

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

UGANDA POLICY BRIEF, JANUARY 2020

Shelter aid is a core component of humanitarian aid, with “appropriate and timely shelter and NFI support” recognized as a priority within the wider Uganda Refugee Response.¹ In 2019, the Global Women's Institute (GWI) and 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 shelter-related findings 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:

Sensitization, registration, verification: When registering for shelter aid – such as tarpaulin, carpets, and poles – aid workers, volunteers, or security guards will offer faster registration in exchange for sex or money. Workers and guards present at the registration sites particularly exploit women and girls' vulnerabilities, committing sexual exploitation and abuse by offering preferential treatment during persons with specific needs (PSN) registration for sex. It may not be clear to women and girls that they qualify for PSN registration and support in constructing shelters, which workers use to their advantage. They demand sex from women and girls in payment for building a house that they were entitled to as a registered PSN, or demand sex in return for registering a woman or girl when they are already registered for shelter assistance.

At distribution or collection points: Sometimes the tarpaulin, carpets, and poles provided are not sufficient to construct adequate for shelters in the settlements, therefore women and girls venture out of the settlements to find the poles and cut grass for thatched roofs. This leads to encounters with host community members, who sexually exploit women and girls by offering access to these items in exchange for sex. Because the locations to cut grass can be long distances from the settlements, this may also force women to spend more time in the bushes than in their homes, increasing their vulnerability to abuse.

“These humanitarian workers also having been constructing houses. So they called some girls, to come and helping them in cooking...So they tell them that they will pay after finishing the work. So these girls agreed and started working, after finishing the work, the girls asked their money and these guys changed that... They started these relationships with these girls. They are forcing these girls to fall in love with them and since these girls are in the camp, they need their money. ... They end up impregnating the girls, and now they disappeared from the settlement.”

– Participatory group discussion with refugee adolescent girls

¹ Government of Uganda and United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). (2019). *Shelter, Settlement & NFI Dashboard: Uganda Refugee Response Plan (RRP) 2019-2020, Quarter 1*. Retrieved from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/69659>.

"I want to talk about the shelter. They are building and constructing houses for these PSNs. The constructors have impregnated many girls. You find that they end up falling in love with the girls. So when you ask the girl who impregnated you, they say those people constructing. They have left and these girls are now suffering in the settlement with their children."

– Participatory group discussion with refugee adolescent girls

During shelter construction: Women and girls repeatedly reported construction workers who build PSN housing and other men (i.e. aid workers, volunteers, other refugees, or members of the host community) who simply offer to build houses for women and girls, as perpetrators of SEA. These men may offer to construct houses in exchange for sex or may enter into sexually exploitative relationships with the women or girls for whom they are already constructing houses. The construction workers can even increase the woman or girl's vulnerability by impregnating her and then leaving after their work is finished.

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 and their intermediaries (i.e. construction workers) were noted to demand sex in exchange for eligibility to receive shelter supplies, preferential treatment, or help with constructing shelters for women and girls. They also were reported to demand sex after offering to pay refugee girls to cook for them while working.

Security forces who guard aid sites and/or areas women and girls travel through to collect shelter materials may refuse to allow women and girls access to such sites unless they have sex with them.

Fellow refugees and host community members were also noted to exploit women and girls by offering to construct shelters in exchange for sex, with those living alone or without adult males and PSNs reported as being targeted. Host community members were reported to demand for sex in exchange for access to land where women and girls go to collect additional construction materials.

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 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	<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>
2	<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>
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 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>
4	<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>
5	<p>More community and direct support to safely construct houses; particularly to vulnerable groups. Particularly targeting vulnerable groups of women and girls, such as female-headed households, widows, or orphaned girls, to reduce their risk of SEA.</p>
6	<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>
7	<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>

- 8 **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.
- 9 **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.

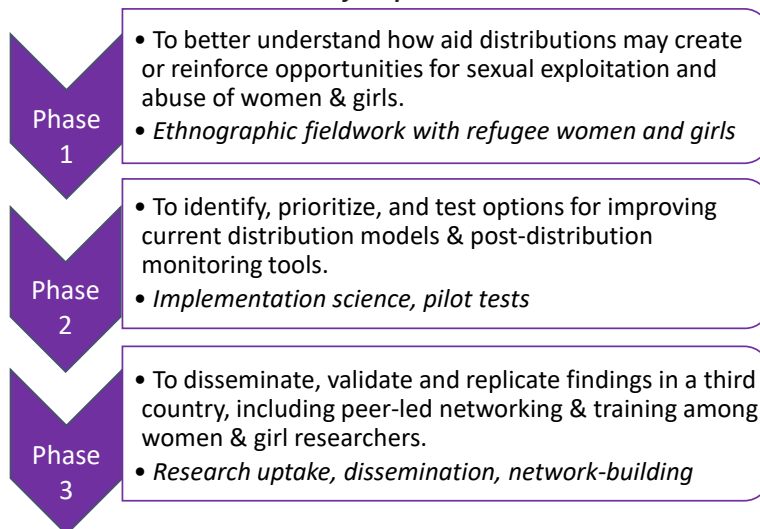
ABOUT EMPOWERED AID

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



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