

December 2016

# Briefing Paper: Sexual Assault Against Humanitarian and Development Aid Workers

## Key Messages

- Sexual assault against female aid workers appears widespread, yet it remains grossly underreported and under-acknowledged
- The vast majority of perpetrators are men working in the aid industry, often those in supervisor/higher-level positions than their victims
- Very few agencies have robust policies and procedures for prevention, security training, investigation and response to sexual assault against aid workers
- The humanitarian community can no longer be reactive to specific instances of sexual assault when they occur, but needs to proactively plan for prevention, response and support

## Study Overview

In 2016, the Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, carried out research on sexual assault against humanitarian and development aid workers to document and analyze the following:

- how managers and leaders of aid organizations understand sexual assault of workers
- circumstances surrounding sexual assault
- perpetrators and victim/survivors
- institutional systems in place regarding prevention and response.

The study's goal is to contribute knowledge to the prevention of and response to sexual assault against aid workers.

## Research Methods

We carried out a review of scholarly and grey literature on the topic; reviewed the data and findings from two survey studies on this topic by Report the Abuse (337 respondents) and the Women's Humanitarian Network (1,009 respondents); reviewed security training materials from international aid organizations and consortiums to identify how they approached the subject of sexual harassment and sexual assault against aid workers; and carried out semi-structured in-depth, individual interviews with male, female, international and national aid workers, including LGBTQ aid workers, security officers from aid agencies, and subject experts. In total, our findings are drawn from 1,346 survey respondents, review of 24 security-training materials, portions of 56 survivor testimonies from women and men from our own interviews and Report the Abuse's study, and 29 in-depth individual interviews. Information gathered from aid workers in these sources represent women and men from at least 70 international aid organizations, including UN, NGO, governments, contractors and those who have left the aid industry.

### Definition: Sexual Assault

Any action in which, through coercion (including the use of drugs or alcohol), threat or force, the offender subjects the victim to sexual touch that is unwanted and offensive. Sexual assault can range from unwanted touching and groping, to battery, attempted rape, rape and sexual torture.

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## Key Findings

### Who Is At Risk, From Who, Where?

The vast majority of victim/survivors of sexual assault are women. Women of different nationalities and across a range of educational, experience and authority levels within missions reported sexual assault.

Sexual assault against female aid workers appears widespread, with many individual victim/survivors reporting experiencing numerous assaults, yet it remains grossly underreported and under-acknowledged.

The vast majority of perpetrators are men working in the aid industry, often those in supervisor/higher-level positions than their victims, or men employed by aid agencies as security providers. Less frequently, perpetrators are from armed forces and armed groups within the area the aid workers are operating.

International women staff of aid agencies report experiencing similar or higher levels of sexual assault than national women staff.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) aid workers reported sexual identity harassment, blackmail, and threats against them, primarily by men working in the aid industry or employed by aid agencies as security providers.

Interviewees reported higher levels of sexual assault against aid workers in contexts where sexual harassment and sexist, homophobic work atmospheres exist (including in housing compounds) and senior management does not stop it; there is recreational use of drugs and alcohol; there are high levels of conflict and non-conflict related violence against local civilian women; armed conflict is on-going; rule of law is weak or non-existent; and a macho form of masculinity dominates the humanitarian relief space.

### How Well Do Agencies Prevent and Respond?

Only a few agencies we reviewed and interviewed had robust policies and procedures for prevention, security training, investigation and response to sexual assault against aid workers. Nearly half of all agency and inter-agency security manuals that we reviewed did not mention sexual assault (despite highlighting numerous other security threats) and none specifically discussed sexual assault against LGBTQ aid workers.

Agency response to sexual assault varied widely and differed for national and international staff, though there was uniformity on the lack of formal policies on addressing sexual assault against LGBTQ aid workers.

The Humanitarian Women's Network reported that the vast majority of women survivors did not report the sexual assault. The minority that did report were widely dissatisfied with their agencies' responses, and experienced more harmful professional and personal consequences than those of their alleged perpetrators. Our in-depth interview findings also confirmed this pattern.

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## What Should Be Done To Prevent and Respond?

The humanitarian community can no longer be reactive to specific instances of sexual assault when they occur, but needs to proactively plan for prevention, response and support. Agencies need to:

- Comprehensively address sexual assault against their aid workers, including LGBTQ staff—in ways that do not stigmatize or blame victims—in their policies and procedures, including in security manuals and pre- and post-deployment training;
- Publicize to international and national staff how to report instances of sexual assault, a preferred method for reporting is through a hotline or other confidential reporting mechanism that does not involve organization staff;
- Appoint qualified, dedicated investigation teams that respond quickly and efficiently to formal complaints;
- In consultation with victim/survivors, as needed, ensure quick evacuation of staff who are under threat from their colleagues;
- Ensure robust mental and physical health care is available to victim/survivors for both national and international staff (regardless of whether they choose to formally report an incident);
- Develop robust policies regarding sanctioning staff or contractors that investigations conclude engaged in sexual assault;
- Ensure that survivors are not penalized or suffer career consequences by reporting incidences of sexual assault;
- Support survivors while at the same time giving them control over their career paths and how they would like the process to proceed;
- Foster inter-agency efforts to better document and understand sexual assault against aid workers, and share and promote best practices on preventing, investigating and responding to sexual assault.

## Addressing Knowledge Gaps

There is a need for additional research on the topic of sexual assault against humanitarian aid workers, in particular a large-scale representative study would enable documentation and analysis regarding prevalence rates, patterns of sexual assault (who, what, where, when), the effects on victims/survivors, and agency response. In addition, detailed country case studies would enable a deeper understanding of the contexts in which sexual assault against aid workers does and does not occur, why, and what agencies can do to better prevent and respond.

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