

Protecting children from the protectors: lessons from 2002 scandal in West Africa

Tuesday 20 February 2018, by [NAIK Asmita](#) (Date first published: 31 December 2002).

One of the first reports that demonstrated the need to protect refugees from threats from humanitarian workers was this 2002 joint UNHCR and Save the Children UK report on the sexual exploitation of refugee children in West Africa.

Sharply turning the tables on the carers and protectors, it asked whether they had done enough to prevent abuses from within their own ranks. Numerous scandals in recent years have implicated other respected institutions of society – including church hierarchies, school administrations and education authorities – in the abuse and neglect of children. Against this backdrop, the aid community could not have hoped to remain immune for long.

The report, based on focus group discussions and individual interviews involving 1,500 children and adults, documented allegations against 40 agencies and 67 individuals. The very numbers themselves were shocking. They brought a sudden realisation among agencies, which may have silently grappled with such issues for years, that this was a collective problem of major proportions and not an individual one of minor scope. The report found sexual exploitation to be endemic in the camps; the exploiters were men in the community with power, money and influence – camp leaders, casual labourers, teachers, security forces, traders, etc. But it was the allegations against the humanitarian workers which drew the greatest moral outrage: the world was shocked that the very people there to help were actually doing harm, even wilfully doing harm in some cases or, at the very least, allowing it to continue unabated. The report cited mainly locally recruited humanitarian workers extorting sex in exchange for desperately needed aid supplies (such as biscuits, soap, medicines and tarpaulin) and sometimes even withholding aid until sex was proffered: “Your name is not on the list”... “The computer swallowed your card”. Even when payment was made it was said to amount to a few meagre pennies – the going price for a ‘trick’ in Liberia was reported to be US10 cents, barely enough to buy a handful of parched nuts or a couple of pieces of fruit, let alone a full meal. Worse still, the practice appeared most pronounced in the significant and established aid programmes of Guinea and Liberia.

The girls, mainly aged between 13 and 18, reported far-reaching consequences on their lives: pregnancies, abortions, teenage motherhood, exposure to STDs and HIV/AIDS, lost educational, skills-training and employment opportunities and even dashed hopes of future personal relationships. The teenage mothers especially described pitiful and harsh lives: “I have to sleep with so many men to make 1500, so that I can feed myself and my child. They pay me 300 each time, but if I am lucky and I get an NGO worker he can pay me 1500 at one time and sometimes I get 2000” (girl mother in Guinea) or “I sleep with different men but mostly NGO workers because I have to eat and feed my child” (girl mother in Liberia).

Earlier warning signs

Alarm bells had sounded before. Anecdotal accounts had circulated for years. UNHCR's 1995 guidelines on sexual violence and refugees expressly acknowledged the implication of "international refugee workers" in sexual violence against refugees, noting that sexual favours may be extorted in exchange for assistance, food or even refugee status.

In recent years, a spate of published reports had warned that something was seriously amiss in West Africa. In mid-1999, Human Rights Watch reported that sexual exploitation was a widespread problem in the camps in Guinea, noting that the children felt compelled to prostitute themselves to make ends meet, with their clients being "primarily refugee men who get their income from trading or working for aid agencies". Refugee girls were engaging in sexual relations with "registrars, Guinean citizens hired by UNHCR to conduct the refugee census, in the hopes that this would ensure that they would be properly registered and receive assistance".

UNHCR's evaluation of its programme in Guinea in January 2001 reiterated the same concerns: "One of the most serious and worrying accusations is that the main customers for refugee prostitutes, given the lack of available cash within the camps, are staff of NGOs and other organisations. This kind of behaviour, if true, clearly constitutes an unacceptable abuse of power and must be prevented. In Kolomba, prostitutes' 'favourite time' is said to be when the food distribution teams are present in the camp". More recently, last year's evaluation of UNHCR's activities concerning refugee children disturbingly foreshadowed the findings of the sexual exploitation report. The evaluation team conducting field visits between March and July 2001 to the same three countries reported: "In a number of focus groups with children themselves and other interviews in West Africa, aid workers and others with access to power and resources in the camps were identified as often responsible for the sexual exploitation of children." The team reported finding attempts to address issues of sexual exploitation "limited" and that "although exploitation by national staff was reported to be common in West Africa, organisations seemed not to know how to respond".

Continuing concerns

Since the report was issued, alarm bells have continued to sound with television footage and journalistic reports giving a vivid and human face to the phenomenon. The media has unearthed fresh allegations of abuse by humanitarian workers.⁵ The US NGO network InterAction reports that child sexual exploitation by aid workers constitutes a global problem of enormous magnitude.⁶ A recent sex for education scandal in Zimbabwe resulting in the sacking of two senior refugee officials together with criminal charges laid against a senior aid official in Kenya for sodomising boys in a refugee camp highlight that abuse is not confined to West Africa and that girls are not the only victims.

Power imbalance

A variety of factors can contribute to an environment where exploitation is able to flourish. In West Africa women and girls are among the most disempowered members of an impoverished group of refugees lacking food, education facilities, health care, employment opportunities, farming land or other means of subsistence. Entering sexually exploitative relationships becomes a survival and coping mechanism and is seen as the only way to make ends meet. Parents seemed defeated – "If you do not have a wife or a sister or a daughter to offer the NGO workers, it is hard to have access to aid." – and refugee leaders, helpless: "NGO workers have so much power that people treat them as really important people and the community cannot challenge them". Children are an unequal match in physical, emotional and psychological terms for the adult aid worker. In many places, the targeting of young barely pubescent girls by all types of exploiters and abusers is a particularly worrying trend. Clearly, the younger the child the greater the imbalance and scope for manipulation.

Absence of controls

In such circumstances only strong controls can act as a bulwark against exploitative behaviour. Inadequate managerial control – particularly proper regulation, monitoring and supervision of staff – is a key contributing factor. The assessment described a “conspiracy of silence” among agency workers fearing repercussions for speaking up about abuse. Physical danger, ostracism, intimidation and loss of livelihood are all very real threats for those who speak out. Refugees likewise noted an absence of a safe and confidential complaints mechanism: “If you report one NGO worker, you will not only be in trouble with that person but with other staff also” (adolescents in Guinea and Liberia). Inadequate management of humanitarian operations, without monitoring whether and how assistance actually reaches intended beneficiaries, fosters an environment where exploitation can flourish.

Poor and ineffectual legal controls can also contribute to the perpetuation of such acts. Criminal standards under which such acts can be prosecuted may be inadequate under national laws, such as when the age of consent is too low or absent. Even where laws exist on paper they may be difficult to enforce in poorly functioning legal systems damaged by years of war and economic and social decline. This, coupled with the usual evidentiary difficulties of prosecuting crimes of sexual violence even in stable countries with well-functioning legal systems, means that criminal law cannot be seen as the principal tool of measurement, prevention or redress.

Social norms and prohibitions would normally be another constraining force on such behaviour. However, in societies weakened by conflict, poverty and displacement, the usual protective social and community structures may have broken down. Traditional practices and behaviour patterns may become distorted especially once these safeguards are lost. Other values born of necessity may take hold of community life. Research in West Africa indicates that sex as a trading commodity is a commonly held notion. Peer and parental pressure in such circumstances may be another force driving children into exploitative relationships.

Prevention

Aside from the remedial measures to be taken to assist survivors of such abuse, a variety of steps can be taken to prevent future exploitation. The issue needs to be tackled in a holistic way as clearly sexual exploitation by aid workers is occurring against a broader panorama of socio-economic deprivation and upheaval and cannot be dealt with in isolation. Underlying causes must be addressed. At the same time, the specific duty and indeed ability to curb abuses by employees must be acknowledged. Even if the wider social ills cannot be redressed there is much an employer can do about the behaviour of those under his or her employ, especially in places where jobs are hard to come by. The leverage an aid agency can exert over this section of exploiters needs to be utilised to the maximum extent possible.

The imbalance of power at the heart of exploitative behaviour must be tackled. If economic desperation is fuelling this pattern of behaviour, the first steps must involve a review of the adequacy of aid, proper monitoring to check that the intended aid is being received, bringing assistance levels up to a minimum standard, paying special attention to vulnerable groups (such as girls from single parent homes and separated children) and developing alternative livelihood options (micro-credit, agricultural land, skills training) to enable the basic needs of the refugees to be met. The refugee community should also be empowered to reassert an equilibrium to the power relations in the camps and to restore a healthy sense of independence for those forced to live in exile.

Important steps in this regard include frequent consultation and involve¹⁸ Protecting the children from the protectors: lessons from West Africa FMR 15 “In this community no-one can access CSB [a

soya nutrient] without having sex first.” (refugee women) “They change girls so much and none of them marry the girls and if she becomes pregnant she is abandoned, with no support for herself and the child. Most of us used to just look at them and wonder. Our brothers, they have a problem.” (aid worker) “No girl will get a job in this camp without having sex with NGO workers, NGO workers who are female already loving with an NGO man. He will continue to go loving with other girls, but girls see it as competition. It is survival of the fittest.” (aid worker) Fiona Wilks - ChristianAid/Still Pictures FMR 15 Protecting the children from the protectors: lessons from West Africa 19 ment of all refugee community stakeholders (especially women and children) in programme development, training and raising awareness of rights and entitlements. It is vital that proper channels for complaints be established. Regular camp sessions between top agency officials and refugees, rather like ‘surgeries’ held by parliamentarians for their constituents, would be an important step in promoting greater humanitarian accountability.

Instituting stronger prohibitions is another angle of prevention. This includes a number of management measures including the development and implementation of codes of conduct. While such codes are not a panacea, especially without effective enforcement mechanisms, they are an important way of establishing acceptable standards of behaviour and the difference between right and wrong – something which, at least from the West Africa example, appears to have become dangerously blurred. Proper staff regulation backed by firm disciplinary action is thus a critical weapon against abuses of this kind especially given the difficulty of meeting the higher burden of proof required under criminal law in such chaotic environments.

In the wake of the report, the InterAgency Standing Committee (IASC) established a Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises. The Task Force’s June 2002 report sets out the core principles of a code of conduct for humanitarian workers.⁷ These expressly prohibit sexual relations with under 18 year old beneficiaries, oblige all staff to report concerns and suspicions regarding sexual abuse by fellow workers and charge managers with responsibility for ensuring that the code is implemented.

Task Force recommendations centre on issues of camp governance and delivery of humanitarian assistance. They include increasing the number of protection staff on the ground, increasing the numbers of female staff, more frequent site visits by supervisory staff and developing confidential complaints procedures coordinated at the country level.

Several countries are to be selected in order to review aid distribution systems and the role of specialised staff.

Legal prohibitions too are important in the fight against exploitation. Advocacy on legal standards is necessary alongside technical support to host governments in developing and implementing legislation prohibiting the abuse of minors. Social controls need strengthening in conjunction with refugee communities through, for example, education and training/awareness-raising activities. Prohibitions at whatever level need to be monitored if they are to have any effect. As the scope for the misuse of aid exists in many situations, not only West Africa, the creation of a much broader-based independent humanitarian watchdog to monitor abuses in aid is warranted.

Given the many different reports drawing attention to this phenomenon, there can be little doubt that there has been a widespread pattern of exploitation and abuse of beneficiaries across different regions, countries, camps and refugee populations which has long gone unchecked. The West Africa sexual exploitation report with its names and numbers was a long overdue wake-up call. The past few months have seen unprecedented action by the humanitarian community with organisations working together under the aegis of various inter-agency processes to tackle this communal problem.

The IASC process as well as grassroots coordination in many countries indicates an impressive level of commitment from policymakers to follow up recommendations. Clear priorities and deadlines as well as mechanisms for monitoring are now needed to turn these policies into action. The focus and energy devoted to this issue in the past few months will, it is to be hoped, result in lasting changes for child protection on the ground.

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P.S.

Forced Migration Review (undated, probably 2002)

<http://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/FMRpdfs/FMR15/fmr15.7.pdf>