

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

LEBANON POLICY BRIEF, JANUARY 2020

Shelter assistance continues to be a necessity for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, with over half of Syrian refugee households living in shelter conditions that are either overcrowded, below standards, or in dangerous condition.¹ In 2019, the Global Women's Institute (GWI) and CARE International in Lebanon conducted participatory action research on risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) within Syrian refugee populations in Tripoli, Lebanon. Key shelter-related findings from the study are found 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:

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.

“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

¹ United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). (2019). *Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon 2019*. Retrieved from https://www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2019/12/VASyR_2019.pdf

“Some [women accept offers], and others don’t. If the woman desperately needs to find a shelter for her kids, she might agree. Others would rather live on the streets and protect their reputations.”

– Qualitative interview with refugee adolescent girl

“In most cases whether at home or in the organization, the organization’s owner or the person providing her with aid might tell her that he can only help her if she offered him something in return. Employees don’t usually do this. It’s mostly the owner of the organization... Because the employees’ job is only to go inside and do their work to earn money. They’re not the founders of the organization and they can’t make decisions... Yes, he has the power to choose to repair her house”

– Qualitative interview with refugee adolescent girl

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.

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 and their intermediaries (volunteers, contractors, etc.) may perpetrate SEA when they visit homes to provide shelter aid, or during shelter-related distributions (i.e. winterization kits).

Landlords, Employers, and Taxi Drivers who offer to pay rent or allow women and girls and their families to live “rent free” in exchange for sexual relationships.

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

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 SHELTER DISTRIBUTIONS SAFER

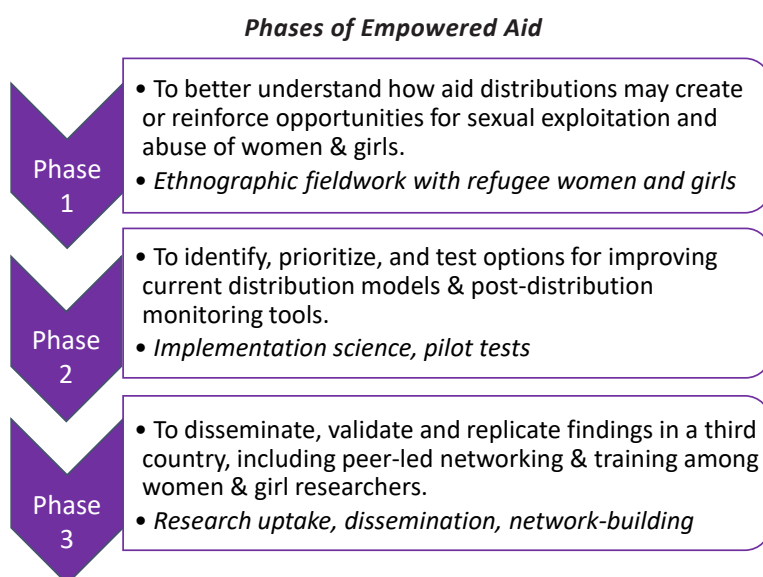
Refugee women and girls involved in the research developed the following recommendations to improve their safety and security throughout the shelter distribution process. Many of these build on steps they are already taking to protect themselves. By applying them, aid distribution systems can more fully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

- 1 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.
- 2 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.
- 3 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.
- 4 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.
- 5 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.
- 6 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.

- 7 **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.
- 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>.

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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