

# Humanitarian sector - 'You need to hear us': over 1,000 female aid workers urge reform in open letter

Monday 12 March 2018, by [RATCLIFFE Rebecca](#) (Date first published: 8 March 2018).

## **Women unite in call for charities, donors and the UN to support and protect staff who report sexual misconduct**

More than a thousand female aid workers from around the world have signed an open letter calling for urgent reform across the humanitarian sector, including better support for women who report sexual misconduct.

The letter, addressed to the leaders of international charities, the UN and donors, urges organisations to treat allegations of sexual harassment and abuse as a priority. Whistleblowers must be listened to and protected, said the signatories.

"Trust in our sector can only be restored when we ask and answer the difficult questions and openly challenge those who exploit and hide behind the good work of many," read the letter, which has the backing of 1,111 female aid workers from 81 different countries. "It is the behaviour of these men, not our complaint of their behaviour, which damages the sector's reputation and public trust."

The aid sector is reeling from allegations that charities including Oxfam, Save the Children and the UN mishandled claims of sexual misconduct. At a summit in London this week, the international development secretary, Penny Mordaunt, described the revelations as a "wake-up call" for the sector, and called on delegates to establish an independent body to ensure standards and scrutiny.

Thursday's letter warns of the need for action rather than words. "We are gravely concerned that the culture of silence, intimidation and abuse will continue as soon as the media spotlight on this issue begins to dim," said the signatories. "We need effective leadership, commitment to action and access to resources."

Where an allegation is made, the subject of the complaint must be immediately suspended or removed from any position of power where they may pose a risk to vulnerable women and girls, the letter added.

Danielle Spencer, an aid worker and one of the coordinators of the letter, said that unless policies are properly implemented, they will make little difference to the most vulnerable women and girls. "There's definitely a need to move conversation from headquarter level and to start working on the ground," said Spencer, who has researched cases of sexual exploitation in the aid sector, including in Syria.

"My fear is that we'll get a batch of reports or high-level dialogues but, then when the next humanitarian crisis hits, or in protracted crises in Sudan or Syria, [the recommendations they make]

are not going to be rolled out properly.”

Women are joining together because in the past individual voices had been ignored, said the signatories to the letter. “We acknowledge that not all women have the same amount of power,” they wrote. “Patriarchy impacts women and girls from the global south and women of colour hardest. We acknowledge that these women are most affected and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by aid workers, yet are also the least likely to be heard and least likely to be able to sign to support this letter.”

Alexia Pepper de Caires, a former Save the Children employee and whistleblower, said that charity bosses had responded to the crisis with talk and promises, but that they need to listen to campaigners and women in the sector. “The whole point of the letter is [to say], ‘You need to hear us, because we’re the ones who are telling you what’s happening.’”

The letter’s supporters acknowledged that, while they had focused on violence against women, men and boys also experience sexual harassment and exploitation.

“The scale of the abuse faced by women and girls is overwhelming and based on global gender inequality,” they wrote. But they went on to add: “Emphasis does not mean exclusion, and although male survivors experience this issue less than women and girls and for different reasons, we stand in solidarity with male survivors as well.”

The letter called for anyone who has witnessed misconduct to speak out, and for agencies to offer support to employees who do so.

“Sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse should no longer have to be discussed in hushed tones in our offices,” wrote the signatories.

## **Rebecca Ratcliffe**

\* The Guardian. Thu 8 Mar 2018 07.00 GMT Last modified on Sun 11 Mar 2018 06.03 GMT:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/mar/08/1000-women-aid-workers-urge-reform-in-open-letter>

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## **‘We stand together’: open letter on sexual misconduct in aid sector**

### **The letter signed by more than 1,000 women aid workers urging reform**

Violence Against Women and Girls is endemic across all societies. The #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have exposed the level of sexual harassment experienced by women in the film industry, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. Thanks to the work of women acting in solidarity with their sisters around the world, in recent weeks it has become increasingly apparent that the international aid sector has its own shortcomings. We, the undersigned, demand that the aid sector is reformed and the patriarchal norms which dominate it are rooted out.

We stand together to speak out about the violence and abuse perpetrated against women and girls by men who work within charities. We stand together because our voices are stronger in unison and

have often not been heard when we have stood alone. We acknowledge that not all women have the same amount of power - race, class, sexual orientation, economic realities and other forms of discrimination and oppression all play a part in women's ability to be heard. Patriarchy impacts women and girls from the global south and women of colour hardest. We acknowledge that these women are most affected and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by aid workers, yet are also the least likely to be heard and least likely to be able to sign on to support this letter.

It is the behaviour of these men, not our complaint of their behaviour, which damages the sector's reputation and public trust. The women who are speaking out now hope to make international aid a better place for the women who work within it, and for those whose rights we campaign and advocate for. We speak out now in the hopes that in future, the blame for the abuse or for "not doing enough" to stop the abuse will no longer fall on women. The twisted logic of blaming women and girls for the violence and abuse they experience has to end and it is everyone's responsibility to end it - within the aid sector and beyond.

We are gravely concerned that the culture of silence, intimidation and abuse will continue as soon as the media spotlight on this issue begins to dim. Trust in our sector can only be restored when we ask and answer the difficult questions and openly challenge those who exploit and hide behind the good work of many. We encourage everyone who has seen issues which are contrary to the principles of equality and justice, which are the bedrock of our work, to step forward and speak out and we ask aid agencies to support them.

We ask for three fundamental reforms to shift the patriarchal bias in aid:

**1. Trust women:** organisations need to take action as soon as women report sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse; allegations must be treated with priority and urgency in their investigation; the subject of a complaint of this nature must be immediately suspended or removed from their position of power and reach of vulnerable women and girls.

**2. Listen:** foster a culture where whistleblowing is welcome and safe - the way to win back trust of donors, the public and the communities we work with is to be honest about abuses of power and learn from disclosures. Sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse should no longer have to be discussed in hushed tones in our offices.

**3. Deeds not words:** We need effective leadership, commitment to action and access to resources. It is not enough to develop new policies which are never implemented or funded - with the right tools we can end impunity at all levels in the sector.

#ReformAid #AidToo

(Although this letter focuses on women and girls as the survivors of male perpetrated sexual violence, we acknowledge that boys and men experience sexual harassment and exploitation too. We further acknowledge that there are women perpetrators and certainly women who are complicit. However, the scale of the abuse faced by women and girls is overwhelming and based on global gender inequality. Emphasis does not mean exclusion, and although male survivors experience this issue less than women and girls and for different reasons, we stand in solidarity with male survivors as well).

*Signed:* Alexia Pepper de Caires, Sarah Martin, Anne Quesney and Danielle Spencer, as well as more than 1,107 other female aid workers who live and work in 81 countries.

*For a full list of signatories, visit:*

<http://www.sexualexploitationreport.org>.

\* The Guardian. Thu 8 Mar 2018 07.13 GMT Last modified on Sun 11 Mar 2018 06.03 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/mar/08/1000-women-aid-workers-urge-reform-in-open-letter>

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