

# EMPOWERED AID IN ACTION: USING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH TO MITIGATE SEA RISKS IN ETHIOPIA



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Since the launch of **Empowered Aid**, our resources have been used in several humanitarian responses to mitigate risks of sexual exploitation (SEA) and abuse through engaging and sharing power with crisis-affected communities, in particular women and girls. One such response is **Ethiopia**, where the **Inter-agency Network for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)** utilized Empowered Aid resources to meaningfully involve women and girls in humanitarian response planning and strategies.

**The Ethiopia PSEA Network** used **Empowered Aid's** *feminist participatory action research methodology that considers women and girls as contextual safeguarding experts and enables local communities to provide feedback to humanitarian actors*. **The Ethiopia PSEA Network** aims to prevent, mitigate and respond to SEA in-country, through actions like the identification of SEA risks through assessments and coordinated referrals, and the development and strengthening of accessible, confidential and efficient systems that allow incidents to be reported in a safe manner<sup>1</sup>.

## USING EMPOWERED AID METHODOLOGIES

The Communicating with Communities Project (CwCP) is an initiative conducted in the Somali Region of Ethiopia, led by the Ethiopia PSEA Network as part of their response to the drought and the SEA related risks emerging therefrom. It emphasizes the importance of meaningfully involving women and girls in humanitarian response planning and strategy and lays out an approach so to how it can be done, building on [Empowered Aid's Participatory Action Research toolkit](#) and methodology.

The Empowered Aid Participatory Action Research (PAR) toolkit contains key research tools & associated training guides used by Empowered Aid in Lebanon and Uganda, such as the Participatory Group Discussion (PGD) and Qualitative *Interview* guides.

The project was organized in three main phases:

- ❖ **Phase 1: Data collection and collection of PSEA community focal points.** In this phase, enumerators were sent out to targeted communities where they held focus groups discussions (5-10 participants) with women and girls in affected communities to identify communication and engagement preferences on issues surrounding SEA. A total of 32 focus group discussions were conducted, 22 female groups (total number of 176 female participants) and 10 male groups (total number of 66 male participants).
- ❖ **Phase 2: Consolidation and analysis of data collected from affected communities.** In this phase, the observations from female and male participants in focus groups guided the identification of SEA risks and ways to improve SEA prevention and preparedness efforts, summarized in a report.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org/location/southern-and-eastern-africa/ethiopia>

- ❖ **Phase 3: Scale up to other regions and peer-to-peer capacity building.** In this phase, insights from the analysis were leveraged to implement the tools in other regions of Ethiopia, and to ensure peer-to-peer capacity building through the development and rollout of trainings and other means of building capacity. Knowledge and strategic products based on these insights and analyses were also produced.

## SEA FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM ETHIOPIA

**Varying levels of awareness on SEA:** Participants from specific regions displayed significant knowledge about SEA, being able to provide accurate definitions and showing high levels of awareness about available reporting mechanisms. It was noted that frequent SEA awareness-raising sessions as well as community-based reporting mechanisms in these areas resulted in higher levels of confidence in humanitarian actors. Conversely, in areas with lower levels of SEA awareness, the most common source of information about SEA was through hearing about an actual case, undermining the affected community's confidence levels in humanitarian actors.

- ⇒ **Recommendation:** Conduct frequent and routine, if possible weekly or bi-weekly, awareness-raising and training sessions on SEA in camps and at sites that targets both males and females.

**Vulnerability, risks and threats:** While male participants tended to emphasize physical vulnerability of women as the principal cause for increased exposure to SEA risks, the majority of the female participants focused on the risks associated with aid distributions. The most frequent vulnerabilities, risks and threats that were reported were mentioned in relation to the trade-off between needs and risk: women would constantly measure the risks of going to distributions against their level of desperation. The higher the level of desperation, the greater the willingness to subject themselves to SEA risks, with desperation being exacerbated by vulnerabilities like displacement, being a female head of household, lacking education or literacy, etc.

- ⇒ **Recommendation:** Proper, rigorous, and continuous training of humanitarian staff is critical, as is signing the Ethiopia PSEA Network Code of Conduct.

**Obstacles to reporting:** The principal reasons for underreporting shared by participants included fear of consequences (including being disadvantaged at distributions), lack of confidence in the system (previous cases having gone unresolved and lack of confidentiality), fear of stigma and embarrassment, low literacy, lack of knowledge of the system, and cases often resulting in arranged marriages between the perpetrator and the survivor. Additionally, the system itself was listed as an obstacle, because of the multiple steps and number of people involved resulting in confidentiality often being compromised.

- ⇒ **Recommendation:** Create a dedicated committee for SEA Reporting and Management that includes local informal and formal institutions and a hotline for reporting.

More details on findings, recommendations and lessons learned can be found in the full report accessible [here: https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/psea\\_cwc\\_report.pdf](https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/psea_cwc_report.pdf)

## LEARNINGS FOR EMPOWERED AID

Findings from the PSEA Network in Ethiopia corroborate findings from Empowered Aid in Uganda and Lebanon on the importance of continuous awareness raising on PSEA and the reporting mechanisms within communities by humanitarian organizations to mitigate risks of SEA. In fact, this point was emphasized in almost every focus group discussion in Ethiopia. Participative discussions with communities also allowed to identify the following takeaways and recommendations to ensure this is implemented in an efficient and contextually-relevant manner:

- ⇒ **Ensure consistent engagement in discussions and awareness-raising sessions on PSEA.** Communities consistently highlighted this as the key to building trust. Organizations who were reported as PSEA champions by communities were those who hold weekly or bi-weekly awareness raising, training, and/or check-in discussions on SEA with communities. The trust in an organization will determine the efficiency of its reporting mechanism.
- ⇒ **Ensure PSEA reporting mechanisms include trusted entry point(s) at community level.** Communities reported being more comfortable in communicating SEA cases to people they already trust as opposed to strangers. They suggested that organizations limit the number of persons or structures involved in the reporting process as this deters survivors from reporting due to worries on confidentiality.

## **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. The initial study was conducted in partnership with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and World Vision in Uganda, and with CARE International and URDA in Lebanon; with scale-up activities currently underway in partnership with World Vision in the Middle East, East Africa and South Asia. 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. Empowered Aid is funded by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration.

Learn more at <https://empoweredaid.gwu.edu>

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