



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

## UGANDA POLICY BRIEF JANUARY 2020

### OVERVIEW

In 2002, a United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)/Save the Children assessment first exposed the magnitude of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) perpetrated by members of the international humanitarian aid community among refugee populations.<sup>1</sup> Almost two decades later, steps taken to strengthen protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) have focused on response mechanisms and punitive action toward perpetrators. While important, another critical aspect is understanding context-specific risks and taking proactive measures to mitigate them, while actively engaging affected populations in these accountability measures.

This policy brief describes key findings and recommendations from participatory action research with South Sudanese women and girls living as refugees in northwest Uganda. It condenses learning from a series of in-depth interviews and participatory focus group discussions with a core group of 29 women and girls who shared their expertise around challenges and difficulties they face when accessing aid, as well as 81 other participants drawn from refugee and host community women, men, girls and boys, and key informants from the humanitarian community, disabled peoples' organizations, and local leadership structures.

Women and girls involved in Empowered Aid fieldwork made structured observations around SEA at different points in the distribution process, including:

- How distribution information is communicated;
- How registration is understood and conducted;
- The point of distribution;
- Transportation to and from the point of distribution;
- Storing or maintaining distributed items.

### Empowered Aid: Transforming Gender and Power Dynamics in the Delivery of Humanitarian Aid

is a multi-country, participatory action research study led by the Global Women's Institute (GWI) at the George Washington University. Partners are 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 seeks to examine the mechanisms through which humanitarian aid—in Uganda: **food, WASH, shelter and fuel & firewood**—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.

The main results report, full set of policy briefs, and accompanying tools and resources can be found online at:

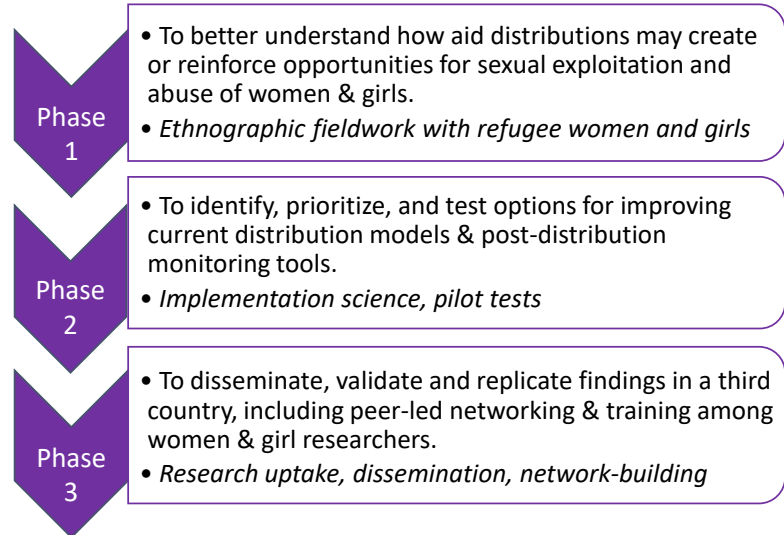
<https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/conflict-crisis>.

1 United Nations (UN). (2002). *Investigation into sexual exploitation of refugees by aid workers in West Africa: report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services, A/57/465*. General Assembly. Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/guinea/investigation-sexual-exploitation-refugees-aid-workers-west-africa-a57465>

Questions also included which groups are most vulnerable; what women, girls and their communities already do to address SEA; how survivors navigate accessing services or support; and recommendations for how to make accessing aid safer and reduce opportunities for SEA to occur.

Overall, current distribution mechanisms are failing to create an environment in which women and girls are actively protected from sexual exploitation and abuse by aid and non-aid actors, as well as gender-based violence, when accessing life-saving aid. By adopting a contextual safeguarding approach when delivering aid, and prioritizing risk mitigation activities, key humanitarian stakeholders can improve aid the safety and dignity of aid delivery mechanisms.

### Phases of Empowered Aid



## 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. Over three months of data collection, the study found that sexual exploitation and abuse by aid and non-aid actors is pervasive in all four types of aid explored and across all points of the distribution process. Women, girls, and other refugee and host community members consulted described the many faces of SEA perpetration by those who use their actual or insinuated power to exploit and abuse others. Perpetrators are identified as aid actors but also truck drivers, construction workers, 'boda boda' or motorcycle drivers, host community members, and other refugees. Little clarity of or faith in reporting mechanisms, lack of support from families or communities, the normalization of SEA, and confusion around the identity of the perpetrator all serve as powerful deterrents to reporting sexual exploitation and abuse.

Within the qualitative discussions held, SEA was most noted in relation to food distributions, followed by shelter; while other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) were most frequently described in relation to accessing WASH (water points, latrines, sanitary materials) and fuel and firewood. This may reflect food and shelter being more centrally-organized distributions; while WASH and firewood rely more on accessing potentially isolated areas and/or negotiating access to host community land and trees. Women and girls were acknowledged as those most vulnerable to SEA by all participants. Adolescent girls—especially those without parents—, widows, single women or those living without adult males, and persons with specific needs (PSNs) were noted as especially at risk.

## WHEN ACCESSING FOOD AID

**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.

**When 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 reported frequently selling part of their food ration (despite needing all of it) in order to cover transport costs; yet drivers still demanding more money and/or sex in exchange for transporting the food.

*“These distributors who are distributing. 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.’ So you end up...after they have realized the food is about to come, they move around cornering girls or women, that, ‘if you really fall in love with me, I will add you food.’ So those are big challenges.”*

– Participatory group discussion with refugee adolescent girls

## WHEN ACCESSING WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE (WASH) ASSISTANCE

**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.

**When improving water infrastructure:** Further findings identified contractors, specifically water truck drivers who bring in water to the settlement and workers contracted to construct WASH infrastructure, as some of the main perpetrators of SEA. In participatory group discussions with girls, they mention 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.

*“...there has been instances where they have been asked to exchange sex for some of those items. So if they are distributing maybe sanitary materials if they don't know that it is free or they know that it is free somebody can always take advantage or kind of try to abuse them.”*

– Key informant interview with humanitarian actor

**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 will not 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 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 sanitary materials.

*“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

## WHEN ACCESSING SHELTER ASSISTANCE

**Sensitization, registration, and 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 registration sites particularly exploit women and girls’ vulnerabilities, committing sexual exploitation and abuse by offering preferential treatment during 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 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.

**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.

## WHEN ACCESSING FUEL & FIREWOOD ASSISTANCE

**During organized distributions:** Women and girls also 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 exchange for sex.

*“These people who are distributing these stoves they will want you to be their friends & 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

*“The other type of violence we are facing when we go & find these natives, some of them even can say that you accept me like your husband we shall leave you to collect the firewood just freely in their areas.”*

– Qualitative interview with refugee adolescent girl

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.

## HOW WOMEN, GIRLS, AND SURVIVORS ALREADY RESPOND TO SEA AND ACCESS SERVICES

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.

### HOW DO EMPOWERED AID'S FINDINGS ALIGN WITH OTHER RECENT ASSESSMENTS?

A recent assessment by the Office of the Prime Minister, Government of Uganda (OPM) and UNHCR confirmed SEA of refugees by aid workers in Uganda.<sup>2</sup> The assessment also noted SEA mostly occurs around food distribution centers. According to a focus group with girls in Basecamp Nakivale, "One man tried to con me, but I refused. Then I found he was in charge of food distribution. He denied me food till when almost it was finished... he told me, until I accept, I will be getting food last and little. I have nowhere to report. I might miss out if I do."<sup>3</sup> Similar to Empowered Aid, women reported fear of putting their families at risk, and losing the little economic and social support they have, as barriers to reporting. The study concludes that SEA thrives on powerlessness, vulnerability, and lack of awareness among those affected, further confirmed in Empowered Aid's findings.

A 2017 CARE study documented SEA of refugee communities by aid workers, contractors and volunteers. The study indicates that the high dependency of relief agencies on volunteers, and the desperate situation of many refugees, leaves women and girls vulnerable to continued harassment and exploitation.<sup>4</sup> Respondents reported that SEA was perpetrated by contractors, such as drivers transporting goods or refugees from the reception center, and humanitarian workers. This aligns with the Empowered Aid findings. Also in line with our findings, those most vulnerable to SEA were noted as adolescent girls between 12 and 17 years and unaccompanied and separated children.

2 Government of Uganda, Office of the Prime Minister (OPM); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2019). *Inter-agency Assessment of Measures, Services and Safeguards for the Protection of Women and Children Against Sexual and Gender Based Violence Among Refugees in Uganda*. Retrieved from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/69840>.

3 Ibid., p.24.

4 Care International in Uganda. (2017). *GBV Experiences of South Sudanese Women and Girls on the Run to Uganda: Case Study from Busia to Imvepi, Arua District, Uganda*.



## WOMEN AND GIRLS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOW TO MAKE AID DISTRIBUTION SAFER

Refugee women and girls involved in the research developed the following recommendations to improve their safety and security throughout aid distribution processes. 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' needs in ways that minimize opportunities for SEA by aid actors and others.

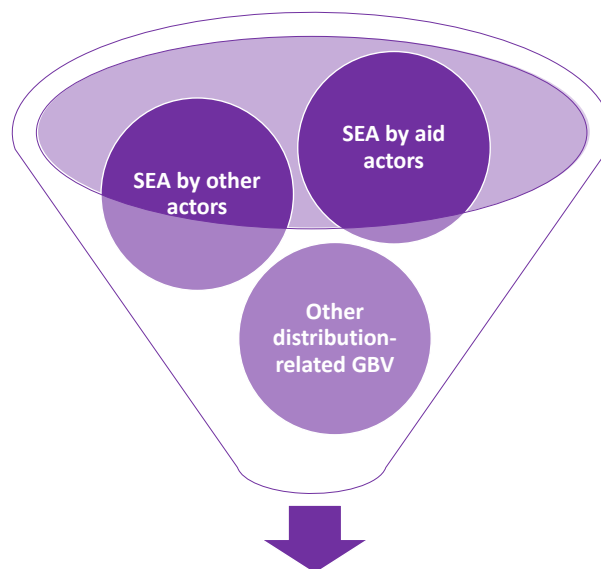
<b>1</b>	<b>Sex-segregated lines at distribution points.</b> Women and girls repeatedly asked for separate lines when waiting at distribution points, to reduce sexual harassment, their being pushed out of line by men, or men offering their space in line in exchange for sex or a sexual relationship.
<b>2</b>	<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.
<b>3</b>	<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 & 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.
<b>4</b>	<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.
<b>5</b>	<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.
<b>6</b>	<b>More community and direct support to safely construct houses; particularly to vulnerable groups.</b> Particularly targeting vulnerable groups of women and girls, such as female-headed households, widows, or orphaned girls, to reduce their risk of SEA.
<b>7</b>	<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.

8	<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.
9	<b>Create accompaniment systems and improve information sharing among women.</b> 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.
10	<b>More security at distribution points.</b> 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.

## CONCLUSION

Aid distribution systems must be adapted to more fully meet women and girls' needs for shelter materials, fuel & firewood assistance, and WASH and food items in ways that minimize opportunities for exploitation and abuse by aid as well as non-aid actors. **The most important way to do that is to recognize women and girls as experts in contextual safeguarding and actively engage them in mechanisms designed to improve aid processes and protect against SEA.** A response to SEA that focuses only on reports related to specific persons misses many opportunities to respond to dangerous *situations*, which women, girls, and other community-based actors already know well and design their own strategies for avoiding (such as discouraging movement after dark, or self-organizing to travel in groups). In addition to bringing better accountability to perpetrators, there is also an urgent need for 'contextual safeguarding'<sup>5</sup> approaches to mitigate and prevent SEA.

*Intersecting Dynamics of SEA and GBV*



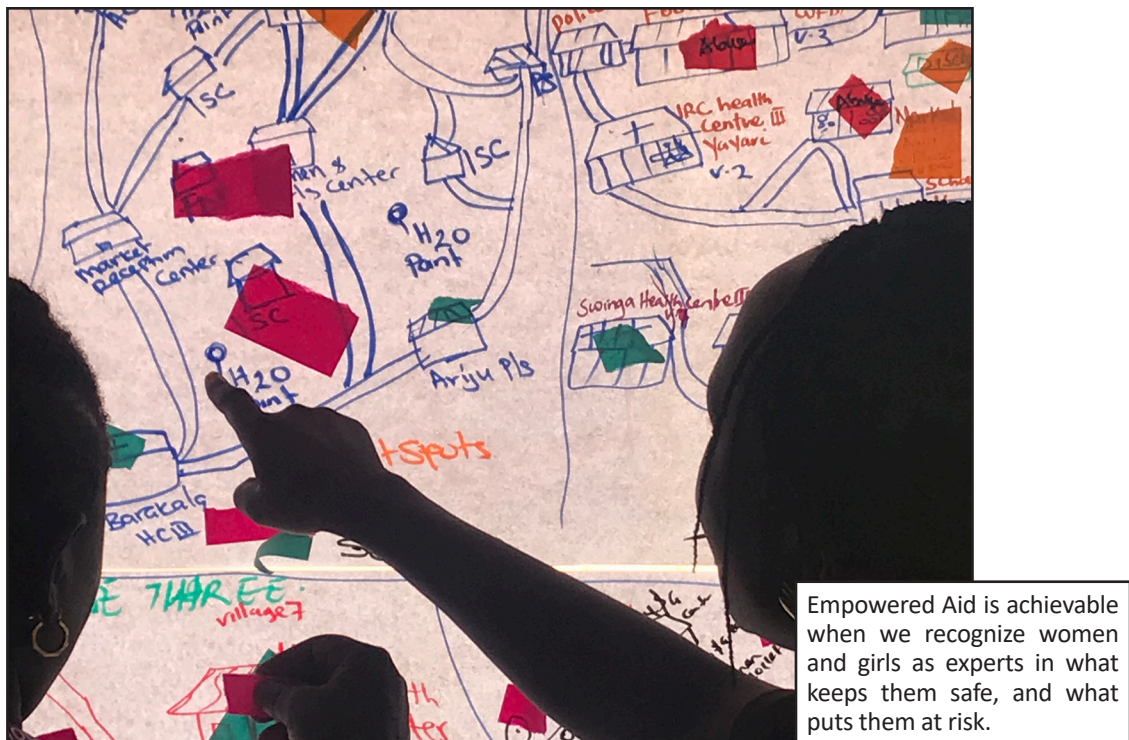
Women & girls faced with sexual abuse & exploitation in order to access life-saving aid

Humanitarian aid stakeholders must also **increase access to GBV services—such as healthcare, psychosocial support, and case management—while ensuring access to such services is not contingent on reporting**

<sup>5</sup> For further resources and information on contextual safeguarding, see: <https://contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/about/what-is-contextual-safeguarding>.

**specific instances of abuse, in recognition of the powerful deterrent this can be.** Shame and stigma, as well as the threat or fear of losing access to the aid they so desperately need, are part of the enabling environment for abuse that silences survivors. On a practical level, many women and girls described situations in which they do not know the exact identity or role of the person exploiting them, only that he is telling them he has power over how much aid they receive, or if they receive any at all. PSEA systems that prioritize information about the perpetrator's identity over a response to the survivor's other needs may inadvertently minimize reporting as survivors do not know, or are afraid to share, that level of detail but want help nonetheless.

**Specifically, senior management and safeguarding leads must take responsibility to reflect on their organization's role in creating a 'conducive context' for abuse.** They must attend to the settings and people who represent 'causes for concern,' dig deeper into these concerns, and act on them. They must also ensure perpetrators are held to account. **Monitoring & evaluation staff** also have a key role to play, as transparently monitoring safety and risk at all points in the distribution process, and sharing this information among humanitarian actors as well as community structures, allows for proactive responses to dangerous situations and contributes to greater accountability in mitigating SEA (and other forms of distribution-related GBV) before they occur. Finally, these findings and the study tools (shared online) should be used for further **training and education**, particularly with social workers and frontline staff. Learn more at <https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/conflict-crisis>.



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**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*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University and Uganda: The International Rescue Committee.