

International Development Committee at the UK House of Commons

Inquiry into Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector: next steps

Further to our verbal evidence on Tuesday 6 October 2020, Shaista Aziz and Alexia Pepper of NGO Safe Space submit this written evidence as part of our witness testimony.

Introductions

- 1. Your experience of addressing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment in the aid sector.*

We experienced deep resistance to acknowledging and addressing sexualised and racialised abuse within the aid sector, and witnessed multiple workplace harms towards marginalised people, ourselves included.

- 2. What successes have you had in helping to tackle sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment?*

We have accessed power held by Parliament and journalists and media platforms to expose the complex nature of sexual violence and harassment in aid. As a result of our work, we have enabled those directly impacted to be heard and directly intervened to remove harmful people from position of power (eg Chair of Save the Children Intl, previously of Save the Children UK), damaging campaigns from public view (eg Amnesty International) and aired discourse at conferences and in academic spaces that has previously been suppressed. We have contributed to media debate, Parliamentary and Charity Commission inquiries and given a voice to those who are not sufficiently protected to be able to speak for themselves.

Culture

- 3. How would you describe the 'culture' of the aid sector?*

The culture of the aid industry is a direct result of the neo-colonial structures on which it is built, exploiting entrenched European & North American white supremacy and patriarchy to gain control over others. The behaviours exhibited by senior management are self-interested, entitled and dominant. As international charities and UN bodies have relied increasingly on marketing to raise funds to pursue "growth strategies" as well as seeking to influence government policy in all countries, a dangerous mix of functions has come into contact with humanitarian aid and development work. This has allowed white men and women who uphold patriarchal values to thrive, even as they call themselves feminists. It is this culture which has allowed sexual harassment, abuse and violence against staff members and people in INGO & UN countries of operation to flourish, combined with racism and Islamophobia.

- 4. Do you think aid organisations are working hard to make their culture more open and inclusive?*

It is our experience that much talking about change has dominated this crisis, many policies have been written and people who are not deeply rooted in representation, anti-oppression and human rights work have been given contracts and consultancies. An open and inclusive culture can only be brought about by serious, slow and deliberate work to dismantle the root causes and structures, which we have not seen happen. Women working in countries of operation have not seen any tangible benefit of all this “work”, and staff in Europe are still encountering processes that do not come from a feminist lens when reporting sexual violence in the workplace.

There is a severe lack of accountability for those who perpetuate workplaces and cultures that do not reform, and whilst staff are more vocal in their expectations, there is still resistance from an older, less well informed generation of senior managers, CEOs and Board members.

5. Do you have any recommendations for how aid organisations can improve their culture?

Hire intersectional feminists to fully review all operations, functions and practices within the aid sector, with freedom to talk to all staff and those who interact with aid work in countries of operation. Ensure Boards of trustees are paid for their time, to improve representation by race, gender, class and migration status. Fund a fully independent aid ombudsman to oversee all complaints about their work, in any country.

Reporting abuse

6. What is the typical experience of someone who reports abuse? Does it make a difference whether they are an aid worker or beneficiary?

What makes the greatest difference to reception of a complaint is the race, nationality, gender, sexuality and disability status of the person who has been mistreated or abused. Those who are deemed by society to hold the least power are given the least access to justice by this sector. It is a mirror of our wider global society and political structures. With a deeply racist, misogynist and Islamophobic Prime Minister in power in the UK, we cannot expect that the aid sector and all of its private consultants, contractors and donors behave any differently.

7. How are they treated by the organisation?

As a problem, with a very limited display of humanity and compassion. It is usually the person reporting abuse who is made to feel that they are the problem. This remains the case after the body of “work” undertaken since the public whistleblowing of Oxfam and Save the Children in February 2018. Women are left extremely traumatised by their experiences of reporting, and tell us that it was not worth it from a mental health perspective. Access to socio-emotional support is still almost absent, perpetrators are fired then re-hired as contractors, and those who experience multiple oppressions are marginalised further.

8. How are cases of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment handled by aid organisations? Have you seen any improvements?

As above

Accountability and oversight

9. *Are the majority of perpetrators local or international staff? What more should the UN and other aid organisations do to make sure that all staff and volunteers from becoming perpetrators?*

Abuse happens because of power dynamics and inequalities – there is no equation where perpetrators are more or less likely to be of certain races or nationalities because patriarchy is global. What we have witnessed is that more men of colour have faced accountability for their behaviours than white men.

10. *The UK government has more or less dismissed the suggestion of an independent ombudsman, so how should oversight of the sector be implemented?*

This discussion can only be raised when we have a new government in power, because the current government is anti-accountability and openly racist and Islamophobic. Without a serious government at the helm to support a funded independent ombudsman and during a global pandemic, there are no pathways for the UK government to play a role in this work. In fact, it would be deeply harmful to human beings for it to do so.

UK government action

We witness the oppression and human rights abuses enacted by the current UK government, across the UK and beyond, and we are not prepared to waste our time giving advice to such a function. We continue to uphold intersectional feminist values in all our work, and to witness that it is impossible for the aid sector to be able to reform given its rootedness in Empire, racism and patriarchy. As the global economic outlook exacerbates under the current pandemic, it is unlikely that the sector will be able to fund the deep work needed to dismantle harmful structures, and we advocate for the UK government and political parties to invest in systematic reparations of stolen wealth in place of the aid industry.