

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

LEBANON POLICY BRIEF, JANUARY 2020

Food aid is a core component of humanitarian aid programming and 70% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon receive food and nutrition assistance.¹ In 2019, the Global Women's Institute (GWI) & CARE International in Lebanon conducted participatory action research on risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) among Syrian refugee populations living in Tripoli, Lebanon. Key food-related findings from the study are summarized in this brief. 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>.

KEY FINDINGS

Findings in this brief evidence multiple levels of fear and risks to SEA that refugee women and girls harbor every single day of their lives. Women and girls involved in the research noted particular risks for SEA at the following points:

At distribution points: When attempting to access food aid, women and girls noted they may face SEA if they travel outside the region where they live to collect food because they are not familiar with the area of distribution. During food distributions, women and girls stated they are asked for sexual relationships or to “please” aid workers sexually in exchange for food. Moreover, disorganization, chaos, and overcrowding at the distribution points reportedly open up a space for harassment and targeting of women and girls by refugee boys and men who are there to benefit from the distribution, in addition to aid workers.

Traveling to distribution sites: Traveling to distribution sites and transporting aid home was second to point of distribution as the part of the distribution process in which SEA was most frequently mentioned and noted as a particularly risky point in the distribution process by study participants. This was mentioned most frequently in relation to food aid as women and girls struggle to transport heavy food rations, with reports stating that aid workers or taxi drivers offer to pick up or transport food home and then demand sex in exchange. Women also reported taxi drivers may offer financial support and a comfortable livelihood to them in exchange for a sexual relationship. Taxi drivers will also reportedly drive women and girls into isolated and unknown places and then ask for sex in exchange for returning the woman or girl safely.

“I saw with my own eyes, an old man letting a young woman walk before him. He may tell her that if she goes out with him, he would give her a box daily.”

– Participatory group discussion with refugee women

“This was what the driver offered me. He asked if I needed money, I refused. Then he asked if I needed food, I told him that I could manage. Also, he offered to take me on a cruise, I refused. I had a strong enough personality to face him, but not all women are strong.”

– Qualitative interview with refugee women

¹ World Food Programme (WFP). (2019). *Food Assistance for Refugees in Lebanon: A Lifeline of Hope*. Retrieved from <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2019-food-assistance-refugees-lebanon>

"I went to receive the food assistance. I took a taxi, and the driver said this... he asked me if I accept the offer... he swore that he wouldn't say a word to my husband... he said that he would give me the amount I ask for \$1000... \$2000... I didn't accept... I didn't accept at all... I am married and I hate it... I have a lot to worry about, I don't want to have something new to worry about... I am done with all of this..."

– Qualitative interview with refugee women

Lastly, in the participatory group discussion with refugee men, it was reported that fellow passengers in taxis offer to pay for a woman or girl's fare when she's returning from food distributions in exchange for sex.

Little clarity of or faith in reporting mechanisms, lack of support from families or communities, loss of aid, the normalization of SEA, and confusion around the identity of the perpetrator all serve as powerful deterrents to reporting sexual exploitation and abuse. Refugee women and girls described varying reactions from family and community members, in some cases showing support while others blame and shame survivors.

Given the range of possible reactions from family and community, SEA survivors tend to be fearful of reporting or pursuing services. Women and girls may feel unsafe reporting to police as police are sometimes the *perpetrators* of violence; and perpetrators will sometimes threaten or intimidate survivors to prevent them from reporting. Refugee women and girls also reported survivors' fear shame, stigma, and gossip in the community if they come forward. These fears, combined with a perceived lack of accountability for perpetrators and lack of knowledge of reporting mechanisms, contribute to a chilling effect on SEA reporting.

WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS?

Aid workers who offer larger portions or faster access to food aid in exchange for sex. Adolescent girls may be more frequently targeted at distribution points.

Taxi Drivers or fellow passengers who offer to drive women and girls for "free" or pay their fare in exchange for sexual relationships, or demand sex after transporting food items home.

Religious or community leaders and "foreign" men (often noted as being from the Gulf States) that distribute aid and pay for livelihood expenses, including food, in exchange for sexual relationships that can result in marriage, pregnancy, and abandonment.

"Owners of organizations," as described by women and girls, who control distribution operations and act as gatekeepers for registration, i.e. who does and does not receive food aid.

If an SEA survivor decides to come forward, she often confides in friends, female family members, and religious or community leaders first to seek counsel on next steps. Women and girls identified caseworkers, the organization in charge of the aid worker or distributor, and the hotline number as places where they could report. Women and girls also reported a preference for accessing services from NGOs that support women; specific mentions of trusted helpers included case workers and therapists.

WOMEN AND GIRLS' RECOMMENDATIONS TO MAKE FOOD DISTRIBUTIONS SAFER

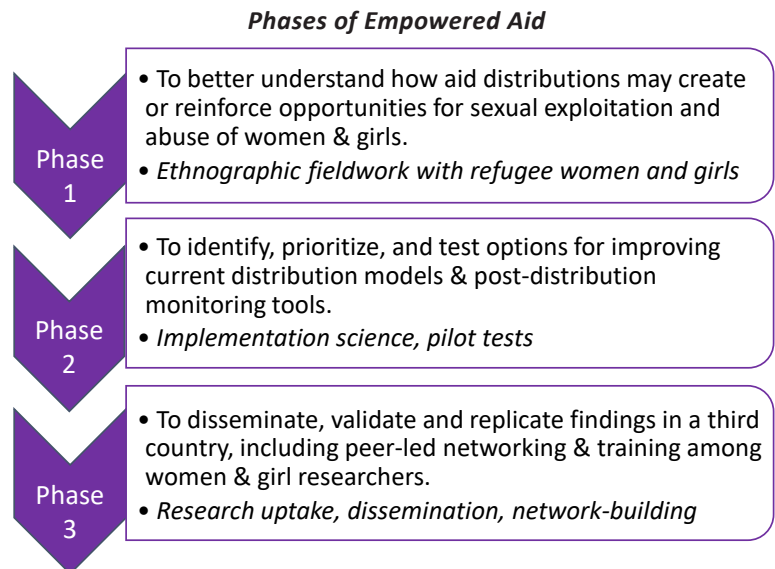
Refugee women and girls involved in the research developed the following recommendations to improve their safety and security throughout the food distribution process. Many of these build on steps they are already taking to protect themselves. By applying them, aid distribution systems can more fully meet women and girls' food needs in ways that minimize opportunities for SEA by aid actors and others.

1	<p>Pre-determined assigned times to groups of families to go and collect aid from distribution points to avoid overcrowding and disorganization that makes women and girls vulnerable to SEA. Disorganized and chaotic distributions may leave women and girls vulnerable to SEA by aid workers that offer to speed up their distribution by taking them to the front or serving them first. Creating systems that allow for organized, timely distributions could decrease exposure to SEA; this is especially important given the number of ad hoc distributions still frequently carried out by non-traditional aid actors.</p>
2	<p>Aid delivery and/or repair assistance at the household level may mitigate risks women and girls face when leaving their homes, if conducted in gender-sensitive ways, e.g. by at least two aid workers, with at least one being a woman. At-home delivery of aid and/or repair assistance can reduce SEA risk in that women and girls do not have to leave their homes, but it can also increase risks of SEA happening in the home. To mitigate this, women and girls requested teams of women aid workers or women workers to accompany male aid workers when working within people's homes.</p>
3	<p>Provide transportation support for those traveling long or isolated distances to collect aid, especially for vulnerable groups. The obligations of the humanitarian community to provide protection and support do not end at the gate of distribution sites. While taxi drivers are not a formal part of the aid system, without them the distribution would not function. Likewise, safe access to WASH and shelter repair services cannot be achieved if sex is demanded in exchange. As shown in this study's community mapping exercises, women and girls have expert knowledge of safe & risky places and times in their communities. Distance & other transport-related needs can be better considered by planning distribution mechanisms in collaboration with women's committees and leaders and discussing possible support (in-kind or cash/vouchers) for groups identified as particularly vulnerable.</p>
4	<p>Closer supervision of distributors and workers at aid distributions points, including filing and following up on complaints. Increased accountability of aid workers through more oversight by NGO/UN staff who understand the risks that could lead to SEA and the importance of creating a safe environment in which women and girls can access aid.</p>
5	<p>Ensuring more women aid workers, volunteers, and leadership structures are involved in aid distribution processes. The issues that women and girls face during distribution could be reduced by better engaging women and girls throughout the process. This includes ensuring meaningful numbers of female staff and volunteers within distribution teams, as well as representatives from women's committees or other leadership structures also being actively engaged in decision-making and supported to serve as key linkages to the wider communities. Women aid workers may also increase accountability and reduce the fear and risk of SEA during at home visits.</p>
6	<p>Create and support formal or informal accompaniment systems and social support mechanisms for sharing share information between women and girls. The creation of formal or informal accompaniment systems was identified as a way to mitigate risk by helping women and girls move together to collect aid or have someone else at home when aid workers or contractors are visiting women and girls' homes. Supporting them to maintain or increase social networks with other women and girls can also foster information sharing and support, including 'sounding the alarm' and getting help when risky situations arise.</p>
7	<p>Sex-segregated lines at distribution points. Women and girls repeatedly asked for separate lines when waiting at distribution points, to reduce sexual harassment, their being pushed out of line by men, or men offering their space in line in exchange for sex or a sexual relationship.</p>

8	Better information and communication of complaint and reporting mechanisms, so that women and girls have correct knowledge if they want to report SEA. This includes ensuring information is provided through multiple channels (loudspeaker, radio, visual, written in multiple languages, community meetings, health facilities, etc.) to increase the number of people in a community who hold this information and power. In addition, employing diverse ways of sensitizing communities to GBV/SEA reporting mechanisms that reach beyond traditional leadership structures, to ensure this information is accessible to those who most need it.
9	More security at distribution points, including ATMs where women and girls collect cash assistance. Female and male teams of well-supervised security personnel, who are trained to proactively mitigate SEA and other forms of violence, receive and respond to complaints, are needed to make distribution points and the area around them safer.

ABOUT EMPOWERED AID

Empowered Aid is a multi-country, participatory action research project led by the Global Women's Institute (GWI) at the George Washington University, in partnership with 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 examines the mechanisms through which humanitarian aid—in Lebanon: **food, WASH, shelter** and **cash assistance**—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.



In Lebanon, 14 women and 12 girls aged 16-52 participated in three months of data collection including two participatory group discussions and four in-depth interviews about their experiences interacting with the aid distribution system. In addition, 7 community participatory group discussions and 11 key informant interviews were held with community leaders and humanitarian personnel. Learn more at <https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/conflict-crisis>.

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