



Experiences of sexual harassment and violence towards staff in the international development and humanitarian aid sector

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NGO Safe Space is a collective of intersectional feminists working together to document, discuss and challenge patriarchal structures and abuses within international development and humanitarian organisations, in particular INGOs founded in the UK.

This report was prepared and submitted as evidence to the UK Parliamentary inquiries into sexual harassment in the workplace and sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector. The questions we answer in this report respond to the framework set by the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry: <https://www.parliament.uk/womenandequalities>

Executive summary

Sexual harassment in the international charity sector is widespread and under-reported. Our confidential survey reveals multiple examples of sexual harassment – ranging from inappropriate comments to rape – being perpetrated against women, often by senior male managers and those in positions of authority.

In many organisations, existing safeguards and whistleblowing arrangements are not adequate or trusted by employees. Reports of harassment are often disregarded, perpetrators are protected by their senior positions, and victims are given little support. As a result, inappropriate behaviours are normalised and many victims are forced to leave their jobs.

To help end sexual harassment in the international charity sector, we call for the UK Government to:

1. Set high normative standards for workplace behaviour
2. Support independent and accountable investigations

We also call for the Government to support and encourage the international charity sector to:

3. Push for effective implementation of anti-harassment policies
4. Strengthen measures to protect staff and beneficiaries from harassment
5. Increase victims' confidence to speak up

Introduction

This report focuses on sexual harassment within the international charity sector. The authors are an independent group of women who work, or have worked, for major UK-registered and funded international development and humanitarian organisations. The authors have prepared this submission on a voluntary basis.

In addition to reflecting the authors' own experiences of sexual harassment – at both an individual and structural level – the submission draws upon evidence and testimonies from the wider sector. Eighty-one people provided input through an anonymous, online survey created by the authors between 23 February and 8 March 2018. Direct quotes from these testimonies are used throughout the submission. Further information was gathered from informal interviews with women who were uncomfortable sharing their experiences through the survey.

What is the scale of sexual harassment in the international charity sector?

Sexual harassment in the international charity sector is widespread and under-reported. Recent revelations of behaviour and abuses at Save the Children and Oxfam, backed up by information collected for this submission, indicate that to public surprise, sexual harassment of women occurs in organisations with a mission to protect rights and promote gender equality, and with high ratios of female staff.

Most contributors to this submission (of which 80% identified themselves as women) reported that they personally experienced sexual harassment of some form whilst working

for international charities. Even more reported being witness to an incident of harassment in the workplace. Far more widespread than sexual harassment are other forms of bullying and intimidation in the workplace, which is a relevant abuse of power against employees.

A large proportion of the reported experiences of sexual harassment were of inappropriate language, including unwanted advances and suggestive comments of a sexual nature. Women also reported more serious offenses such as inappropriate touching, sexual assault and rape.

“I have definitely experienced cases of sexist and ambiguous remarks and jokes at the workplace - but often not directed specifically to me but just accepted in general.”

“I’ve experienced harassment several times. From allegedly less harmful comments and jokes focusing on my body, "sexiness" and beauty to unwanted physical contact.”

“Inappropriate touching, constantly invading personal space in an aggressive manner.”

“At office drinks, when ordering the first drink, was told I was very beautiful while being grabbed by the waist. From then on, small stares, knocking on my chair when passing by, pulled my hair. Had to completely stop talking with this person for these micro invasions to stop. Never went to office drinks ever again.”

“I was sexually harassed by a very senior Director. Verged on stalker behaviour - barrage of emails, texts, requests (sometimes via his PA!) to come into his office for a 'little chat'. Was directly told not to mention our "chats" to other people, as they wouldn't understand.”

“In the most recent situation I was harassed by a male worker who was under my direct supervision. He first made personal advances inviting me for dinners, drinks, sending me texts with obvious intent to have sex with me. Other colleagues - men AND women - repeatedly hinted me about his interest in me. It felt like an attempt to normalise these types of advances towards me.”

“I’ve had a man try to lock me in his office to rape me so I could get a UN job.”

Unlike most other sectors, employees of international charities may work in a range of environments: from an office in a UK-based headquarters to a remote office or crisis situation on the other side of the world. Women shared experiences of being sent on overseas missions by UK-based and funded organisations where they were consequently harassed or felt vulnerable and poorly protected from potential harassment.

Who is at risk of sexual harassment in the international charity sector and what is its impact?

Anyone is potentially at risk of sexual harassment, but almost all people who contributed to this submission reported that sexual harassment is predominantly experienced by women. From this point onwards, the submission will therefore focus on the experiences of women, whilst noting that men, particularly gay men and men in female-dominated environments, can also be victims of harassment.

Pervasive inequalities in the workplace and wider society make all women vulnerable to sexual harassment regardless of seniority, whether they are national or expatriate staff, based in headquarters or a remote overseas office. Certain groups of women are particularly vulnerable: namely young women early on in their career; women in junior roles; women on low paid and insecure contracts; and women of colour.

Women of colour and from ethnic minorities are under-represented in this evidence (12%) for a number of reasons: low representation within the UK international charity sector meaning that anonymous reporting is very hard to achieve; compound discriminating experiences of racism in the workplace which also go unchecked; lack of trust in official processes and lack of solidarity from colleagues reduces safety to report through any channel. We acknowledge the missing experience of women of colour from this submission.

What is the impact of sexual harassment?

The impacts of sexual harassment are diverse and long-lasting. From the examples shared, the impact of harassment can be grouped as follows:

Psychological impact:

Survivors of harassment reported to us that they experienced fear, humiliation, anxiety, depression and stress which affected their mental health. Such symptoms were experienced as a result of the abuse itself, but also in the lead up to and aftermath of reporting cases of abuse, which can sustain for years.

Professional impact:

Harassment in the workplace impacts negatively on women's confidence in themselves and their organisations. Dealing with the psychological impacts of harassment affects an individual's performance at work. Women take measures to protect themselves from harassment which impede their career development, such as not speaking up in the workplace in order to avoid attracting attention to themselves, and passing up opportunities which might mean working alongside a known offender. Many women fear they will be denied interesting work and chances for advancement if they speak out. Only 1 in 3 respondents of our online survey said that they felt confident that they could report a case of sexual harassment and it not affect their career.

Economic impact:

Many women reported that they, or colleagues, had chosen to leave their jobs rather than speak up about harassment. Conversely, there is a perception that perpetrators can continue climbing the career ladder without impact on their professional reputation. Women reported being denied promotions, not having their contracts renewed, or being pushed out of their jobs as a consequence of speaking out. Many women have become resigned to harassment being a 'price for advancing'.

Cultural impact:

When sexual harassment is not called out or seen to be dealt with, it sustains a culture of impunity and inequality. Silence and inaction perpetuates a cycle of harassment, bullying and intimidation. Women and other vulnerable groups continue to be treated with less respect.

Who are the major perpetrators of sexual harassment in the international charity sector?

Perpetrators of sexual harassment are predominantly men, and predominantly men holding positions of authority within an organisation. Perpetrators are found at all levels of the workplace but may also be from other agencies (government, donors, partner organisations) that women in the international charity sector work alongside. In workplaces outside the UK respondents highlighted expatriate men in senior positions as being amongst the worst perpetrators.

At the most recurrent end of the harassment spectrum, inappropriate language and unwanted physical contact is often easily dismissed as a joke, misunderstanding, unintentionally causing offence. The blame is often turned on the receiver for being 'too sensitive' or 'difficult'. Cultural differences are frequently used to excuse incidents of harassment, especially when they take place outside the UK.

Broadly, harassment occurs where there are unequal power positions. Whether power is real or perceived, perpetrators of sexual harassment abuse their power over others.

Some have suggested that within the international charity sector some men (and women) develop an inflated sense of power – sometimes referred to a 'hero complex' – which makes them (and others) feel that any actions are justified when their work is for a good cause. Unacceptable behavior in the international charity sector is too often excused because people working in this sector are operating in difficult environments and are sometimes posted away from home for long periods of time.

Similarly, even when cases are reported, there are cases where organisations seem to have chosen to protect perpetrators who 'deliver results' over all else. The worst offenders of sexual harassment are therefore the individuals who, because of their positions of power, are allowed to go unchecked, unchallenged and unquestioned by the wider organisation and whose behaviours escalate in severity with time.

What measures are already in place to prevent sexual harassment and how effective are they?

- *A huge gap between paper and practice:*

The majority of international charities, especially the larger ones, have anti-harassment policies. However, while many policies and reporting mechanisms are in place, they are not widely known, not easily accessible and are not well trusted by employees. Codes of conduct were often signed at the start of contracts but are not routinely enforced. There is a perceived gap between what exists on paper and what happens in practice, suggesting organisations may be paying lip-service to preventing sexual harassment.

Following recent scandals, some organisations have made efforts to remind staff of their existing policies, what support available and the reporting channels. But there is a need for these processes to be proactively and regularly communicated regularly, rather than only shared reactively in response to media coverage of violations of the policies.

- *Lack of confidence in existing mechanisms:*

Many of those responding to the survey lacked faith in existing procedures, questioning their confidentiality, or stating that they did not go far enough to protect the most vulnerable. Some HR teams were not trusted to uphold confidentiality and even the effectiveness of third-party anonymous hotlines was called into question.

Two-thirds of respondents felt that reporting a case of sexual harassment could affect their career. More senior and more experienced women reported feeling more confident in reporting. A distinction was made between feeling confident to report sexual and gender based violence, but not other forms of harassment or bullying which may not be taken as seriously.

The reasons for this lack of confidence in the existing procedures were; fear that complaints wouldn't be taken seriously, that reports would not be confidential, fear of repercussions, being labelled as difficult or a troublemaker, recognition that the burden of proof is on the person who reports. Some said they had seen others report incidents which were not dealt with. Some feel that organisations give priority to organisational reputation and find it easier to 'deal with' junior staff than senior ones. It was felt that many senior male staff can continue working or go on to other jobs with impunity, while women are penalised.

- *Procedures fail to accommodate cultural differences:*

While some respondents believed that their organisation's charitable role and human rights based ethos was a protective factor that made sexual harassment less likely, others suggested that HR policies did not sufficiently recognise the power dynamics and cultural norms that differ greatly in different countries of operation.

A big barrier in these countries was the belief that the reputation of someone reporting harassment would be called into question. Policies and procedures did not take the role of women in the local context seriously. Concerns were raised about reporting having to go up a hierarchical chain of male leadership or through intimidating investigation teams. Senior positions at the top of the organisational hierarchy were predominantly occupied by men and calls for a female focal point had been denied.

The understanding of what constitutes harassment differs between countries and there is a need for policies to create a shared definition and ensure this is implemented across the organisation through training.

- *Lack of training and HR skills:*

A number of respondents reported that they had received briefings on their organisation's sexual harassment policies and procedures during initial training and had signed codes of conduct. Others mentioned online courses. However there was a sense that training was often under-funded, poorly rolled-out, not regularly refreshed and in some cases was seen as box-ticking. This was a larger problem in countries of operation than in head-office countries.

Staff handling complaints in overseas offices, particularly in countries with poor HR capacity, were not given sufficient training to handle incidents that did occur.

- *What works?*

Examples of good practice were highlighted by respondents. There were cases cited where the organisation's code of conduct was well known and carried serious weight. In these organisations the code was signed by employees at all levels as part of their contractual arrangements and staff were given regular briefings that referenced the Code. Respondents also cited the importance of regular briefings at headquarters level for departing staff on how to report harassment and additional briefings for coordination or senior staff on how to respond to reports and means of supporting staff.

Ethical committees that are able to carry out investigations independent from operational decision makers were cited as an effective mechanism for dealing with incidents/accusations of harassment. It is important that these committees are given sufficient power to act and that their decisions carry weight. Unions are another place to go for advice and support, but they are not routinely publicised and membership is low.

One respondent highlighted the existence of an 'Abuse prevention unit' that was publicised to staff in some offices, although not in every office or unit, and not usually in the local language. Another highlighted that the safeguarding team in their organisation was well known, proactive and supportive in the undertaking dismissals for sexual misconduct.

Recommendations for action

To end sexual harassment in the international charity sector and other workplaces, we call upon the **UK Parliament** to:

1. Set high normative standards for workplace behaviour

- Lead by example: ensure that all reports of sexual harassment in the UK Parliament are rigorously investigated and perpetrators brought to justice.
- Develop clear national guidance for employers and employees on what constitutes unacceptable and inappropriate behaviour, bullying and harassment in the workplace.
- Use international platforms such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union to develop global standards and guidance on ending sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace.
- Require all UK registered and funded organisations to sign up to a Code of Conduct against sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace.
- Request DFID to report to Parliament on measures taken by UK-funded organisations to prevent sexual harassment, and on the numbers of cases of sexual harassment reported each year by each organisation and the outcomes of these cases.
- Support a national public campaign encouraging men and women to call out all forms of unacceptable behaviour in the workplace.
- Request the Charity Commission to provide clear guidance and resources for international charities to fully implement a Code of Conduct against sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace.

2. Support independent and accountable investigations

- Call for the establishment of a fully independent body to investigate cases of sexual harassment in the workplace and to oversee implementation of a Code of Conduct against sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace.
- Request the Charity Commission to review and communicate clear guidance to charity trustees on their responsibilities in overseeing reports of sexual harassment and bullying.

We also call upon the UK Parliament to make the following recommendations to **all UK registered and funded international charities**:

3. Push for effective implementation of anti-harassment policies

- Review and communicate anti-harassment policies and reporting procedures to all staff, trustees and beneficiaries on a regular basis.
- Develop accessible tools, such as posters in local languages, to remind staff and beneficiaries in the UK and overseas of what constitutes unacceptable behaviour in the workplace and how to report cases of harassment.

4. Strengthen measures to protect staff and beneficiaries from harassment

- Ensure all staff and trustees complete mandatory trainings on preventing sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace, diversity and inclusion and repeat these trainings every two years.
- Provide all staff travelling or working overseas with gender-sensitive security briefings and adequate safeguarding measures to reduce the risk of sexual harassment.
- Strengthen procedures for vetting and reference-checking new employees and trustees to prevent offenders being rehired.
- Include questions to test applicant's understanding of harassment in all interviews.
- Hold all senior managers/Country Directors within the organisation accountable for preventing harassment and bullying in the workplace e.g. through individual performance indicators.

5. Increase victims' confidence to speak up

- Demonstrate that reports of harassment are dealt with seriously and confidentially e.g. through publishing the number of reports lodged and their outcomes.
- Increase training for HR teams to deal appropriately with reports of harassment and bullying. Larger organisations should invest in specialised investigators, counsellors, etc.
- Ensure that investigation units include a female focal point.
- Take proactive measures to promote greater diversity in senior leadership roles within the organisation, including on Boards.