

# SUMMARY BRIEF: UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION ON SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE (SEA) AND BARRIERS TO REPORTING

in Kachin, Northern Shan, and Magway  
states/regions of Myanmar

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Protection from Sexual  
Exploitation and Abuse

PSEA Network Myanmar

**unicef**   
for every child

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# Understanding community knowledge and perception on Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and barriers to reporting in Kachin, Northern Shan, and Magway states/regions of Myanmar

## Introduction

Against a backdrop of entrenched patriarchal norms and practices, Myanmar faces some of the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) in the region.<sup>1</sup> The UN states that violence against women and girls is a ‘silent emergency’ in Myanmar,<sup>2</sup> embedded in multiple prolonged complex conflict dynamics, chronic poverty and vulnerability to natural hazards.

**As such, different forms of gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) remain an acute and prevalent problem throughout Myanmar.**

*The 2016 InterAgency Standing Committee (IASC) definitions of sexual exploitation and abuse are:*

- Sexual exploitation: ‘Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power or trust, for sexual purposes including but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another’
- Sexual abuse: ‘The actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions’

ActionAid’s definition of sexual exploitation and abuse aligns to the IASC definition but also covers other areas of Gender Based Violence and abuse (not just sexual) to acknowledge that all forms of sexual violence, and the abuse of power, intersect and inform each other.

ActionAid Myanmar has produced a research study<sup>3</sup> to understand the level of community awareness and knowledge of SEA within Myanmar, and the existing reporting mechanisms and barriers to reporting in the crisis affected areas of Kachin, Northern Shan and non-conflicted Magway regions<sup>4</sup>.

The findings demonstrate that knowledge and understanding of SEA is low amongst the community members who participated within the research, with the misconception that SEA is predominantly sexual violence, such as rape and Intimate Partner violence, and with limited understanding of the interlinkages of power and subsequently abuse of power that can perpetrate SEA. The findings highlighted that awareness on SEA was also different between the regions the research was conducted, with participants from IDP camps of Kachin and northern Shan states having a more robust understanding of the reporting mechanisms compared to the interviewed participants of Magway region, which is an area that does not traditionally receive direct aid from humanitarian settings. As such, more than 63% of U-report surveyed respondents from Magway did not recognise power imbalance between aid workers and community workers. When communities were interviewed regarding

reporting mechanism, participants from Magway region referred to formal justice system such as police, legislative structure, and judicial system instead of the current GBV or SEA reporting mechanism which is run by the INGOs, NGOs and CSOs whereas participants from conflict affected states emphasised more on reporting to the camp leader and its management committee.

In addition, the research highlighted survivors' fear of retribution from the perpetrator, concern about the confidentiality of reporting mechanisms. The research also indicated that Myanmar's cultural patriarchal norms have led to SEA being tolerated or even normalised and instilled a culture of silence and further victimisation of SEA survivors. The findings indicated that this was more evident in conflict-affected communities – especially within Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps – where violence is exacerbated by segregation, overcrowding and lack of privacy. The community perspective towards humanitarian aid workers is positive without single case of SEA by humanitarian aid workers being reported as part of this research. However, SEA by humanitarian aid worker remains a possibility and risks must be constantly monitored, and policies put in place to prevent these cases.

From the findings of this research report, this policy brief focuses on four key recommendations to PSEA workers, and the wider humanitarian community to support in building a robust understanding of SEA, and addressing SEA through a survivor-centred approach and strengthening PSEA mechanisms in Myanmar.

*The four recommendations are:*

1. Increase PSEA Awareness raising within communities.
2. Regularly conduct PSEA Capacity Building Training to field staff, including community volunteers.
3. Engagement of community, specifically women actors, in addressing SEA.
4. Ensure coordinated PSEA mechanisms are integrated in women and girls' safe spaces.

## Recommendations and Evidence:

### 1. Raise awareness of Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) within communities:

Findings demonstrated that most community members did not understand what constitutes SEA, with a large proportion of community members unable to see how aid workers could perpetrate SEA, or how SEA could result from power imbalances associated with gender, age or disability to name a few. 91 percent of surveyed participants replied that they were not aware of the standard principles that community aid workers had to comply regarding to sexual exploitation and abuse. Just over half (52 percent) of surveyed participants from the community correctly identifying humanitarian aid workers exchanging money, employment, goods or services for sex as SEA. Effective PSEA can only be delivered if everyone is aware of what behaviours to expect and not expect by aid workers – and that aid should never be given in exchange for financial or sexual gain.

The need for PSEA is further evidenced by the alarming number of respondents who expressed the belief that women and girls are fully, or partially responsible for SEA perpetrated against them. This links to the cultural patriarchal norms experienced in Myanmar, the status and position of women in society, and the belief in male superiority – all of which increase a woman or girl's risk of SEA.<sup>5</sup> Research participants corroborated these findings, emphasising that increased risk of SEA is connected to entrenched patriarchal norms, financial and social pressures, food insecurity and a culture of silence.

**“...sexual exploitation and abuse cases happen because of girls' misbehaviour and their seduction towards boys.”**

**Adult female**

This culture of tolerating SEA and only viewing sexual violence such as rape as 'serious' often results in self-blaming and can prevent survivors of SEA to seek support. The Myanmar Demographic Health Survey (2015-16) indicates SEA is consistently under-reported in Myanmar, even as a subset of gender-based violence cases. The study highlighted that 37 percent of women who had experienced violence did not report it or seek help from anyone including close family members.<sup>6</sup> SEA is rarely reported or

acknowledged due to the barriers of women and girls face in Myanmar society, including harmful social norms reinforce the normalisation of violence and discrimination against women and hinder them from seeking support services.

This culture of underreporting and impunity was evident in the research findings, where participants raised concerns around fear of retribution and stigma, lack of anonymity in reporting, eroded trust in judicial system and lack of understanding of official or legal reporting mechanisms.

**“I do not dare to report. Let it be. I am afraid of being killed by perpetrator.”**

**Adult female**

Risks of sexual exploitation and abuse are heightened where there is crisis, conflict and forced displacement. In this context, humanitarian workers are in a position of relative power and privilege to emergency affected populations, and community members face multiple layers of vulnerability towards SEA.

Yet alarmingly, in the IDP Camps where interviews were conducted in Kachin, Northern Shan, and Magway states, participants stressed that no specific PSEA related training sessions had been provided. Participants further revealed they had not received IEC material from aid organisations or details on the available reporting mechanisms, such as the PSEA hotline reporting number.

We need simple IEC materials to raise PSEA awareness in public. If we only include words, it will be difficult for illiterate people to understand. We need to add simple cartoons and animations so people could understand easily. I believe this will help reduce future SEA incidences.” (Girl)

Research participants highlighted that they would be very supportive of “a myin phwint” or “awareness raising” training on SEA and reporting mechanisms, to give them more confidence and courage in speaking out against perpetrators:

**“I want awareness raising trainings and special talks on this issue. Only then, village community would dare to speak up. I also want pamphlets, posters, and vinyls to be hung in public areas. I want these things to be carried out.”**

**Boy**

Raising awareness of PSEA, is an important step to ensure SEA is prevented and responded to effectively. It is crucial that communities understand the root causes of SEA, as well as their rights, and entitlement to assistance and support. Early investment in awareness raising and prevention of SEA can avoid adverse effects later and help maintain the trust between communities and aid organisations which is critical to successful delivery of humanitarian assistance. This should include accessible awareness raising sessions and the adaptation and translation of key messaging on PSEA to ensure it is tailored to the community’s context and delivered in appropriate formats.

PSEA policies and practices aim to end sexual exploitation and sexual abuse by humanitarian workers and ensure that allegations of SEA are responded to in a timely and appropriate manner. However, without an understanding of what these policies are, and what mechanisms are in place to address these, SEA will not be effectively addressed. To do so, initial steps need to be taken to raise awareness at community level.

*These include:*

- Running awareness raising training to understand what constitutes SEA with women, girls, boys and men in communities.
- Promoting and raising awareness of mechanisms to address and report SEA concerns, such as through the PSEA hotline.
- Creating simple, contextual and targeted PSEA Information Education and Communication Material in accessible formats (simplified texts, picture messages, audio recordings, graphics or videos) and a range of languages that can be easily disseminated through multiple channels.

## **2. Regularly conduct PSEA capacity building training for field staff, including community volunteers**

The ‘Do No Harm’<sup>7</sup> principle is one of the fundamental responsibilities for every humanitarian assistance worker and it is imperative that they do not exploit and abuse their authority. It has been developed in response to the growing recognition of the potential negative effects of aid and is a vital element of all trainings of humanitarian actors. This principle should be used in coordination with PSEA capacity building training for all staff, including community volunteers.

Research findings found some community workers, especially local-based volunteers, had not been provided with specific PSEA trainings, but did attend trainings on GBV.

**“I do not remember whether I was provided PSEA training before or not, though I remember I had attended GBV training. But I nearly forget the contents of training.”**

**Community worker**

Many participants were unsure of the procedures community aid workers must comply with. A community worker from northern Shan revealed that,

**“I only work as a humanitarian worker for my village improvement. So, I am not aware of specific rules set up by the organization regarding SEA.”**

**Community worker**

It is vital to hold PSEA capacity building training and refresher training programmes for both staff and community volunteers who are directly working with the beneficiaries. This should include regular briefings on PSEA obligations, roles and responsibilities to the ‘Do no Harm’ principle, but also their own responsibilities in reporting and responding to SEA as needed.

More than half of the participants from IDP camps in Kachin, northern Shan and communities in Magway were unaware or uncertain of some of the reporting mechanisms, including how to reach out to the focal person to report SEA cases or how to report suspected SEA cases in the surrounding community.

As such, the PSEA capacity building training for field staff should include information and communication materials on how to provide support to survivors. This should include details on when, how and where to signpost support for an individual who requires assistance, and how to request referral by staff trained in supporting survivors of SEA. This is a crucial step in ensuring the accountability of all staff, and the sustainability of the PSEA mechanisms in place.

*This should be done through:*

- Holding regular PSEA training and refresher trainings for both staff and community members to develop rapport and trust with community members.
- Map referrals and share referral pathways with staff and volunteer support and promote these when working with communities.

### **3. Engagement of community, specifically women actors, in addressing SEA**

Most of the work to protect individuals from sexual exploitation and abuse is done at community level, especially through the support of local women. Nevertheless, several factors cause the exclusion of women from leading activities, or being in leadership positions in Myanmar.<sup>8</sup> These factors include deeply entrenched gender norms and widely held beliefs that men make more effective leaders, as well as the perceived subordinate status of women and girls compared to men.<sup>9</sup> As summarised by one research participant:

**“In our tradition, men can work harder. Also, they have more power since they are the breadwinners of family.... Thus they (men) influence and use power on women. Their perception is like ‘I am above her and believe that women couldn’t do anything back towards them.”**

**Community worker**

The research findings corroborated this, as participants reported that camp leaders and camp management committee members in IDP camps are predominantly men. The male dominance in camp management committees was noted by participants, who highlighted women’s voices are systematically excluded and that a lack of female leadership results in the specific needs of women

and girls not receiving adequate attention or response. This is particularly important, as findings showed that often community members often rely on internal, informal community structures to report SEA concerns, often heavily relying on camp leaders to report cases, due to a lack of faith in formal reporting mechanisms and health care processes available. This is particularly problematic in IDP camps, where violence can be exacerbated by over-crowding, segregation, and lack of support and health care services.

The lack of women representation in SEA reporting mechanism was seen by participants as a major reporting barrier, with survivors fearing that SEA cases reported to male camp leaders would be dismissed. In order to successfully address SEA, there is a need to include women leaders in designing the prevention of SEA mechanisms and programmes, and to work closely with the camp leaders and community members. This will support women and girls to feel more comfortable in sharing their experiences and ensure that the voices and concerns of women are not ignored. This links to Myanmar's cultural patriarchal norms, which reinforce a culture of silence and further victimisation and blaming of SEA survivors, due the perceived subordinate status of women and girls compared to men.

Participants flagged that an additional step is needed to address SEA is the involvement of the community at large, such as Elders, village administrators, household leaders who have a specific level of influence in communities and *'... should be involved (in awareness building activities and trainings) .... In this way, they can influence everyone by knowing how to act if there will be any cases.'* Doing so will help the community identify, define, and act against SEA more effectively. Ensuring all community members have appropriate PSEA awareness training and understanding the disproportionate patriarchal norms, will support community members, such as camp leaders, to action and understand how to respond to the specific needs of women and girls.

In patriarchal context such as Myanmar, there is a need to work closely with local women and women actors as they have a strong understanding of the local context and the needs and realities of women, girls and the community as a whole.<sup>10</sup> This increased involvement and awareness of community will support a more effective response to SEA, in line with the needs and concerns of the community to ensure that PSEA services are safe and inclusive, developed by, and accountable to the community.

Engaging local populations and ensuring support locally is a crucial element in succeeding to promote work in the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse at community level.

*This should include:*

- Increasing representation of women in camp management sites, such as assigning female PSEA focal points and ensuring a gender balanced team.
- Engaging and working closely with community leaders, such as camp leaders, and local women groups to meaningfully develop and help shape PSEA programming

#### **4. Ensure coordinated PSEA mechanisms are integrated in women and girl's safe spaces**

There is a need to have coordinated, safe, gender-sensitive, and accessible SEA reporting channels and response mechanisms to improve reporting and help to build trust. This should start from understanding which services are currently being accessed by groups most susceptible to SEA.

Based on the research findings, community members would at times report SEA cases to GBV focal points, which may result in delays of an adequate response as well as survivors' re-traumatisation if the response to the incidents is not timely and coordinated. Whilst there is a need to have dedicated PSEA and safeguarding focal points, collaborating with GBV actors is vital given the interlinkage between the two. It is important that PSEA and GBV actors work closely also because of overlapping in the response to both SEA and GBV services, for example the survivors' needs to access Psychosocial Support or more specialised mental health services.

A key activity that can combine access to information and safe reporting mechanisms together with access to response services such as Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) and referrals to shelters, health and legal services is the setup of women and girls' safe spaces.<sup>11</sup> Creating safe spaces is an important strategy in the protection and resilience building of women and girls affected by crisis and can guarantee the privacy needed to address certain issues.

We strongly recommend the PSEA Network members to liaise with the GBV Sub-cluster to retrieve and disseminate the information on existing GBV referral pathways. The PSEA Network should also ensure that referral pathways and

information on how to safely refer a SEA incident are accessible to all the members' staff. GBV and Protection actors should prioritise the provision of women and girls' safe spaces where they can

access information on these and other services relevant to their safety and wellbeing, as well as receive information on their rights.

**ActionAid's approach to establishing safe spaces includes the following core principles, which are designed to ensure the leadership of women from affected areas in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the space.**

*Safe spaces must be:*

- Supportive of the leadership and empowerment of women from affected areas.
- Safe and secure with appropriate lighting, privacy and security.
- Centrally located to ensure easy access and situated near hygiene facilities.
- Accessible to all women without physical or other barriers to access.
- Inclusive of all women, including the most marginalised and excluded groups.
- Women-only spaces that are child friendly or offer a separate child-friendly space with supervised care.
- Contextually appropriate and tailored to the context.
- Able to provide non-judgmental and factual information and support.
- An access point for information, services and support.
- Coordinated with other actors and host communities to ensure streamlined support.

Taken from: ActionAid's Safety with Dignity: A Women-led community based protection approach in humanitarian and protracted crises

This brief was based off research conducted by Phyo Thet Naing Win, Hnin Su Htwe, and Dirgha Taj Sigdel (ActionAid Myanmar) in collaboration with the PSEA Myanmar Network and UNICEF.

This policy brief was written by Niki Ignatiou, in collaboration with Martina Lecci.

## Endnotes

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2. UN Women (2016) *Voices from the Intersection: Women's Access to Justice in the Plural Legal System of Myanmar*. Retrieved from: [https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs22/Justice\\_Base-2016-04-22-Women\\_in\\_Myanmar-Plural\\_legal\\_systems.pdf](https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs22/Justice_Base-2016-04-22-Women_in_Myanmar-Plural_legal_systems.pdf)
3. This study was carried out in collaboration with UNICEF and Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) Network. Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Network was established in Myanmar in 2018 and since then the network delivers operational functions, organizes periodic meetings, and help organizations in establishing an implementing PSEA policies. ActionAid Myanmar is an active member since the establishment of the PSEA network in Myanmar.
4. A significant influx of humanitarian assistance activities such as WASH, health, food and shelter has been observed in Magway since 2015 after Cyclone Komen hit the region. As of 2021, 31 INGOs are currently supporting the region, mainly focused on the development and humanitarian emergencies in Magway and this number is comparable to conflict affected regions such as Rakhine, Kachin and Shan states
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11. A safe space is a formal or informal space where women can feel physically and emotionally safe, and where women have the freedom to express themselves without the fear of judgment or harm.