



# Power, Aid and Impunity: How the Aid Industry Sexually Exploited the World's Poor

By Rasna Warah



For decades, sun-drenched Haiti, with its beautiful beaches and Third World-type poverty, has attracted a vast array of aid and humanitarian workers who have set up camp in this Caribbean nation ostensibly to lift its people out of their miserable conditions. Because of the huge number of local and international NGOs in the country, Haiti is often described as “The Republic of NGOs”.

Despite the large presence of NGOs and aid agencies, however, Haiti remains one of the poorest countries in the world, and the most impoverished nation in the Western hemisphere. Both natural disasters and political unrest, combined with a culture of aid dependency, have contributed to this state of affairs. A Western journalist writing about Haiti has described the country as “a poster child for the inadequacies of aid”.

The presence of large numbers of mostly young, naïve and sexually active foreign and local aid workers has also created an environment where vulnerable women and children are being sexually exploited or abused by the very people who are supposed to be helping or protecting them, [including United Nations peacekeepers](#). According to an internal United Nations report obtained by the Associated Press in 2017, at least 134 Sri Lankan UN peacekeepers exploited nine Haitian children in a sex ring from 2004 to 2007. One of the victims said that the soldiers would pass her number along to incoming contingents, who would then call her for sex. One boy claimed that he had had sex

with more than 20 Sri Lankan soldiers. Another teenage boy claimed that he had been gang-raped by Uruguayan soldiers who even had the audacity to film the attack on a cellphone. Although 114 of these peacekeepers were sent home after the report came out, none of them was prosecuted or court martialed.

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These incidents are not confined to Haiti. A separate investigation published by the Associated Press last year revealed that nearly 2,000 allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation by UN peacekeepers have been made in other troubled parts of the world. However, this number could be a gross underestimation as the majority of victims of sexual exploitation or abuse do not report their cases.

“Sexual exploitation” is defined by the UN as “an actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another”. “Sexual abuse” is defined as “the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions”.

Stories of aid workers, UN peacekeepers and UN employees using their privileged positions to sexually exploit or abuse women and children in poor countries have been in the public domain for a long time but it is only now that the international development community has taken notice and decided to do something about it.

It all started in February this year, when the *Times* newspaper revealed that staff at Oxfam GB, one of Britain’s most respected charities, had paid local women for sex while carrying out humanitarian work in Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake that devastated the country and which led to widespread internal displacement of the quake’s victims. This revelation, at a time when the #MeToo movement was gaining momentum, resulted in several similar exposés, the latest being of a senior UN gender advisor – an Indian male called Ravi Karkara – who is currently being investigated for sexually harassing young men in his office.

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The Oxfam scandal also set in motion a series of events, including withdrawal of funding to Oxfam by its leading donors, including the UK’s Department of International Development (DfID), and calls for thorough investigations into allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by those working in the aid sector globally.

This particular scandal prompted the UK’s House of Commons to carry out further investigations, not just on the conduct of Oxfam staff, but on the conduct of staff working for other charities and aid organisations as well. The House of Commons’ final report, released on 31 July this year, sent shockwaves across the aid sector, and has led to demands for stricter measures to be taken against

those who commit sexual crimes against vulnerable populations. The report states that “sexual violence, exploitation and abuse against women and girls is endemic in many developing countries, especially where there is conflict and forced displacement.”

The UK legislators who drafted the report and carried out the investigations also found that the aid industry’s response to sexual misconduct had been “reactive, patchy and sluggish” and that very few organisations actually follow up on reports that have raised the red flag about sexual exploitation or abuse by their employees. For instance, no action was taken after the release of a 2002 assessment by the UN’s refugee agency UNHCR and the charity Save the Children of the effects of sexual violence on children in conflict areas. That assessment documented 67 cases of sexual exploitation and abuse of refugee children in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone in which 40 aid agencies and 9 peacekeeping missions were implicated; the majority of the victims were aged between 13 and 18.

And, despite being warned three years ago that internally displaced and refugee Syrian women were being sexually exploited by men delivering aid on behalf of the UN, the UN did little to arrest the problem, even though the UN’s Population Fund had conducted a gender assessment last year that showed that Syrian women were being forced to engage in “food-for-sex” arrangements with aid workers. The House of Commons report, titled “Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector”, states that “sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers, amongst others, is an entrenched feature of the life experience of women and girls in Syria in the eighth year of the conflict there” and that similar cases around world are merely “the tip of the iceberg”.

The UK legislators further found that a 2007 study for the Humanitarian Partnership conducted in Kenya, Namibia and Thailand found that although the beneficiaries of aid knew that sexual exploitation and abuse was going on, the majority said that they would not report these cases because they didn’t want to risk losing the aid. On their part, humanitarian aid workers were reluctant to report their fellow workers for fear of retaliation.

The House of Commons report does not spare any organisation, not even in the much-revered United Nations, for allowing such abuse to continue. “When it comes to investigating sexual exploitation and abuse allegations, the UN’s approach lacks coherence,” it states. “There is no single body taking an overall interest in the outcomes of investigations or driving them towards resolution...”

What the report failed to recognise is that although the UN has a stated “zero tolerance” for sexual abuse and exploitation, few, if any, of the perpetrators face justice – not only because the UN’s internal justice system is flawed but also because international UN staff enjoy immunity from prosecution, which means such cases are not likely to end up in court.

In addition, because the UN is more concerned about protecting its reputation than about bringing justice to victims, those who are perceived to be tainting the organisation (the people who come out and report such cases) are quickly sacrificed. In 2014, for example, Anders Kompass (who has since resigned as the director of field operations at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights) was suspended after he sent an internal UN report to French authorities detailing cases of French peacekeepers sexually exploiting internally displaced boys in the Central African Republic. At that time the UN claimed that Kompass had put the victims at risk but it soon became evident that the UN had no intention to act on the report or to make its findings public. Kompass was only reinstated after there was an outcry in the media about the case, but by then he had already made the decision to resign. He said that his ordeal had left him “disappointed and full of sadness”.

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This is one of the problems afflicting all aid and humanitarian organisations. Because these organisations survive on donations, the whiff of sexual or other type of scandal could mean the drying up of donor funds, which could affect jobs and projects. So to keep the donor funds flowing, incidents of misconduct are quickly covered up or not investigated. In some cases, the perpetrators are allowed to resign quietly or are transferred to a remote duty station. Meanwhile those who report these cases often find themselves out of a job – the UN, in particular, is notorious for not renewing the contracts of whistleblowers.

However, things are likely to change. Aid and humanitarian organisations that fail to report or address the issue of sexual crimes or misconduct by their employees could find themselves having to close shop, especially if their biggest donors pull out. Since the Haiti scandal, for example, Oxfam has been struggling to survive. Bigger multilateral organisations like the UN, which are funded by member states are, however, unlikely to face such threats because “they are too big to fail”, which is a pity because levels of impunity at the UN are extremely high. Whereas small charities and international NGOs have to be accountable to their donors to survive, the UN can basically get away with all manner of wrongdoing because the UN is accountable only to itself. Few, if any, member states have threatened to pull out of the organisation because of its lack of accountability or because its employees are behaving badly.

Former UN employees who have suffered retaliation as a result of their reporting complain that the UN’s internal justice system is heavily biased in favour of the perpetrator, particularly if he or she is a senior manager. Experiences of UN whistleblowers indicate that those who file a complaint against a senior UN official are not tolerated within the organisation and that the majority of whistleblowers suffer severe retaliation, despite the UN’s whistleblower protection policy. For instance, recently the [country director for UNAIDS in Ethiopia](#), who was a key witness in a sexual harassment and assault investigation involving the UNAIDS deputy director, was suspended from her job in March this year, an action that smacks both of a cover-up and retaliation. As a result, several African women activists called for the resignation of the UNAIDS Executive Director, Michel Sidibé, but he has consistently ignored this call, as has the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

Current and former UN employees have reported a flawed grievance system that is stacked against the victims. One woman told the UK’s *Guardian* newspaper that she was raped by a senior UN staff member while working in a remote location but did not obtain justice despite medical evidence and witness testimonies. Because UN staff members cannot take their cases to national courts, (because UN employees enjoy immunity from prosecution), they have to rely on the UN’s internal justice systems, which are deeply flawed and which rarely deliver justice. As I have argued in [previous articles](#), the UN has to overhaul its internal justice system and put in place external independent mechanisms that are more transparent and accountable – and which do not victimise whistleblowers.

Now, finally, such an external independent mechanism might just see the light of day. The House of Commons report makes a recommendation that could radically transform how sexual exploitation and abuse cases are handled within the aid sector: the establishment of “an independent aid ombudsman to provide the right to appeal, an avenue through which those who have suffered can seek justice by other means”. This recommendation, which will be discussed at an International Safeguarding Conference in October this year, could drastically alter the way aid organisations

operate and could be a game changer for victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. It is undoubtedly one of the best recommendations to be put on the table of an industry that has become a cesspit of impunity and which is more interested in self-preservation than actually doing good in this world.

However, my fear is that if this ombudsman lacks the power to investigate and prosecute, then it will merely become an entity that collects and documents complaints rather than one that carries out investigations and brings cases to trial, or one that has the authority to force aid organisations to dismiss or penalise employees who are implicated in sexual harassment, exploitation or abuse.

My hope is that this ombudsman will not just address the issues of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse, but will also be receptive to receiving cases of other types of abuse within the aid sector, particularly the abuse of power and authority, which allows all manner of wrongdoing, including fraud, corruption, nepotism, and gross mismanagement, to continue.

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