

REPORTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Lessons from the 10th Ebola outbreak in the DRC, 2018-2020

INTRODUCTION

Mechanisms for reporting sexual violence, exploitation and abuse affecting health workers need to be improved. Without adequate reporting the underlying problems remain misunderstood and are difficult to address. Reporting is a first step towards obtaining justice for survivors, yet they should not have to carry the burden of reporting on their own. This short briefing highlights some key lessons about the reporting of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse from the responses to the Ebola outbreaks in the DRC.

Sexual violence, exploitation and abuse are a reality in the DRC, and rural sexual violence is common. Experiences during the responses to the Ebola outbreaks in the country highlighted the extent to which sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) also occurred as part of expected kickbacks as “payment” for employment, promotion and supplier contracts in the response workplace. However, few cases of SEA were formally reported during the Ebola responses.

According to field-based NGOs:

- Congolese women are at greatest risk of brutal sexual violence and SEA.
- Congolese healthcare workers are at risk of SEA and harassment by superiors who demand sexual favours in exchange for work-related benefits such as pay, promotion or the awarding of contracts.
- Perpetrators cannot easily be held accountable, and often money, influence and power are used to keep survivors quiet.
- Documenting cases can be difficult both practically and emotionally. Reporting can be deeply distressing for survivors, who during the reporting process have to relive the trauma of their experience, and who may face shame and stigmatisation or reprisals. This briefing discusses some of the key barriers to reporting.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Sexual violence is widespread in the Ebola-affected eastern regions of the DRC, where the state is unable to protect citizens from violence. Rapes and sexual assaults continued during the Ebola pandemic.

Armed militia groups are known to target women and girls while they are walking to school, collecting firewood or working in the fields. State actors, especially armed forces, are also reported to have targeted individuals. Police have perpetrated sexual violence during survivors’ detention in police custody. Increasingly, however, local communities are **publicly denouncing brutal sexual violence**.

Sexual exploitation and abuse occur in transactional relations, which are common when people attempt to access resources. During the Ebola response this abuse often occurred in exchange for a job, the continuation of work contracts, and promotions. SEA can also involve violence, but is rarely openly reported.

Survivors often find it even harder to report such cases for fear of losing their job or other opportunities, as well as the stigmatisation they experience and their feeling of being implicated in the complex power structures that underlie such abuse.

During the response to the 10th Ebola outbreak in the DRC a number of reporting mechanisms were in place:

- **Hotlines:** A free hotline specifically for reporting SEA was launched by the PSEA initiative, and the Ministry of Health set up another free hotline.
- **Letter or suggestion box:** Survivors could write a letter of complaint and drop it into a letter or suggestion box.
- **Complaint tables or listening points/corner during ongoing activities:** These were common and served to deal with immediate concerns.
- **Aid agency internal reporting mechanisms for staff members:** These mechanisms differ according to the INGO, UN agency or NNGO concerned.

The first three complaint mechanisms, especially the hotlines, produced little information about suspicions of fraudulent activities in general. They also produced **no information** on cases of SEA that were later documented through investigations. Some **20 allegations** were reported in aid agencies, of which five were substantiated and four were still under investigation. The majority of reported cases were uncovered by external investigations rather than internal reporting mechanisms.

However, the underlying reasons for a lack of reporting of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse are usually closely linked to two key factors: **a culture of silence** and **imbalances in power relations**. Expecting survivors to report their traumatic personal experiences in such a context is to assume that they have exceptional courage, inner strength and support.

IMPROVING REPORTING

Building mechanisms for reporting sexual violence is challenging, particularly because it is not just an issue of identifying the right practical tool. Such a process will only be successful if it succeeds in breaking the culture of silence and empowers those who are able and willing to report their experiences. Building such trust with the local community will take time, and requires changes within the aid sector and a large coalition that is willing to disrupt the culture of silence.

Local community leaders and organisations are key. A range of community leaders and organisations increasingly report and denounce brutal violence against women, girls, minors and IDPs. Insecurity Insight's "**Monthly News Brief**" collates these publicly reported incidents of sexual violence perpetrated by conflict parties and law enforcement agencies.

It is encouraging to see how survivors are sharing their ordeals with trusted supporters and how community leaders are challenging the imbalance in power between unprotected civilians and armed actors by publicly reporting sexual violence.

In the case of the response to the 10th Ebola outbreak, it took dedicated investigations by concerned people to uncover some of the cases of sexual exploitation that occurred as part of the international healthcare effort. This was necessary because the burden of reporting should not only fall on survivors.

A wider community response is needed to deal with the real barriers to reporting, i.e. the culture of silence and the unequal power relations between those who can recruit and pay others and those who depend on these relationships to access employment and resources. Such a response should challenge both these barriers.

Local community leaders and local organisations are probably well placed to report sexual exploitation on behalf of survivors. Many survivors are often more comfortable confiding in a trusted person rather than using official reporting mechanisms.

Community leaders have chosen to challenge the widespread incidence of SEA, and it will be important to clearly signal that their efforts are welcome by acting on their reports. However, external support that amplifies survivors' and community leaders' voices in the aid sector will be needed to address the imbalance in power and end the culture of looking away. **Survivors will need to be supported by the voices of others.**

GENERAL BARRIERS TO REPORTING

- lack of information about and understanding about SEA and when/how to report incidents that are different in nature from the common sexual violence;
- significant mutual lack of trust between recipient communities and aid organisations;
- suspected collusion within a group of agencies (protecting organisations and their staff);
- no expectations of a change in behaviour or practices despite a case being reported;
- fear of reprisals;
- lack of knowledge about who receives and deals with the complaint (including how the protection and confidentiality of an individual who reported an incident is guaranteed); and
- lack of follow-up on reported cases.

PRACTICAL BARRIERS

- Hotlines: There was insufficient phone coverage and a lack of privacy when using hotlines, while survivors experienced discomfort when speaking to a stranger over the phone about sensitive issues.
- The community damaged some letter/suggestion boxes. Complaint table/listening points: There is little information on recorded complaints.

SURVIVOR REPORTING

Reporting should be an empowering process that is kept in the hands of those directly affected. Many survivors may not feel comfortable reporting their traumatic experiences immediately after an incident has occurred, and time delays in reporting are common. Reporting mechanisms should be easily accessible and should be safe, secure and anonymous.

Some survivors find reporting their experience an important step in responding to what has happened to them. However, reporting mechanisms will fail if they are designed to expect the survivor to carry the administrative and personal burden of challenging power relationships and fighting to be heard.

However, if change depends solely on survivors' using reporting mechanisms effectively, very little will change. It will take many active voices from both within and outside the aid community as well as active engagement with the wider community through a multi-sector approach to end sexual violence, exploitation and abuse. Creating a culture that permits reporting is an important step in this process.

All response activities relating to sexual violence, exploitation and abuse should be survivor-centred. This means that survivors are treated with dignity and have control over all the decisions relating to their experiences. The only exception to this approach would be if survivors' wishes place them or others at risk of harm.

EMBEDDING REPORTING IN A WIDER RESPONSE OF PREVENTION, PREPAREDNESS AND DETERRENCE

Responding to sexual violence, exploitation and abuse is a complex process, and responses need to be implemented by trained professionals. This briefing lists some key policy areas for the aid sector that are closely related to reporting.

A ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICY TO BREAK THE CULTURE OF SILENCE

A zero-tolerance policy for all forms of sexual violence, including sexual harassment, is important to enable reporting. Such a policy demonstrates the understanding that an environment where sexual harassment is not addressed may degenerate into a setting that is conducive to more serious offences, such as rape and other forms of assault. For the purposes of prevention, the different forms of sexual violence should be seen as interrelated and forming a continuum of behaviour that should also be reported.

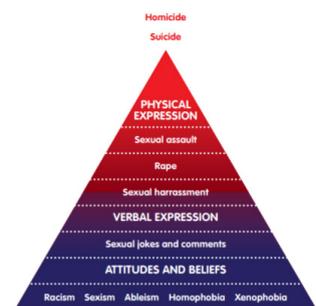
A zero-tolerance culture across an organisation should be supported by:

- the systematic application of the organisation's code of conduct;
- explanations of what the code of conduct means in practice; and
- the provision of accessible and secure mechanisms to report any violations of the code of conduct.

Practical steps that can be taken include:

- explicitly addressing organisational cultures that permit SEA;
- making reporting an embedded instrument in measures to deal with the issue of SEA;
- clearly assigning responsibilities for risk assessment, policies, reporting, survivor support and disciplinary measures; and
- providing training for partners and beneficiaries.

Sexual violence pyramid



WIDENING RESPONSIBILITY

The effective prevention of and responses to sexual violence, exploitation and abuse require a better integration of safeguarding and security risk management measures based on shared information and comprehensive policies that address cultures that permit SEA.

Security risk management is increasingly looking at the diversity among staff when designing appropriate security risk management practices. Such an approach takes into account that different staff members face different risks inside and outside an organisation. Better integration of security risk management and safeguarding practices can help to improve the zero-tolerance culture in an organisation.

RISK ASSESSMENTS NEED TO CONSIDER THREATS FROM BOTH OUTSIDE AND WITHIN AN ORGANISATION.

Perpetrators can be:

- non-state armed actors or members of security forces;
- any individual working within or for aid agencies who holds power over others; or
- subcontractors and administrators who manage the implementation of projects.

Survivors can be:

- staff members of aid organisations;
- staff members working on projects and employed by implementing partners; or
- civilians living in the areas where projects are implemented.

When information from the various risk assessments and reporting structures is combined, this can inform comprehensive policy responses. If present, many reporting mechanisms operate in parallel.

Aid workers' personal security is impacted by the interplay among where they are, who they are, and their role and organisation.

As employers, aid organisations have a duty of care to take all reasonable measures to protect their staff from foreseeable risks, including those that emerge due to an aid worker's personal characteristics – e.g. biological sex, gender, ethnicity, cognitive and physical abilities, and sexual orientation.

See [GISF's website](#) for more information on managing the security of aid workers with diverse profiles.

CONSEQUENCES FOR PERPETRATORS

Sexual violence must entail consequences for perpetrators. Good reporting will take the need for holding perpetrators accountable into account. Aid organisations should:

- ensure that clear policies are in place for appropriate disciplinary procedures for staff, subcontractors and local partners; and
- understand the legal environment of how cases can or cannot be reported to the legal authorities in the country in which the aid organisation is operating.

RESPONSE AND AFTERCARE FOR SURVIVORS

Organisations need to have policies in place for how to respond appropriately and in a timely manner when sexual violence, exploitation or abuse has occurred and provide aftercare to the survivor using a survivor-centred approach:

- Policies and guidance should be in place that outline immediate response mechanisms.
- Survivors should be provided with timely and appropriate aftercare, including medical, psychological and legal support.
- Processes should be designed to guide investigations and ensure that survivors are kept informed about the investigation process.

Responses to sexual violence and SEA are complex and need to be carried out by trained professionals. Detailed information and guidance can be found in GISF's guide [Managing Sexual Violence against Aid Workers](#).

THE WAY FORWARD

Reporting sexual violence is difficult because it challenges power structures. As long as organisational cultures continue to remain silent and passive regarding sexual violence and abuse, reporting will remain patchy at best. Reporting mechanisms that place the burden on the survivor to take on powerful structures in order to report traumatic personal experiences will not work.

Some exceptionally brave individuals may come forward, but such mechanisms will never be able to provide information on the scale of the problem.

As long as the culture in aid agencies has not fundamentally changed, aid workers and concerned individuals will need to take action and report what they see and hear. At this stage in the process it is up to aid workers, including reporters from the organisation **New Humanitarian** and **community leaders**, to end the culture of silence, and initiate and carry out investigations that support survivors.

REPORTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON BEHALF OF SURVIVORS

If you are a concerned aid or NGO worker or a community leader who knows of cases of SEA, you can report these incidents through our safe and secure online reporting platform.

This platform is specifically designed to enable the reporting of SEA occurring in public health emergencies in the DRC. It provides a safe and secure platform for survivors or trusted intermediaries to report and share survivors' experiences. At present the platform is still being **developed and tested**.

Reporting through this platform will not result in an administrative or criminal investigation. It will serve as a mechanism to generate evidence to keep sexual violence, exploitation and abuse as a key issue on the aid-related agenda, to give a voice to those who have experienced sexual violence, and to challenge those who claim that there is no cause for concern.

BE PART OF THE CHANGE AND SHARE WHAT YOU KNOW!

Insecurity Insight is currently developing a new online reporting platform to facilitate the reporting of SEA in public health responses in the DRC. This online platform is designed to allow trusted supporters of survivors of SEA to report an incident on behalf of a survivor.

HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED SEXUAL VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION OR ABUSE IN THE AID WORKPLACE?

You can contribute to breaking the silence!

The Insecurity Insight reporting platform gives survivors the opportunity to record/report their stories. This may provide some survivors with closure and comfort. Reporting should be an empowering process that is kept in the hands of those who are directly affected.

This reporting platform and associated materials have been developed in cooperation with survivors.

The platform has been set up in a way that allows survivors to only provide the details that they are comfortable with. If a survivor does not wish to share specific details, then those questions can be left unanswered or blank.

The ability to share and report is in your hands!

We use the information anonymously to advocate for change. Find out more [here](#).