

One Saturday afternoon in Guinea this past December, 18 women gathered to discuss their respective experiences as women working in humanitarian aid. The women represented many races, religions and nationalities, and were professionally diverse representing heads of missions, middle managers and entry level personnel, both international and national staff.

Within an hour of the meeting, the women realized one thing: they have all experienced some form of discrimination and/or abuse in the humanitarian workspace as a direct result of their gender, and that there was no reliable system in place to address their grievances and not result in backlash to their professional positions. This startling conclusion prompted the women in the room to wonder, **are we alone?** We searched for any surveys or evaluations looking at harassment and gender-based violence within the humanitarian profession, and found virtually nothing. This led us to realize that if we wanted to understand how widespread these issues were, **we would need to ask the question ourselves.**

What resulted was the drafting of a survey targeting women working in humanitarian assistance from as diverse professional and personal backgrounds as the women in Guinea. The survey sought to capture the range of gender-based discrimination experienced by humanitarian women in the workplace: from micro-aggressions that weigh on their psychological states to egregious physical and psychological abuses that endanger them. The survey duly sought to capture what reporting mechanisms existed for women to seek accountability to the problems they encounter. The survey was distributed in French and English.

To the group's surprise, **over 1,000 women from around the world, representing more than 70 humanitarian organizations, responded to the survey within 50 days.** More surprisingly still was that no other survey existed which aimed to capture the range of abuses, which means that women in this profession have been suffering in silence with no recourse to the regular and systemic humiliations they are forced to accept in order to remain in their chosen profession.

Our network has analyzed the survey data using two data experts, and found what we presumed to be true (but hoped was not):

**women in aid are subject to regular and frequent abuses,** from micro-aggressions regarding their competence and sexuality, to serious physical and psychological abuses—and that there is no reliable reporting mechanism, hence ensuring a culture of **total impunity** for wrongdoers. Such hostile work conditions force many women out of the profession, as evidenced by the scarcity of women in senior positions in aid—which only further fuels the culture of impunity.

Some preliminary figures from our survey show that: nearly 50% of women respondents report having being **touched in an unwanted way** by a male colleague in the workplace; nearly **40% of women respondents report that these experiences of discrimination, harassment, or sexual assault have had a strong negative impact on their psychological wellbeing,** and that over **25% of women** respondents report that their experiences of discrimination, harassment, or sexual assault in the workplace have changed the course of their career.

Of the women who reported incidences of discrimination, harassment, or sexual assault nearly **50% assert that there was no follow-up to their allegation.**

It is this culture of impunity that links our issue to the wider issues of **Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation.** Systems that allow staff to get away with harassing or assaulting colleagues are inherently unable to protect more vulnerable beneficiaries. We need to get our house in order in order to end the culture of impunity and get to our core business of helping people. Almost every woman we have spoken with or who has responded to our survey has a story to tell about how her gender has impeded her career because of the **'boys club'** culture in aid coupled with the **'culture of impunity'**. The time to respond to the call of over 1,000 women in aid from around the world—is now.

Help us achieve a work environment where women are able to work in the humanitarian industry free from discrimination, harassment and abuse.