

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

UGANDA POLICY BRIEF, JANUARY 2020

Provision of fuel assistance and reliance on refugees' ability to collect firewood aid is a core component of humanitarian aid programming, in order to meet energy needs for cooking, warmth, and livelihoods.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 fuel & firewood-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 in the settlements. Women and girls involved in the research noted particular risks for SEA at the following points:

During organized distributions: Women and girls reported sexual exploitation and abuse by workers distributing bricks or fuel-efficient stoves, who offer greater access or a larger quantity of bricks in exchange for sex. The workers may approach a woman or girl in a friendly manner and build rapport before asking for sex in return, lowering the woman or girl's inhibitions to say no (i.e. 'grooming' her).

When collecting firewood: Women and girls also travel far out of the settlements to collect firewood, leading to confrontations or sexual exploitation and abuse by the host community men who offer access to land with firewood in exchange for sex. Since women and girls are in far-off locations, they have even less access to help. When they can access land for collecting firewood, men (who may be refugees or members of the host community) will offer to help cut trees or collect grass (in the case of shelter) in exchange for sex. Sometimes they first offer to cut firewood as a favor, then demand sex afterward. Due to tensions between refugees and host communities, refugee women and girls frequently described facing other forms of gender-based violence when collecting firewood, such as rape.

"These people who are distributing these stoves they will want you to be their friends and they tell you maybe to give you this, we need to have maybe some relationship with you or I need to have maybe some sex with you or before I give you. They will of course force you to some conditions that you don't want."

– Qualitative interview with refugee woman

"...Last year when we went, we found a man in the bush saying that, 'if you want firewood, start to move with condoms, next time if you come without them I will kill you.'"

– Participatory group discussion with refugee adolescent girls

¹ United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). (2019). *Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan, January 2019 – December 2020*. Retrieved from <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Uganda%20Country%20RRP%202019-20%20%28January%202019%29.pdf>.

“They will tell ‘you if you go with me, I will help you to get a big tree and then burn for you as charcoal. Then you will make this person cut. After cutting, and burning the charcoal they will tell to come and pick the charcoal. So when you go there they will demand for sex fast before the charcoal. If they tell you that they help you for sex, if you refuse they will decide to leave you and you will suffer. Then the rain will wash you with your children.”

– Participatory group discussion with refugee women

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.

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.

WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS?

Aid workers involved in distribution of fuel assistance, such as fuel-efficient stoves, were cited as building rapport with refugee women and girls (including PSNs) and later demanding sex in exchange for access to this aid.

Host community members and fellow refugees were also identified as perpetrators. As women and girls may have to travel long distances to collect firewood, host community members may offer access to land with firewood in exchange for sex. Men (who may be refugees or members of the host community) will offer to help cut trees in exchange for sex. Men are also reported to offer to cut firewood as a favor, then demand sex afterward.

WOMEN AND GIRLS’ RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOW TO MAKE FUEL & FIREWOOD DISTRIBUTIONS SAFER

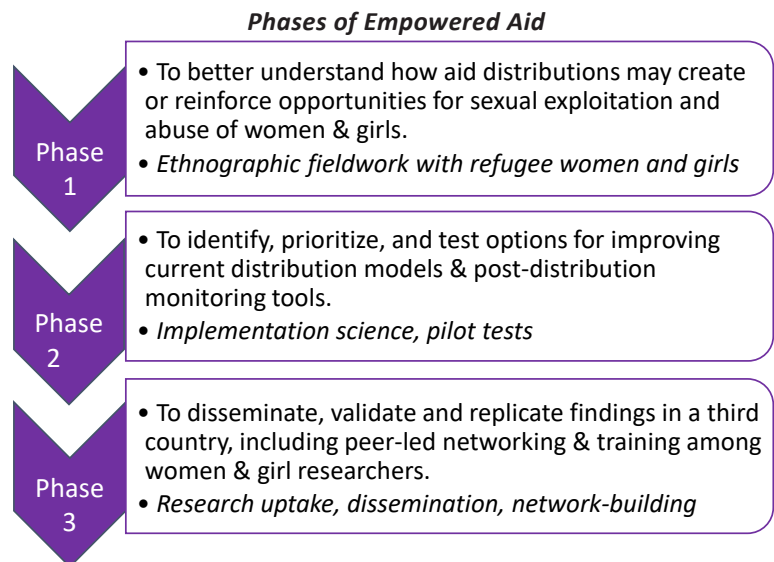
Refugee women and girls involved in the research developed the following recommendations to improve their safety and security throughout the fuel & firewood distribution process. Many of these build on steps they are already taking to protect themselves. By applying them, aid distribution systems can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



1	<p>Information, communication and dispute resolution sessions with host community members. Access to fuel, firewood, and grasses for shelter, as well as water points, can require negotiation with host community members which may put women and girls at risk of SEA and other forms of violence. They request humanitarian and government stakeholders improve information and communication with host communities as well as dispute resolution sessions to manage tensions proactively.</p>
2	<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 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.</p>
3	<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>
4	<p>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.</p>
5	<p>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.</p>
6	<p>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.</p>
7	<p>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.</p>

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>.

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