



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

BANGLADESH PRACTICE BRIEF JANUARY 2023

## OVERVIEW

In 2002, a report by UNHCR and Save the Children 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 mostly 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.

Empowered Aid is a participatory action research project led by the Global Women's Institute (GWI) in partnership with humanitarian aid actors. It works with displaced women and girls, and their communities, to identify contextually relevant, proactive measures to mitigate risks of sexual abuse and exploitation (SEA) in aid distributions. Since 2018, Empowered Aid has conducted rigorous, participatory research in Uganda, Lebanon, Bangladesh, Jordan, and Kenya, on the ways the delivery of humanitarian aid may increase risks of SEA within affected populations, and how to reduce those risks.

This brief shares findings and recommendations from participatory action research with Rohingya women and girls living in Kutupalong Refugee Camp, in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, conducted in partnership with World Vision. It condenses learning from workshops with a core group of 60 women and girls, as well as participatory group discussions with 45 other community members who shared their expertise around the challenges women and girls face when accessing aid. Based on their observations of SEA risks at different points in the distribution process, refugee women and girls formulated recommendations for how to reduce these risks and make accessing aid safer. World Vision Bangladesh implemented their recommendations and adapted their monitoring tools to measure aid recipients' perceived safety and risk during and after distributions.

This demonstrates how aid actors can improve their accountability to affected

**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, in partnership with international and local aid organizations, funded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM).

Empowered Aid examines the mechanisms through which humanitarian aid is delivered, and how they may increase the risks of SEA for women and girls. 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.

Findings, tools, guidance, and a free online course, available in multiple languages, can be found at:

[empoweredaid.gwu.edu](https://empoweredaid.gwu.edu)

<sup>1</sup> 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>

populations by consulting women and girls, in all their diversity. By putting their expertise into action in program design, monitoring, and evaluation, aid actors can proactively address SEA risks in their programs and make aid distributions safer.

## KEY FINDINGS

Overall, the study found that the way services are organized and aid is distributed in Kutupalong camp fails to create an environment in which women and girls are actively protected from sexual exploitation and abuse by aid and non-aid actors. Unsafe distributions may also contribute to risks of gender-based violence (GBV).

## WHEN ACCESSING ASSISTANCE

Women and girl reported being at risk of SEA when traveling to and from distributions, particularly when traveling back to their shelters with goods, as well as when entering the distribution points. They reported poor safety measures, with women and girls facing SEA risks when standing in line waiting for assistance. Although lines (queues) are sex-disaggregated, there is no distance between the two lines, making women feel more at risk due to the proximity with the line for males.

It was also reported that aid workers often distribute less materials or goods than what aid beneficiaries are entitled to receive. Aid workers were also reported abusing or exploiting women or girls in situations of vulnerability, by offering them access to more assistance or shorter lines against sexual acts. Some women have become pregnant from these exploitative relationships and were left with no support for the child or recourse against the perpetrators because they are either not aware of reporting mechanisms or afraid reporting may have a negative impact on their access to lifesaving assistance.

As part of distribution monitoring, GWI worked with World Vision Bangladesh to adapt and implement safety audits in the camp. These are observational tools for identifying risks and/or challenges to safe, dignified, and equitable aid access. Sixteen (16) safety audits were conducted in Kutupalong camp between August and November 2022. Staff conducting the audits recorded very low numbers of female volunteers or staff present at distributions. Based on Empowered Aid's previous research in Uganda and Lebanon (accessible at [empoweredaid.gwu.edu](http://empoweredaid.gwu.edu)), this is an identified risk factor for SEA to occur, and also can reduce the likelihood of SEA incidents being reported when they do occur. Complaint points and helpdesks at distribution points were staffed by one male only, creating another barrier to reporting for women and girls.

The safety audits also flagged the presence of underage children in distribution lines, who were sent by their family members to collect assistance. Due to their age, they may be at higher risk of sexual exploitation and abuse in these circumstances and face additional age-related barriers knowing about and/or feeling safe to access reporting



*Rohingya refugee girls using the community mapping tool to identify and discuss the risks they face in the camp when accessing life-saving aid.*

***"We feel uneasy when the male distributor take[s] our fingerprint holding our hands. If they were female, this would not happen "***

Participatory Group Discussion with Rohingya Women



identified as a risk factor for SEA in research in Uganda and Lebanon. Lack of female staff/volunteers can result in women and girls being uncomfortable in using complaints and feedback mechanisms to report SEA incidents.

Aid recipients also reported not feeling comfortable reporting or talking to the police or security actors, and reported that they sometimes ask for bribes to take action when they receive complaints. Similarly, two (2) respondents in the household survey reported being asked for bribes by the police when crossing checkpoints.

## WOMEN AND GIRLS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SAFER AID DELIVERY

Refugee women and girls involved in the contextualization of Empowered Aid findings developed the prioritized list of recommendations below, to improve their safety and security throughout aid delivery. Many of these build on steps they are already taking to protect themselves, and do not displace the accountability for PSEA—which solidly rests on aid actors. Rather, this exercise demonstrates how aid actors can and should center the expertise of women and girls and include their input in how programming is designed and implemented, with a focus on distributions. By applying these recommendations, aid delivery systems can more fully meet women and girls' needs in ways that minimize opportunities for SEA by aid actors and others.

1	More female distribution staff and volunteers, and more female police, at distribution points.
2	Ensure that there are functional, sex-segregated, and well lit (inside and outside) latrine facilities at distribution points and in blocks, and increase the number of latrines accessible for persons with disabilities. Add sex-segregated water supply points and/or times, to allow girls to collect water without being harassed.
3	Institute complaints and feedback mechanism facilities (i.e. complaints desks) at distribution points and in the block, with female staff available to receive complaints from female aid beneficiaries.
4	Provide transport support for the most vulnerable to reduce risks of exploitation when transporting goods back to their shelter.
5	Increase the quality and quantity of humanitarian aid assistance, and provide information on how to use the items (e.g. sanitary pads).
6	Improve organization at distribution points, for example by putting in place crowd control measures, sex-segregated entry and exit points, and sex-segregated lines.
7	Ensure the Camp in Charge (CiC) office is available and accessible to report issues to, and ensures access to justice for survivors/victims by impartial authorities.

## IMPLEMENTING THESE RECOMMENDATIONS: PUTTING WOMEN AND GIRLS' WORDS INTO ACTION

GWl's Empowered Aid team, in partnership with World Vision Bangladesh, implemented three of the recommendations from the women and girls in Kutupalong Refugee Camp. Using the [Empowered Aid Toolkit for Planning and Monitoring Safer Distributions](#), they modified existing distribution monitoring tools to better identify for SEA risks and take proactive action to address them.

### INCREASING THE NUMBER OF FEMALE STAFF & VOLUNTEERS AT DISTRIBUTION POINTS

Following the recommendations from women and girls, World Vision Bangladesh increased the number of female staff at distribution points, including the staff at the help and complaints desk.

Before the intervention, the ratio of male to female staff at distribution points was as low as 8 males to 1 female. After implementing the recommendation, the crowd control team had a 3: 2 ratio of male to female staff. The

helpdesk, which was previously manned by a male staff only, was offered in a sex-disaggregated format following the recommendation, resulting in females feeling more comfortable in reporting incidents as they could report to a separate desk staffed by a female. Safety audits conducted in Camp 11 and 13 of Kutupalong Refugee Camp confirmed a minimum presence of two female staff at all distribution points, at the verification and feedback points, and undertaking crowd control.



*Help desk staffed solely by a male staff, with no other help desks available (before implementing women and girls' recommendations).*



*A woman is expressing her concerns to female staff at the help desk (after implementing women and girls' recommendations)*

## CREATING FUNCTIONAL SEX-SEGREGATED LINES AND LATRINES AT DISTRIBUTION POINTS

Although sex segregated lines were available in distributions prior to the implementation of recommendations, they were not well organized or functional. For example, both lines were adjacent to one another, resulting in women being harassed in line. After the implementation of this recommendation, space was added between the lines for males and females, with distinct signage for each line. A shed to provide shade was built over the line for females, who are often queuing with small children. In the household survey, almost half (49%) of respondents identified sex-segregated lines at distribution points when asked about observed safety measures to minimize any potential for risk to women and girls. This number increased to 63% after implementing the recommendations.

Waiting areas for women with special needs, like pregnant or lactating women, were also created to allow them to be seated as they queued for assistance.



*Two clearly marked separate lines with adequate spacing were created for males and females*

Additionally, visible improvements were made to the WASH facilities available at the distribution points. Latrines were sex-segregated and fully functional, with facilities available for persons living with disabilities. Safety audit detected this improvement in comparison to previous distributions, where latrines were found to be unavailable or locked. In the household survey, the number of respondents who observed sex-segregated WASH facilities as a measure to minimize risks for women and girls increased from 29% prior to the implementation of recommendations to 46% after their implementation.



*A woman with her child receiving assistance from a female staff at the distribution center.*



*Women with their children waiting in a newly created room at the distribution center for pregnant and lactating mothers, the elderly, and persons living with disabilities.*

## INCREASING INFORMATION PROVISION ON PSEA AND COMPLAINTS MECHANISMS

Safety Audits conducted prior to the recommendations being implemented reported that no messaging or information was provided on PSEA or complaints and reporting mechanisms. After the implementation of the recommendations, banners, and posters on PSEA and complaints mechanisms were displayed at all distribution sites in the Rohingya language.

Given three-quarters (76%) of respondents to the household survey stated they could not read, posters and banners also included information in visual and pictorial form, to ensure accessibility.

NGO staff providing information on complaints and feedback mechanisms at the same time as they provided information on distributions. This resulted in a significant increase in aid recipients feeling comfortable reporting to them: before the application of the recommendation, 67% of respondents to the household survey said they felt comfortable reporting incidents to NGO staff, which increased to 79% after the application of the recommendation. This increase was even sharper among female respondents, from 59% to 80%.



*Awareness messages in Rohingya language are displayed at the distribution point. This message reads "Sexual violence is a crime".*

## CONCLUSION

Aid delivery systems must be adapted to meet women and girls' needs more fully, 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

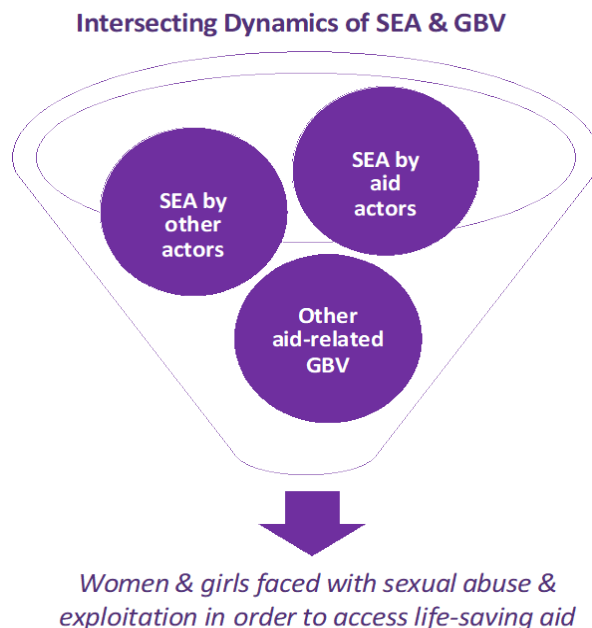
for avoiding (such as self-organizing to travel in groups). In addition to bringing better accountability to perpetrators, there is also an urgent need for ‘contextual safeguarding’ approaches to mitigate and prevent SEA.

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 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.

**Program and monitoring & evaluation staff** also have a key role to play, as transparently monitoring safety and risk at all points in the aid delivery 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.



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