

# Humanitarian Experiences with Sexual Violence:

Compilation of Two Years of  
Report the Abuse Data Collection



**report**  
theabuse



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## **Thanks to**

All those survivors of sexual violence who found their voice and placed their trust in Report the Abuse; your bravery and experiences will not be forgotten

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## Introduction

Report the Abuse (RTA) began operating on 19 August 2015, and one of its first acts was to open up a public, confidential, non-judgemental, and anonymous platform where humanitarian aid workers could express their experiences and knowledge about sexual violence incidents within the humanitarian community.

Some of the respondents to this platform were humanitarian aid workers who wanted to contribute to creating change on the topic. Others were witnesses to sexual violence – particularly against national staff colleagues – who wanted to ensure that these experiences were not forgotten. Overwhelmingly, the humanitarian aid workers who came forward were survivors of sexual violence themselves.

The feedback from these survivors was gratitude for the creation of the platform. For many, it was one of the first times that they had talked about their experiences with sexual violence; a concerning number of survivors had only spoken about it with a few people previously in their lives.

Many survivors talked about how the platform and the existence of RTA helped them to heal, or open up to those in their lives. It helped survivors to proceed with investigations and reporting mechanisms against their perpetrators. It helped survivors to seek psychosocial support and medical care.

RTA was founded by a survivor of sexual violence, but it was built by the community created by the growing number of those choosing to speak up about what they are experiencing as humanitarian aid workers. We are grateful for the trust and support of everyone who is speaking about sexual violence, and in this space honour their voices again.

With the closure of RTA on 20 August 2017, we wanted to ensure that information about sexual violence in the humanitarian community was available long past the end of the NGO's operations. The voices of these survivors cannot be forgotten.

We encourage everyone – humanitarian aid workers, humanitarian organisations, donors, trainers, and journalists – to use the statistics and stories contained within this compilation: with respect, honour, and ensuring the dignity of those who were brave enough to come forward<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The information contained in this compilation may be challenging and impactful for some readers. If needed, reaching out for psychosocial support is encouraged, and resources are available on RTA's website at: <http://www.reporttheabuse.org/help-for-survivors/>



## **Methodology**

RTA does not suggest that the data presented here is a complete picture of the current situation facing humanitarian aid workers. On the contrary, this is just the first of many steps to identifying the nature and type of incidents occurring. National staff and other sectors of the community still need to be reached. Men need be encouraged to report. As a humanitarian community we must continue to highlight the spectrum, nuances, and threads tying all survivors together. Those not yet ready will one day find their voice.

Despite the caveat, this was the first global data regarding sexual violence experienced by humanitarian aid workers to be published, and it is noteworthy for that fact alone. As more data is collected, a stronger picture of the situation facing the humanitarian community will emerge.

## **Recommendations for Usage of this Compilation**

Talking about sexual violence is often not easy: for survivors, supporters, colleagues, or the media. The topic must be approached with sensitivity, care, and an acknowledgment of the bravery of those who come forward about their experiences. This must particularly be bore in mind when quoting the voices of survivors contained within this compilation and other documents published by RTA.

When quoting the statistics created by RTA, it is essential to highlight that these numbers are merely the beginning of our knowledge of the problem. There are still concerns that need to be highlighted; the voices of national staff in particular are missing from available global figures. Where at all possible, further data collection to provide a comprehensive and representational picture of sexual violence in the humanitarian community must be sought and encouraged.



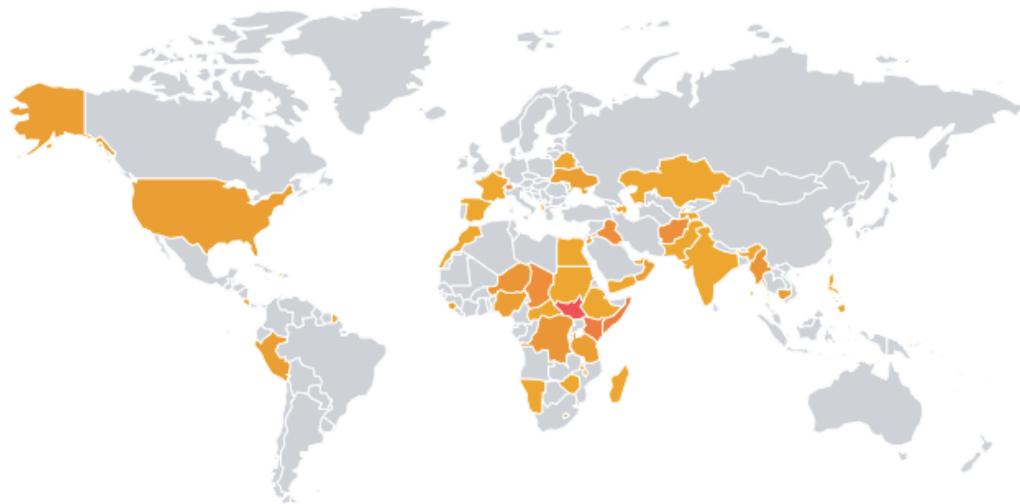
## Humanitarian Experiences with Sexual Violence

On 19 August 2015, RTA opened up the first platform for humanitarian aid workers to talk in a confidential, safe, non-judgemental, and anonymous third-party space about their experiences with sexual violence. The information contained within this compilation is extracted from this data collection, with the utmost gratitude for those humanitarian aid workers who took the time to talk about this vital and grave issue.

More than 1000 individuals responded to RTA's survey platform, though not all were able to finish reporting on their experience<sup>2</sup>. Of those who were able to provide information on their experiences with sexual violence – as a colleague, witness, or survivor – a startling and concerning picture of the nature of sexual violence in the humanitarian community began to emerge.

87% noted that they knew a colleague who had experienced sexual violence in the course of their humanitarian work. 41% reported having witnessed a sexual violence incident against a colleague, and 72% of those reporting were survivors of sexual violence.

These experiences with sexual violence occurred across the globe, with reports in conflict and development areas, as well as HQ.



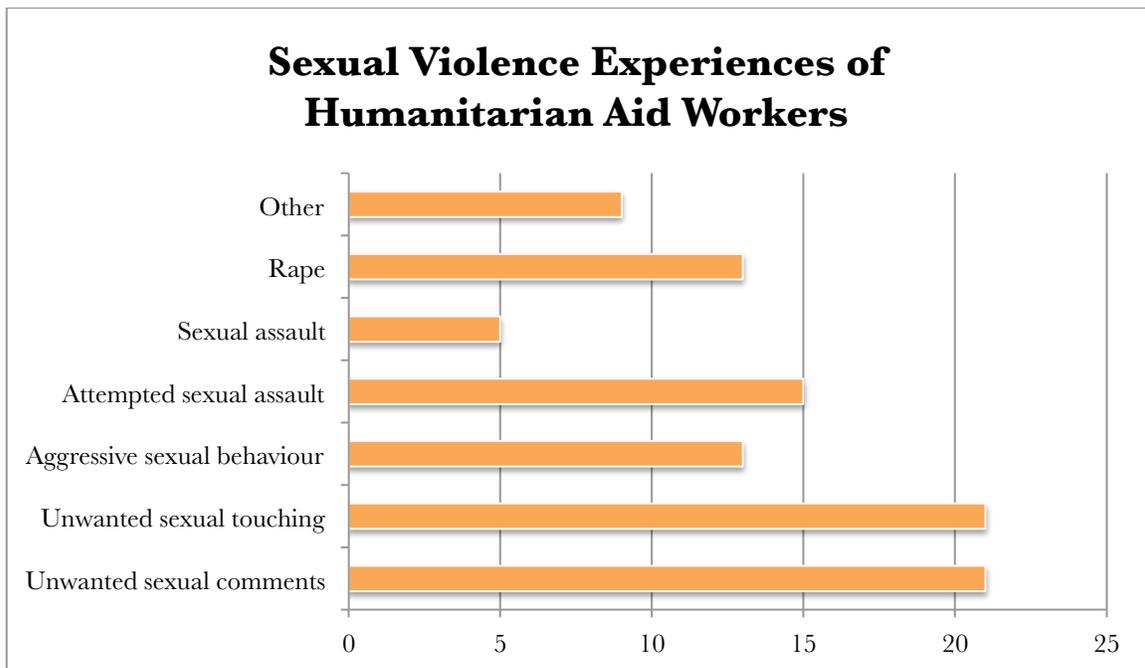
Of these survivors who reported their experiences with sexual violence, some concerning trends emerged. 69% of survivors noted that they were familiar with their attacker; in

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<sup>2</sup> Many respondents stated that they stopped reporting on their experience due to the shame or stigma still associated with sexual violence.

fact, for 64% of cases, the perpetrator was a colleague of the survivor<sup>3</sup>. 35% of survivors overall also noted that they have experienced more than one incident of sexual violence in the course of their humanitarian career.

The nature of these sexual violence attacks was concerning. Although the majority were noted as being on the sexual harassment scale, a not insignificant 13% were reported as being rape.



For these reported incidents, it is important to note that the majority of survivors are female (89%), and the majority of perpetrators are male (92%). This does mean there is slight variation in the traditional narrative of sexual violence binaries (men perpetrating on women), and being open to women being perpetrators and men being survivors of sexual violence is important for the inclusion of all humanitarian aid workers. It is also important to note that only 80% of survivors note being heterosexual, and this diversity in sexual orientation should be integrated into messaging on sexual violence in the future.

For those survivors who noted that they filed an incident report with their own organisation about an experience with sexual violence (56%), it is troubling to realise that only 17% report being happy with how their organisation handled their report of sexual violence. In 2017, it is still the norm that perpetrators of sexual violence are promoted or moved between offices, while survivors are still often fired or quite due to hostile work

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that 96% of individuals reporting were expatriate staff. The experience of national staff is a gap that still needs to be analysed.



environments or to recover from their experience. With only 38% of humanitarian aid workers reporting that sexual violence has been included in any type of training they have attended – and only 39% of these individuals finding the training to have been helpful, even in part – this is perhaps not entirely surprising. We still have a long way to go as a community.

This gap – in terms of both prevention and response – can be filled by humanitarian organisations, and RTA has provided the tools necessary to do so<sup>4</sup>. With 65% of humanitarian aid workers who responded to our reporting platform saying their experience with sexual violence – as a colleague, witness, or survivor – has changed the way they do their work, acting is necessary.

The numbers presented here in brief are valuable; however it is essential that we remember there are people behind the statistics. The stories and narratives of sexual violence experiences of humanitarian aid workers are startling, evocative, and far better illustrate the breadth and depth of the issue. Some of these narratives are set out in the next section of this compilation.

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<sup>4</sup> Details and copies of these tools can be found on RTA's website: <http://www.reporttheabuse.org/help-for-organisations/>



## 50 Days, 50 Testimonies

The first advocacy campaign conducted by RTA was a series of testimonies – 50, to be exact – published in a 50 day time period. It was a strong, difficult, impactful, and moving campaign, one that reportedly helped many survivors to come forward about their own experiences with sexual violence.

This campaign touched the tip of the data RTA collected in a two-year period. More than 200 testimonies were collected from survivors of sexual violence. All were, in turn, heart-breaking, moving, empowering, and inspiring. The choice to not publish all the testimonies of survivors was difficult, yet the narratives of these survivors will still not be forgotten, even if they are not contained in the depths of pain and joy below.

Each experience below could have happened to any humanitarian aid worker – regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, nationality, religion, or position within their organisation – at any location in the world. This speaks to the universality of sexual violence within the humanitarian community. It is likely that these testimonies will spark something within readers – a realisation, empathy, or a chord of their own experiences. For support, please reach out to those around you, or seek professional help<sup>5</sup>.

### DAY 1

On the last night before I left for R&R, a program manager from another organisation came into my tent while I was asleep, climbed into my bed naked and raped me. I was questioned as to why I hadn't reported it directly to the staff of the local agency (all men, some of who reported to the man who raped me) or tell my driver or programme officers (all male, and all my subordinates). They wanted to know why my tent hadn't been locked, why I didn't call and report it immediately as it happened, why I didn't fight back more.

I received little support and no justice. My organization did not provide me with medical care, psychological support, or any legal options (not that going to the police would have led to any sort of justice). PEP or emergency contraceptives were not made available. I had to seek out HIV and STI testing and basic medical care on my own afterwards.

I chose to return to work after the assault; I didn't want what had happened to take away a job I loved and a career I had worked hard for. I didn't want what had happened to define me.

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<sup>5</sup> Report the Abuse has collected and published a series of information for survivors of sexual violence on its website: <http://www.reporttheabuse.org/help-for-survivors/>



### DAY 2

Talked with a few other female co-workers about [my sexual assault], but they just laughed it off. One said 'sorry it happened'.

### DAY 3

Since he spent the next day leaving me presents, I wasn't sure that he actually raped me. I mean he was not a stranger and it didn't happen in a dark street. He jumped on me, forced me to have sex, he hurt me, but he also apologised...I was very confused and it took me time to realise that non-consensual sex is rape.

### DAY 4

The majority of my colleagues were incredibly supportive. However, one or two colleagues complained to my supervisor about the fact I was talking about what had happened and felt that it was inappropriate. My supervisor used this as an example of how I was not handling things appropriately. If I was to go back and do it again, I wish I had not spoken out.

### DAY 5

I was in Afghanistan in the summer of 2015. It was a male/female restroom. A young guy followed me to the restroom. He had asked to be my translator and I said I already had a translator. Then, when we got to the restroom, he saw no one was there but us two, he physically jumped me, saying he 'wanted a kiss.' He wanted more than a kiss. He grabbed me and pushed me against a wall. No one was there, but I managed to fight him off and no one saw us.

I told my co-workers and initially they were supportive. They had security apprehend him and called his family and gave them a 'scare' by saying he must never do this again or they'd prosecute.

After that though, my boss was very curt and unsupportive when I had problems sleeping, had nightmares and explained that I was experiencing stress. He was critical of my work. Said I needed to get over my 'personal problems.' He seemed to expect me to get over it immediately, and I didn't.

My nightmares got worse and I cried a lot. I understood that I was in a war zone. However, I feel that I deserve emotional empathy, consideration and support for what happened in a work situation.

### DAY 6

I was in South Sudan working on GBV. Report it to the police? Not an option.



#### DAY 7

I was working in Afghanistan as a USAID contractor when I had my experience with sexual assault. I felt MUCH better after speaking to my local colleagues. They were kind. Security was kind. But it was supposed to be 'secret', making the situation hard to talk about. Those who knew of the situation – the other expats – were not kind and were dismissive and treated me (I feel) like I was incompetent. It really hurt. I felt betrayed and deeply saddened.

#### DAY 8

He got me very drunk and then implied that if I didn't have sex with him I would be kicked out of the only place I could stay in...I didn't feel that I had a choice.

#### DAY 9

I was offered the email addresses for two individuals trained in psychological first aid but no clear procedure for how to contact them, whether I or the organization would cover the costs, whether it was confidential or would be reported back to my supervisors etc. I was embarrassed and traumatized and in no condition to seek out mental health support on my own.

#### DAY 10

The person who harassed me worked at a local partner organization, which partnered with the INGO I worked for. He was the most senior executive and had a huge staff and a reputation for being improper with women – local and expats alike. I met with him to discuss one of our projects and he flirted with me inappropriately and touched me inappropriately during the meeting. I felt extremely uncomfortable and reported the incident to my coworkers and my HR. It was not dealt with except that I was told there were concerns that I could not 'handle' working in this culture. My organization could not reprimand the other organization, as we relied on them heavily.

#### DAY 11

We were at a social gathering. He cornered me and started fondling me. He wouldn't let me go unless I agreed to go to his room. He kept telling me that I wanted him and I wanted to go to his room. I kept saying no. I walked over to a group of people and asked someone to walk me out. It was daylight when this happened.

#### DAY 12

He was American and he had very strong ties with the local government, and he used them to help the organization gain ground. He informed me upon arrival at the remote field site that we needed to go to the state capital to register me. I did not think much of it, and went with him by train. Before we left, he said that he and the Director (female) typically shared a bed to save money and suggested we do the same. I asked if we had budget for two rooms. He said no. I said then I will only go if we have separate beds. The org had low resources, so it did not strike me as odd until after the incident.



The staff was a heavy drinker, and as we would later find out, was an alcoholic with a serious addiction that had been reported by volunteers (female). He was drinking heavily and I was in the room working. He came into the room, shut the door, and mumbled some things to me. He came up to me and turned my chair around. I asked him what he was doing. He then leant in and pulled the chair towards him to kiss me. I said, wait stop. He kept coming in. He had a hand on either chair arm, and I began to hit him and shout STOP WHAT ARE YOU DOING? I was able to hit him hard enough that he backed away. I did not speak to him the rest of the trip, and we eventually went back to our home base. We did not have to go to the capital to get registered, and the trip was useless.

When I returned home, I mentioned his drinking problem to a fellow coworker, and she informed me that he had had a serious motorcycle crash with her as a passenger a few months prior, and was under the influence of alcohol. She also mentioned that some of the local staff had said things in passing, but no one had filed a complaint. I told her about him coming towards me, and she told me that I needed to report it to the Country Director.

I reported the incident to the CD. The CD accompanied me home, where we found a trail of wine leading to my assaulter's bedroom. The CD removed the staff from the field and enrolled him in AA. Over the next few months, we found empty vodka bottles stashed away throughout his belongings. He told the CD he had no recollection of that night as he was very drunk, and said that he was very sorry for what happened.

10 months later, I was informed that my assaulter would be returning as my supervisor. The CEO had come in from the United States, and I asked to speak with her. She told me to tell her exactly what had happened. I told her word for word. She then looked straight into my eyes and said, 'You're a woman. It happens. Deal with it.' and proceeded to say that he told her I had lied about the entire incident, that his memory of the evening returned and he knew that I was lying.

I was embarrassed about what had happened and was afraid to lose my job.

### DAY 13

We were sharing a dorm room. He was very drunk and asked me if I wanted to sleep with him. The question was totally out of the blue as I had never flirted with him. I said no, and nothing else happened, but it was hard for me to sleep that night. I guess the next day he did not even remember about it.

At that time I thought he was just drunk and stupid. Now I feel it was not correct for him to act that way and that he had no right to make me feel threatened and fearful.



#### DAY 14

To be honest, I didn't even know where I could go. This had never been explained to me, and I don't think the organisation probably even had a formal system. Some of the inappropriate touching and comments happened in front of the head of the field site, and he didn't say anything, so I was at a loss and never reported it.

#### DAY 15

I have spoken vaguely about it with a few friends and my current boyfriend, but mostly I feel stupid. I should have just gotten myself out of the situation and feel that it's mostly my own fault for being there in the first place. I still have nightmares about it and off days.

#### DAY 16

I was at a party in Haiti when a much older expat colleague working for the UN began massaging my knee under a table while we were all sitting around talking. I didn't know what to do - this was someone who oversaw grants to our organization.

#### DAY 17

I still feel ashamed, but the two friends I talked to were very supportive. One of the two had been through a much worse experience while on mission in Lebanon, but by a UN mission staff member.

#### DAY 18

I was at a party in Central Asia and a local guy had too much to drink. He grabbed me and tried dragging me off. I tried to talk to him to get him to stop and leave me alone. Another person at the party intervened and jumped him. They fought and my assaulter left the party.

#### DAY 19

I discussed it with colleagues immediately. I felt terrible because they belittled me, made a joke out of my experience, and told me I should use sexual harassment to my advantage to get what I/the organization wanted.

#### DAY 20

I didn't fill any complain for many reasons. First, I had already had an experience with the local police, while trying to report some stolen property, and they'd made me feel guilty, violated and my complaint had not even been filled. I did not want to know how they'd handle a complaint of rape. Secondly, I was feeling very guilty about what happened to me. I knew him. I thought I deserved it for not being more cautious.

#### DAY 21

I had arrived in country the day before, the driver came to pick me up at the airport.



The next day he was supposed to drive me to the border, he came to the guesthouse much earlier than agreed, asked if I wanted to have breakfast with him (he had the keys and I had just got out of the shower).

I declined the offer and locked myself in the room to get dressed and fix my luggage. When I got back to the living room he was in there and I felt a bit uneasy, so I went to the balcony. He followed me and started hugging me and then groped my breasts. I shook him away and he started behaving as if nothing had happened.

I went back two weeks later, and again he started coming to the guesthouse at very random hours without any need, and every time he tried to touch me again, trying to corner me.

I decided to move out of the place and to a friend's for the time I had to stay there.

#### DAY 22

I was given no support throughout the process after my assault - my probation period was immediately extended, and I was told that I was on tenuous ground. When he came back to the field, they informed me that I had one month to leave. I left the following week. He continues to run the activities in rural India.

#### DAY 23

I was supported within my organisation. I was not emotionally affected by the incident itself, I was more frustrated that I could do nothing to stop him doing this to other people.

#### DAY 24

The only person who offered to listen at least was a colleague who had been assaulted by the same man before, the others just seemed to want to avoid the subject at all costs. Their reactions varied from a knowing smile to avoiding the subject completely. I understood it may not have been easy for them as well, knowing that I was left alone with this man for two weeks, but in a way it felt the thing was unimportant to them, although they all had had a gender awareness training the week before I arrived.

After that I lost some of the trust I had in the organisation, and felt a lot less inclined to talk about other issues in the future.

#### DAY 25

There needs to be more awareness and support of this type of situation. The helpers need to be healthy too, not just the community we serve.



#### DAY 26

I did not need medical assistance. Looking back I may have benefitted from psychological assistance, but I felt embarrassed and thought I would make a bad start asking for support on my first week in the new mission.

#### DAY 27

I sometimes imply it when discussing with friends or colleagues, when this topic comes in the conversation, but I never really told anyone apart from my boyfriend. I felt relieved when I told him.

#### DAY 28

He was hinting for a few days that he liked me, by touching my hand at meetings (I did not). One day we were just the two of us and he aggressively grabbed me by putting his arm around my neck and grabbing my breast. I pushed him away and he fortunately did not try again. I was shaken and asked that another colleague stay with me from that point on (to never leave me alone with this man), so that I wouldn't have to deal with embarrassment and the worry of being attacked again.

#### DAY 29

I met him at an embassy party in Central Africa, when I didn't know anyone else. He was there with his wife who was charming. I had previously met him through work and some social activities. At some point in the night he pulled me into the bathroom and tried to assault me. I managed to escape and go back to the party. I wasn't prepared for it because of his wife. He had been flirting with me but I had just tried to laugh it off, thinking it was harmless fun. It was only when I was suddenly trapped with him all over me that I realised what was going on and had to fight my way out.

#### DAY 30

I am much more cautious, not just in work but in life. I used to be quite fearless but now I am more risk adverse (not in a good way).

#### DAY 31

While living in Central Asia, one night a man tried to enter my apartment as I was walking back to my place.

#### DAY 32

I did not discuss with my colleagues – at the time I was new to the field, a bit naïve, and just accepted this behavior as unfortunately normal.

#### DAY 33

I feel conflicted about telling people. I told one friend, and have since told my now husband. They both are supportive, however their removal from the humanitarian space



means that they don't understand how taboo it is to report sexual abuse or unwanted sexual attention.

#### DAY 34

Every decision I make is framed by 'do I feel safe enough?'. It feels like my entire ability to make a decision is coloured by what happened. I no longer trust myself.

#### DAY 35

I sometimes don't go walking in the evening because of sexual harassment; I don't go swimming because of men staring at me; when at HQ I avoid talking to people because of possible harassment (apparently the moment you are nice to a man they think you want something from them).

#### DAY 36

The psychosocial trauma carried with me for a very long time – I still wonder what may have happened if I was not strong enough to fight him off.

#### DAY 37

I had been previously physically and sexually assaulted in the United States, while not working in the field. So I think my more recent case brought back flashbacks of those other experiences...I could prove nothing and felt I couldn't talk about it either.

#### DAY 38

I have withdrawn and stopped socialising. Following the incident I didn't care much about myself, lacked self-respect and would engage in behaviour that was kind of self-destructing...When I go out now, I always leave with a friend. I have asked a close friend of mine to always make sure we leave the party together and I never go to or stay out at a party without a close friend around. Never.

#### DAY 39

Excuses were made for the person being a man, away from his family and [in a conflict zone]. Basically, that boys will be boys. There was no appropriate response, even when IDPs were targeted. It was simply ignored.

#### DAY 40

[It] made me become over protective with people around me and it made me more cautious, I feel like I have my 'rape radar' on.

#### DAY 41

He tried repeatedly to force sexual relations, both 'sweet-talking' and forcefully (at the same time) until I eventually relented, sadly. Should that be called rape? I'm not sure since I agreed. I eventually said no after a couple times; he then repeatedly tried to insist again (I had to throw him out of my tent once). He then stopped.



#### DAY 42

I feel better talking to family and friends. They were supportive when I left the job I was in at the time, due in large part to the sexual harassment. I have learned how common sexual harassment at work is.

#### DAY 43

I have never seen a complaint handled well; it is more a question of degrees of badly.

#### DAY 44

I talked to another colleague about what happened, but I felt that my superiors could do nothing to help me and that it wasn't so serious a case that warranted a formal investigation or complaint. The assaulter was not working for our organisation, and a formal complaint would have complicated already sensitive relations between our organisation and the local authority.

#### DAY 45

Initially, I felt that I had done the right thing. Soon after, it became quite clear that his connections were more important than my (or other women's for that matter) safety or well being.

#### DAY 46

I am more aware of my surroundings I speak up for myself now. Sometimes feel anxious in parties with strange men and alcohol or just walking down the street alone.

#### DAY 47

Men need to understand that women don't want to be touched against their will. Changing that mentality is impossible in most cultures where women are considered as chattel, are not considered equal, and have no human rights.

#### DAY 48

I struggle a lot with my work environment because I fear sexual harassment. I know how common it is and how seldom it is reported or dealt with appropriately. I approach work a lot more cautiously because of my experience, and I believe it has impacted the quality of my work and my engagement with coworkers.

#### DAY 49

I live on a compound with the foreign staff members. I have touched women inappropriately in the past. I have since isolated myself from others or risk doing it again. I was never violent, but it was clear (maybe just in hindsight) that I was giving unwanted attention.



### DAY 50

I felt that telling it to people around me would bring too much trouble. You may share the same feeling but being a humanitarian aid worker working in difficult contexts also means spending (for me a lot of) time reassuring the non humanitarian people around us that you are fine, that you are cautious, that you follow security rules etc. I feel that it would be too difficult to tell my loved ones that someone raped me while I was on duty but that it is not impacting my career choices, they just wouldn't get it and I think that I have been through enough to handle being judged.

## Long Testimonies

Some testimonies we collected were too long to share on the website, as the power of them was in danger of getting lost in the limitations of the format. In this compilation though, we are grateful to be able to share these powerful reminders about the strength of survivors of sexual violence, and highlight their conflicts, complexity, and power.

### *I've been wanting to tell you...*

I've been wanting to tell you  
That 19 years ago today  
Somewhere along the road  
In the bush  
And in a house  
Full of wounded and scared people  
I was there too

I've been wanting to tell you  
That although 19 years have passed  
I still see this yellow candle light moving  
on the wall  
The ceiling  
My heart freezing  
My thoughts leaving  
The gun  
A shade  
And that sense that I was dying

I've been wanting to tell you  
That 19 years ago today I was there  
As I was being raped  
My voice left  
My body froze  
In the midst of that violence and insanity  
I vowed to remain sane and the same

I've been wanting to tell you  
That 19 years ago  
I was there  
But I kept silent  
Only to tell the truth to a few  
Part of my story left untold  
And me incomplete

With a big part of me missing  
And left behind in that house in Bo

I've been wanting to tell you  
That 19 years ago today  
I was raped  
Yes, there was violence around  
And deaths  
And deep cuts  
And the stories of these heads rolling  
And the gunshots, the visits and the fear  
But there was me too  
And my story to be told too

So today, I've decided to tell you  
That 19 years ago  
In Bo  
I was raped  
It matters to me  
It should matter to you  
It's not just another story  
Another casualty  
« Les risques du métier »  
It happened to me 19 years ago, today

And as I decide to tell you  
I would like you to know that I am done  
And moving on

***Nathalie Rothschild***  
***19 Feb 2017<sup>6</sup>***

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<sup>6</sup> Explicit permission was received from this survivor, who wished to be named to assert that they are not ashamed of their experience or for speaking out.



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The following perfectly articulates how it feels to try and explain the enormity of ‘small’ acts of harassment. The vile and bile and stomach churning fear. The worry that your harasser will do or say something again, something bigger the next time. The scared voice in the back of your head - filled with shame and judgement - suggesting that if you looked different or wore something different or acted different this wouldn’t have happened in the first place. Asking what you did to deserve this, whether smiling at a co-worker would have stopped your violation, whether reporting could have saved someone else from the torment you are living in now. Guilt. Shame. Depression. Violation. Powerlessness. Fear.

This testimony is particularly long, but all the more commanding for its size.

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### *What Does Shame Feel Like?*

I am an aid worker. I am doing what I have always wanted to do as a child, as a teenager—this was my dream, and I have worked, long and hard to reach where I am today. I am articulate, well-educated, and a polyglot. Per chance, I also happen to be a woman.

Some say I am pretty, and I don’t look my age. Some say I am beautiful—the kinds that makes them think I shouldn’t be out in the field, as an aid worker, but an actress. Almost all weigh my worth on three factors—one, that I am woman and consequently, two and three, how I look like every day and what I wear. I still don’t know how I am supposed to feel about – should I feel elated that someone equates me to an actress, or should I feel saddened that that’s all there to my identity. Despite my achievements, academic and professional.

I ask myself this question often. I ask the people around me—my colleagues, this question often. Not because I gloat over the attention but because I hear an off-hand remark about my looks almost every other day. I feel embarrassed, mortified, and nervous by these “compliments,” for I always feel that they have an ulterior motive. Because my past experiences have made me cautious enough to second guess the motives of the people complementing, all the time. And so I am always waiting for a barrage of inappropriate comments to hit me, after these compliments have subsided. When I tell my (male) friends how these compliments make me feel, they tell me I am lying—for of course everyone loves being praised, especially women, especially for their looks. I can never explain adequately enough that I don’t.

Today, among other things, I am asking these questions to myself because I believe I was sexually harassed at work yesterday. I am asking these questions because in some corner of my mind, this incident has triggered an avalanche of horrible, detestable memories. I



am still asking myself how acknowledging to myself that I was “sexually harassed” is going to impact me, the work I do, and the years I am still to spend in the field. For today in some corner of my mind, I am still doubtful—was it sexual harassment, I have been repeating silently to myself, since yesterday.

I came to this field as someone who has lived through years of sexual abuse from very close quarters—and felt guilty about it and remained silent about it. For a long time, I believed that it was all my fault- that I brought it upon myself, somehow. Today my rational mind knows that’s not true. On bad days however, I have difficulty accepting that. On bad days, I blame no one but myself. What happened to me, I never confided in anyone about it for the longest time, because I knew that no one would believe me. Despite all the female emancipation, empowerment and feminism of the 70s, and 80s, this I know remains true to this very day. And yesterday, what happened with me, only confirmed my belief. I wasn’t told I wasn’t believed. On the contrary, I was told, multiple times, that no one thought I was lying. However, when it came to taking what I said seriously, it was a different story.

Most times, when incidents like these occur—and I have been in the field long enough to have faced multiple incidents of these sorts- I shut up. I don’t speak about it to anyone, I don’t report. I clam up; I somehow make myself invisible- as much as is possible for me to become invisible. I retrace my steps—all my steps, all my words a million times trying to figure out where exactly I went wrong, and what exactly I did wrong to have brought the situation upon myself. And that, that sets off the trigger. I relive each incident, every experience, and every single memory like they all happened together. I feel like there is a block of cement, or a heavy stone sliding gradually down my throat, and settling somewhere at the bottom of my stomach. And yet, simultaneously I feel bottomless, because my heart keeps sinking deeper, and deeper. I shrivel, literally, wanting to make myself invisible. I get quizzical looks, and questions about how I am quiet, and silent and not roaring away with laughter, like always. On days like these, I feel physically ill—so much so that I am unable to drag myself out of bed, where I am usually lying with eyes wide open, in a fetal position. I breathe, but I keep gasping for breath. I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out and yet, I am screaming in my head. Asking myself the same questions, again and again. How did this happen? Why did this happen? And yet, I don’t get any satisfactory answers. I don’t think I ever will.

All my supervisors, when writing my performance appraisals have never failed to mention how I am always smiling, and how I integrate seamlessly into any work environment. On good days, I pride myself on this quality—I don’t have hang ups about who I talk to, or who I befriend and laugh with. I like being amiable. On bad days, I wonder if this very quality makes men think I am easy. Easy to flirt with. Easy to touch, appropriately or inappropriately. And easy to bed. Cheap. Easy and cheap. Even promiscuous sounds too sophisticated a word to use for how I feel.



What happened to me yesterday wasn't physical harassment. It was verbal. It wasn't the first instance of harassment for me in this office. I have experienced at least two other, what I felt personally were serious incidents (the kinds which if left unaddressed would likely lead to more aggravated forms of harassment) before this, and a multitude of other remarks, which even when inappropriate, I have let slide. One I handled myself- telling the guy that he was making me uncomfortable. The other, which was an instance of inappropriate touching, I reported unofficially, and I can only assume that it was handled. And yet, yesterday I snapped. It was implied (and to an extent, I believe, passively conveyed) that because I had never said no to flirtatious conversations with this male colleague before, I had no right to say no now. That my consent to the brazen proposition of someone wanting to have sex with me was irrelevant. I was told, the words imprinted on my brain for posterity, that it wasn't a possibility that I was perhaps already partnered with someone else because only this guy had the right. To sleep with me. I felt debased. I felt cheap. I felt easy. I felt bile rising up my throat and choking my voice. And I wanted to report it. Officially.

I am not brave for wanting to report it. Doing the most natural, and obvious thing shouldn't require me, or for that matter anyone else to be brave. And yet, the trepidation and heaviness in my feet, as I walked out of my office yesterday reminded me of the previous time (the only other time) I had decided to officially report an instance of verbal sexual harassment. I had been hopeful, very hopeful that last time—which was just a few months ago, because my supervisor had been a woman too. I had expected her to empathise, and understand. I had expected her to tell me that even though I no longer worked for the organisation (surprise, surprise- the harassment happened AFTER I left), I didn't have to deal with it by myself. That she will support me if I wanted to file an official complaint. Instead, what she told me sucked the air out of my lungs. She washed her hands off it, told me to handle it myself, speak to the guy who had harassed me, and do it all with a "conscience." To this day, her words sting me—by bringing my morality into the equation, she told me that I was lying, without even using the words, "You are lying." Yesterday when I was on my way to speak to my colleague about it, officially, my mind went back to this incident and I hesitated, thinking if I would face something similar. And yet, I hoped. I hoped because the colleague I was going to report it to was also a friend—a good friend, one who knew what I have been through and experienced, and what I regularly face, in the field, and off it. I took solace in the fact of our friendship, and his professionalism, and in the fact that we both have always wanted to do the right thing, personally, and professionally. And this was the right thing to do. Or so I thought.

And then, as I sat in his office, and heard him talk, I started to feel breathless. First, there was the disbelief- apparently the male colleague in question was a nice guy. Not unexpected—even I too thought this male colleague was a nice guy, but then I was like, when has niceness ever stopped anyone from being deviant, or just a little malevolent—as long as they know they can get away with it. Then, there was acceptance. Okay, this happened. And then, my friend, and colleague I was reporting it to advised me to let it



go, and not report it officially. I will talk to him, he said and it won't happen again. He advised me to let it go since this was the first time the male colleague in question had done something like this. Sometimes, he said, people make "bad jokes" without realizing what they are saying, without intending, and meaning what they are saying. As a lawyer you are supposed to know, my friend continued—a repeat offence would be of a higher severity. It is the severity, and the gravity he said. Let it go, he said.

First time. Bad jokes. Intention. Meaning. Severity. Gravity. I am still grappling with the import of what I was told yesterday. Still trying to understand what these words mean in the context of harassment, sexual harassment, or inappropriate conversation at work place and during work hours. Does anyone know what they mean or they mean different things to different people, depending on the different contexts of the situations they are in?

As I sat in my colleague's office yesterday, trying to make sense of what I was being told, a part of my brain was saying, this isn't happening. He doesn't believe you, was my second thought. He thinks you played a part in this, was my third thought. The other part of my brain was asking questions—which I couldn't bring myself to vocalise. I wanted to ask my friend, how do you TELL someone that whether they like it or not, you are going to sleep with them? And how do you say this to someone, anyone without meaning it or without having the intent to do so? Maybe you are just saying it as a way of pushing the boundary—to know if your colleague would give in or not. If they say yes, you score. If they say no, it's easy to pretend that you meant it as a "joke." Yes, I am a lawyer. And as a lawyer, I know that when you drive recklessly, and you hit someone, you are still guilty of an offence, whether you meant or intended for the offence to occur or not. It is the recklessness that makes you guilty, your intention is irrelevant. Shouldn't it be the same with reckless verbal statements? Your reckless verbal statements should make you culpable by the very fact that they are reckless. But I couldn't bring myself to say any of this.

Yes, I had engaged this male colleague and his friendly banter before; I said when my friend asked. No, I had not said anything to him—nothing to tell him that I didn't like how he spoke with me. But then again, I say, he has never said anything of this sort before—nothing similar to what he said today. You should have told him. I look at my friend, with a look of absolute disbelief plastered on my face. I know because I saw my eyes have widened in shock, and disgust in my reflection in the glass window behind him. Told him what, exactly? What do you tell someone you consider a colleague, a friend when they invite you to go dancing? Or when they tell you they might drop by your house later during the evening to say hi. Do you say, 'please stop. I don't like the conversation we are having?' Or, do you say, 'I don't like you coming on to me like this.' Or, better still, do you say, 'Mind your own business.' Yes, I could have said that I don't like being talked to like this- but like what? I don't like being invited to go dancing? Or I don't like people to check up on me? Tell that to any person and they would actually



think you are demented. And what if you say it? What if your colleague just laughs in your face, or try and hug you to make it sound all non-serious and then walk away, feeling smug at having caused you discomfort? And leave you to grapple with what happened and what that conversation meant. But I don't say any of this.

Is an invitation to go dancing, to which you haven't even said yes, flirtatious? When you don't say yes, isn't someone supposed to **KNOW** already that you are not interested? Isn't the lack of a **YES**, automatically a **NO**? Are you supposed to know that a colleague you have barely known for a month or two, and who says he **MAY** drop by to say hi, wants, maybe, something more from you? And does the fact that you engaged in this conversation take away your right to say something when the same colleague brazenly, openly, explicitly suggest what is on his mind? So then, what **DO** you say to someone who invites you to go dancing with them, no alcohol involved, he insists. Or to someone who wants to drop by and say hi? What? Which part is it exactly that you are supposed to feel uncomfortable about? When exactly are you supposed to know that the conversation is flirtatious—and you would do better to steer away from it? Yes, he had tried to caress my cheek once and I had brushed his hand away forcefully. Is that notice enough? Does that mean I said something or do I still need to actually say something? Shouldn't that have been notice enough? All this is going on in my head, but I don't say this, I don't know why.

Who measures the severity, and gravity of a verbal comment said so casually, but of such destructive import on another individual's psyche so as to render them physically incapable of performing their everyday tasks? What would it take—I asked, for an incident to be severe and grave? Does someone need to touch me inappropriately, or rape me, I asked, for you to sit across from me and tell me that yes, what I faced was severe and grave. By not taking official cognizance, I told my colleague, he was becoming part of the problem. By asking me to not report the incident officially, he was asking me to become part of the problem too. I want this to stop- this behavior, not just with you, but with everyone. It is not okay, it is not acceptable. It has to stop, he said. I want to report it, I reiterated. Even if you complain, he said, the maximum that is going to happen is that there would be a warning given. At least, he is saying he is sorry and this is not going to happen again—that's what matters, he said.

Sorry. So he is going to move on with his life by saying sorry. What else do you want, he says. I want some action against him, I hear my head screaming. But no words come out of my mouth. I want this to be official- but no words come out of my mouth. No one would know. And he could, and likely may do it again, I said. I still don't say that he tried to caress my cheek, or that he told me that he **LOVED** my hair (I love it too, I remember I had said, and laughed.) And you may never again know, because hey, no one may report it, I said. And how do you know even know if this is the first time—how do you know he hasn't done anything? Maybe he did, and no one reported it, so he got away with it. My friend, and the colleague I am reporting this to, just sat there and shook his



head—this is futile, he seems to be saying. We are going round and round in circles, he seems to be saying. I DON'T CARE, he seems to be saying. I am up against this indifference, and I am supposed to be explaining why I feel I have been sexually harassed. And I am trying, I am really trying, and I can see I am failing.

I am reminded at this moment of what my friend, and colleague had told me, when I had confided in him about what I had previously been through. Why didn't you tell your parents, he had asked? I would have, if I were you, he said. You need to stop such behavior, and the only way you can is if you report it and someone takes action. And there I was, sitting across from him, BEGGING him to take action against someone who had verbally harassed me, and who I knew if unchecked would definitely do something physically to me— because by keeping quiet, I would enable him. By keeping quiet, my friend, and colleague I was reporting to would enable him. But here he was my friend, and colleague saying no. No. No. No. No. No. Don't wash your dirty linen in public, he seemed to be saying. He is a nice guy- everyone knows he is a nice guy- he didn't mean it, he didn't intend it. It happens. Don't report it. No. No. No. No. No.

And what about me, I ask. Do you know how I feel; I ask my friend, and colleague. Tell me how do you feel, he says, wanting to sound sympathetic. Trying to help me navigate my feelings. I feel like my body is only for men's pleasure—whosoever wants it, whenever they want it, I say. That's what I feel like. Cheap. Filthy. Easy. I felt bile rising up my throat when I was hearing all this, I say, wondering if I was even hearing accurately what was being said to me. I understand, he said. Understand was a huge word coming from someone who didn't seem to be in favour of taking any official action. No, you don't understand. You never will, I say, so don't peddle that to me, expecting me to believe it.

At this stage, I give up. I give up because I know there is no point dragging this further. I give up because it feels like I am dragging myself through muck, to prove that something that happened to me was wrong, and cognizance should be taken of the matter. I give up because I am tired of trying to make people understand that every time something like this happens, big or small, verbal or physical, harassment like this chips you away, little by little. It chips away your soul, it chips away at your dignity, and it chips away at your very being. You live through it, and maybe you learn too. Yes, you are somehow a bigger person because of all that has happened to you, but at the same time, you feel like you are less of a person too. I sat there and told my friend that I won't file an official complaint because I don't have it in me emotionally to follow it through. That I am not strong enough to defend myself, to stop this from becoming about me—about how I DIDN'T DO anything to stop it. Or how I probably, likely, enabled this colleague. No, I didn't have it in me to be triggered day and night into reliving my experiences, is what I should have said. I didn't have it in me to face everything that haunts me. Any of it. All of it. And I walked out of his office.



Today morning, another one of my colleagues ‘wished me’ good morning by saying “oh you look so pretty today” and came to hug me. My mouth opened instinctively but nothing came out although in my head I could hear myself say, “don’t come near me, and don’t touch me.” My hand just created a barrier so he couldn’t come close, and yet my colleague tried to embrace me. Probably, I should have said something, I guess—like stop. There were five other people looking, and since then everyone’s been asking me if I am okay or not. I am not okay, and no one is getting it. And I can’t explain. That I feel ashamed.

*Shame  
Is a scar.  
That  
Has itched,  
Years after you forgot  
That the wound had healed.*

*Shame  
The last gasp of breath, that  
One right there that doesn't  
Unclench your tight chest.*

*Shame is the  
Bile that squeezes your voice  
So when  
You open your mouth, only you can  
hear  
The screams in your head.*

*Shame is lying  
Awake night after  
Night, in your bed, asking yourself if.  
If  
If you had done things  
Differently; would you still  
Have laid here night  
After night.  
Wondering if you should use a blade*

*To cut or a knife, but being  
Too ashamed to do so.  
Shame  
Is a memory,  
Well dusted and forgotten  
Flashing you with its astonishing  
Alacrity, each frame  
As sharp as it happened,  
Today.*

*Shame.  
Is a scar.  
That continues to itch, where  
A wound that never healed, had  
Once been.*



### **Concluding Remarks**

Talking about sexual violence is not an easy experience for many survivors. It is also often difficult for friends, family, colleagues, or other supporters to hear about these types of events. It is absolutely vital however that we talk about these issues, as it helps to de-stigmatise and de-mystify the experiences of sexual violence survivors. It is essential for recovery and healing process. It is necessary for creating accountability and accessing justice.

This is particularly important for the humanitarian community, which must do more to support those experiencing sexual violence in the course of its work. What was briefly presented in this compilation is merely the surface of the reality facing humanitarian aid workers around the world.



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