

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

UGANDA POLICY BRIEF, JANUARY 2020

Food aid is a core component of humanitarian aid programming, and more than 1 million refugees in Uganda receive food and nutrition assistance.¹ In 2019, the Global Women's Institute (GWI) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Uganda conducted participatory action research on risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) among South Sudanese refugee populations in Bidi Bidi and Imvepi Settlements in northwest Uganda. 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 day of their lives in the settlements. Women and girls involved in the research noted particular risks for SEA at the following points:

Sensitization, registration and verification: Information is a form of power. Aid workers or community leaders, who act as interlocutors between aid agencies and the general community, may use misleading or confusing information about persons with specific needs (PSN) eligibility and/or the size of rations to sexually exploit women and girls. They do so by promising women “favors” in the form of larger amounts or special statuses, when in fact that amount is what they are already entitled to receive. Small food quantity/portions was noted as a factor that leads women and girls to seek other ways to access a larger quantity of food, which puts them at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers, host community members, and other refugees.

At distribution points: Women and girls reported SEA in relation to “workers” offering to help in distributing food more quickly (serve them first or take them to the front of the line), promising more food, or making access to the point of distribution (i.e. by security guards) contingent on sex. It was also highlighted that workers tended to identify and favor girls they are interested in or deem “attractive” in the line and take them forward to get food, only to ask for sexual relationships later.

“Then there the place of food there is sexual exploitation by the workers, if people are many they come and they deceive other women they tell them if you don't want to stay in line you accept me let me sleep with you, you will not stand in the line.”

– Community participatory group discussion with refugee women

“At times you find that we girls or women we find difficulties with the distributors. These distributors.... they come and tell that, ‘if you fall in love with me, I will add you more food, or for the cooking oil you will get a big share.’”

– Participatory group discussion with refugee adolescent girls

¹ World Food Programme (WFP). (2019). *Uganda Country Brief*. Retrieved from https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000108420/download/?_ga=2.229430174.383065759.1575405265-1404801916.1575405265

“Like the boda boda guys. You agree with him to bring your food home. Yet he has intentions of corning you. Now he will carry for you the food and of course the distance is long and after carrying the food he will end up telling you, ‘I have helped you, I want you.’”

– Participatory group discussion with refugee adolescent girls

Transporting and storing items: Transporting heavy, bulky food items once they are received is yet another challenge which leaves women and girls extremely vulnerable to manipulation by ‘boda boda’ drivers in the settlement. Women and girls also reported frequently selling part of their food ration (despite needing all of it) in order to cover transport costs, yet still having drivers demand more money and/or sex in exchange for transporting the food. Women and girls also reported boda boda drivers running away with their food. Study participants also described how the long

distance from distribution sites or collection points to women and girls’ homes increases their risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Women and girls who experience SEA are often not able or willing to report the behavior or access services. Seeking help from informal supports or formal mechanisms is limited by lack of awareness, normalization of SEA, victim-blaming, and fear of losing aid, as well as confusion around the actual role of the perpetrator (i.e. who is a staff member or volunteer and from which agency, versus whom they may portray themselves as). Survivors tend to be fearful of reporting or pursuing services due to fear of stigma from their community; shame around SEA, and worry about being blamed for the incident; and perpetrators who will sometimes threaten or intimidate survivors to prevent them from reporting.

WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS?

Aid workers were noted to demand sex in exchange for: increased food rations, prioritizing someone in a distribution line, or offering to protect food rations.

Security forces who guard distribution sites refuse to allow women and girls to access sites unless they have sex with them.

Boda boda drivers who offer to transport women and girls’ food aid and then demand sex in exchange (or even in place of) money.

Fellow refugees and host community members were also identified as perpetrators. These refugees may serve as volunteers for aid agencies or serve as community leaders who provide key linkages between aid agencies and the wider communities. In addition, other refugee men and boys sometimes offer support to women and girls at food distributions in exchange for sex.

SEA is often normalized within refugee communities, and women and girls may not report due to the perception that the sexually exploitative relationship is benefitting them. They may fear that aid will be taken from them if they move to end the sexually exploitative relationship. Women and girls may feel unsafe reporting to police, as police are sometimes the *perpetrators* of violence; or aid agencies as these groups are sometimes perpetrators themselves. These fears, combined with a perceived lack of accountability for perpetrators and lack of knowledge of reporting mechanisms, suppress SEA reporting. If a SEA survivor decides to come forward, she often confides in friends, family members, and community leaders first to seek counsel. Refugee women and girls identified the complaints desk, the women’s center and women refugee leaders as places where survivors may seek services. Women and girls also reported a preference for accessing services from NGOs that support women.

WOMEN AND GIRLS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOW 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	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.
2	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 boda boda drivers are not a formal part of the aid system, without them the distribution would not function. Likewise, safe access to firewood or water points cannot be achieved if sex is demanded in exchange for access. 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 points in collaboration with women's committees and leaders and discussing possible support (in-kind or cash/vouchers) for groups identified as particularly vulnerable.
3	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.
4	Support women and girls to organize response mechanisms to assist each other when they feel unsafe or at risk (sounding an "alarm"). Traveling isolated distances or having to negotiate with host communities for access to key resources may leave women and girls vulnerable to SEA. Supporting them to create systems that allow for sounding alarms and getting help can be lifesaving.
5	Increased community sensitization on SEA/GBV. Improve the communication between aid organizations and the community. 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, diverse ways of sensitizing communities to GBV/SEA reporting mechanisms that reach beyond traditional leadership structures are needed to ensure this information is accessible to those who most need it.
6	Create accompaniment systems and improve information sharing among women. Women and girls who move in groups may be less vulnerable to various risks in the distribution process. 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 when aid workers or contractors visit women and girls' homes.

- 7 **More security at distribution points.** 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. This also includes 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.

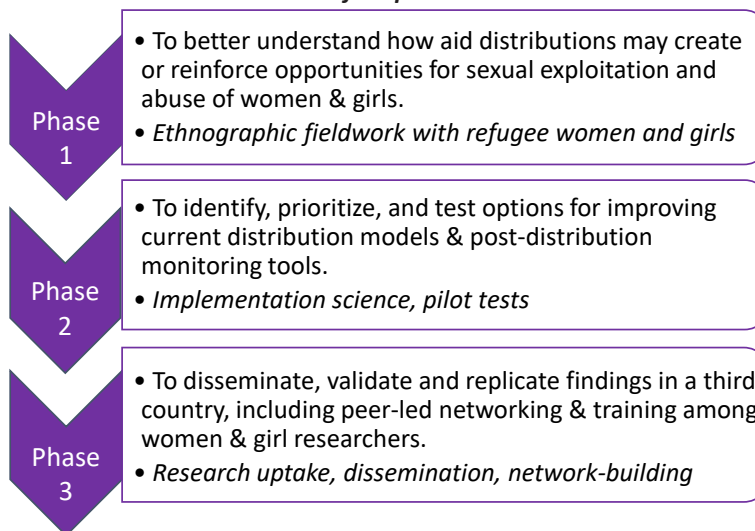
ABOUT EMPOWERED AID

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 the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Uganda and CARE International in Lebanon, 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 Uganda: **food, WASH, shelter and fuel & firewood 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 Uganda, 16 women and 13 girls aged 15-62 participated in three months of data collection including two participatory focus group discussions and four in-depth interviews about their experiences interacting with the aid distribution system. In addition, 18 community participatory focus group discussions and 17 key informant interviews were held with community leaders and humanitarian personnel. Learn more at <https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/conflict-crisis>.

Phases of Empowered Aid



This policy brief was drafted by Alina Potts, Harriet Kolli, Elizabeth Hedge, Chelsea Ullman, and Maureen Murphy.

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

Suggested Citation: Alina Potts, Harriet Kolli, Elizabeth Hedge, Chelsea Ullman, and Maureen Murphy. (2020). *Empowered Aid: Participatory Action Research with Refugee Women & Girls to Better Prevent Sexual Exploitation and Abuse—Uganda Policy Brief, Food*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University and Uganda: The International Rescue Committee.