

# EMPOWERED AID: REDUCING RISKS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN WATER, SANITATION, AND HYGIENE (WASH) DISTRIBUTION

UGANDA POLICY BRIEF, JANUARY 2020

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) needs persist among the refugee population in Uganda, as most water infrastructure continues to be temporary and families lack adequate and accessible latrines.<sup>1</sup> 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 WASH-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:

**At distributions for WASH assistance:** Aid workers and volunteers perpetrate SEA by taking advantage of women and girls' lack of information when distributing sanitary materials (panties, soap, pads). Workers or volunteers arbitrarily separate groups so women and girls won't understand why they are or are not receiving aid, then offer the sanitary materials in exchange for sex. When adequate WASH assistance—such as sex-segregated latrines that can be accessed safely or menstrual hygiene materials—is not available, this can open up risks for sexual exploitation and abuse. Examples include transactional relationships women and girls may enter in to in order to access sanitary materials. If there is a shortage or delay in distribution for sanitary materials or pads, women and girls may enter into relationships with a man or boy in exchange for money to help them access necessary items like sanitary materials.

**When improving water infrastructure:** Further findings identified contractors, specifically water truck drivers who bring in water to the settlement and workers contracted

*"...there are some NGOs that are coming to support the women & girls with some sanitary materials like maybe Always, panties & soap. But as they come to the ground, they select some people from the community to assist them distribute these things to the people...these volunteers selected will now begin to select or to segregate people so that some will be given and other will not be given. As a result they may need also to confuse the women & the young girls that, 'you accept me you will get these materials or you will get that' & some women can accept because they need the support... So they will offer sex & they will not know the effects that may come out of that or what they may acquire after having sex with that man."*

– Participatory group discussion with refugee women

<sup>1</sup> 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>; UNHCR. (2019). *Assessment of Water Service Delivery in Refugee Settlements in Uganda: Analysis and Recommendations*. Retrieved from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/72424>.

*“...the water in the area may not be supplied on time. So sometimes you have to go and collect from the watercourse where they are supplying. When you go there, these men may want to be in a love relationship with you. If you refuse, they will not open for you the water. If you refuse you will not be free to fetch the water.”*

– Participatory group discussion with refugee adolescent girls

to construct WASH infrastructure, as some of the main perpetrators of SEA. In participatory group discussions with girls, they mentioned that drivers of water trucks will favor girls at the distribution point and start relationships with them. The girls also reported that once a girl is pregnant, the drivers run away and leave the girl with the burden of pregnancy and raising the baby alone. Several individual interviews also noted that aid workers who construct wells or dig latrines were also reported as perpetrators of SEA.

**When collecting water:** Traveling isolated distances or having to negotiate with host communities for access to key resources may leave women and girls vulnerable to SEA. Women reported SEA by men who offer to fetch water or transport support in exchange for sex, or stop them from fetching water unless they offer sex in exchange. Findings also show that guards lock water facilities early and take advantage of women and girls arriving afterward, offering to open water taps in exchange for sex.

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** demand sex in exchange for registration/eligibility for WASH assistance including sanitary materials; access to water; and access to new or improved WASH infrastructure (i.e. digging latrines, constructing wells).

**Security guards** who demand sex in exchange for unlocking water points for women and girls.

**Contractors, including truck drivers**, who construct and/or transport water or other WASH supplies to the settlements and/or are present at distribution points.

**Fellow refugees and host community members** that offer to collect or carry water for women and then demand sex in exchange, or provide them with money to access sanitary materials if they enter into a sexual relationship.

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 TO MAKE WASH DISTRIBUTIONS SAFER

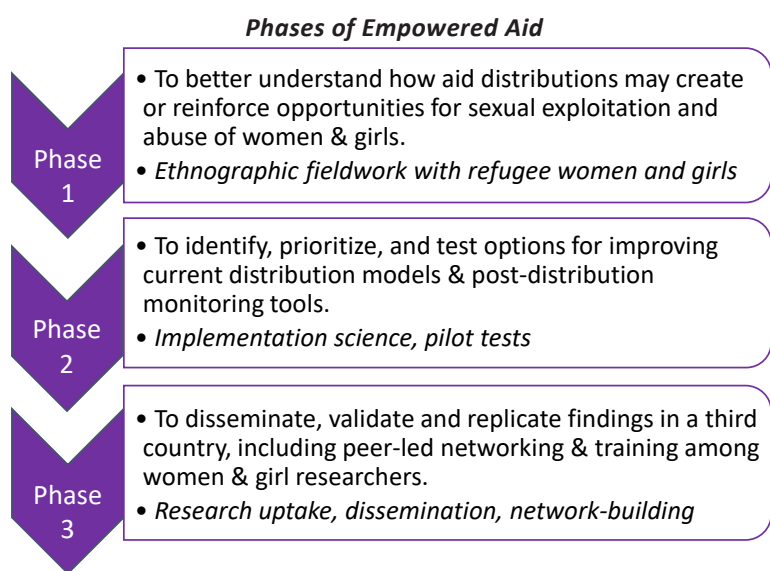
Refugee women and girls involved in the research developed the following recommendations to improve their safety and security throughout the WASH distribution process. Many of these build on steps they are already taking to protect themselves. By applying them, aid distribution systems can more fully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

1	<p><b>Sex-segregated lines at distribution points.</b> 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><b>Information, communication and dispute resolution sessions with host community members.</b> 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><b>Provide transportation support for those traveling long or isolated distances to collect aid, especially for vulnerable groups.</b> 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 &amp; risky places and times in their communities. Distance &amp; 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><b>Better lighting and closer WASH distribution points.</b> Women and girls highlighted distance to WASH distribution points or facilities (i.e. water taps, latrines) as something that put them at risk, as well as lack of lighting at these sites.</p>
5	<p><b>Ensuring more women aid workers, volunteers, and leadership structures are involved in aid distribution processes.</b> 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>
6	<p><b>Support women and girls to organize response mechanisms to assist each other when they feel unsafe or at risk (sounding an "alarm").</b> 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><b>Increased community sensitization on SEA/GBV.</b> 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>.

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