

Sexual abuse 'endemic' in British aid sector: report

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Report by UK parliament's International Development Committee humanitarian groups enact safeguards against sexual abuse.

London, England - Sexual abuse and exploitation of some of the world's most vulnerable people by humanitarian workers is "endemic", according to a new [report](#) by British members of parliament.

Released on Tuesday following an inquiry by the International Development Committee, the report said: "the ease with which individuals known to be predatory and potentially dangerous have been able to move around the aid sector undetected is cause for deep concern and alarm."

For many living in crisis zones, sexual abuse by humanitarian staff is an everyday reality, according to victim testimonies gathered by Corinna Csaky, an international child development consultant who presented their accounts to the House of Commons.

"The people who are raping us and the people in the office are the same people," said a young Haitian girl interviewed by Csaky.

More than half of the 341 interviewees from South Sudan [\[1\]](#) ,Haiti [\[2\]](#) and Ivory Coast [\[3\]](#) ;recalled incidences of sexual coercion, with 250 of them aged between 10 and 17. Over half were girls.

"Without the protection and support from parents, many are using transactional sex just to survive," said Csaky.

"Abusers are both foreign and national staff. Some come from overseas, but many more are local people employed by international humanitarian organisations ... From the perspective of victims and survivors, there is no difference between the two."

Victim and survivor approach

But victim testimonies do not convey the full scope of the problem. Speaking out carries huge risk and little reward, creating a culture of silence around the abused and relative impunity for abusers. Virginity also carries immense social currency and raped girls are often sold off or married to attackers: victim stigmatisation causing dire economic consequences, the potential for further violence and deep psychological wounds.

In a statement at the House of Commons prior to the report's release, Save The Children's Chief Executive Watkins admitted: "We have very clear standards for what we do in water and sanitation or for how to build a school. Do we really have the same frameworks for safeguarding provision or trauma and counselling support? The answer is that no, we do not."

Csaky's primary recommendation - taken from victims themselves - is to build confidence in

speaking out safely. Helping channel the belief that reporting incidents will bring positive change as well as effective medical, psychosocial and legal support.

"A victim and survivor approach is absolutely critical. Without this, you are designing a system in a vacuum that, essentially, nobody will use," said Csaky.

Major scandals

The report also focused on the scandals of Oxfam and Save The Children, which entered into formal inquiry via parliament's Charity Commission on February 12 and 11 April 2018.

In the case of Oxfam, revelations unfolded after top-level staff - including Haiti relief operations manager Roland van Hauwermeiren, were accused of paying Haitian earthquake survivors for sex in 2011, swiftly followed by similar accusations dating back to 2006 in Chad, a relief effort which van Hauwermeiren also led.

Earlier this year, Save The Children's former chief executive Justin Forsyth and chief strategist Brendan Cox were accused of sexual misconduct against three female employees between 2012 and 2015. Cox resigned before an internal disciplinary panel amid the allegations in 2015. Forsyth quit four months later, moving on to become UNICEF's deputy executive director - a position he later resigned from in February, citing his past coverage as damaging to the charity.

However, with major reports on humanitarian exploitation produced by the UNCHR in [2002](#) and Save The Children in [2008](#) continually recommending stringent safeguards, the absence of concrete policy as well as the UN's "lack of coherence" in their investigative approach presents stark evidence that little progress has been made, the report said.

'Stand up for rights'

Helen Stephenson, chief executive of the Charity Commission, suggested the commission's regulatory powers could be strengthened if serious-incident reporting were made statutory.

"We seek to encourage more and more charities to comply with that but we cannot enforce it."

Mandatory incident reporting applies only to charities generating over 25,000 British pounds (\$32,700) . With 17,000 smaller charities of the 168,000 registered by the Charity Commission as working overseas, incidents are thinly monitored - despite them being awarded five million British pounds (\$6.5m) by the British government for the increased workload spurred on by the Oxfam and Save The Children scandals.

"We are very conscious of the need to make sure that we are encouraging and supporting the smaller charities while still holding them to account," said Michelle Russell, the commission's director of Investigations, Monitoring and Enforcement.

But what do the Charity Commission's suggestions for "robust" incident response frameworks or donor welcome packs for increased transparency mean for those vulnerable to abuse, living amidst squalor and destitution?

The report stated "a failure to listen to and consider the needs of victims and survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse will engender a response that is not only ineffective, but potentially harmful," adding that "it is important that whistleblowing systems exist for the instances when the established reporting mechanisms fail."

The primary focus should centre on those affected - those on the ragged edge of humanitarian crises, said Csaky. Working from the ground up to embolden their voices, strengthened by statutory staff protocols, screening procedures and most importantly, education, she added.

“Many of [the victims] said, ‘if we knew about our rights we would know how to stand up for them.’ They do not know that this is not an inevitable fact of life.”

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Al Jazeera

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/sexual-abuse-endemic-aid-sector-report-180731111837724.html>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.aljazeera.com/topics/country/south-sudan.html>

[2] <https://www.aljazeera.com/topics/country/haiti.html>

[3] <https://www.aljazeera.com/topics/country/ivory-coast.html>