

Submission to UK Parliament inquiry on sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector: next steps

Introduction

... is a membership organisation and is a recipient of UK's foreign aid and development fund ...

The Aftermath of Reporting Sexual Harassment

In 2019, I was sexually harassed by a colleague. I reported the incident, it was eventually investigated, and my allegations were substantiated. I was informed by Human Resources that I am not privy to the disciplinary action taken against my perpetrator, but as of today, he is still employed at

Not firing a proven sexual predator means ... has chosen to protect the perpetrator and he remains free to seek employment within the ... network and the larger aid sector when his current contract with ... ends. [Just as the alleged perpetrator Gerald Anderson formerly of American Red Cross was able to seek employment at Save the Children previously, reported in 2018.](#)

While mine was the only one on record for full investigation, I know for a fact that this particular perpetrator is a repeat offender of this conduct against many other women. Women that do not feel empowered or confident to report or move forward with a full investigation because they do not trust any of the staff support or services handled by Also out of founded fear of retaliation and risk loss of livelihood. After reporting, I faced rumour milling, slut shaming and invasive verbal queries from internal and external colleagues of my reporting. This forced me to avoid social gatherings, self-isolate, and live in a constant state of paranoia of not knowing who to trust in

And sadly, this perpetrator is only one of many in [this] ... network ... that exposes these predators to vulnerable communities. There are many other well-known repeat offenders that the organisation similarly protects.

Initially I engaged a barrister, but I soon came to realise that the legal route means I can only seek monetary compensation. I don't want money for myself. I want to see ...'s leadership, and the commitment of the larger ... leadership, to accountability and uphold their "zero tolerance" promise. I also want to see changes in the way ... handles these instances to be more survivor centred and justice oriented.

Highlights on Grave Mishandling by ...

While ... maintains that it has done to the best of its capacity and claims that it has upheld their mandate of zero tolerance to the fullest, this submission outlines grave mishandling in their response to my case that they have vehemently defended in their legal letter to my lawyer:

- ... did not put the perpetrator on immediate administrative leave. There were many instances when I was cornered in the office, and also forced to have work meetings with him

after he knew I reported him. Management said I could work from home but proper support was not given to ensure optimal work from home environment. They had also suggested that I'm the one to go on leave instead and use my own allocated annual leave. I was not offered additional leave days.

- ... shared my mission travel data with the perpetrator through an open administration email. I was travelling to ... , and he to ... , we were to be at the airport at the same time because his flight was only 45 minutes before mine. He had access to my pick up time from home, estimated time of arrival at the airport, the terminal number, and my flight number too. Upon seeing this email I had to upgrade myself to business to gain separate entry at the terminal for business/first class travellers. And I sat in the business lounge in fear and anxiety the entire time, waiting for the last possible moment to board. After that incident, I cried and I told everyone relevant (management, HR, Legal, Admin) how I felt very unsafe. I requested for my future travel data to be separated from everyone else's. It happened twice again after with the perpetrator also in the same email thread. In their response to my lawyer, ... does not take responsibility for this, indicated that it was unfortunate and thanked me for alerting them anyway of this gap.
- ... denied me counselling after the fact and specific to my sexual harassment trauma. They claim they gave me counselling but those were existing packages already granted and approved prior to this sexual harassment case generally available to all staff. In the legal response letter ... even portrayed my mission debrief in February 2020 as counselling. While they claimed I did not request additional counselling. I have the email I wrote to the ... Ombudsperson to which s/he later responded verbally that the ... [leadership executive] denied the request.
- ... refuses to tell me what, if any, disciplinary action was taken for which they cite policy. This policy is not justice oriented; an accuser has a right to know the outcome of the process and trauma they've had to endure, particularly where they are among the rare few who actually succeed in proving their case despite everything weighted against survivors.
- ... HR told me to take comfort from my allegations being substantiated. This is a terrible and dismissive consolation tactic, without real sense of justice or accountability, that doesn't take into account the entire trauma I endured. I didn't need ... confirming to me that I wasn't lying.
- ... states I was free at the time of the incident to make a police report and chose not to. This option was not discussed with me at all nor was I aware of it being an option. They kept telling me to "trust the system" when I first reported. And then they decide to victim-blame for not taking the criminal law route against their official.

Leadership and Other Concerns

After exhausting all internal channels of engagement with ..., I have now made the very difficult decision to go public with my personal experience because of the organisation's continued defensiveness and denial of their mishandling of the case. I will proceed with engaging with the membership of ..., donor governments and the media.

This is, and has always been, bigger than a single perpetrator issue. This is an issue of ...'s leadership, the organisational culture, lack of proper survivor-centred processes and outdated self-serving policies:

- ...'s anti-harassment guideline is from 2007.
- ...'s online security training for all staff continues to have a component where the victim is blamed for not being culturally sensitive by their choice of dress, and states that this could affect the security of their persons.
- ...'s [prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse policies] are theoretical and are not accompanied by concrete process flows, violating predictability and transparency rights in due process.
- ...'s in-country HR team members are not fully sensitised, and I myself have heard some very disturbing discriminatory remarks while engaging with them. Reports on these experiences were not met with action.

Engagement with donor ... entities

To date, I have contacted six (6) ... members that orchestrate funding towards

The range of responses and timeline to react to my attempt at internal whistleblowing vary.

While all of these entities may follow up internally through their own channels of communication and legal within ... to enquire on the issue, I would like to clearly indicate here that many have been going along with the pretence that setting up alternative reporting routes can solve these larger issues, and that international organisations are able to regulate themselves. On both these accounts, experience shows conclusively they cannot.

Next Steps

Moving forward I don't wish to be a passive bystander since I've made this very difficult decision in going public, taking the risk that I may never work again in this sector. I will continue to engage with relevant government agencies, the larger ... membership network and the media.

I seek to heal myself through fostering connection to other survivors, having my voice heard meaningfully, through counselling, legal representation and political engagement such as this current submission. But these are decisions that I am empowered to make and options I am able to obtain through my position of privilege. I ask that considerations be made for people who do not have the luxury to access all these forms of support through their own means.

My case is only one of many, because organisations such as are continuously allowed to handle cases through inconclusive policies that allow great discretion ... and arbitrary judgments by the people operationalizing them. Therefore, there needs to be funding allocation and political support to:

- engage directly with these victims and survivors to identify the precise kinds of support, services and changes they would like to see happen;

- engage and fund independent organisations that provide such comprehensive support services to these specific subset of victims and survivors in the form of individual and/or group counselling, mediation, and employees' rights education;
- appoint an external body that works with these aid/development actors to audit and ensure they not only have policies in theory to tick boxes of funding requirements, but also in their ability to prove actual and concrete process flows by different scenarios (harassment, sexual harassment, abuse, discrimination) with impact assessment.
- ensure fund recipient organisations have properly trained staff on SGBV misconduct and abuse survivors sensitivity, do's and dont's of interacting with survivors (and not only through online training created and provided by the organisations themselves).

I hope that this Panel will consider this submission seriously, as well as trigger an official investigation of ... overall culture and response in this case and others. I also kindly request that you consider funding sanctions against them until they are able to fulfil various markers that are to be created from the above discourse.

I thank the UK Parliament and the FCDO for providing the opportunity to survivors to submit their testimony in this inquiry, and I hope that this in some way will contribute to the larger discourse towards eradicating this endemic issue in the aid and development sector.

13 August 2020