



Sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment in the food security sector

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Question

What do we know about the particular risks and incidence of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment in the food security sector, and what learning is there on effective risk analysis and management?

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1. Summary

Globally food insecurity¹ is rising, especially for women and girls, potentially placing them at increased risk of sexual exploitation and abuse in their attempts to access food. In response, this rapid review focuses on what we know about the particular risks and incidence of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment in the food security sector, and what learning is there on effective risk analysis and management.

There was little literature uncovered by this rapid review which directly focused on the particular risks and mitigations measures relating to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment in the food security sector, although there have been some more recent reviews of the research and evidence around the links between food insecurity and gender-based violence more broadly (Fraser, 2020; Ahlenburg, 2021). More literature focused on sexual exploitation and abuse than on sexual harassment, and the literature focusing on sexual harassment tended not to specify the organisations involved making it hard to identify if they are in the food security sector. Most of the literature seems to focus on sexual exploitation and abuse relating to food security in humanitarian rather than other settings. The majority of the literature is focused on the risks faced by women and girls but there have been also cases of boys being exploited and abused in exchange for food (Feather et al, 2020: 36).

Cases of sexual exploitation and abuse relating to food insecurity, by food security actors themselves, and others in the aid and peacekeeping systems, have occurred in a range of countries, including: Guinea, Liberia, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, northern Uganda, Burundi, North-East Nigeria, Mozambique, Lebanon, Syria, Burkina Faso, and Ethiopia. Findings from these cases suggest that:

- Risky moments in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse in the food security process occur during distribution, registration, and transport home, as some aid workers, local officials, and others use their power over food access to take advantage of those in need.
- The evidence suggests that particular risks relating to sexual exploitation and abuse and food security include, gender inequality; hunger and poverty; displacement; lack of support systems; chaotic and food insecure humanitarian settings; power imbalances; lack of clarity around entitlement and distribution of food aid; and insufficient food rations.
- Those at particular risk of experiencing sexual exploitation and abuse are the young (children and adolescent girls) and female heads of households (widows, divorced and single women).
- The fear and experience of sexual exploitation and abuse can put some women off accessing food assistance.
- Shame, stigma and the fear losing the food they need to survive are part of the enabling environment for abuse that silences survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.

¹ Food security exists when “all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (<https://fscluster.org/food-security-emergencies>, accessed 16.2.2022).

Staff within the food security sector, such as those working for the World Food Programme, have also experienced sexual harassment, including reports of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault.

Sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment is widely underreported across the aid sector and data is not routinely collected indicating whether or not the case relates to food security programming. However, what data there is available from the UN indicates that there were a total of 190 sexual exploitation and abuse allegations involving World Food Programme staff and implementing partners and 9 involving Food and Agriculture Organisation staff and implementing partners.

Sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment risk analysis and management policies and tools are generally more generic rather than specifically related to the food security sector, even for the publicly available protection from sexual exploitation and abuse resources that some of the main food security actors have produced. However recent research in Lebanon and Uganda has looked at incorporating recommendations from women and girls to reduce risk of sexual exploitation and abuse in food distributions. The adaptations, which included more female staff, small group distributions at preassigned times, and home delivery, resulted in less fear around food distributions. They suggest that the tools they used are effective for identifying risks and actions that can be taken to mitigate them (Potts et al 2021a, 2021b).

Several recommendations from the literature for food security actors are provided at the end of the report, including suggestions from beneficiaries for measures that could be taken to make food distribution processes safer.

2. Definitions of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH)

The Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO) uses the UN definitions for sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH)²:

“Sexual exploitation: any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes. Includes profiting momentarily, socially, or politically from sexual exploitation of another. Under UN regulations it includes transactional sex, solicitation of transactional sex and exploitative relationships.

Sexual abuse: the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions. It should cover sexual assault (attempted rape, kissing / touching, forcing someone to perform oral sex / touching) as well as rape. Under UN regulations, all sexual activity with someone under the age of 18 is considered to be sexual abuse.

Sexual harassment: a continuum of unacceptable and unwelcome behaviours and practices of a sexual nature that may include, but are not limited to, sexual suggestions or demands,

² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safeguarding-against-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-and-sexual-harassment-seah-in-the-aid-sector> Accessed 16/2/2022

requests for sexual favours and sexual, verbal or physical conduct or gestures, that are or might reasonably be perceived as offensive or humiliating.”

Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) occurs when a position of power is used for sexual purposes against a beneficiary or vulnerable member of the community. SEA focuses primarily on aid workers and beneficiaries (Ohuma & Ndombasi, 2018: 8).

Sexual harassment, on the other hand focuses on acts committed within organisations, and occurs when differences in power between staff members in a work environment, are abused (verbally, through touch, use of inappropriate images, etc) (WFP, 2020).

Sexual exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment fall under the umbrella term of gender-based violence, with this report focused on SEAH specifically rather than the other forms of gender based violence occurring around food security.

3. Risks of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment in the food security sector

Food insecurity

Globally, food insecurity is a concern, with major drivers such as conflict, climate variability and extremes, and economic slowdowns and downturns (now exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic) continuing to increase in both frequency and intensity, and occurring more frequently in combination (FAO et al, 2021: xiii). Projections suggest that 720 and 811 million people in the world faced hunger in 2020, with world hunger increasing due to the COVID-19 pandemic (FAO et al, 2021: xii). As a result, many people will be reliant on urgent humanitarian food assistance to try and alleviate their hunger (FAO et al, 2021: 56). By the end of 2020, at least 155 million people suffered from acute food insecurity requiring urgent humanitarian assistance in 55 countries/territories (FAO et al, 2021: 56).

Women were found to be even more likely to experience moderate or severe food insecurity than men during 2020 (10% higher compared to 6% higher in 2019) (FAO et al, 2021: xii). Especially at risk of acute food insecurity are “older women, women and girls with chronic conditions or weakened immune systems, pregnant and lactating women, migrant and domestic workers, refugee and displaced women and girls, and poorer households” (Fraser, 2020: 4). Adolescent girls are often the most food insecure as they are perceived to need less food, than others, “which is reinforced by social norms that male household members are more important and productive” (Fraser, 2020: 10).

Hunger, food insecurity and sexual exploitation and abuse

Evidence suggests that hunger and food insecurity may make women and girls more vulnerable to sexual exploitation in exchange for food, including engaging in transactional sex (Fraser, 2020: 2, 10; GBV Sub Sector, Nigeria, 2019: 1). Often social norms, childcare responsibilities, and other barriers mean that their access to livelihood opportunities and the ability to earn money to buy food is limited, which increases their risk of being sexually exploited for food or small amounts of cash (Ahlenbach, 2021: 7). Studies suggest that “women who engage in these forms

of transactional sex due to food insecurity also reported less power to demand protection during sex and often stayed in violent or abusive relationships for food” (Fraser, 2020: 10).

Previous research looking at food insecurity and gender based violence in conflict settings has noted that women and girls face heightened risk of exposure to different forms of gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse, due to 1) the lack of food; 2) the search for food; and 3) access to food aid (Ahlenback, 2021: 2; Fraser, 2020: 2-3). Sexual exploitation and abuse have been noted as particular concerns in the latter two, with access to food aid posing a particular risk in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers and others involved in food assistance (Ahlenback, 2021: 3; Fraser, 2020: 2).

Hunger and poverty lead to increased risks of sexual exploitation (Fraser, 2020: 5; GBV Sub Sector, Nigeria, 2019: 1; Cone, 2021: 5; Feather et al, 2020: 31). Women and girls in many communities are responsible for food in their families and the activities they undertake while searching for food can expose them to increased risk of sexual exploitation by men and boys in the local communities who often have greater control over resources and access to opportunities (Ahlenback, 2021: 5; GBV AoR & UNFPA, 2019: 43).

Fraser’s review of literature looking at food security and violence against women and girls suggested that food assistance may reduce instances of survival sex or ‘sex for food’ outside of the formal food distribution system (Fraser, 2020: 11). However, cases of sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers and officials providing food assistance have been reported in numerous humanitarian settings and “[h]umanitarian emergencies present increased risks of SEAH relating to food distribution and food insecurity” (Ahlenback, 2021: 6; Fraser, 2020: 3, 10-11; Pattugalan, 2014: 30). Food is a crucial asset, so those with access to it hold a position of power (Michels, 2013: 98). There are “there are deep-rooted power imbalances between the communities receiving aid and the aid workers they depend on for vital provisions” and “[p]ower imbalances can be particularly prevalent in humanitarian settings, where people lack the most basic services and their social networks are likely to become fragmented making them more vulnerable” (DFID Safeguarding Unit, 2018: 12).

A study of the risk of SEA and humanitarian assistance in Lebanon found that “SEA was *most frequently mentioned* in relation to interactions at the point of distribution; and also mentioned across all other points of the distribution cycle including transporting items home (*second-most mentioned*), finding out about aid (access to information/communication), during registration/verification exercises, and safely storing or maintaining aid” (Potts et al, 2020a: 3, 9-11 – original italics).

Risk factors

Gender inequality, poverty, lack of support systems, young age, displacement, and being a female head of household put women and girls in positions of reduced power in relation to those in control of food distribution, who are most often men, and increases their risk of SEA (Ahlenback, 2021: 6; Potts et al, 2020a: 3, 11; GBV Sub Sector, Nigeria, 2019: 1; GBV AoR & UNFPA, 2019: 24). A study in Syria, for example, found that “female-headed households are almost five times more likely than male-headed households to be asked for physical or emotional relationships in exchange for assistance” (GBV AoR & UNFPA, 2021: 28). In Lebanon, adolescent girls, widows, female headed households, and those lacking an income were identified as being most vulnerable to SEA (Potts et al, 2020a: 3). Adolescent girls, “have less

access to information and less decision-making power, may be singled out by those distributing aid, and are more likely to stay silent for fear of community or family backlash” (Potts et al, 2020a: 11). A 2008 report by Save the Children found that children as young as six were trading sex with aid workers and peacekeepers in exchange for food, with the most vulnerable to SEA being “orphans and children separated from their parents; those from especially poor families; children who are discriminated against; children displaced from their home communities; and children from families who depend on humanitarian assistance” (Csáky, 2008: 5, 7). Being in an unfamiliar area when attempting to access food aid can also increase women and girl’s vulnerability to SEA (Potts et al, 2020a: 8).

Looking more generally than the food security sector, a global evidence review of SEAH in the aid sector noted that risks of SEAH were related to a range of intersecting factors (structural, community, organisational and individual) (Feather et al, 2020: 6):

- **Structural factors:** Issues of power, patriarchy and poverty have a fundamental impact on risk of SEAH.
- **Community factors:** Where protective factors such as family and community structures are disrupted, e.g. during disasters and emergencies, risks of SEAH increase significantly.
- **Organisational factors:** Social norms and culture within organisations, as well as working practices, can have a significant impact on the risks of SEAH.
- **Individual factors:** Aspects of identity combine to increase risks of SEAH for particular individuals and groups, including age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, socio-economic status, migrant status, race and ethnicity, and isolation.

Case study examples of SEA relating to food

The following section provides some examples of reported instances of sexual exploitation and abuse linked to food insecurity and food assistance. This is not an exhaustive list, given the time available for the review.

In 2002, a sexual exploitation and abuse scandal emerged in West Africa, when a study by UNHCR and Save the Children found that children were being sexually exploited and abused by men in positions of relative power, as they felt it was the only option to receive food and other basic necessities (UNHCR & STC-UK, 2002: 3-4). A relatively prosperous 'elite' – including UN staff, peacekeepers and NGO workers – sexually abused and exploited children who were unable to complain for fear that their source of basic survival would be removed (UNHCR & STC-UK, 2002: 4-5). The practice of offering or withholding food and other aid for sex appeared to particularly occur in locations with large established aid programmes, such as the refugee camps in Guinea and Liberia (UNHCR & STC-UK, 2002: 4). A conspiracy of silence was found to exist allowing humanitarian staff to behave with impunity (UNHCR & STC-UK, 2002: 5). Factors contributing to the sexual exploitation of refugee children were found to be poverty, lack of livelihood options and consequent inability to meet basic survival needs; insufficient food rations/supplies; lack of information on basic rights and entitlements to food and other services; and pressure from parents and peers (UNHCR & STC-UK, 2002: 8-10). The sexual exploitation led to teenage pregnancies; girl mothers; reduced educational opportunities; sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS; and lack of safe sex (UNHCR & STC-UK, 2002: 10-12).

A 2006 study looking at the links between protection and gender in World Food Programme (WFP)'s operations in Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, and northern Uganda, found in all countries there were "reports of sexual exploitation and abuse by people involved in providing food assistance, including camp managers, volunteers, members of food management committees, teachers and WFP or partner staff" (Michels, 2013: 98). Women and girls were asked to provide sex in return for registration, food rations or school meals, and transport to and from distribution points (Michels, 2013: 98).

Research in 2004-2005 in Burundi by CARE, a WFP implementing partner, found that women were being sexually exploited by local officials responsible for putting together beneficiary lists of vulnerable groups, for targeted food distributions (Zicherman, 2006: 31). Those most at risk of this sexual exploitation were widows and single women without husbands or grown-up males in their families, who had no money to bribe village heads to be included on the list and no one to protect their reputations (Zicherman, 2006: 31). Exploitation took place in secret and was not discussed openly (Zicherman, 2006: 31). "Fear that they would be excluded from the lists was the main factor which led women to submit to requests for sexual favours" (Zicherman, 2006: 31). Women who had refused were removed from the beneficiary lists (Zicherman, 2006: 31).

In Mozambique, local community leaders were demanding money or sex in exchange for being put on aid distribution lists after Cyclone Idai in 2019 (HRW, 2019). In some cases, households headed by women were excluded from the lists which left women desperate to feed themselves and their children after weeks of hunger, and they were coerced into sleeping with local officials for food as their names were not on the official list (HRW, 2019).

In North-East Nigeria in 2019, women and girls' risk of SEA was increased as a result of their needs not being met fully by humanitarian assistance including "food (when it runs out and they have nowhere to get more until the next cycle), lack of condiments, fuel for cooking" (GBV Sub Sector, Nigeria, 2019: 2). Adolescent girls, female child headed households, orphaned girls living with care takers, were identified as being particularly at risk (GBV Sub Sector, Nigeria, 2019: 2). For example, in one of the camps parents give their daughter(s) out to spend the night with a man in exchange for one kilogram of rice (GBV Sub Sector, Nigeria, 2019: 2).

In Lebanon, displaced women and girls were asked for sexual relationships or to "please" aid workers sexually in exchange of food during food distributions (Potts et al, 2020: 8). Cash assistance, which is another way food assistance is being provided in Lebanon, also resulted in cases of SEA by workers registering women and girls for cash assistance or distributing automated teller machine (ATM) cards, and women and girls being denied assistance if they refused (Potts et al, 2020a: 8).

Studies in Syria found women and girls, especially widows, divorced women, and adolescent girls, were being sexually exploited by men delivering food aid on behalf of the UN and international charities (Fraser, 2020: 11; GBV AoR & UNFPA, 2021: 14, 28). In Lebanon and Syria, women and girls have been forced to 'marry' officials or men who distribute aid for a limited period of time through temporary Islamic marriage arrangements, including as little as a few days, and to multiple men, to access food and other necessities (Ahlenback, 2021: 6; Potts et al, 2020a: 10, GBV AoR & UNFPA, 2018: 31).

Research in refugee camps in Uganda in 2019, looking at different forms of humanitarian assistance and SEA found that SEA was most noted in relation to food distributions (Potts et al,

2020b: 3). Those registering women and girls for food assistance manipulated them at registration regarding the quantity of food they are supposed to receive, while aid workers or volunteers at distributions offered to help in distributing food more quickly (serving them first or taking them to the front of the line), promised more food, or made access to the point of distribution (i.e. by security guards), contingent on sex (Potts et al, 2020b: 7-8, 11). Small food quantity/portions were noted as a factor that “forces women and girls to seek other ways to access a larger quantity of food, which puts them at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers” and others (Potts et al, 2020b: 8). Aid workers were the most frequently identified perpetrators of SEA in relation to food, with some using their increased social and/or economic status as aid workers to exploit women and girls for labour and sex (Potts et al, 2020b: 12; see also UNHCR & STC-UK, 2002: 4). As they move around and work for different organisations, it become harder to hold those who commit SEA accountable (Potts et al, 2020b: 12).

Other news reports from Uganda in 2020 noted that the United Nations had launched an investigation into allegations of sexual abuse and the exploitation of vulnerable women centred on a World Food Programme compound and involving UN staff demanding sex from local women in exchange for food (Okiror, 2020).

In 2021, reports emerged of sex-for-food aid in Burkino Faso as local men, including community leaders involved in the registration processes, approached displaced women requesting sex or cash in exchange for registering them for food aid (Mednick, 2021; Wilkins, 2021). Such exchanges did not necessarily result in their names being added to beneficiary lists and some of the men may have “pretended to be involved in the registration process and capitalised off the lack of information around how to register for assistance” (Mednick, 2021). International aid agencies reported they had not received claims involving the registration process, although government and aid workers are aware of the problem, suggesting cases aren’t reported (Mednick, 2021). There was also not yet an inter-agency system to prevent and address sexual exploitation and abuse fully in place nearly three years after the crisis escalated and aid efforts intensified (Mednick, 2021). When asked about its responsibility to respond to the abuse claims or to try to prevent similar situations, WFP’s country director in Burkino Faso, said “the organisation wasn’t responsible for the registration process and was “not a protection agency””, despite WFP policy on sexual abuse and exploitation that “states that claims of abuse by partner organisations – which experts on the issue said should include the government managing the lists – must be reported through internal ethics and compliance systems” (Mednick, 2021). USAID, the largest donor to WFP, requires that it be informed of any suspected cases of sexual exploitation and abuse involving its resources, but it’s not clear whether it has been informed about these allegations (Mednick, 2021).

In Tigray, Ethiopia, in 2021, risks of increasing SEA were noted to be the scarcity of resources such as food due to the huge levels of acute food insecurity; restricted humanitarian access, and the high number of female-headed households (Cone, 2021: 6). There are reports that displaced women and girls have exchanged sex for food from host communities, while food distributions have been conducted in such chaotic ways that SEA can easily go unnoticed (Cone, 2021: 7). Restrictions on aid exacerbated the scarcity of resources and resulted in high staff turnover, putting women and girls at greater risk of experiencing SEA (Cone, 2021: 8). Lack of power, lack of protection from a male family member, and lack of livelihoods (due to limitations placed by social norms, movement restrictions, and childcare responsibilities) are some of the contributing

factors to female-headed households being particularly vulnerable to GBV and SEA (Cone, 2021: 9).

SEA risks beyond the formal food aid structure

SEA risks extend beyond the 'formal' aid structure to the everyday practicalities of how aid is accessed (Potts et al, 2020a: 3). For example, the provision of heavy and bulky food items that women find hard to transport home increases their risk of sexual exploitation as aid workers and others, such as taxi drivers, may offer to transport their food aid home in exchange for sex (Ahlenback, 2021: 6; Potts et al, 2020a: 10; Potts et al, 2020b: 11; GBV AoR & UNFPA, 2019, 43).

Sexual exploitation and abuse in relation to food is not only perpetrated by those officially involved in food assistance but also by other aid workers or peacekeepers operating in places where food insecurity exists. For example, during the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, burial teams in one village exploited girls by providing food and money in return for sex (Fraser, 2020: 5). In West Africa, peacekeepers were alleged to have sexually exploited children in exchange for money and food (UNHCR & STC-UK, 2002: 6). In Somalia, hunger drove women and girls to have sex with African Union Forces, while others were sexually assaulted after going to bases looking for food (HRW, 2014: 22, 29). French peacekeepers in the Central African Republic were accused of raping starving and homeless boys when they went looking for food, in a case exposed by a whistle-blower (Laville, 2015). The vast majority of SEA allegations involving peacekeeping operations is transactional sex, with reports of young girls doing it in exchange for food (Westendorf, 2016: 3; Csáky, 2008: 10).

Other gender-based violence risks to be aware of in these settings include "physical and sexual violence as well as harassment by men and boys at food distribution sites, and also when traveling to and from distribution sites by foot or transport", and domestic violence at home (Ahlenback, 2021: 5; Potts et al, 2020a; Pattugalan, 2014: 32).

Consequences of SEA related to food

Evidence from Syria has found that the fear and risk of sexual exploitation and abuse while accessing food aid has stopped women and girls, especially widows, from accessing this assistance, increasing their food insecurity and putting them at risk of other forms of gender-based violence (Ahlenback, 2021: 6; Fraser, 2020: 11; GBV AoR & UNFPA, 2021: 60; GBV AoR & UNFPA, 2019: 43).

Shame and stigma, as well as the threat or fear of losing access to the aid they so desperately need to survive, are part of the enabling environment for abuse that silences survivors of SEA (Potts et al, 2020a: 3; Potts et al, 2020b: 3, 14; GBV Sub Sector, Nigeria, 2019: 1; GBV AoR & UNFPA, 2018: 30; Csáky, 2008: 12; DFID Safeguarding Unit, 2018: 28). Sexual exploitation and abuse 'thrives on powerlessness, vulnerability and lack of awareness among those affected' (Potts et al, 2020b: 17). In addition, lack of clarity of or faith in reporting mechanisms, lack of support from families or communities, the normalization of SEA, and confusion around the identity of the perpetrator all serve as powerful deterrents to reporting sexual exploitation and abuse (Potts et al, 2020c: 2).

Sexual harassment within food security actors

While there are some reports looking at sexual harassment within the aid sector (e.g. Mazurana & Donnelly, 2017; Norbert, 2017), the sensitivities around it mean that the organisations are often not directly identified, nor whether the staff involved were working within the organisation's food security programming. However, some evidence was found from the World Food Programme.

An external review of the workplace culture and ethical climate at the World Food Programme found that 8% of respondents (641 people) indicated that they had experienced or witnessed sexual harassment at WFP (WTW, 2019: 3). Women indicated they have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment significantly more than men (13% of women vs. 5% of men) (WTW, 2019: 3). WFP respondents most cite examples of sexual harassment experienced or witnessed were: sexual comments or jokes about sex, unwarranted questions/remarks about marital status/sexual orientation/history etc., repeated requests for 'a date', and unwanted touching or kissing (Parker, 2019). "Rape, attempted rape or other sexual assault" was reported by three percent, or 28 people (Parker, 2019).

Cases of sexual harassment were experienced/witnessed twice as much by those working at headquarters, compared to those in the field (WTW, 2019: 26). "There are also some countries (Kenya 17%, Egypt 16% and Italy 14%), functions (Field Operations Management 20% and Resource Management (17%) and employee categories (Consultants 15%, International Professional staff (short term) 16% and International professional staff 21%) that report higher levels of sexual harassment" (WTW, 2019: 44). "Colleagues were identified as the group most likely to be the perpetrator of sexual harassment (58%) followed by Director Supervisor/ Manager (35%) and Senior Manager (30%)" (WTW, 2020: 48). Levels of reported sexual harassment at WFP were consistent, if not better, than surveys of other UN agencies and in other industries (Parker, 2019).

4. Incidence rates of SEAH in the food security sector

Feather et al's (2020: 5, 8) global evidence review on SEAH in the aid sector notes that there is widespread underreporting of SEAH across the aid sector, and much less evidence on SEAH perpetrated against communities and beneficiaries by aid workers than that perpetrated by peacekeepers. This chronic underreporting of SEAH is the result of complex reasons relating to "culture, gender inequality and power imbalances between abusers and the abused, as well as the inaccessibility of reporting mechanisms" (DFID Safeguarding Unit, 2018: 11).

In addition, there seems to be little systematic collection of SEA incidences or allegations relating or linked specifically to food security programming. Where organisations report cases of SEAH, they generally don't specify the programme the beneficiaries were involved in, making it hard to identify the risks food insecurity pose in relation to SEAH.

This is also the case for the UN reporting system, which is why only the total figures for the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN (FAO) and WFP and their implementing partners are detailed in Table 1 below, despite it being possible that SEA cases for other organisations also involved food (perhaps in the cases of transactional sex or exploitative relationships). More information on the types of allegation broken down by the nature and type of allegation and other information can be found in the links under the table (see also UN, 2021).

Table 1: Allegations involving WFP and FAO staff and implementing partners

SEA allegations	WFP	WFP implementing partners	FAO	FAO implementing partners
Total	77	113	8	1

Source: Authors own, adapted from figures in [Microsoft Power BI –Implementing partners](#) and [Microsoft Power BI - UN entities other than PKO/SPM](#)

5. SEAH risk analysis and management in the food security sector

The aid sector has developed more generic policies relating to preventing sexual exploitation and abuse or gender-based violence more broadly, but there seems to be little specifically relating to SEAH risk analysis and management in the food security sector. Ahlenback’s (2021: 8) review of the evidence of links between food insecurity and gender-based violence in conflict affected setting found that while there is recognition of the links between food insecurity and gender-based violence amongst food security actors, this is not necessarily focused on the specific risks around SEA and food security. She notes that there is not yet an “encompassing framework that can provide guidance to GBV and food security actors to work in a coordinated way to address GBV and SEA risks associated with food insecurity conditions before they happen, and mitigate the risks in situations of food insecurity” (Ahlenback, 2021: 8).

Various food security actors, including WFP and FAO have PSEA policies, guidelines, and risk mitigation checklists, but these are often more general and not necessarily specifically focused on food security related SEA risks. A brief overview of some of WFPs work on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) is presented below:

WFP’s work on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA)

As a result of the 2002 West Africa SEA scandal, WFP focused on activities designed with specific protection objectives in order to prevent further harm, while at the same time the IASC Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises was created (Martin & Kaethler, 2013: 111). Such activities included “(i) incorporating into all staff contracts the United Nations Code of Conduct and the United Nations-NGO Standards of Accountability; (ii) adopting a zero-tolerance policy for staff and partners; (iii) training all staff and partners in the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse; (iv) sensitization campaigns in camps; (v) participation in inter-agency committees to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse; and (vi) increasing the number of women staff” (Martin & Kaethler, 2013: 111).

During the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, for example, WFP was found to have “a clear commitment to protect beneficiaries of food distribution from sexual exploitation and abuse, with a clause included in all Field Level Agreements with partner organisations” (Fraser, 2020: 5; Shepherd et al, 2017: 26). Beneficiaries were “informed that assistance was free, and assessments were conducted to identify any risks of SEA and mitigate them” (Fraser, 2020: 5).

Use of women and girls' recommendations to reduce SEA risks during food distribution

There is some recent research that looks directly at reducing the SEA risks during food distribution in Uganda and Lebanon and the tools used to do this.

Empowered Aid is a three-year project that aims to reduce the risks that may lead to sexual exploitation and abuse in aid distributions that has worked in Uganda and Lebanon. In Uganda, a recommendation from the first phase of the research with women and girls was taken up by World Vision in their food distribution, which was increasing the number of female aid workers (staff and community volunteers) at Food Distribution Point 1 (FDP1) in Zone 3 of Bidi Bidi (Potts et al, 2021a: 3). In addition, trainings were held on PSEA and GBV core concepts with all World Vision staff and volunteers involved in the adapted distribution and at the other distribution sites (Potts et al, 2021a: 5).

“At the adapted distribution site, respondents of the household survey reported higher levels of feeling “free of fear” than at the non-adapted distribution sites (84% vs 77%), as well as lower levels of fear at the adapted site than the normal sites (3% vs 8%), and both were statistically significant” (Potts et al, 2021a: 8).

“Tools that best captured SEA-related risks as well as feelings of fear in aid distributions were the survey module and the adapted focus group discussion guide. SEA mitigation measures were well captured in the safety audit tool, and this complemented community feedback on mitigation measures captured through the focus group and survey tools” (Potts et al, 2021a: 9).

In Lebanon, Empowered Aid, used the recommendations made by Syrian refugee women and girls in phase one of the programme to distribute food parcels, although adaptations had to be made as a result of COVID-19 (Potts et al, 2021b: 45). In one location, aid recipients were organized to arrive in small groups of 20 people at a time, at pre-assigned times, while in the other, items were distributed directly to recipients' homes through a “door-to-door” process (Potts et al, 2021b: 45). “Household survey and point of distribution questionnaire respondents found both adapted distributions to be generally safe for women and girls, and findings from both tools also suggested that female and male respondents found the door-to-door distribution to be a good safety measure to prevent risk for women and girls during aid distributions” (Potts et al, 2021b: 48). Respondents to the household survey across both distribution modalities overwhelmingly reported “feeling safe” at all points during the food parcel distribution (99.3%) (Potts et al, 2021b: 73). “The safety audits found it was feasible to implement most safety measures recommended during both distribution modalities, such as clear methods for handling complaints, appropriate behavior of staff or volunteers, and timely information communication on distributions that reached all audiences” (Potts et al, 2021b: 49).

The point of distribution questionnaire was found to be a good at capturing SEA related risks in aid distribution (Potts et al, 2021b: 50). SEA mitigation measures were also well captured in the safety audit and household survey tools and “information from the survey and point of distribution questionnaire about where women and girls felt unsafe in the distribution process can be used to better target where in the process SEA mitigation measures should be implemented” (Potts et al, 2021b: 50). Sex-segregated lines at distributions points and an increase in the number of female distribution workers were the most commonly prioritised safety measures amongst the household survey respondents (Potts et al, 2021b: 75).

Recommendations from the literature for PSEA in the food security sector

Some recommendations from the literature relating to preventing sexual exploitation and abuse in the food security sector are presented below, including recommendations gathered directly from women and girls aid recipients themselves.

- Donors should “Include detailed requirements to prevent and respond to SEA in funding requests for all food distribution programming” (Ahlenback, 2021: 8; GBV Sub Sector, Nigeria, 2019: 4).
- As women and girls are best placed to understand the risks of SEA in the food distribution process it is important to “support the role and leadership of women’s rights organisations and women-led organisations in the food security sector and humanitarian response” (Ahlenback, 2021: 8; Zicherman, 2006: 32). This includes ensuring that women and girls are part of programme design (Potts et al, 2020a: 3).
- Food security actors should “learn from existing recommendations developed by women and girls on how to make food distribution processes safer” and minimise opportunities for exploitation and abuse by aid and non-aid actors (Ahlenback, 2021: 9; Potts et al, 2020a: 3; Potts et al 2020c: 3). These include (Potts et al, 2020c: 3; Potts et al, 2020d: 3; Potts et al 2021a):
 - Aid delivery at the household level may mitigate risks women and girls face when leaving their homes, if conducted in gender-sensitive ways, e.g. by at least two aid workers, with at least one being a woman
 - Pre-determined assigned times to groups of families to go and collect aid from distribution points to avoid overcrowding and disorganization that makes women and girls vulnerable to SEA
 - Provide transportation support for those traveling long or isolated distances to collect aid, especially for vulnerable groups
 - Closer supervision of distributors and workers at aid distributions points, including filing and following up on complaints
 - Ensuring more women aid workers, volunteers, security guards, and leadership structures are involved in aid distribution processes
 - Create and support formal or informal accompaniment systems and social support mechanisms for sharing share information between women and girls
 - Support women and girls to organize response mechanisms to assist each other when they feel unsafe or at risk (sounding an “alarm”)
 - Sex-segregated lines and facilities at distribution points
 - Increased community sensitization on SEA/GBV
 - Better information and communication of complaint and reporting mechanisms, so that women and girls have correct knowledge if they want to report SEA
 - More security at distribution points, including ATMs where women and girls collect cash assistance
- Food security actors should “build more effective SEA monitoring systems at food distribution sites” (Ahlenback, 2021: 9).

- “Frontline workers in food assistance interventions should receive training in how to respond to disclosures of GBV and SEA and refer survivors to GBV services in the area” (Ahlenbach, 2021: 3).
- “Senior management and safeguarding leads must take responsibility to reflect on their organization’s role in creating a ‘conducive context’ for abuse” (Potts et al, 2020a: 4).

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