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The full conference can be seen [here](#)

Over the last decade, I have worked alongside women and girls in a number of emergency responses, in refugee settings such as Dadaab, Kenya; Lebanon and Bangladesh, and with those displaced in their own countries in Darfur, Sudan; eastern DR Congo and northern Syria. For us, the #MeToo and #AidToo revelations have not come as a surprise, rather a depressing validation. We appreciate your shared attention; we worry that it could shift at any moment.

To share just one example of what this issue looks like, in practice -- A young girl's family contacts you to report abuse by a man trucking water to their refugee settlement. You track down the list of PSEA focal points, only to find most of them have since moved onto other jobs, in other countries. You advocate with senior managers to take responsibility and act quickly; their attention focuses on whether the alleged perpetrator was a contractor, staff, or volunteer; and which agency hired him and is responsible. In the meantime, the complaint is withdrawn.

Sexual exploitation and abuse is inherently about gender -- and power --, layered with the additional lenses of race, class and other forms of privilege. It is largely perpetrated by men -- against women and girls. When boys and men experience sexual abuse and exploitation, it is overwhelmingly at the hands of other men.

As the Gender and Development Network notes in its "Safeguarding and Beyond" report, understanding how survivors disclose abuse -- "*slowly, hesitantly, indirectly*"-- is critical to creating safe and confidential avenues for help. In emergencies, I have worked to quickly establish services and supports for women and girls, within which they can choose whether

or not to disclose abuse. Time and again I have witnessed how, once safe services are established, more survivors come forward.

The unintended consequence of a 'zero tolerance' approach is to drive reporting even further underground, to avoid losing reputation and funding. Conversely – the more cases are reported, the better we are doing as a sector to create spaces in which survivors feel safe to come forward and access support.

Even with services in place, most survivors will never seek help – an analysis of DHS data from 24 countries over 8 years found that only 7% of survivors reported to a formal source. While more will tell close friends or family, the vast majority will stay silent. Thus -- reported cases do not signify the scale of the issue before us. To use a common metaphor, they are the '*tip of the iceberg*'. As core humanitarian guidelines advise, we must assume multiple forms of violence are happening and act accordingly.

What does this mean for better responding to sexual exploitation and abuse?

First, centering survivors in responses means not requiring them to disclose. Disclosure is dangerous for many reasons, including physical harm to oneself or one's children, denial of aid, forced marriage to perpetrators to 'solve' the issue, stigma, and public shaming . Many of us recently witnessed the dangers of disclosure on a national stage, in the testimony of Dr Christine Blasey Ford.

Second, case management models and the leadership of women's organizations—long on the frontlines—are critical in re-centering survivors in these discussions. Groups discriminated against because of their sexual orientation and gender identities, or because they live with a disability, also possess expert knowledge on how their specific experiences must be accounted for, to ensure dignity for all.

Third, the search for accountability is not about finding and cleansing ourselves of '*a few bad apples*'. It is about recognizing the patriarchal systems and structures in which we work, naming their resistance to change, and setting up meaningful ways in which survivors and

women's organizations, particularly from the '*global south*', possess enough power to hold aid organizations accountable – without expecting them to displace their own work and priorities to do so.

Fourth, a shift away from criminal justice approaches to '*contextual safeguarding*' is critical in preventing SEA. Senior management and safeguarding leads must take responsibility to reflect on their organization's role in creating a '*conducive context*' for abuse. They must attend to the settings and people who represent 'causes for concern', dig deeper into these concerns, and act on them.

Finally, when investigations, or disciplinary actions are initiated, they must be completed regardless of whether the person(s) under investigation have resigned. Their decision to participate has no bearing on the process of an investigation. Organizations must keep transparent records of the outcomes of these investigations.

In conclusion, the metric for success is not the absence of reports. It is *how* received reports are handled, and how contexts conducive to abuse are proactively *identified* and *addressed*. Throughout, safety and protection for survivors is paramount.