if they are not to date within their primary dating pool?

What other forms of feminism are being put aside and what are the (unintended) consequences?

Critical voices, especially from the Global South, have generally been left out of discussions on sexual violence, as many women felt more in common with their compatriots of all genders in throwing off legacies of racism and colonialism than with the white saviours who came to ‘save brown women from

27 The [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Guidance](#) documents on the Palermo Protocol make the distinction that the ‘exploitation of prostitution’ does not refer to prostitution per se, but ‘rather to deriving some benefit from the prostitution of another’, and strongly suggesting that sex work in and of itself should not be considered ‘trafficking’.

brown men'.²⁸ In that landscape, transnational feminism emerged – it prioritises addressing economic and structural barriers inherited from colonialism as the root causes of inequality and violence, believing that excessive attention to individual harms through individual punishment distracts from the real politics of feminism – seeking systemic change as an **emancipatory project**.

A transnational feminism advocates for the rights of sex workers, not their prohibition or the **criminalisation of buyers of sex, which further contributes to the harm of sex workers themselves**. The human rights movement more broadly is moving towards full recognition of the rights of sex workers as both a human rights and labour rights issue, as reflected through the positions of **Human Rights Watch**, **Amnesty International** and a ground-breaking and well-researched publication in 2021 by Front Line Defenders, **Sex workers' rights defenders are human rights defenders**.

A transnational feminism also calls into question the almost voyeuristic and 'othering' undertones of IASC principles 3 and 4 with respect to local women's sex lives. When these principles are read together they appear to prohibit not only commercial sex, but any transactional aspect of ongoing sexual relationships or occasional selling of sex by women, and to define any relationships between workers and community members as exploitative.

The aid sector continues to exceptionalise women²⁹ from the Global South in how they navigate their lived experience with poverty and their decisions on adaptive protection strategies. For example, an **independent review into PSEA practices** by members of the Australian Council for International Development seeks a middle ground by being pro-sex worker's rights while justifying the appropriateness of restrictions on transactional sex in the humanitarian context. It is difficult to logically wear these two hats at the same time: the protectionist rationale reproduces colonialist tropes that people are too poor to make decisions in their own self-interest so we must do it for them.

And as research from both **the US** and **globally** demonstrates, women from low-resource communities in both donor and aid recipient countries may engage in transactional sexual relationships and/or partnering in order to economically benefit themselves and their families. A study of **youth in Liberia** noted a complexity to sexual economies, with young women often feeling that transactional sex gave them a sense of agency and control. **Research in Haiti** reflected that women who engaged in regular or occasional sex for money or goods, or developed relationships with UN peacekeepers in which they expected and received goods or monetary support, generally considered these acts as beneficial – some even claimed empowering – in their attempts to educate or otherwise gain economic benefits for themselves and their families.

28 See, Gayatri Spivak's seminal article, '**Can the sub-altern speak?**' that discusses the concept of the 'white saviour' saving brown women from supposed harmful cultural practices in their colonial rule, while masking their own roles in oppression and silencing the voices and perspectives of those sought to be saved.

29 With full recognition that men, boys, transgender, non-binary and all other culturally appropriate terms for people living outside the gender binary can and do experience sexual violence by aid workers, the carceral feminist approach has tended to over-emphasize and essentialise the female experience, and I rely on the female pronouns to reflect discussions centred on the heterosexual female experience.

Yet, we spend time and resources to police transactional aspects of relationships in aid settings, causing more harm in the process. In my years of conducting investigations, allegations involving transactional sex or local relationships are most often made against staff who are not well liked, typically for reasons of bullying or poor management that senior management has failed to address. Investigators are faced with gendered stereotypes about the woman's behaviour from reporters as evidence he is breaking the rules. Witnesses discuss what she is wearing, how she is acting or dancing, and being the 'wrong type of lady'. If we are ever to interview this woman, the process of substantiating the allegations require enquiries that inherently express our judgment of her for engaging in transactional sex or relationships. It is something she is unlikely to admit if it is against her self-interest, such as causing the staff member to lose his means of supporting her, or causing her internalised shame. Sometimes we are also faced with male elders trying to police women's behaviour by calling in INGO investigators when women appear to be having **extramarital sex**.

What if we were to actually quantify the economic benefits being distributed via transactional sex by aid workers? Some **women report** that aid workers are generally better clients and pay more for sex. **One study** estimated that, during post-conflict reconstruction in Monrovia, Liberia, more than 50% of the female population in the city engaged in transactional sex.

Do we regulate individual behaviour because otherwise we might be forced to admit that our interventions aimed at addressing distributional inequalities are failing when people are still seeking out transactional sex to fulfil their unmet needs? If we don't have any meaningful strategies or resources to help women meet these needs, are we setting them up for more dangerous risk-taking behaviour instead?

Rather than viewing PSEA from a moralising sexual perspective, it would be more helpful to write standards of conduct that reflect what is within an organisation's legal responsibility, under both common law³⁰ and civil law jurisdictions³¹ to prevent, stop and correct staff causing harm to others through the use of their employment. Using this guiding perspective of organisational responsibility for harm caused by staff, we could move away from the gender policing of sexual relationships (**that also shows up in GBV programming**) which reinscribes neo-colonial interpretations of appropriate sexual behaviour for women and echoes conservative values of chastity and virtue through prohibitions on transactional sex defining the scope of permissible relationships with community members.

30 For example, under US tort actions, an employer can be held indirectly liable for acts of employees (vicarious liability or respondent superior) for wrongdoing and harms caused by its employee during 'the scope of employment'. See §§ 4.01 and 4.03, Restatement Third, Agency. Employers can also be held directly liable under the tort of negligent hiring, retention and supervision for harms of their staff when they have reason to know the risk of harm staff pose towards others and take insufficient actions. Section 4.04 (c) Restatement of Employment Law, updated through March 2019.

31 In French civil law, employer liability is reflected in Civil Code Section 1242, where liability for damages attaches the acts of those for whom he is responsible, including the specific example of '[m]asters and employers, for harm caused by their servants and employees within the functions for which they employed them'.

We should focus on abuses of organisational authority, replacing ‘sexual exploitation’ with the [Transparency International term of ‘sextortion’](#) – which would encompass the misuse of a position in an organisation to trade aid or jobs for sex (a form of corruption) – in addition to continued prohibitions on sexual assault and sexual harassment in the workplace (trading job benefits for sex or creating a hostile environment through unwanted sexual comments or advances).

What would a bottom-up safeguarding practice look like?

Transnational feminism’s anti-carceral approach *does not* mean lack of accountability: it means better responses that centre the harmed individual’s needs to repair harm. Transnational feminism also asks us to prioritise projects led by impacted persons and developed at the grassroots level over top-down approaches. For instance, Ugandan feminist Sylvia Tamale suggests that an [Afro-feminism](#) needs to move away from imported concepts of ‘gender equality’ and return to cultural roots of *ubuntu*, which are based in recognising the humanity in each other (‘I am because we are’) and using a long tradition of community processes to facilitate the repairing of harms where they occur.

The [Feminist Safeguarding Policy](#) developed by [FRIDA](#), the young feminist fund, fuses agency and empowerment with accountability. It moves away from a paradigm that presents safeguarding as a [protective project](#) rooted in Global North principles that can infantilise young feminists, rather than a participatory one. They adopt an approach based on consent, cultural context and shared responsibility, and work with girls and young women in assessing and controlling risks. When harm occurs, the first preference is for restorative and healing justice to seek reconciliation, and as an opportunity for restoration and transformation from oppression and harm.

We can look to the [Organisational Safeguarding Best Practices and Procedures: A Toolkit for Transnational and Intersectional Feminist Accountability Frameworks](#),³² also developed through a participatory approach centring grassroots organisations. The toolkit highlights the current challenges to PSEAH progress and includes a solutions-oriented framework. Challenges include lack of clarity around the terms used to describe harmful behaviours, the inordinate attention on separating individual behaviours from systemic practices, and the stigmatisation of sex work that both reinforces conservative sexual norms and inhibits reporting of real harm. Among its solutions, the toolkit focuses on power and better accountability practices: distributing power more fairly in the organisation, as opposed to hierarchical governance, and employing a *restorative* practice that ‘strives to restore dignity and respect to survivors of violence and abusive practices in all their forms, and to redress the harm that has been done to them’.

32 Produced in collaboration between [Centre for Transnational Development and Cooperation \(CTDC\)](#), and [Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom \(WILPF\)](#).

Conclusion

Should we keep doubling down on a structure and system with so many foundational cracks, or is it time to reform the PSEAH agenda altogether? If we are truly interested in intersectional transnational feminism and decolonising aid, we need to re-examine our carceral impulses in PSEA by asking ourselves: who does it benefit and who does it burden in its practical application?

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How many more years before we walk the talk? Translating safeguarding and localisation into action in DRC

Gang Karume B. Augustin and Thérèse Mema Mapenzi with support from CAFOD's DRC team

In the wake of the Ebola crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), revelations came to light of significant levels of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH) of community members by individuals involved in the crisis response. Perpetrators included local community leaders, and staff of national, local and international organisations, including the World Health Organization. A senior protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) technical support mission was deployed to the country, visiting Goma, Beni and Butembo, Bunia, Mbandaka and Kinshasa, and issued a report,³³ which stated:

While the risk of SEA [sexual exploitation and abuse] in DRC is a long-standing issue, the public health response to the 10th Ebola outbreak in eastern DRC created the conditions for exacerbated SEAH risk. The overall response was characterized by a large influx of cash, [and] a disproportionately male workforce made up of people coming from outside the local community.

It is notable that the mission did not take the opportunity to hear from eyewitnesses, survivors and those providing survivor support in the areas where abuse is happening in South Kivu province.

Since that visit and the coverage of those abuses, there has been a considerable scale-up in efforts to prevent and respond to SEA in DRC, significantly driven by the wider momentum on these issues as

33 Report of the Senior PSEA Technical Support Mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Emergency Directors' Group, December 2020. <https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org/media/1036/download>.

the global humanitarian sector has sought to belatedly give safeguarding the attention and resourcing it deserves. For example, a United Nations (UN) agency key informant described how the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has developed partnerships with four national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to expand PSEAH outreach in territories and locations where international NGOs (INGOs) and UN agencies do not have access. The national NGOs collect information and share this with their INGO partners. The UN synthesises and manages this information to then follow-up through advocacy and other actions.

To capture the perspectives of national and local NGOs involved in humanitarian action and wider development and women's rights efforts, we interviewed staff from 26 national NGOs, five INGOs and two UN agencies (UNFPA and UNICEF). The national NGOs that we spoke with included a mix of seven women-led organisations and women's rights activists, and 19 national NGOs focused on humanitarian or development and humanitarian mandates, which were generally all male-led. In addition, there was a mix of both local NGOs that had benefitted from funding, capacity-strengthening and other forms of support on safeguarding and/or PSEAH (6 organisations), and those that had not received any to date (20 organisations). As one of our co-authors manages a shelter for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) and is connected to networks of women employed in national humanitarian organisations, she was able to draw on insights shared by women about their own experiences of SEAH: both community members that had experienced SEAH as project participants, and women that had experienced SEAH as employees of institutions involved in the aid response.

Based on these interviews and additional literature research, our findings point to the following seven priorities to help more effectively engage, support and capitalise on the potential role of national and local NGOs in PSEAH and safeguarding efforts in DRC:

Shift expectations on PSEAH beyond the tick box

One of the most consistent and concerning issues raised by our interviews was the inevitable gap between organisations establishing a policy on PSEAH and then institutionalising and socialising that policy into their systems, operations and staff understanding and practices at all levels. In several cases, we heard from senior managers or technical specialists mandated to lead on PSEAH – both amongst INGO and national NGO informants – that their agency had established policies and conducted trainings with NGO partners. Yet follow-up interviews with those NGOs' staff revealed that most were unaware of the policy, or if they were, they did not have the knowledge to implement it in practice and highlighted that project participants and wider community members would have no idea about either the agency's safeguarding policy or how to raise a complaint or concern if need be.

One larger national NGO had received several rounds of training on PSEA from at least three different donors, yet of the four staff we interviewed in their Bukavu office, only two of these had ever heard of PSEAH, and one of these had heard about it from other sources, not from training or other efforts within their organisation. They also expressed the view that the PSEAH system in their organisation was nominally in place, but in reality it was not functional. Another local organisation told us that in order

to access funding, they agreed to have PSEAH documents as outlined by their donor agency, but they had never received any follow-up training or other support to implement them. Building PSEAH into proposals and adding a requirement to have an implementation plan that is regularly monitored would help address this issue. Several heads of organisations presented us with tools that had been provided to them on PSEAH, but were not able to describe their contents when questioned during the interview. Therefore, involving communities, community-based organisations and national NGOs earlier in safeguarding processes would result in a better understanding of SEAH risks, and increase the relevance and effectiveness of any interventions.

An issue raised by several interviewees was the extent to which top-down requirements from institutional donors and international agencies is driving the momentum to establish policies, training and strengthened practices on safeguarding, as well as resourcing. For example, UNICEF has established six norms of relevance to PSEA, which organisations must meet and against which they are evaluated prior to contracting with their NGO partners. The Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) has rolled out a global process to collaborate with partners on assessments of the partners' strengths, challenges and priorities to address safety, accessibility, dignity, inclusion and accountability priorities (so-called 'SADI' profiles); these result in the development of short- and longer-term action plans to address priority gaps and challenges. CAFOD provides ongoing accompaniment to assist partners to achieve the priority actions set out, which may include funding specific capacity-strengthening initiatives.

This raises questions: how can donor funding and partnerships between international agencies and national and local NGOs more effectively support such efforts, and ensure that they go further than the 'tick box' of having policies in place to access funding or secure a partnership agreement with an international agency? The goal is a more sustained and meaningful approach to preventing and responding to SEA, one that is tailored to their local context.

Provide sustained, regular training and sensitisation of staff and contractors (and all involved)

The majority of the INGO and national and local NGO staff that we interviewed had limited knowledge of the safeguards within their own agencies' manual of procedures and code of conduct (when they had these in place). Key factors cited for this were the lack of continuous training, and the internal culture and commitment needed to cascade information and training about these safeguards to their different sub-offices. To the extent that any agencies had engaged on any efforts regarding PSEAH, this had been mainly limited to a small circle of staff, and it was yet to be cascaded to a wider range of staff, or consultants and suppliers. For example, of the 33 organisations interviewed, only three of these had the safeguards signed by staff when they started working for the agency. It was even written in one organisation's manual that in emergencies, exceptional arrangements could be made for newly hired staff to start work without any PSEAH briefing.



Programme with national NGOs in DRC focused on support to GBV survivors funded by the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF). Credit: Caritas Scotland

A major factor raised by national and local NGOs – both those that had received support until now and those that had not – was the need for longer-term funding and partnerships to more effectively institutionalise, disseminate and practise PSEAH commitments. The challenges faced by local NGOs in addressing safeguarding are financial, technical and organisational. Most national and local NGOs are receiving very short-term grants, generally between 6–12 months. If effectively addressing SEAH involves addressing the attitudes, norms and practices of individuals, teams and organisations, multi-year timeframes for investment and organisational change are required; yet funding for work over five- or 10-year horizons is almost non-existent for national organisations in DRC. More than one key informant talked about the need for ‘continuous capacity-building’ on PSEAH, and that short-term, fragmented, ineffective approaches to PSEAH were shaped also by a wider challenge in short-term, fragmented, ineffective partnerships between humanitarian agencies, in particular between international agencies and national and local NGOs.

There is a perception that the significant funds mobilised for PSEAH at the global level have been largely captured by international agencies and consultants and that these resources are not cascaded in an equitable or effective manner to national and local NGOs. As a consequence, national and local NGOs are at the frontline of humanitarian response, with ever-expanding expectations of what they are supposed to deliver on PSEAH alongside other programmatic outcomes, but the resources allocated to them are not commensurate with the tasks expected of them. Indeed, as staff of national NGOs acquire expertise on PSEAH or other issues, they are then also poached by international agencies, further undermining the investment in local capacity.

Cascade coordination and joint effort to the local level

As with other agendas where there is a gap between policy and practice, interviewees highlighted how decision-making and attention to PSEAH has been initiated at headquarters in the capital and in provincial centres: there needs to be a shift to focus on action across DRC in the places that humanitarian action is delivered to communities. The overall picture emerging from our interviews is one of PSEAH policies having been adopted at headquarter level and involving a small circle of national and local organisations, but inadequately disseminated, understood or acted on at the sub-national level, and yet to reach the vast majority of national and local NGOs involved in humanitarian response. Although just over half of the national organisations interviewed had heard of the existence of an inter-agency network on PSEAH, the majority of them were not informed about what it was doing and had not yet been engaged by it.

Since December 2020, a PSEAH coordination structure had been established in DRC, and the first official PSEAH working group meeting took place around June 2021. Prior to this, PSEAH efforts have been taken forward through individual agencies. For example, UNICEF has worked both through INGOs such as War Child and a number of national NGOs, such as TPO, ACAD, AVREO and APES. These national NGOs in turn collaborate with community-based organisations that establish various initiatives, such as complaints boxes in health structures, early-warning community mechanisms, alert delivery channels and information management systems.

In Mutala and Bunyakiri, SEA survivors are given support at a Protestant hospital, which is supplied with post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) kits for HIV treatment and has received other training. The government's provincial department for gender is reportedly also engaged in a mechanism to support on access to justice for GBV survivors. Additionally, UNFPA described a network of more than 30 international and national organisations engaging in inter-agency PSEAH efforts. This includes national organisations such as SARCAF, a women's organisation; TPO, an organisation providing psychosocial support; IDHE, a women's rights organisation; and ADMR, a human rights organisation, specialising in access to justice. These examples demonstrate the value in having networks inclusive of organisations at all levels to turn policy into practice.

Several local NGOs expressed a cynicism about international humanitarian coordination processes, which they perceived as a largely extractive experience. They provide input to assessments or other agendas of the coordination process, but do not feel that they receive tangible benefits from it. Whilst a more effective humanitarian response, and indeed more effective SEAH prevention and response, should be seen as a benefit for all actors – including local NGOs – the fact is that coordination also links to resource mobilisation and, until now, some in local NGOs perceive that they input to coordination processes that secure funding for the international partners, rather than themselves. Proper communication and coordination on PSEAH between donors and funding partners (UN, INGOs) and those downstream (national NGOs, community-based organisations) would greatly increase trust and promote transparency amongst staff and communities.

Address the social and cultural factors that shape understanding of PSEAH

The majority of interviewees suggested that the most common form of SEAH was sexual harassment, including sexual harassment of women employed within humanitarian agencies, and the sexual exploitation of women community members by employees of organisations involved in aid efforts. Interviewees also suggested that a majority of SEAH complaints received relate to sexual exploitation by government officials involved in decision-making or overseeing humanitarian aid efforts at different levels.

A major factor undermining efforts to address these by national and local NGOs, and by international agencies working in partnership with those NGOs, is the extent to which women and men think it is normal for men to offer to employ a woman in exchange for sex and to make sexual advances to a woman in the workplace. One Congolese women's rights activist described a widespread belief that 'by nature men are sexually weak compared to women' and that people will assume and insinuate that the woman herself provoked the harassment. Whilst some interviewees suggested that local social and cultural norms are helpful in PSEAH, as such abuses are prohibited and taboo, others highlighted that it is precisely the taboo nature of SEAH that results in victims themselves, their families and community leaders preferring to not discuss or address it. Discriminatory gender norms and the stigma that survivors of any gender-based violence (including SEAH perpetrated by those involved in humanitarian responses) face are major barriers to action within national and local NGOs, and discourage any survivors of such abuses to seek assistance. An additional factor is that when family cohesion is at stake, people choose to keep quiet.

Several organisations also emphasised how important the respect of local norms, traditions and customs is in their ability to operate in the community. This represents a barrier to them engaging with community stakeholders – whether project participants or community leaders – in discussing or identifying strategies to mitigate harmful norms and practices in relation to gender, including the prevention of and response to SEAH. As one chairman of a national NGO told us:

I hear about these issues [SEAH] in other organisations but would not be surprised the same is said outside about my own. These are things you are the last to hear about.

Of the 33 organisations that we interviewed, only four of them had established specific policy documents or frameworks to address gender- or child protection-specific issues in their organisation. As such, it is clear that any effort on PSEAH amongst humanitarian agencies in DRC, including national and local NGOs, needs to be framed within a much wider effort to address harmful gender norms and beliefs that in practice normalise sexual harassment and other forms of SEAH. What was described by one informant as a total lack of any follow-up by relevant government authorities on complaints made in relation to SEAH by government officials involved in humanitarian response – which is a significant proportion of cases reported into the system – leaves international humanitarian agencies and national and local NGOs struggling in their efforts to both prevent and respond to incidents.

Implement ‘zero tolerance for inaction’, not ‘zero tolerance for incidents’ to encourage national and local NGOs to address PSEAH

Several national NGO interviewees highlighted the issue that they face, which is a fear that increased effort, scrutiny and transparency relating to PSEAH by their organisations may result in them becoming blacklisted by international agencies and their institutional donors. The impact of funding partners suspending or terminating partnerships in response to incidents of SEAH is explored more fully in the [recent study](#) commissioned by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies. Clearer risk assessments and criteria for decision-making by donors are needed to allay the fears amongst staff about the consequences for their organisation of speaking out about abuse. As the director of one local NGO highlighted to us, even though his organisation has rolled out a programme to sensitise staff and project participants about their code of conduct and mechanisms to raise complaints in a safe and confidential manner:

they [staff and project participants] still continue to be afraid to denounce cases of abuse for fear of making the workers lose their jobs, for fear of reprisals, for fear of not seeing the justice involved, for fear of denouncing without any guarantee of their safety, so why should they denounce if nothing can be done to prevent the system from harming staff?

Demonstrate that the reporting of SEAH will lead to action to end the abuse, and not lead to survivors, their families or their community facing retaliation or being denied access to assistance

Both interviewees amongst international and national and local humanitarian organisations, and women rights activists, highlighted that a major barrier to any survivor reporting abuse, or any community member reporting any concerns about the potential for abuse of others, is a perception that it will not result in any follow-up action. Furthermore, many of them expressed a fear that reporting any such abuses would result in the survivors themselves or their family or community being denied assistance as a consequence, or worse repercussions.

One women’s rights NGO interviewee, for example, referred to the challenges faced in wider efforts to address GBV by armed groups and other powerholders, which have led to the victims who denounced their perpetrator being abducted, disappeared and worse. Examples were shared of where perpetrators of sexual violence associated with armed groups have been sentenced to prison for five years, but are then released after one to two months. Both amongst employees of national and local NGOs, and amongst the general community, this wider climate of impunity in relation to GBV and abuses of power by those in influential institutions resonates with and shapes their perception of how SEAH will be addressed – or not. As one survivor of SEAH told us: ‘If I denounce him, he will lose his job and God will punish me. I prefer to keep quiet and leave him to God.’ As such, any further effort on PSEAH in DRC needs to address this reality, or else little progress will be made.

Although this challenge is not specific to the role of national and local NGOs, it is local organisations that have roots in the local community and so through their practices in relation to PSEAH contribute to wider understanding about effective survivor-centred responses.

Leverage the potential of local women's rights organisations and networks

Five representatives of local women-led NGOs and women's rights NGO representatives were interviewed, and through the interviews it became apparent that they were not yet engaged at any strategic level in understanding PSEAH challenges or addressing them. In a number of contexts globally, the UN-NGO humanitarian coordination structure on GBV, the GBV Area of Responsibility (often titled GBV sub-cluster at country level), has sought to engage local women's rights groups, networks and activists in their wider efforts on prevention and response to GBV. Amongst other things, this has included efforts to engage local women's rights groups in facilitating or inputting to 'audit' processes to survey women and girls about risks and threats to their safety and their access to assistance and protection programmes in specific locations. These processes in contexts like the Syrian regional response and Colombia have revealed insights about PSEAH issues, which have then to varying degrees been followed up on by international and national humanitarian agencies. None of the local women's rights groups that we interviewed had yet been engaged on such efforts in DRC.

Will we finally walk the talk?

Over the months that we conducted interviews and other research, there was a clear and ambitious scale-up in efforts on PSEAH in DRC, following up on the findings from the UN-NGO mission in December 2020. As such, we are encouraged that the coming months and years ahead should see a more effective approach by international, national and local organisations to addressing safeguarding abuses. However, our research also points to some very serious barriers to meaningful action, in relation to addressing SEAH risks in local organisations, and leveraging the potential positive contributions of local NGOs to the wider PSEAH effort.

To move beyond a tick box approach to engaging local NGOs on PSEAH, there needs to be a wider shift in partnerships between international agencies and their local partners, including support for multi-year capacity-strengthening and a more equitable, partnership-based approach to how resources are allocated, strategies are developed and initiatives to tackle SEAH are implemented. One-off trainings and the adoption of policies at a central level need to be followed up not only by more regular, on-going training and other steps to institutionalise PSEAH, but also a wider effort to address harmful gender norms. This means that both staff – male and female – and community members and project participants understand and believe that harassment and other abuses are not norms to be accepted, but rather unacceptable behaviours and practices that can be called out and prevented, and that survivors will be supported, rather than face repercussions for seeking assistance or trying to end the abuse. For this to happen, donor institutions and international agencies also need to adopt a 'zero tolerance for inaction' approach, rather than punish local organisations by ending partnerships and withdrawing funding when they report incidents or patterns of abuse and take appropriate action.

Lastly, whilst the level of understanding and action on PSEAH shared through our interviews is a concern, we were also encouraged by how numerous local NGO staff – both of national humanitarian organisations and local women’s organisations – expressed their willingness to contribute to a wider effort in the humanitarian sector to prevent and better respond to SEAH. Many of these individuals and their organisations know that such abuses take place, want to see an end to them and have expertise to contribute to that effort. The question now is whether donors and international humanitarian agencies are willing to invest the necessary resources and to partner meaningfully with them to do so. Will we now finally walk the talk?

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Thérèse Mema Mapenzi is the Director of Centre Olame Bukavu, a Congolese Women’s Organisation that provides psychological support to women in Eastern DRC. She is a trained psychologist and previously worked with the Archdiocese of Bukavu Justice and Peace Commission managing trauma centres.

Lessons from Mozambique and Venezuela on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse

Irene Coello and Maria Alvarez

Irene, Humanitarian Affairs Officer at the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Venezuela, arrived in Mozambique on 3 December 2021. Her mission: to support the Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Network³⁴ in Cabo Delgado for three months as subnational Inter-Agency Coordinator. A few weeks later, Maria reached Caracas in the capacity of PSEA Network Coordinator. Irene has now returned to her regular assignment as the PSEA and gender focal point for OCHA in Venezuela and Maria used to work as PSEA National Coordinator in Mozambique in 2019–2020. After dozens of calls and emails, information, advice and support exchanges, they finally met in person in March 2022, eager to get each other’s perspectives on PSEA in Mozambique and how to apply these experiences to their activities in Venezuela, where they now both work.

34 A PSEA network is a space for inter-agency coordination and strategic decision-making on how to address and deliver on commitments on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, as part of the United Nations’ work. It is comprised of UN agencies, funds and programmes, and very often also includes international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Operating in complex and sensitive contexts

There are as many approaches to addressing sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) as there are operational contexts. Maria's and Irene's experiences of Mozambique and Venezuela confirm the need for context-appropriate and innovative approaches to prevent and address SEA. PSEA networks and practitioners face different issues in every country and adapt their work to the operational context. For instance, PSEA operations in camps apply different approaches to community sensitisation and to the prevention of and response to SEA. Contextual factors such as multi-language use, the presence and treatment of ethnic minorities, and social norms related to sexual conduct all end up defining and nuancing SEA prevention and response strategies. While the PSEA community has developed guidance and tools to support the design and implementation of community-based activities in accordance with the characteristics, needs and preferences of the different population groups,³⁵ we still have a long way to go in ensuring that our PSEA-related policies are comprehensive.

As just one example of this, it is widely recognised that a large proportion of SEA allegations globally do not concern staff directly hired by United Nations (UN) agencies or their partners. On the contrary, they often involve personnel linked to local authorities – non-traditional humanitarian and development actors such as teachers, health workers, local leaders or community volunteers. These are the types of actors that are regularly found at the frontline of on-the-ground operations across sectors and geographical regions. In most cases, UN and international non-governmental organisations' (INGO) frameworks do not enable the effective management and enforcement of corrective or disciplinary action against such personnel.

Advancing the PSEA agenda necessitates that our policies and processes apply to sexual exploitation and abuse committed by all categories of personnel involved in humanitarian and development activities regardless of contractual ties. A very common example of this barrier to PSEA is the management of cases in which the alleged perpetrator is a community volunteer or member of the local authorities. Who has the authority to investigate? How do we refer SEA cases to national authorities, ensuring that a victim-centred approach is followed? Who has the competence and the authority to determine and enforce disciplinary actions? These are issues that PSEA practitioners in the field face on a daily basis. Unfortunately, the PSEA policies and frameworks do not provide a consistent answer.

A novel workaround had already been established in Mozambique before Maria arrived. When the humanitarian operation was concentrated in Sofala in response to Cyclone Idai, the majority of allegations reported were against community leaders. Under the leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) at the time, the Network had an arrangement whereby it would compile cases and send them to the Provincial Prosecutor's Office via the Humanitarian/Resident Coordinator (HC/RC). The Provincial Prosecutor's Office could then proceed with the investigation and disciplinary measures. While Maria was coordinating the national network, conversations were started with the National

35 For example, [World Food Programme training for PSEA focal points](#).

Prosecutor's Office with the objective of developing a national-level agreement that would standardise the referral approach across the country. That piece of work is currently led by the PSEA National Coordinator.



Irene Coello at a women's focus group at Nicavaco relocation site in Northern Mozambique. Credit: Deiliany Souza / UNHCR

How to implement PSEA on the ground – going beyond the national level

In Mozambique, there is one national and three subnational PSEA networks. Irene led the Cabo Delgado network, one of the most active ones, for almost three months. This high level of activity meant that the national network's daily workload often came from the Cabo Delgado network. As conflict continues to unfold in Northern Mozambique, provoking a growing humanitarian impact and response, the main SEA risks in Mozambique – including sexual exploitation being committed by community leaders linked to beneficiary registration and access to assistance – have been identified in Cabo Delgado. More than 90% of the cases registered in 2021 were reported in Cabo Delgado, most of which purportedly involved leaders of the communities.

Nonetheless, individual organisations within the network do not have staff who can focus solely on PSEA. The growing number of field staff need in-depth PSEA training before going out to work with communities and affected populations, as untrained staff present a risk per se. For this, the support of the national PSEA network in Mozambique is key, as it focuses on developing the training packages and materials for subnational actors working in the field. The National Network is also pivotal in creating a framework of understanding with national authorities by engaging in high-level discussions and agreements, from which the subnational network benefits.

Venezuela does not have subnational networks, so keeping PSEA afloat at this level is more challenging. Discussions regarding PSEA are scarce at the field level: there is a thin presence on the ground, fewer human resources and access problems. The underreporting of PSEA incidents means that a case for greater resources and dedicated coordination structures at the field level cannot easily be made; it is seen as an isolated issue, or one of lesser priority. In lieu of such networks, therefore, strong advocates within organisations act as PSEA focal points. Yet there is no guarantee this is enough. As in Mozambique, there is a lack of dedicated capacity to fulfil PSEA obligations.

Whether national or subnational, PSEA networks allow their members – and the wider humanitarian community – to build on one another’s initiatives and capacities, mapping common risks, jointly identifying mitigation strategies and delivering on agreed priorities, putting the needs of victims and survivors in the centre of our response.

PSEA as a collective responsibility – who does what?

PSEA is supposedly a collective responsibility – a top priority for the UN and the wider humanitarian community. Nonetheless, there is a big gap between what needs to be done, what we would like to do as PSEA advocates, and what we can actually do. We need to ‘walk the talk’, as Irene often says.

International rosters managed by agencies or NGOs are the main source of PSEA coordinators; they are often couched in complex bureaucratic processes. When these rosters are not a viable and agile option, organisations need to think outside the box and look for other alternatives. There are often officials who are not fully dedicated to PSEA as part of their daily job, but are actually quite able to provide support to an operation for a defined period. This was the particular case of Irene, as she went on an OCHA surge mission for almost 12 weeks to Cabo Delgado, to work as the Inter-Agency PSEA Coordinator for Northern Mozambique; her actual position in Venezuela is Humanitarian Affairs Coordinator, heading the Caracas field hub. ‘There is internal capacity for sure; it’s a matter of enquiring and also opening up opportunities, even for national staff such as myself,’ says Irene.

On the matter of perception of affiliation, PSEA coordinators are often hosted by UN agencies, having in fact an inter-agency role. In practice, it is difficult to promote understanding of this; colleagues require constant reminders in meetings and other spaces. As a collective responsibility, it is important to put perception of affiliation or even actual affiliation aside, for a coordinator to be able to perform their duties to the best of their ability. This could also help navigate complex inter-agency dynamics.

It is globally recognised that inter-agency PSEA capacity is a must. However, human resources are not the only capacity challenge. Funding is one of the main constraints; humanitarian operations need timely funding for national and – as in the case of Mozambique – subnational coordinators. In order to bring forward the inter-agency PSEA agenda, funding for inter-agency activities and projects is required yet hardly ever secured. Mozambique is a success story in this regard, according to Maria. With strong support from the HC even before the arrival of a full-time PSEA coordinator, the PSEA inter-agency activities were budgeted alongside the coordination position and funding was secured from the onset of the operation for community sensitisation, reporting channels and other key activities. As an example of strong inter-agency cooperation, the PSEA concept note collectively created for the Mozambique context informed one component of the World Food Programme’s (WFP) own project, ensuring that interagency PSEA received funding as part of it. This led to the creation of Maria’s PSEA Coordinator role.

As National PSEA Coordinator, Maria has been hosted by two different agencies: the WFP in Mozambique and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in Venezuela. As per her experience, the leading role played by the HC/RC is a key factor in ensuring that her position is seen as being inter-agency. Such leadership is vital to opening doors for PSEA to be effectively integrated in all strategic and technical processes. By reporting directly to the HC/RC in both Mozambique and Venezuela, Maria has been able to support them in the fulfilment of their responsibilities and accountabilities on PSEA. Such access to the most senior UN officials in-country is rooted in the PSEA Coordinator [terms of reference](#), and grants coordinators access to key decision-making spaces (e.g., Humanitarian Country Teams or UN Country Teams).

Building on Mozambique’s and other countries’ experience, in Venezuela the Network has designed and submitted a PSEA inter-agency project to the Humanitarian Response Plan for 2022. This includes key areas that have been identified by the Network as priorities. This brings us back to funding – mobilising resources is among the Network’s foremost goals, if it is to focus on these priority areas.

PSEA and the triple nexus

If PSEA is to remain a humanitarian priority, it is critical to ensure PSEA adaptation in the humanitarian–peace-building–development nexus agenda. While humanitarian and development actors have the responsibility of maintaining PSEA core standards in all operations, we believe there is still work to be done in terms of:

- Integrating PSEA not only in Humanitarian Response Plans, but also in Development Frameworks agreed between the UN system and national authorities.
- Improving the understanding of PSEA by governmental implementing partners, including the aforementioned issue of SEA and non-affiliated personnel.

- Guaranteeing safe access to government-managed assistance services, within the principles of the victim-centred approach, particularly when cases purportedly concern non-traditional humanitarian or development actors, such as community leaders.³⁶
- Building the capacity of government institutions to embed PSEA approaches and mechanisms within their disciplinary, human resources and service delivery frameworks.³⁷

Overall, the nexus agenda is about strengthening local capacities and creating conditions for future development and peace. In the case of Venezuela and PSEA, this entails a need to address bigger and more transcendental issues, such as gender inequality and how it manifests through the feminisation of poverty; the oversexualisation of Venezuelan women and girls; and the increasing levels of gender-based violence, in the midst of rampant impunity. These issues are intertwined, and the nexus agenda cannot be achieved without tackling them.

Conclusion

After endless animated conversations about successes, challenges and opportunities to improve, coming from both contexts, we agree on the following three priorities for the PSEA strategy in Venezuela in the upcoming year.

First, in terms of presence and representation, we must recognise that we lack the resources and capacity in-country to establish subnational networks. Therefore, it is key to focus our efforts in stretching the presence of the existing national network across the country. For this purpose, we will roll out a two-fold approach. On the one hand, we must strengthen the participation in the national network of organisations that are only present at the subnational level. On the other hand, we must strengthen PSEA in subnational coordination bodies by further engaging subnational inter-agency focal points, which will also allow us to bring the field priorities and nuances to the national agenda. In parallel, we both emphasise the need to continue the efforts to bring meaningful participation of NGOs to the PSEA inter-agency work, as they are the ones implementing on the ground, with direct and constant contact with the communities.

Another key priority is to initiate a dialogue with government institutions and local authorities, prioritising those who are involved in humanitarian and development activities, in particular education, protection, health and disaster risk management. Our main challenge in this regard is to ensure that thorough risk analysis and mitigation plans are in place prior to their involvement, particularly in relation to the referral of potential allegations concerning them.

36 The Venezuelan Humanitarian Response Plan includes the establishment of a fund to remove barriers to gender-based violence (GBV) and child protection (CP) services for SEA victims. Complementary activities include the integration of PSEA in the case management Standard Operating Procedures for GBV and CP, and the provision of PSEA training to GBV and CP service providers and case managers.

37 For example, in Venezuela we are starting to collaborate with education stakeholders to integrate PSEA standards in the existing code of conduct and schools' governance frameworks, in order to ensure teachers' awareness of PSEA principles and that child-friendly reporting mechanisms are built into existing structures to ensure sustainability.

Finally, it is imperative that we further strengthen our efforts on community engagement, which is crucial to address our main concern at this stage: SEA underreporting. We need to focus on making sure that communities understand PSEA principles and that our reporting mechanisms are informed by the needs and preferences of those groups that are most at risk of SEA. We must guarantee not only safe access to our systems but also build community trust in them, in order to overcome victims' fear of retaliation.

Maria and Irene both acknowledge the rare but wonderful opportunity to cross paths and work together, sharing an expanded understanding of both the Mozambican and the Venezuelan contexts and proactively building on this to continue to work together to strengthen PSEA in Venezuela.

Irene Coello is a Venezuelan gender/human rights professional, with over 15 years of experience in development and humanitarian affairs. She works as Humanitarian Affairs Officer at OCHA.

Maria Alvarez is the Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Coordinator in Venezuela.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in the article are solely those of the authors and do not represent the positions of their organisations.

Joint PSEA and AAP Networks: a coordinated approach for system-wide accountability

Husni Husni

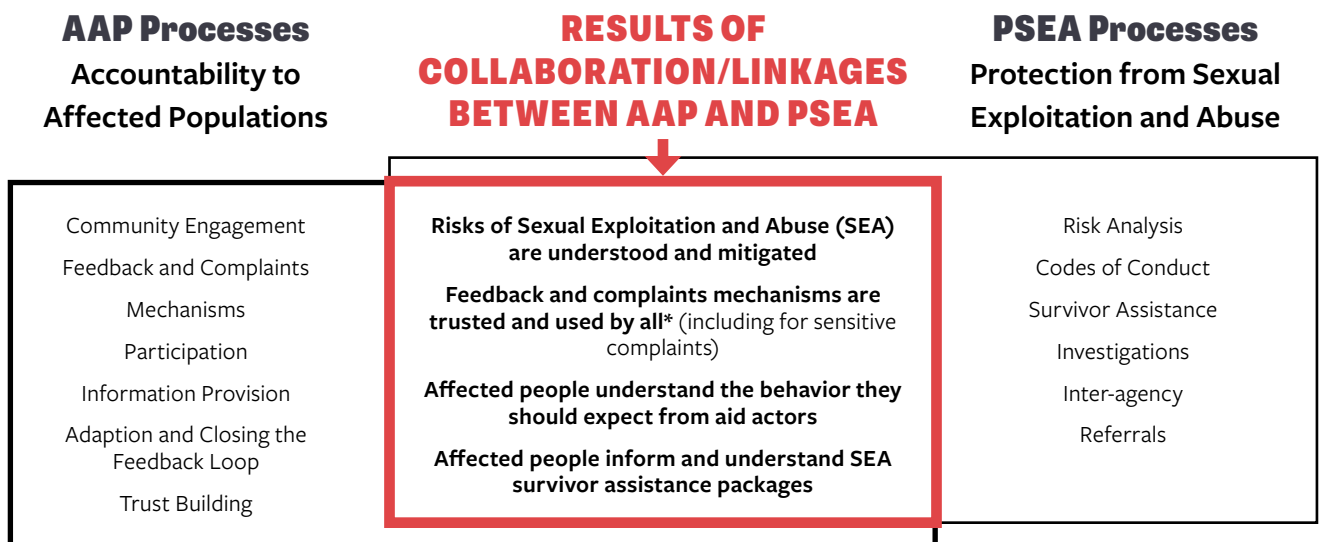
This article discusses the links between Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and Accountability to Affected People (AAP) by exploring the implementation of collective approaches to accountability in humanitarian action. It examines good practices, challenges and opportunities to establish, undertake and strengthen the connections between these two thematic areas in response operations. The article focuses on collective PSEA and AAP initiatives implemented in the humanitarian response in Ethiopia in 2021, and in Indonesia in 2018, in response to the Central Sulawesi earthquakes and tsunami response. It also draws on examples from other contexts.

In 2015, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Team on AAP and PSEA established essential links between these two areas of work.³⁸ The primary intersection is on ensuring the harmonisation of community-based complaints mechanisms (CBCM) to improve reporting on and responses to sexual

³⁸ The essential linkages between Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) and Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) | IASC Accountability and Inclusion Resources Portal (alnep.org)

exploitation and abuse (SEA) at the community level. Additional links between PSEA and AAP were drawn in relation to awareness-raising and two-way dialogue between crisis-affected people and aid providers (Figure 1) to illustrate key collaborative actions both thematic areas could prioritise.

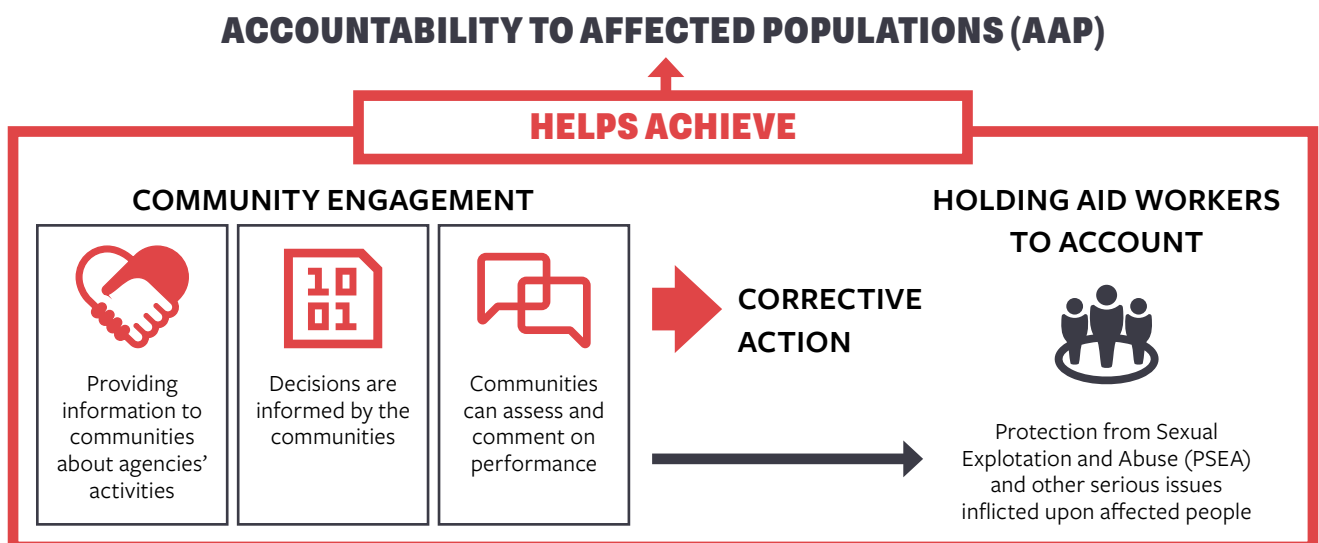
Figure 1 Links between AAP and PSEA



Source: IASC AAP and PSEA Task Team

The interconnections are also noted in the IASC definition of AAP (Figure 2), indicating that effective coordination between AAP and PSEA must be addressed simultaneously to hold aid workers to account collectively.

Figure 2 IASC definition of AAP



Source: IASC AAP and PSEA Task Team

Through these guidelines and other global standards and commitments on AAP and PSEA, including the Grand Bargain and the Core Humanitarian Standard, substantial progress on collective efforts to address the links between PSEA and AAP by aid actors in emergency operations has been made.³⁹ There is good practice in at least two important areas: joined-up PSEA and AAP coordination mechanisms; and common and/or collective community feedback and complaints systems. These two areas are key to operationalising collective PSEA and AAP at the institutional level, as well as in communities.

Joint PSEA and AAP coordination: synergies, challenges and opportunities

There is growing awareness within the aid community that a coordinated approach begins with a structured coordination mechanism. Over the last several years, collective models have been developed to roll out inter-agency approaches to PSEA and AAP, including working groups, task teams, communities of practices and consortia.⁴⁰ Despite where these structures are situated (for example, a technical group is formally positioned under humanitarian, development and government coordination architectures in country), they are often governed by terms of reference and a workplan that reflect the priorities and limitations of the humanitarian system. The inclusion of PSEA and AAP networks in the formal humanitarian architecture enables access to decision-making fora and more opportunities to advocate for collective responsibility for accountability, including for PSEA.

In Tigray in Ethiopia, humanitarian actors tested PSEA and AAP coordination in 2021 by merging both thematic areas into one technical working group to support the Area Humanitarian Country Team (AHCT).⁴¹ The humanitarian coordination structure in Ethiopia is decentralised to allow decisions to be taken closer to and in dialogue with affected communities.⁴² This decentralised structure enables humanitarian actors to regularly consult communities on their needs and priorities, including on sensitive issues such as SEA, and take action locally. The sub-national PSEA and AAP (Tigray region) network advises the AHCT on the reporting channels communities are most comfortable using to engage on SEA, as well as programme adaptations, based on the views of and feedback from affected people.

Joint coordination of PSEA and AAP strategies and activities in the Tigray crisis supports more effective and efficient delivery of respective tasks and responsibilities. For instance, the Tigray PSEA and AAP Network contributes to local assessments to identify the needs and priorities of affected people, suggests improvements to community feedback and complaints systems based on community visits and other methodologies such as surveys, and jointly advocates for course correction through a collective community voices platform (a joint humanitarian initiative to bring the voices of affected people into decision-making).⁴³ The Tigray network's terms of reference outline the specific technical

39 Voices of Asia-Pacific: Lessons and Outcomes on Aid Accountability: <https://express.adobe.com/page/NcVQrvsECrHsw/>

40 PSEA country coordination dashboard in Asia and the Pacific: [PSEA Coordination Dashboard \(google.com\)](#)

41 Terms of reference PSEA and AAP Network in Tigray: [joint_regional_network_for_tigray_-tor.pdf \(humanitarianresponse.info\)](#)

42 [ethiopia_mid_year_review_of_the_humanitarian_response_plan_october_2021.pdf \(reliefweb.int\)](#)

43 Ethiopia Community Voices Platform: [Microsoft Power BI](#)

Similar coordination practices are being undertaken in the Asia-Pacific region. The Regional AAP and PSEA Working Group was also created in recognition of the links between PSEA and AAP and a desire to reduce the number of coordination meetings but with the ultimate goal of eventually including other cross-cutting thematic areas such as gender, gender-based violence (GBV) and other protection-based working groups under one 'people-centred approach'.⁴⁵ In Rakhine State in Myanmar, humanitarian actors are currently exploring the possibility of embedding AAP into the established PSEA Network to avoid creating a new coordination structure.

However, while joint coordination can help to streamline collective efforts, this approach also presents operational challenges that require collective solutions. The main obstacle is the difficulty in finding people with both PSEA and AAP skills, and the experience to fill inter-agency coordinator roles. Another challenge is how to avoid duplication of effort, maximise synergies and manage the raising and allocation of resources against the competing priorities which sometimes arise between these thematic areas.

In Ethiopia, the Operational Peer Review, conducted by senior humanitarian leaders in Northern Ethiopia between September and October 2021, strongly supported efforts to link PSEA and AAP, suggesting that these connections should be further strengthened and streamlined. Where joint PSEA and AAP networks exist, it is important to recruit dedicated PSEA/AAP interagency coordinators, prioritising facilitation and coordination skills as well as technical capacity. Such action, accompanied by increased funding for and investment in capacity strengthening and adaptive programming, would significantly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian response.

Common community feedback and complaints mechanisms increase synergies between PSEA and AAP

In the response to the 2018 earthquakes and tsunami in Central Sulawesi in Indonesia, AAP and PSEA implementation was guided by the Collective Framework for Accountability and PSEA, designed with the support of the Humanitarian Country Team, and complementary to the government-led response. The joint framework articulates collective outcomes that put affected people at the centre of operations.⁴⁶ A collaboratively developed bulletin, *Suara Komunitas*, served as a common feedback platform to advocate for the needs and priorities of affected people in near-real time.

Suara Komunitas features evidence of feedback and complaints from affected people through focus group discussions, hotlines, digital media, radio and other communication channels gathered by aid agencies in Central Sulawesi. The three editions of the bulletin produced during the response presented analysis of community feedback and complaints and proposed corrective actions, raised awareness of PSEA initiatives and reported on the outcomes of two-way dialogue with community members. For instance, the second edition (December 2018) featured the views of vulnerable groups, including women and youth, on shelter programming. Women raised with the government and aid responders critical

45 [Regional Working Group on Accountability to Affected People \(AAP\) & Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse \(PSEA\) | HumanitarianResponse](#)

46 Collective Framework of Accountability and PSEA, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (Draft, 2018)

issues related to the protection, safety and security of women, asking them to put a protection system in place when delivering shelter assistance.⁴⁷ The bulletin encouraged discussion in government cluster coordination meetings and within aid agency coordination fora to improve the delivery of assistance based on community preferences. Although the bulletin was discontinued once recovery was under way, a special Covid-19 edition was later published at the onset of the pandemic.

Common feedback platforms such as *Suara Komunitas* are critical avenues for improving the operationalisation of PSEA. Similar joint and collective approaches to addressing PSEA and AAP have been used in the Philippines and Afghanistan. In the Typhoon Rai (known locally as Odette) response and recovery in the Philippines in 2022, SEA issues have been well integrated into the design and implementation of a community voices bulletin, *Tingog sa Komunidad*.⁴⁸ This inter-agency community platform shared feedback collected from consultation with communities affected by the typhoon with government and humanitarian responders. Focus group discussions, key informant interviews and other rapid assessments were jointly conducted with affected people by the government and humanitarian responders. The aim has been to ensure that government and humanitarian responders understand the needs and priorities of affected people and take decisions and adapt responses, including PSEA measures, accordingly. This approach has enabled the identification of key PSEA measures that aid actors should take, for example enhancing the links between the reporting system and services for survivors through the government's Department of Social Welfare and Development. In Afghanistan, questions on PSEA were included in a community perception survey to assess community awareness and understanding of PSEA reporting channels and survivor services. The survey also included questions on how satisfied respondents were with the channels and services provided and what challenges they faced in accessing or using them.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Collective approaches to PSEA and AAP have improved humanitarian responses in Ethiopia and Indonesia. While there are many links between the two thematic areas, two key areas of work – joined-up coordination mechanisms and common community feedback and complaint mechanisms – could be key drivers to enable meaningful operationalisation at both institutional and community level. Collective community-centred approaches are necessary to reduce competition for scarce resources, maximise the use of shared resources and achieve system-wide accountability.

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47 [Suara Komunitas Eng Dec Final Online.pdf \(reliefweb.int\)](#)

48 [Tingog sa Komunidad, Community Voices Bulletin: Typhoon Rai \(Odette\), Philippines, Edition #1 - February 2022 \[EN/TL\] - Philippines | ReliefWeb](#)

49 Afghanistan: <https://express.adobe.com/page/NcVQrvsECrHsw/>

Advocating for the rights of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse

Jane Connors

Since its establishment almost 77 years ago, the United Nations' (UN) role in conflict, humanitarian crisis and development has diversified and expanded. Throughout this time, victims of sexual exploitation and abuse by UN staff, non-staff personnel and those of humanitarian organisations have reported their experiences to the UN, civil society, the media and others. For over 20 years, the UN and partner organisations have developed and implemented increasingly comprehensive standards and policies to prevent and respond to these wrongs. These include the 2002 six Core Principles (revised in 2019) adopted by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) – the oversight body responsible for the interagency coordination of humanitarian assistance, to create an environment free of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in humanitarian crises – and the [2003 UN Secretary-General's bulletin on special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse](#).

In early 2017, UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched a new strategy to confront sexual exploitation and abuse, pledging to elevate the voices of victims and put their rights and dignity at the forefront of prevention and response. To operationalise these objectives, he appointed a system-wide Victims' Rights Advocate to work with states, local authorities, UN entities and civil society to ensure that reliable, gender-sensitive pathways are in place for every victim or witness to complain, receive timely assistance and support, and access accountability processes and remedies. To embed the victims' rights approach on the ground, the Secretary-General instructed that field victims' rights advocates be designated in the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Haiti and South Sudan – the countries from which the highest number of cases had been reported. Recognising that SEA occurs where there is a power imbalance between UN personnel and affected populations, the Secretary-General encouraged the designation of field advocates in peace, humanitarian and development contexts where sexual exploitation and abuse required special measures. As in the case of the Victims' Rights Advocate, field victims' rights advocates operated in these countries from late 2017 but performed victims' rights functions along with other duties. Senior Victims' Rights Officers (SVROs), fully funded and dedicated to the victims' rights advocacy role, have been in place since the end of November 2021. They work with, and under the direction of, the global Victims' Rights Advocate to develop victim-centric policies, procedures and programmes. Most importantly, the officers are tasked with maintaining direct and regular contact with victims.

These advocates have demonstrated that the presence of a person on the ground tasked with prioritising victims' rights – someone they trust and to whom they can turn for assistance, confident they will advocate on their behalf – makes a real difference to victims. The SVROs coordinate urgent medical care and psychosocial support; secure victims' access to legal aid, including to resolve paternity and/or child maintenance claims; and arrange capacity-building for victims so they can generate income.

The SVRO in the CAR cooperates with the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), UN funds, programmes and agencies, the protection from SEA task force and the gender-based violence (GBV) and child protection subclusters to coordinate prevention activities, assistance and support for victims and to foster information exchange among UN actors on victims' cases. She interacts personally with victims to identify assistance needs and support referrals in Bangui and across the country, including in Alindao, Bambari, Bangassou, Mobaye and Pombolo. She follows up with them regularly and, building on the victims' assistance tracking system that records engagement with victims of uniformed and civilian personnel and the support they receive, created a system-wide tracking tool she updates continually. She cooperates closely with service providers and local organisations, such as the Mukwege Foundation, to facilitate immediate and longer-term medical and psychosocial support for victims. She leads, and participates in, awareness-raising and outreach activities for communities throughout the country, UN colleagues, and international and local civil society organisations. These activities are directed at preventing sexual exploitation and abuse by highlighting the standards of conduct required of UN personnel, clarifying reporting pathways and flagging available support and assistance for victims. She also works with local partners to facilitate legal and related assistance, such as the issuance of birth certificates essential for school registration and the resolution of paternity and child maintenance claims.

In consultation with UN entities and local partners, and informed by discussions with victims, the SVRO develops project proposals to support victims and children born of SEA. Notably, a project to provide medical, psychosocial and educational support, capacity-building for income-generating activities and legal assistance for victims is under development to address the needs of victims of alleged widespread SEA, reported in September 2021, which led to the repatriation of the Gabonese contingent in line with Security Council resolution 2272 (2016). This will be funded by the [Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#), established by the Secretary-General in 2016 (A/69/799, para. 66). Further projects, which respond to expressed demands of victims for income-generating support and payment of school fees, are under development.

The SVRO contributed to the work of the multidisciplinary team established by the UN Secretariat to determine the factors generating the high number of allegations in the CAR and will take forward the team's recommendations on the protection of, and support to, victims. In line with the good practice pioneered by the Investigations Division of the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) in the DRC, the SVRO accompanies victims during investigations into these and other allegations to provide emotional and practical support, information on available services and to ensure they are treated with dignity, including by making it clear that their choice and consent are preconditions to their participation in investigations. This practice helps to restore victims' trust in the UN and has garnered the appreciation of investigators as it facilitates accountability processes.



The SVRO in the DRC, Mihaela-Aurelia Porumb, meets staff from the Community Based Complaint Mechanism in Beni, DRC. Credit: Mbette Mbainadjim and Jean Claude Bahati Muhindo

In the DRC, the SVRO receives complaints from victims through community-based networks; collaborates with the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF to facilitate medical and psychosocial and other support for them through local partners; and maintains close contact with victims through calls and texts, even as they moved across the country and, in some cases, borders. She manages the implementation of multiple projects financed by the Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, most focusing on strengthening victims' income-generation skills and educational support for children born of sexual exploitation and abuse. Through these projects, almost 400 women received training in tailoring, pastry-making, hairdressing and other skills, and around 86 children received education support. Victims say the income they have earned through their new skills has allowed them to make further investments, reintegrate into their communities and regain their dignity.

The SVRO in the DRC also facilitated the provision of assistance to victims harmed by UN and affiliated humanitarian workers responding to the tenth Ebola virus epidemic outbreak in the Eastern DRC, and accompanied them as they cooperated with the OIOS investigators examining these events. She provided strong support to the independent commission established by the World Health Organization

(WHO) to investigate these incidents, and was part of the team, along with the WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA, which sought to identify gaps in victim support and strengthen community awareness, networks and complaint mechanisms in November 2021. In addition, the SVRO supported victims in accountability processes, such as the in situ courts martial organised by one troop contributing country and its visit to the DRC to gather DNA samples from mothers and children for use in resolving outstanding paternity claims related to its personnel.

Based in Goma, the SVRO has forged strong partnerships with the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) components, the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Steering Committee and the UN entities which participate in the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Network (PSEA) (of which she is a member). She also cooperates closely with the interagency PSEA coordinator.

The SVRO is in almost daily contact with known victims, including through a dedicated WhatsApp account and her frequent visits to field offices. To encourage other victims to come forward, she maintains contact with communities, community-based complaint mechanisms, local authorities and service providers across the country, and conducts capacity-building and training sessions to support them. She also raises awareness of her role and that of the Victims' Rights Advocate, especially their system-wide reach, with UN entities and implementing partners. These have included activities organised by the International Organization for Migration for managers of internally displaced persons' camps on how to approach girls in vulnerable situations who might wish to report sexual exploitation and abuse and access assistance; several workshops on the UNICEF technical note on the Victims' Assistance Protocol; and information-sharing and exchange across UN entities in the DRC.

The SVRO cooperates with colleagues to create trust fund projects, several of which are being crafted by IASC members, including UNFPA, and supports the implementation of those which are ongoing. She pursues the good practice of supporting victims in OIOS investigations, including the further investigations it is conducting (mostly in Beni in the north-east of the country) into the many allegations related to the Ebola response, pursuant to a memorandum of understanding between it and the WHO. She seeks to limit the number of times victims are interviewed to avoid their re-traumatisation. She enables their presence at interviews, including through arranging safe, secure and dignified transportation, food and water, and accommodation where necessary. The SVRO meets with victims individually to determine their needs and concerns, coordinate support and assistance in a way that upholds their rights, dignity and safety, and confirms that they consent to cooperate in the investigations.

During the short time the advocates have been deployed, they have contributed significantly to the prioritisation of the rights and dignity of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse on the ground through many activities. But they face challenges. These functions are new to the UN, and more effort is required to make them known within and outside the organisation. The fact that their role relates to victims of all UN personnel, and not only those in peace operations, requires greater understanding across the UN system. Although they are full-time staff, the SVROs are human- and financial-resources poor, though

they have been provided with some ad hoc support. Both the CAR and the DRC are vast countries, where there are many victims, often in remote areas that are difficult to reach. One advocate working alone is unable to respond to the needs of victims who come forward – especially where there are upticks in allegations, such as in the context of the Ebola response – and to ensure that prevention initiatives incorporate victims’ rights perspectives. For example, until the end of April 2022 surge support was provided to the SVRO in the CAR, where many allegations surfaced in 2021.

The officers also face the complex task of managing victims’ expectations. They are fearful of perpetrators, concerned about confidentiality, and may face stigma and discrimination from their families and communities. In line with the 2008 UN Comprehensive Strategy on Assistance and Support to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (A/RES/62/214, Annex), assistance and support should be provided through existing services, programmes and their networks, usually through GBV and child-protection programming. These are chronically underfunded and may be unavailable or inaccessible in remote and insecure areas. Service providers may be unaware of the specific needs of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse by UN personnel. Their capacity to deliver specialised assistance such as psychological care may be limited, while legal aid that is essential to assist victims in criminal and civil accountability procedures, including paternity and child maintenance claims, is rarely available. Certainly, victims and children born of sexual exploitation and abuse have benefited from projects financed by the trust fund and other sources, such as the WHO Survivor Assistance Fund, but follow-up is required to monitor and assess the quality of the assistance and ensure that the victim is equipped – for example, by upgrading their skills – to take full advantage of these interventions. Nonetheless, the focus on victims’ rights and dignity, especially through the efforts of the SVROs on the ground, inspired the confidence of many victims and helped them move forward.

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UNHCR's journey towards a victim-centred approach

Diane Goodman, Blanche Tax and Zuhura Mahamed

Several years ago, in the spring of 2018, a female colleague at the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) shared the following experience through an anonymous survey:

I was sexually harassed by a colleague when I was an intern with UNHCR in a remote field location. (...) I did not report because I was brand new, young, scared, and didn't know anything about reporting. I guess also I was sure that nothing would happen (...).⁵⁰

Until not so long ago, the response to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment (SH) in the aid sector would likely be described by observers as characterised by the wish to minimise reputational risk, particularly when allegations of sexual misconduct became public. Shifting from an approach that focuses on the organisation to one that revolves around the safety, rights, well-being, and the expressed needs and choices of victims, requires long-term investment and effort.⁵¹

Taking inspiration from the #MeToo Movement and the courage of colleagues speaking out about experiences of and concerns regarding sexual misconduct, in early 2018 UNHCR's leadership fundamentally changed the way that the organisation thought about and tackled these abuses, initiating a series of concrete measures in this respect.

50 In 2018, an informal employee group, Women and Change, collected testimonies of female UNHCR personnel, describing gendered experiences they had in UNHCR. This quote is part of the collection of anonymous testimonies. With the agreement of those who participated in the survey, the testimonies have been used to advocate for change in UNHCR and for awareness-raising and training purposes. A Men for Change employee group is also actively advocating for change by organising 'barbershop sessions' for frank dialogue amongst male UNHCR staff on masculinities, sexual harassment, unconscious bias and related topics. These sessions have now been expanded to include similar dialogues with female staff.

51 The terms 'victim' and 'survivor' are each used to refer to the person subjected to sexual exploitation and/or abuse, or sexual harassment. In the legal field, the term 'victim' is usually used to refer to persons subjected to sexual violence in conflict and/or displacement. Today, 'survivor' is more commonly used and is often preferred to 'victim' in psychological and social support sectors because it implies resilience. In the UN, the term victim is used more often in the context of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, as in 'Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate (OVRA)' and UNHCR has followed this approach in its policy and guidance related to sexual misconduct. In this article, the term 'survivor' and 'victim' are used interchangeably.

As a first step, the High Commissioner created dedicated capacity by establishing a Senior Coordinator on the Prevention of and Response to SEA and SH⁵² and a multifunctional coordination structure.⁵³ A vision, strategy and action plan was developed, featuring a victim-centred approach (VCA).⁵⁴ By bringing efforts to tackle both SEA and SH together – a marked departure from previous practice – the organisation recognised that all forms of sexual misconduct are rooted in gender inequalities and power imbalances and that eradicating them required a change in individual attitudes and behaviour as well as our organisational culture. We realised that changing our working culture is critical to build victims' trust and help overcome the enormous barriers faced in speaking up and receiving the support and assistance they need.

Safe spaces for dialogue

Creating safe spaces for dialogue and self-reflection are important catalysts for organisational culture change. As a first priority, we looked for new and innovative ways to listen to and interact with colleagues on this sensitive issue. In 2018 and 2019, informal dialogues on addressing sexual misconduct led by the High Commissioner and Deputy High Commissioner, where colleagues could ask questions anonymously, were broadcast live around the world. Victims' voices, through dramatisations or creative videos with victim testimonies,⁵⁵ were central to these dialogues.

These exchanges were complemented by reflective leadership dialogues, where smaller groups of managers were provided with an opportunity to reflect on their roles as agents of change, how gender and other dynamics affect work environments, and the impact of SH and SEA on victims, their families and their communities.

An internal challenge on how to prevent sexual harassment provided the opportunity for colleagues across the organisation – often in the most remote locations – to engage in conversation and share ideas through our innovations platform.

52 Currently the Office of the Senior Coordinator includes seven international staff members and one national staff member. The Victim Care Officer is situated within the Office of the Senior Coordinator.

53 In May 2018, a multifunctional working group was established to support the Senior Coordinator and to help ensure a coordinated approach to organisational efforts to tackle sexual misconduct. The working group includes representation from a wide range of entities including the Legal Affairs Service, the Ombudsman's Office, the Ethics Office, the Inspector General's Office, and those entities covering emergencies, security, external relations, human resources, protection, risk management, programmes and innovation. At the same time, a director-level task force, consisting largely of the same entities and chaired by the Deputy High Commissioner, was also established to provide strategic advice, to endorse critical actions and to ensure the mainstreaming of efforts within each Division or Entity.

54 In May 2018, the organisation launched its first [Strategy and Action Plan](#) to prevent and respond to SEA and SH. This was replaced in 2020 by a new two-year [Strategy and Action Plan](#). For more information on UNHCR's broader efforts to tackle sexual misconduct, please see the Year in Review Publications for [2018](#), [2019](#) and [2020](#), the report on the [High Commissioner's IASC Championship on Protection from SEA and SH](#), and visit UNHCR's dedicated [webpage](#).

55 [This video](#) was developed by UNHCR as part of the [High Commissioner's Inter-agency Standing Committee \(IASC\) Championship on Protection from SEA and SH](#), for a [communications package](#) for IASC Principals, but can be used in a variety of settings to encourage dialogue on this issue.

The Victim Care Officer

One of the most impactful and early steps in promoting a VCA was the decision, in September 2018, to establish the position of Victim Care Officer (VCO). The VCO, a licensed clinical psychologist, provides confidential psychosocial support, guidance and accompaniment to victims of SH. The VCO helps to identify and assess risks victims may face and ensure that their needs are met irrespective of the resolution process they choose. While not all risks can be mitigated or eliminated, there are usually some accommodations that can be made that make the process more manageable for victims and – as explained by one colleague who was supported by the VCO – reduce the fears associated with the process:

She [the Victim Care Officer] explained the options that were available and we discussed my barriers in depth. With her support I was able to raise a complaint and I felt the steps were less stressful. I was so scared to raise a complaint but after a long discussion and all the clarification she provided I felt more confident and ready to make the complaint.

The accompaniment of SH victims through our processes has provided UNHCR with an overview of how victims experience our internal justice systems.⁵⁶ This insight has helped us to identify and work to address systemic issues that would have previously been difficult to detect. We receive anonymised feedback from victims through the VCO, who also regularly consults with victims in a safe and confidential way to ensure their perspectives are informing UNHCR actions and initiatives.

The role of the VCO has evolved over time to include new elements such as support and guidance to managers responding to individual situations of sexual harassment. The role also includes broader organisation- and system-wide initiatives to improve the work environment, training and learning activities, and the integration of the prevention of and response to sexual harassment into corporate guidance, tools and frameworks.

UNHCR's victim-centred approach policy in response to sexual misconduct

In November 2020, UNHCR took a critical step by issuing its [Policy on a Victim-Centred Approach in UNHCR's response to Sexual Misconduct: Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment](#). This policy, the first of its kind in the UN, creates a framework to put victims at the centre of UNHCR's response to SEA or SH. Building on these elements, UNHCR developed a definition that is both rights- and needs-based, and that emphasises the need for victims to (re)gain a measure of control over actions taken after an experience of sexual misconduct, whether in the context of assistance and support or pursuing justice.

⁵⁶ Victims can choose to resolve their experience of sexual harassment through a formal investigation, which can lead to sanctions (usually dismissal), or through a restorative justice facilitated dialogue, where they can be supported to deliver messages to their harassers.

The policy defines a VCA as:

a way of engaging with victims that prioritises listening to victims, avoids re-traumatisation, and systematically focuses on their safety, rights, well-being, expressed needs and choice, thereby giving back as much control to the victims as feasible, and ensuring the empathetic and sensitive delivery of services and accompaniment in a non-judgmental manner.

It includes high-level principles⁵⁷ and lists entities involved in responding, or supporting colleagues based around the world in responding to SEA and SH. It does not detail the operationalisation of the VCA. Instead, it tasks UNHCR's Senior Coordinator to work with all UNHCR entities involved in responding to or advising on the response to SEA and SH cases to incorporate the VCA into their work.

Box 3 Our symbol

We wanted to capture both our journey as an organisation and that of victims/survivors in a single image that could be used to symbolise our work on SEA and SH. To find a suitable image, we went through an internal consultation process, inviting a range of colleagues including victims/survivors to take part in the process.

Our chosen symbol conveys the journey that we are on as an organisation in addressing SEA and SH. We chose a dark colour as the background because the subject matter is heavy, but we illuminated the path and the stars to symbolise hope. The symbol is encapsulated in a circle because we wanted to convey a trusting and safe space for victims/survivors to come forward. The two stars represent the subject areas of SEA and SH, but we also wanted to denote an additional meaning: that the stars represent UNHCR as well as victim/survivors who are on a personal journey following an experience of SEA or SH. We wanted to communicate that they are not alone in their journey, but rather that it is a shared one and that we are in this together.



57 The principles of a VCA outlined in the policy are: safety and security; assistance and support; non-discrimination; an end-to-end, holistic approach; giving back control; confidentiality and informed consent; ask and listen; keeping victims informed; assistance to and support for child victims; and due process.

From policy to practice

In order to operationalise the policy and its principles, a series of workshops were held and guidance developed to support colleagues and entities involved in responding to incidents of sexual misconduct. These workshops sought to consider, for each principle, what actions victims would wish to see and how these actions could be implemented. This process of perspective-taking, alongside dialogue with victims, is another key way in which we have approached the adoption of a VCA. In an effort to implement the end-to-end VCA, the guidance looked at what actions might be taken prior to, during and after any accountability procedure a victim may engage in. While not comprehensive, the guidance provides examples of things to do, not to do, and/or how to do them, as well as other relevant considerations.

This was complemented by a series of dialogues with colleagues in the field aimed at taking stock of how country operations are operationalising the VCA in relation to cases of SEA. It also provided the opportunity to better understand what practices exist and what support is required to enhance the practical application of the policy and ensure that victims of SEA receive holistic support through existing services for survivors of GBV and throughout the complaint-handling process. The dialogues also highlighted a number of challenges in implementing a VCA for victims of SEA, including issues of informed consent in relation to mandatory reporting; concerns about the safety and security of victims; how to ensure that appropriate support and assistance is being provided to victims while maintaining confidentiality; and keeping victims informed throughout the investigatory process.

A key challenge we have faced in becoming victim-centred is the extent to which we are able to revamp our services to be more cognisant of the victim experience. Victims perceive our response as being singular and united, but in fact the institutional design of our organisation has meant that the various support and resolution services on offer are housed in discrete units. In order to make progress, it is important that our organisational response is reconfigured, or that coordination is improved, in order to meet the needs of the individual victim, rather than expecting victims to fit into the logic of our traditional ways of working. This is particularly important because victims cannot separate out the various facets of their experience – including, for example, physical safety concerns, psychological well-being, protection from retaliation, and justice and resolution – simply because organisational matrixes require them to do so.

Implementing a VCA is not only about policies, processes and procedures, but also requires prioritising safety, inclusion, accountability and respect in our organisational culture, and engaging all staff in these efforts. Crucially, it requires confronting real or perceived conflicts of interest, where the organisational interest and the needs and choices of a victim do not, or do not fully, align.

When Tarana Burke – the founder of the #MeToo Movement – was asked about the success of the movement four years after it went global, she said, ‘I think what we’ve made possible is the millions

of survivors who feel comfortable coming forward (...) I think we've made it possible for people to see healing as a possibility.⁵⁸ While UNHCR still has a long way to go, we are taking steps in that same direction.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

Accountable to whom? Moving towards a survivor-centred approach to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment

Laurens Kymmell and Taryn Kurtanich

Sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH) represents a violation and a deep betrayal of the communities we work in, as those in power use their position to exploit and abuse. Like other forms of gender-based violence (GBV), SEAH is rooted in unequal power relations, gender inequality and a lack of a 'speak-up culture' that deprioritises accountability. Repeated scandals, from the movie industry to politics, have shown that SEAH is an issue everywhere. The humanitarian sector is no exception. Gender inequality and unequal power relations are often dominant, with the risk of SEAH compounded in an operational context characterised by a lack of oversight, conflict, erosion of the rule of law and a constant influx of new employees.

To help tackle SEAH within the aid sector, the United States Agency for International Development and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs formed an SEAH Community of Practice (COP) in 2020. This brought together a wide array of stakeholders, including donors, academics, aid practitioners, researchers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international governmental organisations (IGOs) and the private sector to share lessons and good practice. The COP offered a space for dialogue on an issue that is often only discussed internally, aiming to enhance transparency, stimulate cross-organisational learning and improve communication and interaction between different aid agencies.

⁵⁸ McShane, Julianne (2021) 'It's been four years since #MeToo went global. Tarana Burke wants to stay 'laser-focused' on healing' (<https://www.thelily.com/its-been-four-years-since-metoo-went-global-tarana-burke-wants-to-stay-laser-focused-on-healing>).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) Reference Group on Ending SEAH, a multi-stakeholder group supporting learning and implementation of the [DAC Recommendation on Ending SEAH in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance](#), has continued the work of the COP through its peer learning sessions and further research on how to develop and implement the COP's main findings and recommendations.

This article shares some of these findings and recommendations with one key question in mind: how do we ensure that the needs and rights of survivors are at the centre of efforts to prevent and respond to SEAH? How do we ensure that it is the survivors to whom we are accountable?



As part of the annual 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence in 2017, UN Women Guatemala initiated the painting of vibrant murals in zones 5, 6, 7 and 18 of Guatemala City, where the Safe City programme would be implemented. Community members, women leaders and artists came together to paint the murals, as a way of reclaiming public spaces. The murals signify women's empowerment and freedom from violence. Credit: UN Women/Ryan Brown

Introduction: a scenario

It could be anywhere in the world. A woman, or a girl, waits for food aid, or cash assistance, or a vaccination. Instead, she encounters an aid worker who demands sex in exchange for the assistance. She refuses and is sexually assaulted. She knows that what occurred was not the norm. She had been told that the aid would be free, and if someone asked for anything in exchange, she could report it.

Step 1: Reporting

She is processing a lot as she considers reporting the incident. She is weighing the need for medical care and other support; she does not know where to report or what will happen once she does. She is worried about retaliation from her attacker and shame from her community, and does not know how the aid organisation will protect her and her family, or if the aid they need to survive will cease. She notices a box that has 'complaints' written on it but has no way to submit a complaint, without paper or a phone to access the link, and she does not know who reads the complaints.

This scenario illustrates the myriad barriers that lead to chronic under-reporting of SEAH across the aid sector. The New Humanitarian and the Thomson Reuters Foundation have highlighted the difficulties around reporting during the Ebola response in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): many survivors opened up about their experiences to journalists instead of using organisational reporting channels. So, what can we do to ensure that we move towards a survivor-centred approach on reporting? How do we make reporting mechanisms safer, more accessible, known and trusted by survivors?

First, we must do everything to put power and choice back in the hands of the survivor. This means offering multiple mechanisms for reporting, including SMS, hotlines, post boxes and local focal points. Survivors should be able to make both verbal and written reports in their own language. For this purpose, inter-agency community-based complaint mechanisms (CBCM) are being designed and implemented to root reporting systems in community input so that the structure is both culturally and gender-sensitive, and to create one point where complaints from multiple organisations can be received. However, the [recent Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(IASC\) review of PSEAH](#) indicates additional evidence is needed around the effectiveness and operability of these systems.

Second, organisations need to actively raise awareness among communities about the existence of these mechanisms. The focus has often been on the development of multiple mechanisms, without parallel efforts around outreach to ensure communities actually know how to find and use what is available to them.

Third, we need to embed reporting mechanisms into safe and accessible spaces: within health clinics, women's centres, libraries or focal points.

Lastly, in order to build the trust of communities and survivors, local communities and civil society organisations should be involved in the design of these reporting systems, and these systems in turn should include regular engagement and outreach with specific community groups, such as those for women or people with disabilities. Accountability to the survivor, including proper follow-up by organisations, transparency about and throughout the process, and processes that adapt to survivors' needs, is a critical factor in determining whether survivors are encouraged or discouraged to report.

Step 2: Survivor support

The survivor decides to report the assault after hearing about a focal point that can provide resources for psychosocial, legal and medical services. The focal point referred her to GBV services and shared the organisation's policy on survivor support. When she sought out mental and legal support, services were not readily available and not robust enough to meet her needs. She is concerned about accessing these services as her community is small, and she is not sure how her identity and information will be protected.

Although many organisations have broad guidelines on support, implementation in a survivor-centred manner is often a challenge. Survivor support is a critical component in accountability, for both the organisation and the aid sector. The COP participants highlighted some important steps, including a holistic and well-funded package of appropriate, safe, timely and accessible medical, psychosocial, legal and financial support. This support needs to be systematically offered over longer periods of time and should be available regardless of a formal report or investigation. As with reporting mechanisms, consultations and feedback with the community, community groups and survivors are needed to develop appropriate and safe support systems, and to avoid assumptions about survivors' needs in these instances.

Step 3: Investigations and accountability

While the survivor struggles to access support, she knows that the NGO that employs the person who assaulted her is aware of her report. An investigator arrived at her home to interview her while her parents were there. They asked uncomfortable questions and then left without giving her any contact information. She never heard back from the organisation to learn what happened to the perpetrator, and one day, he is gone from the community. She does not know if he was sacked, moved to another role or hired by another organisation.

In the interests of accountability, organisations strive to move quickly and decisively – to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable and to prevent additional harm. But mechanisms for employment accountability often lack survivor-centred principles. While organisations consider legal definitions and compliance structures, survivors are left disconnected from the system.

Local communities, organisations and survivors should be involved in defining survivor-centred mechanisms. Engagement and transparency with the survivor throughout the process should enable survivors to determine if, when and how to engage. Training for investigators and regular information checkpoints should be integrated into policies around investigations, and organisations should look to independent or third-party investigation mechanisms. Independent ombuds functions and human rights organisations are potential initial resources for the aid sector to increase accountability to survivors.

Accountability must extend beyond investigations and beyond individual organisations, to ensure that perpetrators are not able to circulate through the aid sector. Organisations should develop multi-layered

frameworks for screening employees, including self-certifications, interview questions and reference checks to determine any history of misconduct. Initiatives such as the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme and United Nations (UN) ClearCheck system address barriers to a holistic referencing system at the sector level and provide further opportunity for collaboration and research.

Investigations often focus on the individual incident and accountability of the perpetrator, and not on the broader enabling environment, such as what factors enabled the incident to take place or failed to prevent it. Investigations should consider the systems and structures in place for prevention and response, how these policies and processes worked in practice, and where broader failures may have occurred. For example, were proper reference and background checks done? Were prevention measures implemented? Were policies for survivor-centred approaches followed? Reframing accountability to centre the survivor also means asking questions about who is being held accountable, and ensuring organisations are also accountable to survivors, even where investigations cannot be concluded or substantiated; organisations are transparent with survivors; systems are safe, accessible, confidential and survivor-centred; and organisations assess and address any systemic issues.

Complementary mechanisms for response and support should take survivors' needs into account and evaluate environmental and contextual factors beyond the individual incident, including the legal framework, social and cultural norms and barriers to access. As organisations focus on administrative investigations, access to justice can be especially challenging for survivors of SEAH. In order to facilitate access to legal support, coordination with local human rights institutions and legal services organisations can connect survivors with additional options through local legal systems.

Step 4: Putting prevention first

Once organisations have concluded investigations and the aid sector has pivoted to another humanitarian disaster, survivors remain. This is why prevention is critical to SEAH work. Mechanisms for response – reporting, survivor support, investigations and accountability – are important, but organisations should ensure that the strengthening of accountability measures and the reframing of risk are continually viewed through a prevention lens. The COP identified two key aspects to embedding prevention.

First, we need to move away from risk management approaches that only focus on legal, financial and reputational risk to include duty of care and an equal, if not greater, consideration of risks that may impact the health and well-being of people and communities, not just the organisations themselves. COP members emphasised the need for a strong risk management culture with risk assessments that are proactive and focused on prevention and encouraging learning. SEAH needs to be seen as an inherent risk within our work, regardless of the place and context. SEAH risks therefore need to be taken into account at all stages of programming. More collaboration, transparency and sharing of data is needed to prevent the circulation of perpetrators.

Second, preventing and combating SEAH requires organisational and sector-wide cultural change. Rooted in power and gender inequality, addressing SEAH goes beyond strengthening procedures and processes; it requires strong and ethical leadership to create safe spaces for addressing SEAH, accountability in human resource processes and an organisational culture based on respect, integrity, empowerment and accountability. Diverse leadership – including women, LGBTQI+, people of colour, people from different ethnic backgrounds, and those with disabilities, and a commitment to strong diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility – can support organisational cultures rooted in respect and inclusion, which in turn support strong SEAH approaches. Developing organisational culture takes conscious effort and consistent and repeated training – both formal and informal – for all staff, that is comprehensive, detailed and tailored to varying needs. Combating SEAH needs to be a responsibility carried by everyone in the organisation, and everyone within the organisation must feel empowered to take action to prevent and address it. In addition, the sector would do well to learn from and amplify the learning gained from years of GBV prevention work, and increase funding and support for community-level GBV awareness and support services.

Conclusion

Much more needs to be done on survivor-centred approaches to PSEAH. Implementation of such approaches is still uneven across organisations and contexts, and it will take a major shift for the aid sector to move away from self-protective ways of framing risk to truly centre our work on the safety, well-being and dignity of the people we serve.

The COP has sought to create space for the aid community to reflect on what we have learnt and to identify areas for further research and action. The work of the COP built upon previous efforts to address SEAH through increased coordination and communication, driven by commitments to strengthen accountability. The OECD-DAC is now taking this work forward.

Tackling SEAH in a more survivor-centred manner will require a more humble approach where we truly listen to survivors and communities. It also does not come free, and survivor-centred approaches may be more expensive than those that simply check the box. Organisations and donors should be prepared for these costs – as they are for issues of fraud and security – particularly where prevention efforts are concerned. Success will ultimately be judged by the people we serve: individuals and communities, especially women and girls, who are safer because we acted promptly to reduce the risks of SEAH, as well as the survivors who receive the care they need, when they need it.

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Disclaimer: This article was co-written in a personal capacity.

Understanding the barriers to speaking up: bystander conversations at the ICRC

Heike Niebergall-Lackner and Paulien Vandendriessche

For too long, sexual misconduct by staff of humanitarian organisations has been an ‘open secret’, remaining invisible, tolerated or ignored. Revelations in February 2018 of abuse across the humanitarian sector provided another wake-up call and have put the prevention of and response to sexual misconduct more prominently on our agendas once again. Collectively, progress has been made in acknowledging the significant risks of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) during humanitarian responses, and the link with the intrinsic power imbalance between affected communities and humanitarian workers, or among staff members.

Like many other organisations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has enhanced institutional efforts to protect members of affected communities and staff from SEAH.⁵⁹ Regardless of whether sexual misconduct is against another staff member, a recipient of assistance or protection activities or another member of the communities we work with, they need to be addressed comprehensively and together, as they represent ‘expressions of, and contributors to structural power inequalities that render the targeted persons less able, if at all, than perpetrators to control the sexual engagement’.⁶⁰

This article focuses on our efforts to address the internal dimension of sexual misconduct, i.e. among ICRC staff. These efforts are based on the understanding that the way we interact and respond to each other internally is intrinsically linked to how we can protect from harm those we serve and work with externally.

Our efforts in preventing sexual misconduct aim at contributing to an organisational culture of integrity that ensures that everyone working with us feels safe and respected. This requires that managers and staff alike understand and are equipped with the skills they need to fulfill their roles and responsibilities with respect to fostering such a culture.

In the following article, we share the example of bystander conversations on SEAH, an initiative developed by the Ethics, Risk and Compliance Office and implemented with the active involvement of

59 See ICRC’s Code of Conduct, available at <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/code-conduct-employees-icrc>.

60 Sen, P., Grima Algora, R. and Lacava, F. (2020) Bridging the Gap: Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and harassment. UN WOMEN: New York.

staff from different contexts ICRC is working in. The initiative, which complements other prevention and awareness-raising activities, provides space for staff to analyse and understand the phenomenon of SEAH and explore what it means to be an ‘active bystander’.⁶¹

Bystander conversations on SEAH

Our bystander conversations aimed to create awareness about everyone’s responsibility towards a culture of integrity and instil confidence to speak up and raise concerns.

For the conversations, groups were organised in country offices and in one department at headquarters. Most conversations took place face-to-face, though some used a virtual or hybrid format due to restrictions linked to the pandemic. Discussion groups were implemented in close collaboration with staff familiar with the context. Whenever possible, a member of staff known to and respected by the participants helped with preparation and acted as co-moderator.

Staff were invited to discuss different scenarios of incidents of SEAH, informed by behaviours identified in ICRC investigations,⁶² and were asked to take the perspective of the individuals affected, and the colleagues observing the incidents. This triggered reflection on how they would feel, what actions they could take and what barriers might prevent victims/survivors from speaking up, and observers from intervening.

A range of staff (permanent, daily workers, international and national) were invited to participate. We organised the initial sessions by grouping staff according to gender and role (e.g. cleaning staff, drivers). In contexts where strict security rules apply for international staff, separate discussion groups were held to address specific risks (e.g. sharing a house with colleagues, living in a compound).

Observations

So far, bystander conversations have taken place in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali, South Sudan, Nigeria, Iraq, Syria, Armenia, Switzerland and the United States. Initial concerns that it might be difficult to discuss the prevention of SEAH in some of these contexts proved unwarranted. The bystander discussions showed us that these conversations can be held anywhere, including where gender stereotypes and rigid gender roles are widespread.

61 The methodology of bystander intervention training is based on the social norms approach. It aims to empower and encourage individuals who are not directly involved to identify, speak up or engage others when observing or hearing about problematic or inappropriate behaviour. See, for example, Berkowitz, A.D. (2013) *A Grassroots’ Guide to Fostering Healthy Norms to Reduce Violence in our Communities: Social Norms Toolkit*. New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault. and Fenton, R.A., Mott, H.L. and Rumney, P.N.S. (2015) *The Intervention Initiative: Theoretical Rationale*. University of the West of England.

62 Kelly, L. (2020) *Stepping up to the challenge: Towards international standards on training to end sexual harassment*. UN Women: New York.



Bystander discussion in Goma, DRC, September 2021. Credit: Paulien Vandendriessche

The discussions provided us with detailed insights into barriers for staff to speak up, both when affected by and observing inappropriate behaviour. While we would have expected differences in the types of issues and barriers raised in different contexts, the content of the discussions was surprisingly similar. While certain forms of SEAH may be excused or normalised with reference to cultural norms, the root causes are the same: gender inequality and other power imbalances between different social groups.

Barriers include a lack of understanding of existing procedures, limited access to reporting (due to language barriers, computer illiteracy or limited IT connections) and a feeling that it is culturally unacceptable to speak up.

The most frequently mentioned barrier to speaking up was the fear of negative consequences, socially and professionally. The other barriers listed by participants were social exclusion, gossip and being seen as a troublemaker, as well as contracts being terminated. These negative consequences clearly related to the risk of victim-blaming, aggravated by existing gender inequalities and power imbalances.

Victim-blaming is about reversing responsibility, claiming that victims/survivors provoked the behaviour through their attitudes or clothing, or endorsed it by not explicitly contesting it. Whether it takes explicit

or more indirect forms, victim-blaming contributes to normalising or excusing sexual violence.⁶³ For the bystander conversations, it was important to address statements of victim-blaming right away during the session. An effective way of doing this was to have them discussed and countered by other participants. Addressing the fear of negative consequences – in particular in environments where victim-blaming remarks are tolerated – is complex. This is partly because some of these consequences are hard to detect or prove (e.g. negative consequences on career advancement), or they are outside the organisation’s control (e.g. stigmatisation by families or community). Whether fear will stop someone from speaking up is closely related to the level of confidence and trust that person has, at the individual and institutional level (‘Am I misinterpreting the behaviour? Will they believe me? Will my manager take this seriously? Will the organisation follow up?’). While the fear of negative consequences demonstrates the obvious need for strict confidentiality and victim/survivor-centered approaches during follow-up, the confidential and individualised nature of the process itself can, paradoxically, complicate trust-building within a wider audience – beyond those involved in a specific case – as most staff are not necessarily aware of good practice for handling cases.

Addressing these barriers will require continued action at various levels. Having a formal protection mechanism against retaliation, a strict confidentiality requirement and a victim/survivor-centred approach embedded in policies and guidelines is an important first step. Colleagues also need to trust that the organisation is serious about protection from and prevention of SEAH, and that staff will be regarded positively for speaking up, rather than labeled as ‘troublemakers’. For trust to grow in this sense, there must be awareness-raising around the mechanisms and unequivocal messaging by leaders and managers that reporting of SEAH is necessary and welcome, and that other inappropriate, sexist attitudes will not be tolerated. Moreover, staff must be assured that the organisation’s response to SEAH will be guided by a victim/survivor-centred approach, meaning that there will be a case-by-case assessment of the risks to and needs of victims/survivors. Sharing detailed, anonymised practices on how reports and investigations linked to SEAH are conducted has helped build confidence that SEAH concerns will be followed up in a way that is genuinely victim/survivor-centred.

Tackling victim-blaming attitudes and related concerns requires clarity around the notion of ‘active consent’, and work to raise awareness of how power differentials silence some individuals and make it difficult for them to actively contest behaviour. Separate discussion groups according to gender have been helpful and will remain essential. These conversations must be shaped and owned at the local level to allow deconstructing victim-blaming or passive attitudes amongst peers.

63 Referred to as ‘rape culture’ in the academic literature. See for example UN Women, ‘16 ways you can stand against rape culture’, 18 November 2019 (<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/11/compilation-ways-you-can-stand-against-rape-culture>).

Takeaways for impactful bystander conversations

The following elements were identified as being key to organising impactful bystander conversations.

First, the need to integrate a gender lens in the discussions and create awareness about underlying root causes such as power imbalances and structural inequalities. This can be challenging given different levels of gender awareness in the group and the fact that the sessions are quite short, lasting for one and a half to two hours only. The moderator must strike the right balance between providing the space for participants to express disagreement and ensuring that the discussion retains a firm focus on the gendered root causes and barriers to speaking up. If this balance gets lost, a discussion group can quickly slip into a victim-blaming session, doing more harm than good.

Second, following a ‘values-based approach’,⁶⁴ the sessions should go beyond explaining rules, and stimulate reflection around the active role each person can play as a ‘bystander’. Instead of analysing whether a specific situation amounts to a violation of ICRC’s Code of Conduct, we focused on how bystanders can positively intervene, and the barriers that could stop them from acting. Case scenarios using context-adapted examples and language have proved key to fostering discussion.

The involvement of respected local co-moderators was crucial in enabling impactful discussions, and the local ownership of centralised and/or HQ-driven prevention initiatives. Having one moderator from the ethics office and one co-moderator from the context meant that messages could be relayed on ICRC’s institutional commitments and processes while also addressing the context-specific PSEAH challenges. The choice of who would act as co-moderator was left to the office and was made based on the co-moderators’ interest and personality (their readiness to promote PSEAH in front of their peers) rather than their official function. A preparation session, including a short gender capacity-building induction, was organised with all co-moderators.

Successful implementation requires the country office management to support and encourage all staff to participate. If possible, organising in-person sessions facilitates the conversation, and helps staff open up. Separate discussion groups according to gender (including the moderators) have been – in our experience – crucial to creating a safe space for participants to express themselves. They also minimised the risk of victim-blaming statements being addressed directly to victims/survivors. However, we do recognise the limits of this approach, and, if not framed appropriately, there is a risk of confirming stereotypes about sexual violence.

64 L. Kelly, Stepping up to the challenge.

Building on these experiences, and taking into consideration external literature⁶⁵ and materials, we are currently developing bystander intervention training.⁶⁶ These modules will be rolled out through a network of integrity advisors and trainers in offices and departments at headquarters. In the future we hope to connect initiatives to public debates around sexual violence in civil society and the media in specific contexts. We will also explore options to extend the conversation to mixed discussion groups. The more contextualised the content of the discussions, the greater the likelihood that participants will truly identify with the scenarios and apply the skills they have learned when confronted with problematic situations.

Prevention work at different levels

Another takeaway from the bystander discussions is the need to embed these conversations in a more comprehensive prevention strategy backed by senior leadership. Opening the conversation at a local level is impactful and necessary, but needs to go hand in hand with strong centralised direction, which demonstrates ‘institutional courage’⁶⁷ through effective implementation of policies and procedures (such as putting in place an independent complaints mechanism) and by effective action in practice (for example, by promoting staff and managers who have been proactive in addressing sexist attitudes among their team members).

Exclusively focusing at a local level may create initial interest, but this can quickly turn to disappointment if staff perceive change is not taking place at higher levels in the institution. Conversely, focusing entirely at a senior level would feed perceptions that PSEAH is another buzzword driven by donors, and would not respect the victim/survivor-centred approach we are committed to.

Prevention work must constantly address these different levels to drive progress on PSEAH within the organisation. This means that we continuously try to identify, at all levels, both allies and critics, and to look beyond organigrams and job titles to understand how to influence and find connections with operational work. We are also mindful that SEAH risk factors will differ according to context and the nature of activities being implemented and that vulnerability to such risks can change.

65 See, for example, P. Sen, *What will it take? Promoting cultural change to end sexual harassment* (New York: UN Women, 2019), pp. 41; A. D. Berkowitz, *A Grassroots’ Guide to Fostering Healthy Norms to Reduce Violence in our Communities: Social Norms Toolkit* (New Jersey: 2013, New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault); R.A. Fenton, H.L. Mott and P.N.S. Rumney, *The Intervention Initiative: Theoretical Rationale* (Bristol: 2015, University of the West of England).

66 R.A. Fenton, H.L. Mott and P.N.S. Rumney, *The Intervention Initiative: Theoretical Rationale* (Bristol: 2015, University of the West of England).

67 See the Centre For Institutional Courage. <https://www.institutionalcourage.org/>.

Outlook

All individual complaints reported to the ICRC Ethics, Risk and Compliance Office are followed up in a consistent manner. Going forward, we need all staff to recognise that PSEAH goes beyond individual case management and requires an organisational culture of integrity, where all forms of inappropriate behaviour are no longer tolerated, and are addressed. Successful PSEAH is achieved when the collective element is fully embraced, and everyone working with us considers SEAH as problematic behaviour that affects us all. The bystander sessions are an important tool for us to foster collective ownership of ICRC's culture of integrity, and with it the collective commitment to prevent SEAH.

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Applying policies in practice: preventing sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian settings

Clara Satke, Madison Jansen, Nina Lacroix and Noor Lakhdar-Toumi

Occurrences of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) represent a failure of the humanitarian system to operate in accordance with its fundamental principle: to do no harm in the delivery of protection and assistance to crises-affected populations. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) remains committed to strengthening the [Six Core Principles Relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#), originally published in 2002 and revised in 2019.

Though the Six Core Principles are the basis for IASC policy, grave failures by humanitarian staff to abide by these principles persist. Thus, the IASC secretariat in the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) commissioned the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) International Development Consultancy Project to identify areas where new policies or clarity are needed to prevent SEA. This article is a summary of the project findings, which will additionally be published on the LSE [Department of International Development blog](#).

Figure 3 Six Core Principles Relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse



Note: Adapted from the IASC 6 Core Principles relating to SEA, September 2019

Researchers extensively reviewed IASC members’ public-facing policy guidance related to protection from SEA (PSEA), including standard operating procedures (SOPs) and codes of conduct (CoCs). To glean a more comprehensive understanding of PSEA in practice, we conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with key informants (KIs) having various roles and regional expertise within core IASC member countries. By complementing the desk-based review with interviews, we were able to form a comprehensive understanding of how the Core Principles are interpreted, adopted and applied across participating IASC members, both in policy and in practice.

The findings of this research must be seen in light of some limitations. Due to time constraints and delays, we had limited capacity to select a representative sample of IASC members. Thus, the interview sample lacks sufficient representation, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and NGO networks are particularly underrepresented. Additionally, all but one KI identified as women. A gender-balanced interpretation of PSEA is critical to ensuring a non-biased reflection of the Core Principles.

How are the Six Core Principles adopted, interpreted and applied across the core IASC members?

IASC members’ roles and actions with regard to PSEA are defined and informed by their policies. All IASC members and standing invitees have incorporated the exact wording of the Core Principles provided by the [Secretary-General’s Bulletin \(ST/SGB/2003/13\)](#) into their SOPs and CoCs. In fact, throughout the years, widespread consensus regarding the importance of PSEA has elicited the adoption of PSEA-specific policies, as well as the reinforcement of the members’ CoCs. For example, the [International](#)

Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) incorporated a special provision regarding the relationship between professional health workers and beneficiaries, which is not explicitly mentioned in the Core Principles.

In terms of application, wide-ranging initiatives have been taken by IASC members. For instance, following the Ebola response in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), in 2020 the WHO created a dedicated investigation team for SEA and established a benchmark of 220 days for the completion of an investigation. WHO additionally prioritised survivor support through the creation of a multi-level framework that is designed to raise awareness of SEA, and increase accountability. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) strengthened its reporting channels and ensured that they were safe and accessible in all programme sites. This initiative allowed it to reach over 61 million women and children in 2021, as opposed to 6.2 million in 2017. It has been found that the more accessible reporting channels are, the more likely beneficiaries are to use them, increasing the number of allegations being made. At the World Food Programme (WFP), collaboration with Translators Without Borders to produce material intended for beneficiary use has been instrumental to the application of the Core Principles, as it ensured the meanings and nuance of the principles are not lost when applied in a non-English-speaking context. The WFP also utilised radio dramas in local languages; visual images on signs and posters; and songs. These mechanisms not only enhance accessibility but also provide creative ways to simplify and contextualise the Core Principles.

The duties of the PSEA network, coordinators and focal points are organised around four pillars: management and coordination; engagement with and support of the affected population; prevention; and response. While this system insists on collaboration among staff and across agencies, collaboration takes time, and currently the [IASC Terms of Reference](#) in relation to PSEA focal points define the position as a role or a ‘hat’, which does not have to be full time. This lack of dedicated full-time capacity negatively impacts the strength of reporting mechanisms, leading to the underreporting and the mishandling of complaints. A lack of capacity has been highlighted as a serious issue in KI interviews (KIIs):

We have a system of PSEA Focal Points [...] this isn’t their main job [...] so often they have at least one if not two other roles within that office, they are hugely overworked, they are not necessarily protection or gender experts [...] they may be but often they’re not so the conversation is lost. We have all the tools, there is simply not enough capacity in many of these settings.

In addition to a lack of dedicated capacity, KIIs revealed communication challenges between staff at headquarters and at country-level staff, which resulted in diverse applications of the Core Principles.



Indigenous women participants of the Safe Space in Catatumbo, Zulia State. Community sensitization session on PSEA, including standards of conduct of humanitarian personnel and SEA reporting channels. Credit: Carmen Jordán, Aliadas en Cadena/UNFPA

Which areas are less well understood or more difficult to implement?

One key area that is less well understood among IASC members is the interaction of the Core Principles with cultural norms and national law. Specifically, confusion occurs around the applicability of the Core Principles when behaviour that is considered culturally and legally acceptable in a particular country is defined as misconduct in the Core Principles.

This tension is illustrated particularly with the implementation of Principle 2, which prohibits sexual activity with beneficiaries under the age of 18 ‘regardless of the age of majority or age of consent locally’. The exception to this – which allows UN staff to be legally married to a person under the age of 18 but above the age of majority or consent in both the UN staff member’s and the spouse’s countries of citizenship – highlights how the Core Principles can be interpreted as subsidiary to local laws and regulations. Local staff may assume they are allowed to engage in sexual activity with beneficiaries in accordance with their rights set out by national law as opposed to the guidance set forth by their IASC member agency. Accordingly, implementation challenges arise in enforcing the Principle:

In the Middle East [...] we've had situations and incidents recently where contracted workers working for us in the field are marrying 15 to 17 year old girls, and because within the country it's not frowned upon it's very hard to get the national office to take it as seriously as we take it.

Another core principle often in conflict with national law is Principle 3. Several KIs highlighted the particular confusion from local IASC member staff around the sanction that this Principle imposes on soliciting a sex worker, especially in contexts where this conduct is considered both legal and normatively acceptable.

When you are talking to enumerators who are going to be away from their families for six months or a year [...] they say to me, genuinely, 'well what do you expect me to do, go without sex for a year?'

This quote illustrates that there is still a lack of understanding surrounding the precedence of the Core Principles over conduct that is accepted culturally and legally at a national level. Rectifying this misunderstanding requires a more comprehensive discussion around power dynamics in PSEA training sessions.

Since the majority of humanitarian response is now organised through local organisations and individuals who may be from the crisis-affected community themselves, another area less well understood is to whom the term 'beneficiary' applies. This confusion may stem from a wider lack of awareness around power asymmetries. This particularly challenges the implementation of Principles 3 and 4, which prohibit bribery for sex, and any sexual relationship between humanitarians and beneficiaries, respectively.

We are still missing the point of the rules-based system [...] we need to explain where power derives from and the way we can be abusing that power and privilege by the very nature of the persons within the humanitarian response.

This quote emphasises that a rules-based approach to PSEA training sessions may not sufficiently address the existence of power dynamics in the humanitarian sector. Training material must communicate effectively that anyone affiliated with the UN or an international NGO has greater power – even if they are from the community themselves.

This issue is already being addressed in some PSEA training sessions through the 'power walk concept', an activity used to start a conversation around what power is and where power lies. Role-plays also allow participants to assume different identities to relate this concept to their daily lives before narrowing it down to specific humanitarian contexts.

In summary, PSEA activities and training sessions must be conducted in a way that is less focused on compliance alone, and more focused on stopping abuses of power. This can happen by encouraging

people to reflect on their behaviour and the impact that they have, and how they are perceived within the affected communities. As SEA and sex can be context specific, power is a more overarching entry point into these discussions.

Differences in the interpretation of the Core Principles

The Core Principles are still evolving: the specific terminology used is interpreted in various ways by members. For example, in 2019, the IASC revised the language of Principle 4 from ‘strongly discouraged’ relationships with beneficiaries to ‘prohibited’ relationships, to strengthen the language of the principle and reduce interpretation differences. Yet, in a sentiment echoed across several KIIs, this revision has produced the opposite effect in many respects:

When [Principle 4] was revised it wasn't in any way simplified, it is just the same level of complicated, but with different words.

Additionally, according to one IOM representative, the new language of Principle 4 resulted in a lack of clarity regarding which relationships between staff and beneficiaries are prohibited. Mainly, there are different interpretations of whether relationships between local staff and people from their community are forbidden even if they were mutually consensual and pre-existing. In turn, organisations find that employees often fail to disclose pre-existing relationships out of fear of termination, raising further implementation challenges because of the uncertainty regarding the nature of these relationships.

Another difference in the interpretation of the principles is the application of IASC guidelines outside working hours within societies that legally allow certain behaviours, such as sexual relations with individuals under the age of 18 or sex workers. KIIs claim that employee contracts often influence behaviours at work, but they cite multiple instances pertaining to each of the principles where staff violate the guidelines outside work hours. Staff often do not understand the purpose of the guidelines, and view following the principles as a means to maintaining employment. Therefore, beneficiaries are put at risk in environments where staff fail to comprehend that the principles always apply, and organisations fail to hold their employees accountable to the guidelines.

Conclusion

This research confirms the IASC's strong commitment to PSEA but also reveals areas of weakness that should be addressed. Areas that are less well understood include the interaction of IASC policies with culture and municipal law, and the power asymmetries that exist within the humanitarian sector. Other areas of confusion include the language within Principle 4 prohibiting relations between humanitarian workers and beneficiaries, and the applicability of IASC guidelines outside work hours. These areas of weakness elicit differences in the interpretation and application of the IASC Six Core Principles, and subsequently may result in the failure to protect those whom the humanitarian system aims to serve. To address these issues, the researchers encourage the IASC to consider several recommendations, such

as clarifying how cultural norms and national law conflict with IASC policy; continuing to view the Core Principles as a living document by working to further clarify the concepts; increasing field capacity for PSEA; and using power dynamics as an entry point for PSEA training. Additionally, in light of the under-representation of those identifying as male in the key informant sample, the researchers recommend the IASC to follow up with another evaluation of the Six Core Principles with a wider and more representative range of KIs. In addition to adopting the outlined recommendations, the researchers are confident that doing so will further strengthen the IASC's global mission against SEA.

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Disclaimer: The thoughts and opinions expressed in this report are based solely on interviews with key informants, and do not purport to reflect those of the organisation by which they are employed, nor the official position of LSE or UN OCHA.

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