I did what is needed because for me it's important

How humanitarian managers perceive and experience their responsibilities with regards to managing risks of sexual violence

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Abstract

Since 2018 and what is referred to as the “Oxfam scandal” it seems that the practices around the prevention of sexual violence in the aid sector have evolved but it is difficult to estimate how much has changed. This research focuses on the specific point of view of managers in aid organizations. They have a specific role with regards to safeguarding because they manage a team and are involved in project design.

This study’s aim is to understand how humanitarian managers perceive and experience their responsibilities towards safeguarding. Based on the analysis of interviews with 6 managers, it examines how they perceive their responsibilities with regards to safeguarding and the risks of sexual violence. It also questions how equipped they feel to mitigate these risks and whether they have observed a change in the past few years, with regards to sexual violence in the aid sector.

This qualitative research relies on the framework of gender-based violence, the concept of intersectionality, the concept of situated knowledge of Donna Haraway and the theory of competencies, one of the theories of adult learning. It demonstrates that the perceptions of sexual violence by managers of the aid sector are linked to their personal ethics and experiences and that although they consider themselves responsible to prevent sexual violence, their perceptions of the risks are not homogenous. This study lays the ground for further research on safeguarding from the perspectives of managers, with a stronger emphasis on intersectional and decolonial approaches.

Keywords: safeguarding, sexual violence, humanitarian, aid sector, NGO, managers, victim, survivor, vulnerability, situated knowledge.
Acronyms and key words

**NGO**  
Non-Governmental Organization

**PSEAH**  
Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment

**Safeguarding**  
"Taking all reasonable steps to prevent harm from occurring both to the recipients of aid and to people delivering it and responding appropriately when harm occurs."¹

**Victim/survivor**  
The use of the word “survivor” has become the standard when it comes to discussing cases of sexual violence. It shows more resilience and agency than the word “victim” which seems to imply a passive posture. People who are not working in the safeguarding sphere are not used to this choice of word, therefore I have decided to use “victim/survivor” in this research.

**Affected population**  
Population affected by the crisis the aid organizations are responding to. This expression is preferred to the word “beneficiary” or “beneficiaries” commonly used by organizations until now. Similarly, to the word “victim”, “beneficiaries” expresses passivity and dependance towards aid whereas “affected population” is more neutral and allows us to consider that these people have agency.

¹ [https://safeguardingsupporthub.org/](https://safeguardingsupporthub.org/)
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1. Introduction

The New Humanitarian recently published an article titled “What’s changed since #AidToo? Not much, say sex workers in Sierra Leone”. The journalist spoke with several sex workers in Freetown who regularly have clients who work for aid organizations. 5 years after the Oxfam scandal (BBC, 2018) and the #AidToo movement, I would also be quite tempted to consider that not much has changed, but looking at the situation from a specific angle might allow to see things differently.

The first reports on sexual violence perpetrated by aid workers were published in the early 2000’s and were about aid workers and peace keeping soldiers perpetrating acts of sexual violence on vulnerable women and children, mainly but not exclusively exchanging food for sex. Following the #metoo movement, aid workers spoke up about sexual violence in the sector under the hashtag #aidtoo. This wave of testimonies brought attention to the abuse perpetrated within organizations. Some media accentuated the focus on sexual violence in the aid sector as they exposed some organizations’ practices with regards to perpetrators of abuse. The case of Oxfam has become very symbolic and can be considered as a turning point. Previously tolerated behavior in the aid sector was no longer considered acceptable. The organization was exposed as having let a head of mission resign following serious misconduct. He had allegedly paid for the services of sex workers at his home, while he was working for Oxfam, in Haiti. No sanction had been given – he had resigned after being found out – and this senior manager had continued his career with other aid organizations. This relatively well-known organization had a lot of attention from the media, including very mainstream media, but it is not the only organization that received bad press for its management of cases of sexual violence. Since 2017, the attention on the issue of sexual violence and mitigation of risks in the aid sector has remained strong.

The first standards of prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) in the sector were defined 20 years ago and increasing resources have been allocated to the prevention and management of cases since, especially in the past 5 years. These initial standards have been reviewed and best practices continue to be researched and documented. There is some change but it’s difficult to measure it. An increasing number of reported cases of abuse doesn’t necessarily mean that there is more abuse happening now. It could be that victims/survivors or witnesses make
more official complaints than before, and that can be considered as a very positive evolution given the barriers to reporting.

I think that the situation may appear differently depending on the scale of the picture we look at. I believe managers have a key role to play when it comes to the prevention of sexual violence, and I want to have a look at what it is like to be a manager in this sector today. #metoo, #aidtoo and the media have shed light on the issue of sexual violence in the aid sector. The topic is out there, discussions are happening, cases are being investigated, resources are increasing but what does it look like from the managers’ point of view?

**Aim and scope of research**

Prevention of sexual violence intervenes at many levels in an organization: governance, recruitment, internal policies, procedures, complaints mechanisms, training, risk assessments... Some employees have specific responsibilities – senior managers, safeguarding focal points, human resources personnel, security advisors - while all employees of an NGO are responsible for the prevention of sexual violence.

Somewhere between the specialized roles of some employees and the “ordinary” employees, there is another level of responsibility which seems important to me: the managers. They have specific responsibilities that do not relate to their technical expertise but that are linked to the fact that they lead a team. Additionally, managers who are involved in program design and program management have another layer of responsibility. Team management is a central concern when it comes to sexual violence because each manager must deal with any situation where a team member is a perpetrator of sexual violence. Project and program design are also decisive when it comes to prevention of sexual violence because a poorly designed project may increase the risk of sexual violence.

This research aims at understanding how humanitarian managers perceive and experience their responsibilities towards safeguarding.

The research questions are:

- Do humanitarian managers consider themselves responsible of the prevention of sexual violence, at their level?
- How do they perceive the risk of sexual violence?
- Do they feel equipped to deal with these risks?
- Have they observed any change over the past 5 years?

I chose to focus on international humanitarian organizations that have teams and programs in several countries, because most smaller and local organizations don’t necessarily have the resources to apply the strongest safeguarding practices and may have very diverse setups. There are small and local organizations with robust systems but in order to have comparable structures I decided to target the larger international organizations.

**Positionality**

After about 15 years in the aid sector, I was a bit disenchanted and although I didn’t want to leave humanitarian organizations altogether, I wasn’t satisfied with my situation as an employee of one of those organizations. I wanted to participate in making aid better and I gradually realized that specializing in the prevention of sexual violence was the alignment I was searching for.

I’m a European cisgender heterosexual woman. My twitter handle says “Humanitarian, feminist, activist”. Perhaps I wouldn’t phrase it exactly like this today, but it is how I defined myself a few years ago when I returned from Yemen, where I had been working for an international organization for a year. I was on a steep learning curve regarding feminism, gender, intersectionality, antiracism and the specific topic of sexual violence but I wasn’t sure how to articulate my work, my identity, and this activism. I still work in the aid sector, but as an independent consultant in safeguarding and this has allowed me to feel better aligned and to create some distance with organizations.

**Reflections on positionality**

I am directly involved in safeguarding investigations, audits, and trainings and my clients are aid organizations, so I am used to seeing things from the perspective of the external consultant who interacts with safeguarding focal points and senior managers. I also speak with aid workers as part of my investigations and trainings, but in both situations the setting is not neutral. I am an expert who is sometimes involved in enquiring on a person’s behavior. As part of the investigations that I participate in, I speak to victims/survivors, to witnesses and to the perpetrators of sexual violence as well. I am sometimes very affected by the testimonies of these different people. I am often
impressed by the vulnerability and courage of victims/survivors who come forward. In parallel, I am shocked and angered by the behavior and minimizations of the majority of perpetrators. I am also regularly disappointed by the lack of adequate response of organizations when sexual violence occurs.

As a safeguarding professional, a woman, and an activist against sexual violence, I have my own perceptions on how the aid sector is changing and there is a risk that I will seek information that confirms my perspective. I have tried to limit this risk by using different strategies which I will explain in the chapter dedicated to the methodology.

My expertise and personal experience may influence my perception of what these managers share with me. I have an opinion of what a manager should do to prevent sexual violence. I am also familiar with the standards and best practices as well as with some research about sexual violence in the aid sector. For the purpose of this thesis I know I will have to keep some distance. I have been in the informants’ shoes, but it was prior to the Oxfam scandal and the #aidtoo movement and I acknowledge that the situation has changed since. I have to make sure not to project my experience and beliefs on what the informants will tell me. The perceptions they have shared are their own. They have trusted me with them, and I should respect that they are personal, and that each person deals with this challenge with the means that are available to them.

Disclaimer
I want to be transparent about the fact that I have signed service contracts with two of the organizations some of the informants for this research work for. These contracts cover safeguarding services, including investigating cases of sexual violence, however I have not collaborated with these organizations since the signature of these contracts. I have worked for one of the four organizations informants work for, in the past, but I didn’t interview anyone I managed or any of my managers.
2. Theory and previous research

For this research, I have drawn on previous research on sexual violence and more specifically on sexual violence in the aid sector. This research and the theme of sexual violence can be considered through the lenses of different frameworks which I will present as well.

Gender-based violence

The first framework which comes to mind quite spontaneously when we look at sexual violence is the gender-based violence framework. It is difficult to dissociate sexual violence from systemic patterns and gender. Statistically, it has been demonstrated that the majority of acts of sexual violence are perpetrated by men while the majority of survivors/victims are women and girls. According to RAINN², 9 out of 10 victims/survivors of rape in the United States are female, 1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime while 1 in 33 American men have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime. The World Bank states: “Gender-based violence (GBV) or violence against women and girls (VAWG), is a global pandemic that affects 1 in 3 women in their lifetime”.

One of the forms of gender-based violence is sexual violence and the UNHCR³ defines it as follows:

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) refers to any act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships. It includes physical, emotional or psychological and sexual violence, and denial of resources or access to services. Violence includes threats of violence and coercion. SGBV inflicts harm on women, girls, men and boys and is a severe violation of several human rights.

The framework of gender-based violence underlines the need to address structural problems rather than consider that sexual violence is related to individuals and their personal trajectories and personalities.

Some key references can be cited with regards to gender and power as for example the concept of hegemonic masculinities coined by Connell in 1995. It is a practice which reinforces men’s

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² Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, USA, https://www.rainn.org/
³ The United Nations Refugee Agency
dominant position in society and makes it acceptable. It relies on the domination of women and on a hierarchy between men. It is also homophobic as the standard on which it is based is related to stereotypical gender norms. A “real man” cannot be weak, must compete with other men and devaluate women and weaker men.

Another concept which is important with regards to the understanding of sexual violence is the continuum of violence (Kelly, 1987). There are different degrees of gravity when we consider gender-based violence. Sexual harassment cannot be placed on the same level as rape for example. Although these acts differ in their impacts, they are linked, and allowing the less serious behaviors to take place creates an environment which permits more serious gender-based violence. This applies to all types of sexual gender-based violence and it is particularly relevant to apply it to behaviors in a workplace or organization. In terms of prevention, it means that any sexist behavior should be clearly condemned and sanctioned when appropriate.

It is often represented as a pyramid:

1. The pyramid of the continuum of sexual violence source: personal interpretation inspired by a pyramid seen on the website of the University of British Columbia

There are many different versions of this pyramid, but the principle is always the same: the lower layers in the pyramid represent behaviors that have a higher probability of occurrence with a lighter
impact whereas the higher layers and the tip of the pyramid indicate very impactful behaviors which occur less often. There is a correlation between all of these layers; it is those less serious behaviors which enable the other types of behaviors. All of these layers represent acts of sexual violence, including acts which are not considered to be sexual violence by some people.

In relation to the idea of the continuum of sexual violence, it’s interesting that some research has been made on disparagement humor. In 2004, empirical research by Ford and Ferguson identified that disparaging humor didn’t create hostility but reinforced existing prejudice and probably discouraged victims/survivors of any discriminations to report the behavior. Another study from 2010 demonstrated that the higher the person making the sexist remarks in the hierarchy, the more harmful it was (Hershcovis et al. 2010).

**SGBV in the aid sector**

In 2003, the UNHCR and the organization Save the Children published a report documenting sexual exploitation of refugee children in different countries of West Africa which underlined the importance and the risks related to power imbalance in humanitarian contexts (UNHCR, StC, 2003).

In 2003, a UN secretary bulletin⁴ established the first principles to prevent sexual abuse and exploitation in the sector, specifying that not respecting these principles would constitute gross misconduct and therefore be grounds for termination (UN, 2003). These principles laid the foundations for all the policies, procedures and codes of conduct that were developed since by organizations.

Stephanie Matti examined the codes of conduct of 100 humanitarian non-governmental organizations and took a look at how they dictate what is acceptable and what is not regarding aid workers’ sexual behavior (Matti, 2015). In her conclusion, she specifies that “Only 13 of the 100 surveyed organizations had organization-specific codes of conduct that contain substantive references to sexual conduct. Among these there was wide variation in the scope of applicability, types of sexual behavior covered and level of enforceability”. It would be interesting to repeat the same study and check the evolution post #metoo and #aidtoo.

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⁴ See appendix 3
After the Oxfam scandal in 2018 and the opportunity of the #aidtoo wave of expression, more testimonies were collected and research showed that there was also a lot of sexual violence within aid organizations (Report the Abuse, 2018, UK House of Commons, 2018). People from the affected population were not the only ones at risk. Victims/survivors reported allegations of sexual violence perpetrated by their colleagues and managers.

The word “safeguarding” started to be used in the aid sector only a few years ago and has become a trendy word. Even though it is not quite a buzz word (Sandvik, 2019), its use demonstrates an evolution in the practices of the sector and a rephrasing from “prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation” to a broader objective of avoiding harm whether inside or outside of an organization. Initially used in the UK as a synonym of protection of children and vulnerable adults, “safeguarding” is now commonly used in the aid sector and includes the prevention of harm to aid workers and by aid workers.

As I briefly indicated it in the definitions listed at the beginning of this research, there are debates around the wording that is used in general in the aid sector and particularly in the sphere of safeguarding. Some of these discussions are a result of efforts to decolonize and localize aid, two important trends in the last few years. Choices had to me made with regards to the most relevant frameworks this research should rest on and I have consciously put this aside, but I am aware of the importance of these movements and wanted to make a note of this in my research. It would be very relevant to look into the colonial heritage in the aid sector and how it impacts safeguarding today.

The way that security is managed in the aid sector is an interesting example of how perceptions of otherness and sexual violence are at play. Although the issue of sexual violence perpetrated by aid workers has been studied for over twenty years, the myth that sexual violence has more chances of being perpetrated by an outsider to the NGO remains strong. According to Daigle et al., maintaining security in a humanitarian setting typically entails viewing the threat as external. In addition, security management frequently adopts a narrow perspective that places women at greater risk solely because of their gender and ignores any other factors that might increase or decrease vulnerability, such as skin color, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, etc.
Daigle, Martin and Myrttinen (2020) also explain that perceptions around security management in the aid sector are influenced by colonial heritage and often lead to security managers and other aid workers considering that perpetrators are necessarily local men. Other key perceptions are addressed as for example the fact that when there are no reports of sexual violence it does not mean that there are no acts of sexual violences. It’s actually often the opposite: if no there are no reports, the reporting mechanism is probably not known, or victims/survivors don’t have any trust in it.

Riley (2020) draws attention to the fact that women are particularly vulnerable in this industry and that those who commit crimes are neither prosecuted nor punished. In contrast, they are typically free to quit and then reapply for jobs at other companies, allowing them to carry on with their careers unscathed. The phrase "failing upwards" alludes to the reality that as the offenders keep moving toward more responsibility, the system is failing the victims/survivors.

Generally, it seems that organizations tend to consider that they should focus in priority on affected populations and not on their own practices. Michelle Lokot demonstrates that with regards to gender mainstreaming, organizations tend to address it mainly in their programming without considering that their own organization would benefit from a similar approach (Lokot, 2021).

Statistically, it appears that the majority of victims/survivors of sexual gender-based violence are women and girls which explains why most programs targeting these acts of sexual violence aim at protecting women and girls in priority. Nevertheless, there are male victims, as well as LGBTQ+ people and other minority groups and their needs are overlooked (ICRC, Norwegian Red Cross, 2022).

Not all of the research depicts the shortcomings of organizations when it comes to safeguarding. An interesting initiative has demonstrated that relying on women from the affected population and considering them as experts in safeguarding can be very efficient (Potts et al. 2022). Empowered Aid, a multi-year, multi-country participatory action research study involved women and girls living in Uganda and Lebanon, two countries with very important refugee populations in the world, to determine how to conduct activities in the safest way.

**Intersectionality**
The link between sexual violence and gender is clearly demonstrated through the GBV framework, however the combination with other factors needs to be taken into account to have a thorough approach of the question and the framework of intersectionality allows to better evaluate and analyze complex situations.

Intersectionality is a concept which was first developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991. In this first presentation of the concept, it focused on the specific situation of women who were discriminated because of their gender but also because of their race and class. Intersectionality is not only a way to measure the discrimination but a tool to analyze the specific situation of people who are facing situations due to their position in different categories of the population. It does not consider the combination of categories as a simple sum. The combination of categories can expose a completely different situation.

In the aid sector, it can be useful to consider more categories than the initial classic ones - international vs. local employee for example if you are looking at employees - but also any other category which is meaningful within the population affected by a crisis: ethnic minority, political motivations, marginalized groups such as albino/roma/yazidi etc.

The concept of intersectionality is occasionally used in the aid sector but it’s not a word most aid workers are familiar with. It is sometimes applied without using the word, but even in situations where different characteristics related to vulnerability are taken into consideration, it cannot be considered that there is an intersectional approach. When needs assessments are carried out for example, and specifically when protection needs are evaluated, it is best practice to consider specific vulnerabilities and their combinations, but these combinations are often very simply evaluated.

An important intersectional reference on the theme of sexual violence is that of Angela Davis. She specifically addresses the issue of gender, class and sex with regards to sexual violence in the United States of America (Davis, 1981) and points out that when men rape black women, the mechanisms, perceptions and consequences are completely different than when men rape white women. Davis presents rape as a crime of power and demonstrates it through the example of white men who raped their black slaves. She also depicts the image of the black rapist, a stereotype which has been resorted to in order to legitimate racist violence and which prevents some women from
reporting sexual violence until today as they don’t want to seem to support or perpetuate this stereotype.

Aid organizations rely on an intersectional approach for safeguarding purposes. It appears in Médecins Sans Frontières’s policies. The Safeguarding Resources Hub considers that an intersectional approach is the best practice. Oxfam, Médecins du Monde and other organizations are using it more and more in relation to gender programming.

When it comes to research, there are not many articles and publications with an intersectional approach which are situated in the aid sector. Vernon, in a very recent article (2022), does a wonderful job in linking sexuality, gender and the colonial violence in humanitarian interventions, highlighting the research that has already been carried out as well as the gaps which are worth studying.

**Situated knowledges**

A third framework which seems relevant with regards to the material of my research is the concept of situated knowledges of Donna Haraway. In her thesis (Haraway, 1988) she explains that scientific objectivity is a myth, and that any knowledge is a result of a personal perspective. This positionality determines what we are able to see and to know. Acknowledging this also allows for accountability towards what we express and produce. I have purposefully given some information with regards to my positionality to explain what my standpoint is for this research. It also occurs to me that each of my informants have their own positionality and that affects their knowledge, understanding and management of safeguarding.

Michelle Lokot (2022) addresses the issue of the researcher’s positionality when conducting research in a humanitarian setting. As she mentions in the beginning of her article, positionality is not considered in most cases when research is conducted in the humanitarian sector. Researchers consider themselves to be neutral and feel that there is no need for any information regarding their standpoint. I strongly believe that positionality impacts research and appreciate the analysis Lokot presents, with a particular standpoint as she is Australian of Sri Lankan descent and has conducted research in Jordan, where people are notably racist.
I will not analyze each informant’s situatedness in this research, but I will demonstrate in what ways their situatedness plays a role and how it is expressed in the interviews I have conducted. While the aid sector has defined principles and standards, the diversity of individual trajectories makes it very challenging to ensure these standards are understood and adopted and it questions the effectiveness of these prevention strategies.

**Gaps in existing research**

Most research and guidelines which have been published so far focus either on policies, procedures and tools that organizations should have in place or on victims’ testimonies. There is a lot of material produced on how to set up a complaints mechanism and how to handle complaints but not on how to prevent abuse. Some research underlines the need for organizational culture change but without specifying how to do it.

There is no research focusing specifically on managers. The number of technical roles is increasing (experts, safeguarding leads etc.). How about the capacity of other staff? Every employee has a responsibility when it comes to safeguarding. How are non-expert staff equipped to deal with the risks and the cases?

Managers are only considered as people who should know and apply the rules. Don’t they have specific responsibilities as team and project managers? They are supposed to oversee that risks are mitigated within their teams and in their activities, whatever they are (logistics, program, finance etc.). Are they benefiting from any kind of training or support which is designed specifically for them? Do they consider that they have responsibilities with regards to safeguarding? How do they know how to take them on? Do they find this challenging?
3. Research design and methodology

This research follows an abductive approach, there is existing research and the qualitative data gathered through the research will be examined through the lenses of the existing research. Even if the existing research doesn’t examine the specific role of managers, links can be drawn between existing frameworks, best practices in safeguarding and this empirical data.

Some change has happened over the past few years, new roles have been created with diverse titles related to safeguarding and accountability to affected populations. The need for trained investigators and safeguarding experts has drastically increased and there are more reports through complaints mechanisms. A lot of this change has been led through a top-down approach. CEOs, boards, senior managers have decided to invest in safeguarding resources. Most of the time the motivation for this change has been donor requirements. Organizations need to tick the boxes, show that they have policies and procedures in place, in order to access funding.

I have chosen to carry out interviews with managers from the aid sector because they have specific responsibilities when it comes to safeguarding. All NGO employees are expected to behave according to humanitarian principles, to abide by the law and respect their organization’s policies and procedures. One of the principles of safeguarding which are applied sector-wide us also the obligation to report any case of abuse for an NGO worker. Managers have an additional responsibility; they must ensure that the rules are applied within their team and that the affected populations are not impacted negatively by the organization’s activities and personnel. They have managerial as well as programmatic responsibilities which are related to safeguarding.

Choice of method

The best way to capture how managers deal with these different responsibilities seemed to be semi-structured interviews. They allow for in-depth conversations on the selected topic. There is some freedom in the discussion and the conversation can take very different paths from one person to another. What I understand by that is that questions are usually open and although there can still be some bias and the phrasing can induce some answers, the perspective of others on a situation can still be surprising.

The interviews were conducted through Zoom and Microsoft Teams.
Selection of participants

I initially selected informants on LinkedIn. I aimed at interviewing people I didn’t know previously. I searched for managers of diverse profiles and asked them if they would be interested in participating in this research. I searched LinkedIn with the use of keywords such as “manager” and the name of an organization, adding the filter “people”, and then scrolling through the suggested profiles in order to identify managers with minimum 5 years of experience, who were in a field position. I then sent them a message through the chat asking them if they would be interested in participating in my research. This step was a bit challenging because the number of characters is very limited when you are not linked yet. Many humanitarian managers responded positively initially. Unfortunately, a number of people who expressed their interest in participating in the research couldn’t make themselves available afterwards and I had to find other informants. Because of the limited timeframe, I ended up asking people from my network to suggest people they knew. Through this approach I managed to find other informants relatively fast, but I ended up with informants from an organization I have worked for although I initially wanted to avoid that.

All interviews were carried out in May 2023.

Sample

The sample of informants focused on aid workers holding senior leadership roles. I contacted over 20 potential informants to find 6 managers who were available to participate in the study. The sample presents diversity in terms of age, gender and nationality and includes aid workers from Europe, South-East Asia, Africa and the Middle East who are presently holding senior leadership positions with INGOs in African, Asian and Middle Eastern countries.

I chose to include 3 people who identified as male and 3 who identified as female. Only one of them is from a western country, the five other informants are from Asian, African or Middle Eastern Countries. They were all employed by 4 large international organizations. They were in what are considered field positions, they did not work in the organization’s headquarters at the time of the interviews. 4 of the informants were expatriates, while the other 2 had local
employment contracts. Some of the informants held support\textsuperscript{5} positions while others held positions that involved the management of projects.

I chose to interview people who had at least 5 years of experience. It seemed like the minimum duration to be able to observe a change in the approach of organizations. The informants had between 6 and 15 years of experience in the aid sector.

**Data analysis**

Before I conducted the interviews, I prepared an interview guide (see appendix 2). The questions were divided into different themes. The first part was very general and designed to engage the informants in the conversation and get some background on their current role as well as their past experiences. If they mentioned safeguarding spontaneously, I followed their lead and took this opportunity to transition to the specific questions I had prepared. Otherwise, I followed my questions which were designed to gradually dive into the topic. As these interviews were semi-structured, I followed the questions but didn’t necessarily ask them in the order of the guide. I simply checked regularly that we were covering the different topics during the conversation. Most of my research questions were not part of the interview questions, but different interview questions allowed me to answer my research questions, and I made sure while drafting my interview guide that all research questions were taken into account.

The data which was collected through the interviews is very rich qualitative data and each testimony is personal and gives a different perspective on the situation of managers in the aid sector. Many factors play a part in these individual trajectories, and it was not possible to study them. The analysis is based solely on what has been expressed during the interviews and on a little bit of background information on each person.

The method I applied to this research was thematic analysis. I followed the approach recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). I transcribed all interviews and read them several times. I scrutinized the data to record multiple occurrences of some words. I tried to identify recurrent themes and patterns. I color coded the information and tried to group the different ideas under main themes. I

\textsuperscript{5} We usually refer to the term “support” for all logistics, admin, finance, HR roles and more broadly for all roles which are not directly involved in the program implementation.
also analyzed what differed from one interview to another although on such a small sample it is quite common to have important disparities.

The different perspectives I observed through these transcripts lead me to consider that one of the main themes was the situatedness of each of the informants. This was the starting point of my analysis and an important take away from this empirical study.

**Methods and limitations**

The people selected for the interviews work for only 4 different organizations and the diversity of profiles within the group is limited. A person’s perspective and experience of safeguarding can be affected by many parameters and this qualitative method doesn’t include a wide diversity of experiences. Aside from that the positionality of a person can have an important impact on how they experience and perceive safeguarding issues.

My experience of the sector most probably influences the way I ask questions and my interpretation of the data while my current role – Safeguarding expert and investigator – probably influences the informants who may not have expressed themselves as freely as they would have with someone else. The will to perform, even with a stranger, is still present. No one likes to answer “I don’t know” or admit that they should have done better/otherwise. Nevertheless, some informants asked questions and shared their concerns with regards to their understanding and knowledge of safeguarding practices which indicates that they were comfortable enough to show some vulnerability.

I didn’t want to interview friends or ex colleagues to prevent the risk that they would try to perform or express ideas that would “please” me or meet my purpose. I purposely chose not to publish a call for interest on social media, although there are specific humanitarian groups, because it would have attracted people who are sensitive to the theme, most probably already informed and possibly victims/survivors of sexual violence. This didn’t correspond to the scope of my research and entailed specific ethical precautions. We can still consider that the people who took the time to participate in this research have some interest and/or awareness of safeguarding, but according to the data collected it is not necessarily the case.
Even though the informants were selected randomly and did not respond to a call for participants, we can assume that people who aren’t interested in the topic or don’t feel comfortable talking about it, didn’t respond to my messages. Therefore, this sample is a reflection of individuals who do not represent the entire population of aid workers. Within this broad group, I know that there are people who don’t want to get involved in safeguarding because they feel it’s not their responsibility or not their priority and none of the informants correspond to that profile.

**Feasibility and reliability of the research**

I have designed my research while taking into consideration the type of data I could access, therefore there was no major difficulty collecting the material. The fact that I had a particular interest in managers’ perspectives wasn’t a challenge, as it could have been if I had wanted to look into victim/survivor perspectives. I didn’t meet any resistance discussing safeguarding with the informants through the angle I had chosen.

It took more time to schedule the different interviews than what I had planned but all of them went smoothly, and I didn’t compromise on my initial plan to speak to 6 people, 3 of them identifying as female and 3 as male.

My aim was to base the research on the informants’ testimonies. I tried to keep some distance and focus on what they perceived and experienced, putting my own trajectory aside. This focus on their words and their perspectives ensures the reliability of the research. Further analysis of the material could deliver additional information but with the chosen frameworks in mind, these are the findings I could reach.

**Ethics**

Prior to the interviews, I made sure that the informants understood the purpose of the interviews and explained that the data would be anonymized. I asked them to sign a consent form to allow me to use the data (see appendix 1). As mentioned in the document, they were informed that they could decide to revoke their consent at any time.

During the interviews, I explained again the aims and scope of this research and I offered to send them the thesis once it would be completed. I recorded the interviews, and I stored the recordings and the transcript on the drive of LiU, the safest option.
As I had to postpone the submission of my thesis, I wrote to the informants to let them know that I would send them the final thesis a bit later than what was planned initially.

In the thesis, the informants are cited anonymously. I also omitted any information that would allow their identification. I didn’t mention their gender, age, position, country of location, nationality or the organization they work for.
4. Analysis

The different testimonies collected through the interviews show great disparity. These six managers do not have the same level of knowledge about sexual violence nor the same capacity to apprehend a situation of abuse. This is the main take-away from my research and can be analyzed through four different declinations. The first and most obvious one is the fact that these testimonies are very clear expressions of the concept of situated knowledges. The second axis focuses on the way the informants perceive risks of sexual violence and associate them to gender but also to other parameters. The third theme which is recurrent in the interviews is related to the prevention of sexual violence and how it requires a broad and cross-disciplinary approach. Finally, I found it interesting to examine these testimonies in the light of the learning model of the four stages of competence, analyzing the position of the informants with regards to their awareness vis à vis their knowledge or lack of knowledge.

Each perspective on safeguarding is a result of situatedness

Each manager’s capacity to assess and take into account the risks related to sexual violence appears to vary depending on their opportunities to learn and become more aware. Most of the managers clearly stated that they were not conscious of the risk of sexual violence in the aid sector when they started working in it. One manager says

*It was after some time working in the humanitarian sector [that I became aware]. I was not aware of it when I joined the sector.*

In most cases the managers became more conscious of what safeguarding entails through trainings and briefings although they all indicate that they received little to no formal training. The deduction one can make is that it is a topic which is discussed between coworkers and presented to them as part of their environment and/or scope of work. One manager says he became conscious of the safeguarding risks

*when [he] started doing security (…). It was at that moment that they began to give me responsibilities for safeguarding, protection, everything related to security, because safeguarding too, can be linked to security.*

Even if the sample of this research is limited and doesn’t allow simple generalizations, it appears that some roles require more involvement in the issues of safeguarding than others. Senior roles
which include in their scope the implementation of programs and/or the safety and security of teams imply greater responsibilities and potentially more experience in safeguarding.

Most informants also acknowledge that there has been an evolution in the sector with regards to the awareness of safeguarding but also of the management of cases of sexual violence.

*I saw a drastic change (...) during my first year or second year or third year in humanitarian work, I was not really aware of all these policies, safeguarding, protection (...). There wasn’t really any worry or all that, we didn’t know that. I think that with everything that has happened to organizations and all that, it’s really started to sink in little by little, they’ve started to talk to us about it, started to have training, people are really starting to become aware, and I think there have been cases [of sexual violence perpetrated by aid workers] on television, in the newspapers. We really started to become aware little by little. I think we still have a way to go (...). I would say that ten years ago, eight years, seven years ago, it was almost commonplace.*

This informant not only expresses that they feel that there has been an important evolution with regards to the awareness of safeguarding, but they also explain that the perceptions have changed. A few years ago, some level of sexual violence was widespread, and nobody considered that there was a problem. This informant also relates the evolution to the scandals in the media when they say “with everything that has happened to organizations”.

The role of the media was also mentioned by another informant. They consider that there has been an overall increase of conversations around safeguarding, including because of the media, and that it has led to an increase in awareness and reporting:

*I think (...) the reporting has increased. Our awareness has increased, especially with the media that has reported several times. There was something about the Oxfam as well, MSF(...) something related to exploitation, and with that I think the awareness has increased.*

A majority of informants consider that there has been a change and that there is more awareness of safeguarding while there is also less tolerance of sexual violence at all levels. This doesn’t seem to be a result of formal trainings but rather of more or less formal discussions.

Even though there is a general impression of evolution, a minority of informants consider that they haven’t gained knowledge on this topic over time or thanks to the organization’s efforts. Within
the informants, there are also managers who explain that they are responsible for preventing sexual violence but that they have always felt guided by their personal ethics.

One informant says

*It's more about personality issue. I like to take this kind of responsibility that maybe other people prefer to take a step back and to say “it's not my problem”.*

In this statement, they relate the responsibility of safeguarding to their personality and clearly state that some co-workers may consider that it’s not part of their responsibilities. This implies that for this person, it is not related to their job description or to the policies of the organization.

Another informant explains

*It's a part of my culture, so it's quite easy for me (...). I may have that more in me than someone else.*

Again, managing safeguarding risks is linked to personal values and the manager specifies that some people have a greater awareness than others. On multiple occasions in the interview, this informant mentioned that they will not compromise on safeguarding and that it’s a personal culture they had before coming to the aid sector.

This same informant says

*I never had any training in safeguarding except my only personal work and interest in that, unfortunately.*

There are two interesting points here. This senior manager in charge of large teams has not benefited from any safeguarding training from the organization he works for or from previous employers (he has worked with several large international organizations), according to what he says. On the other hand, he specifies that he has gained some knowledge through personal initiative and interest.

When asked about training in safeguarding, almost all informants indicated that they only benefited from some internal awareness sessions and briefings facilitated by staff from the organization. Some had no training, one person mentioned having had to follow some online modules on training platforms like Kaya or Disasterready.org and another one was designated to be the safeguarding focal point and attended a training facilitated by a UN agency.
According to the data collected, these managers didn’t receive much training from their organizations but as mentioned above, they have seen an evolution in how safeguarding is apprehended, and they have all answered positively when asked if they considered that safeguarding was one of their responsibilities. They also reported that safeguarding is something they discuss with their line managers, or with staff dedicated to the accountability to affected populations, or with HR, or with safeguarding focal points. This tends to indicate that there are conversations about safeguarding. It is a subject of discussions, briefings and meetings and it may participate in the increasing awareness of the informants even though they haven’t had much training.

According to Sandvik (2018)

(...) safeguarding means different things to different people, depending on where they are situated within the aid sector: variations are based on gender, nationality, geographical location and age.

It is not relevant to assess the situatedness of the informants according to these criteria for this research as the sample is small, but it seems clear that there is great disparity in their perceptions of safeguarding and their own role with regards to it, and that it is a result of their situatedness as well.

As one informant summarizes the situation:

I would like to say that I did what is needed by finding external resources just because for me it's important and that's how I'm working. I don't expect everything from the organization. I know that only few organizations have the culture and the needed resources. We are a little bit alone, so we need to be proactive. So, I did what is needed, but I'm afraid that most of my colleagues will never. So that's a risk, right? Because at the end, most of my colleagues are the frontliners and are the ones who need to ensure the safeguarding of all beneficiaries, (...) much more than me at the top of the organization.

The perception of the risks related to sexual violence are very different from one person to another and even though none of the informants discussed the fact that they have a responsibility with regards to safeguarding, they are clearly not equally equipped to endorse this responsibility. Beyond the fact that they don’t receive much training, it seems that their knowledge and ability relies on their convictions and motivation. It requires personal interest and initiative to compensate for the lack of training and guidance from the organizations who employ these managers.
The aid sector has identified some safeguarding principles and guidelines. Each organization has its policies and procedures which are aligned with the sector-wide principles. In parallel to that, it appears that the managers in aid organizations have varying levels of knowledge and awareness with regards to safeguarding and that this knowledge is situated. Each person’s trajectory, personality, and other criteria allows to understand their position and how they apprehend safeguarding.

**A very dominant “classic” GBV framework**

In the data collected, the GBV framework is highly demonstrated in the way informants consider the people who are at risk of sexual violence while the intersectional approach is minor.

All informants have replied “women” when asked who is more vulnerable to the risk of sexual violence, whether inside or outside of the organization.

The women’s financial situation and educational status was mentioned by more than one informant:

*It depends on their educational status and also the financial situation.*

And

*I would describe them as having less educational status, not enough knowledge, not enough training, uh, having grown up in a vulnerable or unstable environment.*

The specific position of cleaners was mentioned by informants. One informant mentioned managers and compared them with cleaners:

*In most organizations, managers have more information because of their experience (...) than people like cleaners or people who are not on the managerial aspect.*

Another one explained that a cleaner might not feel legitimate to express herself:

*I’ve seen a case in my previous workplace where a cleaner was abused. When I say abuse, it might not be sexually, any form of violence, (...) people are taken for granted. They might feel that “I am cleaner, and I cannot express my opinion. Who would listen to me?”.*

Again, the hierarchy is mentioned by this informant who associates it to financial difficulties and the social condition of the person:
These are people who may not be very well situated in the hierarchy or people who really have financial difficulties. (...) these are people who really, due to their social condition, do not have a level, that is to say, not high enough in society or even in the hierarchy of the organization and who have supervisors who are abusers.

A number of informants have mentioned that the vulnerability and the possibility of sexual violence are linked to power and power imbalances. As this informant says

*The problem with power abuse is that as a humanitarian worker, you have power over a lot of people.*

Regarding the most vulnerable people in the affected populations, informants mention displacement, power imbalance, lack of freedom of women and girls. Their analysis of factors of vulnerability with regards to sexual violence corresponds to the GBV framework but in their statements, gender is associated to other parameters which demonstrates that their analysis is more complex than just considering gender.

One informant explains:

*They I don't have job, they are looking for any kind of income to feed their families, so they would accept to do any kind of act that is not appropriate for the community, prostitution or whatever (...). It's not necessarily that those women or those ladies, they are the one who are offering their services. Maybe they are in a position that they are kind of forced to, but in a way that they know that if they do it, they can get some benefits for their family, so they would accept it. But in a way they are not offering themselves, they are like kind of obliged from a needs perspective.*

More than one informant explained the vulnerability of women and the power at play in a humanitarian crisis and gave the specific example of exchange of sex for aid or money. The informants who gave these examples explained in their words that this exchange didn’t indicate that the women were sex workers but that their lack of resources had led them to resort to this activity. Without necessarily using the words “consent” or “power abuse”, these informants gave examples of situations where consent cannot be considered because there is an abuse of power.

The same informant explains that because the people are 100% dependent on the aid delivered by the organizations, it creates an environment with very high risk of abuse:

*They are 100% dependent of us. (...) this kind of situation as they are dependent on the humanitarian worker, there is always chance to like groom them, to make the environment so that the [aid workers] can take the benefit of like the physical or it can be in the form of sexual abuse, exploitation (...). So, this is always a high risk in this area*
Again, the power imbalance and opportunity for perpetrators of sexual violence are well demonstrated in these statements.

The World Health Organization has identified the following risk factors:

- lower levels of education (perpetration of sexual violence and experience of sexual violence);
- a history of exposure to child maltreatment (perpetration and experience);
- witnessing family violence (perpetration and experience);
- antisocial personality disorder (perpetration);
- harmful use of alcohol (perpetration and experience);
- harmful masculine behaviours, including having multiple partners or attitudes that condone violence (perpetration);
- community norms that privilege or ascribe higher status to men and lower status to women;
- low levels of women’s access to paid employment; and
- low level of gender equality (discriminatory laws, etc.).

Some of these factors have been mentioned by the informants like the level of education and the access of women to paid employment.

It is important to highlight that some categories of the population are totally absent from the informants’ estimation of who, in the organization and in the affected population, is most at risk of sexual violence. None of the informants mentioned men as potential victims. None of the informants mentioned LGBTQ people as more exposed to the risk of sexual violence and they have not mentioned categories specific to the country and crisis their organization intervenes in.

Recent research has demonstrated that men and LGBTQ+ people are not considered in programs aiming to reduce sexual violence although there are important needs that may not be captured by statistics because of several layers of taboo (ICRC, Norwegian Red Cross, 2022). The testimonies gathered confirm the existence of this same blind spot in the perception of sexual violence by humanitarian managers.

Regarding the perpetrators, the interview questions didn’t focus on their profiles but rather on the possibility that they could be from the organization. The response to the question “Do you consider
that the risk of sexual violence is also internal, can come from within the organization?” received very different responses. I will come back to the informants who expressed doubt vis-à-vis this suggestion, but half of the informants considered it obvious that there could be perpetrators of sexual violence in the organization.

One informant says:

*My experience is that I have been aware of more cases internal to organizations than external. Even when you discuss safeguarding with people from other organizations, there are cases of safeguarding within the organization. There seems to be more cases within organizations than external.*

Another informant acknowledges that

*There is always some black sheep in your team.*

While a third informant says very simply

*It's inherent to the sector. It's inherent to the human being, right?*

It is quite to the point and a fact people often struggle to accept. There is a consensus among academics to say that sexual violence is present in every trade and in every layer of the society even though there are some variations in each country or context. If sexual violence is everywhere, it is also present in aid organizations. I will come back further in the analysis to the fact that even aid workers struggle to acknowledge that there are morally reprehensible behaviors within their organizations.

The informants were not familiar with the concept of intersectionality, nevertheless, it is interesting to note that their analysis of vulnerabilities demonstrate an understanding of the multiple factors which are at play in humanitarian contexts. They all recognized the gendered aspect of sexual violence, but they associated other parameters to the situation. The diversity of these parameters and the examples they gave demonstrate an understanding of the power dynamics involved in sexual violence.

**Safeguarding is a global issue which concerns everyone**

Several informants refer to the good practices that are in place in their organization and to the complaints mechanism that seems to be working. The safeguarding policy and complaints
mechanism are put forward as an alibi for best safeguarding practice. It seems that if you can tick those boxes, then you’re good!

One informant, when asked “Do you consider that there's a risk of sexual violence that is coming from the organization you work for?” replied:

No, not really. Because I told you we have a good system.

In response to the same question, another informant states

In our organization, we have a very good complaint feedback mechanism.

On the other hand, an informant criticized the focus on the policy and explained that the organization needed to focus more on the culture:

I think the organization took the wrong direction. They felt pressured to have a safeguarding policy and instead of ensuring the development of the culture, we are running to just deploy and say “OK done”.

His statement illustrates the “box ticking” approach some organizations have with regards to setting up safeguarding measures.

One informant expressed relief that they never had to reprimand anyone in their team about safeguarding and/or inappropriate behavior. This informant also reports having used the reporting mechanism, so while they never had to reprimand a member of their team, they have witnessed situations which needed to be addressed. It is unlikely that there was never a situation requiring a reminder, a managerial reaction, or an investigation in such a large team, but the perceptions of certain behaviors play a role as well.

Some informants have a strong understanding of the concept of continuum of violence even though they don’t name it this way. They systematically report or call out what could seem to be “little things”. One informant mentions that he has told employees that what they were saying about women was not acceptable.

It goes up to the way some international [staffs] are talking about women in the guest house. There's no justification to say that it's a bad joke, there's nothing like that acceptable in my opinion, and that's how strict we should be in my opinion.
They specify that it happened in the guest house (the house where international employees live) which is important. Not only did they reprimand someone for sexist comments, but they did it in what some might consider to be a personal space, probably outside of working hours. There is no such thing as a personal space when you represent an aid organization abroad, and all employees should be aware of that, but it’s not always clear. You are entitled to some intimacy of course, but you always represent the NGO. By calling out this behavior, the informant applies a strict zero tolerance policy towards sexual violence and includes sexist behavior in his scope. This is considered a best practice which takes into consideration the continuum of violence.

Another informant has adopted a similar practice and explains the impact of letting these less serious acts go unnoted: there is a deterioration of the working environment.

*There are people who consider many things that are abnormal to be normal. (...) Often, it’s necessary [to reprimand people or remind them of the adequate behavior] because if we don’t do it, it builds up and people are no longer able to work in a truly adequate environment, I think.*

In order to ensure that the working environment is safe, it is necessary to call out any inappropriate behavior, even if it doesn’t seem serious. As research has demonstrated, disparaging humor is detrimental to the well-being of some groups of people and in the case of sexism it is detrimental to women and potentially to men who are not considered to be “real men”.

Regarding the risk of sexual violence towards the affected population, two informants mentioned safe programming as an important part of safeguarding.

*At the beginning, (...) I had thought that it was really something specific to the person or employees to avoid abuse and exploitation and everything. And then I realized that it goes beyond, it goes into our way of delivering assistance and doing programming, of carrying out our activities and everything. (...) Safeguarding should not (...) only focus on my manager or on our team or on the employees but on the programming, on the quality of the assistance, on our very way of designing projects. So, it really takes on a more global aspect.*

In order to apply the principle of “do no harm” it is important to look at many different aspects of the organization’s intervention in a country. Harm doesn’t only come in the form of direct violence. The organization may be creating an environment where part of the population is more exposed to violence as a result of the activities which are implemented.
One of the informants gave a specific example and explained that in the country where they work, they identified that distributing cash assistance to women actually exposed them to a higher risk of violence and that this approach should no longer be supported by the organization:

Some cash activities also are putting beneficiaries at risk. As an example, I cancelled all the cash activities because in my opinion that creates more vulnerabilities for women, especially because donors are always asking to target women for cash. In a society like [country name], that puts them at risk even within their own households, of sexual violence. So, I think we need to rethink the way we are operating.

Additionally, in a humanitarian crisis or setting it is important that all actors are sensitized to safeguarding related risks, especially given the fact that international organizations are not bound to stay indefinitely.

An informant focused specifically on the local organizations and highlighted the importance of having a sustainable approach:

We need to empower local actors. Having a safeguard policy for the UN or NGO, it’s not the solution. So, we need to cascade down to all the implementing partners because at the end they will be the accountable or they will be responsible to continue the support. We will not stay; we will not implement the program because once the emergency situation is over then we will leave.

Another important point which was made by an informant relates to the importance of diversity:

In [country name], when I came, I had like two women colleagues at senior management level. Now we are half and half and that changed completely the dynamic of the country office.

It is true that the gender balance of the employees in any humanitarian response - or of the employees in any structure - for the matter has been presented as a good practice to mitigate the risk of sexual violence.

Some of the informants have demonstrated a rather complex understanding of safeguarding in their statements. They have shown that:

- It is a cross cutting issue which requires to be mainstreamed in different parts of the aid response and notably in any project design.
- It concerns everyone and is not limited to the international organization’s personnel. Local actors need to be trained in order to have a sustainable approach.
- Some behaviors are not acceptable even if they do not qualify or are not recognized as sexual violence and need to be addressed in order to create a safe environment.
- Gender balance matters and is directly corelated to the prevalence of sexual violence.

**Knowing that you don’t know is the key**

There was great disparity in the levels of understanding of sexual violence and how to prevent it, from one informant to another. One of the informants even asked what I meant by “safeguarding”. It is symptomatic of the fact that some organizations are not using this term and prefer to speak about “abuse” or “PSEA” or “appropriate behavior” as explained by Sandvik in her article about the word “safeguarding” (Sandvik, 2018).

As a trainer, one of the theories that this echoed with is the theory of the four stages of competence. This theory was presented in a training of trainers I participated in, in June 2022. It is not clear who initially developed this theory, but it is referred to in a number of peer reviewed articles about adult learning like for example “Why training doesn’t stick” (Lipow, 1989).

This theory distinguishes four stages of competence. In the first stage of competence, we are not aware that we do not have a specific competence. We may even believe that we have it. In the second one, we are aware that we do not have this specific competence. In the third one, we have the competence, but we consciously rely on it. In the last stage, our intuition is led by this competence. We don’t need to think about it, to use it.

![The four stages of competence](Source: personal illustration)

According to the statements of the informants, it is possible to have some insight of the knowledge of safeguarding that each informant has, but the interviews were not systematic enough to clearly
evaluate this and it was not the objective of the research. Rather than saying that this person has more knowledge or expertise than this other one, which wouldn’t have a very strong interest with regards to my research, I find it interesting to note that some informants can be situated in different levels of competency with regards to safeguarding. It is not a judgement of their personal performance but rather of the system that has put them in this situation.

Some informants are at the first stage of this categorization, they are not aware of the knowledge they don’t have, while others are aware that they would need more training. Some informants could be considered to be in the third or fourth stages, at least for some aspects of the safeguarding expertise if it is broken down into sub-categories. They have some expertise in safeguarding, and they apply it more or less automatically in their work.

The informants who consider that they would need more training are not necessarily the ones who have less awareness of safeguarding, according to the information they shared during the interviews. On the contrary, the informants who understood the dynamics behind the sexual violence, the best practices to prevent sexual violence, and the need for sector-wide change are the ones who know how to situate themselves with regards to safeguarding. They usually have specific ideas of the type of training that they would need to benefit from or that others would need to benefit from, like this informant:

*Yes, yes, clearly, especially on this whole cross-cutting aspect I think, yes. How to apply it? How to enforce it? How to integrate all of this in programming and interventions? How to integrate it into emergency responses? Yes, I think I really need some training.*

Informants who stated that they didn’t need training or didn’t need it as much as other staff aren’t necessarily the ones who have the highest expertise. An informant can be very confident with regards to his or her expertise of safeguarding and still need additional training. This indicates that the training should probably be dispensed systematically without taking into consideration the self-assessment or previous trainings of individuals.

It is also possible that some informants weren’t comfortable to say that they would need more training. As mentioned earlier, there is a risk that informants will want to perform during the interview even if they were told that this was not an assessment of their individual capacities.
Additionally, there is a reluctance to admit that some people in aid organizations don’t have what are considered ethical behaviors or that organizations aren’t always capable or guaranteeing a safe environment for their employees and for the affected populations. As Marie Chantoufi explains in her research (Chantoufi, 2018), the image of aid organizations impacts the perceptions around sexual violence. Even aid workers who are victims/survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by other aid workers, have a tendency to minimize what they have experienced. All of the women interviewed for Chantoufi’s research were victims/survivors of sexual violence and said that they weren’t happy that Oxfam was portrayed so negatively by the media. At the same time, they all said that they were not surprised at all by the revelations made by the media because it was so common in the sector, and they too believe it’s problematic. Most aid workers do not want to harm the aid organization they work for even when they have been harmed themselves.

There is probably also a form of disbelief that there could be some perpetrators of sexual violence among colleagues of the informants, people they believe that they know. At least two informants were quite categorical when asked if they thought that sexual violence could come from within the organization. One informant stated:

No, I don't think so (...) Maybe if you ask me for [country name], I would say yes, but here a big no.

This expression a “big no” implies a high level of confidence in the team this person works with and it’s interesting to note that there can be a clear difference of perception of this risk according to the country.

When asked “Do you consider that there's a risk of sexual violence that is coming from the organization you work for?”, another one said:

No, not really. Because I told you we have a good system.

In this case, the “good system” is what makes it unlikely. Perhaps the person thinks that sexual violence cannot occur because of the rules set by the organization or that if there was any sexual violence, it would be reported or addressed thanks to the system. This informant actually explained a situation where they were a victim/survivor of what could be considered sexual harassment, which is interesting because it contradicts the initial statement that sexual violence cannot happen in the organization. Either this person doesn’t consider that it qualifies as sexual violence, doesn’t
perceive it as such, or considers that this behavior was somehow compensated because when they mentioned it to their manager, they received validation and support.

Regarding these perceptions of the risk, there is no right or wrong as they are personal feelings and perspectives but given the risks of power imbalances in the aid sector and the fact that sexual violence is present in all trades, one could say that as a matter of precaution, it can be considered that the risk is present in any organization.

To conclude on this point relative to the confidence one can have of their knowledge I would like to cite this quote "The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance; it is the illusion of knowledge." I find it really aligned with this part of my analysis. It is a reminder than learning depends on one’s ability to remain humble and admit that they do not know everything. It can also be linked to the Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges. Each person has a certain level of knowledge, depending on their capacity, their biases, their exposure to some situations, their training.

In this case, it may seem difficult to find the balance between considering that there is a high risk of sexual violence everywhere, including among familiar colleagues and other social spheres, and trusting these same people without any question. The expression that has stuck with me over the years following a training in an aid organization is “keep an attitude of doubt”. It was not a training about safeguarding, but it can be applied to many topics and to anything we think we know. I find it to be a very wise recommendation!

**Limitations and suggestions for future research**

The chosen methodology as well as the data collected through the interviews have allowed me to identify some limitations to this research.

As in most exercises of qualitative research the sample is small and very heterogeneous. There are big disparities in the types of roles of the managers and this may have impacted the research. It

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6 It has apparently been commonly associated to Stephen Hawking but also to the historian Daniel J. Boorstin over time, without being able to situate it in any of their writings therefore I am not capable of giving a reference for it
seems that informants with more operational roles had more to say and were more aware of safeguarding related issues while managers in support functions have had less exposure to safeguarding and therefore have less experience and information to share but this is a good example of something which would need to be confirmed with a larger sample. More broadly, it is not possible to generalize any conclusion based on the basic information I collected regarding the informants’ profiles.

Two thirds of the informants work for organizations with headquarters based in France. Even if these managers were not French themselves, and their organizations have international programs and multiple branches in the world, these organizations can probably be considered as a specific category among international humanitarian NGOs. The way French NGOs apprehend safeguarding and the amount of resources allocated to it could be considered different to the way northern European or Anglo-Saxon organizations apprehend it.

This research has opened up some additional perspectives. One of the potential leads would be to carry out a quantitative survey which would take into account specific criteria to ensure a large diversity of profiles. In this research, it is not possible to draw conclusions based on the gender of the informants for example but with a larger sample it could be interesting to see if the perceptions around safeguarding vary depending on the gender the informant identifies to. Similarly, more questions could be asked to collect information on how the informants define themselves. They may consider themselves as part of a minority in their working environment, whether it is related to ethnic background, religion, disability, sexual orientation or any other criteria.

One of the possible ways to explore this more adequately would be to conduct an intersectional analysis of the way the informants perceive their own identities, on a large sample of informants, prior to an analysis of their perceptions and experience of safeguarding (Crenshaw, 1991).

Another route could be to integrate the intersectional analysis in the research design, still using qualitative interviews as the main means of conducting the research (Windsong, 2018). The interview questions would be phrased in a way that informants reflect on their position with regards to categories to which they identify.

Taking this a step further, it could be interesting to look at the perceptions of specific minorities, drawing on Haraway's idea of the epistemological privilege of the subjugated (Haraway, 1988).
Focusing on the perspectives of a specific category within the managers would allow to question the dominant discourse.

Another perspective which has not been explored here and would require different interview questions and most probably information relative to how informants identify themselves, would be to assess the presence of racial bias and other heritage linked to the colonial history of most countries the NGOs are based in.

Perhaps a more thorough but relatively “classic” approach could also be to focus on only one large aid organization and to carry out a quantitative survey and some interviews or focus group discussions to gather rich qualitative data. This combination would allow for a deep analysis of one structure and could include interviews of key stakeholders involved in the implementation of safeguarding measures. The different perceptions between different levels of management could be assessed as well as the variations of perceptions according to how people identify themselves.
5. Conclusion

This research has allowed to gather some understanding of how humanitarian managers perceive and experience their responsibilities towards safeguarding.

Regarding the first research question, it is clear that all managers interviewed feel responsible for the prevention of sexual violence. It seems quite obvious to them that their roles entail some responsibilities related to the prevention of sexual violence. It may not be the case for all managers in aid organizations, but it is interesting to note that on a random sample of managers, these are the responses.

Some informants seem to take this responsibility of preventing sexual violence more personally than others and present it as something linked to their values and their way of working. For them, it is a part of their identity and their ethics, and not something associated to the sector they work in or their specific role in an organization.

With regards to the second question, how managers perceive the risk of sexual violence, the responses present some similarities. They all describe the people most vulnerable to the risk of sexual violence in the same way. They perceived women as most vulnerable, and they associate criteria relative to the social class, economic situation and education to this first gender-based category. These perceptions are aligned with the gender-based violence framework. The informants also all seem quite aware of the risks related to power differentials and gave examples in the workplace and in the contexts they work in. These descriptions of the most vulnerable people with regards to the risk of sexual violence are not based on an intersectional analysis and present blind spots common to the sector.

There were some clear disparities in the informants’ reactions when the possibility that perpetrators of sexual violence could come from within their organization was evoked. For some informants it is clear that this possibility exists, while for others it is categorically impossible. Interestingly, some of the managers who consider it unlikely mentioned some occurrences of sexual violence they had directly witnessed in their respective organization, at another point of the conversation. One of the possible explanations to this is the common reluctance to admit that this kind of
behavior happens in aid organizations. It may be difficult for the informants to say it to outsiders like me and it may also be hard to admit it to themselves.

When I tried to understand how organization managers had been trained and how they were supported on the management of the risk of sexual violence and cases they may be facing, it appeared that very few of them had benefited from formal training on safeguarding. Most of them don’t consider this lack of training to be a problem, and some of them express the feeling that they have enough knowledge to deal with the situations they face. On the other hand, some of the informants consider that they need more training. They have an understanding of their level of expertise and the gaps in their training and knowledge.

The correlation between the perception that informants have of their knowledge and the perception they have of the risks of sexual violence is interesting even if it is not possible to generalize from such a small sample. Those who consider that they need more training, and potentially also resources, are also the informants who consider that there is a possibility of sexual violence occurring in their teams or in the context they work in, as a result of the NGO presence. The informants who don’t think that there could be perpetrators of sexual violence in their organization are less in demand for more training.

Most informants have observed some change in the past few years regarding the perceptions around prevention of sexual violence in the sector. They explain that the topic is more discussed and that some behaviors that used to be commonplace are not tolerated anymore. Some informants attribute this change to the fact that several NGOs were called out by the media on their practices and tolerance of sexual violence.

Several managers also mentioned that safeguarding is systematically discussed during induction briefings, either the ones that they benefit from themselves or the briefings they deliver to newcomers. They also have the possibility to refer to their line managers, HR, specialized staff when they need to discuss cases they have to deal with or concerns.

A limited number of informants mentioned the need create a culture of safeguarding and the challenges related to this, beyond the present tools and practices that are already in place. While some managers express strong satisfaction with the available tools and policies and don’t express concern about the need for more change or resources.
If we look at this sample of managers and at their perceptions and experiences, it appears that the initiatives they take with regards to acquiring more knowledge and the reflections they have about creating a safe space is a result of their personal trajectories.

There is usually a policy and a complaints mechanism in an organization. From the organization’s point of view, these boxes can be ticked, but the disparity in the managers’ perceptions and the statements that they make highlight an important challenge. Standards have been set in the sector over 20 years ago, but practices seem to have changed as a result of #aidtoo and media coverage of cases of sexual violence committed by aid workers and as a result of some individuals’ personal ethics and commitments, rather than as a result of an effort from organizations to prevent sexual violence more efficiently.

One informant interestingly questions the very foundation of the battle against sexual violence:

*We should not have waited for all those scandals, and we should not wait for an organization to be afraid about its reputation, to have something in place. We should have something in place to protect the survivors, to protect our national colleagues, to protect our beneficiaries. (...) at the end something came but it came from the wrong angle and because it’s coming from the wrong angle, it’s not sustainable in my opinion.*

If the aid organizations are not leading safeguarding strategies with the “do no harm” and a victim centered approaches at the core of their initiative, how efficient and sustainable can their efforts be?

This thesis which focuses on the perceptions of managers of the aid sector has given me hope. Things are changing and this qualitative research has allowed me to collect and analyze rich data on how it is happening. Each of these managers is going at their own pace, and it is potentially an indication that organizations need to step up, but it is also likely that this evolution is still in progress. This type of change can never be homogeneous and even with a lot of disparities, some trends can be perceived. In this case, the trend seems to indicate an increasing awareness and sense of responsibility towards the prevention of sexual violence and further research will definitely determine if this evolution continues.
6. References


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7 Personal translation


Appendix I: Consent to data processing form

I hereby consent that Linköping University processes my personal data in the form of any answer I may give or opinion I may express during one or more interviews with Caroline Paoli as well as the recording of this or these interviews for the purpose of Caroline Paoli’s master thesis which will analyze the perceptions around safeguarding from the perspective of humanitarian managers. During this or these interviews I will answer questions about my experience of prevention of abuse in a humanitarian organization.

Information:

Your personal data will be processed in the following way:

We will normally have one meeting which will be recorded. I will attribute a code for your ID and will save it on a document protected by a password. I will write a transcript of this interview. Both the recording and transcript will be stored on the LiU server under your coded ID. I will analyze the data captured during the interview and may quote some things you have said. I will not mention your name, the organization you work for or any information that would allow you to be identified.

Personal data controller is Linköping University, 581 83 Linköping, corporate identification number 202100-3096.

My contact details are Caroline Paoli carpa319@student.liu.se

Legal basis for the data processing: Consent.

Withdrawal of consent/questions/complaints: If you wish to withdraw your consent, please send me an email informing me that you no longer give me consent to use the data.
Your consent will be valid without limitation in time. You may withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. We will in that case stop using your personal data that we have collected based on your consent. You may request to have your personal data erased, and if you do so, we will erase information about you wherever possible. You have the right to obtain information about your personal data that are processed by Linköping University. You may request this in writing by contacting the registrar’s office at Linköping University, either by email or letter. You also have the right to request that the use of certain of your personal data be limited.

If you want to know how your personal data is used, or you believe that we have used your personal data in a way that violates the agreement or current legislation, please contact Linköping University's data protection officer at dataskyddsombud@liu.se. If you have complaints regarding the way in which Linköping University processes your personal data, you are always entitled to contact the relevant inspection authority, which in this case is the Swedish Data Protection Authority.

I hereby consent to Linköping University to process my personal data according to the information above.

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Appendix II: Interview guide

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview.

Firstly, I would like to introduce myself. I have been working in the aid sector for 15 years. I first worked in HR management in an organization’s HQ, then worked in program management in the field, mostly in the Middle East, and after that I decided to specialize in safeguarding, and I’ve been working as a safeguarding consultant for the past 4 years. I conduct investigations as an external investigator, I also support organizations in developing policies and procedures and I conduct training.

As I explained previously, I’m currently studying gender studies and this interview is part of a research project for my first-year thesis. I have decided to take the opportunity of this thesis to look into how managers feel about safeguarding. I am interviewing several managers from different organizations to gather their perceptions around safeguarding, and potentially explore how it could be better approached.

I’m not here to assess your performance with regards to safeguarding. I know it’s quite challenging, I’ve been a manager in the field myself and it is not the purpose of my research to check if managers are performing. I want to hear what you perceive, what you experience, how you feel about things. I will ask you specific questions but will also leave some space for us to discuss.

I also want to remind you that I will not mention your name or the organization you work for in my research. All the data will be anonymized. I may quote you, but I will not indicate who I’m quoting, and I will be careful not to include any information that could allow someone to identify you.

You have signed a consent form allowing me to use the data from this interview. As mentioned before, you can change your mind and retract your consent at any point. Please inform me by email if it is the case.

In order to allow me to focus on our discussion rather than on my notes, I would like to record this discussion. Do you mind if I record?

Would you like me to send you the thesis once it’s finalized? I’ll be happy to share it.

Interview questions

Identity

Which NGO do you work for at the moment?
In which country are you based?

What type of contract do you have (expat/local)?

What is your nationality or what are your nationalities?

**Current position**

How long have you been working in the humanitarian/aid sector?

What is your current position?

How many people do you manage?

How long have you been working in this position?

What do you like about this role?

What do you find challenging about this role?

**Safeguarding - training**

Have you ever had any training in safeguarding/PSEA/prevention of abuse/inappropriate behavior?

How did you find the training?

Was it carried out directly by your organization or by an external person/company/org?

What would you say were the main takeaways from this training?

Do you think you could benefit from more training in safeguarding?

If yes, on what topics more precisely?

We often speak of survivor centered or survivor led approach in safeguarding trainings, have you ever heard of it?
**Safeguarding - responsibility**

Do you feel you have a responsibility with regards to safeguarding, as a manager?

Is it a responsibility you are comfortable with?

Did you always feel you had this responsibility as a humanitarian manager?

If not, when did you become aware of it?

**Safeguarding – risks**

Do you consider that the risk of sexual violence is internal within the organization?

Did you always perceive it this way?

Since when do you perceive it this way?

Do you consider that there are people who are more vulnerable to sexual violence than others, within your team?

Who would you say is most vulnerable? Which categories of people? How would you define them?

Do you consider that there are people who are more vulnerable to sexual violence than others, within the affected population?

Who would you say is most vulnerable? Which categories of people? How would you define them?

Have you heard of an intersectional analysis or approach? Are you familiar with this concept?

**Safeguarding – experience**

Have you ever had to deal with a report/complaint in your team?

What happened/ how did it go?

Have you ever had to reprimand someone in your team about his/her behavior?

What happened/ how did it go?
Did you feel supported when managing this/these situation/s?

How do you feel you could have been better supported?

Do you discuss safeguarding risks/issues with your line manager?

Do you discuss safeguarding risks/issues with other persons in your organization?

If yes, what position do they have?

**Safeguarding – zero tolerance**

Do you feel as though there is a zero-tolerance approach in your organization?

Have you been able to observe it and how so?

**Turning point**

Did you observe or feel a change in your organization/ in the sector over the years?

Was it linked to any specific event or incident?

Would you relate it to the Oxfam scandal/ #metoo / #aidtoo?
Appendix III: UN Secretary bulletin 2003(extracts)

For the purposes of the present bulletin, the term “sexual exploitation” means 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. Similarly, the term “sexual abuse” means the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions.

Sexual exploitation and sexual abuse violate universally recognized international legal norms and standards and have always been unacceptable behaviour and prohibited conduct for United Nations staff. Such conduct is prohibited by the United Nations Staff Regulations and Rules.

In order to further protect the most vulnerable populations, especially women and children, the following specific standards which reiterate existing general obligations under the United Nations Staff Regulations and Rules, are promulgated:

(a) Sexual exploitation and sexual abuse constitute acts of serious misconduct and are therefore grounds for disciplinary measures, including summary dismissal;

(b) Sexual activity with children (persons under the age of 18) is prohibited regardless of the age of majority or age of consent locally. Mistaken belief in the age of a child is not a defence;

(c) Exchange of money, employment, goods or services for sex, including sexual favours or other forms of humiliating, degrading or exploitative behaviour, is prohibited. This includes any exchange of assistance that is due to beneficiaries of assistance;

(d) Sexual relationships between United Nations staff and beneficiaries of assistance, since they are based on inherently unequal power dynamics, undermine the credibility and integrity of the work of the United Nations and are strongly discouraged;

(e) Where a United Nations staff member develops concerns or suspicions regarding sexual exploitation or sexual abuse by a fellow worker, whether in the same agency or not and whether or not within the United Nations system, he or she must report such concerns via established reporting mechanisms;
(f) United Nations staff are obliged to create and maintain an environment that prevents sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. Managers at all levels have a particular responsibility to support and develop systems that maintain this environment.

3.3 The standards set out above are not intended to be an exhaustive list. Other types of sexually exploitive or sexually abusive behaviour may be grounds for administrative action or disciplinary measures, including