

Aid agencies must be held to account for sexual exploitation by workers

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Donor countries should use an agency's record in safeguarding as a key criterion in making grants, says Asmita Naik

After Savile, Weinstein, the well-cosseted world of the BBC, Hollywood, the Catholic church, how can anyone be surprised by revelations of sexual exploitation in the world's most lawless and ungoverned spaces (Report, 14 February)? The aid agencies are certainly not - the issue was categorically put on the table by the 2002 West Africa scandal, which implicated 40 organisations in claims of "aid for sex" with refugee children, and on which I co-authored a report.

A principal failure here, as always, is putting agency needs above those of the victims. Aid worker abuse cannot completely be eliminated - as with all crime, it is a fact of life. But risks can be minimised and problems dealt with transparently.

Aid is delivered in an unaccountable space - those who pay for aid in developed countries are too removed, those who receive it in developing countries too powerless. Donor governments like ours play a critical role in holding aid agencies to account, which may mean (responsibly) withdrawing funding. There is no reason why an agency's track record in safeguarding beneficiaries cannot be a key criterion in making grants - the money should surely go to the best. Those who claim that "good works" will be undermined fail to understand the competitive world of aid, and short-change the victims by suffocating their calls for justice. If donor governments can exercise their financial clout, they will be doing us as taxpayers a favour and more importantly, protecting those we want to help.

Asmita Naik

P.S.

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