

## 7.7 Sexual violence

Sexual violence is one of the most serious incidents that aid workers can face and may have lifelong consequences for survivors. Aid organisations have a duty of care to protect their staff from threats of this nature, whether they emanate from within or outside the organisation. While the role security staff play in managing this type of incident will vary by organisation and will likely have to be managed in collaboration with other colleagues (particularly HR and other specialist staff), security risk management can play an important role in preventing, preparing for and responding to incidents. This chapter presents key definitions and actions for security professionals to consider, including how to take a survivor-centred approach when responding to this type of incident.

### 7.7.1 Definitions and scope

Sexual violence is any act of a sexual nature, or attempt to obtain a sexual act, that is unwanted or forced. Sexual violence can be perpetrated by any individual against another (regardless of their relationship) using physical force, coercion or threats. Sexual violence includes scenarios in which offenders exploit an environment that is coercive, or an individual's inability to provide authentic consent.<sup>102</sup>

The line between sexual harassment and coercion or assault can sometimes be hard to draw, but it is important to understand that these incidents often co-occur and can be seen as existing along a continuum that covers acts from minor (e.g. sexual comments) to severe (e.g. rape).<sup>103</sup> See Figure 12.

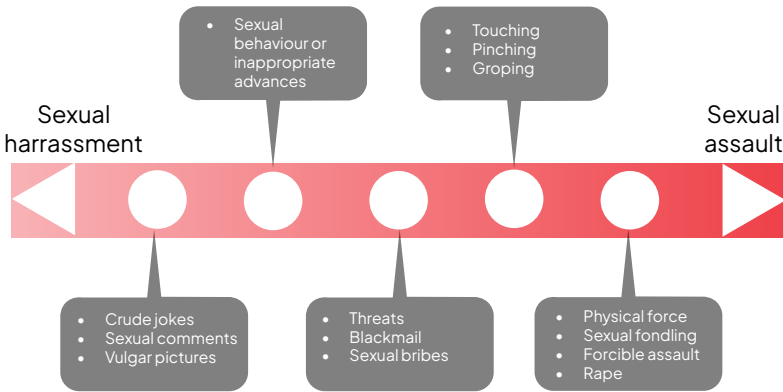
Within the context of the aid sector, sexual violence can take many different forms, for example:

- individual targeting, including the administration of drugs to incapacitate the target;
- sexual abuse and exploitation, where aid workers are coerced by individuals in positions of power (including other aid workers); and
- as a weapon of war or intimidation, where aid workers are targeted by armed actors.

<sup>102</sup> EISF (2019) *Managing sexual violence against aid workers: prevention, preparedness, response and aftercare* (<https://gisf.ngo/resource/managing-sexual-violence-against-aid-workers/>), pp. 12–13.

<sup>103</sup> EISF (2019) provides a full list of forms of sexual violence and their definitions.

Figure 12 Examples in the continuum



Source: EISF (2019) *Managing sexual violence against aid workers: prevention, preparedness, response and aftercare* (<https://glsf.ngo/resource/managing-sexual-violence-against-aid-workers/>).

### A note on gender-based violence

Gender-based violence is an ‘umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will, and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females’<sup>i</sup>. It encompasses various forms of violence, including but not limited to sexual violence. This chapter focuses specifically on incidents of a sexual nature – from harassment to assault – given their extreme nature and the role security professionals play in mitigating these risks. All forms of gender-based violence should be considered and addressed within an organisation, as these can be precursors to or accompany sexual violence.

i IASC (2015) *Guidelines for integrating gender-based violence interventions in humanitarian action* (<https://gbvguidelines.org/en/gbv-guidelines/>).

Working in violent environments where there is weak rule of law can increase the risk of particularly traumatic forms of sexual violence. Staff may also experience sexual violence in domestic settings, and organisations should discuss internally how and under what circumstances they may respond to these types of events in order to ensure the wellbeing of the affected staff member.

Unlike other critical incidents within the aid sector, risk management for sexual violence is still hindered by stigma as well as misconceptions around what it is and why it happens (e.g. that it only happens to women, most perpetrators are strangers, it is consensual if there was no physical resistance, it is always extremely violent, and survivors report immediately after an incident occurs). It is imperative that staff involved in managing incidents of this nature are trained and can access support from experts.

### Related terms and areas of work

The following terms and areas of work have similarities and are worth defining with more clarity.

**Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA)** is an area of work that focuses on protecting affected populations from sexual exploitation and abuse within humanitarian response operations. For further details, see: <https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org/>

**Safeguarding** encompasses efforts to protect everyone (including staff, volunteers and aid recipients) from all forms of harm, abuse and exploitation. To learn more, see: <https://safeguardingsupporthub.org/>

Conceptually, sexual violence affecting aid workers and PSEA fall within safeguarding, although the definitions and the way these workstreams interact in practice can differ across organisations. The important point is that these areas of work collaborate and support each other where appropriate.

## 7.7.2 Risk considerations

Risk considerations relating to sexual violence can be grouped under four areas:

- individual risk considerations;
- perpetrator profiles;
- organisational risk factors; and
- external risk factors.

Strategies for risk mitigation should aim to address all four areas. Security staff can ensure that procedures prioritise not only managing staff behaviour, but also deterring potential perpetrators and addressing other risk factors. For example, organisations can focus on training staff on how to reduce their exposure to the risk, while also putting in place measures to deter perpetrators, addressing the organisational and external conditions that contribute to sexual violence (when possible) and mitigating risks in these environments.

### Individual risk considerations

While certain profiles are at particular risk of sexual violence, sexual violence can affect anyone, and preparedness and response measures must account for this. An individual's intersectional identity can affect their vulnerability to sexual violence, including gender, race, sexual orientation, disability and relative power and choice. National aid workers are at particularly high risk, especially in violent environments or patriarchal societies. These staff members are also often afforded fewer safeguards than their international counterparts, for example support while travelling to and from work.<sup>104</sup> A survey for the UN has found that 'non-staff' (such as consultants, interns and volunteers) are also particularly vulnerable and are less likely to feel able to report incidents.<sup>105</sup>

Under-reporting of sexual violence incidents is pervasive for various reasons, including social stigma, lack of safe reporting channels and restrictive legal and cultural environments. These reporting barriers affect both men and women, and in many of the contexts where aid organisations work can be particularly challenging for individuals who identify as LGBTQI+.

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104 Stoddard, A., Harvey, P., Czwarno, M. and Breckenridge, M. (2019) *Aid Worker Security Report 2019. Speakable: Addressing sexual violence and gender-based risk in humanitarian aid*. Humanitarian Outcomes (<https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/AWSDR2019>).

105 Cronin, E.A. and Afifi, A. (2018) *Review of whistle-blower policies and practices in United Nations system organizations*. Joint Inspection Unit, UN (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/h643065?ln=en&v=pdf>).

► For more information on identity-based risks, see Chapter 1.2.

### Perpetrator profiles

Perpetrators may be external or internal to the organisation, for example staff, contractors and individuals belonging to armed forces, non-state armed groups and local communities. While perpetrators are more likely to be men, other genders can also be perpetrators or accomplices.

Perpetrators may be motivated by factors completely removed from their target's personal characteristics or conduct, such as personal circumstances, including family history, personality and behaviour (e.g. substance abuse), a permissive organisational environment and sexually aggressive peers. Perpetrators often rely on opportunities and allies to carry out their aggression, as well as environmental, cultural and societal factors, including power imbalances, cultural or societal justifications, perceptions of entitlement and a climate of impunity.

For more severe forms of sexual violence, perpetrators may attack their targets through coercion, incapacitation (e.g. using drugs or alcohol), or force (using weapons or physical strength). Perpetrators often require:

- means – the power, support and resources to offend;
- access – psychological or physical access to their target;
- knowledge – knowledge of their target's vulnerability or susceptibility;
- capacity – their ability to offend;
- motivation – willingness to offend; and
- opportunity – permissive circumstances or times to offend.

### Organisational risk factors

Discomfort with discussing sexual violence and gender dynamics in organisations means that there are still insufficient conversations about this type of risk within aid organisations. The lack of direct and explicit attention to this issue can exacerbate the risk by contributing to permissive organisational cultures. Preventing serious incidents can depend on quickly responding to minor ones. Allowing minor instances of sexual violence or other forms of targeting, such as harassment, bullying and offensive jokes, can encourage more severe forms of violence, including sexual violence (this is sometimes described as a pyramid of violence<sup>106</sup>). Perpetrators take advantage of permissive environments and

<sup>106</sup> For an example pyramid of violence, see EISF (2019).

may be influenced by aggressive peers. An organisation should ensure that no environment in which their staff work is a place where hostility of any kind – sexual or non-sexual – is the norm. Minor events need to be taken seriously, as these can be precursors to more serious incidents.

Organisational culture, including inclusivity, plays a strong role in determining whether incidents of sexual violence are reported and addressed. In the aid community, organisational cultures can often value toughness and macho attitudes (particularly in patriarchal contexts), which can further deter reporting. It is advisable for organisations to have clear guidance on what is a reportable offence as this can help staff understand when behaviour is not acceptable and feel empowered to take action.

All staff should be trained and feel able to address attitudes that can make sexual violence more permissive, such as discouraging offensive language. Managers and focal points play a particularly important role in ensuring their staff feel they can raise concerns. Through communication and outreach efforts, security staff can also shift organisational culture.

When the wider culture in an operational context is more permissive of sexual violence, it is especially important for organisational leaders to communicate and demonstrate through actions that what may be accepted outside of the office will not be tolerated by the organisational culture within it.

### **Climate surveys or targeted consultations**

Staff-wide consultations can help organisations better understand organisational culture and whether attitudes and actions within the organisation are indicative of an environment that is permissive of sexual violence. These can take the form of ‘climate surveys’ – sometimes carried out by an external entity – which focus on perceptions of acceptable behaviour within the organisation. More targeted consultations ask specific questions around harassment, bullying and the concerns of particular groups of staff, for example female employees or individuals who identify as LGBTQI+.

### External risk factors

Context analyses can help identify external factors affecting the risk of sexual violence, for example:

- High levels of sexual aggression in the broader environment.
- A failed or fragile state or other form of breakdown in law and order.
- Widespread impunity, including a criminal justice system that tolerates sexual violence or favours perpetrators.
- Active conflict or a militarised location.
- A conservative or patriarchal society.
- Power imbalances, for example between men and women or between ethnic groups.

These environmental risk factors enable sexual violence against local populations, and by extension those working for aid organisations. Sites of higher risk may include areas where armed groups operate, prisons and detention facilities, hotels and staff accommodation and border crossings and checkpoints. There may be times when risk is heightened, such as after dark, during busy events and when armed actors enter or leave a location. Attackers may sexually assault residents during compound raids. Sexual violence can also occur when aid workers are detained or held captive.

#### 7.7.3 Risk mitigation: prevention and preparedness

Many sexual violence risk mitigation measures focus on regulating staff conduct. While an individual's vulnerability to sexual violence partly depends on the interaction between their intersectional identity (who the person is), behaviour, location, role and organisation (their intersectional vulnerability), sometimes there is nothing an individual can do to mitigate their inherent risk of being targeted. Like any other threat, measures must be taken at an individual and organisational level to reduce the risk.

The following is a basic overview of risk mitigation measures. For more detailed guidance, consult the GISF (formerly EISF) guide *Managing sexual violence against aid workers*.<sup>107</sup>

### Governance

Policies, systems and mechanisms should be in place for preventing, preparing for and responding to incidents of sexual violence affecting staff. This can include

<sup>107</sup> EISF (2019).

a policy of zero tolerance towards sexual violence and an organisational code of conduct that explicitly references all forms of sexual misconduct. These organisational instruments should be transparent and consistently applied, and include guidance on their practical implementation.

Good organisational practice includes developing clear policy statements about what support survivors can expect from the organisation following an incident. One international organisation found that ensuring that every incident of sexual assault and severe sexual harassment was reported up to the executive leadership team significantly helped with accountability.

### Roles and responsibilities

How security staff are involved in managing sexual violence risks will vary by organisation. Security staff should ideally be equipped to: identify risk factors; implement respectful and inclusive risk mitigation measures; communicate threats appropriately; address inappropriate behaviour; recognise signs of a hostile environment; act as empowered bystanders (see the box below); and develop survivor-centred contingency plans that prioritise safety, confidentiality, respect and non-discrimination.

#### Empowered bystander

While a simple bystander might witness a situation without taking action, an empowered bystander, referred to as an ‘upstander’ within the UN, recognises harmful or unjust situations and takes steps to intervene, support those affected and prevent further harm. Empowered bystanders are equipped with the knowledge and confidence to act, whether through direct intervention, seeking help or providing support to those affected, while keeping themselves and others safe.

Within the UN, an ‘upstander approach’ to an event involves the following steps:

- noticing the event;
- interpreting the situation;
- taking responsibility;
- deciding to help; and
- intervening.

Human resources staff are often central in shaping policies and practices related to sexual violence, including developing and disseminating the code of conduct, creating duty of care policies for survivors and staff, guiding confidential response processes and leading internal investigations. They also carry out background checks designed to prevent the recruitment of sexual predators and establish disciplinary procedures.

A number of roles may be more directly involved in managing sexual violence risks and supporting survivors.

- **First responder.** The initial point of contact for a survivor of sexual violence, responsible for ensuring their immediate safety, providing emotional support, helping preserve evidence and facilitating medical care. This could be a trained staff member or a trusted colleague. Since all staff may be first responders, it is good practice to ensure they have access to guidance on psychological first aid.
- **Survivor supporter.** A survivor supporter acts as the primary point of contact between the survivor and the organisation. This individual should be equipped with training and guidance to offer emotional support, maintain confidentiality and assist the survivor in navigating the organisation's response protocols. It is good practice for organisations to allow survivors to choose their supporter.
- **Safeguarding focal point/ombudsperson.** Some organisations have established safeguarding focal points or ombudspersons to provide staff with a confidential means of reporting concerns. It is helpful to have both male and female focal points.
- **Internal investigators.** The individuals conducting an internal investigation into allegations of sexual violence must be entirely independent of the survivor, the alleged perpetrator and their respective management lines.

### Induction, briefings and training

All staff, no matter their location, are at risk of sexual violence as this risk exists in every country and can even be perpetrated online. Organisations should ensure that all staff, no matter their role or location, are informed of the nature and forms of sexual violence they may encounter in their work. They should be made aware of online threats, the risk of date rape drugs and that perpetrators may be known to them and may even be a colleague. Staff can also be made aware of contextual and other factors that may place certain profiles at higher risk than others. This enables staff to:

- understand what the organisation has in place to reduce risk;
- understand what procedures and rules they need to follow;
- use this information to identify their own personal risk profile (which may be unique due to their intersectional identity); and
- get advice from focal points and work with their organisation to reduce risk.

► See *Chapter 1.2 on identity-based risks*.

Staff inductions and orientation briefings cover policies, reporting and accountability mechanisms in relation to sexual violence. To respect cultural norms, the organisation may choose to deliver briefings and training to male- or female-only groups. By considering local attitudes, the organisation can tailor its approach to encourage open discussions on sensitive issues.

Security training can provide important information on sexual violence risks, such as how staff can reduce their risk and respond in the event of an incident. This can include guidance around culturally appropriate conduct, when and how to report incidents or concerns, how to travel (e.g. in larger groups), how to set personal boundaries and which areas, times and groups to avoid. All staff benefit from training on local risks and prevention strategies, their specific roles and responsibilities in responding to sexual violence, and the importance of protecting confidentiality when incidents are reported. It may be advisable to provide guidance on collecting and preserving evidence should the survivor choose to pursue a case.

Inductions and training are an opportunity to foster a positive organisational culture, with the organisation sending the message that violence in any form is not acceptable and no one is ever to be blamed if they are a target of sexual violence.

Some organisations train their staff on bystander intervention, which can be an effective strategy for preventing sexual violence. Training can include interactive elements such as role-playing and discussions tailored to the specific context.<sup>108</sup>

### **Inclusive risk assessments and security plans**

An inclusive risk assessment should identify high-risk places, times and situations, as well as considering how factors such as age, sex, nationality, race, sexual orientation, disability, appearance and behaviour affect individual vulnerability.

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<sup>108</sup> For more guidance, see EISF (2019), Tool 2, bystander intervention (pp. 94–95).

A comprehensive risk assessment should integrate individual, organisational and external risk factors. This assessment should address both external and internal threats, recognising that perpetrators may be employees, and understand potential perpetrator profiles.

The risk analysis can draw from various sources, including internal reporting systems, confidential consultations with staff and the local community, and insights from focal points in other aid or human rights organisations. Discretion and sensitivity to cultural and social norms may be necessary when gathering information.

Guidelines and SOPs for responding to sexual violence must be clear and readily available to staff. They should carefully avoid a framing that suggests ‘advance victim-blaming’ and give equal attention to understanding and deterring would-be perpetrators.

Organisational contingency plans (such as evacuation or relocation of affected staff) must also consider sexual violence risks and what support is available in the short and longer term. It can be beneficial to discuss with staff from various cultural backgrounds what prevention measures, protocols and support they find most appropriate. These consultations ensure that the organisation responds effectively in each context and does not cause further harm.

### **Identity-based mitigation strategies**

In some circumstances, security procedures may differ for certain groups of staff if the risk assessment indicates that their personal profile places them at higher risk of sexual violence. The following key questions can be considered to avoid undue discrimination.

- Does the risk assessment consider personal characteristics and robustly indicate the differentiated risk across staff profiles (this involves considering all identity characteristics and their intersectionality, including sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity and visible and invisible disabilities)?
- Have affected individuals been informed of their heightened risk (acknowledging they may already be aware of this) and had the opportunity to discuss risk mitigation measures?

- Could less extreme forms of risk mitigation be implemented? A blanket ban or removal of a group of staff is a common risk mitigation strategy, but other measures may be more acceptable and appropriate to the circumstances. Consultations with affected staff can help identify alternative security risk management options.

► See Chapter 1.2 – *Person-centred approach to security for a more detailed discussion on differentiated risks.*

### **Incorporating sexual violence risks into security procedures**

Security procedures should consider any heightened risk of sexual violence.

- **Site security.** Hotels and accommodation used by staff should offer maximum protection from intruders. In some cases, the risk assessment may indicate that staff at particularly high risk, such as female staff, could be lodged with colleagues or in specific areas judged more secure.
- **Travel security.** Staff need to be briefed on appropriate travel procedures and how to protect themselves and others against the risk of sexual violence while on the move. Staff considered at high risk (international or national) can be accompanied from home to work in an organisation vehicle. At-risk staff can travel either in groups or accompanied by others – inside and outside work hours. In a particularly high-risk environment, it may be advisable for at-risk staff members not to be left on their own, even for short periods.
- **Information security.** Staff members' personal details should not be displayed outside their residences or listed in the telephone directory. Security measures should be in place to protect staff from unwanted disclosures relating to their identity and whereabouts, both online and offline.

- ▶ *To learn more about site security measures see Chapter 7.2.*
- ▶ *For more guidance on travel security, see Chapter 7.1.*
- ▶ *For more on information and communications security, see Chapter 6.1.*

## Contingency planning

### *Service providers*

Creating a network of competent service providers, including medical and psychological professionals, in all operational contexts can ensure timely support for survivors of sexual violence (which should ideally be given within 24 hours after an incident takes place). This network should be thoroughly evaluated for responsiveness and capability. Attitudes towards survivors can also be assessed to ensure that they do not cause further harm through victim blaming or inappropriate remarks.

All staff should have access to emergency medical treatment, including emergency contraception, HIV post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) kits and other medicines to reduce the risk of disease transmission. In remote areas, PEP kits may be stored by the UN, ICRC and/or medical NGOs. If PEP kits and other specialised medication are not readily available from medical institutions or other agencies in the area, organisations can ensure that they are on hand in the office and can be dispensed under medical supervision (as side-effects need to be monitored), or that the survivor can be transported immediately to somewhere where they are available. Organisations should pre-identify safe locations for medical examinations and care, and set up referral procedures. Known and trusted private clinics can be used if the survivor chooses not to report the incident.

Organisations with particular restrictions (for instance, against contraception) should inform staff of this more generally.

- ▶ *See Chapter 5.4 for more on staff care.*
- ▶ *See Chapter 5.5 for more medical and health considerations.*

### Logistics

Logistical arrangements include reliable transport for the survivor and an accompanying individual, as well as provisions for confidential relocation or repatriation of survivors, if necessary.

### Insurance

With the survivor's consent and where insurance policies are in place, it is crucial to inform insurance providers promptly about the incident to ensure that the survivor can access medical and psychological support. The timing of this notification can vary depending on existing agreements with the insurance provider(s) and organisations should be aware of the minimum information required by insurers to initiate support. Protocols should be established for maintaining confidentiality.

It is also helpful to have clear agreements with insurance providers regarding the specific types of coverage available for incidents of sexual violence. This includes understanding the scope of medical care, psychological counselling and other psychosocial support, and any potential legal support. Ensuring that these areas are explicitly covered in the policy can prevent delays and complications when an incident occurs.

► See *Chapter 5.4 for more on insurance.*

### Legal considerations

Organisations should be prepared to advise survivors on their options, including the implications of reporting to local authorities and the legal definitions of sexual violence in that context. Relationships should be established with trusted local legal professionals who can provide immediate assistance if needed. For more legal considerations, see section 7.7.4 below.<sup>109</sup>

### Reporting and whistleblowing

Robust and confidential reporting and whistleblowing mechanisms not only support incident response, but can also deter potential perpetrators. Responsible staff should ensure that these mechanisms are confidential and accessible to all staff regardless of position and language. Staff should be encouraged to report even minor incidents. Sexual violence reporting channels may be separate from reporting mechanisms for other security incidents due to the need for additional confidentiality. Unofficial reporting of sexual violence

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<sup>109</sup> For more detailed guidance, see EISF (2019), Tool 3, legal environment questionnaire (pp. 96–98).

incidents (for example via medical services, counselling and surveys) may be considerably higher than incidents reported through official channels.

It is good practice for organisations to offer staff several confidential reporting channels, including options to raise concerns anonymously, formally and informally. Staff in an office may not speak up if all reports go to one senior manager, who may be the perpetrator or an ally of the perpetrator. To address this risk, one international NGO has introduced a third-party ethics and compliance service provider to host an online whistleblower website to report ethical concerns or misconduct involving the organisation's staff.

Designated safeguarding focal points/ombudspersons can help staff who require more information, are unsure whether an incident is severe enough to merit a formal complaint, or are afraid of the repercussions of reporting.

Finally, organisations should be transparent about what happens following a report, including what investigations and disciplinary actions may take place and how the reporter may be involved in the process. Reporters should be provided with regular feedback on how their report is being actioned. Need-to-know information-sharing protocols can be followed, limiting information to a minimum number of individuals. Maintaining a secure log of all communications and decisions regarding the response may also be advisable.

### **Case example: Failures in whistleblower protection**

In 2009, a volunteer aid worker was murdered in Benin after she reported to her country director concerns that a contractor for the agency was sexually abusing local community members. Investigations into the incident indicate that failures in confidentiality may have allowed the whistleblower's identity to be revealed to the alleged perpetrator, who had personal connections within the organisation. The case highlights many shortcomings, including a lack of safe and confidential reporting mechanisms, robust investigation processes and security measures to protect whistleblowers.

Source: Peace Corps Office of Inspector General (n.d.). *Resources: Kate Puzey Volunteer Protection Act of 2011* ([www.peacecorps.org/resources/resources-kate-puzey-volunteer-protection-act-2011](http://www.peacecorps.org/resources/resources-kate-puzey-volunteer-protection-act-2011)).

When logging incident reports within the organisation's incident information management system, security staff will want to consider how to ensure confidentiality when names and other details may be required fields. Some organisations keep these types of incident reports separate for confidentiality reasons. Reporting is necessary for security risk management and risk analysis, but this needs to be balanced with the safety, psychological wellbeing and privacy rights of the survivor.

### **Recruitment, investigations and disciplinary action**

Rigorous screening for potential employees, including thorough background checks and reference checks across multiple countries, can prevent known sexual violence perpetrators from moving between aid organisations. Several safeguarding initiatives in recent years have focused on supporting organisations with this.<sup>110</sup>

Organisations should have a formal process for investigating reports of sexual violence, with adapted measures if the alleged perpetrator is employed by the organisation. Allegations against staff members should be followed by an internal investigation and disciplinary action if applicable. If the survivor wishes to pursue justice, the authorities may be brought in. Offenders, allies and enablers should be held accountable by the organisation. To deter further offences, non-compliance with policy and investigations should result in disciplinary action.

### **7.7.4 Response**

Timely responses to sexual violence incidents are critical to ensure the safety and wellbeing of those affected. How an organisation responds will depend on various circumstances, including when the incident took place, the wishes of the survivor, the severity of the incident and the risks posed to others. Some overarching things to keep in mind when responding are as follows:

- Survivors of sexual violence can report incidents immediately, days, weeks, months or years after the incident. Factors that influence when an incident is reported include safety, culture and the psychological and emotional impact of the event on the survivor. Organisations should treat all reports as a priority, no matter when the incident took place.
- Organisations should be prepared to inform survivors of any relevant cultural and legal considerations. In some regions reporting sexual violence could lead to additional harm for the survivor due to local laws and cultural practices.

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<sup>110</sup> For example, the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme: <https://misconduct-disclosure-scheme.org/>

- The risks of re-traumatisation, self-harm and suicide are very high. It is imperative that responders are trained to provide adequate support and maintain confidentiality.

Good practice highlights the need to ensure that responses to sexual violence incidents are guided by survivor-centred care, which respects the survivor's wishes as much as possible, as long as these wishes do not put them, colleagues or the organisation at risk of harm. A survivor-centred approach is responsive to a survivor's needs and preferences, and seeks to protect survivors from stigma, discrimination, retaliation or other harmful consequences. The approach aims to create a supportive environment in which the survivor's rights, safety and confidentiality are respected and prioritised, and in which the survivor is treated with dignity and respect. The approach aims to support the survivor's recovery by enabling them to choose the support and care they need; lead decisions about optional reporting; and decide if/how they wish to be involved in any investigation. This is distinct from a survivor-led approach, which leaves all decision-making power with the survivor, even if these decisions may place them or others at risk of harm.

- ▶ *For more details on the survivor-centred approach, see Chapter 5.4 on staff care.*

### Communicating with the survivor

As with all traumatic events, how individuals and the organisation interact with a survivor plays an important role in healing and recovery. Psychological and emotional support can come from colleagues and friends, through peer support networks and compassionate interactions. Any communication with the survivor should aim to:

- make them feel safe;
- make them feel in control;
- make them feel believed and heard; and
- make them feel that the organisation is taking the incident seriously.

Communication should not:

- imply the survivor is to blame or judge them in any way;
- minimise their experience;
- force companionship or other support on them;
- tell them how they should be acting or feeling, or normalise their response; or
- place pressure on them to make decisions or act.

### Initial response

When an individual experiences sexual violence, particularly a severe incident, timing is key. Often, it helps to prioritise actions into a response timeline identifying immediate, short-term and long-term needs. It is also important to recognise that everyone's experience is different. Some may require immediate medical and psychosocial support, whereas others may request support later. There is no 'correct' path. However, as it relates to some aspects of response, such as medical care and reporting, timing may play a larger role.<sup>111</sup>

Depending on the severity, the organisation's incident management structure may need to be activated, including providing family and communication support functions. The first responder, responsible focal points or the incident management team (for severe incidents) will usually oversee some or all of the initial response activities outlined below. Due to their sensitive nature, many organisations may set up a separate incident response team to handle sexual violence cases.

► See *Chapter 4.4* for more details on how to manage critical incidents.

- **Safety and security.** Ensuring the survivor's immediate safety and that of others at risk is the top priority, while maintaining confidentiality to protect the survivor.
- **Medical care.** Emergency medical care, including treatment for injuries, infections and prevention of pregnancy, should be provided with the survivor's consent as quickly as possible. Survivors of sexual assault may

111 EISF (2019) presents a detailed response framework of key steps responsible staff can take at different times.

require emergency contraception, prophylactic treatment for sexually transmitted infections, PEP for HIV and medicines for other diseases such as hepatitis B. All of these should be initiated as soon as possible after the incident.

- **Psychosocial care.** Immediate access to appropriate psychosocial support should be offered.
- **Identifying a survivor supporter.** Organisations can ask a survivor who they would like to be their supporter, or offer access to an organisation-trained survivor supporter.
- **Family liaison.** With the survivor's consent, their family can be informed through a designated contact person, following strict confidentiality guidelines.
- **Location.** Survivors may need to be housed in a secure, confidential location close to supportive individuals, with relocation or evacuation if necessary.
- **Incident reporting.** The incident should be reported through appropriate channels, while safeguarding the survivor's safety and privacy.
- **Support and guidance.** The organisation should be clear that they believe the survivor's account and provide clear guidance on next steps, ensuring ongoing communication and support throughout the process.<sup>112</sup>

In the longer term, additional administrative and logistical support may be needed, such as arranging financial assistance for the survivor and support staff, organising private transportation for those involved in the response process, suspending work duties for affected staff, agreeing on how to communicate about the survivor's absence to colleagues, and establishing regular check-ins to address ongoing needs and concerns with survivors. Insurance providers may also need to be informed, with the survivor's consent.

Support may need to be offered to other staff members, such as witnesses and the wider team. Supporting sexual violence survivors is stressful and demanding. Those doing so can be offered emotional and psychosocial support, including taking breaks or stepping away.

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112 For more detailed advice for first responders, see EISF (2019) *Tool 5, guidelines for a survivor supporter* (pp. 58–61).

## Online risks of sexual violence

Online forms of sexual violence are an increasing concern for aid organisations. While anyone can be a target, women and LGBTQI+ individuals are disproportionately affected, necessitating tailored prevention and response measures. Risks include harassment, stalking and cyberstalking, sexual extortion and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images.

► See *Chapter 6.2* for more details on digital risks and mitigation measures.

### Response considerations

Focal points or the incident management team may need to address some of the more complex response considerations discussed in the following section.

#### *Confidentiality and communications*

Organisations must proactively manage communications in the event of a serious sexual violence incident by establishing clear internal and external protocols, considering the implications of sharing information about the incident and the perpetrator, and ensuring the confidentiality and safety of the survivor. At the same time, organisations should respect the survivor's right to speak out, if they wish, and should provide guidance and support, including access to trained focal points who can help navigate the potential risks and consequences of public disclosure.

If the incident is publicly known, media management may be required.

► See *Chapter 4.4* for more details on media management.

#### *Reporting to the police and legal proceedings*

Organisations should ensure that they have a comprehensive understanding of the legal environments in which they operate, particularly concerning incidents of sexual violence, with access to local lawyers to provide guidance and support in the event of an incident.<sup>113</sup>

The organisation can assist the survivor with any legal and justice processes they choose to pursue. This includes accompanying them to report the incident

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113 For more detailed guidance, see EISF (2019) *Tool 3, legal environment questionnaire* (pp. 96–98).

to the police, supporting them if a police interview is required, and ensuring their safety and wellbeing during any evidence-gathering processes. Collecting evidence does not commit the survivor to legal action but preserves the option for the future. Reporting an incident to the police can itself be a traumatic experience, even in the best of circumstances.

Organisations may also need to secure appropriate legal representation for the survivor. The organisation's legal adviser can help clarify procedures and timelines for reporting, as obtaining official documentation can be crucial if the survivor later decides to press charges or seek further treatment. The decision to prosecute rests with the survivor and they should feel supported and empowered to make an informed choice.

More broadly, organisations must understand the legal requirements for reporting sexual violence incidents to the police in the country, including any obligations to report, implications for the survivor and alleged perpetrator, and whether they must remain in the country after reporting. Some foreign nationals might choose not to report incidents to the police if this would require them to remain in the country until the trial concludes (which could take several years). In some countries, survivors may face charges of adultery or fornication if they cannot prove assault. This can result in punishment for the survivor rather than the perpetrator. Organisations must also consider the impact of legal action on alleged perpetrators, especially if they are staff.

If legal proceedings are pursued, prosecution will usually occur in the country where the incident took place and may require the collection of medical evidence. The risk of further trauma is immense in these circumstances, and it is advisable for the organisation to be prepared to help survivors navigate these procedures safely e.g. pre-identifying trusted medical facilities and local forensic evidence collection expectations. Some medical facilities that treat survivors may also automatically file reports with the police.

In some cases the focus may be less on whether the incident took place and more on whether it was consensual, which can throw up different challenges.

### **Case example: A second traumatic experience**

It is not uncommon for a survivor to suffer a second trauma as a result of insensitive treatment by the police. In one case a female international aid worker was sexually assaulted while working outside of her home country. No one in the organisation knew what to do immediately after the incident. The next day she was sent, alone, to her embassy to report the incident.

The embassy sent her to the local police accompanied by the embassy security officer, a national. Once at the police station, four armed policemen interrogated her, asking detailed questions about the incident. When she hesitated in her answers, they accused her of lying. During the interrogation other policemen kept coming in for a look, as they were curious. The police undertaking the interrogation insisted that she show them her injuries before she was allowed to leave the station. They then insisted on her taking them to the place where the incident took place, for a re-enactment which they claimed was essential to the investigation. No real investigation ever took place. The assailant was never caught, and the survivor learned later that it was very rare for anyone in that country to be tried or convicted of sexual assault. Her experience at the police station was effectively a second assault.

A well-informed and trusted individual should always accompany the survivor to the police station, to ensure that they are not intimidated or further victimised, that interviews are conducted in a language the survivor understands, and that appropriate documentation and assistance are provided. The accompanying individual may need to be prepared to intervene if the survivor's rights and dignity are not respected. It is important that this individual takes on the role as an organisational representative and is not perceived as acting in their individual capacity.

### ***When the alleged perpetrator is a member of staff***

When an alleged perpetrator of a sexual violence incident is a member of staff, organisations may need to take a series of immediate and carefully considered

actions, including safeguarding both the survivor and others who may be at risk of further harm, as well as protecting the alleged perpetrator. Alleged perpetrators can pose continued security risks to the survivor and other staff, including staff investigating allegations.

If the allegations are serious, the organisation may decide to suspend the alleged perpetrator or place them on administrative leave (while maintaining confidentiality about the reason for their absence). If the alleged perpetrator poses a risk or is in danger themselves due to the allegations, they may need to be relocated to a secure location and accompanied during their stay. It is usually advisable to prevent any contact between the survivor and the alleged perpetrator, particularly in severe cases, although the survivor's preferences regarding contact should be considered.

It is important that trained and independent investigators conduct the process (supported by relevant departments such as HR and security) to prevent re-traumatisation or further harm.<sup>114</sup> A poor investigation can be profoundly harmful to the survivor, the alleged perpetrator and others impacted by the incident. Failing to address an allegation can have equally damaging consequences.

### 7.7.5 Post-incident actions

#### Aftercare

Affected staff may require long-term aftercare following a sexual violence incident. Organisations should put in place a supportive framework while avoiding overwhelming survivors with decision-making. It is imperative that an organisation's policy clearly outlines the extent, cost and duration of the support it can realistically offer survivors, ensuring they are not misled about the availability of indefinite assistance.

Survivors may require ongoing medical support, including regular health checks and treatment for any physical health issues. Survivors may need long-term psychosocial support to cope with trauma, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues that can arise after an incident. This support should be tailored to the individual's needs, and provided by trained professionals experienced in handling trauma.

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<sup>114</sup> For a detailed internal investigation process, including key steps, see EISF (2019).

A comprehensive long-term survivor support plan can be developed, taking into account the survivor's preferences and needs. This may include medical and psychological assessments and therapies, logistical support for aftercare, an evaluation of work options, a work reintegration plan and a transition to long-term support services (such as national services), along with a communication and check-in schedule. The length of any legal proceedings should be factored into the support plan. The support plan should be flexible to adapt to the evolving needs of the survivor over time. Trauma can manifest many months or even years after an incident, and it may be difficult to anticipate when or how triggers will arise. Ideally, survivors should have easy and straightforward access to psychosocial resources and care, even if they need support months after the incident or after their employment has ended. It is important to remember that cultural factors can significantly influence an individual's response. When providing support, organisations should remain open and sensitive to the various paths to recovery and the survivor's preferences.

► See Chapter 5.4 for more on staff care.

### Post-incident review

Finally, organisations should conduct thorough post-incident reviews, while maintaining strict confidentiality to protect the staff involved, to assess the handling of severe incidents of sexual violence and identify areas for improvement.

► See Chapter 4.4 on incident response and crisis management for more guidance on post-incident reviews.

## Further information

### Guidance

**EISF** (2018) *Managing the security of aid workers with diverse profiles* (<https://gisf.ngo/resource/managing-the-security-of-aid-workers-with-diverse-profiles/>).

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**Deloitte** (2019) *Safe space survey report* ([https://viraltopiczone.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/d3bcc-un\\_safe\\_space\\_survey\\_report\\_15-january\\_2019\\_final.pdf](https://viraltopiczone.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/d3bcc-un_safe_space_survey_report_15-january_2019_final.pdf)).

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**Mazurana, D. and Donnelly, P.** (2017) *STOP the sexual assault against humanitarian and development aid workers*. Feinstein International Center, Tufts University (<https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/stop-sexual-assault-against-aid-workers/>).

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