HOUSE OF COMMONS

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector: next steps, HC 605

Tuesday 13 October 2020

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Mrs Pauline Latham; Navendu Mishra; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 131 - 160

Witnesses

I: Paisley Dodds, Investigations Editor, The New Humanitarian; Philip Kleinfeld, Deputy Africa Editor, The New Humanitarian; Nellie Peyton, West Africa Correspondent, Thomson Reuters Foundation; Robert Flummerfelt, Investigative Journalist and Independent Researcher.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Paisley Dodds, Philip Kleinfeld, Nellie Peyton and Robert Flummerfelt.

Q131 **Chair:** I would like to start the next session of the International Development Committee's evidence-gathering on sexual exploitation within the aid sector. I am incredibly grateful that we are joined by a group of journalists who worked for a year uncovering sexual abuse and exploitation in the DRC and recently brought that story into the news. Hopefully, that is going to have a real impact on changing the response that all victims and survivors of abuse receive and also, hopefully, will make NGOs realise that they do have a duty of care to the beneficiaries and that they need to put many more measures in place to prevent that exploitation and change the culture that we are unfortunately seeing too much of.

I would like it if the witnesses could introduce themselves, and then what I would like to do is go, particularly, to Robert, who I know was on the ground, to give an overview of the experience you discovered in the Congo. Could you just introduce yourselves and give us a little bit about your background and the part that you played in uncovering this awful situation that was happening in the Congo in relation to the Ebola crisis?

Paisley Dodds: Thank you for inviting us and for having all of us. I am Paisley Dodds. I am the investigations editor for The New Humanitarian. I started with TNH last year. For the most part, we have been doing a lot of similar investigations that are linked to SEA in some way or another. Prior to my time with The New Humanitarian, I spent more than 20 years at Associated Press, the last bit of which I was on the international investigations team, and I was also covering and reporting on sexual abuse and exploitation with the peacekeeper abuse in Haiti and the peacekeeper abuse in DRC and Central African Republic, during which time we also tried to trace back some of the alleged perpetrators in the Haiti abuse to Sri Lanka.

Philip Kleinfeld: My name is Philip Kleinfeld. I am a correspondent and editor at The New Humanitarian on the Africa desk. I have been based in the Democratic Republic of Congo on and off for quite a few years now. I was in Boma, which is the main eastern city near the outbreak zone, for the majority of the 2018-20 Ebola crisis, co-ordinating TNH coverage of Ebola and other stories as well.

I have been involved in the investigation more or less since the outset. Being based in Boma, I obviously heard the same rumours that a lot of us were hearing. I was working with Robert, Sam, Nellie, Paisley and the rest of the team on the story and, in parallel, I was also doing separate stories on corruption within humanitarian aid in the Congo, which sort of overlaps with this story and we might touch on at some stage.

Nellie Peyton: My name is Nellie Peyton. I am the west Africa correspondent for the Thomson Reuters Foundation. I cover west and

central Africa from my base in Senegal. I was one of a team of six people at the Thomson Reuters Foundation who worked on this investigation. Our initial role was to verify the findings of The New Humanitarian, which had done some initial reporting on the ground, and also to collect more evidence to back up those findings. That included interviews with women, aid workers, local police and UN officials from Congo to New York, and then, in keeping with our commitment to free, fair and impartial journalism, I also went to all of the organisations named in the report weeks before publication to present them with our findings and give them a chance to comment.

Q132 **Chair:** Can I just say, at this point, a huge thanks both to The New Humanitarian and the Thomson Reuters Foundation? The investment that your organisations made in getting the truth out there was considerable. It pains me that we are reliant on journalists to get these stories exposed, because I would really like them not to be there, but I am incredibly grateful to you and your colleagues and peers for making this happen.

On the ground, of course, was Robert, who I believe works as an independent journalist. I wonder whether you could tell us a little bit about yourself and then tell us what all of you uncovered recently.

Robert Flummerfelt: Yes, absolutely. My name is Robert Flummerfelt. I am an investigative journalist and independent researcher. I have been based in DR Congo and east Congo for about three and a half years now. At first I was working a little bit in the humanitarian sector and then I worked as a fixer and facilitator with a colleague of mine. I speak Kiswahili, which is a lingua franca in east Congo. Ultimately I transitioned into offering some of my own materials, with a particular focus on Beni and Beni Territory, not just in terms of the Ebola response but additionally mass killings in Beni Territory, which is another very sensitive issue.

In terms of the response, I was doing, as you noted, a lot of the reporting on the ground in Beni, which is one of a couple of major hotspots and major areas where the response was based. In terms of what we uncovered, in effect, we spoke with a total of 51 women who shared with us harrowing accounts of various forms of sexual abuse and exploitation from various organisations involved with the response, most frequently the World Health Organisation but additionally UNICEF, IOM, ALIMA, World Vision and the Congolese Ministry of Health.

Notably, most frequently, the perpetrators were described as being foreigners. Again, the majority of allegations were made against the World Health Organisation. There was definitely a variety of sorts of abuse and exploitation that were described to us, but, overwhelmingly, these were circumstances in which vulnerable women were interested in working in the response in some capacity. A number of women in the lower tiers of the response—people working as cleaners, cooks and so forth—were propositioned by men working in the response, who

demanded in various ways that the women would have to sleep with them in order to be employed.

This would take, as I said, a variety of forms and a number of circumstances. Women who were already working with the response were informed they would have to sleep with a man at the end of every month or sometimes at the end of every week if they wanted to remain employed or if they wanted to receive pay. In a number of circumstances, women were simply told to come and meet men at hotels where they could discuss employment opportunities. Then the men would say, "Come up to my room", shut the door, lock it and say, "You need to sleep with me right now". Additionally, in the majority of cases, the women would ask for the men to wear condoms and the men would refuse to do so.

Suffice it to say, there was a variety of forms of abuse and exploitation described to us, but, generally speaking, those were the sorts of things that we saw.

Q133 **Chair:** Did you specifically look at abuse happening with those who were employed by the aid workers or did you look at the beneficiaries of, say, healthcare from aid workers?

Robert Flummerfelt: It certainly appeared, at the very least under the auspices of this investigation, that what we were looking at was commonly called "sex for jobs". Overwhelmingly, the women who were victimised were interested in working for these various organisations. There were a number of circumstances in which either women would be made promises by an individual who would then block them and they would not end up working for the organisations ultimately, or women who were sick and who definitely could be termed beneficiaries described forms of abuse and exploitation. Overwhelmingly, we were looking at individuals who were trying to be employed by the response or indeed those who were ultimately employed by the response.

Q134 **Chair:** I will quote back what one of those employees said: "Knowing the poverty of the population, many consultants amused themselves by using sexual blackmail for hiring". Would you say that was symptomatic of what you found?

Robert Flummerfelt: Yes, absolutely. Another quote that I believe made it into the piece—as a matter of fact, this was a pretty common sentiment—was from a woman who was describing part of the reason this was so frequent among foreigners, in her judgment. She said, in effect, "If Congolese men were asking to hire you, they would often ask for a cut of your salary"—this is something TNH has documented in other investigations—"but the foreigners already had their money so they would ask for your body". That really touches upon the power dynamics, which were quite pronounced and certainly enabled this sort of abuse and exploitation. The power being in the hands of the individuals, particularly foreign expats working with these organisations, particularly WHO, enabled these forms of abuse and exploitation that were described to us.

Q135 **Chair:** There also seems to be the knowledge that, if someone complained, you could pay them off quite cheaply—quite cheaply for us but a lot of money for the people locally.

Robert Flummerfelt: I am not so sure I understand the question.

Chair: Another example—I do not have the quote to hand—was that if people complained about the abuse, there was an understanding that the aid workers could basically pay them some shut-up money so it did not go public.

Robert Flummerfelt: I know this is something that is, as a matter of fact, addressed in DFID's operational review. However, in the majority of cases or, as a matter of fact, in all of the cases, the women that we interviewed first and foremost felt generally victimised by the organisations as a whole and really did not have any faith that there would be good-faith efforts on the parts of said organisations to investigate claims that were made, if they were to come forward and make a claim.

Secondly, oftentimes women were not familiar with how it was that they could even lodge a formal complaint. As a matter of fact, no one who we spoke to was familiar with the hotlines that the response said had been put in place, among other mechanisms.

Finally, and certainly most importantly, women overwhelmingly described real crushing stigma, which prevented women from reporting these forms of abuse and exploitation to almost anyone. People would say, "I have not even told my mother about this". In many cases, women did not share this information with their spouses or even very close friends. This is another layer disconnected from those organisations, namely fear in communities of real, crushing and serious stigma that the women would have to live with for however long. There was a desire in many cases simply to move past this event and not lodge a report or launch an investigation for that reason.

Chair: I can only thank you for giving these women a voice. It is a really powerful thing you have done.

Q136 **Navendu Mishra:** Thank you to all the witnesses for making time for this session. I wish we were meeting in person, but, because of Covid, we are on Zoom. That will have to do. My first question is to the investigative journalists. What prompted you to begin the investigation into sexual exploitation and abuse during the Ebola response in the DRC?

Robert Flummerfelt: This is a question that would be better answered by Paisley Dodds, the investigations editor. She and indeed TNH had been following this story for a very long time in advance of my involvement in the reporting on the ground.

Very briefly, I would say that as early as February 2019, so rather early in the response, I had been doing unrelated reporting in Butembo. This

problem was articulated, but it was not by individuals coming forward saying, "I have been victimised in this way". It was articulated by community members as one of the main reasons they harboured resentment towards the response. Alongside militarisation and conceptions of Ebola profiteering, people would, in indirect ways, describe this sort of abuse and exploitation as one of the core reasons there was widespread community distrust and resentment towards the response.

As I said, however, the investigations editor, Paisley Dodds, would perhaps be in a better position to answer this question.

Paisley Dodds: As Robert pointed out, one of the interesting things about this investigation is that we had a lot of interlocking parts. We had been on the ground for a long time reporting on the Ebola response. At the same time, Philip was doing separate investigations looking at the framework of the aid sector in DRC. It was around the middle of last year that we started hearing rumours on the ground and tips that sexual abuse and exploitation was happening. That was also coming within the orbit, as Robert was saying.

In terms of the overall grievances that we were hearing from the community members, specifically with regards to the Ebola business, you had more than $700 million pouring into the region, and that was making a lot of the community members quite angry. The more reporting we did, it seemed like we could very well be dealing with a pretty widespread abuse problem. That is when we started putting plans into place, barring the restrictions of the pandemic, to do better reporting and to figure out how we could actually do a proper job, get the resources we needed from locals, keep in mind the security of the women who we were about to talk to, which was a big effort with this investigation, and explore the scale on which we had understood the abuse might be happening.

Q137 **Navendu Mishra:** Nellie, in the write-up you interviewed UN and NGO officials in the DRC. Is that correct?

Nellie Peyton: Yes.

Q138 **Navendu Mishra:** What prompted you to begin the investigation into sexual exploitation and abuse during the Ebola response? I believe you have recently interviewed UN and NGO officials, and I believe you joined the foundation in 2017.

Nellie Peyton: Yes, I did. This is exactly the type of story the Thomson Reuters Foundation hopes to bring to light. We cover the lives of people who struggle to live freely and fairly around the world, and women's rights is a huge part of that. Once we saw some evidence of what was happening, we knew that this was an important story. We knew that with our reputation and reach we could really make sure these women's voices were heard, so we were very excited to take part in this with The New Humanitarian.

Q139 **Navendu Mishra:** Could you tell us a bit more about how you undertook

the investigation?

Paisley Dodds: As I was saying a little bit earlier, a lot of these investigations have to do with uncovering rocks and following tip by tip by tip by tip. For us, that really started in early last year. Outside of the reporting and outside of figuring out the scale on which we needed to do reporting—that is why we also turned to the Thomson Reuters Foundation—a lot of that was figuring out what resources we needed on the ground. It required a lot of logistics; it required a lot of investment in terms of time and money; and it required a lot of thought in terms of how we would tell the story.

As Nellie was saying, one of the things that is difficult with these stories, especially if you are dealing with women who do not want their identities to be revealed, is making sure those women's voices are heard. A lot of effort went into—I am not sure whether you guys have seen this—allowing the women to tell the stories in their own words and then trying to put that into audio that was then used by a lot of broadcasters. I thought that was a powerful thing to do. Really, we just had to figure out the best way to tell the story and make sure the women's voices were heard.

Q140 **Navendu Mishra:** Robert and Nellie, do either of you want to say a bit more about how you undertook your investigation?

Robert Flummerfelt: Yes, absolutely. For my part, as I mentioned, there were these indirect reports, and furthermore the operational review had touched upon the fact that it seemed this phenomenon was going on. Importantly, there was CARE's gender analysis written by a consultant called Nidhi Kapur, which additionally touched on these issues. All of these reports that were coming were indirect. People would do focus groups and community members would describe the fact that this phenomenon was going on but there were not, per se, direct reports of people coming forward.

My colleague, Sam Mednick, reporting for TNH, went to Beni and was on the ground in October. With limited resources and limited time, he was able to speak to two women who came forward. It became increasingly clear to TNH that there was a lot more to this than just rumours and hearsay and so forth. Having had a lot of experience documenting the mass killings in Beni, when I came on the investigation I began communicating with trusted Beni-based researchers and civil society actors, many of whom articulated, "Robert, this is quite different from the massacres. Obviously the massacres are a sensitive issue, but it is going to be really difficult to find anybody who would be comfortable coming forward directly to talk about these sorts of things".

Ultimately, through a trusted Beni-based researcher, who sought to remain anonymous for security reasons, we uncovered the first three cases of women who were willing to come forward after assurances from her and from the civil society organisations. We sat down with them. We

had to make it plain that, first, our top priority was protecting their identities, respecting their anonymity and not revealing any details that may have betrayed their identities; secondly, that we are not working with WHO or any of these other organisations, which was a very important factor in all of this, and, thirdly, that we had that trust established with those researchers and civil society actors.

We conducted those interviews based on those understandings. Basically, at the end of those interviews, we asked them, "Do you know other people who have experienced similar forms of abuse and exploitation?" In every interview, the answer was yes. Interestingly, we tapped into an informal network of women who shared these experiences and only, seemingly, shared information about these experiences with other women who had experienced similar forms of abuse and exploitation in the same workplaces. After those women were able to share with other women who we were and, again, the reasons we could be trusted and so forth, we began uncovering a lot of cases. Again, consistently, in every case, the woman knew others who had experienced similar things often in the same work setting.

Navendu Mishra: Yes, trust is quite a big thing in investigations like this.

Nellie Peyton: Of course, the women we interviewed were the central part of the story, but there were also many other interviews, some of which made it into the piece and some of which did not, to back up their stories. We would not have published anything if we were not 100% sure it was accurate. This meant interviewing local police officers, who said they had heard about what was going on, and a local women's association, who had heard about what was going on. We talked to someone who was responsible for recruiting women for jobs at an Ebola centre, who said he knew what was going on. We talked to the drivers who drove the women back and forth from the hotels; we fact-checked every little detail.

There was a lot of behind-the-scenes work that was not just talking to the victims. The Thomson Reuters Foundation also had a reporter on the ground, who unfortunately we cannot name for security reasons. The Congolese researchers and reporters who worked with us were also really crucial to this investigation.

Paisley Dodds: Picking up on Robert and Nellie's point, one of the most interesting and disturbing things about this investigation, based on the reporting I have done in the past, was that it seemed like everyone knew about it. It was not just the women who shared the stories and put Robert and the Thomson Reuters Foundation reporter in touch with other women. It seems like we talked to so many aid workers who also knew what was happening. It was quite an open secret, and that raises a lot of questions in terms of why no one else spoke up. If everyone knew this was happening, why did no one in the aid community speak up about it?

Q141 **Chair:** Paisley, could I probe you a little bit more on that? You have been working in this field and exposing sexual abuse and exploitation for 20 years. With this particular example in the DRC, was it unique? It seems widespread and not just a few individuals. How has the acceptance that you could do this spread amongst aid workers? Were aid workers particularly attracted to the area because they thought they could exploit that situation? I know it is only your opinion on this, but I would really appreciate hearing it.

Paisley Dodds: There are a couple of things. In the cases of peacekeeping abuse I have reported on in countries like Haiti, the bases were quite spread out and people were not necessarily congregating in such a small place that you saw in Beni, for example. It is quite different when you look at widespread allegations of aid-worker abuse in a relatively small area versus a complex humanitarian operation that is spread out in various parts of the country. That is the first thing I will say. In this case, as Robert will tell you, a lot of the places the alleged abuse was happening were hotels that were frequented by aid workers. They were hotels in complexes where aid organisations had their offices. It was quite visible, according to the people who we talked to.

The other point I would like to make is that part of this investigation involved us going to more than 30 of the aid agencies and organisations. We did a survey. We asked them how many sexual abuse and exploitation claims they had received during the two-year period of the response, and the really shocking thing was the majority of them said they had not received any complaints. That points to what we found in the reporting in terms of the failures in the reporting mechanisms, but this also indicates that there likely were no whistleblowing complaints about what was happening. That is something new that we had not seen. It is certainly not something that we have seen in previous stories regarding sexual abuse and exploitation in terms of taking a hard look at the numbers of organisations that are involved in these types of humanitarian operations—in this case, obviously, in the Ebola response—and finding out what the numbers are compared to the numbers we found.

Philip Kleinfeld: I would also add that Robert has mentioned this operational review, which was a review commissioned by the British Government in the aftermath of a corruption scandal in DR Congo that TNH helped to uncover. This operational review has a line in it about sex-for-work schemes in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but it also goes into incredible depth about just how widespread sex-for-jobs and sexual exploitation of beneficiaries is around the Democratic Republic of Congo.

When Robert and the TRF reporter went to the Ebola outbreak zone, they spent three weeks on the ground cumulatively in one part of the outbreak zone in one relatively small part of the Democratic Republic of Congo focusing on one humanitarian response, and we got a really astonishing

number of claims. The scale that this is happening at, across the country, across humanitarian aid efforts, is quite frightening, if you are to extrapolate from what we have found.

I would add that it was a complex investigation to report, but we really used some old-fashioned journalistic methods. We did something most of the aid groups did not, which was we asked the women what happened to them. Between them, the aid groups spent $700 million, as Paisley said, or more. Every aid group and every UN agency worth its salt was in Beni, Butembo and Ituri for more than two years.

We had two reporters on the ground for three weeks, and we picked up far, far, far more cases than they managed to pick up in two years, so something really big is going wrong here. Our investigation is not just an investigation into sexual abuse and exploitation; it is an investigation into what policies those aid groups have on the ground and why they are failing. That is something we would like people to take quite seriously. Those reporting mechanisms are not working.

Q142 **Chair:** This Committee would like this to be taken seriously as well. Philip, was this wilful blindness?

Philip Kleinfeld: At some stage you have to ask quite serious questions, because, as every single panellist has said, every journalist who worked on this knew that this was happening. Any aid worker you would speak to said that this was happening. We have spoken to many of the top officials, often off-record, often anonymously, and they knew it was happening. At some level, you have to ask yourself why there was nothing proactive and nothing aggressive in more than two years beyond this preventing sexual abuse and exploitation network, which we can talk about at a later stage. It was a very technocratic approach that was not introduced until more than a year into the outbreak. They were not blind to it; they saw it. The question is whether they wanted to act?

The other issue here is obviously about whistleblowing. I am sure you have heard a lot about this in previous sessions. Do aid workers feel empowered to come forward within their own organisations? Do they feel disempowered by management, who cover this stuff up? Obviously people have not felt empowered to talk about it to aid groups, because no cases have been reported and it has come out through a team of investigative journalists.

Q143 **Mr Sharma:** Thank you very much to the panel members. I can see that this was not simple journalism. It was a very courageous initiative that you have all taken, and I really congratulate and thank you for this work you have done. I have visited this area, and I am familiar with the fact it is not easy to move around, ask all of those questions and find the right people, so thank you very much.

I know you have partially answered the question, but I still feel there is more to say on it. There must be many challenges that you face in

getting the local population and individuals to open up to you. What kind of challenges did you individually face when you were approaching the local population to ask these questions and trying to get them to be open with you? You have all done this kind of work. Philip can start and others can join.

Philip Kleinfeld: I will punt this straight over to my colleague, Robert. He was on the ground and is really the most experienced person to talk about this.

Robert Flummerfelt: The most important obstacle was probably the reality that in Butembo, in this corner of the Congo, where there was this massive Ebola response, there was indeed, as we mentioned, widespread and deep distrust of the Ebola response wholesale. All outsiders, indeed, on some level or another, are reflexively associated with the response. This culminated in formal and informal attacks against centres of the Ebola response for the reasons we have already addressed.

Apart from just having trust, which is the product of being in a place for a long time and having worked there on sensitive issues, one of the most important things I found in approaching communities is independence—

Q144 **Chair:** I hope we have not lost you, Robert. Nellie, would you like to tell us about your experiences while we wait for Robert's line?

Nellie Peyton: The experiences were different. The reporter we worked with on the ground was a Congolese woman, which may have helped some of the victims feel comfortable, although of course Robert also admirably gained their trust. It was negotiating which details and how much we would reveal about them. The women only felt comfortable talking if they knew we would not identify anything that would come back to identify them.

It is tricky, because of course, if the women wanted to name the perpetrators publicly, it might lead to more consequences or more follow-up, but these were women who spoke to us because they knew we would get this out there. They were angry and many of them said, "This has destroyed our lives, and we do not want it to happen to anyone else so we do want to make it public", but they were not ready to have their personal lives turned upside down by it.

Paisley Dodds: I would echo what Nellie and Robert said in terms of independence. The majority of the people we talked to probably would not have spoken to us and probably would not have opened up, had they thought we were not independent.

The other thing I would like to add is that we invested quite a bit of time in developing a relationship with each of the victims we talked to. These were not short interviews. In some of the cases, as Robert can speak to, we spent days just developing a rapport and trust with the women. From what I know of some of the investigations that the organisations have done in the past, they do not invest that amount of time in earning the

trust of the women. The amount of time we spent during the interviews was really key in developing that trust, and we needed to be nimble, because, quite frankly, we ended up spending a lot more time on the ground than we thought we would originally.

Philip Kleinfeld: I just want to add one more thing, which is taking the question in a different way. There was one thing that we had to get rid of as a set of journalists. The foundational principle of the Ebola response was that you had, on the one hand, this group of responders from the WHO to all the NGOs who were the heroes and, on the other hand, you had this irrational and unreasonable group of Congolese residents who were launching all of these attacks, did not believe Ebola was real and thought it was some kind of conspiracy. Journalists would fly in and out for two years reporting essentially the same kind of story.

These agencies did some remarkable work in overcoming a very complicated epidemic—I am not trying to deny that—but there was this narrative that was promoted by the agencies themselves, which journalists did a lot to repeat. We had to overcome that. We started off by looking at this issue of militarisation and the dependence on military escorts. We then looked into Ebola business and the fact that response funds were being siphoned off by local elites. We ended up looking at the widespread sexual abuse and exploitation. What we were able to do with that was to show that a lot of these mistrust issues were coming from the structural violence of the response rather than the local population.

Overcoming that narrative and thinking critically about this response was central to the whole work. I know that is something Robert also feels quite strongly about.

Q145 **Mr Sharma:** Thank you very much. I am sure Robert and others will have more to say. Why do you think these workers had not been reporting cases of sexual exploitation and abuse to the organisations implicated but they did speak to your investigation? I know there was mistrust and distrust in those individuals, but, in your own words, why did they come to you and open a complaint but never went to the organisations?

Nellie Peyton: One point that came across very clearly in our reporting was that the women did not know how to report. All of the organisations had in place hotlines, mailboxes, email addresses and various other mechanisms. UNICEF said they had 22 mechanisms in place to receive complaints. None of the women we talked to were aware of this.

Of course, we went looking for these women; we did not wait for them to come to us with these complaints. There are various reasons why the women did not come forward to the organisations, but a big part of it and a basic one was that they were simply unaware of these complaint mechanisms.

Robert Flummerfelt: If I may add something to that, as I mentioned before, there was this very important sense—this was pretty consistently the case—that women felt as though they had been victimised by the organisations as a whole. More importantly, they felt that the organisations as a whole represented a single block. Interestingly—we have touched on this throughout the panel—there was absolutely, per the accounts we received, an expectation on the part of the perpetrators of impunity, which enabled this sort of behaviour.

I know Nellie mentioned this, but, for instance, we conducted interviews with WHO drivers, who described being sent in marked WHO vehicles to pick up women and ferry them to hotels, where they were abused and exploited. Additionally, there was a case where a woman described being told by a foreigner working with WHO, through a translator, that she would have to sleep with him in order to get a job. In almost every case, if indeed these women were employed with these organisations, they described how after they were employed it became the talk of the workplace. Other men had been told by the perpetrator that this had happened, and in almost every case other men would approach the women and proposition them and engage in sexual harassment that some women described as so severe that they ultimately left the organisations.

Finally, as Paisley mentioned, a substantial portion of the accounts we received were of abuse and exploitation occurring at major hotels of the response, such as Okapi Palace. WHO responders called Okapi Palace their operational headquarters. There were rooms block-booked by the WHO and there were WHO offices at the Okapi Palace. Additionally, if senior officials were in town, this is where they would stay. Senior officials stationed there often would stay at Okapi Palace.

Looking at this sort of dynamic of an open secret and a culture of impunity, on some level it could honestly be said that this was happening, it seems, per our accounts, in front of everybody's eyes, yet these reports are not happening and there is not a robust commitment on the part of individuals in these organisations to pursue this problem, despite the fact it is seemingly quite evident. Put differently, it seems that the images we got from our interviews inside these organisations actually reflect the expectations of the women that we spoke to, namely that not much could be expected in terms of a good-faith and robust investigation of these things.

Paisley Dodds: Quite simply, the question is applicable to both: what is the incentive for the women to come forward and report such abuse, and exploitation and what is the incentive for aid workers to report it? In the majority of reporting, we found that there is a lack of incentive for either to come forward.

Philip Kleinfeld: I would add something on top of what my colleagues have said. Why did we receive these reports while the aid groups did not?

We went out and proactively asked them, which is more than you can say for a lot of aid groups. Their position on this is that they will sit back, and if the reports come in through their complaints system, something is happening; if they do not, nothing is happening. That is not really the approach we took.

Also, Robert speaks fluent Swahili. That is really important. If an investigation is about to take place in the DR Congo, how many of the investigators will speak the local languages? Often, they do not. Robert worked with local women. We cannot go into details about the TRF reporter, but suffice it to say that they had strong connections to the country. We managed to build our trust like that.

Finally, I would add that we went in and did the bulk of our reporting in July and August. The epidemic had actually already ended by that stage. That is important, because, by then, a lot of these women had moved on from their jobs and they were looking to move on in their lives, but they were in a position where they felt probably more empowered to tell their stories and less worried that there might be repercussions in terms of continuing the work they were doing.

Q146 **Chair:** Robert, you used the word "impunity", and that is something that UN staff often refer to—that they have impunity from local legislation. Did you mean it in that sense?

Robert Flummerfelt: No, I did not mean in that sense. I meant, simply put, an institutional culture of impunity, namely seemingly an expectation on the part of the perpetrators that they can send marked WHO vehicles to pick women up or they can bring women in front of everybody's eyes in hotels where there are offices, rooms are block-booked and senior officials are staying. That evidences the fact that, on the part of those responders, there was zero expectation that anything would be done on the part of those organisations to pursue what was, per the accounts we received, occurring right in front of their eyes. I did not mean in the legal sense, no.

Q147 **Chair:** Even though the UN says it has zero tolerance to sexual exploitation, you saw no evidence of that.

Robert Flummerfelt: Yes, that is an excellent rhetorical commitment; however, the reality we saw was very different. This was additionally reflected in conversations with senior officials and lower-level employees associated with the response. I do not believe that, collectively, we talked to anybody who expressed the fact they were not aware that something was going on, and yet, evidently, nothing came of that.

Q148 **Mrs Latham:** You have done an amazing job of exposing this, and it will have been the trust you built up with the women. That is sometimes quite difficult for men to do. The local language and all that sort of thing would help hugely. We have done a lot of work here, and we are assured by all the aid organisations that they have all of these procedures in place

and that the women can report what is happening. As you said, even if they have 23 different methods of reporting it, if they cannot read and do not have mobile phones, it is extremely difficult for these very vulnerable and often least educated women, who are being totally exploited.

In Britain, through IDC and through challenging Ministers, we have tried to do work on this and see what we can do. Obviously, the survivors and victims want something done about it. What can we do that would help those very vulnerable people get recompense for this? We need to act on this; we need to act on it seriously and challenge everybody. Did anybody give you names of perpetrators or did they not want to go that far? If you have names, we can help to stop those people getting jobs elsewhere by talking about it. If we do not know who they are, it is extremely difficult. What do the victims and survivors want us to do?

Robert Flummerfelt: I can say that, yes, in a substantial portion of the cases, names of perpetrators were indeed shared with us. However, the most important issue from our standpoint, of course, is victims' consent. Given the fact that these interviews were conducted based on the strictest assurances that no details would be relayed that betray the identities of the women we interviewed, that is definitely an important issue. Our first priority is respecting the wishes of the women as far as that is concerned.

This is not a monolith and not everybody wants the same thing. In an ideal universe, likely many of the women would indeed be interested in the sorts of processes by which they can receive counselling or some sort of compensation, but the people that we spoke to overwhelmingly articulated that, for the time being, they are interested in moving past this. They are concerned about the repercussions that would occur, should this information get out in communities and so forth. Based off our conversations, I do not believe it would be in their interest for communities to be teeming with WHO investigators who are going around and trying to dig up more information about this and so forth.

It is a little bit of a complicated issue, namely because the majority of these women basically have no faith in these organisations to follow up with a good-faith effort to assist them in any way.

Q149 **Mrs Latham:** I am sure they do not want people from the organisations that have produced the perpetrators to help them. I do not know whether something could be done with somebody neutral, but whether they would ever trust them or not is another matter. Nellie, did you want to add anything to that?

Nellie Peyton: First of all, you have probably seen that five of the seven organisations have pledged to launch internal investigations at this point as well as Congo's Ministry of Health. We are very interested to see what will come of that, and we will be asking them for regular updates.

In terms of what the victims want, some of them said, "We want this to stop; we do not want anyone else to have to go through this". There

were not specific things like, "I want compensation", or "I want the man to be arrested". As Robert has explained, it was more that they want this to be known.

Something else interesting that came across in my interviews with experts and researchers is that it does help to provide services for victims of sexual abuse, such as medical care, child support or psychosocial support, but those really have to be set up in advance so the victims know that this is available, and that will then possibly give them an incentive to come forward. At this point, however, maybe some of those victims will be reached with those kinds of services, but that was not the goal of why they came forward.

Paisley Dodds: Going to your question, the other real thing that could come out of this is establishing an independent panel of inquiry. That was done with the abuse that happened in Central African Republic, and a lot of the experts we have talked to are asking why, given the scale of this, organisations are not coming together and asking for that type of independent inquiry.

Philip Kleinfeld: Speaking for us as a group of reporters, we do not feel like our job is done here. Guterres has said he is going to launch an investigation, because WHO is sending someone to look around. We are going to continue looking into this and we are interested in what constitutes a proper investigation. What are the competencies of the investigators? What languages do they speak? How long are they there for? What does psychosocial assistance mean? How much psychosocial support do they get? It goes on and on and on. There are questions about impunity in prosecutions and where they can be prosecuted.

The focus needs to remain on this story from everyone, and we need to ask tough questions about what happens next and not be satisfied that aid agencies have committed, on paper, to sending someone out to have a look. That is not enough.

Q150 **Mrs Latham:** Yes, quite a lot of them have assured us before that they were looking into it and sorting it all out, and that it was all lovely now and there were no problems whatsoever. Can you tell me very briefly the most significant thing that you discovered during this during?

Philip Kleinfeld: It is hard to pick out one thing. I would echo what has been said the whole way along: there are a lot of cases of abuse in the sector that happen in kind of remote places and that involve a peacekeeper or a few, but this happened in an area that was teeming with aid workers and awash with response funds. Everyone saw it happen; nothing was done. That for me is the most significant finding of this story.

The patterns of abuse are horrific, but how could this go on for so long? Why did it take us to investigate it? Again, it is not quite like the Oxfam

scandal; not as many people knew about the Oxfam scandal. A huge number of people knew about this.

Q151 **Mrs Latham:** That is not quite true. When I started talking about this before the Oxfam scandal, I was hearing that, like was said at the beginning of this conversation today, everybody knew about it. I do not necessarily mean Oxfam, but everybody knew that aid workers were involved with women and abusing them, but nobody was doing anything about it because what was the point? They just all accepted it, and I was so shocked, and I continue to be shocked when all these organisations apparently have these wonderful procedures in place. I am sure we will be asking many people lots of questions about this.

Paisley Dodds: To your point, my takeaway from this speaks to what you were just saying. It is disturbing to me that we keep covering humanitarian operations over and over again and we keep seeing the same thing. It is not as if this was the first time that there has been an Ebola response, even though we all understand that the circumstances were quite challenging. I would say that was the first thing.

The second thing, which we never really dug into, at least not in the stories I have worked on, is the fact that so many of the responders in this case were predominantly men. WHO, for example, was more than 80% men. One question I had throughout this is, "Can that be changed?" All of the allegations were against male responders. Going into this, we did not actually know the gender and power dynamics as much as we did certainly after the reporting was done.

Q152 **Mrs Latham:** It has been said before that there are too many men in powerful situations, but there are also far too many men who cannot keep their trousers done up.

Nellie Peyton: I would echo what the others said. The scale was really shocking. Women said that this was the only way to get a job in the response. Several women told us that.

There was also the fact that, in talking to officials and experts, several of them said that, given the context and the past experiences, these risks really should have been known in advance. This was almost predictable. We did not really go into detail on this, but we saw that the network that was set up to prevent sexual abuse was started more than a year into the response. It had a section where it said that the lesson learnt from this response was that you need to start preventing sexual abuse from the very beginning. Yes, that is a good lesson to learn. Many people said that it really should not have come to this to put these kinds of basic prevention measures in place.

Robert Flummerfelt: Just echoing what everybody on the panel has been talking about, for me the most important finding or takeaway was the fact that this so clearly was not a case of a load of bad apples spoiling the bunch. It is bad apples coupled with negligence, when looking at, for

instance, the failure to set up the PSEA network. Then, remarkably, as I touched on previously, we have the kind of impunity we saw, where this is an open secret and it is happening out in the open and nothing is being done about it.

That situates the problem away from just the perpetrators themselves and those bad apples and more towards an institutional or structural level in terms of what sorts of structures were in place in these institutions that facilitated and abetted abuse and exploitation on this scale. That is the most important takeaway.

Q153 **Mrs Latham:** It has been suggested to us in the past that aid is where perpetrators go now, because the church is cleaning up its act. In Britain, the scouting organisation was very bad at one time, and they are cleaning up their act. People who are in education and care are being cleaned up. Is aid somewhere where people feel they can go anonymously and abuse women because they are never going to be found out?

Chair: Philip, you are nodding.

Philip Kleinfeld: Yes. It attracts that sort of person, yes. In my experience, it attracts that sort of person.

Mrs Latham: That is so awful, because it is the most vulnerable.

Robert Flummerfelt: Quite importantly, as well, the power dynamics we discussed are very important, in the sense that this particular scandal entailed allegations made mostly against foreigners who, really by design, had very transient ties to the communities and yet had a lot of power over said communities. Those communities are of course, by definition, very vulnerable. It really is almost like a perfect cocktail, a perfect mix for something like this to occur.

Q154 **Chair:** Paisley, can I just pick up on the point you made that 81% of the World Health Organisation's staff in this response were male. Is it normal to be that high a percentage of men? I have to say that, when you think about humanitarian stuff, you tend to think it would be gender-neutral.

Paisley Dodds: To be honest with you, it is the first time that we dug in and did this kind of survey where we look at the gender component of all of the organisations that were involved in the response. The short answer is that I do not know. I can tell you what I have seen on the ground in my previous reporting experience. For the most part, the people in decision-making positions were mostly men. Whether that is changing or not, I am not sure. I would defer to Philip, Robert and Nellie.

Chair: As a Committee, we will try to do some research into that and find that out.

Q155 **Mr Sharma:** What shocked or surprised you most during the investigation?

Nellie Peyton: I would say the points we have already mentioned, but what shocked me most was the interviews with people who worked for these organisations who knew what was happening, particularly the WHO. You mentioned that quote at the beginning where they said, "Knowing the poverty of the population, many consultants amused themselves by using sexual blackmail for hiring". It is just this very blatant understanding that they had total power over these women. We did not speak to the people who actually did this, but we heard from people who said, "I know my colleagues were doing this". That was the most shocking to me.

Philip Kleinfeld: We have said that the reporting systems are not very good and do not work. That was something that was covered in depth in the operational review, but I was still very surprised by just how few cases were reported to the aid groups over the course of two years.

Paisley Dodds: Picking up on Philip's point, it always helps to have a data set to compare your reporting to. One of the frustrating things for us, which goes to the point Nellie was talking about, was that the organisations we surveyed either said that they did not have any reports of sexual abuse or exploitation during that period of nearly two years or they would not tell us. That goes back to your question about whether the aid sector attracts a certain type of person because it is not as accountable as other sectors. That spoke volumes to me. If an organisation cannot tell you the number of sexual abuse and exploitation claims they are collecting in a two-year period, there is a big problem. That has nothing to do with protecting the privacy of the people who are coming to them.

Robert Flummerfelt: What was especially shocking to me was beginning to discover the patterns of abuse and exploitation on the part of perpetrators that were described to us. There were a number of remarkably similar and seemingly entrenched approaches to engaging in this sort of abuse and exploitation. A simple example is recruitment fairs, where community members would go to see whether their names were listed among the people who would be employed by the response. We received a substantial number of accounts of individuals working with the response who were targeting visibly disaffected women who clearly did not find their names on the list. They approached the women and said, "Give me your phone number and we will meet up at a hotel and we can talk about getting you a job".

These sorts of patterns demonstrate that there was a set of perpetrators who had worked out a well-oiled machine for engaging in this sort of abuse and exploitation in the response. That was especially shocking to me, yes.

Q156 **Mrs Latham:** I was going to ask you a question about sexual exploitation and abuse and whether it could be taking place in humanitarian responses in other areas of the country, but I suspect you are all going to

say yes, probably. When you challenged the UN agencies and the aid organisations what was their reaction? Did they just say, "It happens", or, "That is shocking; that should not be happening"?

Nellie Peyton: We contacted all of the agencies in early September to tell them what we had found. The general response was that they did not know. They did not deny anything. They said, "We did not know this was happening". Most of them said that. As Paisley mentioned, the WHO did not tell us whether or not they had received any reports of this during the response. Two of the organisations committed right away to investigate. For some of them it took a little longer. UNICEF and IOM, after our story came out, committed to investigate.

Another thing we asked them was, "Why do you think women did not use your reporting mechanisms? Are the methods you are using, such as hotlines, ineffective?" Many of the agencies told me that they know this is a problem. They said, "We know underreporting is an issue. We are trying to find ways to do better". Several of them said, "This reporting shows that we need to do more".

Q157 **Mrs Latham:** Paisley, did you want to add anything to that, or was it the same reaction when you spoke to them?

Paisley Dodds: It was pretty much the same thing. There is one thing I would note. We all know UN peacekeeping operations are not without their problems. However, that said, the peacekeeping operation seems to have done a better job of act tallying numbers of SEA allegations. The same cannot be said with the UN agencies or NGOs, which I found to be quite surprising. When you try to push back on them and try to get those numbers, it is frustratingly silent sometimes.

Philip Kleinfeld: One thing to add that is important, which we have not touched on, is that, as we have mentioned, there was this network set up. One of the things the co-ordinators of the network tried to do was to ask all of the aid agencies, the 30 main aid agencies, to give them information on how many abuse cases they were seeing so the co-ordinators could have an idea of the patterns of abuse, where it was happening and how many people were involved. The aid groups did not want to do it. They were not getting much information—we have already established that—but they were very reticent to share what they did have in a way that might have allowed more senior officials in the response to have a bird's eye view of where all the cases were and then to know what to do about it.

Q158 **Navendu Mishra:** With this question, I would like to go to Paisley first. Could I ask about the reaction to your investigation from the aid organisations and UN agencies that were working on the ground?

Paisley Dodds: Like Nellie said, the majority of them, including the Congolese Government, have promised investigations. They say they are shocked by the allegations. We have heard that once or twice before on previous investigations. We had quite a bit of reaction in DRC itself. Quite

a few people were actually talking about the investigation after they heard it on the radio. At this point, essentially what we are hearing is that they are shocked by the allegations and they are pledging to investigate, although, as I said before, none of them, to my knowledge, is calling for an independent inquiry.

Q159 **Navendu Mishra:** An independent inquiry would be the best place to start, you would have thought, regarding the claims that have come out. My next question is broad, so please feel free to come in on it. Do the findings of the operational review undertaken by Adam Smith International corroborate or resonate with what you heard?

Philip Kleinfeld: TNH obtained the draft version of that operational review in May, and so we had an early look at it and published a piece on it. The operational review went into considerable depth about why reporting mechanisms fail. Women are bought off by perpetrators; they are silenced; they suffer stigma and shame. It looked at the complete impunity for perpetrators and it said that this kind of stuff happens all over the country. As I said previously, having read that, it really bolstered our decision to put more resources into that investigation. We read it and we were like, "Gosh, this is even more confirmation".

Having read that, we went to Beni and Butembo. We went to this one particular part of DRC and we showed how all of these issues mentioned in the operational review played out in one particular area. This is what I said at the beginning. We could have looked at two areas in the Ebola response. Congo is a big country. There are other humanitarian contexts in the country, or other humanitarian contexts and crises. It just shows how big an issue this is. We spent three weeks on the ground with two reporters, and we uncovered widespread allegations.

Q160 **Chair:** I put my final question to an FCDO Minister this morning. The Department's new terms and conditions for employment state that sexual relationships with beneficiaries are "strongly discouraged", not that they are banned or that it is gross misconduct, just that they are strongly discouraged. Philip, you alluded to organisations not doing enough. Does it surprise you that FCDO, now the biggest donor to WHO, just strongly discourages its staff members from having relations?

Philip Kleinfeld: It seems like a problematic stance to have, yes. The power dynamics at play when you are in these contexts are enormous. The idea that you could have a free and fair sexual relationship with a beneficiary is very complicated and difficult. That does not strike me as a particularly robust position, though I have not seen it yet so I cannot comment further.

Chair: Thank you. I am aware I was putting you on the spot with that.

Philip Kleinfeld: That is fine.

Chair: I will end this session by saying that this Committee is hugely, hugely grateful to all of you for the work you have done, to all of your

organisations for supporting you and to the people on the ground who gave you their confidence, trust and stories.

Two things have been very clear for me. First, if you want to find cases of abuse and sexual exploitation, you have to ask people; you cannot expect them to come to you. Just by being open and giving people confidence, the number of cases you found in a relatively short period of time is symptomatic of what we could experience. The other thing is—Nellie, you said it—that you ought to be working on the assumption that there is the possibility for sexual exploitation in these completely unequal relationships within aid organisations and beneficiaries. You ought to be preventing it from the very beginning.

I look forward, with optimism, to the aid sector as a whole learning to shift its culture and address what is going so horribly and repeatedly wrong. If I can answer to Philip, I am really grateful that The New Humanitarian and Thomas Reuters Foundation are going to continue working on this, and so is this Committee. If we can work together to expose this, we will make the sector better. Let us stop this once and for all. Thank you all very much for your time.