



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

JORDAN PRACTICE BRIEF DECEMBER 2023

OVERVIEW

Since its magnitude first came to light in 2002, the aid community's focus on addressing sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) has primarily rested on establishing reporting mechanisms and punitive actions against perpetrators of such violence. In addition to response, accountability for ending SEA must include proactive measures to mitigate risk and prevent abuse from occurring. Since 2018, Empowered Aid has:

- Conducted rigorous and participatory research on the ways the delivery of humanitarian aid (including food, non-food items, shelter, water, fuel, cash & vouchers) may increase risks of SEA within affected populations, and how to reduce those risks.
- Shared power with refugee women and girls, their communities, and emerging women researchers from some of the largest refugee-hosting countries in the world, to ensure prevention of SEA is led by those most affected by it.
- Partnered with local and international humanitarian aid actors to develop, document and disseminate tools and resources for safer aid distributions

This brief shares findings and recommendations from participatory activities with Syrian women and girls living as refugees in Al Azraq camp, Jordan. It condenses learning from "contextualization workshops" with a core group of 34 women and girls, as well as participatory group discussions (PGDs) with 40 refugee men and boys, on risks for sexual exploitation and abuse when accessing different types of aid.

Based on these observations, women and girls applied their contextual safeguarding expertise to develop recommendations to aid actors to mitigate known SEA risks and make accessing aid safer. GWI supported World Vision to apply several of these

Empowered Aid is grounded in multi-country, participatory action research led by the Global Women's Institute (GWI) at the George Washington University, in partnership with international and local aid actors, and funded by the US State Dept.

It examines **how mechanisms for delivering humanitarian aid may inadvertently increase risks of sexual exploitation & abuse**, engages those most affected—refugee women and girls—in designing safer programming, and supports aid actors to apply their recommendations and adapt M&E processes to proactively monitor safety and risk.

Empowered Aid supports aid delivery that **actively reduces power disparities and gives women and girls a sustained voice** in how aid is delivered. Visit empoweredaid.gwu.edu to access findings, toolkits, tip sheets, case studies, and an online course (in 5 languages).

recommendations in their programs, and adapt their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools to better capture safety and risk related to the SEA risks identified by the community. By monitoring activities prior to and after the implementation of these recommendations, it was possible to identify the outcome of putting women and girls' words into action.

KEY FINDINGS

Below are ways in which humanitarian aid delivery in Al Azraq camp may create opportunities for aid actors and/or their intermediaries to perpetrate sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly targeting women and girls.

WHEN TRAVELLING TO ACCESS ASSISTANCE

All women and girl participants reported being verbally and physically accosted by male camp inhabitants when traveling to or from aid distribution or service points, including NGO centers, clinics, schools, hospitals, and markets. They stressed that no matter how near or far their destinations are, walking to any area inside the camp exposes them to harassment and abuse. Men and boy participants corroborated this and specifically mentioned that the highest risk happens when women and girls travel to collect food distributions or to the "mall," where food vouchers must be used.

"Once, a girl and her mother went to the mall, and the bicycle driver was their neighbor. The mother trusted him and told him to take the girl home. He physically harassed her all the way long."

Contextualization workshop with Syrian refugee adolescent girls

"Today, a young man harassed me on my way to this workshop. The Peace Center is about 20 minutes away from me, I always see guys follow me and verbally harass me, I stopped coming, or I come with my friend or group of girls."

Contextualization workshop with Syrian refugee adolescent girls

The only means of transportation available in Al Azraq camp are bicycles driven by male inhabitants of the camp, and fitted with a seat for 1-2 passengers. Women and girls noted that sexual and physical harassment and abuse by bicycle drivers was frequent. The perception was unanimous among adolescent girls in contextualization workshops that bicycle drivers offer to drive women and girls home to sexually harass and potentially exploit them.

AT HUMANITARIAN SERVICE POINTS

Syrian women and girls reported disorganization, chaos, and overcrowding at some services or centers run by (I)NGOs, which is a risk for perpetration of SEA and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV). Adolescent girls also noted that mixed-sex activities can lead to an organization gaining a "bad reputation," which prevents girls from attending activities that they consider interesting and important.

"There are cameras and security in the mall. Nevertheless, there is indirect harassment. Males take advantage of the crowd and try to touch the girls or the woman. If we were subjected to any harassment or abuse and we spoke to the harasser, he told us: If you are upset about it, do not come to the mall."

Contextualization workshop with Syrian women

ACCESSING EMPLOYMENT AND LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES

Refugee women and girls—many of whom have lived in Al Azraq for years—reported needing additional financial resources to meet basic necessities. Restricted from working outside the camp, their only income sources are incentive-based volunteer roles with aid organizations. Scarce livelihood options lead to heightened risks of exploitation. All women and girl participants reported high levels of nepotism in recruitment processes, and some women being coerced into sexual actions or otherwise exploited in exchange for employment.

“Some humanitarian workers ask for money or a percentage of the salary so that the woman or girl gets the job, and some of them ask for the phone number to tell us about future job openings but they have other intentions, and things develop into more than just talking on the phone.”

Contextualization workshop with Syrian women

“If a girl wants to work, they may not hire her unless having something in return.”

Contextualization workshop with Syrian girls

WHEN ACCESSING MEDICAL SERVICES

Women and girls also reported incidents of harassment by ambulance drivers, who are humanitarian workers or civil defense officers from the host community. Female participants reported that the ambulance drivers—all male—behave inappropriately while they are inside the ambulance: they stare, throw papers with their phone numbers, physically harass them, and/or use their patient data to text or call them days later.

“Once, my daughter vomited in the ambulance. When the car arrived [at the health center], the driver texted me: May God forgive you. I told him: What do you want? He replied: I want to talk to you. I immediately blocked him.”

Contextualization workshop with Syrian women

DURING SHELTER REPAIRS

“A maintenance employee came and told me: give me your number and I will put your name first on the list.”

Contextualization workshop with Syrian

Refugees are reliant on humanitarian organisations for any repairs to their shelters at Al Azraq camp. Women and girls reported incidents of SEA by shelter workers, who demand relationships or phone numbers from women and girls as a form of payment for repairing their shelters. They also reported that shelter workers asked women or girls for sexual acts or for their phone numbers, in exchange for prioritization on the maintenance waiting list. They stated that women are often put in situations where they are forced to accept these terms because of extreme financial stress, or because the waiting lists for repairs are very long in the camp.

WHEN ACCESSING FOOD ASSISTANCE

Syrian refugees in Al Azraq camp depend on food coupons, which can only be redeemed in “malls.” They report malls being overcrowded, having inflated, and many items selling out quickly then being unavailable for months. As a result, women reported being obliged to sell their coupons at a lower price than what they are worth, in order to buy food at refugee-run local markets.

“NGOs indirectly contribute to SEA. Because the food coupons are distributed and we need cash instead so we can purchase our needed items from anywhere we want, so we sell the coupon, and the dealers exploit us financially and buy it at a lower price than the real one. The one who exploits me financially will exploit me sexually one day.”

Contextualization workshop with Syrian women

“Many women go to Village #5. All items are available there and way cheaper than here. But they go illegally. If something bad happened to them or they were kidnapped, no one will know.”

Participatory group discussions with Syrian men

Additionally, some women reported being obliged to access food in the mall of Village 5, which has more items available at less inflated prices. Village 5 of Al Azraq camp is a closed area of the camp housing refugees with security concerns, which is off limits for refugees living in other villages. Accessing this prohibited area puts women and girls at risk of SEA and other forms of GBV, while making them less likely to report incidents through humanitarian actors’ complaints mechanisms, as they would be afraid of the repercussions of reporting they had been in Village 5.

WHEN ACCESSING WATER

Women and girls reported a scarcity of water points and limited water availability (4 hours daily) causing overcrowding. They identified adolescent girls and widowed or divorced women as particularly at risk when going to the water points alone.

“Once I was on at the water point alone, and there were many young men. A young man came behind my back and stood close to me, I felt scared, and then I went home quickly.”

Contextualization workshop with Syrian girls

WHEN TRAVELLING TO THE HOST COMMUNITY

“There is a Syrian woman I know who went out of the camp to find a job, the taxi driver tried to harass her, and when she refused, he said: ‘You are all (Syrian women) like this. First, you refuse, and when you see the money you accept, don’t act innocent.’ She got out of the taxi and started crying.”

Contextualization workshop with Syrian women

Several women and girls described sexual exploitation perpetrated by taxi drivers in the host community. They mentioned sometimes having to deal with smugglers (usually members of the host community) to access the host community illegally, either for employment, treatment, or to access some resources that are illegal in the camp, such as cement and metal.

WOMEN AND GIRLS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SAFER AID DELIVERY

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

1	More women aid workers or women's committees involved in aid distribution processes, including food distributions.
2	More supportive ways to move around the camp: better organized roads, additional forms of public transport i.e., buses to all areas of the camp, formal/informal accompanying systems when women and girls collect/receive aid and information sharing on moving in groups.
3	Better lighting and closer WASH points & distribution points to reduce identified SEA risks, such as traveling long or isolated distances.
4	Provide food aid in the form of cash or E-wallet transfers instead of coupons (vouchers) to reduce women's need to illegally sell the coupons, which only allow them to purchase food at the mall, to cover more important needs or to allow them to purchase food at local shops and markets or Village 5, as the mall lacks many basic items and has inflated prices.
5	Provide more job opportunities for women: a lack of job opportunities and nepotism lead to sexual exploitation in exchange for employment.
6	Make caravans safer by building individual latrines, building protection for windows and doors, and increasing the spaces between each caravan.
7	Build another "shopping mall" as there is currently only one mall in the camp that serves three villages, making it crowded, disorganized, poorly managed, and far from many women and girls.
8	Sessions for community sensitization to GBV / SEA and better knowledge and communication on SEA complaints on reporting mechanisms
9	Information communication/dispute resolution sessions with the host community
10	Prevent misconduct through hiring humanitarian workers with high standards and strong ethics , and ensuring closer supervision of distributors/workers/facilitators/staff at aid distribution points/centers , including filing and following up on complaints.
11	Increase the time difference between girls' & boys' school shifts to more than 30-minute intervals between shifts, as girls reported many boys intentionally go to school earlier to see the girls.
12	School uniforms for adolescent girls , which are seen as a source of more dignified clothing for girls while traveling to and attending school.

IMPLEMENTING WOMEN AND GIRLS’ RECOMMENDATIONS AND MEASURING HOW THEY WORK

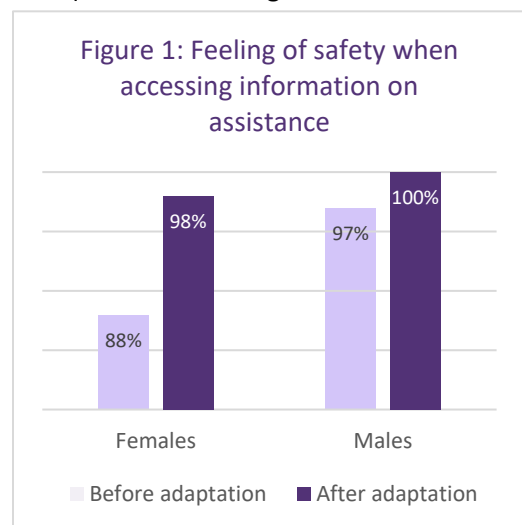
World Vision in Jordan chose three of the recommendations above to implement in their programming, with support from the Global Women’s Institute. Using the [Empowered Aid Toolkit for Planning and Monitoring Safer Distributions](#),¹ they adapted their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools to better account for the SEA risks identified, and monitor aid recipients’ feelings of safety and risk on an ongoing basis. This makes the program cycle more accountable to proactively addressing SEA risks. The following sections describe the findings from monitoring aid activities prior to and after the implementation of each recommendation, and demonstrate the outcome of putting women and girls’ words into action.

INCREASING THE NUMBER OF FEMALE AID WORKERS

As part of its “Road to Resilience” programming at the Peace Center, World Vision offers sessions for adolescents aged 15-18 years (“Impact Plus”) and parenting sessions for caregivers. They applied this recommendation by increasing the presence of female staff in the outreach teams that conduct home visits to girls’ shelters. Results from the safety audits conducted prior to this change revealed that the World Vision outreach team consisted of four Syrian incentive-based volunteers (IBVs), 3 males and 1 female, who work in pairs to conduct interviews to register eligible participants. This resulted in many girls and their female caregivers being visited by a male-only team.

Taking into account the recommendations from women and girls, a new female IBV was added to the World Vision outreach team to increase gender balance, and the team was asked to ensure that all interviews for registration were conducted by a sex-matched team (i.e. women caregivers are interviewed by women, and men caregivers by men). All members of the outreach team also received a GBV/SEA training to equip them with the necessary knowledge to identify and flag risks, and provide information on available services and complaints mechanisms.

The results from the household survey, conducted before and after the implementation of the recommendation, show an increase in satisfaction and perceived safety following the increase in female aid workers. Overall satisfaction with registration increased from 90% before to 98% after the recommendation was implemented. Both female (+10 percentage points) and male respondents (+3 percentage points) reported feeling safer when accessing information on assistance (see Figure 1).



CREATING ACCOMPANYING SYSTEMS FOR TRAVELING TO ACCESS SERVICES

While women and adolescent girls reported being verbally and physically harassed when moving around the camp, findings from the safety audit conducted prior to implementing recommendations noted that most of the Peace Center users (regardless of gender) travelled alone to access services.

¹ The Global Women’s Institute. (2021). *Empowered Aid: Toolkit for Planning and Monitoring Safer Aid Distributions*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University.

Following the recommendation from women and girls, World Vision shared information on moving in groups and supported them to create accompanying systems for adolescent girls travelling to activities at the Peace Center. They created groups based on individuals' addresses, and shared name lists according to blocks, with designated safe meeting points within each block. Adolescent girls would wait at these safe points until every member of their group was present and then walk together as a group to or from the Peace Center (see Figure 2). At times, an adult female facilitator waited for the girls to arrive at the identified assembly point and walked with them.



Figure 2: An adolescent girl walks to the identified assembly point while her group members wait for her, before they travel

The household survey results, conducted before and after the implementation of the recommendation, show a distinct shift between in participants' feelings of safety.

The introduction of a group travel system for girls and women led to notable changes in their travel preferences, with 57% of girls and 50% of women opting for group travel. Further details are available in our [case study](#) and [peer-reviewed article](#) in *Child Protection and Practice*.²

"I feel way more empowered after moving in groups, I feel safe now when travelling to and from the Peace Center. I wish other NGOs can do the same thing."

Syrian adolescent girl participating in the group travelling system

AWARENESS RAISING AND INFORMATION ON SEA AND COMPLAINTS MECHANISMS

World Vision implemented this recommendation from women and girls by training all Peace Center facilitators on GBV and SEA, and conducted sex-segregated and door-to-door awareness sessions for all project participants. PSEA awareness messages and information on World Vision's complaint mechanisms were disseminated through weekly WhatsApp messages, posters, and paintings in Al Azraq Camp.

In the adapted household surveys conducted as part of program monitoring, participants were asked to identify the top three GBV/SEA measures that they think would be most helpful to implement and make women and girls feel safer. Educating women and girls on how to report incidents in the camp, and educating other community members on how to report, were the two measures most frequently identified.



Figure 3: Sessions on SEA/GBV and available complaints mechanisms, conducted with women in the World Vision Peace Center.

² Al-Saudi M, Fattal L, Belli M, Weber J, Potts A. (2024). Co-Creating Accompanying Systems to Improve Adolescent Girls' and Women's Access to Services. *Child Protection and Practice* 1:100005, DOI: 10.1016/j.chipro.2024.100005. www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2950193824000056

Using the Adapted M&E Tools for Ongoing Monitoring of Safety & Reporting Preferences

Feelings of fear when accessing services: In the household survey, participants were asked to rate their level of fear when accessing services in relation to GBV/SEA risks. Before implementing the recommendations, women (24%) and men (24%) reported similar levels of fear, but for different reasons. Among women who reported feeling fear related to Peace Center sessions, 60% said it was due to priority being given to men at the Center, 20% due to the lack of female staff/volunteers, and 20% due to the session time/time of day. In comparison, among men who reported feeling fear during the Peace Center's sessions, 60% reported being bullied by other male refugees on their way to/from the Center, and 40% reported being physically assaulted by other male refugees on their way to/from the Center.

After implementing the recommendations, fear decreased from 24% to 16% for females and from 24% to 5% for males. Reasons cited for those still reporting feeling fearful included fears from other refugees unrelated to accessing the Peace Center. Notably, the above reasons for feeling fearful related to Peace Center operations, which had been reported previously (e.g. lack of female staff/volunteers or giving priority to men) were not mentioned after implementing the SEA risk recommendations.



Figure 4: Aid worker wearing visibility item with the agency logo, center name, and title. Including job titles can be **protective** in that literate aid recipients know the person's position. For the same reason, giving branded items out to community members during awareness raising events introduces **SEA risk**.



Figure 5: A suggestion box. Monitoring results highlighted drawbacks including literacy, and fear of reprisal if seen placing a paper inside. For most women and men surveyed, their preferred complaint mechanism was being able to speak face-to-face with someone of the same gender.

Complaints and Reporting: Safety Audit results noted the suggestion box installed at the Peace Center is visible and easily noticeable, with posters visible above it and in other areas inside the center describing available feedback and complaints mechanisms. The information is written in Arabic, which may be a barrier for users with low literacy to understand its purpose or how to use it. No material was observed on mechanisms specifically designed for reporting SEA. In the household survey, participants were asked to identify their preferred mechanism for sharing concerns or complaints about WVSR projects. At baseline, the top three complaint methods for females were face-to-face with World Vision staff (84%), suggestion boxes (64%), and the WVSR hotline number (40%). Male respondents preferred to speak face-to-face with World Vision staff (48%), the WVSR hotline (34%), and suggestion boxes (14%).

After implementing the recommendations, raising complaints face-to-face with World Vision staff remained the preferred method among female (75%) and male (32%) respondents. Using the WVSR hotline number was the second preference for females (56%) while both the WVSR hotline number and suggestion boxes were the second preference for males (23% each). The third-most preferred method for females was suggestion boxes (31%), and for males it was referring to community leaders/representatives (9%). Other methods were preferred by 18% of males (mostly adolescents), such as telling their caregivers or going directly to the Community Police.

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.

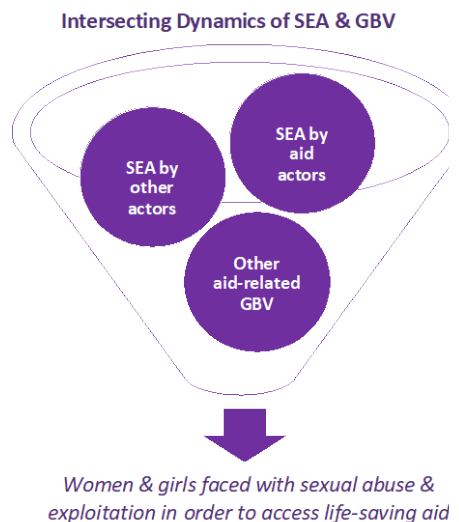
The most important way to do that is to recognize women and girls as experts in contextual safeguarding and actively engage them in mechanisms designed to improve aid processes and protect against SEA. A response to SEA that focuses only on reports related to specific persons misses many opportunities 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.

To improve SEA risk mitigation, **senior management and safeguarding leads must take responsibility to reflect on their organization's role in creating a 'conductive 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 staff, as well as monitoring and evaluation (M&E) staff, also have a key role to play. 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.



This practice brief was drafted by Mathilde Belli, Loujine Fattal, Maha Al Saudi, Jessie Weber, and Alina Potts. For questions, contact Alina Potts, Principal Investigator, at apotts@gwu.edu.

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