EMPOWERED AID: REDUCING RISKS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN AID DISTRIBUTION

COVID-19 UPDATE APRIL 2020

Empowered Aid sheds light on how to mitigate sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in humanitarian aid delivery—with women and girls' voices at the forefront. Findings from the first phase, completed in late 2019, are shared in a series of reports, briefs and accompanying tools. This note outlines how to apply those findings in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic.

According to research and programmatic evidence, gendered vulnerabilities often intensify in times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic is no different.[1] Reports of increased risk of gender-based violence during the pandemic are already widespread, and findings from our research only amplify this cause for concern.[2] Factors that increase women and girls' risk of being sexual exploited and abused are exacerbated by the pandemic itself as well as measures to control it—while at the same time, services to support survivors and mechanisms for reporting SEA are being reduced or even shut down. As information and service provision moves increasingly onto mobile and online platforms, the technology gender gap leaves women and girls cut off from accurate and reliable sources of information and outreach.

COVID-19 & SEA Risks

Empowered Aid's research demonstrates that women and girls face multitude of situations that put them at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. As the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic impact health systems and economies in low and middle-income countries—many of whom lead the world in opening their doors to refugees—it can further exacerbate existing power imbalances and open up space for sexual exploitation and abuse to occur.[3]

Empowered Aid Transforming Gender and Power Dynamics in the Delivery of Humanitarian Aid is a multi-country, participatory action research study led by the Global Women's Institute (GWI) at the George Washington University. Partners are CARE International in Lebanon and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Uganda, and funded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration.

It seeks to examine the mechanisms through which humanitarian aid—in Lebanon: **food, WASH, shelter** and **cash**—is delivered, and how these processes might inadvertently increase the risks of SEA for women and girls, in order to address them.

Its goal is to support the creation or adaptation of aid delivery models that **actively work to reduce power disparities and give women and girls a sustained voice** in how aid is delivered.

The main results report, full set of policy briefs, and accompanying tools and resources can be found online at: **https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/conflict-crisis**.

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1 See the rapid gender analysis conducted by CARE and IRC: https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/4676/globalrgacovidrdm33120 final.pdf; Peterman, A. Potts, A. O'Donnell, M. Thompson, K. Shah, N. Oertelt-Prigione, S. and van Gelder, N. (2020). Pandemics and Violence Against Women and Children. *Center for Global Development Working Paper 528*. Retrieved from https://www.cgdev.org/publication/pandemics-and-violence-against-women-and-children; COVID-19: The Gendered Impacts of the Outbreak. *The Lancet, 395,* 846-848. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30526-2

2 Leonard, N. (2020). *Domestic Violence Is on the Rise With Coronavirus Lockdown. The Responses Are Missing the Point.* The Intercept. Retrieved from https://theintercept.com/2020/04/13/coronavirus-lockdown-domestic-violence/; Fraser, E. (2020). *Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence Against Women and Girls.* UK Aid. Retrieved from http://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1881/vawg-helpdesk-284-covid-19-and-vawg.pdf.

3 Evans, D. and Over, M. (2020). *The Economic Impact of COVID-19 in Low- and Middle-Income Countries.* The Center for Global Development. Retrieved from https://www.cgdev.org/blog/economic-impact-covid-19-low-and-middle-income-countries

Women and girls may continue to travel long distances to collect food aid or water and, as resources become scarcer and movement restrictions harsher, their ability to access live-saving needs will diminish. Women and girls' also often face challenges in accessing accurate information about aid eligibility and distribution, and this lack of information places them at increased risk of sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers. The spread of COVID-19 places critical importance on ensuring women and girls—especially those without access to mobile or internet platforms—can reliably access vital information regarding health protections as well as changes to aid eligibility and distribution mechanisms.[4]

The protective strategies women and girls already use to prevent SEA – such as moving in groups to collect aid, or accompanying each other when aid workers visit their homes – may also become increasingly difficult to execute given COVID-19 distancing measures and movement restrictions. In addition to their informal roles as caretakers and providers at home, women also face increased risks as frontline aid workers and healthcare workers, such as heightened exposure; intimate partner violence; shame and stigma from the community; and sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse, based on their perceived disease status or association with people who are sick. Scarcity of personal protective equipment (PPE) and healthcare resources exacerbate these vulnerabilities.[5]

Recommendations to prevent & respond to SEA in the context of COVID-19

With these risks in mind, it is important – now more than ever – that front line workers are sensitized on issues of sexual exploitation and abuse, and that women and girls' voices are centered in programming and response efforts. If we wish to protect the health and safety of women and girls during crises, we must listen to them. Empowered Aid provides a range of recommendations, sourced directly from refugee women and girls, for how this goal can be achieved in humanitarian response. These recommendations are detailed in the results reports and policy briefs, and include:

- Sensitizing frontline healthcare personnel, aid workers, and monitoring and evaluation staff on gender & power dynamics that underlie SEA and other forms of GBV, so that they can better recognize and act to mitigate contexts that are conducive to abuse.

- Ensure continued oversight and accountability of aid workers through monitoring & evaluation of all activities including distributions; and adapting M&E tools and feedback processes to take into account social distancing measures. Safety audits are a key tool for doing this.

- Increasing awareness through dissemination of PSEA key messages using a variety of communication methods, inclusive but not solely reliant on internet and mobile platforms. Messages should include information about how to access services and how to connect with complaint and reporting mechanisms.

- Strengthening women and girls' voices in decision-making processes related to aid distribution and the COVID-19 outbreak, to understand what their needs are and how to safely meet them.

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4 Erskine, D. (2020). *Not Just Hotlines and Mobile Phones: GBV Service Provision During COVID-19.* UNICEF.
5 Yaker, R. (2020). *Securing the Safety and Wellbeing of Women Frontline Healthcare Workers in the COVID-19 Response.* GBV AoR Helpdesk. Retrieved from https://gbvguidelines.org/en/documents/securing-the-safety-and-wellbeing-of-women-frontline-healthcare-workers-in-the-covid-19-response; World Health Organization (WHO). (2020). *COVID-19 and Violence Against Women: What the Health Sector/System Can Do.* Retrieved from https://gbvguidelines.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/WHO-COVID-19-VAW-full-text.pdf.

These recommendations form part of a multi-sectoral response to the COVID-19 pandemic that takes into account its direct as well as indirect effects. They should be applied in addition to key resources such as the IASC Interim Technical Note for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse,[6] in order to protect those must at risk in crisis-affected settings, and to hold perpetrators to account. Your actions to prevent and respond to SEA and other forms of violence against women and girls matter.

How Empowered Aid is further supporting the COVID-19 response

The *Empowered Aid* reports and briefs contain the wisdom of almost 200 women and girls living as refugees in Lebanon and Uganda, other members of the refugee and host community, and humanitarian stakeholders. We hope these findings further motivate and support action and advocacy to mitigate risks in refugee settings. We are shifting and adapting our own activities under Phase II of Empowered Aid to meet the need for PSEA resources relevant to the changed context under COVID-19. Our current focus is on developing further PSEA messaging, distribution guidance, and monitoring tools based on those used by partners and adapted with the inputs of women and girls living in refugee settings. We will continue to share these through the webpage listed above, partner organizations, our national and global Technical Advisory Groups, and aid coordination fora.

Empowered Aid is achievable when we recognize women and girls as experts in what keeps them safe, and what puts them at risk.

This policy brief was drafted by Alina Potts, Elizabeth Hedge, and Aminat Balogun.

For questions, contact Alina Potts, Principal Investigator, at apotts@gwu.edu.

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6 See the IASC Interim Technical Note for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/other/interim-technical-note-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-psea-during-covid-19-response.