

Humanitarian Workplaces Free  
from Sexual Violence:

The First Steps and a Call to  
Action



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## **Acknowledgements**

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## Message from our Founder and Director

Report the Abuse began with a passionate desire to create safer and healthier workplaces for humanitarian aid workers, ones free from sexual violence. While this organisation was first inspired by my own experience with sexual violence while working in South Sudan, it was genuinely supported by the collective voices of survivors speaking about their experiences across the globe and demanding more from humanitarian organisations. When I started RTA on World Humanitarian Day, 19 August 2015, I never imagined we would have such a meaningful impact in just two years.

This says something extraordinary about the power of humanitarian voices, in particular the power of survivors of sexual violence controlling their narratives. It speaks to the movement and strength of this issue. It speaks to the need for action, for change, for growth, and for the momentum that has been built to endure.

In just two years of Report the Abuse's operations, the first data on the issue was published, and the first academic report followed shortly afterwards. The first analysis of how humanitarian organisations are addressing sexual violence against their employees was published. Survivors came forward in droves and conversations about the issue began happening in every corner of the humanitarian world – from the UN Secretary-General's office to the most remote corner of our field sites.

Change is not easy or quick, but the persistent signs of progress are positive and encouraging. It will take dedication – not just from one person or one organisation – but the entire humanitarian community to address sexual violence within our workplaces. Our work is far from done.

The closure of Report the Abuse on 20 August 2017 cannot be seen as an end to the work or a signal to be complacent; the NGO is closing simply because of the lack of sustainable funding streams available at this time. There is much more to be done, and my passion to address this problem is unwavering.

Together though, with persistence, passion, and hard work, I am confident that we will keep creating safer humanitarian workplaces. We will keep breaking down barriers and we will keep raising our voices, for the growing group of confident, determined, and passionate survivors of sexual violence in the humanitarian community.

We can change the status quo.

Together.

Megan Nobert, Founder and Director, Report the Abuse



## Message from our President of the Board

Sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers is not a new phenomenon. For those of us who have been working on gender-based violence issues for many years, colleagues and peers had repeatedly told us of their experiences and we did our best to support them. However, persistent structural inequalities have remained, policy implementation has been weak, and survivor support mechanisms are woefully inadequate. This must change. When Megan invited each of us as Board Members to support the challenge of setting up Report the Abuse, we firmly believed that the endeavour to pursue such critical change was vital, and we still do.

In a short time, RTA has been able to achieve several outcomes including:

- Capturing of testimonies by survivors through an online survey. The willingness of survivors of sexual violence to come forward and provide first-hand insights of their experience was the first of its kind. The words of survivors explicitly highlighted institutional fault lines, gaps in duty of care, and provided clear instructions on how to make things better. The survey grounded RTA's work in an evidence-base framework as well as laying the foundation for others' policy research.
- Building awareness of sexual violence against local and international humanitarian aid workers on a global scale, and working with partners and key champions to push an agenda forward.
- Producing guidance to establish responsive and effective survivor-centred strategies.

When Megan, as Founder, approached the Board about dissolving Report the Abuse, it was surprising. For such an important issue not to find a clear path to sustainability is difficult to accept, especially considering the extensive efforts of Megan and the additional commitment by active and engaged Board Members in promoting this important work.

When I consider the closing of Report the Abuse, I turn to the work of Sri Batliwala and Michel Friedman, who write: “[I]t is this force within the self, this fluid movement towards change that is a powerful source of our agency, our capacity to act for change.... As feminist leaders deeply concerned with the transformation of power inequalities, we understand that we have to engage in transformational work within ourselves, as we are instruments of power in our own organisations and movements”<sup>1</sup>. While Report the Abuse may no longer be a visible entity in the present struggle to dismantle the systemic and systematic barriers that exist in ending sexual violence in the humanitarian community, RTA began with one woman speaking out about her

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<sup>1</sup> Sri Batliwala and Michel Friedman, *Achieving Transformative Feminist Leadership: Toolkit for Organisations and Movements*, CREA, 2014, pg. 33.



experience. It grew through the collection of voices contained in testimonies, and its vision for change will continue through other instruments of power – through survivors and advocates speaking out, dynamic organisations leading by example, and movements carrying this agenda forward.

On behalf of the Board Members of Report the Abuse, thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Papan'.

Andrea S. Papan, President of the Board of Directors, Report the Abuse



## Mission and Goals

Sexual violence<sup>2</sup> – in and out of conflict settings – is a global phenomenon disproportionately affecting women and girls worldwide. Current data suggest that 1 in 3 women will experience sexual violence in their lifetime<sup>3</sup>. While it has only recently begun to be openly discussed, sexual violence within and against the humanitarian community is not a new or emerging problem. Report the Abuse’s (RTA) survey data suggests that 87% of humanitarian aid workers are reporting they know of a colleague who has experienced sexual violence in the course of their work; 72% of those reporting are survivors themselves<sup>4</sup>.

87% of humanitarian aid workers currently report that they know of a colleague who has experienced sexual violence in the course of their work<sup>1</sup>.

RTA grew out of a call to action that became evident when our Founder and Director, Megan Nobert, spoke publicly about her own experience with sexual violence<sup>5</sup> while working as a humanitarian aid worker in South Sudan. A collective of voices followed this publication<sup>6</sup>, as other

humanitarian aid workers who were also survivors of sexual violence spoke out. The strength of these voices created the foundation of RTA’s work, and informed its direction and passion.

First hosted by the International Women’s Rights Project<sup>7</sup>, RTA established itself as a separate entity on 1 July 2016. Based in Geneva, Switzerland, the organisation was strategically placed to keep the issue of sexual violence within and against the humanitarian community on the agenda of relevant organisations, both large and

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<sup>2</sup> Report the Abuse uses the following definition of sexual violence: “sexual violence includes, at least, rape/attempted rape, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. Sexual violence is ‘any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic a person’s sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless of relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.’ Sexual violence takes many forms, including rape, sexual slavery and/or trafficking, forced pregnancy, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and/or abuse, and forced abortion,” **taken from** Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery*, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> *Facts and figures: Ending violence against women*, UN Women, available at:

<http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

<sup>4</sup> Statistics contained in this report are generated through Report the Abuse’s survey platform (run from 19 August 2015 to 10 August 2017), which tracked the nature and type of incidents of sexual violence in the humanitarian community. These statistics are current as of the publication of this report. To check the final statistics and other findings, please consult our website:

<http://www.reporttheabuse.org/two-years-of-data-collection/>

<sup>5</sup> Jina Moore, *An Aid Worker Was Raped In South Sudan And The U.N. Did Almost Nothing About It*, BuzzFeed, 24 July 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Many of these voices can be found on RTA’s website, where the testimonies of survivors have been collected and highlighted: <http://www.reporttheabuse.org/two-years-of-data-collection/>

<sup>7</sup> The International Women’s Rights Project is a Canadian NGO aiming to strengthen the capacity of women’s NGOs (in Canada and internationally) to advocate for women’s human rights. More information about this NGO can be found on their website: [iwrp.org](http://iwrp.org)



small. Others have since begun to work on the issue; a move welcomed as the organisation strengthened its global network.

RTA was the first global non-governmental organisation (NGO) solely devoted to the prevention, mitigation, and response of sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers. Working towards creating sustained change, our holistic approach covered the entire cycle of sexual violence prevention: tackling stigma, encouraging reporting, and improving the prevention and response strategies of humanitarian organisations.

By advocating for a global agenda to end sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers, and developing and promoting survivor-centred organisational policies and mechanisms that tackle sexual violence and stigma against humanitarian aid workers, RTA became a trusted knowledge sharing hub for humanitarian aid workers who are survivors of sexual violence, and the contact point on the issue for the humanitarian community.

RTA's *Humanitarian Workplaces Free from Sexual Violence: The First Steps and a Call to Action* report reflects a challenging and yet rewarding two years for the organisation. Our efforts not only included advocacy on the existence and scope of the issue at hand, but also important steps towards the creation of the first good practices to address sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers. Out of a difficult and complicated subject, new spaces to discuss this problem emerged, attitudes began to shift, and survivor-centred policies began to emerge. Significant positive steps were taken in the right direction, though we have only begun the path to safer workplaces for all humanitarian aid workers.

This report also serves as the final publication for RTA as an NGO under Swiss law, as the organisation closed that door on 20 August 2017, due to the absence of sustainable funding streams needed to continue operations. This is not a reflection of the lack of work needed on the issue or our lack of passion, it is merely an unfortunate reality in the current challenging funding climate for the humanitarian community.

There is considerable work to be done, more than one person or one organisation can accomplish on its own. However, with barriers having been broken, momentum built, and the first stages of good practices set, this is the time for real change in the humanitarian community on the issue of sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers.

We urge all members of the humanitarian community to keep addressing this issue, to form networks and alliances, to raise their voices, support survivors, and to implement the changes and recommendations proposed by RTA and others.



## 2015 – 2017

The first steps towards any goal are always the most difficult, and the first two years of RTA's work reflect this reality. For every accomplishment along the path, celebration is warranted. However, the goal of safer workplaces for all humanitarian aid workers must continue to be strove for, as it remains still beyond our reach.

In the course of its first two years, from 19 August 2015 to 19 August 2017, RTA had three primary objectives:

- 1) Advocating for a global agenda to end sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers;
- 2) Developing and promoting survivor-centred organisational policies and mechanisms that tackle sexual violence and stigma against humanitarian aid workers; and
- 3) Becoming a trusted knowledge sharing hub for humanitarian survivors of sexual violence.

In the course of this time period, all indicators set for our work were met, despite having a limited budget and just one full-time staff member. Barriers to speaking about the issue within the humanitarian community have begun to break down, and real momentum has been created.

### ***Advocating for a global agenda to end sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers***

Though not a new phenomenon, sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers has only recently begun to penetrate the public consciousness. In the course of two years of advocacy, RTA wrote or participated in the publication of 54 media pieces<sup>8</sup>. Ranging from pieces in The Guardian, New York Times, IRIN, Reuters, Devex, to the BBC<sup>9</sup>, audiences throughout the world gained a better understanding about the reality and impact of sexual violence in the humanitarian community.

Raising the issue in the media is important, however there is something particularly impactful about the opportunity to speak one-on-one with audiences, which RTA was able to do at various workshops and conferences over the past two years. With representation at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey in May 2016 to Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) in Brazil in September 2016, there were multiple opportunities to raise concerns and advocate for change at high-level events.

No opportunity though could have the potential to be more impactful, or represent the permeation of the issue into the consciousness of the humanitarian community, than the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) hosted side-event on the

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<sup>8</sup> 12 in 2015, 13 in 2016, and 29 in 2017, as of the date of closing.

<sup>9</sup> For a full and updated accounting of all media pieces published on the issue, please consult RTA's dedicated webpage: <http://reporttheabuse.org/research/against-humanitarian-aid-workers/>



'Protection of Humanitarian Action: Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Aid Workers' at ECOSOC in June 2017<sup>10</sup>. This not only represents the height of an exciting array of advocacy efforts, but also marked as a legacy of the impact of RTA, whose work, commitment, and passion were highlighted by all participants at the event.

This advocacy work was born out of the sexual violence experiences of humanitarian aid workers, whose trust and strength of conviction allowed RTA to publish the first global statistics on the issue on its first anniversary on 19 August 2016<sup>11</sup>. This was followed by the publication of data collected by other bodies<sup>12</sup>, most notably the analysis of the Feinstein International Center, whose research culminated in a report in May 2017<sup>13</sup>.

Our research and the participation of survivors of sexual violence has also helped RTA to highlight the varied voices of humanitarian aid workers, showing that all members of the community – women and men, expatriate and national staff, regardless of nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or placement in the humanitarian hierarchy – are affected by sexual violence<sup>14</sup>.

This work, alongside that of allies, lead to the appointment of two Co-Champions to address the issue of sexual violence within the IASC, providing the space for further conversations about the role senior management within the humanitarian community has to play on this issue. RTA's direct conversations with Humanitarian Coordinators and Resident Coordinators has underlined the need for strong leadership at the field level, and these conversations have lead to the opening of discussions about sexual violence throughout all corners of the humanitarian community.

Advocating for change though is most effective where there is a standard we can work towards. Part of RTA's core mission was ensuring that this problem was not only known – de-stigmatised and de-mystified – but that concrete action could be taken based upon this knowledge. With RTA having proposing language changes for the revised Sphere Handbook for 2018 that would set such a standard, there is an opportunity to reinforce the urgency of addressing this issue, necessitating improvements to existing internal prevention and response strategies for humanitarian organisations.

This is a real and gave issue, and the UN General Assembly in Resolution A/RES/71/129 made it clear that sexual violence attacks on humanitarian aid

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<sup>10</sup> Sophie Edwards, UN must end 'toxic tolerance' of sexual abuse of aid workers, top official says, Devex, 27 June 2017.

<sup>11</sup> For updated statistics on the issue, please consult RTA's dedicated webpage: <http://www.reporttheabuse.org/two-years-of-data-collection/>

<sup>12</sup> **See** Humanitarian Women's Network: [iasc.ch/system/files/hwn\\_full\\_survey\\_results\\_may\\_2016.pdf](http://iasc.ch/system/files/hwn_full_survey_results_may_2016.pdf); Insecurity Insight: [www.insecurityinsight.org/aidindanger/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Sexual-Violence-Against-Aid-Workers-January-2015-March-2017.pdf](http://www.insecurityinsight.org/aidindanger/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Sexual-Violence-Against-Aid-Workers-January-2015-March-2017.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Feinstein International Center, ***STOP the Sexual Assault Against Humanitarian and Development Aid Workers***, May 2017.

<sup>14</sup> To read the voices of survivor, please consult RTA's dedicated webpage: <http://www.reporttheabuse.org/two-years-of-data-collection/>



workers will no longer be tolerated. This Resolution must be shared and highlighted at all opportunities, as humanitarian organisations becoming increasingly vocal about their struggles to address the problem and advocate for justice in the face of impunity.

Further advocacy at the highest levels is needed, though the steps taken thus far are in the right direction. RTA is proud of its accomplishments to raise the profile of this problem, and is confident that humanitarian aid workers across the world will not allow conversations on the issue to stop.

***Developing and promoting survivor-centred organisational policies and mechanisms that tackle sexual violence and stigma against humanitarian aid workers***

When RTA began in 2015, one of the first tasks it undertook was research and analysis into how the humanitarian community was addressing sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers, by examining the prevention and response strategies of 92 different humanitarian organisations. The results, published in a report August 2016<sup>15</sup>, were startling: only 16% of the examined humanitarian organisations had a single mention of sexual violence even being a risk to their staff. None of the organisations had a policy or procedure that approached being survivor-centred or holistic.

While alarming, the results of this study did serve as a catalyst for change, and excellent progress has been made by humanitarian organisations in the proceeding year. This report also provided one of the first opportunities for humanitarian organisations to express their vulnerabilities on this issue – opening up the door for dialogue and growth.

Born out of this analysis was also the first good practices tools, published in August 2017 by RTA<sup>16</sup>. Not only were these the first documents created to address sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers in an inter-agency manner, but they take a comprehensive approach to the problem: addressing prevention measures, policy, and procedure. From Human Resources through to Senior Management, all staff within humanitarian organisations has a role to address the problem, and these tools help to illustrate what are those roles. Similarly, it drives home the idea that everyone – from the cleaner to the Executive Director – has a right to a safe and healthy workplace, free from sexual violence, as well as an obligation to help create such environments.

In the many conversations RTA has had with humanitarian organisations in the past two years, one theme in particular emerged: there is a lack of direction and knowledge needed to appropriately implement survivor-centred prevention and response strategies. 25 humanitarian organisations purposely approached RTA from 1 July 2016 looking for feedback and assistance; with our guidance 15 humanitarian

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<sup>15</sup> Report the Abuse, *Prevention, Policy and Procedure Checklist*, August 2016.

<sup>16</sup> All of these good practices tools can be found on Report the Abuse's website: <http://www.reporttheabuse.org/help-for-organisations/>



organisations took steps to making concrete changes to how they address sexual violence issues internally.

With the good practices tools now publically available and widely disseminated, these figures should grow. The pieces are available to help all humanitarian organisations – it is now for them and their employees to demand implementation and change.

### ***Becoming a trusted knowledge sharing hub for humanitarian survivors of sexual violence***

The RTA reporting platform was part of our broader efforts to prevent sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers and ensure that survivors are provided with appropriate care when it does occur. The information gathered allowed us to develop a better picture of the nature and scope of incidents, and approaches taken (or not) by humanitarian organisations in response to these incidents. Importantly, it was also a confidential, non-judgemental, and anonymous space for sexual violence survivors to break their silence and take back the narrative of their experience.

Active from 19 August 2015 to 10 August 2017, and available in 30 languages<sup>17</sup>, it provided a space where, often for the first time ever, humanitarian aid workers could talk about their experiences with sexual violence. Many of those who reported sexual violence felt further along their path to healing after expressing their experience. Others felt emboldened to tell more individuals in their circle, to share further. It opened up the space for dialogue and as survivors came forward sharing their stories, more felt empowered to do the same. It was a catalyst for discussions throughout the humanitarian community.

RTA also, through discreet information gathering and sharing, connected survivors post-sexual violence with the appropriate avenues to file reports on their experience and seek accountability. While we only encourage this course of action where survivors feel safe and comfortable – as in 2017 it is still the norm that survivors who come forward are retaliated against – speaking out is a vital piece to ensuring this problem is taken seriously in the humanitarian community. As more survivors come forward, more humanitarian organisations are required to respond and make changes to their internal structures. As the issue gains exposure, the fear of retaliation will hopefully begin to decrease.

Finally, RTA believes that it is the responsibility of humanitarian organisations to provide their employees with the medical and emotional assistance needed to recover from the traumatic impacts of work-related sexual violence. However, this is not always the case and survivors are often left to seek support on their own. To fill this gap, RTA created a series of databases and information, made publically available<sup>18</sup>, so that survivors could more easily identify the psychosocial and legal resources when

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<sup>17</sup> These translations were thanks to the tireless support of Translators without Borders: <https://translatorswithoutborders.org>

<sup>18</sup> These resources are available on Report the Abuse's website: <http://www.reporttheabuse.org/help-for-suvivors/>



they are needed. We also attempted to fill in some of the information gaps regarding date rape drugs, post-sexual violence kits, and reporting systems within the humanitarian system, by creating a series of fact sheets and guidance notes to help assist and inform humanitarian aid workers.

Work to break down the stigma surrounding sexual violence in the humanitarian community has started, though these barriers will take time to destroy. As more survivors become empowered however, humanitarian organisations are taking steps towards implementing appropriate, responsive, and survivor-centred prevention and response strategies. We are on our way to the creation of safer workplaces for humanitarian aid workers.



### **A Call to Action...**

The efforts needed to address sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers are beyond that of just one person or one organisation. They take all members of the humanitarian community acting together, pushing for change, and raising their voices.

Creating and inspiring partnerships, networks, and alliances will help to further the movement, as it enters into a phase where the issue must be born by all members of the humanitarian community. Sharing lessons learned and vulnerabilities will encourage more humanitarian organisations to take the steps needed to address this problem within their own ranks.

As more survivors demand action and accountability, others will feel empowered to come forward as well. The continuing strength of survivors and their allies will drive forward work on this issue, and force change within humanitarian organisations that may be reluctant.

The donor community has a role to play<sup>19</sup>, demanding more from the organisations it funds and ensuring there is just as much transparency about how humanitarian aid workers are treated as we currently give to financial transparency.

More research is needed and representational data required to show how pervasive the issue of sexual violence is within the humanitarian community. In particular, we need information on the experiences of national humanitarian staff, who are too often neglected or dismissed in conversations on the safety and security of humanitarian aid workers.

There is genuine momentum right now, which cannot be allowed to stop. Although RTA may no longer exist as an NGO in Switzerland, its work and resources remain available. It is hoped that there will be the resources to continue our work in the future.

In the meantime, we ask all to take our tools, capitalise on our efforts made, and barriers broke. Use it. Create dialogues to de-stigmatise the experiences of humanitarian aid workers who are surviving sexual violence. Destroy policies and procedures that seek to protect perpetrators and further impunity. Raise the voices of those not yet able to speak. Empower each other. Push for justice and change.

Together, the humanitarian community can change the status quo when it comes to sexual violence against humanitarian aid workers.

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<sup>19</sup> Megan Nobert, *Guidance Note: The Role of Donors for Addressing Sexual Violence in Humanitarian Workplaces*, Report the Abuse, August 2017.

## Income and Expenditure

### *Income (USD)*

<b>Income Stream</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
Institutional		142,000 <sup>20</sup>	22,800
In-kind donations	3993	50,172	0
Individual donations	687	1408	3590
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>1600</b>	<b>193,580</b>	<b>26,390</b>

### *Expenditure (USD)*

<b>Income Stream</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
Activity Costs		20,836.89	0
Operational Costs	600	92,269.44	53,228.91
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>600</b>	<b>113,106.33</b>	<b>53,228.91</b>

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<sup>20</sup> Part of this donor grant was carried over into 2017 as a no-cost extension.



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