

No wonder sexual abuse is rife in the aid sector

Tuesday 26 June 2018, by [AZIZ Shaista](#) (Date first published: 8 June 2018).

Allegations of sexual abuse against Oxfam are “completely distorted and out of all proportion”. That was the verdict of Clare Short, the former international development secretary, this week when she appeared before the parliamentary committee investigating abuse scandals in the aid sector.

She declared: “I’m not in any way trying to belittle taking it seriously, but I did think the hysterical response to the [Times reporting](#) – as though everyone working in development was morally disgusting and everyone was sexually abusing everyone – was way exaggerated and disproportionate.” [1]

This extraordinarily insensitive and crass response sums up exactly where we are, months after [whistleblowers](#) at Oxfam went public with accusations of sexual abuse and misconduct at the charity – triggering similar action from women at Save the Children, Médecins Sans Frontières and the UN; and the creation of the hashtags [#AidToo](#) and [#UNToo](#), on the back of the [#MeToo](#) and [#TimesUp](#) movements.

In reality, very little has really changed in the sector since the first [Oxfam revelations](#). And little will change until those in the sector realise there is nothing exceptional about the aid industry – that sexual abuse is the result of structural patriarchy, abuse of power and inequality, just as it is elsewhere in society.

However, sexual exploitation in the aid sector had been well documented prior to the Oxfam case; [at the UN](#) it goes back many years. The environment these organisations operate in – with its [huge imbalance of power](#), and privileged westerners working in close proximity to vulnerable individuals – creates a climate conducive to sexual abuse and exploitation.

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A few months ago I joined a group of former and current aid workers – including the extraordinarily brave [Save the Children whistleblower](#) Alexia Pepper [de Caires](#) – to establish [NGO Safe Space](#). This is a platform to record individuals’ experiences of sexual harassment in the UK aid sector. In just over two weeks we received more than 80 anonymous testimonies, the vast majority from women describing sexual harassment, physical abuse and rape. They have now all been accepted by the parliamentary [inquiry into sexual harassment](#) in the workplace. NGO Safe Space has illustrated what happens when you create a space where you believe and trust women.

We now need to analyse whether these devastating stories are more than isolated incidents, and instead represent a structural problem. Until steps are taken to change the framing of this

discussion into a detailed critique of patriarchy and power – what we are attempting to do with NGO Safe Space – nothing will change.

Such an analysis should lead to a focus on the women who are missing from the equation – the women of colour. Until the realities of women of colour are put front and centre of the #AidToo moment, we will be light years from a movement. Short says that she did not believe sexual abuse was a “special problem” within charities, and she is right to say sexual abuse exists everywhere.

But what makes the aid sector unique are the opportunities it presents for people who have had their agency removed – vulnerable women, refugees, displaced people and others – to be exploited and abused. These women are overwhelmingly women of colour.

[Women](#) who go on the record to talk about sexual harassment and assault while still employed by UK aid agencies know that there is no shortage of people lining up to dismiss their lived experiences as survivors and victims. And, it seems, there is no shortage of people happy to throw them under the bus for breaking their silence, including women such as Short.

And for women of colour, it’s worse. NGO Safe Space found that women of colour working in UK aid agencies are unwilling to report abuse for fear that their ethnicity could make them identifiable. There are so few women of colour working in this sector that their anonymity is not privileged, just as their lives and existence are not privileged. As one woman told us: “If I speak, everyone will know who I am, and I will never work again. I have been a victim of racism and misogyny. I cannot operate like a white woman, I cannot speak my truths and carry on with my life.”

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P.S.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/08/clare-short-wrong-sexual-abuse-aid-sector-oxfam-whistleblower>

Footnotes

[1] [Oxfam sexual abuse scandal fallout was ‘out of proportion’, says Clare Short](#)