



By Mark Califano and Sarah Morgenthau

“Safeguarding” Aid Workers: The Importance of Rooting Out Bad Actors

A recent series of alarming revelations of widespread sexual misconduct by international aid workers – both against other workers and aid recipients – and attempts to cover up the scandals are fueling unprecedented pressure on aid organizations to step up their efforts to detect, investigate, punish, and prevent this behavior. This is a watershed moment at a time when the need for international relief is at a historic high. Hundreds of relief and development actors around the world – NGOs, charities, and humanitarian organizations – risk losing both government funding and public and donor support unless they address the long-standing, pervasive problem of sexual misconduct by their own workers.

The challenge is complicated. On one hand, the crisis conditions in which aid organizations must frequently operate provide broad opportunities for inappropriate, unlawful, and sometimes violent sexual behavior. Confidentiality of investigations is difficult, and fear of losing a paying job or being expelled from camp as a result of reporting assaults and abuse is widespread. Whistleblowers and witnesses (particularly women) are often ostracized and punished by communities if they are seen as contributing to efforts to remove a perpetrator from his position. Couple this with aid organizations’ struggle to gain cooperation in these communities and limited oversight in host countries, and the risk of misconduct is heightened.

On the other hand, organizations and their donors demand commitments to spend every available dollar on direct aid. The pressure to avoid investment on proper infrastructure and administration has shortchanged the essential processes that could have been protecting effective practitioners and deterring illicit behavior.

A culture of retaliation in many communities and eviscerated oversight structures pose growing challenges to aid organizations as they struggle to meet emerging safeguarding standards. One likely outcome is that aid groups will consider seeking help from specialized professionals that have experience operating in these environments, such as investigative firms, and can provide the elevated quality of vetting, monitoring, and investigating that the situation requires and can help ensure the compliance that donors demand. Any successful effort will require the commitment of donors and their resources in support of these efforts.

Understanding the full scope

Frequent sexual misconduct within civilian aid organizations – as opposed to well-publicized atrocities by United Nations peacekeeping forces – has been a poorly kept secret for years. Mistreatment of women by civilian aid workers generally floated below the public’s radar until early this year when *The Times of London* reported on misconduct by workers from Oxfam, one of the UK’s biggest and best-known charities, with 10,000 aid workers in more than 90 countries. Seven staffers helping with Haiti’s recovery from the devastating 2010 earthquake – including the head of Oxfam’s Haiti mission – were fired or allowed to resign for hosting parties with prostitutes at Oxfam facilities, bullying and intimidating witnesses at these events, and failing to protect the staff.

The Oxfam incident was merely the tip of the iceberg. In May, *The Times* obtained a confidential, 84-page report conducted in 2001 that had found evidence that 67 aid workers from more than 40 aid organizations operating in West Africa had sexually exploited refugee children in return for providing humanitarian assistance. The report, prepared for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Save the Children and never made public, implicated workers from 15 international organizations, including UNHCR, the World Food Programme, Save the Children, Medecins Sans Frontières, Care International, and the International Federation of Red Cross Societies.

The alarming revelations have sparked public and governmental outrage that could deeply impact the entire global aid community. In the UK, parliamentary hearings and government inquiries have unearthed 80 previously unreported incidents at 26 organizations, ranging from sexual harassment, intimidation, and date rape of fellow employees to sexual abuse of children.

Among the additional disclosures:

- *The Guardian* disclosed that Report the Abuse, a web site for aid workers, received almost 500 allegations by women of rape, assault, or harassment by fellow aid workers and staff between November 2015 and February 2017
- A survey by Thomson Reuters Foundation found that 120 staff from leading global charities were fired or lost their jobs over sexual misconduct
- Save the Children UK reported 53 allegations of sexual misconduct in 2016 alone, including two reports that “predatory men” were using aid work as an opportunity for abuse
- Oxfam, in its 2017 annual report, revealed that it had received 87 complaints of sexual exploitation and abuse and fired 22 workers in just one year

Allegations of sexual misconduct have reached the highest levels of aid organizations. The deputy director of UNICEF resigned in late February after apologizing for several episodes of inappropriate behavior towards women in his previous job as chief executive of Save the Children UK.

An imperative to act

Government scrutiny has already intensified. In early March, Penny Mordaunt, the Secretary for International Development in the UK, convened a “Safeguarding Summit” of 29 major aid organizations, which produced general agreement on:

- Introducing new standards for vetting and referencing job candidates
- Protecting whistleblowers and providing victims with counseling and support
- Creating an independent body to promote external scrutiny and to ensure the highest possible standards across the aid sector
- Changing organizational culture to tackle power imbalances, encourage reporting, take allegations seriously, and hold people to accountable

Additional measures are inevitable. Since February, the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) has required all 179 organizations that receive government funding for overseas aid work to spell

out what steps they are taking to ensure that their safeguarding practices are firmly in place. It has ordered those organizations to report all incidents of sexual misconduct to the Charity Commission, the UK's charity regulator, and warned them that they will lose their government funding if they do not comply with these "tough and exacting" new standards. Baroness Stowell, chair of the UK's Charity Commission, said that points raised at the London safeguarding summit would be taken to a worldwide conference to be held later this year.

In the US, Mark Green, Administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), hosted a Forum on Preventing Sexual Misconduct in March, reiterating the Agency's policy of zero tolerance for sexual misconduct. He called on NGOs and UN agencies to strengthen the protection of beneficiaries of development and humanitarian organizations and announced that USAID's general counsel would conduct an internal review of the agency's policies and oversight practices.

Concern continues to grow worldwide. In May, the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) commissioned an independent review of the procedures used by its 124-member organizations to deal with sexual misconduct and to unearth previously undisclosed cases.

The implications are enormous for aid groups, many of which rely heavily on government support. Oxfam receives about 45 percent of its income from governmental bodies – including about \$52 million from the UK last year. It has been prohibited from bidding on any new UK-funded projects until it proves that it has beefed up its procedures and enforcement. The elimination of government funding and a drop in private donations since the beginning of the year are already taking their toll: in May, Oxfam announced it was laying off 100 of its 2,000 UK employees.

Rooting out the bad actors

There are no simple solutions to safeguarding a crisis that is firmly rooted in the aid community's culture. Ironically, sexual predators may gravitate toward aid work because of its endless opportunities to exert power over women and children in remote locations in failed or failing states, far from home office supervision. In many instances, the culture in the camps and communities actively discourage victims and witnesses from coming forward and any observed contact with investigators can lead to retaliation and violence against these individuals. In many instances, suspects have left their positions before any review is completed. As a result, no findings are made despite grounds for concern.

Moreover, emergency aid situations often require aid workers to crowd together in closed communities under very tense conditions where government infrastructure is nonexistent, police are scarce, and crime and drugs are pervasive. Organizational oversight is weak. Charities – constrained by government and donor standards that do not address these issues – feel compelled to spend money on aid activities, supplies, and specialists rather than on experienced administrative staff and on appropriate resources to monitor, investigate, address, and prevent bad behavior. The aid and development sector's common use of short-term contracts also deters potential whistleblowers, who don't want to damage their prospects of employment in their present or next aid role. Historically, some charities have covered up misconduct to protect their reputation and fund-raising potential.

While reshaping this entrenched culture might seem an overwhelming challenge, attention is quickly focusing on one specific, potentially fixable problem that lies at the heart of so much abuse. The widespread failure of aid groups to properly vet job candidates, including those for senior roles, recycles serial abusers from one aid group to another.

For example, the head of Oxfam's Haiti mission, who was among those accused of sexual misconduct, was allowed to resign in 2011 and then was quickly hired by Action Against Hunger (AAH) to lead its mission in Bangladesh. AAH said that it had conducted some background checks but received no red flags from Oxfam. Moreover, before joining Oxfam, the staffer had left the medical charity Merlin after being accused of sexual misconduct in Liberia (*NY Daily News*, February 14, 2018). That same code of silence apparently prevented Save the Children UK from including any mention of its CEO's repeated sexual misbehavior in the references that it provided to UNICEF when they recruited him for the position of deputy director.

Ineffective vetting is a sector-wide problem. Devex, a social networking and media platform for the global aid community, reported that vetting is often a perfunctory, box-checking exercise conducted by low-level, poorly trained Human Resources staff. Applicants can usually get away with listing friends rather than former supervisors as references and omitting any mention of previous jobs where they had problems. Their previous employers, fearing bad publicity or litigation, typically stay silent about any sexual misconduct that doesn't result in legal action. Furthermore, because so much hiring is done in response to a crisis, the priority is often on speed and fast-track hiring rather than thorough vetting.

To be sure, these same weaknesses undermine the normal vetting process at all sorts of businesses and organizations, not just aid organizations. Therefore, many businesses routinely supplement their internal resources by engaging the specialized capabilities of professional investigative firms to properly vet candidates for crucial senior roles. Aid organizations should consider the costs and benefits of adopting this practice as toughening standards begin to imperil their crucial sources of funding and the important work that they do on the ground.

Even before the Oxfam scandal surfaced, the need for more robust action was highlighted last year in a major research report by Dyan Mazurana and Phoebe Donnelly, two doctoral students at Tufts University's Feinstein International Center. Among their many findings was that most perpetrators of both sexual harassment and assault are civilian men working in the aid industry, often in supervisory jobs. They recommend that aid groups "ensure mandatory, rigorous screening and training of all staff at all levels."

Among its many recommendations, the Tufts report urges that organizations "provide resources for robust, external, multidisciplinary investigative units with specialists in investigating and responding to sexual harassment, assault, and exploitation." It also recommends that aid organizations "develop, strengthen, promote, and ensure comprehensive whistleblower protection and response policies within the agency to protect whistleblowers from retaliation."

Expanding vetting procedures and establishing independent complaint and investigation procedures are tasks that can stretch the internal capabilities of even the most well-funded and sophisticated aid groups. Nevertheless, organizations would do well to consider the judicious use of outside resources such as investigative firms to vet executive and supervisory job candidates, to audit the effectiveness of internal monitoring processes, to provide protection for victims and whistleblowers, and to investigate specific allegations of serious misconduct. At some point in the near future, growing pressure from government overseers could well make these professional processes the entry fee for being part of the global aid community.

About the authors

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