

Sexual harassment and violence

Unfortunately sexual harassment and assault is a real threat faced by aid workers. It is difficult to be sure how commonly incidents occur as there is likely to be significant underreporting given the intimate nature of these attacks, the stigma often felt by survivors upon reporting the crime and the barriers to obtaining justice.

In many parts of the world it is tragically still the case that violence against women is normalised and commonplace. Additionally, in certain societies there will be very strongly held expectations around women's behaviour and dress, with assumptions made about women who do not conform. Western women may well encounter misconceptions held about western attitudes to sex and sexual behaviour. Therefore understanding the context in which you will be working is a key step that you can take to understanding and consequently lowering your vulnerability. By understanding the role of women in the society you are visiting, and how they are treated you are arming yourself with a better understanding of how you may be perceived and in what way your vulnerability may be altered. As a result you are then in a position to make informed decisions around whether or not you chose to modify aspects of your behaviour or dress in order to try and lower your vulnerability. However, it should be remembered that the onus for preventing sexual harassment and violence lies solely with perpetrators.

Men can also experience sexual harassment and violence, however this is likely to be even less reported. As a result the true extent of this type of attack and the circumstances in which men may be most at risk is even less clear. Similar advice around understanding the context in which you are working, how you may be perceived and therefore obtaining a clearer understanding of your vulnerability equally applies.

Being aware of your own behaviours and how they may be interpreted is also important in order to avoid being a perpetrator of sexual harassment. Working within the aid sector can mean periods away from usual support networks, in challenging environments where privacy is limited. Living under such stressful conditions can result in intense relationships forming as a mechanism of coping. Establishing clear boundaries with professional colleagues and respecting the boundaries of others is key. Avoiding being alone with people whom you don't know and trust is important, however it should be remembered that most attacks are perpetrated by someone known to the victim. Personal protective equipment can also be useful; portable door locks make it harder for someone to force entry to your room or you may consider carrying an alarm to be used in case of attack.

The current reality is that until predominantly male perpetrators stop committing these intimate violations, nothing can completely prevent the risk of sexual harassment or violence. However, bearing in mind the points above may help to reduce your vulnerability:

- be aware of the context
- establish clear boundaries and always respect the boundaries of others
- avoid being alone with people you don't know and trust
- consider personal protective equipment such as portable door locks