



Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children by Aid Workers and Peacekeepers

Policy brief

Many children already caught up in the trauma of war and other crises face sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers and peacekeepers – the very people who are supposed to protect them. Despite efforts to combat it, the problem persists. UN agencies, donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) need to take a comprehensive and coordinated approach to protect children, punish perpetrators and eradicate this appalling abuse of power.

What is the nature and scale of the problem?

Sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers and peacekeepers includes coercive sex, kissing, touching, verbal abuse, trafficking and rape.¹ Understanding the scale of this abuse and exploitation is complicated by the secrecy and sensitivity that inevitably surrounds it. The information we have is scarce and country-specific. In 2008, in Côte D'Ivoire, Sudan and Haiti, we found that nearly 90% of those interviewed recalled incidents of children being sexually exploited by aid workers and peacekeepers.² In Liberia in 2006, we reported high levels of abuse of girls, some as young as eight.³ In 2004, it was reported that many girls and women in war-torn areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) traded sex for food and other essentials from UN peacekeepers.⁴ During the UN mission in Cambodia in 1992/93, the number of sex workers, including children, rose from 6,000 to 25,000.⁵ Research also shows that incidents of trafficking increase dramatically with the presence of peacekeepers.⁶ In 2003, in separate instances, Italian, Danish and Slovak peacekeepers were expelled from Eritrea for having sex with minors.⁷

Since there is strong evidence that sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers and peacekeepers is severely under-reported, the scale of the problem is likely to be far greater than official statistics and the evidence above suggests.

Why is it happening?

In times of war and prolonged crises, poor and vulnerable children and their families are at even greater risk of exploitation and abuse. Earning a living in the normal ways is often impossible, so people are forced to depend on humanitarian aid. Social norms and structures are often damaged or no longer exist. Children are separated from their parents and local systems of care have often broken down, making children more vulnerable to exploitation by predatory adults. Discrimination against women and girls can lead to a degree of fatalism about the violence perpetrated against them. Communities can become resigned to engaging in this form of exploitation to survive.

Our 2008 research found that it is often those children who are already most vulnerable that are most at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. These include children who have been orphaned or separated from their parents, especially those from poor families. It also includes those who are discriminated against because of their ethnicity, those who are displaced from their home communities and those whose families depend on humanitarian assistance. Perpetrators of abuse target orphans and separated children, for example, because they are least likely to report them to the authorities.

Finally, current protection systems and responses implemented at local and national levels, as well as by UN agencies and NGOs, are often inadequate. In most humanitarian crises, national systems are failing or absent, affording children little or no protection amid the chaos. Similarly, assessments of humanitarian responses in the early 2000s exposed agencies as having “weak or nonexistent codes of conduct, poor awareness of rights and duties, nonexistent or confusing complaints mechanisms and few (if any) on-staff investigators”.⁸

Why is abuse under-reported?

There are a number of reasons why children and communities are reluctant to reveal the nature of this problem. In 2007, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) consulted 300 disaster survivors and found that people affected by sexual exploitation and abuse do not complain about violations because they do not trust the system.⁹ This is critical, since many UN and NGO measures for tackling the problem are wholly dependent on the willingness and ability of children and their carers to report it. If safe reporting cannot be assured, the whole system remains ineffective.

People are also afraid. They are afraid that speaking out will jeopardise the vital lifeline of food and other forms of support that peacekeepers and aid workers provide. They are fearful of the stigma and discrimination associated with abuse. And they are frightened by the threat of retribution or retaliation, either from the perpetrator, the organisation, or by the family of the victim for having associated them with the stigma of abuse.

People are not speaking out because they feel powerless. This is linked to discrimination; a lack of awareness about their rights and how to exercise them (even though 68% of those consulted by HAP had received some form of awareness-raising on this type of abuse); to the confusion created by complex and competing procedures specific to individual organisations; and – perhaps most importantly – to a chronic lack of faith in the response an allegation will receive.

In many cases these fears are justified. Often local authorities are unwilling to pass on or respond to an allegation for fear that the accused organisation will retaliate or withdraw assistance. Due to a lack of efficiency and cooperation between organisations, allegations that do get through are sometimes mismanaged. Moreover, field staff and local communities are not responding adequately to allegations because they simply do not see them as a priority.¹⁰

What are the UN and NGOs doing to combat the problem?

In 2001, a number of aid and development agencies, along with the UK’s National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), formed the Keeping Children Safe coalition.¹¹ This coalition has developed a set of standards for child protection for organisations working with or in contact with children across the world. It also provides training and other resources to support implementation of the standards. In a complementary action, other NGOs have collaborated as Building Safer Organisations to build their own and other NGOs’ capacity to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.

In March 2002, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises, composed of a number of UN agencies and NGOs, was set up. It adopted six standards of behaviour to be included in UN and NGO codes of conduct. This led to the 2003 UN *Secretary General’s Bulletin Special*

Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (known as the SGB).¹² The SGB stipulates that any acts of sexual exploitation or sexual abuse committed by UN staff members or persons under contract with the UN “constitute acts of serious misconduct and are therefore grounds for disciplinary measures, including summary dismissal”.

In 2004, the UN Secretary-General invited HRH Prince Zeid Ra’ad Zeid Al-Husseini, the Permanent Representative of Jordan to the UN, to act as his Adviser on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by UN Peacekeeping Personnel. In March 2005, following various visits and investigations, he produced a report.¹³ Although this advisory position was not extended beyond the end of 2006, the UN declared a zero-tolerance policy in 2005. Also in 2005, the Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of the Executive Committees on Humanitarian Affairs and on Peace and Security (ECHA/ECPS) and NGOs took up the work of the IASC Task Force. Dozens of UN and non-UN agencies signed a *Statement of Commitment Eliminating Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by UN and non-UN Personnel* containing ten action points.¹⁴ In 2008, the General Assembly adopted a UN-wide strategy on assistance to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse by UN staff and related personnel.¹⁵

Many standards, tools and commitments have been developed through all of the above groups. It is time to ensure these policies and tools are translated into action on the ground.

What more is Save the Children calling for?

Tackling sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers and aid workers requires a comprehensive, dynamic and coordinated approach. This includes greater accountability, adequate resourcing and oversight by all agencies, and immediate steps to increase awareness, encourage reporting and reduce risk.

The various coordination mechanisms need to be brought under one system of accountability. We can no longer have separate mechanisms and coordination structures. They must all be grouped together – UN, peacekeeping and NGO. While some initial steps have been taken in this direction, we need one set of procedures; one complaints mechanism template; one way for communities to report; one accountability ‘over-see’ to monitor our collective efforts; one way of applying justice.

In order to ensure we collectively achieve the above and tackle both the causes and the abuse itself, Save the Children is calling for the immediate implementation of the following recommendations by the international community – namely UN agencies including the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, aid agencies, NGOs and troop-contributing countries – and donors:

- **One coordination mechanism**
Whether at the global or the field level, both NGOs and the UN (and importantly including peacekeeping forces) should all sit around a table to draw up a comprehensive plan on the policies and procedures to tackle the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse.
- **One way of reporting**
Effective local complaints mechanisms should be set up to enable people to report abuses against them. Establishing these complaints mechanisms needs to be jointly undertaken by UN agencies and international and local NGOs in every humanitarian context, through the above coordination mechanism. This will enable children and communities to report allegations and break the wall of silence.
- **One accountability mechanism**
A new independent and impartial global watchdog should be established to monitor and evaluate the efforts of international agencies – both UN and NGO – to tackle this abuse and to champion more effective responses. The international community needs to immediately enhance its accountability to children and communities on the measures it

takes to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse. An agency with expertise, such as HAP International, should be tasked and resourced to lead the way in the development of a pilot watchdog for all agencies – UN, peacekeeping and NGO.

- **One national system to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse**

Tackling the root causes or drivers of abuse should become a greater priority for governments, donors and others in the international community. This should include the development of stronger child protection systems at the national level. By developing effective and accessible national child protection systems, children's vulnerability to this form of exploitation will be reduced. In addition, effective and immediate responses will be available.

References

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- ¹ The UN defines sexual exploitation and abuse as – **sexual exploitation**: any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another; **sexual abuse**: actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions.
- ² Save the Children UK (2008) *No One to Turn To :The under-reporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers and peacekeepers*, Save the Children UK: London
www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/54_5706.htm
- ³ Save the Children UK (2006) *From Camp to Community: Liberia study on exploitation of children*, Save the Children UK: London www.savethechildren.org/publications/liberia-exploitation-v4.pdf
- ⁴ K Holt and S Hughes, 'Sex and Death in the Heart of Africa', *Independent*, 25 May 2004
- ⁵ A MacKay, 'Sex and the Peacekeeping Soldier: The New UN Resolution', *Peace News*, June 2001
- ⁶ www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/wid/pubs/trafficking_dai_lit_review.pdf
- ⁷ E Barth, 'The United Nations Mission in Eritrea/Ethiopia: Gender(ed), Effects' in L Olsson *et al* (eds) *Gender Aspects of Conflict Interventions: Intended and Unintended Consequences*, Oslo International Peace Research Institute, 2004
- ⁸ K Lattu (2008) *To complain or not to complain: still the question*, Humanitarian Accountability Partnership: Geneva p.11 www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/bbc-report-lowres.pdf
- ⁹ Lattu (2008)
- ¹⁰ Under Save the Children UK's *Safeguarding Children Policy*, if a child or other person in the community discloses an abuse to a member of staff, there is a contractual obligation to report it, regardless of whether it was committed by Save the Children UK staff, someone from another international organisation or an ordinary member of the local community. The staff member who identifies the abuse reports it to their senior manager. This information is then taken directly to the Chief Executive of Save the Children UK in London, who oversees proper follow-up. Senior managers at country level ensure that the allegation is reported to their counterpart in the organisation responsible for the abuse. If it involves one of our own staff, the allegation is immediately investigated and referred to the police, if necessary. At every stage of this process the best interests of the child are prioritised.
- ¹¹ For more information go to www.keepingchildrensafe.org.uk/
- ¹² www.un.or.id/learning/sites/default/files/SG%20Bulletin%20ST%20SGB%202003%2013.pdf
- ¹³ UN General Assembly (2005) *A comprehensive strategy to eliminate future sexual exploitation and abuse in United Nations Peacekeeping operations (A/59/710)* (The Zeid report)
www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/SE%20A%2059%20710.pdf
- ¹⁴ www.icva.ch/doc00001962.html
- ¹⁵ <http://cdu.unlb.org/Portals/0/Documents/KeyDoc13.pdf>