

Exploring the Root Causes of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Sexual Harassment (SEAH)

This evidence digest draws on evidence and research related to the root causes of sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH) within the aid sector which act to increase risk and vulnerability. It highlights the way that power inequalities, driven by gender and social norms, social exclusion and inequitable distribution of resources, are fundamental to the perpetration of SEAH and cultures of impunity that surround it.

We recognise that root causes of SEAH stem from pervasive issues of power and privilege often related to race, class, sexuality, misogyny and patriarchy. Whilst some of the evidence featured below highlights those underlying root causes much of the evidence examines the specific vulnerability and risk factors that increase the likelihood of individuals experiencing SEAH.

Summary

Much is being discussed and debated around the root causes of SEAH with reference to the humanitarian and development sectors. The evidence featured in this digest explores root causes of risk and vulnerability to SEAH in relation to:

- power and privilege
- gender and social norms
- social hierarchies which lead to exclusion and vulnerability
- beliefs around class, race, ethnicity, misogyny and patriarchy



Image credit ©Shutterstock

Box 1: Defining SEAH in the aid sector

The RSH has adopted the following definitions and understanding of SEAH in the aid sector:

- **Sexual Exploitation:** Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes. Includes profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from sexual exploitation of another. Under UN regulations it includes transactional sex, solicitation of transactional sex and exploitative relationship ([UN, 2017](#)).
- **Sexual Abuse:** The actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions. It should cover sexual assault (attempted rape, kissing / touching, forcing someone to perform oral sex / touching) as well as rape. Under UN regulations, all sexual activity with someone under the age of 18 is considered to be sexual abuse ([Ibid.](#)).
- **Sexual Harassment:** A continuum of unacceptable and unwelcome behaviours and practices of a sexual nature that may include, but are not limited to, sexual suggestions or demands, requests for sexual favours and sexual, verbal or physical conduct or gestures, that are or might reasonably be perceived as offensive or humiliating ([UN, 2018](#)).
- In defining the aid sector, this includes SEAH perpetrated against **‘anyone involved in the delivery or receipt of humanitarian aid and development assistance’** (RSH working definition of safeguarding) and **includes forms of SEAH perpetrated against both children and adults**. This includes all forms of SEAH perpetrated by or against staff or associates involved in the delivery of humanitarian aid and development assistance, as well as communities.

Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) is the term used by the UN and NGO community to refer to measures taken to protect people from sexual exploitation and abuse by their own staff and associated personnel.

Box 2: Defining Root Causes of SEAH

This evidence digest distinguishes between “Root Causes” and “Vulnerability and Risk Factors”.

Vulnerability and Risk Factors refer to specific quantifiable factors that increase the risk of individuals experiencing SEAH. For example, a lack of secure private accommodation places individuals at higher risk of SEAH because it is easier for perpetrators to enter the personal spaces of others.

Root Causes, in contrast, refer to factors that create power imbalances that enable perpetrators to commit SEAH with impunity. The factors that contribute to this power imbalance can be divided between:

- **Deep rooted, unequal and harmful cultural and social norms**, which are leveraged in order to motivate and justify SEAH and to cause harm to individuals or groups. These norms give rise to many forms of prejudice including but not limited to misogyny, patriarchy, homophobia, ablism, and racism.
- **Visible and deliberate inequitable distribution of resources**, which give perpetrators of SEAH the ability to withhold vital resources from victims in return for “sexual favours”. These resources include but are not limited to: food, shelter, money, and decision-making.



Image credit ©Shutterstock

Selected evidence on Root Causes of SEAH

Evidence of SEAH in the aid sector typically concerns:

- SEAH perpetrated by aid workers against beneficiaries or community members
- SEAH perpetrated by peacekeepers against community members
- SEAH perpetrated against aid workers

In this evidence digest we consider evidence against these three categories, recognising that the root causes of power and privilege, social norms as well as social exclusion play out similarly across these settings.

Evidence on SEAH perpetrated by aid workers against community members and ‘beneficiaries’

[Empowered Aid: Participatory Action Research with Refugee Women & Girls to Better Prevent Sexual Exploitation and Abuse--Uganda Results Report](#). Washington, DC: The George Washington University (2020)

Participatory Action Research by the Global Women’s Institute explores the gender and power dynamics that exist within the delivery of humanitarian aid in Uganda¹.

The report finds that women and girls in Uganda reported SEAH before, during and after the distribution of a) food aid, b) WASH assistance, c) shelter and d) fuel and firewood. These women and girls report that perpetrators use their connection to aid to exploit and abuse victims. They do this by leveraging their perceived power over women and girls who are seeking aid by withholding necessary resources in order to coerce them into unwanted sexual activity.

The findings suggest power imbalances in the distribution setting can place women and girls at greater risk of experiencing SEAH.

The women interviewed identified a need for²:

- More women aid workers, volunteers and leadership groups in the aid distribution process, to improve accountability in cases of SEAH and to reduce the risk of SEAH by aid workers.
- Closer supervision of and improved accountability mechanisms for individuals distributing aid.
- Closer collaboration with NGOs or UN Staff who understand the risks that could lead to SEAH and who understand the importance of creating a safe environment for girls and women to access aid.

[Sexual Misconduct and International Aid Workers An Afghanistan Case Study](#). Wagadu (2012).

This case study explores the complexities of interactions between international workers and local populations in conflict or post-conflict contexts.

The report finds significant power differentials between international workers and local populations. International workers exercise power (over) local populations because:

- They control the distribution and allocation of resources essential for human survival.
- They also have greater control over their mobility and are able to remove themselves from conflict contexts quickly.

These power differentials create an environment which exacerbates sexual exploitation and abuse by international workers, with limited opportunities for alleged perpetrators to be held to account.

The report discusses the implications of including women within international military, civilian personnel and aid processes as critical for gaining the trust and cooperation of local populations. However, including women is not enough to prevent SEA in these contexts.

¹ A parallel report has also been produced for Lebanon. Both reports draw on findings from Participatory Action Research and feature types of aid that were typically provided in both those contexts.

² This list of recommendations is not exhaustive.

Whole of Syria. Voices from Syria 2018: Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview. Whole of Syria: Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (2018).

This assessment draws on primary and secondary data to explore the effects the extended conflict in Syria has had on the types of SEAH & GBV women and girls experience both in and outside their homes.

Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes and societal structures which underpin Syrian society are seen as key drivers which normalise this violence. This is particularly the case when female headed households have to resort to negative coping mechanisms to survive.

Unequal power dynamics exacerbate women's and girls' risk of sexual exploitation:

- Participants commonly cited that sexual exploitation by humanitarian workers was a risk for women and girls when they were trying to access aid.
- Widowed or unmarried women and girls are also at increased risk of sexual exploitation in the community as they may be perceived to be a threat to men's traditional role of power holder and provider.



Evidence on SEAH perpetrated by peacekeepers against community members

“It’s Not a Gift When It Comes With Price”: A Qualitative Study of Transactional Sex between UN Peacekeepers and Haitian Citizens. Social Work Faculty Publications (2015).

This qualitative study with 231 Haitian women examines the drivers of transactional sex among Haitian women and girls and UN peacekeepers.

Women predominately engage in transactional sex with peacekeepers in order to gain access to scarce resources. The resource inequality between peacekeepers and women and girls incentivises transactional sex.

The power to grant or withhold resources rests in the hands of the peacekeepers which makes it more difficult for women to negotiate how that transactional sex takes place.

- This power inequality surfaces in the difficulty many women and girls report they face in negotiating condom use.
- The power inequality between peacekeepers and women and girls from these communities is further exacerbated when peacekeepers have access to weapons.

Peacekeeping, Compliance with International Norms, and Transactional Sex in Monrovia, Liberia. International Organisation (2017).

A survey of 1,381 households randomly sampled in greater Monrovia, Liberia was conducted to assess the prevalence of transactional sex with UN peacekeepers.

The research indicates that the presence of UN Mission to Liberia (UNMIL) peacekeepers contributed to an increase in levels of transactional sex and a reduction in the age that women enter into transactional sex in Monrovia.

- Between 2003 and 2012, an additional 12,000 women are estimated to have entered the transactional sex market who would not have done so in the absence of UNMIL.
- The probability of a woman reaching twenty five without engaging in transactional sex would be around 72% without the presence of UNMIL.

Findings suggest that negative gender norms and power imbalances between peacekeepers and women and girls contributed to increased prevalence of transactional sex. Placing women and girls with lower access to economic resources at greater risk.

The report makes several recommendations:

- The UN could staff missions with personnel from countries where more equitable gender norms are widely held³.
- More women included in peacekeeping contingents may support an organisation culture more conducive to safeguarding

The report cites issues of poverty, displacement, and consequences of female headed of the household, alongside deep rooted structures of gender inequality, as contributory factors to sexual exploitation and abuse.



Image credit ©Shutterstock

Evidence on SEAH perpetrated against aid workers

[Aid Worker Security Report 2019, Speakable: Addressing sexual violence and gender-based risk in humanitarian aid.](#) Humanitarian Outcomes, June (2019).

Analysis of the Aid Worker Security Database is presented in this report exploring the drivers of SEAH among aid workers in humanitarian settings.

It finds that religious, social and cultural norms around women, men and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex (LGBTQI) people place specific members of staff at particular risk of SEAH. This is built on social exclusion and unequal distribution of power based on a person's nationality, position, sexuality, gender or religion.

The report highlighted risk factors, contributors and barriers the exacerbate SEAH:

- Shame around sexual assault may be leveraged by perpetrators to limit the likelihood that survivors will report SEAH and thus enable them to act with impunity.
- The focus on risk mitigation often falls to the survivor rather than on the alleged perpetrator – telling women how not to get raped.
- Risk assessments tend to focus on external risks rather than internal threats from members of the organisation itself.
- Power differences between national and international staff, due to unequal distributions of influence and resources create an enabling environment for SEAH against national staff by international staff.

This report recommends:

- A more systematic inclusion of gender and diverse profiles in risk assessments along with a collaborative and collective approach to risk assessments.

³ Evidence suggests that the number of SEA allegations is lower in missions that are composed of personnel from societies where more equitable gender norms are prevalent.

Stop the Sexual Assault against Humanitarian and Development Aid Workers. Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy (2017).

This report draws on a desk review and analysis of relevant literature, including the 2017 Report the Abuse study, which spoke to 1,418 respondents, and the Women's Humanitarian Network study in 2016, which spoke to 1,005 respondents. A further 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the prevalence and perceptions of sexual harassment (SH) and assault against aid workers, including heterosexual women and men, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT)⁴ professionals.

This research suggests aid operation tends to be dominated by cultures of sexism, machismo and male domination.

- Findings suggest that sexual harassment and sexual assault of female aid workers is widespread.
- Majority of perpetrators of sexual harassment or sexual assault against aid workers are male.

These cultures increase the risk of SEAH and create a culture where perpetrators are able to harass and assault with impunity.

- LGBT aid workers reported sexual identity harassment, blackmail, threats, and assaults against them, primarily by men working in the aid industry.

Sexual assault exists on a continuum with sexism, homophobia, sexual discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual and gender-based violence.

The report makes a number of recommendations of which one is central:

- To tackle the pervasive culture of sexual abuse and harassment against aid workers organisations must be free from: sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, homophobia, and a dismissive attitude around sexism and homophobia.

Evidence on SEAH from outside of the aid sector

Clear and Present Danger! Quid-Pro-Quo Sexual Harassment as a Limitation to Female Access to Quality Tertiary Education in South-West Nigeria. Oasis (2019).

This desk based review provides a synthesis of studies into sexual harassment in universities across South-West Nigeria.

This research is underpinned by two major theories:

- Sexual harassment is a consequence of inequalities rooted in cultural notions of patriarchy, male supremacy and female subordination. It can be interpreted as a means of keeping women subordinate.
- Sexual harassment is an example of how wider societal inequalities between men and women are reproduced within organisations.

Unequal power dynamics play a major role in sexual harassment, with male lecturers the most common perpetrators of sexual harassment against female students.

The lack of a specific statute against sexual harassment has likely contributed to the seriousness and frequency of the sexual harassment. Female students face barriers to refusing sexual advances and are often blamed for sexual harassment experienced.

The report suggests that increasing numbers of women in leadership and authority positions may help to rebalance power and encourage more women to speak up about sexual harassment.

⁴ This report uses the term LGBT as different from the previous report which discussed LGBTQI+ groups.

Spotlight on sexual violence and harassment in commercial agriculture: Lower and middle income countries. ILO (2018)

The paper synthesises research from a number of agriculture contexts in Africa, Asia and Latin America to understand why sexual violence and sexual harassment commonly occur in commercial agricultural settings.

The discussion centres around the power imbalances between supervisors and senior workers and those who are commonly employed in temporary or informal work in these settings, most often women in precarious and vulnerable situations.

Supervisors abuse their power to offer or deny work; to withhold or reduce wages; to make conditions difficult; and to undermine the workers. The power they wield also works as a deterrent to reporting. This behaviour is further exacerbated by culture norms which condone it and unaccountable structural environments.

Reflections

Whilst many of the reports featured in this digest explore sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment in different contexts we can see that common threads run throughout. Issues of power and privilege dominate the discourse in these reports. The groups identified as most vulnerable and at risk of SEAH are overwhelmingly those that hold less power and privilege in their context. Societal, and organisational, norms which exclude people based on their gender and gender identity, race, class and ethnicity play into a culture of impunity where these types of behaviour are pervasive. In order to address SEAH in the aid sector we must recognise and challenge these root causes and work together to establish new norms.

Contact us:

info@resourcesupporthub.org
+44 (0)1355 843 747