Five guidelines for security risk management personnel: how to address sexual violence

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The issue of sexual violence – which ranges from sexual harassment through to rape – is increasingly a subject of discussion in the humanitarian community. Both Oxfam and Save the Children have recently spoken publically about their experiences addressing sexual violence against their staff members, an issue facing all humanitarian organisations. Across the sector, 76 incidents of sexual violence against humanitarians were reported to [Insecurity Insight](http://www.insecurityinsight.org/) between January 2015 and March 2017, a number considered to be the tip of the iceberg. Information regarding the issue of sexual violence within the humanitarian community is still only emerging, but it is clear that there is a problem.

It is also a problem that must be addressed by all humanitarian organisations. Setting aside the issue of reputational risk, humanitarian organisations have a legal and moral duty of care towards their staff. In addition to appropriately responding to incidents when they occur, this duty of care requires that reasonable steps be taken by humanitarian organisations to prevent security incidents from occurring against their staff, including sexual violence.

When speaking to security risk management personnel about their efforts to address sexual violence against aid workers, it has been made clear that there is still a concerning knowledge gap on how to handle the issue. This is not due to a lack of desire to integrate sexual violence into their risk management systems – quite the contrary in many cases – but rather a lack of knowledge on how to accomplish this task.

Addressing sexual violence in current risk management systems need not be difficult, and does not require creating new or parallel systems for security risk management. Rather, addressing the issue would build upon existing systems and structures, merely expanding what is already being reflected upon in our risk management and security protocols.

Addressing sexual violence: from prevention and preparedness to response

The following five general categories of activities form a broad set of guidelines for security risk management personnel on how to address sexual violence against aid workers:

1. **Consult staff about their concerns**

Start a discussion with male and female staff – international and national – about their concerns, fears, and ideas for preventing incidents of sexual violence. Be open to the experiences of these staff members, even if these does not match a reality you understand or operate in. Take this information and use it to reconsider what internal and external risks might be faced by all staff members in the context.

Seeking frequent feedback from staff members – in particular female colleagues – can assist in course correction should risks be under or overestimated, as well as ensure that new risks are appropriately considered. For example, changes in organisational personnel, movement, drivers, or working locations may reduce, increase, or bring about new risks of sexual violence for staff members. By emphasising consultation and feedback from staff members, information on these potential risks can be captured in a timely and concrete manner, ensuring a safer working and living environment for all staff members.

Personnel can and should also give feedback on the method of providing information on sexual violence as a risk, as well as the language used. Traditional approaches to the prevention of sexual violence have focused on what staff members – typically female staff members – should not do, for example, dress inappropriately, take taxis, drink alcohol.

Current approaches avoid this victim-blaming approach, which encouraged rape myths, instead favouring a focus on stopping perpetrators and promoting community prevention methods. Practically, this requires a shift in the conversation to not perpetrating sexual violence, and saying outright that this is unacceptable behaviour. This statement alone can help to create an environment that does not enable or empower perpetrators to act. It will not, however, change the inherent bias, cultural beliefs, and attitudes about gender and sex that justify the use of sexual violence for some perpetrators.

Recognise that there is a gap between saying sexual violence is unacceptable and the internalisation of that statement. Community prevention methods can help to stop incidents from occurring or escalating. At the most basic level, this can mean humanitarians looking out for one another, and saying something when they see misconduct on the part of their colleagues. It can involve making sure a colleague gets home from a party safely or asking if they are okay when behaviour appears to be out of character.

A new approach to prevention of sexual violence also involves the honest reflection that nothing – not taking all the precautions in the world, wearing the most modest clothing, or avoiding any type of risky behaviour – will prevent someone from experiencing sexual violence, nor is the survivor to blame if they did take a taxi or drink or wear a skirt. While this might seem inconsequential, it is actually necessary to help breakdown victim-blaming stigmas that might stop someone from coming forward about an experience with sexual violence.

1. **Share information horizontally**

Seek and share information from other security risk management personnel about contextualised risks of sexual violence. Information on sexual violence issues may not be routinely shared at the field level, often due to concerns about exposing the identity of any survivors involved. Similarly, when incidents occur against an organisation’s staff members that may affect the security of other humanitarian actors or the implementation of humanitarian action more broadly, this information should be appropriately shared. Some key considerations surrounding security incident information sharing is discussed in the second chapter of the [‘Security Incident Information Management Handbook’](https://www.eisf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2204-RedR-UK-EISF-Insecurity-Insight-2017-Security-Incident-Information-Management-Handbook.pdf) published by Insecurity Insight, Redr UK and EISF.

Where possible, information should be shared with respect for anonymity through local NGO security forums, UNDSS, or security risk management teams, as well as other none security coordination platforms. This can reduce concerns regarding the exposure of or retaliation against survivors of sexual violence, while ensuring the overall security situation of the humanitarian community is upheld.

1. **Train your staff**

Proactively seek and undertake training on the subject of sexual violence, including how it can occur and its impact at the individual and organisational level. It is important to become comfortable with the concept of discussing sexual violence as a real risk that might be faced by any of your staff members. Develop the skills necessary to speak to survivors in a manner that does not traumatise them, recognising that anyone on the staff might be might be a first point of contact when incidents occur; it is probable that a survivor will not seek contact first with the ‘right’ staff member, but with someone that they feel comfortable with. Everyone within your organisation should understand and be prepared to address sexual violence issues. Psychological first aid training is readily available and helps staff support others who have had a traumatic experience.

Creating an environment where sexual violence can be openly discussed is the responsibility of all staff members, but particularly those in roles of authority, such as safety and security personnel. Acknowledging that sexual violence is a risk and how it will be prevented and responded to can significantly reduce the shame and stigma associated with the experience. Training can help equip security and safety personnel to undertake this task.

1. **Evaluate on-boarding materials**

Evaluate how or whether sexual violence as a risk is mentioned in relevant materials related to different roles. For those working in safety and security, this may include security briefings, on-boarding materials, and context packages. Consider how sexual violence, as a risk, will be presented to all staff members – international and national, male and female – at on-boarding as well as continuously throughout their mission. Ensure that information on sexual violence includes the possibility of men being victimised, as well as information on how all incidents of sexual violence will be held accountable.

Raising the fact that sexual violence is a risk from the start of recruitment can significantly reduce feelings of shame and the perception of stigma. It also helps to build an environment where acts of misconduct are less likely to occur, as knowing there are measures in place may discourage potential perpetrators.

1. **Evaluate existing security protocols**

Evaluate the extent to which sexual violence is integrated into existing security protocols, including the reporting of incidents and post-incident procedures. Where necessary, consider the development of a code word for radio reporting of sexual violence incidents, as the confidentiality of survivors will not be maintained if the word ‘rape’ or terms to describe other forms of sexual violence are communicated through the radio room. Consideration should also be given to the classification of evacuations or relocation after an incident of sexual violence (i.e. how do we communicate the type of or reason for the evacuation: general vs. administrative vs. health reasons), and the impact that this classification might have on the privacy of the survivor.

Consultation with staff members – in particular female staff members – can improve the quality of security protocols regarding sexual violence. It is essential to ensure that such protocols are sensitive and responsive to survivors, as the impact and treatment of survivors after an incident of sexual violence can have a profound impact on their recovery process.

While reflecting on how to appropriately respond to survivors is essential, it is also necessary to consider the investigation process and how alleged perpetrators will be treated during that process. A balance must be struck between believing survivors and ensuring that perpetrators are not condemned before facts can be established. Your organisation may want the perpetrator or survivor to remain in country during the course of the investigation or be provided with (paid or unpaid) leave. Think carefully about who will conduct the investigation. If this is done in-house, measures must be taken to ensure that conflict of interest does not interfere with accountability. Your organisation should develop a policy regarding what action is taken against individuals within your organisation found to have committed acts of sexual violence. Assess when or if national legal systems should be contacted but be aware that the survivor’s wishes should always be respected.

These issues are vital to consider before an incident of sexual violence occurs. Making decisions after an incident will significantly increase the likelihood of the case being mishandled, resulting in traumatised survivors and the creation of a work environment where accountability will be seen to not exist.

**Conclusion**

Integrating the advice set out above represents the first step towards preventing sexual violence against aid workers and preparing to respond to such an incident. As our knowledge about the risk factors for experiencing sexual violence grows, more survivors come forward, and humanitarian organisations develop appropriate policies and procedures, safety and security risk management systems must keep appropriate pace. With the tools being created by EISF and others, building our skills to address sexual violence in the humanitarian community will become easier.

Sources and Further Reading

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