

Sexual abuse - The dark side of the aid sector

Monday 13 August 2018, by [MITCHELL Mitch](#) (Date first published: 4 August 2018).

Much is being made of the all-party MPs' report into sexual abuse by charities and NGO workers in various parts of the world. But it is unlikely to remedy the situation if the environment and attitudes that facilitate this behaviour - and have done so for many years - are not addressed, argues Mitch Mitchell.

The House of Commons International Development Committee's report, "Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector" [1], was occasioned by Oxfam workers using sex workers from among the people displaced by the hurricane in Haiti in 2010. Allegations of high-level cover ups and bullying by senior staff to keep transgressions away from the public eye followed closely behind. Several accused individuals had either resigned at the time of the offences, or soon after these stories began to filter out via whistle-blowers.

Then it transpired that volunteers with Save the Children had committed similar crimes in Africa. Now, we hear that members of Médecins Sans Frontières are also accused of sexual assault and exploitation. For many years, UN 'peacekeepers' have faced varying levels of similar accusations [2], notably in Rwanda and The Central African Republic, where peacekeeping forces have been accused of rape and sexual exploitation and some individuals - a small fraction - convicted. Many of those exploited have been children.

Such behaviour is nothing new. The history of warfare is replete with examples. The all-conquering Roman legions had their camp followers, mainly women, who gave the soldiers sex in return for food (and not being killed). In more recent times the Nazis had the infamous Joy Division. Rape has been used as a weapon of war for centuries by marauding armies and sadly remains in widespread use today. But the question is raised - aren't these aid-sector organisations supposed to be the opposite of conquering armies? Perhaps similar behaviour patterns reveal something about their nature.

One excuse peddled out by Oxfam has been the impossibility of vetting every volunteer - many who only stick around for a couple of days. Vetting procedures are indeed difficult; volunteers, by their very nature, give of their time freely and often pay their own expenses to travel to far-flung places.

Unfortunately, it is not just the big charities who are affected by this. When the Calais refugee camp, the so-called Jungle, was in operation, there were a number of volunteers - mainly men, but one or two women also - found to be having sex with refugees living in the camp. Since the place was finally razed by French authorities this is less prominent - largely because there are hardly any women refugees in Calais.

However, in Dunkirk, where there is a women and children's centre, control ceded to organised crime; many women and children go missing and are presumed to be sold into the sex trade.

Our Home Office are complicit with the criminal groups that exploit these vulnerable children. Having rejected the applications for family reunification in Britain these young people and teenagers

are easy prey for exploitative criminals and terrible circumstances. Indeed, the Appeals Court has just found the Home Office guilty of lying to the judge during a case involving of huge numbers of missing refugee children [3].

What leads to such behaviour within organisations that engage in aid and charity work? We need to begin with the context in which they operate, in countries that have been devastated by war, as a result of the appropriation of resources, or by natural disasters. These are systemic consequences of the capitalist world-system. Therefore aid workers are placed in situations where the disparities between them and the population, by every metric, could not be greater. This creates opportunities for sexual abuse. Didier Bourguet, the UN 'peacekeeper' convicted of rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo, explained his actions thus: "Because we had money it was really easy", he said [4]. "We just had to give money to buy something and of course they were starving so of course... that is why it's easy, it was easy". And the immense amounts of money ploughed into aid agencies create a defensiveness with the organisations' hierarchies, lest scandals threaten the position of highly-paid executives.

Many charities, grass-roots included, have taken to wearing branded tabards and clothing. This is not only a colossal waste of money, but immediately creates a barrier and a 'them and us' situation. Meanwhile, members of the same organisations are repeatedly found to have sexual relationships with people in the same communities that are targeted by their aid and resources.

Some charities and groups also have a problem with men who join them, purely to be able to make contact with women volunteers. If that is mutually agreeable, then there can be little argument, providing the aim of the organisation doesn't suffer, but where internal hierarchy is used to pressure, coerce or bully people into sex, then that must be stopped.

This affects many groups, across the political spectrum, and is one reason why a new refugee support group I am involved with, Refugee Lifeboat [5], is to be run as a cooperative with no leaders or senior members. I think it is also worth mentioning that currently 70-75 percent of those involved are women. This leaves far less possibility for the environments of impunity and misogyny relied on for decades for men to exploit women to come about.

It is pretty obvious that a fundamental change is needed. In short, the patriarchy must be smashed and laws tightened up to protect vulnerable people. These changes must be inclusive of the world's most vulnerable communities, not just those already in this country. It must be made clear this behaviour is unacceptable when committed at home, abroad or against anyone. Until that is achieved, armies will continue to use rape as a weapon, men will be encouraged to continue bullying, harassing and coercing. And, finally, right-wing journalists and MPs will be emboldened to smear all those undertaking humanitarian work and fighting for the very kind of attitudes and laws that are the true enemy of misogyny and sexual violence: equality, fairness and accountability.

Mitch Mitchell

P.S.

• RS21, 4 August 2018:

<https://www.rs21.org.uk/2018/08/04/the-dark-side-of-the-aid-sector/>

Footnotes

- [1] <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmintdev/840/840.pdf>
- [2] <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/aug/01/the-un-sex-abuse-scandal-tv-review>
- [3] ESSF (article 45680), [Britain: Home Office misled court about treatment of child refugees from Calais, judges find](#).
- [4] <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/french-police-to-investigate-new-abuse-claims-against-former-un-peacekeeper/>
- [5] <https://www.facebook.com/Refugee-Lifeboat-529624960742365/>