**Addressing endemic abuse**

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A number of international organizations have faced high-profile allegations of sexual abuse perpetrated by staff members and contractors in several instances during emergency-crisis response activities.

In a 2018 report on sexual abuse and exploitation in aid, the UK government cited that sexual abuse is ‘endemic in aid organizations’. It is clear that sexual violence needs to be addressed in development work, both within development institutions and in their operations in the field.

In many developing countries, a culture of impunity for sexual violence exists due to a combination of factors such as weak legal protection, limited welfare and social protection systems, lack of basic services, and prevailing patriarchy. This inhibits women’s participation, voice, trust and confidence in reporting incidences of sexual violence.

Within this scenario, large infrastructure projects financed by development organizations often bring disruption and changes to the fabric of communities from an influx of workers – both foreign and from other regions of the country – which increase the risks of sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment for women and girls in project communities.

Several studies have found that development projects with infrastructure components and large labour influx can negatively impact host communities by creating a situation in which incoming workers have greater power than vulnerable community members, creating disruption to established social and economic relations, causing stress, and potentially increasing risks of sexual violence, especially if the community is rural, small, or remote.

The negative impact is exacerbated if local institutions are weak and unable to effectively protect women and girls, if there is a high level of poverty in the host community, and if gender inequality is rife both within households and communities.

These studies further confirm that risks of large infrastructure works stem not simply from the influx of male workers, but also through compounding of pre-existing gender inequalities in the dynamics of power and influence in local communities and worker camps. It is therefore imperative to take into account all these factors when we design infrastructure development projects.

Development operations need to safeguard against potential risks of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. How can this be done?

Development organizations should continue focusing on the people their projects are meant to support, taking into account specific needs and circumstances of women and girls. They also need to be aware of the issues and gaps related to sensitivity, level of trust, and risks related to confidentiality, potential re-victimization and retaliation when it comes to gender-based and sexual violence.

At the core it comes down to women’s empowerment – both economic and social – to address the underlying causes of this complex problem. Developing countries need to be assisted in establishing systems through which voices and concerns of those affected by sexual violence in connection with development projects are heard, and measures to support survivor recovery are in place.

This should be taken into account from the outset of project development and incorporated in the project design as both ‘do no harm’ and ‘do good’ measures.

Development operations are designed to bring positive economic changes to people and communities, but they also bring social changes, some of which may amplify risks of gender-based and sexual violence. Recognizing how this violence occurs and the key factors that increase the risk of such violence is the first step to prevent, mitigate and develop effective response mechanisms.

It is also extremely important to change perceptions and attitudes of people who interact with survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation. Stories of victims are often doubted which results in reluctance of survivors to come forward regarding such incidents. A significant shift is required so that any report of sexual exploitation, abuse or sexual harassment is treated as plausible until proven otherwise.

Project grievance redress mechanisms and response systems need to be specifically tailored for women and girls, and based on survivor-centred and survivor-informed principles. This means that the needs, rights and safety of survivors must be the cornerstones of prevention, mitigation and response.

Privacy and confidentiality, survivors’ agency, dignity, respect and non-discrimination are key principles for a ‘survivor-centred approach’. We must create a supportive environment in which survivors’ interests are respected and prioritized, and through which each survivor is treated with dignity and respect. This is crucial to build trust in reporting and response systems, but more importantly to promote survivor recovery and reinforce their capacity to make informed decisions about their lives on their own.

Addressing sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment in development projects cannot be done without shared responsibility and joint efforts of development organizations, government agencies, project contractors, non-government organizations and service providers.

Support for survivors should be a high priority, and we need to enhance systems and build capacity of contractors and government agencies, as well as service providers, to ensure a trusting and survivor-centred environment for reporting and access to services.

The result of such collective endeavours will have multiple positive social and economic outcomes. Development organizations and government agencies will be safeguarded against reputational risks, people in project host communities will be safer, and women and girls will be more empowered.

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