

How an uproar over aid and sexual exploitation ignored women's actual experiences

5 April 2018, by Giulia Piccolino

The recent "Oxfam sex scandal" – during which some aid workers were accused of paying for sex with young women in vulnerable conditions – [has focused almost exclusively](#) on the aid workers and aid organisations involved. But the perspectives and motivations of the young women who were paid for sex with money or material goods have hardly been discussed at all, and the contexts in which they live have been misrepresented and misunderstood.

The problem of transactional sex in areas hit by disaster, war, or extreme poverty is not strictly specific to the aid industry. Aid workers are not the only men who offer money and [material goods](#) in exchange for sex to impoverished young people – other foreigners, and also local men, are involved.

The focus on [aid workers](#) and their organisations has led to the mistaken belief that this problem can be solved mainly, if not exclusively, by punishing the culprits and the organisations for which they work. This thinking rests on the conflation of transactional sex with rape and sexual harassment – an issue that dates back to the United Nations (UN) "zero tolerance" [policy towards sexual exploitation and abuse](#), adopted in 2003.

That policy started with noble intentions. But it has [achieved little](#) in the way of curbing sexual exploitation by aid workers and peacekeepers. [Some have argued](#) that the failure to distinguish between consensual and non-consensual sex is one of the causes of this inability. The zero tolerance policy has been criticised also for framing the problem as a simple question of discipline and conduct detached from the UN's broader human rights agenda.

The women's perspective

There is a long debate among feminists on whether sex work is inherently exploitative or not. But even if we concede that it is, we need to recognise one fundamental distinction: unlike other forms of abuse, many of transactional sex's "victims" accept and even seek out these exchanges themselves as a means of improving their often dire circumstances.

"Transactional sex" is a catch-all term for a [wide continuum](#) of different relationships. At one end are relationships between adults that, even if an exchange of money and material goods take place, appear mutually beneficial; at the other end are relationships that are unambiguously damaging and exploitative.

The reporting on the Oxfam scandal often overlooked this distinction. Instead, the selfsame commentators who as a rule rail against the "white saviour" mentality [reverted to exactly the same thinking](#) by portraying poor women in conflict and disaster-affected zones as helpless victims.

This is not to say that the worst-case scenarios aren't real. During my own research in post-conflict Côte d'Ivoire, I witnessed cases at the extreme abusive end of the continuum. Among them were incidents where girls aged 13 or 14 were pushed by the lack of opportunities and family support to sell sex for the equivalent of less than a dollar. Their clients were not just international personnel, but also local men. I was struck by how little support and attention the aid and peacebuilding community gives to the most vulnerable girls and women involved in selling sex, and just how far down the list of priorities they seem to sit.

And yet, not all these contexts are alike. Many testimonies from women involved in these types of relationships in post-conflict and post-disaster

settings paint a more complex picture. According to one [survey](#) of Haitian women who reported having had sexual encounters with UN peacekeepers in exchange for gifts and money, many "experienced transactional sex to be highly beneficial". According to the author of the report, these relationships "helped them meet daily life needs and enabled them to access resources and opportunities to improve the economic status of their household".

Still, many also reported serious episodes of sexual and physical abuse. The report concludes that the individual benefits are offset by the fact that transactional sex "replicates and often magnifies the power imbalance present in male/female sexual relationships" in Haiti.

Others from Haiti described similar complexities. The Times ran an [interview with Mikelange Gabou](#), the only young Haitian woman who agreed to talk about her relationship with a disgraced Oxfam staff member. Gabou did not describe herself as a victim; instead, she drew a distinction between her own experience and that of "other women" whom the man has, [in her words](#), "done wrong". One might argue that Gabou's case stands at the middle of the continuum, and the case of the "other women" at the more clearly abusive end.

To be sure, those responsible for [sexual exploitation](#) must be punished. But whereas punishing the perpetrators of rape and [sexual harassment](#) can put an end to their abusive actions, impoverished people can simply find other men to sell to. The illusion that by simply punishing "our men" we can "save" these [women](#) is just another example of how a discourse that aims to challenge ethnocentrism actually ends up reinforcing it.

How aid can help

The only true solution is to transform the structural conditions of poverty, inequality and gender discrimination that push people into transactional sex in the first place. This is far more than aid can ever achieve by itself – but cutting aid, as some sections of the British right proposed in the wake of the Oxfam scandal, surely would not help. Instead, the way aid is administered must be rethought from the recipients' point of view.

In post-conflict settings, the type of scenario I am most familiar with, aid agencies tend to focus on two groups: those that could disrupt the peace process, and those who can help change things for the better. Teenagers who sell sex belong to neither category. They're also often difficult to work with; they might have substance abuse or mental health problems, making them unpredictable or even violent. But these are reasons to engage with them more, not less.

Even small efforts can make a difference. In Côte d'Ivoire, [a small programme run by two Italian NGOs](#) is providing education and training to teenagers formerly involved in sex work. Programmes like this don't just offer material support; they help their beneficiaries restore their self-respect and envisage a different life.

The aid industry cannot tackle these problems simply by disciplining its own workers. The international staff responsible for misconduct deserve punishment, but they don't deserve all the attention. Attention should be given to the people who need it the most: the [young women](#), and in some cases men, who have to make extremely difficult choices in extremely difficult circumstances.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

APA citation: How an uproar over aid and sexual exploitation ignored women's actual experiences (2018, April 5) retrieved 8 March 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-04-uproar-aid-sexual-exploitation-women.html>

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