

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

LEBANON POLICY BRIEF JANUARY 2020

OVERVIEW

In 2002, a United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)/Save the Children assessment first exposed the magnitude of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) perpetrated by members of the international humanitarian aid community among refugee populations.¹ Almost two decades later, steps taken to strengthen protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) have focused on response mechanisms and punitive action toward perpetrators. While important, another critical aspect is understanding context-specific risks and taking proactive measures to mitigate them, while actively engaging affected populations in these accountability measures.

This brief shares findings and recommendations from participatory action research with Syrian women and girls living as refugees in Tripoli, Lebanon. It condenses learning from a series of in-depth interviews and participatory focus group discussions with a core group of 26 Syrian refugee women and girls who shared their expertise around the challenges they face when accessing aid, as well as 44 other participants drawn from refugee and host community women, men, girls and boys, and key informant interviews from the humanitarian community, disabled peoples' organizations, and local leadership structures.

Women and girls involved in Empowered Aid fieldwork made structured observations around SEA at different points in the distribution process, including:

- How distribution information is communicated;
- How registration is understood and conducted;
- The point of distribution;
- Transportation to and from the point of distribution;
- Storing or maintaining distributed items.

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.

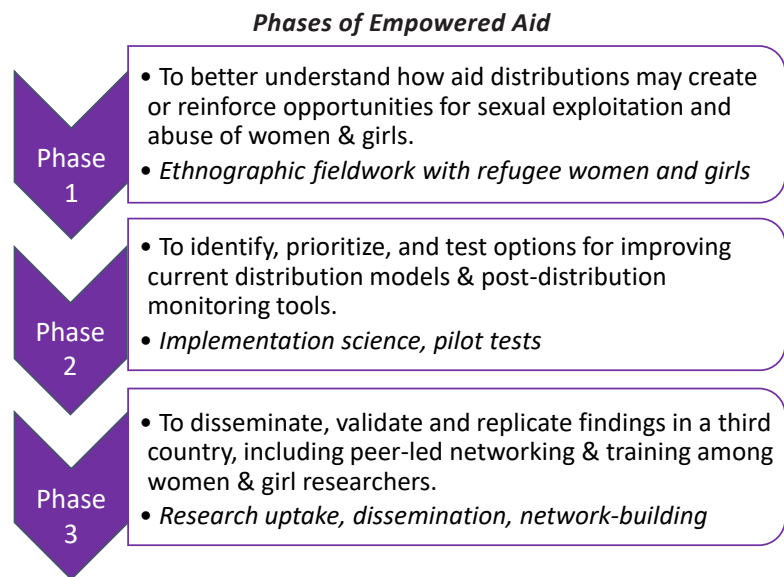
Its goal is to support the creation or adaptation of aid delivery models that **actively work to reduce power disparities and give women and girls a sustained voice** in how aid is delivered.

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>.

¹ United Nations (UN). (2002). *Investigation into sexual exploitation of refugees by aid workers in West Africa: report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services, A/57/465*. General Assembly. Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/guinea/investigation-sexual-exploitation-refugees-aid-workers-west-africa-a57465>

Questions also included which groups are most vulnerable; what women, girls and their communities already do to address SEA; how survivors navigate accessing services or support; and recommendations for how to make accessing aid safer and reduce opportunities for SEA to occur.

Overall, current distribution mechanisms are failing to create an environment in which women and girls are actively protected from sexual exploitation and abuse by aid and non-aid actors, as well as gender-based violence, when accessing life-saving aid. By adopting a contextual safeguarding approach when delivering aid, and prioritizing risk mitigation activities, key humanitarian stakeholders can improve aid the safety and dignity of aid delivery mechanisms.



KEY FINDINGS

Over three months of data collection, the study found that sexual exploitation and abuse by aid and non-aid actors is pervasive in all four types of aid explored across all points of the distribution process. Results showed that sexual exploitation and abuse was most frequently reported in relation to accessing shelter and cash assistance; during interactions at distribution points or moving to and from distributions. However, SEA also occurs in relation to trying to find out about or receiving information on collecting aid, registering for aid, or when storing aid. Perpetrators were identified as aid distribution actors but also taxi drivers, NGO-contracted repairmen or construction workers, landlords, religious leaders, or staff at places of worship, and foreign men (“men from the Gulf”) coming to Lebanon. Women and girls identified as most at risk to SEA include adolescent girls – especially those without parents – and widows, as well as women and girls who are a family provider or caretaker (head of household) and those who lack income (either themselves or from a spouse).

WHEN ACCESSING FOOD AID

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 of 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.

“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

When transporting items: Reports also show that transportation is yet another challenge which leaves women and girls vulnerable to harassment and abuse by taxi drivers, who attempt to sexually exploit them on their way to or from food distribution centers. Taxi drivers also drive women and girls into isolated and unknown places and then ask for sex in exchange for returning the woman or girl safely.

“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 woman

WHEN ACCESSING CASH ASSISTANCE²

During registration exercises: Women and girls reported sexual exploitation and abuse by workers registering them for assistance or distributing automated teller machine (ATM) cards, who offer cash assistance in exchange for sexual relationships and/or threaten women and girls with other types of violence if they refuse. It was noted in participatory group discussions that vulnerable women - specifically those who are economically vulnerable, widows and divorced - may enter into sexual relationships in exchange for cash assistance offered by aid workers because they are in need.

“They might be asked for something in return, in order to receive the cash assistance... they might be harassed or something. ...She might go to the center or to the organization to receive the assistance and the employee there might ask her to do something in order to grant her the assistance... although she is registered and has the right to take the assistance, he asks for something in return... he might ask her to go out with him, for example... she is obliged to...”

– Qualitative interview with refugee adolescent girl

At ATM machines: Women and girls generally spoke positively about having ATM cards and being able to withdraw cash from any ATM machine across Lebanon and spent on their essential needs, food or otherwise. However, due to lack of awareness on how to use the cards, they stated they might face sexual exploitation when they go alone to the ATM. Adolescent girls stated that women and girls can be vulnerable to SEA when they are not able to withdraw the full amount of money because they don't know how to use the ATM.

WHEN ACCESSING SHELTER ASSISTANCE

During at home visits: Aid workers or contractors/suppliers perpetrate SEA when they come for shelter assessments or repairs—or come under the pretext of house repairs—but instead ask women and girls for sexual favors or a sexual relationship in exchange for money or shelter aid. This more commonly occurs when women and girls are alone in the house with no men or boys present.

At distribution points: Taxi drivers, aid workers, landlords, and “owners” of private organizations offer rent payments or winterization aid and/or a higher placement on a registration/distribution list to women and girls in exchange for sex or sexual relationships. Women and girls often identified the “owners” of organizations as the gatekeepers to information, registration, or access to aid at distributions, and used their position of power to perpetrate SEA. In specific cases, the foreign men or sheikhs (often reported to be “from the Gulf”) who visit Lebanon—sometimes to distribute aid—offer to pay rent or other expenses in exchange for sexual relationships that can result in marriage, pregnancy, and abandonment. Widowed, divorced or single women and adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to this type of exploitation.

² “Cash assistance” refers to the many ways in which cash is provided within humanitarian assistance in Lebanon, for example through multi-purpose cash cards, on an as-needed basis in association with protection or other basic needs, etc.

“Yeah it can be for example, houses where there are girls that are, you know, the contractors that are doing the shelter repair might like to come back to that house, you know, more times, you know, do extra more thorough work that takes more visits. We also have had some cases around where women have tried to offer themselves to the people who are assessing the house to see whether they are, what’s the word, could be put on the list for upgrades or housing, then some of the women would have felt the need for them to be on the list, they’d get to offer themselves, so there I know, the cases that we heard.”

– Key informant interview with humanitarian actor

When women and girls lack access to or must maintain access to shelter aid: Women and girls involved in the study shared examples of aid workers, landlords, or employers offering to repair houses or pay rental fees in exchange for sex / sexual relationships. According to them, women and girls are forced into sexual relationships to earn money so the family can provide for themselves, pay for rent, and maintain the apartments and space they need to store aid. This is one of the ways in which being able to safely maintain the aid received, such as shelter aid, can also lead to risks of sexual exploitation and abuse.

WHEN ACCESSING WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE (WASH) ASSISTANCE³

During at home visits: Participatory group discussions with refugee and host community women and girl’s groups and refugee boys identified WASH aid workers—specifically suppliers or service providers—as perpetrating SEA by making water and sanitation repairs or assistance contingent on sex. Widows and female heads of household were noted as particularly vulnerable.

At distribution points: Women and girls also reported workers at distribution points offering to distribute WASH items more quickly to younger women and girls than to others (by serving them first or taking them to the front of the line) in exchange for sex. According to one adolescent girl respondent, aid workers may take advantage of adolescent girls most often because they are young and impressionable, often think about their family before themselves, and therefore may be more susceptible to exploitation because their family needs the assistance.

HOW WOMEN, GIRLS, AND SURVIVORS ALREADY RESPOND TO SEA AND ACCESS SERVICES

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.

³ WASH assistance in Lebanon includes in-kind distributions—which have reduced in scale but are still carried out, especially by local and non-traditional actors (for example of menstrual and other hygiene materials)—as well as construction and maintenance of shared and household-level WASH facilities.

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.

HOW DO EMPOWERED AID'S FINDINGS ALIGN WITH OTHER RECENT ASSESSMENTS?

Evidently, the voices of women and girls were not only unique to the Empowered Aid study; a 2016 report by Amnesty International confirmed SEA by aid workers in Lebanon.⁴ Similar to Empowered Aid, women feared reporting crimes to the Lebanese authorities, and losing the little economic and social support they have provided through aid, as barriers to reporting. It concludes that Syrian women and girls continue to live in an environment with increased powerlessness, vulnerability, and lack of awareness, as confirmed in our findings.

According to Human Rights Watch, landlords, employers, and aid workers perpetrate SEA in exchange for salaries, money, or rent. The study indicates that the high level dependency on aid but also the increasing desperate need for cash, leave women and girls vulnerable to continued harassment and exploitation.⁵ Amnesty International found that landlords often exploit their female tenants and routinely increase rent. Women who are unable to pay rental fees may face eviction or are propositioned for "survival sex" – an offer to reduce rent in exchange for sex.⁶

WOMEN AND GIRLS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOW TO MAKE AID DISTRIBUTION SAFER

Refugee women and girls involved in the research developed the following recommendations to improve their safety and security throughout aid distribution processes. 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' needs in ways that minimize opportunities for SEA by aid actors and others.

- 1 Financial aid through cash assistance for women and girls to reduce risk of SEA.** Particularly targeting vulnerable groups of women and girls, such as female-headed households, widows, or orphaned girls, to reduce their risk of SEA.
- 2 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.

4 Amnesty International. (2016). 'I Want a Safe Place': Refugee women from Syria uprooted and unprotected in Lebanon. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde18/3210/2016/en/>

5 Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2013). *Lebanon: Women Refugees from Syria Harassed, Exploited*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/26/lebanon-women-refugees-syria-harassed-exploited>

6 Amnesty International. (2016).

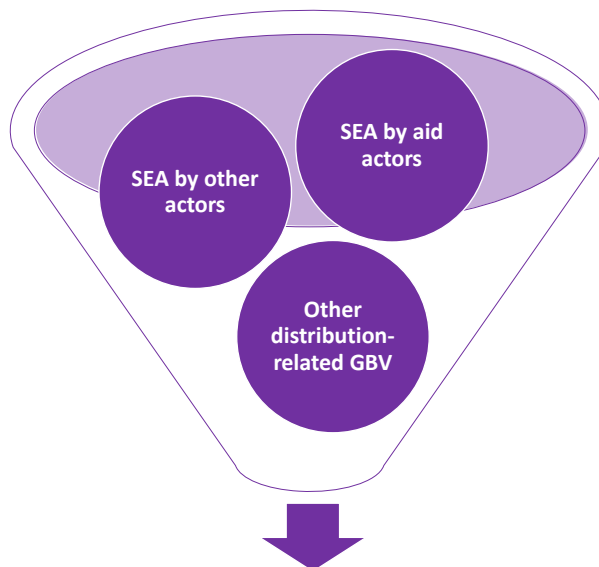
- 3 Aid delivery and/or repair assistance at the household level may mitigate risks women and girls face when leaving their homes, if conducted in gender-sensitive ways, e.g. by at least two aid workers, with at least one being a woman.** At-home delivery of aid and/or repair assistance can reduce SEA 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.
- 4 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.
- 5 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.
- 6 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.
- 7 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.
- 8 Information sessions on safely and securing withdrawing money from ATMs.** Empowering women and girls with the information to withdraw money from ATMs correctly and securely to reduce the possibility of SEA occurring.

- 9 **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.
- 10 **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.
- 11 **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.

CONCLUSION

Aid distribution systems must be adapted to more fully meet women and girls' needs for shelter and cash assistance, and WASH and food items in ways that minimize opportunities for exploitation and abuse by aid as well as non-aid actors. **The most important way to do that is to recognize women and girls as experts in contextual safeguarding and actively engage them in mechanisms designed to improve aid processes and protect against SEA.** A response to SEA that focuses only on reports related to specific persons misses many opportunities to respond to dangerous *situations*, which women, girls, and other community-based actors already know well and design their own strategies for avoiding (such as discouraging movement after dark, or self-organizing to travel in groups). In addition to bringing better accountability to perpetrators, there is also an urgent need for 'contextual safeguarding'⁷ approaches to mitigate and prevent SEA.

Intersecting Dynamics of SEA and GBV



Women & girls faced with sexual abuse & exploitation in order to access life-saving aid

Humanitarian aid stakeholders must also **increase access to GBV services—such as healthcare, psychosocial support, and case management—while ensuring access to such services is not contingent**

⁷ For further resources and information on contextual safeguarding, see: <https://contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/about/what-is-contextual-safeguarding>.

on reporting specific instances of abuse, in recognition of the powerful deterrent this can be. Shame and stigma, as well as the threat or fear of losing access to the aid they so desperately need, are part of the enabling environment for abuse that silences survivors. On a practical level, many women and girls described situations in which they do not know the exact identity or role of the person exploiting them, only that he is telling them he has power over how much aid they receive, or if they receive any at all. PSEA systems that prioritize information about the perpetrator's identity over a response to the survivor's other needs may inadvertently minimize reporting as survivors do not know, or are afraid to share, that level of detail but want help nonetheless.

Specifically, senior management and safeguarding leads must take responsibility to reflect on their organization's role in creating a 'conducive context' for abuse. They must attend to the settings and people who represent 'causes for concern,' dig deeper into these concerns, and act on them. They must also ensure perpetrators are held to account. **Monitoring & evaluation staff** also have a key role to play, as transparently monitoring safety and risk at all points in the distribution process, and sharing this information among humanitarian actors as well as community structures, allows for proactive responses to dangerous situations and contributes to greater accountability in mitigating SEA (and other forms of distribution-related GBV) before they occur. Finally, these findings and the study tools (shared online) should be used for further **training and education**, particularly with social workers and frontline staff. Learn more at <https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/conflict-crisis>.



This policy brief was drafted by Alina Potts, Loujine Fattal, Elizabeth Hedge, Farah Hallak, & Amelia Reese.

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

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