

Guidance Note:

Communicating about Sexual
Violence Incidents as
Humanitarian Organisations





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The need for this Guidance Note came out of many discussions around how we speak about sexual violence – within humanitarian organisations, across them, and at the global level – following the [attack on Terrain Hotel in July 2016](#). While this was not the first time humanitarian aid workers have been sexually attacked on a large scale, it was unique as the brave survivors talked about their experiences publically. News breaking on this incident sent shockwaves through the humanitarian community, as many humanitarian aid workers, even those based in South Sudan, did not know the full extent of what had happened in July 2016.

This is not to say that all were unaware of the events – many did know – but little information left South Sudan, and even HQ level staff was startled to realise how vulnerable their organisations might be on the ground. Just as concerning, no one discussed the fact that the events at Terrain Hotel were not the first rapes of expatriate female humanitarian staff by government forces in Juba that year; this was primarily because humanitarian organisations had kept these previous events quiet, which may have potentially placed humanitarian staff in South Sudan at risk of further acts of sexual violence.

This tells us a few different things about the current approach to sexual violence issues within the humanitarian community. First, it is still a stigmatised experience, for survivors and their employers. Second, the lack of information sharing may be placing humanitarian aid workers at risk, and undermining the safety and security of humanitarian operations more broadly. Third, the lack of transparency and information sharing on a global level – not being honest about vulnerabilities, worries, and faults – is contributing to the idea that humanitarian organisations are not struggling with how to address sexual violence in their workplaces.

Communicating as humanitarian organisations about the sexual violence experiences of humanitarian aid workers has multiple purposes. It helps to raise the voices of survivors, destigmatise their experiences, and open up conversations about the issue. It can change behaviours and norms, shift approaches to addressing sexual violence incidents, and create changes to prevention measures, policies, and procedures. Communicating about this issue can assist in the pursuit of justice and accountability. It can establish models for other humanitarian organisations and change the status quo. There is always value in promoting transparency, professionalism, and vulnerability, as it encourages growth throughout the humanitarian community.

What is set out within this document is a series of suggestions on how humanitarian organisations can approach improving or shifting how they communicate about sexual violence – internally, at the field level, and globally. Not every suggestion will be suitable for all incidents of sexual violence of course; this document does not suggest, for example, that internal incidents should be communicated across organisations at the field level. Contextualisation is also important, particularly in locations where sexual violence incidents may be punishable by death or severe harm, as is the involvement of effected staff.

Humanitarian organisations are encouraged to take the ideas and principles outlined in this document and make them their own, build on them, and share the lessons learned.



Communicating Internally

There are two different types of internal communications to be considered in this section: horizontal, within offices; and vertically, between field offices and HQ. Both are important avenues for creating dialogue about the issue of sexual violence in the humanitarian community, and each contributes to the creation of a safer and more trusted humanitarian work environments in different ways.

Horizontal Communications

Communicating horizontally, within the office of a humanitarian organisation, serves several different purposes. First, it allows essential safety and security information to be shared with staff members, ensuring that they are provided with the necessary information to take precautions to prevent further safety and security incidents. This can build trust, as communicating fully about safety and security incidents, and actions taken in response, shows transparency. It also demonstrates for staff what actions will be taken should they or those they know come forward about sexual violence incidents in the future.

Second, it can help staff members to better respond to colleagues who experience sexual violence when they know when and how such incidents occur, particularly those who are or might be placed in a position where they will be interacting with such survivors. This does not mean sharing every intimate detail of a staff member's experience with sexual violence, but requires being open and honest about the impact of sexual violence. We tend to shy from talking about sexual violence because it is uncomfortable and most people lack the necessary knowledge to understand or address the problem. By sharing the reality of sexual violence incidents against humanitarian aid workers, we begin to de-stigmatise and de-mystify these experiences, creating a more open and supportive work environment. Hearing about the experiences of other staff members may also help more individuals to come forward, as knowing that someone else has had a similar experience can help survivors to feel less isolated and alone.

When discussing incidents of sexual violence within an office environment, it is imperative that the survivor is included in the process. All information about the details to be shared must be discussed and approved by the survivor. Making them part of this process can be empowering and help to re-orient their narrative. By recognising that their sexual violence experience should be talked about, the survivor may feel less stigmatised by the event.

Of course, if there is a danger to the safety and security of the survivor if disclosure – in any form – were to occur, then the incident should be kept completely confidential. If sharing information about the incident outside a small circle of individuals were to also put other staff members at risk, then the incident should be kept strictly confidential. Finally, if sharing information about the incident might risk interfering with an investigative or inquiry process, then humanitarian organisations need to gauge the value of transparency versus the impact of a compromised procedure. These determinations are highly contextual, and need to be done on a case-by-case basis for every incident of sexual violence.



Setting aside those genuine concerns for safety and security, transparency and openness should be the goal of all humanitarian organisations, particularly at the field level. Knowledge about the risks that humanitarian aid workers face can be vital to securing the safety and security of humanitarian operations overall, and sharing how a humanitarian organisation addresses such risks can be valuable to building trust with its staff members.

Vertical Communications

It should be standard that information about sexual violence incidents is shared between field offices and HQ. Where this is not normal operation, procedures must be put in place to ensure information sharing happens efficiently, effectively, and professionally. It must be noted that such a process should not just include discussions about incidents involving staff of the organisation, but broader attacks against humanitarian action that might affect the safety and security of humanitarian aid workers.

Similar to horizontal reporting of sexual violence incidents within an office, all details may not need to be shared vertically within an organisation. However, there should be a clear standard for transparency between the different levels of operations. Once the type of information needed and process for sharing is standardised, it will become automatic and a less uncomfortable task for focal points on the ground; this will lead to more fruitful discussions about sexual violence issues at all levels of the humanitarian organisation. Confidentiality and the inclusion of the survivor in this process must be paramount.

The goal of sharing such incident information between field offices and HQ should not just be transparency, but also to provide HQ with a more complete and full picture of the risks facing its staff, so that Senior Leadership can make informed decisions about where to undertake humanitarian operations. This also allows humanitarian organisations to do a better job fulfilling the duty of care they owe to their staff.

Where decisions based on this information are made in the interest of the safety and security of staff members, discussing it in more public forums – to the media, within inter-agency networks, or to donors – can help to demonstrate further transparency, establish lessons learned, and share good practices.

Communicating Between Organisations at the Field Level

This section is not meant to suggest that internal incidents should be shared between humanitarian organisations at the field or HQ level, though reflections on how we can prevent the floating of serial perpetrators of sexual violence in the humanitarian community is warranted. Rather, this section is aimed at a more full sharing of information relating to sexual violence incidents against humanitarian aid workers that might result in further attacks or pose a risk to the broader safety and security situation on the ground.



The sharing of information at the field level may not be standardised in all locations of humanitarian action. Whether information is actively shared may be dependant on the personalities of the actors on the ground, the strength of the inter-agency networks, or the presence of an NGO safety forum or body. Where possible, such information sharing gaps should be filled, and the roles of the Humanitarian Coordination Teams and Security Management Teams should be underscored, as their responsibilities to ensure broader protection of humanitarian action cannot be sufficiently emphasised.

One of the concerns frequently raised by humanitarian organisations regarding the communication of sexual violence incidents at the field level is the risk of exposing the identity of the survivor. The second main concern is whether publically sharing such information may open the humanitarian organisation to further attacks or other risks.

These are legitimate concerns, and there are different ways to reduce them. First, if NGO security forums or bodies exist on the ground, sharing information through them can get around both issues, as information regarding the sexually violent attack would be anonymous. UNDSS can and should fill a compatible information-sharing role at the field level.

Second, humanitarian organisations should not communicate information about the attack if there is a genuine risk that it will place their staff or the broader humanitarian community in danger. Sharing information between humanitarian organisations should not normally result in such a risk, and if there are such worries, deeper issues of confidentiality, professionalism, and trust on the ground may need to be addressed.

Humanitarian organisations should also reflect on whom it is that they are shielding when they do not share information about sexual attacks on their staff at the field level. If the identity of the survivor can be protected, why not share information about the attack? Are we worried about our own reputation? What is the cost of not speaking out to protect boarder humanitarian action?

Communications about sexual violence incidents between humanitarian organisations at the field level can be essential to the protection of humanitarian action. It can help to break cycles of sexual violence, build transparency, and provide the opportunity for humanitarian organisations to set examples of good behaviour. It may lead to the reduction of sexually violent incidents on the ground and, perhaps, mean that another event like Terrain Hotel does not occur.

Communicating Globally

The recent side-event at ECOSOC¹, hosted by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) was an excellent start to discussing the problem of sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers at a global level, but there are different forums of conversations that need to happen.

¹ Sophie Edwards, *UN must end 'toxic tolerance' of sexual abuse of aid workers, top official says*, Devex, 27 June 2017.



The humanitarian community needs to have regular and accountable discussions about the issue, its effect on humanitarian operations, and the steps humanitarian organisations are taking to address it.

This must include advocacy by humanitarian organisations on incidents affecting its staff. This does not necessarily need to involve information sharing about specific incidents, though it would lend significant weight to the advocacy, but can involve sharing information about the risks facing humanitarian aid workers and the steps being taken by the specific organisation to address these dangers. Communicating globally about sexual violence attacks can also help to educate the public and donor community, and provide a larger and safer space for survivors to speak about their experiences. It can de-stigmatise and de-mystify the experience of sexual violence as it pertains to humanitarian aid workers.

One of the concerns raised again by humanitarian organisations is a worry that speaking out could place individuals or the organisation in danger. In some instances, this may be the case, and a risk analysis should always accompany decisions to speak out about attacks on humanitarian aid; this is already common procedure for in kidnapping situations, when organisations consider whether announcing the incident would result in additional or probable harm.

For example, if there were a genuine concern that speaking publically would bring harm to an office on the ground, humanitarian organisations may want to consider whether having the message come from HQ, as opposed to the field, would reduce this risk. Coordinating messages with other humanitarian organisations – in partnerships, through inter-agency networks, or the cluster system² – might also reduce this potential harm, as the information would not be from one agency. Removing specific details about the perpetrators or talking in broader terms, while perhaps reducing the possibility of holding perpetrators accountable, would still allow the broader humanitarian community to know what happened in a manner that reduces risk for the organisation speaking out.

Humanitarian organisations also need to reflect on why they do not speak out about sexual violence attacks, where they might do so when staff members have been killed or offices have been bombed. Similar to what was explored in the previous section, we need to consider whom or what we are protecting by staying silent.

Some humanitarian organisations have suggested that the discomfort about speaking out on sexual violence issues could be alleviated if we removed the sexual aspect of the incident, speaking instead of an assault or act of violence against humanitarian aid workers. While perhaps well meaning, the effect of removing the sexualised aspect from conversations about attacks on humanitarian aid workers not only undermines the nature of the incident, but it undermines the

² The Working Group on the Protection of Humanitarian Action is a new body in the humanitarian community, with the potential to drive forward advocacy and action on a number of issues, including sexually violent attacks on humanitarian aid workers.



message on a whole. Without naming what is happening, we continue to stigmatise the experiences of sexual violence survivors. We send the message that this is an issue we do not want to speak about, and we create an environment where incidents are more likely to occur. It is important to bear in mind that words matter, and accurately naming attacks on humanitarian action is essential for prevention and accountability.

One option humanitarian organisations should consider is creating a template statement for reporting on sexual violence incidents that occur in the field. This can help to reduce the time needed to respond after critical incidents, which promotes transparency and shows how seriously humanitarian organisations considers these events. Such a template statement is provided at the end of this document.

Conversations on the existence, impact, and response to sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers must also include inter-agency networks, advocacy directed at state actors, and denunciations from the highest levels of the humanitarian community. It must be directed at and include all areas of humanitarian action. It should include media communications about events that are occurring, but also actions that can and should be taken to prevent and respond to these kinds of incidents in the future.

Communicating about the issue of sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers at the global level can help to achieve justice and accountability. At the very least, it can be used to show that the issue is real and grave, and promote transparency. Demonstrating that the issue is being handled appropriately may also help to re-establish trust in humanitarian organisations, as all strive to improve how sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers is addressed.

Balancing Confidentiality and Stigma

One of the guiding principles we discuss when speaking about post-sexual violence care is the confidentiality of the survivor – keeping their identity and the intimate details of their experience unknown by colleagues or outside bodies. This is a vital element for creating the trust needed for survivors in the internal reporting systems for humanitarian organisations, and it recognises that there are many reasons survivors might not want to have their experience and identity widely known.

When we talk about confidentiality though, we should be conscious of how we approach it, and that we walk the line between maintaining this essential principle of post-sexual violence care and sending the message that survivors of sexual violence should want to keep their experience confidential. While the former provides the protected space necessary for survivors to come forward, the latter sends the continuing message that survivors of sexual violence should feel ashamed about their experience, and perhaps even that they deserved to be sexually violated.

This is not an easy balance to maintain, but it is vital we find ways to de-stigmatise sexual violence while recognising that not everyone will want to talk in more public manners. In an ideal world, sexual violence survivors would feel as empowered to speak openly about their



experiences in the same way we encourage those who are robbed, attacked, or kidnapped while working in the field to narrate their stories. Finding ways to show the experiences of humanitarian aid workers, though the scenarios worked through above, will help to meet this goal, and contribute to safer and healthier humanitarian workplaces overall. It will also help to continue developing the supportive community of survivors that has particularly emerged in the last two years.

Conclusion

Speaking about sexual violence can be uncomfortable, but not speaking about this problem contributes to the prevailing environment of secrecy and impunity, stigmatising survivors. It drives the issue further underground and prevents it from being addressed appropriately. It deepens the mistrust many humanitarian aid workers currently feel towards their organisations.

It is essential that we find ways to communicate about sexual violence in the humanitarian community in a way that is transparent and professional. It is equally important that humanitarian organisations reflect on how they can be sensitive and vulnerable about how they are addressing the issue as well, creating space for dialogue and growth.

This is far from being an easy topic to advocate on, but if humanitarian organisations can take steps towards being more open about their struggles, safer and healthier workplaces for all humanitarian aid workers can be created – ones that are free from sexual violence. Communicating on the issue at all levels is the key to achieving this goal.



ANNEX A

Template Statement for Communicating Incidents of Sexual Violence:

[Name of Humanitarian Organisation] reports that an incident of sexual violence was perpetrated against one of its staff members in [name of country, or region if this would provide more anonymity] on [date]. We have taken [outlined steps] to support the survivor, and are taking [outline steps] at this time to ensure there is accountability for this act.

We strongly condemn any and all acts of sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers, in line with UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/71/129, and our legal and moral duty of care to protect all staff members of [name of organisation] from violence. Attacks of any kind, including sexual violence, against humanitarian aid workers undermines the safety and security of humanitarian action, and reduces our ability to provide effective and safe programming to affected populations. The actions of [perpetrator] will not be tolerated and we ask for the support of the broader humanitarian community to ensure this act does not occur with impunity.



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