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

actionaid

Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

PSEA Network Myanmar

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for every child

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

Acknowledgement

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About ActionAid

ActionAid is a feminist organization that uses a human rights-based approach to ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable, particularly women and youth, are heard. ActionAid is working with communities across the world to develop solutions that help people adapt to climate change impacts and build resilience.

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Acronyms

AAM	ActionAid Myanmar
AAUK	ActionAid UK
CBO	Community Based Organization
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender Based Violence
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
IASC	Inter Agency Standing Committee
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IEC	Information and Education Communication
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KAP	Knowledge, Attitude and Practice
KBC	Kachin Baptist Convention
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KII	Key Informant Interview
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KMSS	Karuna Mission Social Solidarity
MIMU	Myanmar Information Management Unit
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PSEA	Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
RCSS	Restoration Council of Shan State
SEA	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SSA	Shan State Army
UN	United Nations
UNA	United Nations Associations
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
VAW	Violence Against Women
WASH	Water Sanitation and Hygiene

Executive Summary

Against a backdrop of entrenched patriarchal norms and practices, Myanmar faces some of the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) in the region. The UN states that violence against women and girls is a 'silent emergency' in Myanmar (UN Women, 2016), embedded in 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 findings demonstrate that knowledge and understanding of SEA is low amongst the community members who participated within the research. The findings showcased participants had a more simplistic perception of what SEA entails, with a many participants considering SEA to be predominantly physical and sexual violence such as rape, and Intimate Partner Violence, rather than an understanding of the interlinkages of power and GBV. Just over half (52 percent) of surveyed participants from the community correctly identified that humanitarian aid workers exchanging money, employment, goods or services for sex is also SEA. Generally, the community perspectives towards humanitarian aid workers was positive and no cases of SEA by humanitarian aid workers were reported as part of this research. SEA by humanitarian aid worker, however, is a possibility and needs to be constantly monitored with the implementation of policies.

Lack of reporting or acknowledging SEA is a result of the inhibiting barriers of women and girls in society, with the general lack of understanding of SEA in Myanmar reinforced by harmful social norms that normalise violence and discrimination against women and even hinder them from seeking support services. It is evident through the research findings, that Myanmar's cultural patriarchal norms have tolerated and even normalised SEA by creating a culture of silence and further victimisation of SEA survivors, with widespread acceptance of GBV and the perceived subordinate status of women and girls compared to men. The research findings further highlighted survivors fear of retribution, or uncertainty of confidentiality of reporting mechanisms, due to the low visibility and awareness of existing reporting mechanisms.

The need to recognise the additional risks of SEA in conflict-affected communities was further showcased within the research findings. In instances of internal displacement in particular, violence is exacerbated by a policy of segregation, overcrowding and lack of privacy in Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps. The additional presence of male dominance in camp management committees has also been flagged as a major concern, with participants highlighting that women and girls are vulnerable to specific dangers as a result of their needs not being met. Participants also highlighted the lack of access to support services such as reporting and health care in IDP communities – as a result women and girls are forced to rely on informal, internal community structures to resolve or report cases (such as through camp leaders, or those most influential amongst the community).

This research study has examined the level of community awareness and knowledge of different forms of SEA within Myanmar, and the existing reporting mechanisms and barriers to reporting these in areas of Kachin, northern Shan and Magway regions. Through this, it proposes seven key recommendations to the PSEA Network.

1 Background

1.1 Introduction

Myanmar is one of the least developed countries in the world, marred with prolonged conflicts, internal displacement, poverty, violence, and political unrest. According to the 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview report, 241,000 people in Myanmar have been displaced due the armed conflicts between ethnic Tatmadaw, and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), of which 77% are women and children (OCHA, 2019). More than a million people are in need of some form of humanitarian assistance due to civil wars, natural disasters, conflict between communities, and other factors (OCHA, 2021).

In this context, emerging evidence suggests that different forms of gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)[1] remain an acute problem. The Interagency Standing Committee for Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (IASC) revealed that 50% of affected populations in Myanmar were unable to reach any support services in 2020 and 75% of them were unable to access a safe complaint system (IASC, 2021). However, the true extent of these issues is unknown, due in part to a lack of available data, high levels of underreporting and misunderstanding and misinformation about these different forms of violence. While both men and women are impacted by different forms of SEA, the majority of survivors are women and girls (PSEA Network Myanmar, 2020) and the normalisation of SEA has been linked to Myanmar's predominantly patriarchal society shaped by discriminatory gender norms. Different forms of GBV, including SEA, not only impacts on the ability of women and girls to live safely, but it also impedes their ability to exercise their full human rights, including meaningfully participating in decision-making related to recovery, transition, peace building and development efforts in the communities in which they live (UNFPA, 2017).

Some groups of women and girls may be disproportionately impacted by different forms of GBV, including those from ethnic and religious minorities, and 'stateless women'[2] (OCHA, 2018). Evidence also highlights that women and girls living in states and regions affected by conflict and natural hazards which largely depend on humanitarian assistance may be more vulnerable to different forms of GBV including SEA (Davies & True, 2017; Haar, et al., 2019). For example, in Kachin, northern Shan, and Rakhine states, large numbers of displaced women and girls are living in camps and temporary housing[3] with limited WASH facilities and limited access to income. These women and girls have experienced high levels of harassment, and have been vulnerable to trafficking, and recruitment into sex work (Klein, 2012; Qiu, Zhang, & Liu, 2019). In cyclone-affected Magway, where there has been a significant influx of humanitarian assistance since 2015 providing humanitarian assistance activities such as WASH, health, food and shelter. As of 2021, 31 INGOs are currently supporting the region, mainly focused on the development and humanitarian emergencies in Magway. The scale of support is one of the highest for non-conflicted regions and is comparable to conflict affected regions such as Rakhine, Kachin and Shan states (MIMU, 2017).

The government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has acknowledged GBV as an important issue affecting the country and have committed to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls in the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) 2013-2022. However, there has been limited progress on the successful implementation of this plan, due to a lack of institutional capacity, regulatory mechanism, limited development of policies and laws to support the implementation (PSEA Network Myanmar, 2020).

As evidence suggests that different forms of GBV and SEA are widespread in Myanmar, this research study aimed to explore the community perception and understanding on SEA and the dynamics around aid and power. This research is intended to contribute key evidence gaps by specifically interrogating the issue of SEA in the crisis affected areas of Kachin, northern Shan, and Magway regions, where there are high levels of humanitarian assistance. Moreover, the research explores the community perception on SEA committed by the humanitarian aid workers as there have been cases of local women and girls being exploited and abused by them in developing countries due to their high influence and status in the community. Oxfam, UNICEF, and the Red Cross have recently reported SEA within their organisations and with communities in various countries (BBC News, 2021).

This study's research objectives were to examine:

- Levels of community **awareness and knowledge** of SEA
- Community perception on **SEA committed by humanitarian aid workers**
- Existing **reporting mechanisms and barriers to reporting** SEA

This study was carried out in collaboration with the UNICEF and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Network. PSEA Network was established in Myanmar in 2018 and the network delivers operational functions, organises regular meetings and helps organisations in establishing and implementing PSEA policies. ActionAid Myanmar is an active member of the PSEA network in Myanmar since its establishment.

Please note that this study did not directly investigate the prevalence/incidence/disclosure of SEA in any of the research sites and was informed by ActionAid's SEA policy and procedure and ActionAid's research guidelines on ethics and safety. It is intended that the recommendations from this study will help inform and strengthen strategies on the prevention and reporting of SEA in communities affected by crisis in Myanmar.

2 Research Methodology

This research study employed a mixed method and was implemented between May 2020 and March 2021. Research was undertaken in three states/regions of Myanmar: Kachin, northern Shan, and Magway. Magway was included as a research site as it has been identified as the region with the highest density of humanitarian organisations outside of conflicted areas and provides a unique perspective for comparative study highlighting difference in community awareness, knowledge, and perception on SEA in non-conflict areas compared to those who are living in the IDP camps of Kachin and northern Shan states. The research team undertook field research over a period of five months (August– December 2020) in these three states/regions. The geographical locations were selected to ensure a comparison of political landscape, social structure, gender norms, geography, and conflict dynamics and humanitarian work.

Since the focus of the study was to explore the community perception on SEA and the current reporting mechanism, mix-method[4] and feminist intersectionality approach were used to answer the research questions. During the first stage, a quantitative survey questionnaire was developed by adapting the humanitarian staff PSEA KAP survey which was conducted by PSEA network Myanmar in 2020 (PSEA Network Myanmar, 2020). The questionnaire was translated to Myanmar language and verified by the research team, UNICEF and UNFPA PSEA focal. In August 2020, the questionnaire was shared via Facebook to the community by using U-report tool – an online social media platform developed by UNICEF (U report Myanmar, 2021). The qualitative data collection was conducted from September to December 2020 in IDP camps of Kachin and northern Shan, and villages in Magway region where ActionAid Myanmar projects are currently active.[5] During the second stage, the research team developed various sets of qualitative questionnaires focusing on three broad categories: current community knowledge of SEA and their perception, perception on existing reporting mechanisms, and barriers and factors influencing reporting SEA cases in their community. These questionnaires were translated, verified and pilot tested by the team before conducting focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII) with volunteers, aid workers and staff who have been working in IDP camps, IDPs from Kachin state and northern Shan state and community members from Magway region. A total of 60 FGDs and 70 KIIs were conducted.

The primary research was supplemented by literature review. Children including girls and boys, and youth were included in this research as they were consistently identified as potential SEA survivors during literature review. Participant selection was done by the research team with support from the child protection teams of the CSO partners.

With intersectionality at the core of the research approach, the research team identified four participant groups (men, women, girls, and boys) and one community aid worker group as primary participants for interviews. In each category, the research team included interviewees from the two main religions in the areas: Christianity and Buddhism. Most participants in Kachin and northern Shan are Christian while a few from northern Shan and Magway are Buddhists. Moreover, the researchers were asked to select girls with different backgrounds like single, married, or widows for interviews. During participants' selection, different ethnicities were considered as well (Bamar, Shan, and Lisu (Kachin). Operational definitions of these five groups were established by research team as below:

- Community workers – volunteers or staff who have been working in IDP/community or have had close, regular contact with community for more than a year.
- Men – adult men who are older than 24 years at the time of data collection.
- Women – adult women who are older than 24 years at the time of data collection.
- Boys – boy youths between 15 to 24 years of age.[6]
- Girls – Girl youths between 15 to 24 years of age.[7]

AA Myanmar got prior consent from the parents/ guardians of all participants between 15 to 18 years of age.

	KII	FGD
Male	14	14
Female	14	14
Boy	14	14
Girl	14	14
Community workers	14	4
Total	**70**	**60**

Fig (1): Sampling frame

Comic Book: With the support from PSEA network, ActionAid Myanmar has developed a Comic Book to raise awareness on SEA.

2.1 Research team composition

Research team consisted of a Research Lead, Research Officer, Conflict Sensitivity and Social Accountability Advisor and a team of locally recruited enumerators[8] from Kachin, northern Shan, and Magway regions. Since the research subject is very sensitive, the Research Lead recruited a gender-balanced number of enumerators for each group and all the participants were interviewed by enumerators of the same gender so that they could openly discuss the topic without hesitation. Prior to data collection, all enumerators attended multiple trainings on basic qualitative research methodology, data collection methods and management, conflict sensitivity and safeguarding. Furthermore, the Conflict Sensitivity and Social Accountability Advisor provided technical support in developing a research framework, qualitative questionnaires, and analysis.

3 Literature review

Since SEA is still a very new topic of interest in Myanmar, there is not much literature or reports to help understand the current context. Thus, the research team decided to include sexual violence and gender-based violence under this section as it is also related to deeply-rooted cultural norms and power imbalances. Furthermore, the reported cases of GBV and SEA were handled similarly by the community member of IDP camps and villages.

3.1 Conflict-related sexual violence

Kachin state is situated at the northernmost part of Myanmar and is a home to 1.7 million people of different indigenous ethnic groups – mainly Kachin, Bamar, Shan and smaller ethnic groups (Department of Population, 2021). The majority of people living in Kachin state are Christians. Kachin has abundance of natural resources and is renowned for its jade and mining industries (Hughes, et al., 2000). It is geographically connected with China to the East and India to the West. Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) is the largest Ethnic Armed Organization in the state and has been fighting with the Tatmadaw for over 60 years to demand self-determination. After a decade-long ceasefire between KIO and Myanmar military, an internal civil war broke out in 2011 resulting in bloodshed and more IDPs. Shan state is the largest state in Myanmar and residents are from many ethnic minorities including Shan, Wa, Pa-O, Lisu and Ta'ang. According to the department of population, approximately 4.7 million of people are living in the Shan state with Buddhism as the dominant religion (Department of

Population, 2021). Shan state shares borders with China, Thailand, and Laos and is known for opium production (UNODC, 2020). Multiple EAOs are based in northern Shan state including Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army (RCSS/SSA), Shan State Army North, Shan State Army South, and Ta'ang National Liberation Army. KIA also has some control over northern Shan state. Both Kachin state and northern Shan state experience sporadic conflicts between the EAOs due to competing interests such as control over territory and illegal businesses (HARP, 2018). As a result, thousands of civilians were forced to flee from their homes, and many had been displaced and are unable to return (Lut, 2013). According to Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021 report, a total of 168 IDP sites have been set up in Kachin and northern Shan states with more than a hundred thousand people still receiving humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2021).

During the conflicts, widespread human right violations were recorded from both EAOs and *Tatmadaw*, including sexual violence against women and girls (Hedström & Olivius, 2021; HARP, 2018). Reports specifically mention rape being deliberately used as a weapon by the Myanmar military during multiple military operations (Pistor, 2017; Ryan, 2020). A review on sex trafficking and sexual exploitation in armed conflicts settings identified that internally displaced women, especially women and girls from minority ethnic groups, were more likely to experience sexual assault than that internally displaced men (McAlpine, Hossain, & Zimmerman, 2016). Research conducted in Kachin state also revealed that levels of sexual violence against children, especially girls, was higher in IDP camps compared to children living in other settings (Fry & McChesney, 2019).

Furthermore, several studies have indicated that overcrowding and lack of privacy in IDP camps exposed women and girls to sexual violence, exploitation, and gender-based violence (GBV) (HARP, 2018; Pistor, 2017). A risk analysis study conducted by PSEA Myanmar network claimed that beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance such as food, water and sanitation and health are at an increased risk of exploitation by humanitarian aid workers due to their high dependency on this assistance (PSEA Network Myanmar, 2020).

3.2 Sexual violence reporting in IDP camps

Myanmar Demographic Health Survey (2015-16) mentions that the number of gender-based violence cases where SEA is a subset is consistently under-reported across Myanmar. The study highlighted that 37% of women who had experienced violence had not reported nor sought help from anyone including immediate family members (Ministry of Health and Sports - MoHS/Myanmar and ICF, 2017). The situation in IDP camps can be further aggravated by the multiple and intersecting layers of vulnerabilities.

Usually, the survivors were unable to report the sexual violence they experienced. A study analysing sexual and gender-based violence in conflict states claimed that people who experienced violence were not able to report due to shame, an insecure environment and fear of stigmatisation (Davies, True, & Tanyag, 2016). Fear of stigmatisation and social marginalisation of the survivor by their community has been identified as a major barrier in reporting.

The role of IDP camp staff and leaders is an important factor in deciding whether survivors report the case or not. IDPs and community members feared if they report SEA cases, they will be stripped of the support being provided by aid organisations due to changes in the attitudes of staff (Semler, 2019). Lack of awareness of how to report SEA and GBV, poor or non-existent women's representation in camp committees, weak access to services, lack of support towards SEA survivors, and lack of trust in the reporting mechanism hinders the people living in IDP camps to report SEA cases (UNFPA Myanmar, 2014; Justice Base, 2016).

A qualitative study in Kachin state conducted by Oxfam found that the barriers and preferences relating to perceptions and experiences of misconduct reporting depend under three main types of factor: personal, inter-personal and structural factors (Semler, 2019). The study revealed that being dependent on the humanitarian assistance made the community felt powerless and humiliated. While the rights-holders were grateful towards humanitarian aid workers, they felt vulnerable towards sexual exploitation.

■ အာဏာပါဝါဟု ဆိုရာတွင်

(က) ငွေကြေး၊
(ခ) လူမှုရေး၊
(ဂ) အလုပ်အကိုင်အခွင့်အလမ်း သို့မဟုတ်
(ဃ) နိုင်ငံရေး များပါဝင်သည်။

■ လိင်ပိုင်းဆိုင်ရာ အမြတ်ထုတ်မှုနှင့် အလွဲသုံးစားပြုမှုတွင် အကျုံးဝင်သောအရာများ

■ ကိုယ်နှုတ်အမူရာဖြင့် လိင်ပိုင်းဆိုင်ရာ ကိစ္စရပ်များအား ပြောဆိုခြင်း။

■ လိင်ပိုင်းဆိုင်ရာ မဖွယ်မရာ ထိတွေ့ကိုင်တွယ်ခြင်း။

■ အသက် ၁၈ နှစ်အောက် ကလေးများနှင့် လိင်ဆက်ဆံခြင်း။

■ ရာထူးအာဏာ၊ ငွေကြေး အကူအညီပေးပစ္စည်းများ၊ အလုပ်အကိုင်အခွင့်အလမ်းများနှင့် လိင်ဆက်ဆံရန် တောင်းဆိုခြင်း။

■ လိင်ပိုင်းဆိုင်ရာ အမြတ်ထုတ်မှုနှင့် အလွဲသုံးစားပြုမှုများတွင်

ကျူးလွန်သူများ အကူအညီပေးရေးဝန်ထမ်းများ၊ volunteer များဖြစ်နေတတ်ပြီး ကျူးလွန်ခံရသူ/နစ်နာသူများ အကျိုးခံစားခွင့်ရှိသူ (သို့ မဟုတ်) ရပ်ရွာလူထုတွင်းရှိ နေထိုင်သူများ ဖြစ်နေတတ်သည်။

PSEA IEC Pamphlet: ActionAid Myanmar collaborated with CSO partners to produce a pamphlet on PSEA specifically targeting community members.

3.3 Sexual violence and cultural norms

Discussion of topics related to sexual violence including sexual exploitation is still very sensitive in Myanmar. Sexual exploitation and abuse stems from various socio-cultural factors, including gender norms, the status and position of women in society, and the prevalence of male power. A community's attitutes towards sexual exploitation and abuse significantly depends on their attitudes and beliefs about sex and gender. Freccero et al. (2011) underscores three major aspects of socio-cultural influence on SEA which are: perceived male entitlement to sex; the perception of females as a symbol of honour or purity; and sex as a taboo. When these factors are coupled with low level of awareness, normalisation of sexual exploitation and abuse takes root.

In a country of 53 million people, the reported cases of sexual violence are the tip of the iceberg as a significant number of rape cases go unreported. Myanmar Demographic Health Survey (2015–2016) estimated that one in five women experienced some form of IPV in their lifetimes – of this 15% reported physical violence, 3% sexual violence, and 14% emotional violence (MoHS Myanmar and ICF, 2017). The Ministry of Home Affairs data estimates a 28% rise (from 1,100 in 2016 to 1,405 in 2017) in unreported rape cases

(UNDP, 2019). Survivors, especially women and girls, are often reluctant to talk openly about GBV and intimate partner violence (IPV) due to family pressure, the fear of being treated unfairly as women and lack of trust in the efficiency of the justice system, based on women and girls' lived experiences (Smith, 2006).

Though in some IDP camps and villages, reporting mechanism have been set up by organisations but survivors of SEA and violence preferred traditional dispute resolution systems for SEA cases due to the lengthy process and uncertain outcome. These traditional dispute resolution mechanisms often victimise survivors, although this is less true for SEA cases (Justice Base, 2016). Moreover, marital rape and violence is not considered as a crime under Myanmar Penal Code section 375 (The Penal Code -Amended, 2016). As such, non-consensual sexual activity by a person's spouse is not punishable by law.

3.4 Covid-19 and gender-based violence

In IDP settlements, access to basic health care services, water and hygiene facilities are already difficult for vulnerable women and girls due to social norms, limited resources, and safety concerns. The Covid-19 pandemic has further aggravated the living condition of women. The

first case of Covid-19 in Myanmar was reported on 23 March 2020. To contain the virus, the government issued strict restrictions and isolation measures to the people living in the IDP camps and humanitarian aid workers (Hkawng & Fishbein, 2020) thereby limiting the support of humanitarian agencies (Thompson, 2020). Since humanitarian aid workers were not allowed to come inside IDP camps due to Covid-19 restrictions, the mechanisms which monitor sexual violence became less effective, increasing the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse within the camp (OCHA, 2021). Moreover, crowded living spaces and curfews increased the risk of gender-based violence, including IPV which is still predominant in emergency settings (Hall G. , 2020). A report on the Covid-19 epidemic in Myanmar and its impact on civic and political space found that gender-based violence increased 7.5-fold during the Covid-19 outbreak (Thompson, 2020).

4 Ethical and safety considerations, data security and management

During the design stage of this research, the research team held meetings with the UNICEF, PSEA network focal and UNFPA members. Research locations were selected with support from the UNICEF Child Protection Focal and respective local CSO partners to ensure their participation and collaboration in the research. The research team then informed local authorities and camp leaders and waited for their approval to conduct research in those areas. Due to the sensitivity of the research subject matter, the research team decided to conduct face-to-face interviews despite the Covid-19 epidemic. To mitigate the risk of transmitting Covid-19 among enumerators and interviewees, the team adapted the initial plan to collect data in remote IDP camps which require two to three days of travelling and instead opted for locations which could be reached in a day. The planned travel was also disrupted by tension as a result of the Myanmar general elections which occurred during the same period. This was agreed and coordinated with UNICEF, the local CSO partner and the IDP camp leaders.

Prior to data collection, the research team closely coordinated with the UNICEF Child Protection Focal and CSO partners to explore the current existing referral mechanism for SEA and GBV. Instructions on how to report cases of SEA and GBV were given to the enumerators to share with the interviewees. During data collection, all interviewed participants, including boys and girls under 18 years of age, were provided with clear information about the purpose of the

research, the data collection process and audio recordings. Verbal and written informed consent were obtained prior to data collection. Guardian/parental permissions were sought and granted to participants under 18 years of age. All the interviewed participants were given the PSEA hotline phone number and child protection focal phone number to report any cases of SEA and GBV at the end of data collection. A copy of the signed informed consent form was also shared with the participants which included the contact number of the research focal so they could reach the team at all times.[9]

All the FGDs and KIIs were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by enumerators at the interview sites, before being deleted. Memos were collected and daily feedback sessions were held between research project focal and enumerators to discuss the process including any issues and emerging key findings during the data collection period. All the verbatim transcripts were anonymised to preserve confidentiality. Signed informed consent forms and transcripts were safely stored in ActionAid Myanmar office with only the research team given access to the collected data which will be destroyed after three years. Scanned copies of the transcripts were stored in the cloud database and will be deleted after one year.

The research team recruited local enumerators to mitigate the risk of importing Covid-19 from other states and regions. There was no known Covid-19 transmission in research destinations during the data collection period, and the research team followed Covid-19 guidelines prescribed by Ministry of Health and Sports to ensure the safety of enumerators and participants. During the field work, enumerators and participants were provided with face shields, masks, and hand gel.

4.1 Data analysis

In the data analysis, the project team used a thematic analysis approach along with an intersectional feminist lens. To familiarise themselves with the transcripts and identify the major themes and sub-themes for this research, the team delivered a two-day participatory analysis workshop with the local enumerators and team. This was followed by coding of transcripts with the qualitative research analysis software Dedoose.[10] Subsequently, the coded data were compared and triangulated between each respondent to identify similarities and links between themes and sub-themes.

5 Limitation

The research data was collected in November and December 2020 during the second wave of Covid-19 infections when strict Covid-19 measures were imposed nationwide. Due to these restrictions, all the trainings to enumerators were moved online. While there can be a question on the efficacy of online trainings and subsequent research process, this was necessary to ensure the safety and security of team members and participants.

The data collection process occurred during the electoral cycle of 2020 general elections in Myanmar and during restrictions related to Covid-19. The electoral cycle was marked with rising political tension between different armed groups. Initially, interviews were planned to be conducted in remote IDP camps of Kachin and northern Shan, however, as the situation deteriorated and Covid-19 restrictions made travel more difficult, the research team in consultation with UNICEF and CSO partners decided to conduct field work in the IDP camps within a day's reach from the Myitkyina (Kachin state) and Lashio (northern Shan state) to ensure the team members safety.

Since the quantitative data is collected through online polling using social media, it became difficult to control and balance the number of participants from different states and regions. As such, there were more responses from Shan state than other regions. During the KIIs and FGDs, the research team did not have access inside camps due to the Covid-19 related restrictions. Because of these restrictions, the research team worked with the camp management team to help get the necessary approvals and identify participants for the study.

This report aims to explore the perspective of communities regarding the SEA and the reporting mechanism and its barrier. Due to the lack of knowledge on the subject matter, GBV and SEA topics were used interchangeably during the research data collection. Most of the participants confused SEA with GBV and the research team had to clarify frequently to the participants.

In addition, while the sample size in this research was comparatively large, it was not large enough to be seen as representative. As such the opinions and experience captured in the report should not be read as experiences of all members of IDP camps, communities, and community aid workers. This report does not claim to provide a comprehensive analysis of SEA in Kachin, northern Shan, and Magway states/regions, rather, it provides a snapshot of the recurring themes from the perceptions, opinions and experiences highlighted during the interactions.

6 Findings

6.1 Current community understanding and awareness on SEA

6.1.1 Misunderstanding with other forms of sexual violence

Despite the high level of literacy rate (89.1%) (Department of Population Myanmar, 2020), the low level of awareness on sexual exploitation and abuse in Myanmar has moulded a narrow view of sexual exploitation and abuse i.e., that only physical sexual violence is SEA. The quantitative U-report survey showed only half (52%) of surveyed participants from the community could correctly identify the humanitarian aid workers exchanging of money, employment, goods, or services for sex as SEA.

One third (33%) of participants considered SEA as humanitarian aid workers for not reporting to the organization if they were suspicious of SEA. Only 6% of participants understood humanitarian workers engaging sex with children under 18, 5% with sex workers and 4% with community beneficiaries as SEA. Alarmingly, nearly 95% of surveyed participants think it is normal for humanitarian aid workers to engage in sexual relationship with sex workers, children (under 18 years of age), and community beneficiaries. When we investigated the perspectives of men and women separately, 58% of male participants perceived SEA as aid workers exchanging money, employment, goods, or services for sex while only 42% of female perceived that was the case. When we examined the responses of different age groups, participants who are older than 30 years had more understanding of the different aspects of SEA. 73% of respondents above 35 and 63% of 30–34-year participants mentioned exchanging sex for money, aids, and services meanwhile only 52% and 48% of respondents in the 14-19 and 20-24 age groups mentioned this. These findings are further triangulated with the qualitative findings.

6.1.1.1 Rape

In Myanmar, rape is being weaponised by security forces. According to the Human Rights Council report of 2019, the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar verified widespread use of rape during the military operations by security forces (Human Rights

Council, 2019). Since rape is a frequent form of sexual violence in Myanmar, most of the interviewed participants perceived only rape as SEA.

> **"In our village, we know only about physical abuse like rape as sexual exploitation and abuse."**
> **Community worker**

Apart from rape, many community members including youth in Myanmar do not recognize other forms of sexual violence as SEA. For example, a young boy from Magway expressed that touching someone's hand without permission, abusive facial expressions and verbal abuse are normal.

> **"Except rapes and physical exploitations, the rest are normal."**
> **Boy**

This understanding has been a result of a lack of awareness of sexual exploitation and abuse in Myanmar. Most research participants expressed social norms that reinforce the normalisation of sexual violence against women and even hinder them from seeking support services. As such, the traditional gender arrangements, beliefs, and behaviours reinforce women's sexual subordination to men (Connell, 1987; Ingraham, 1994; Martin, 2009). What is witnessed here is a cultural violence which tolerates, justifies, or even legitimises direct and structural sexual violence.

6.1.1.2 Intimate Partner Violence

In Myanmar, sexual violence, particularly by intimate partners, largely goes underreported and unpunished (UNFPA, 2017). Myanmar's proposed Prevention of Violence Against Women Law does not acknowledge marital and intimate partner rape – survivors of marital rape are not protected by law. Despite the cultural and legal definition of marital rape, however, this study found that most of the interviewed community members considered marital rape as a form of SEA. For instance, young boy from Magway mentioned,

> **"As for me, I think (SEA) is the rape to one's wife with no consent."**
> **Boy**

Most of the interviewed participants acknowledged that sexual exploitation and abuse are common in most families across research

sites and that it rarely gets reported. But when the research team further investigated, it was found that they were referring to intimate partner violence. Young boy and girl respondent from Magway and northern Shan stated that,

> **"I think (SEA) is the beating of a married man to his wife."**
> **Boy**

> **"I have a couple living beside my home and every day the husband beats his wife. I think it is SEA"**
> **Girl**

6.1.2 Human trafficking

In Kachin and Shan states, the ongoing conflicts and destruction of livelihood have forced people to seek new opportunities for jobs and a safe haven. People affected by conflicts in Kachin and Shan often cross the nearby border to China in the search for better opportunities and jobs. This trend has increased the risks of human trafficking and many interviewed participants from Kachin and northern Shan highlighted this issue while asked about sexual exploitation and abuse.

> **"Firstly, it happens in youth. A child who works in China was almost sold by a fake lover. Her parents knew it on time and saved her."**
> **Girl**

This view is also shared by a few of the interviewed community workers that they perceived SEA as one form of human trafficking. A community worker from northern Shan explained,

> **"What I understand is a woman being told that she will get job and earn money, and she was taken to a workplace. But later, she did not receive any salary for her work. Instead, she experienced physical abuses."**
> **Community worker**

However, we did not observe participants from Magway mentioning human trafficking when asked about their understanding of sexual exploitation and abuse.

6.1.3 SEA influenced by internet

Another reason for SEA cited by many interviewees was the widespread misuse of internet. As of January 2021, there are 23.65 million internet users in Myanmar, with 43.3% of internet penetration. There are 29 million social media users in Myanmar as of January 2021, a 32% increment from 2020. Similarly, 69.43 million people in Myanmar use mobile connections (Kemp, 2021). While the widespread use of social networks has made information accessible, digital literacy remains low and online sexual abuses are proliferating.

> I believe cases increase due to the widespread use of Facebook and phone. Some boys are very much naughty and do not have the basic human mindset. They do not show any empathy towards other people and do things recklessly.
>
> **Boy**

This lack of digital literacy, unmonitored internet usage, weak reporting mechanism and lack of robust cyber security law and its implementation further makes the online abuse and harassment likely. Online sexual abuse and harassment unfortunately is not considered to be a serious form of sexual abuse in Myanmar.

6.2 Perceptions of SEA committed by humanitarian workers

6.2.1 Lack of awareness on codes of conduct

When participants were asked about their understanding of SEA, most of them appeared not to have a good understanding – even community aid workers are not aware of the required codes of conduct while working in the IDP camps and villages. Moreover, 91% of the U-report 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. A community worker from northern Shan revealed:

> "We do not have any rules being set up in the IDP camp (for SEA). But we think there should be some principles and regulations which we must follow."
>
> **Community worker**

> "I work as a humanitarian worker for my village but I am not aware of the specific rules set up by each of the organisations I work with regarding SEA."
>
> **Community worker**

6.2.2 Positive relationship with aid workers

The study found that the community members' perception towards the humanitarian workers in the research areas is positive. The participants highlighted the co-operative environment between the community members, leaders, and the humanitarian aid workers. An interviewee from Kachin state said:

> "The relationship between community members and humanitarian aid workers has always been good. They work cohesively, with no hostility amongst them."
>
> **Adult male**

Almost all the interviewed participants reported that they have not heard of any sexual exploitation and abuse conducted by humanitarian aid workers. However, community members acknowledged the possibility that humanitarian aid workers can be involved in SEA.

> "I have never heard about sexual exploitation and abuse by NGO staff."
>
> **Boy**

> "It is possible for volunteers to commit sexual exploitation and abuse. However, there is no such case here yet."
>
> **Adult female**

While the communities expressed that have not heard of any SEA conducted by humanitarian aid workers, it cannot discount the possibility of unreported cases.

"It is possible, that if someone was exposed to sexual exploitation, they may not date to speak out. Specifically as aid workers can be seen as our 'Sayar'."

Adult female

"I think people, especially those most discriminated and facing greater financial hardships, could be more easily exploited. They are most likely to have to rely on assistance which could increase the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse."

Boy

A sense of fear towards aid workers was also expressed by the vulnerable groups. For instance, IDPs from northern Shan mentioned that they are afraid of not receiving assistance if they do not maintain good relationship with aid workers.

"If we are not having good terms with humanitarian aid workers, we will not receive their assistance. Also, they will not come anymore."

Adult female

This power imbalance between aid workers and IDPs is alarming as this fear can silence IDPs in case of SEA.

6.3 Perceptions on barriers to SEA reporting

6.3.1 Gender norms

Myanmar is a patriarchal society, where the women and girls have a lower status than men. The interviewed participants confirmed that due to the self-claimed 'superior' status of men, they hold the power and influence in the everyday lives of women.

"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. The perception of men is that they are above women and that women cant do anything to push back'"

Community worker

A perception of male superiority is also felt by female participants. Due to deeply-rooted cultural and gender norms, most of the interviewed female participants revealed that they were treated unfairly by male partners and family members, and they do not have much influence over men. A few interviewed participants had further pinpointed that women and girls from poorer families had the highest risk of sexual exploitation, and abuse.

"We are not allowed to learn because we are women. This is culture. We do not know anything except marrying man. Here forced marriages could happen even if you dislike as you are women and you do not have any power. I think it relates to culture and religion."

Adult female

"Women from poor family have highest chances of becoming victims. And I think women under 18 years of age, children and older women are also at risk of exploitation."

Boy

However, a few male participants, especially youth, acknowledged that they could also experience SEA like any women or girls though they believed this was far less common. A young male respondent from the Kachin state shared:

"Women who have power or high social status could also be the perpetrator and we (male) might be the SEA victims.

Boy

6.3.2 Victim blaming

The social and cultural structure and legal system in Myanmar is patriarchal and male supremist (Norsworthy & Khuankaew, 2004). As a result, at best the SEA perpetrator faces minimal legal penalties. Even in cases where perpetrators are given legal penalties, the process often backfires on the survivor in the form of victim blaming. Regardless of their age, both male and female respondents from research areas testified to the prevalence of a patriarchal mindset and victim

blaming culture that trickled down to what women and girls wore and how they behave.

> "Women and girls always wear short dresses, not only during the ceremonies but also i the daily lives when they are in the camps. They wear it in front of men and older people, even during the praying. This kind of behavior of women and girls is inappropriate for us to see."
>
> **Boy**

During the interview, a youth respondent from Kachin state also pointed out that young girls are careless about their behaviour and their friendliness towards boys and emphasised such behaviour as a cause of sexual exploitation and abuse.

> "If we think critically, SEA cases happened because of girls' misbehaviour and their seduction towards boys."
>
> **Adult female**

Furthermore, young girls and boys pointed out that parents are responsible for trusting relatives and neighbours who can potentially be the perpetrators of sexual exploitation and abuse. Some participants including community aid workers also highlighted that the 'wrong' behaviour of women and girls needs to be corrected to prevent SEA.

> "Parents should teach their daughters how to behave in front of the people. They should not initiate anything. They should not be talkative in the crowd. They should behave. They need to be cautious."
>
> **Community worker**

As demonstrated by both male and female participants including youth and community workers, there seems to have a wider acceptance that women and girls are fully or partially responsible for the sexual exploitation and abuse against them. This narrow and simplistic view of the causes of SEA often further victimises the

survivors of SEA and prevents them from seeking support.

6.3.3 Culture of Silence

6.3.3.1 Shame and lack of trust in the justice system

Despite being a common problem to most of the women in Myanmar, there is a dark and damaging culture of silence around sexual exploitation and abuse in Myanmar. Raising one's voice against sexual exploitation and abuse is generally unwelcomed and often has economic and social repercussions. Most of the interviewed participants believed that girls reporting any experience of sexual violence would represent a scandal that could negatively impact their reputation and perceived value in the society, in addition to harming the reputation of their families. As such, survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse voluntarily or involuntarily opt silence over seeking justice. This qualitative finding is further validated by the U-report survey. 19% of surveyed participants perceived that it was shameful for them to report if they were sexually exploited. A community worker from northern Shan state mentioned that,

> "We do not talk about SEA much in our camp/village."
>
> **Community worker**

> "Myanmar girls will choose to be killed instead of humiliation when they encounter these things. So, it is very much difficult for them to report."
>
> **Boy**

Multiple factors in this study have been identified which contribute to this culture of silence. 17% of U-report surveyed participants reported a belief that even if a case is reported to local authorities and the aid organisation that no action will be taken. This finding was also consistent in the interviews where most of the interviewed participants mentioned they were hesitant to file the case to the authorities. A participant from northern Shan stated that,

"Even if they report to IDP camp leaders, they will say that "He only touched your cheek and do not take seriously over that." They did not think of that as a crime, so they do not try to solve the case and take any action towards perpetrator. Later, no one reports, and it became like norm for everyone."

Community worker

6.3.3.2 Fear

In a traditional society like Myanmar, fear plays a crucial role in shaping attitude towards sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly of women and girls. 15% of U-report surveyed participants said they fear threats and danger if they report SEA cases meanwhile 12% of participants believe the reporting process is not confidential and their information would be leaked to the community. Moreover, 9% of surveyed participants mentioned that they were afraid of excluded and discriminated against by the community if the abuse was found out. These findings were corroborated during interviews with youth and women from the IDP camps of Kachin and northern Shan states. They expressed a fear of mistreatment by camp leaders and others if they report an incidence of sexual exploitation and abuse. The interviewed adolescent boy further added,

"In the past they (camp leaders) scolded someone (women who reported about SEA) in front of me and so I am scared".

Boy

This trend seems to be common in IDP camps where camp leaders have the authority to deny food and other necessities to people living in IDP camps. However, in Magway region the community does not directly rely on the village head or humanitarian assistance workers for their daily needs. A female interviewee from Kachin state revealed that she is more frightened about reporting of such incidents after she started living in an IDP campTwo participants from Kachin mentioned,

"There is no safety. We cannot keep secrets in camp and if something happens like this, everybody from the camp will know it. It will also spread outside the camp."

Adult female

"If SEA case happened inside camp, I believe no one will report it. They will keep it secret until they could not suffer anymore. In most cases, girls are the victims, and they tend to keep it as secrets."

Adult male

Women across the research sites have also reported a fear of violent retribution from the perpetrator. This is particularly acute among women living in conflict affected areas, ethnic minority women, internally displaced women and women living in poverty. A female respondent from northern Shan claimed that the risk is as high as being killed.

"I do not dare to report. Let it be. I am afraid of being killed by the perpetrator."

Adult female

The family, friends, and supporters of the survivor also reported fearing retribution from the perpetrator. The fear of revenge therefore silences the whole support system, despite the existence of laws and regulations that are supposed to protect the survivor.

"If I help in reporting, there is a chance that although the case may not be directly related to me, the perpatrator may come and threaten me."

Girl

The degree and frequency of revenge were found to be directly connected with the status and wealth of the perpetrator. The fractured legal system in Myanmar aids perpetrators and impunity is widespread. This trend has eroded the trust of participants in the justice system and survivors are less likely to seek justice.

> "There is an incident that perpetrator who has money and power tried to revenge even when the survivor won the case."
>
> **Adult male**

6.3.3.3 Concern of safety and security

Women and girls from the IDP camps in Kachin state are concerned about their safety and security, with many reporting that any person can get into and out of the camp without scrutiny or ID. Participants living in a camp in northern Shan state said:

> "As our camp is not very big, there is no one assigned for the safety reason. I believe it is easier for outsiders to cause distress to us."
>
> **Adult female**

The poor infrastructure of the camps such as weak and eroded walls also compromise the privacy and safety of women and girls:

> "There is no safety in this camp as houses are too close and tight against each other. The one we are living right now is meant for temporary living, but now two years has passed by. Walls are damaged and have holes and there is no privacy. Perpetrators can do us harm as they see us every day and we do not feel safe.
>
> **Boy**

6.3.3.4 Lack of knowledge on rights

Many participants have reported a lack of knowledge as the reason they are unable to report incidents of SEA. The underprivileged and marginalised ethnic groups such as Lisu and Shan have low levels of literacy and are generally unable to access reporting processes. Participants from northern Shan state mentioned that:

> "We, Lisu ethnics, are minority group here and only a few people are literate. We do not know which rights we have. We do not dare to speak in front of people."
>
> **Boy**

Many participants perceive that knowing the camp leader personally will influence the reporting process. Participants suggested that this has an impact on extent to which people feel confident to report cases, as summarised by one participant:

> "We have worry in reporting because we know nothing. I am not close to the village leader and I do not even know his name."
>
> **Boy**

6.4 Perceptions of community on reporting mechanism

6.4.1 High influence of camp leader in reporting process

Our interviews with IDPs, community members and community workers identified that more than half of the interviewed people who are currently living in IDP camps or villages do not know how to report SEA. Most of the interviewees (45%) in both quantitative and qualitative studies indicated that their first contact for reporting is the camp management committee or camp leader. As indicated above, participants complained that camp management committee are dominated by men and systematically excludes women's voices in crucial issues like sexual exploitation and abuse. No participants had heard of a female camp leader.

> "We only have camp leader to report in this village... I have never seen people going to other places for reporting".
>
> **Adult male**

There is a high level of dependency on camp leaders for reporting cases of SEA. While this demonstrates the important role of the camp leader in combating sexual abuse and exploitation, it also highlights the likelihood of bias in the reporting process which can potentially silence both the male and female survivors. One young male from northern Shan state said he will not pursue any legal actions if his camp leader decided to not act on the case he has reported.

> **"I will be silent and take no more actions if village leader does not react on the reported case. I am afraid that will damage (the harmony of) our camp. I cannot face people alone and I do not know where to go."**
>
> **Boy**

A few participants mentioned that they will first report any cases to religious leaders because they are viewed as moral authorities. Most of the Christian participants from Kachin and northern Shan states believed their religious leaders are more accessible and trustworthy. It is important to note that most of the camps in Kachin and Shan states are being run by local faith-based organisations, and religious leaders are influential figures in the camp management committee. One respondent from northern Shan state reported:

> **"If anything happens, we firstly report it to religious organization (A tin thaw)."**
>
> **Adult male**

However, in Magway region, it was found that the village head had less influence compared to IDP camp leaders from Kachin or northern Shan state. Participants from Magway also stated that their first point of contact for SEA is village head, and the reporting process will be followed accordingly.

> **"If we are sure, we will report the case (SEA) to village leader first. Then, we will go step by step from township level to district level. In our village, the reporting mechanism is like this."**
>
> **Adult female**

6.4.2 Lack of knowledge on reporting mechanism

It was found that more than half of the participants from IDP camps in Kachin and northern Shan and communities in Magway are unaware of the SEA reporting mechanism and do not know how to reach the focal person for SEA reporting.[11] In Kachin and norther Shan, the adult male participants explained that they were not aware of the reporting mechanism as they spend most of their time away from the camp for work –

this lack of knowledge increases their vulnerability. 73% of participants mentioned that they did not know where to report if SEA cases happen in the community. Moreover, 17% of participants believe that even if they reported the case, there will be no action from the related organisation. A participant from northern Shan state revealed,

> **"There is no reporting mechanism in place that I know of. No person or organisation to report to."**
>
> **Adult male**

However, it was found that in some locations there are organisations working on combating gender-based violence with trained and assigned focal persons in IDP camps for camp inhabitants to report such incidences. For instance, several female and youth interviewees from Kachin state mentioned that they are aware of gender-based violence reporting mechanisms which had been set up by a local network group and international organisations. However, those are not specifically targeting sexual exploitation and abuse cases perpetrated by humanitarian aid workers. A community worker indicated that, in their experience, these gender-based violence reporting mechanisms are effective:

> **"We refer (SEA) cases to [Organisation X]. We also provide training via phone calls.... I do not know the details but according to feedback provided by experienced person, it is quite effective."**
>
> **Community worker**

> **"Women solve their cases with [Organisation X] and with Women Affair Committee.... I think we can tell the incidence of SEA to their volunteer... I think we should solve the cases by telling them."**
>
> **Adult female**

6.4.3 Weak rule of law and policies

Security and access to justice are central in the protection of women and girls from sexual exploitation and abuse, especially in conflict affected countries. In Myanmar, it was found that participants' trust in the justice system has eroded

to the extent that they will not report cases to the legal system. Many participants mentioned that, in their experience, reporting to the police station and other formal justice system will not yield any results – rather it will exacerbate the suffering of survivors. A respondent from Magway claimed that the current laws and regulations are not practical and rarely implemented. More importantly, most interviewees acknowledged the power imbalance between perpetrators and survivors in SEA cases, and when cases reported, the perpetrators often try to settle the case with money and their social status, using camp leaders or religion leaders as mediators. As a result, most cases do not reach judicial systems and are settled outside the system.

> "There were cases solved with money. I have even heard about the cases settled in accordance with social concerns and the cases were settled with apologizing at home."
> **Girl**

> "Money wins the justice the one who has more money wins the trial regardless of how right it is from one's side."
> **Boy**

In Myanmar, despite having protective legislations and accompanying systems in place, the barriers to women and girls accessing justice are alarming. These include social norms, victim blaming, a culture of silence, fear of reprisals, financial costs, social shame, and lack of trust in the legal system. Fighting a culture of impunity, holding perpetrators to account, and ensuring a safe environment for SEA survivors who decide to press charges are important aspects of interventions.

7 Conclusion

This research has focused on SEA by humanitarian aid workers in Myanmar and explored the community perspectives on SEA due to its hidden nature and prevalence in communities and IDP camps.

During this research, a range of participants including community members, IDPs and community aid workers were consulted, and it was found that the understanding of SEA is low among community members and is often confused with GBV and other types of sexual violence. The community perspective towards humanitarian aid workers is positive and no participants

reported knowledge of SEA by a humanitarian aid worker. However, SEA by humanitarian aid worker remains a possibility and needs to be constantly monitored with the implementation of policies.

Several cultural norms in Myanmar were found to be strongly influencing and reinforcing the culture of silence and further victimising the SEA survivors. Gender norms that privilege men and fuel inequalities are being supported by both men and women regardless of their age and geographical locations. As such, victim blaming culture is pushing survivors towards culture of silence and self-censorship. A culture of silence remains at the core of SEA which is influenced by multiple factors including confusion of SEA with GBV and sexual violence, fear of retribution from perpetrators, lack of anonymity in reporting, and lack of understanding of the reporting process. Misuse of internet and social media platforms were found to be a contributing factor in cases of SEA, both online and offline.

IDPs in Kachin and northern Shan states and community members in Magway are not aware of the existing reporting mechanism, as a result of its low visibility. IDP camp leaders, community leaders and religious leaders are considered to be the first points of contact for reporting SEA and GBV. However, due to the male dominance of these 'gatekeeping' positions, women and girls are often deprived of the support and services they require. The weak rule of law and widespread impunity has also eroded trust in legal system, leading survivors to seek justice outside of official means.

If SEA is to be addressed in a way that is locally relevant and effective, it is important to hear the voices of communities. There is a clear gap between the needs of communities and the current efforts on preventing SEA (PSEA).

In this research, IDPs and communities have suggested that a targeted awareness raising program on PSEA, coupled with promoting the active role of leaders, the appointment of female focal leaders and immediate support such as safe spaces and psychological support would help tackle the prevalence of SEA.

This multifaceted, survivor-led approach will help prevent and combat cases of SEA. The new system should make use the existing GBV prevention networks and structures to ensure progress is not delayed.

In summary, AAM hopes that this research will aid progress towards building understanding about the causes and prevention of PSEA and assist communities to take decisive action against injustices perpetrated against them.

8 Recommendations for PSEA network members

8.1 Need for building PSEA awareness in the community and with aid workers

"I want awareness raising training and discussions on this issue. I want pamphlets, posters and vinyls to be hung in the public area. Only with these activities out in the open, will there be greater understanding within the village community to speak out."

Boy

The research findings highlighted that most of the community beneficiaries did not fully understand what constitutes sexual exploitation and abuse and it is often interpreted as gender-based violence. In addition, community members did not see aid workers as potential perpetrators as they are respected and admired in the community. Participants reported that they have positive relationships with most of the aid workers as they visit the IDP camps regularly and provide cash and basic needs for people in the camps.

There has been no PSEA related training or awareness-raising sessions provided in the IDP camps where we conducted interviews. This may be one of the factors for the low level of SEA reporting from the community. Research participants highlighted that they would be very supportive of "a myin phwint" or "awareness raising" training on SEA and reporting mechanisms, which would help them have more confidence and courage in speaking out up against perpetrators. Early investment in awareness raising and prevention of PSEA can avoid adverse effects later and maintain the trust between communities and aid organisations which is critical to the successful delivery of humanitarian assistance.

8.2 Need for contextualised and targeted PSEA IEC materials

"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

During our research, many interviewed participants had revealed that they had never seen a single IEC material provided by the aid organisations and in IDP camps. Furthermore, they have been consistently asking the PSEA hotline number for IEC materials specifically targeting community so that they could raise awareness on PSEA, and report cases. Based on their feedback and suggestions, the research team reviewed the current IEC materials (pamphlets, vinyls, and videos) which were shared on the PSEA network page and noted that most of them only mention the IASC six core principles – this information is targeted at staff and isn't appropriate for community members.

Therefore, there is a need to develop appropriate IEC materials to explain what constitutes sexual exploitation and abuse; the power imbalance between perpetrators and survivors; how to report a case; and the availability of support for survivors.

8.3 Regular PSEA capacity building training for field staff and community volunteers

"I do not remember whether I was provided PSEA training before or not, though I remember I had attended GBV training. I have forgotten the content of the training."

Community worker

The 'Do no Harm' principle is one of the fundamental responsibilities for every humanitarian assistance worker and they must not exploit and abuse their authority. We recognise that most of the aid organisations have a stated zero tolerance policy for SEA and an appointed focal person to provide mandatory trainings to staff and partners. Despite this, this research revealed that some community workers, especially locally-based volunteers, had not been provided with PSEA trainings. Fortunately, they had received training around gender-based violence.

This report recommends PSEA capacity-building training and refresher training programmes for both staff and community volunteers. With the availability of internet, e-learning options could also make the PSEA training more accessible.

8.4 Engaging camp/village leaders to address SEA

"Elders from the community also need to understand this issue. They should be involved (in awareness building activities and trainings) as they are main leaders in this village. They need to know that SEA should not be tolerated in the community by understanding first about what sexual exploitation means. In this way, they can influence everyone by knowing how to act if there will be any cases. I also want village administrators, ten household leaders and village heads to be involved in this."

Community worker

In almost all IDP camps, the camp leaders and camp management committee members are men, and tend to overlook the needs of women and girls in camps. The research found that women and girls are reluctant to report SEA to the male camp leaders as the camp leaders often dismiss these complaints. IDPs believe that camp leaders rarely take SEA seriously, especially when the perpetrator is a humanitarian aid worker.

This indicates the need for collaboration between camp leader and camp management committee in order to address SEA. Many research participants highlighted that the need for camp leaders and

female decision makers to be heavily involved in designing the prevention of SEA mechanisms and programmes in their IDP camps and villages. Many participants suggested the camp leaders and village leaders should also be given mandatory PSEA training. It is also crucial to ensure the accountability of leaders and the sustainability of the PSEA reporting mechanism.

8.5 Assign a female PSEA focal

"Survivor need women to accompany him/her. A mentor and counsellor will also be needed. Financial supporter will also be needed."

Adult female

Research participants saw a lack of women representation in SEA reporting mechanism as one of the major barriers in reporting. Participants emphasised that it is important to assign a female focal person to ensure women and girls feel comfortable in sharing their experiences and ensure their needs are met. In coordination with camp or community leaders, a female focal person may also effectively take care of the specific needs of women and girls.

AAM recommends the creation of a focal unit and persons at all levels to be designated clear and defined roles in supporting PSEA survivors within the aid organisation. A list of these contacts would be provided to communities in IDP camps and villages for assistance. If this is already in place in an organisation, we suggest improving the visibility of their work within and outside the organisation. There should be regular site visits conducted by these focal persons to assess the knowledge of field staff, including volunteers, regarding SEA and how to report it to ensure consistency in the policy implementation. This report also recommends that aid organisations provide regular reports on PSEA situation with recommendations and suggestions on how to strengtheni the response to PSEA.

8.6 Promoting PSEA hotline to public

"If we face SEA cases, we do not have any phone number for reporting. We need that."
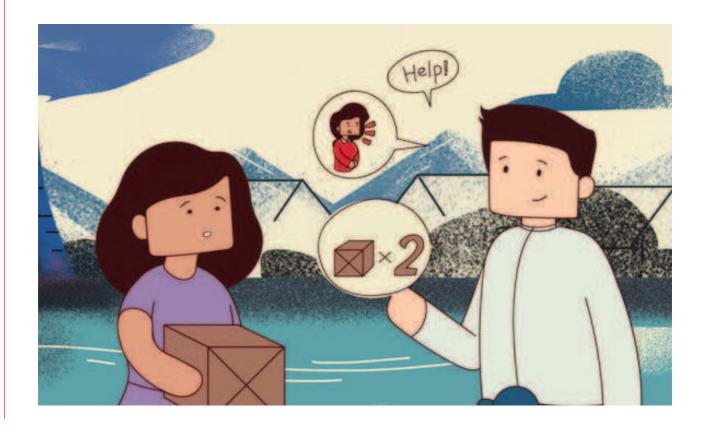
Adult female

Almost no interviewee was aware of where and how to report SEA cases in the community. Thus, during interviews, almost all interviewed participants asked the research team for the PSEA hotline number so that they could report if such incidences happen. There is a strong need to promote and share the PSEA hotline number with community members.

8.7 PSEA focal to coordinate with existing GBV focal or committee for services

Based on our interview results, the community members report potential SEA cases to GBV focal or volunteers due to the similarities in safeguarding issues and the need for survivor-centred support. This research has identified a need to designate a specific PSEA and safeguarding focal person at all levels. This team will oversee and develop materials for PSEA awareness-raising activities, conduct regular site visits to identify reporting issues, and collaborate with GBV-related focal points.

Participants also indicated the need for safe spaces for SEA survivors. 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 learn about 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 staff, including partners. 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.

Endnotes

1. UN defines sexual exploitation and abuse as 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 (United Nations Secretariat, 2003). And the sexual abuse was defined to the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions (United Nations Secretariat, 2003). **ActionAid's definition of SEA aligns with the UN but goes further to include Gender Based Violence (GBV) and other forms of abuse as these forms of sexual violence and abuse of power intersect and inform to each other (Team, 2019).**

2. 'Stateless women' was noted in OCHA 2018. It links to the international legal definition of stateless person, as 'a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law". In simple terms, this means that a stateless person does not have the nationality of any country. Some people are born stateless, but others become stateless.' See: https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/about-statelessness/

3. In Kachin, as of July 2020, more than 105,106 people (36% children and 30% women) remain in 138 internally displaced person (IDP) camps which were established in 2011 (OCHA, 2020). Nearly 40% of total IDPs in Kachin live in EAO controlled areas (Gender in Humanitarian Action Workstream, 2020). Similarly, in Shan, there are more than 9,000 people (children 38% and women 31%) who are living in displacement camps or camp-like settings (OCHA, 2020). Many IDPs living in camps or camp-like situations remain dependent on humanitarian assistance to meet basic needs, making them vulnerable to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) (OCHA, 2020).

4. Mixed method study research uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods to understand the research objectives.

5. Before data collection in Magway region, the research team approached local authorities and did a mapping exercise on several organisations which were currently based in selected villages. Interviewees ranged from local CBO volunteers who do not receive funding from AAM to some INGO staff.

6. According to United Nation's definition – (United Nations, 2017)

7. Ibid.

8. A total of 29 enumerators were hired, of which 5 were males, 21 were female and 3 were transgender. To ensure the voices of women are not left out, the research team emphasised the importance of hiring more enumerators.

9. A sample informed consent form is shared in Annex 1.

10. Dedoose is a cross-platform app for analysing qualitative and mixed methods research.

11. This reflects community perspectives, indicating a further lack of awareness in the mechanisms and structures in place. ActionAid Myanmar have trained all their staff on SHEA and PSEA policies.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Informed Consent form

Part I: Information

Background

Numerous reports from the Special Rapporteur about human rights found that sexual violence is widespread in Myanmar, especially in Kachin, northern Shan and Rakhine. Women and girls from ethnic or religious minorities, as well as stateless women, remain especially vulnerable and often suffer multiple forms of abuse. The combination of gender inequality and exposure to violence, harassment and abuse not only remain critical protection risks but serve as an impediment to women's participation in decision making to support recovery, transition, peace building and development. In addition, recent global reports stated that aid workers had been found to commit sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) against individuals in the communities they were working with. SEA by aid workers contradicts the principles upon which humanitarian action is based and represents a protection failure of the aid community. Myanmar is no exception to this – over 241,000 people are internally displaced and receiving humanitarian aid.

ActionAid is an international non-governmental organisation that is committed to working towards the end of injustice and eradicate poverty, and to build a world which upholds the rights and dignity of all people including vulnerable women and children living in internal displaced camps (IDP). ActionAid is committed to preventing any form of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse and responding robustly when these harms take place.

Purpose of the study

Under the guidance of UNICEF, ActionAid Myanmar will conduct a qualitative research study exploring the community perception of aid and power in relation to SEA and barriers to reporting SEA across Kachin, northern Shan, Rakhine and Magway. Results of this study will be provided to National Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Network (PSEA) and will provide recommendations to help prevent incidences of SEA in future humanitarian programs.

Participation

You are invited to take part in the study though your participation is entirely voluntary. If you choose not to participate, there would be no negative consequences in your receiving of aids, healthcare assistance and etc. You do not have to answer questions which you are not comfortable with and can leave the discussion at any time if you no longer want to participate in the study.

Procedure

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group discussion with 5-7 other participants. Total time for this participation would be around 90 minutes.

Confidentiality

Everything you say as part of this study will be kept confidential. You will be identified by a code, not your name. Only members of the research team will know what your code is, and this information will be kept in a secure place, which is only accessible to senior members of the research team.

Benefit

There will be no direct benefit and you will not be provided with any kind of incentives. However, your participation will hugely help us in strengthening current PSEA reporting mechanism in humanitarian settings.

Part II: Certificate of consent

I have been invited to participate in the study titled "Exploring community perceptions on aid and power and barriers to reporting sexual exploitation and abuse". I have been informed the background and purpose of study. I am aware that there will be no benefit to me for participating in the study. I have been given the name and address of a researcher who can be easily contacted.

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time without any negative consequences.

Name of participant _____

Signature of participant _____

Date _____