

A woman with long, vibrant red hair is shown from the back, blindfolded with a wide, grey cloth. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, top. The background is a soft, out-of-focus sunset or sunrise over a body of water, with warm tones of orange, pink, and blue. The overall mood is somber and evocative.

# SEXUAL HARASSMENT, ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION IN THE AID SECTOR

## PROGRESS REPORT



## Introduction

In March 2018, a collective group of women aid workers, saddened and angry at the levels of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse against women and girls in the aid sector, reached almost 2000 self-identifying women aid workers with the #AidOpenLetter.<sup>i</sup> This letter asked for 3 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.

**The letter was signed by over 1500 self-identifying women working in the aid-sector, but did aid agencies listen?**

In June 2018, the group decided to test the progress of the implementation of these reforms. **The results show that little has been achieved in the first half of 2018 to improve the ways in which the sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse of women and girls by aid workers is handled and what has been done has been at a very surface level.**

On 31<sup>st</sup> July 2018, the International Development Committee of the UK Parliament published its report on sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector. Within that report it states: *“Whilst there are clearly actors within the aid community who are dedicated to tackling SEA, the overall impression is one of complacency, verging on complicity”*, the result of our survey unfortunately finds that this statement is still largely true, and that the majority of effort has been spent by aid organisations in mitigating reputational damage, rather than in reform or in strengthening of reporting or protection mechanisms. Our informal group of experts, *ChangingAid*, welcomes the IDC’s report and our submission and our members feature heavily within it.<sup>ii</sup> The emphasis on the need for gender transformational approaches within the report is further welcomed. Lastly, we take seriously Matthew Rycroft’s (Permanent Secretary, Department for International Development) words in his evidence before the committee, that “nothing is in the “too difficult” box anymore, even if it ever was”. We very much hope that when we repeat this survey, more positive results will be able to be presented.

## Results

There were 51 submissions. The majority of respondents were from INGOs, however, there were respondents from UN agencies that are active in humanitarian contexts (8 UN agencies, 18 INGOs, 1 consultancy – surveys were completed by those located largely in the global north). All INGOs represented receive funding from DFID, some NGOs were members of the top ten most funded INGOs by DFID in 2017. Of the 51 submissions, 48 were made by self-identifying women. Of the 3 men who responded, they were more likely to present a positive response to questions than women. This reinforces the need for the internal response to be led by women, as they are more likely the targets of abuse, or are more likely to be confided in by other women.

### Favourable results

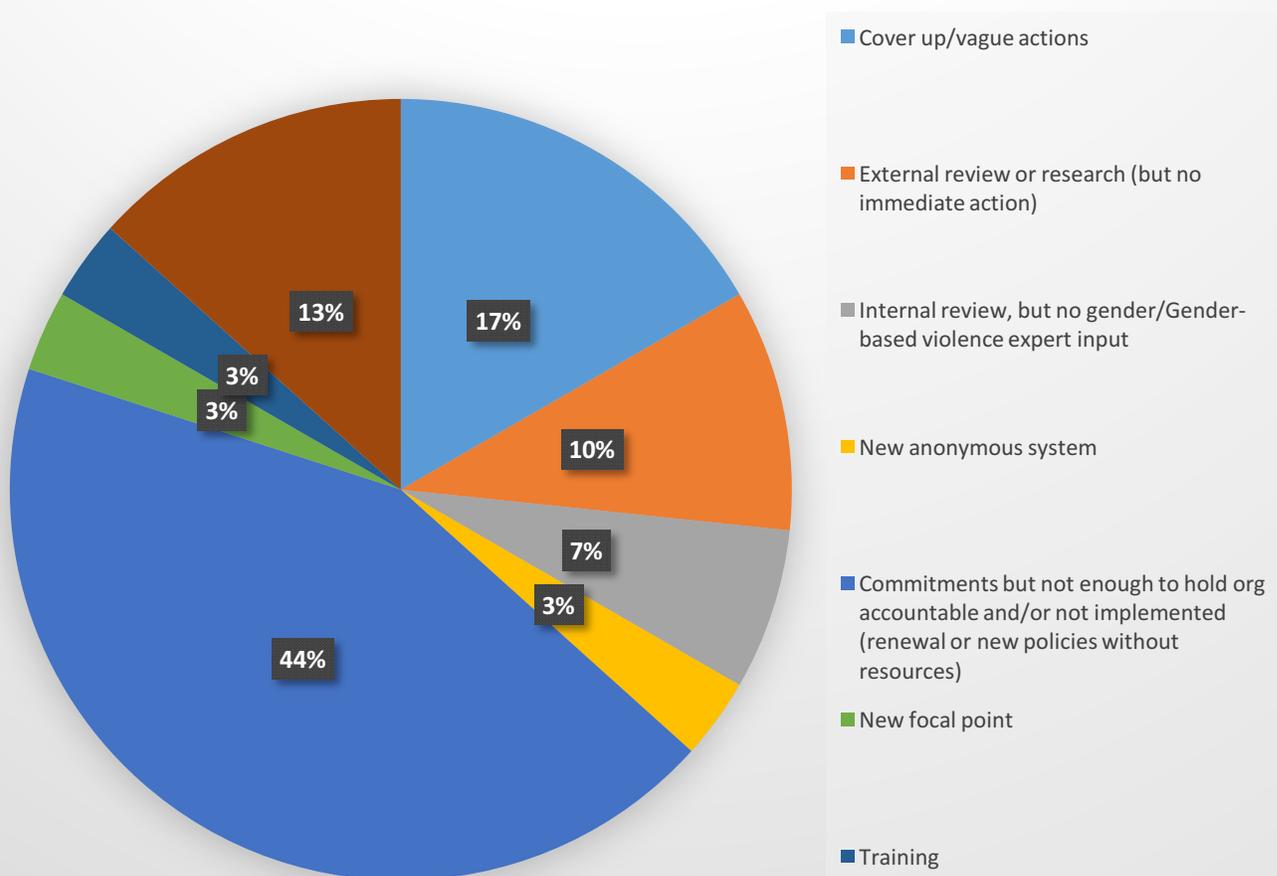
1. In answer to the question 'has the organisation formally discussed the current public revelations of sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment of women within the sector?' 88% said that there had been some discussion.
  - a. **However, only 7.8% of respondents felt that formal discussion had happened at all levels of the organisation.**
2. 65% of respondents reported that a review of policies had taken place internally. However, this leaves 29% without any review, and 6% without any understanding if a review had taken place.

### Areas requiring immediate improvement

3. 62% of respondents stated that specific commitments had been made to staff members, partners, supporters or donors about how the organisation is responding to issues of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse. However, 38% did not think that any new commitments had been made at all. Further, when asked to comment on their answer, those who had stated that their organisation *had* made commitments, further elaborated in the following ways:

Have specific commitments been made to staff members, partners, supporters or donors about how the organisation is responding to issues of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse? If 'yes' please provide details.

*Grouped by theme*



This shows, starkly, that the majority of commitments or activity taking place internally within aid agencies is **only on the surface**. Some of the responses received which demonstrate this are:

**Example Statement 1:** *“A policy on PSEA was signed off last year and all efforts have been focused on moving forward with rolling that out in response to media scrutiny (little action was taken last year after it was approved) so it basically feels like they’re having all staff discussions in case*



*anyone in the media asks if we've had a discussion. Zero awareness of the need for a women-only space to discuss issues and total neglect of consultation on hierarchical and heteronormative structures in the organization."*

**Example Statement 2:** *"Commitments [made] to donors to appropriately prevent, report, investigate and respond to SEA [using our] existing system. [We are] over promising/spinning our capacity and commitment as the current system has a lot of flaws. Basic gender equality training is only just starting and piecemeal across the organization and substantially under-resourced. Staff are not challenged in their harmful gender attitudes or equipped appropriately with gender-based violence risk mitigation or gender transformative programming skills. Operations is even less equipped. Beginning now to train teams of SEA investigators within HR but no link to services response and very weak gender lens."*

**Example Statement 3:** *"Typical messages have been shared w/ donors about prevention and response systems in place. We have not yet communicated with all staff as to internal action plans."*

**Example Statement 4:** *"A letter has gone out to all staff from CEO, and CEO has signed the Interaction pledge, however additional resources have not been granted to hire an SME with PSEA background having a dedicated point, beyond an internal task force looking at the issue. Without additional resources this task force has limited ability to tackle this without being overwhelmed with the task."*

**Example Statement 5:** *"Board has commissioned an external evaluation, and we are promised that results (on some level) will be shared. Leadership seems committed to making real changes to improve our accountability frameworks to protect staff and beneficiaries. Proof will be in the results however."*

**Example Statement 6:** *"...all has been VERY vague rather than operational. I lack confidence in the organization's willingness and capabilities to take action in such a situation."*

**Example Statement 7:** *"Lots of rhetoric. People doing it still work for us thus no credibility. Most in leadership positions. Lots of cover up at the field level by the VERY reps so no investigation in their office in case it involves looking also into rampant fraud at the country office level."*

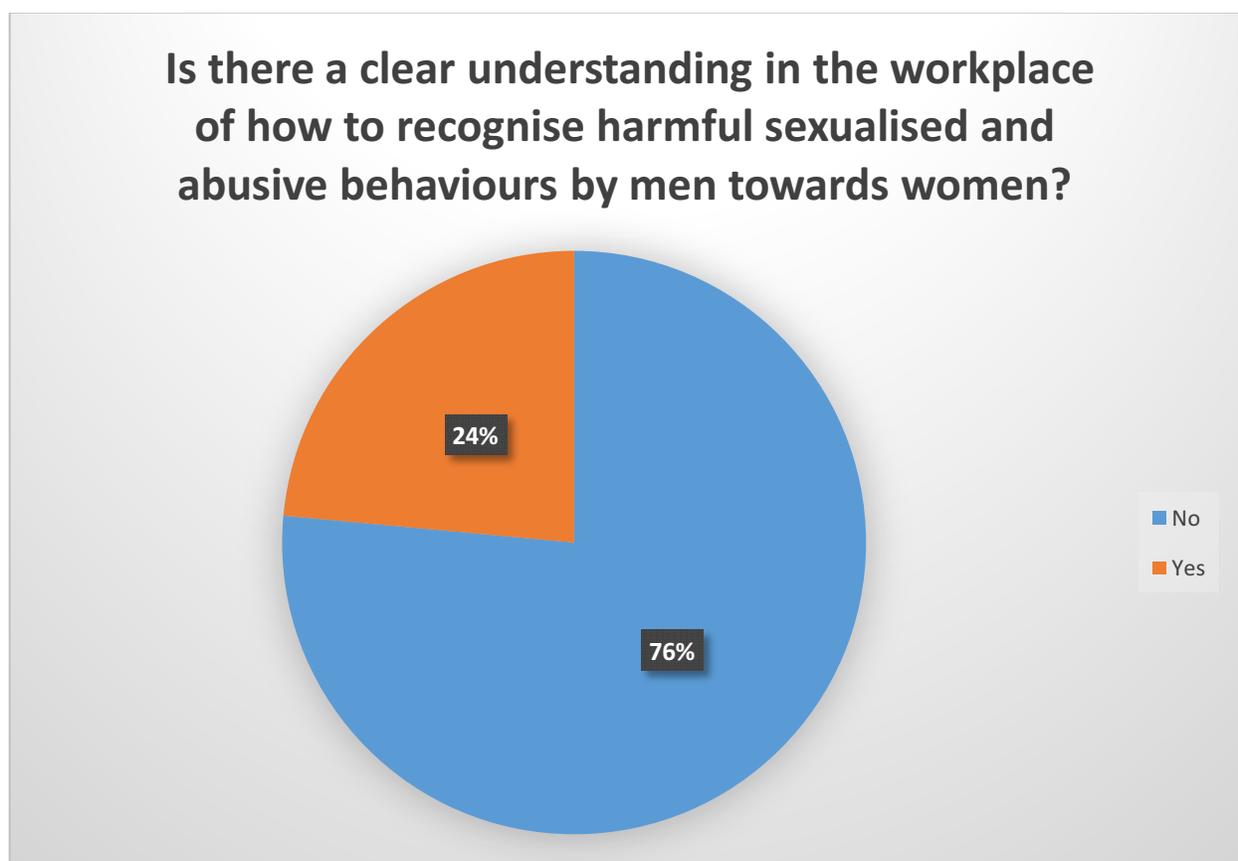
#### **Lack of women's space, lack of respect for women's experience and skills**

4. In order to ensure that transformational change takes place, an empowered all-women space is required within the workplace to discuss gendered workplace experiences. 75% of respondents stated that their workplace did not have a formal all-women's space.

5. Only 33% of respondents stated that women with relevant expertise have been at the centre of policy review, formal discussions or communications (25% stated “on the surface”, 22% stated “no”, and 20% “didn’t know”).
6. 40% of respondents felt that female staff members who disclosed issues relating to sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse had not been protected or supported. 11% didn’t know.

### Basics still not in place

7. When asked if there was a clear understanding in the workplace of how to recognise harmful sexualised and abusive behaviours by men towards women, **76% (or over three quarters) or responses stated that this was not something which was in place.**



8. **75% of respondents either didn’t know (28%) or were certain that their was not (47%) an effective system in place to responding to sexualised and abusive behaviour by men towards women.**
9. **75% of respondents, still, nearly half a year after media attention on this issue intensified, do not trust their organisation’s systems to keep women staff members, and women and girls who benefit from aid safe.**



10. 44% of respondents stated that their organisation's policies failed to address sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse from a perspective which recognises gender inequality, and other intersecting inequalities, as the root cause of the problem. A further 19% did not know.

## Conclusion

The 'ChangingAid' collective of women in aid advise that this survey will be repeated on a six monthly basis to track to what extent aid agencies are truly walking the talk on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, and on sexual harassment. We hope that more respondents will come forward each time, and that we develop trust with our community. Aid agencies will never reform if they are only accountable to themselves and this presents a way to gauge progress. **If we see no improvement in the next reporting round, we may start to name organisations (where it is safe for respondents).**

We will use these inputs as a baseline and hope to see improvement. **The results of this survey show, without doubt, that aid agencies have focused on changing policies as a means to 'prove' that work on the issues of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse has happened – either to donors or to the media. It is important to note here that there are some outliers, but the majority of agencies are simply not working to change their culture.**

### ChangingAid continues to recommend that donors should:

- Appropriately fund INGOs and NGOs to support their prevention and response to SEA.
- Increase funding to support human resources work on SEA, sexual harassment and child safeguarding.
- Recognize that in order to support safe and effective programming and increase action and accountability when SEA occurs, overhead funding needs to be increased.
- Understand that the more that SEA cases which are reported within NGOs the better – this shows a robust reporting mechanism is in place. However, this is not enough; reporting must be accompanied by investment in investigation capacity which protects whistleblowers, survivors of sexual violence and due process.
- Support the creation and running of an independent SEA interagency humanitarian reporting system with an attached independent investigation team. This independent body should enable reference checks on potential new hires to ensure employees proven to have committed SEA are not serially rehired within the industry.
- Work with, train and fund Women's Rights Organisations to deliver humanitarian assistance – localisation should not replicate patriarchy, but be a mechanism to break it.

### ChangingAid continues to recommend that Humanitarian and Development agencies should:

- Acknowledge the international development and humanitarian sectors are patriarchal and therefore systemically perpetrate and excuse VAWG.



- Commit to changing norms and practices to empower women - particularly women who experience multiple forms of discrimination and oppression (including oppression based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, class etc.) change cultural norms to change and challenge gender inequality, power differentiation based on other axis of oppression and to promote safety for all.
- Do not discriminate against or fire women (or men) who disclose sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse either perpetrated against them or others - this perpetuates a climate of fear and intimidation. Intimidation and hostility in the workplace can take many forms and can range from isolating a person, to verbal abuse, to increasing workload. A hostile work environment may be created when management acts in a manner designed to make an employee quit in retaliation.
- Adequately fund sexual exploitation and abuse reporting mechanisms, training and investigations. Take all reports seriously.
- Increase the size of your GBV and/or gender team. Do not expect one or two people to be able to do everything on GBV, Gender and on SEA.
- Invest in GBV, Gender Equality and Prevention and Response to SEA teams and programming.
- Create SEA policies. Many agencies simply do not have these in place yet. But don't stop there, policies are not an end in themselves.
- Investigate SEA appropriately, report to the police in country if it is a crime, and fire the perpetrator if proven to be guilty.
- Close all 'loop-holes' in the system – including loop-holes regarding taking responsibility for contractor's/sub-contractors actions.
- Not assume that white men are not perpetrators of GBV. GBV and gender inequality are universal. Further, racial hierarchies are exacerbated by inequality in pay between colleagues from the global North and global South. White men in development and humanitarian contexts are therefore in positions of great power with limited legal or organisational oversight.
- Stop deprioritizing issues relating to women and girls – there is never a 'greater good', SEA and harassment are not acceptable, and it is never acceptable to knowingly continue to put women and girls at risk in order to meet indicators or deliver humanitarian assistance.
- Women count when we consider 'do no harm'

These recommendations are inextricably linked to the 3 fundamental reforms laid out in the #AidOpenLetter. We hope for more positive results at the end of the year.



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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.sexualexploitationreport.org/openletter.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Full report available here:

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/international-development-committee/sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-in-the-aid-sector/written/81162.pdf>