

# Intersections

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Compiled by Meara Kwee

## Safeguarding

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In 2018, the humanitarian and development sectors were confronted by several scandals, with news outlets revealing significant failings in organizations' efforts to protect children, communities receiving assistance and organizations' own staff from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH). While allegations of SEAH by United Nations peacekeepers and NGO workers have been documented since the 1990s, these new revelations pushed the international aid and development communities to reckon with our own #metoo movement—the #aidtoo movement—and to address our collective inaction and failure to keep the same people safe that our sector seeks to serve.

SEAH refers to sexual violence and harm perpetrated by the *staff* of humanitarian and development organizations toward community members and colleagues. As a form of sexual and gender-based violence, SEAH is often based on gender inequalities and is most often directed toward women and girls. However, SEAH can be based on other inequalities besides gender. Power imbalances rooted in colonialism, racism and ableism that the humanitarian and development sectors have been long been reticent to address increase the risk of SEAH.

Staff, volunteers and associates of humanitarian and development organizations (hereafter “staff”) hold considerable power. They are connected to a trusted organization that provides assistance, services and programs in often very vulnerable communities. Staff make decisions about who can participate in projects and which communities will receive assistance. Even staff with limited organizational decision-making power may be perceived by community members as having the power to influence selection criteria or to distribute additional goods or services. In these circumstances it can be very easy for an organization's staff to abuse their power by asking for favors from participants in exchange for services or assistance, using participant data for one's personal benefit or abusing program participants.

Within humanitarian and development organizations, power differentials based on characteristics such as gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and type of position/employment (e.g., full-time vs. volunteer, junior- vs. senior-level staff) have also contributed to sexual

violence perpetrated by staff against other staff. This form of violence within the workplace is referred to as sexual harassment, defined as a continuum of unacceptable and unwelcome behaviors of a sexual nature. It can include, but is not limited to, unwelcomed discussions or jokes of a sexual nature or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.

SEAH, in all its forms, harms survivors and their communities, contributes to unsafe workplace environments, and erodes the trust that organizations have worked to build with communities and their donors.

In response to the global outcry against SEAH, the humanitarian and development sectors began renewed efforts to work at *safeguarding*. Safeguarding refers to the prevention and response measures organizations take to ensure that their staff, operations and programs do not harm children, program participants or staff. It addresses SEAH and other forms of harm caused by the misuse of power, as well as harm caused by an organization's staff, operations or programs that may be unintentional (for example, project planning that does not appropriately assess and mitigate risks of harm). Safeguarding is different from *protection* programming; protection programming seeks to prevent harm between members of families and communities, whereas safeguarding is focused on prevention of harm caused by an organization's *own staff*.

MCC's commitment to preventing and responding to SEAH is rooted in its mission as "a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches" that "shares God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice." Until 2018, MCC's safeguarding work had largely focused on child safeguarding by supporting partners who worked with minors with tools and resources to ensure their programs and operations were safe for children. Internally, MCC also worked to improve its support for staff who experienced sexual violence. In 2018, with the renewed global call for organizations to extend protections for everyone who interacts with an organization, MCC began revising its policies to include the prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH), including an expanded PSEAH and child protection policy framework that was approved by MCC's boards in 2019.

Since then, MCC has taken a hard and long look inward, recognizing that we have much work to do to strengthen our own systems for prevention and survivor-centered response. This work has included:

- creating a safeguarding standing committee and dedicated safeguarding staff positions;
- developing and improving safeguarding and related policies;
- documenting and standardizing MCC's response procedures when concerns about SEAH are reported;
- developing tools for programs to use with partners in analyzing and mitigating safeguarding risks in projects;
- surveying staff about barriers to reporting abuses of power;
- improving and expanding MCC's reporting mechanisms to make them more accessible and safe; and
- developing staff training about abuses of power and how to report them.

MCC has also identified and trained a network of safeguarding focal points who work within each MCC program to support implementation of MCC's safeguarding policy. While their safeguarding responsibilities are just one

**“ To do safeguarding well takes more than developing policies and providing staff training. It requires a shift in organizational culture, with leaders modeling transparency and accountability, inviting staff to report concerns and putting steps in place to protect reporters from retaliation.”**

part of their jobs, focal points play an important role accompanying and training partners and serving as a resource on safeguarding for other staff.

The articles in this issue explore approaches to working with partners on safeguarding. Articles from the United States and Mexico discuss ways that MCC programs are accompanying partners and navigating power dynamics and silence around sexual abuse. Articles from Cambodia, Haiti and Lebanon, Syria and Iraq address safeguarding with individuals and communities that have specific vulnerabilities to SEAH, including people with disabilities and those facing humanitarian crises. Finally, the articles from Uganda and Bolivia discuss the challenges and opportunities of using safeguarding tools with partners in contextually and culturally appropriate ways.

To do safeguarding well takes more than developing policies and providing staff training. It requires a shift in organizational culture, with leaders modeling transparency and accountability, inviting staff to report concerns and putting steps in place to protect reporters from retaliation. Doing safeguarding work well means that organizations allocate sufficient resources so that survivors feel supported and safe and that safeguarding staff and focal points feel empowered to do their work. It requires true accountability to the communities an organization seeks to serve. It demands that MCC invites program participants to participate fully in identifying safeguarding risks and mitigation strategies. Finally, doing safeguarding work well requires that organizations address the underlying power inequalities that create the conditions for SEAH to occur.

MCC is on a journey to be a safe organization for everyone who interacts with MCC in any capacity. We are committed to accompanying and supporting our partners in their commitments to safeguarding. While our efforts are far from perfect, we are striving to address our own power, learn from our partners and adjust our efforts as we learn. Safeguarding is a long journey, and it will take considerable collaboration, time, resources, energy and, most of all, hope.

*Meara Kwee is an MCC safeguarding coordinator in the Planning, Learning and Disaster Response department, based in Pennsylvania.*

## **Progress over perfect: a collaborative approach to safeguarding within MCC's Summer Service program**

“First, do no harm.” Medical students make this commitment in ceremonies marking the beginning of their journeys in the medical profession. Beneficence, non-maleficence. These terms, also stated in social work, counseling and public health codes of ethics, describe the responsibility of those in helping professions to practice good work, particularly as received by the community served, and of course, avoiding harm. These values are not matters of contention. Rather, they are universally acknowledged and respected. In the last year through my safeguarding work, I have found this to be true. However, I have also seen that some pathways to “do no harm” can also cause harm. While the outcomes we seek—safe programming, accessible and responsible reporting mechanisms—are clear, the path to achieving these outcomes is less clear.



Safeguarding Resource and Support Hub: <https://safeguardingsupporthub.org/>

“Then and Now: 25 Years of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.” *The New Humanitarian*. February 11, 2021. Available at <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2021/2/11/25-years-of-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse>



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The Summer Service program provides grants to communities of color working with young adult leaders in their home communities. These young adult leaders span from ages 18 to 30 and work in church leadership, immigration response, climate care, restorative justice and more. In a typical year, over two-thirds of Summer Service participants work directly with minors. Summer Service participants are not MCC employees. They are program participants and their employers (MCC's partners) are grantees. Because of the high volume of participants working with minors, the Summer Service program clearly carries an inherently higher level of risk compared to programs that do not work with children. Less clear, however, is how to manage those risks, and more specifically, how to do so responsibly as funders walking in step with our partners.

The nudge to consider revamping Summer Service safeguarding practices came from human resources colleagues at first. A standard review of our program showed a lack of clarity of our partner organizations' responsibility to inform MCC of any reports of abuse happening within MCC-sponsored programming. Creating language for agreements between MCC and Summer Service partners that captured both best safeguarding practices and reasonable expectations of our partners was a key priority. Initial language in these Summer Service partner agreements requested copies of partner organizations' safeguarding policies, with the understanding that in future years proposals from organizations who did not have operational safeguarding policies would be immediately rejected. We also envisioned a safeguarding webinar to provide capacity building, but the details for what that needed to include were hazy.

This approach had clear flaws. It encouraged hastily written child protection policies that had minimal practical relevance to the partners' distinct contexts. Beyond that, the capacity-building potential of a single online seminar is limited. Organizations of varied sizes, diverse cultures and different contexts would struggle to gain applicable insight from this one-size-fits-all approach. A one-on-one conversation directly with partners followed by a referral to supporting agencies who specialize in safeguarding work, we thought, would bring more value to each organization while also strengthening relationships and building trust with our partners.

In discussions within MCC's safeguarding standing committee, a group comprised of MCC staff both domestically and internationally, we challenge the temptations to urgency and perfectionism which lead to all-or-nothing approaches with partners. Such approaches, while promising clarity and efficiency, assume *power over*, leading to polarization and defensiveness. Instead of emphasizing issues of liability which lead to blame shifting, we ought to emphasize our shared interests in providing safe programming where children can learn, play, commune and worship with peace of mind. Instead of speaking over our partners, the *power with* approach invites us to speak with our partners, listening to their insight and the wisdom of their experiences to learn how to support their work in their distinct contexts.

We have settled on this more collaborative approach. Collaboration looks like revising the wording in agreements requiring partners to have a safeguarding policy to allow grace and support for organizations who are still in a learning and development phase. It also looked like working within MCC to create financing options for capacity building for Summer Service partners. MCC offered grants for partners to receive consulting and support services from private safeguarding agencies like Plan to Protect

who specialize in development of safeguarding policies within church and nonprofit contexts.

Communicating with partners directly about their safeguarding policies can be intimidating. When organizations apply for funding to support a Summer Service worker, MCC asks them if they have a child protection policy. MCC staff use these responses as starting points for conversations with partners about how they work at safeguarding and child protection. These churches and community organizations may begin with no formal policy in place, have a policy in place but not implement the practices outlined in it or have an actively utilized policy. These candid conversations help MCC staff determine what resources are most helpful for their specific contexts and gain insight on how we can improve in our accompanying work alongside them.

These choices to pursue true collaboration have yielded meaningful fruit. One organization, we learned, teaches training on safe programming with youth in their communities already. Another organization was implementing a new tech-supported process for keeping track of children in their programs. As we hoped, a few organizations named the need to create official child protection policies for the first time and requested MCC's support in doing so. For these organizations, conversations with MCC about safeguarding were more than a check box marked. They were meaningful, tangible support in the work and mission of these organizations.

Constructive conversations with partner organizations have been paired with an educational, conversation-based workshop on safeguarding for Summer Service participants at our annual leadership conference. In their evaluations of the leadership conference, Summer Service participants named the safeguarding session as one of the most valuable sessions of the week.

The feedback we have received from Summer Service partner organizations and participants has reinforced our decision to avoid a hierarchical approach to safeguarding in which MCC acts as instructor and enforcer of safeguarding expectations. Through a collaborative, invitational and non-judgmental approach, MCC's Summer Service program has invested in building trusting relationships with our partners, recognizing that trust is essential to creating communities of safety, accountability and belonging.

*Abby Endashaw is Summer Service program national coordinator for MCC U.S.*

## **Challenges and opportunities in safeguarding work with churches in Mexico**

I take a breath and say a short prayer. I am standing in front of a diverse audience, composed of teenagers, children with their mothers and grandparents, some young couples and few men. It is Sunday, July 9, 2022, and the God with Us Mennonite Church in Mexico City has invited me to hold a workshop on preventing child sexual abuse. This is the first workshop I am going to present on this topic in a church.

Days before, as I prepared the workshop, I realized what a great challenge it would be, not only to talk about such a painful topic as sexual abuse, but

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MCC Abuse Response and Prevention. Education and Prevention Resources for Congregations and Pastors. Available at <https://abuseresponseandprevention.ca/for-congregations-pastors/prevention-and-education/#policy>

**“Our culture, founded on and shaped by patriarchal ideologies, has tolerated sexual abuse, creating a culture of silence around it, and this silence must be urgently confronted and overturned.”**

to point out the need that we, as God’s people, have to discover a redeemed sexuality of which we can stop being ashamed, to begin to educate ourselves about what a redeemed sexuality looks like and to be able to transmit to new generations fewer taboos, less silence and more appreciation and dignity for our body and its genitals.

Speaking about transformed sexuality is not easy. I grew up in an evangelical culture where the positive aspects of sexuality and how to care for, protect and defend our bodies were rarely discussed. I did not learn to speak without shame about sexuality, let alone learn the names of the genitals. As a teenager, I received a lot of negative information about the potentially sinful consequences of exercising that mysterious and disavowed sexuality before marriage, without a positive vision for sexuality. It does not surprise me that child sexual abuse is such a widespread cancer in our contexts in which we avoid discussing sexuality. But it does sadden me that we, God’s people, have not been able, as we have done with so many other aspects of life, to transform the perspectives we have on sexuality and the body.

**What has been our approach?** In our MCC Mexico workshops for churches, we talk a lot about the power relations and inequalities from which we construct an image of children as vulnerable and incapable. We start from a perspective of children as persons with rights, but we also remind our brothers and sisters that the Lord himself spoke in favor of respecting the integrity of children in Matthew 18, pronouncing harsh words against those who dare to cause them to stumble (vv. 1-10).

In other words, in our workshops we combine an Anabaptist theological perspective of childhood with a human rights framework that helps us to balance the unequal relationships between children and adults in terms of capacities and competencies so that the former can respond to sexual abuse, and the latter are aware that children have as many rights and are as valuable and important as adults, simply because they are human beings created in God’s image.

We also insist in these workshops on the potential that we as believers have to transform our social and cultural environment in the light of Jesus as the center of our faith and guide of our practice. We remind the participants that children are not responsible for the abuse they experience, but that it is we, the adults, who have built a culture of silence around sexual violence that facilitates the formation and birth of new aggressors, as well as their impunity in the context of family, ecclesial or community complicity.

**Challenges:** Along the way, we have discovered that sexual violence in its specific form of child abuse has generated many “ghosts” that haunt the halls of schools, churches and other places, but also inhabit the victims’ own homes.

When we speak of “ghosts,” we are not referring to souls in pain trapped in this temporal plane. The social psychology of groups tells us that human beings, by spending time together and collaborating with others, generate certain dynamics of which we are sometimes aware and sometimes not. In every human group there will be things that are explicit, such as schedules for carrying out certain activities, the delimitation of spaces and what they are used for, the people who live under the same roof, and so on. But there will also be aspects of these explicitly named realities that are never talked about but are practiced. Take, for example, who is in charge of carrying out certain tasks—mom takes care of children, cooks and

helps children with their homework, while dad works and disciplines the children. Or there will be things that were not known or had not been made clear, but that unexpectedly become present, generating conflicts, crises or misunderstandings. The issue of healthy sexual education is one of these ghosts. It is not tangible, nor can it be seen, nor is it talked about, but since all human beings are born with sexuality, when this manifests itself in its different stages it sometimes generates crises in the family space because no one was prepared. And how much more if what we are talking about is sexual abuse!

Another “ghost” that is present is the parenting style used with our children. We raise our children with the understanding that adults know what is good for them, and that they themselves cannot make decisions that benefit them. However, when an adult abuses that trust and understanding, children do not have many tools to defend themselves.

A third “ghost” has to do with the unfinished conversation we have in our churches about the rights of children. Generally, children are considered as reserve “believers,” the future of the church, but in the church we do not speak much about the rights children have—to respect, to have a voice, to bodily integrity. In the Gospels we find a very clear position on the part of Jesus regarding children, as Jesus stresses to his disciples that no one should stop children from coming to Jesus and highlights the importance of child-like faith. Too often our church practices are centered around adults. A gospel-shaped practice will honor the dignity of children, giving them visibility and priority.

A fourth challenge is to address gender, connecting it with faith and our task as peacemakers. We live in a world that often operates based on misunderstandings. As soon as we touch the subject of gender, some become worried about what they understand as “feminism.” We must not divert the important conversation to which God calls us. What we are talking about here is statistics: 80% of sex offenders are males between 30 and 50 years of age who are directly related to the victims either by kinship or by some other role of authority over the child or the family. It must be said clearly, even if it hurts, that in the church these sex offenders are teachers, instructors, coaches, children and youth leaders and pastors. Our culture, founded on and shaped by patriarchal ideologies, has tolerated sexual abuse, creating a culture of silence around it, and this silence must be urgently confronted and overturned.

These four challenges are at the same time opportunities for the church to practice the true fast that pleases the Lord: breaking the chains of injustice and speaking out to defend the vulnerable (Isaiah 58:1-12). In MCC Mexico workshops with Mennonite churches about sexual violence, we end by saying *yes*, when abuse is finally uncovered, the family or church system *will* go into crisis. Rupture and pain will be inevitable. There will be division. Many more conflicts, along with many more victims, may surface. But may I tell you something? All that potential conflict is nothing compared to the suffering of a victim and the cost of ongoing silence on the part of the church about abuse. As much as I know Jesus, I think he would be the first to stand in the gap for any child, regardless of the consequences to the adults. *So enough*. As Scripture reminds us, we know what is right when it comes to protecting children: when we fail to take steps to do so, we commit sin (James 4:17).

*Ruhama Pedroza García is MCC Mexico facilitator of training processes and safeguarding focal point.*



Maria Huet Gomez, of San Gregoria, Chiapas, a graduate of a food sovereignty project with MCC partner Instituto de Estudios e Investigacion Intercultural (INESIN), with her gift of tomatoes for a visiting MCC group in 2021. (MCC photo/Rick Cober Bauman)

## Disability, safeguarding and inclusion in Cambodia

*Cry of the Gecko: History of the Christian Mission in Cambodia* contains the 2004 account of Min Sor, a Cambodian working for World Vision, who learned that a newborn girl in a nearby village had recently been crushed to death because she was born with a cleft palate. The local soothsayer told her family that her birth defect was a sign of spiritual disfavor and that the baby needed to be killed to avoid future disaster. Min Sor kept in touch with the family and when their next baby was born, a boy who also had a cleft palate, he intervened before the infant was crushed and took him to live with the Sisters of Mercy. After Maryknoll paid for surgery to repair the baby's cleft palate, the boy was happily taken back by his birth family.

**“No system of safeguarding and inclusion can work without people going into communities, listening, following up and intervening.”**

In Cambodia, people with disabilities are often believed to have been immoral in a previous life due to how Buddhist beliefs about karma are interpreted locally. Disability, and misfortune in general, are believed to have been caused by accumulating negative karma in a past life. People with disabilities—particularly birth defects—are kept home and out of sight due to familial shame. Cambodia is a collectivist culture, with family members expected to contribute to the family economy. This family structure is stressed when family members do not contribute sufficiently to the family unit—this dynamic sometimes results in people with disabilities being shamed, excluded or disowned.

In this traditional belief system, overt birth defects are considered signs of spiritual disfavor. Women are believed to be closer to the celestial world than men and thus are more susceptible to evil spirits, especially during childbirth. As healthcare has improved, more Cambodians are turning away from soothsayers and towards medical science, but mothers are still seen as responsible both for children having a disability and for being their caregiver. During an MCC project visit in 2023, several community members told us how a local mother was to blame for her child, who had obvious signs of Down Syndrome, for “not being normal” because she “did not take him to the hospital soon enough.”

Across the world, people with disabilities are especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Several international studies have shown that women with disabilities are sexually assaulted at rates at least double that of the general population. Women with cognitive or communication disabilities, due to their lack of comprehension of the situation or their inability to say no, are wrongly claimed to be consenting. General safeguarding strategies often fail to protect people with disabilities because of cultural beliefs (“they are unclean”), social stigmas (“they are crazy, don’t believe them” or “getting involved would hurt my reputation”), fear (“if I report, who will care for them”). These cultural factors are compounded by the fact that most reporting mechanisms require a high degree of cognitive and communicative ability.

MCC Cambodia is working on ensuring the safeguarding and inclusion of people with disabilities in our projects using the following approaches:

- We ensure that persons with disabilities are added to our participant tracking tables for all new projects. If we want to include and safeguard vulnerable populations, we first need know that they are participating in our projects.

- We asked our partners to begin including and categorizing disabilities in their baseline surveys, so that MCC and our partners can better understand the diversity of needs.
- We have made it a point to visit participants with disabilities and to follow-up based on what we have heard. Recall the account of Min Sor who saved the baby. When he heard about the family’s situation, he visited the family and made a point to follow up regularly. No system of safeguarding and inclusion can work without people going into communities, listening, following up and intervening.
- The other takeaway from Min Sor’s account is that he saw a baby, a person created in God’s image, not reducing the baby to its disability or viewing the baby as a sign of spiritual disfavor. Shifting the narrative from negative to positive, from a focus on disability as a negative sign to a focus on our common humanity, is essential for disability inclusion and safeguarding. This work should start on our own MCC teams before engaging partners and community members. We all harbor prejudices and we cannot effectively respond if we are only seeing disability.
  - In 2022, Women Peace Makers, a Cambodian organization and MCC partner, invited MCC Cambodia office staff to join an immersive sensory art display they had organized called Close Your Eyes and See, in which we were blindfolded and then led through a dark room that simulated the uneven pavement, sights, smells and sounds of daily life in Phnom Penh. It was a powerful experience that made several MCC staff weep and helped us understand what it really means to be blind in Cambodia.
  - Trainings and policies set standards and expectations. However, these do not necessarily result in narrative change. Human-to-human exposure is the most effective way to break down negative stereotypes. Many local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations that work with people with disabilities have community ambassadors who will share their experiences. Visiting people with disabilities in the communities where we work begins to change the narrative as their humanity and ability are witnessed.
- People with disabilities are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse.
  - When working with people who cannot report sexual exploitation and abuse for themselves, connect with and broaden their network of reporters.
    - The obvious way to do this is to require it—check the box by adding it to a policy or to someone’s job description. But MCC and partner staff are not going to be there 24/7. A community of care must be built up around the person. This can happen organically just by consistently following up on the person with a disability. If a partner knows that you care and are going to ask, they will start checking in too. The same is true for community leaders, neighbors and other NGO workers who visit the community. Ask how the person with a disability is doing and listen to the answer.
    - Identify and connect with natural supports—those who are already actively caring for the person with disabilities—and make sure that they also have access to the reporting mechanism. It is important to go beyond the primary caregiver. In 2023, we visited an elderly man who was caring for his wife with dementia and ambulation difficulties. We listened to his concerns about



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**ff** **Shifting the narrative from negative to positive, from a focus on disability to a focus on our common humanity, is essential for disability inclusion and safeguarding.”**

falling while helping her, learned that their children are not supportive and identified neighbors who are engaged with him.

- There is a place for surveys designed around visual cues, but these can be challenging to interpret if the surveyor does not know the person or culture well.
- Watch for physical or emotional signs of abuse. Train staff and partners to do so as well.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ disciples ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answers neither—the disability was not the result of immorality. Two thousand years later, Christians still struggle to listen to Jesus, too often attributing disabilities to sin. Policies, reporting mechanisms and pointing to Scripture can only take us so far. To ensure safeguarding for people with disabilities, we must embrace human-to-human interactions with them. We must see the baby ourselves—including but not limited to the baby’s disability—before we can help others to see the baby.

*Charles Conklin is MCC representative for Cambodia, based in Phnom Penh.*

## **Preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment after the 2021 earthquake in Haiti**

Solidarity of Haitian Women (SOFA), started in February 1986, is a feminist organization that assertively defends the rights of women. It includes peasant women, women living in *katye popilè* (low-income, “popular” neighborhoods) and professional women. SOFA is the first organization to fight against violence against women in Haiti. It provides medical, social, judicial and psychological support to women and girls in its Daybreak Centers in all departments of the country. SOFA also organizes advocacy activities to push state officials to take responsibility for setting up structures to provide adequate support to women and girls.

MCC has been financially supporting SOFA activities since 2015. On August 14, 2021, an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.2, coupled with Hurricane Grace, hit the southwest of Haiti, leaving 3,000 people dead, 344 more disappeared and 130,000 destroyed houses. To avoid repeating the sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) that happened during the international humanitarian response to the January 12, 2010, earthquake, MCC and SOFA, with a grant from InterAction (a U.S.-based network of NGOs working internationally), started a project to raise awareness of women, girls and community leaders in the communes of Beaumont, Pestel and Jeremie in Haiti. This project lasted six months, running from November 2021 to May 2022.

Through this MCC-supported initiative, SOFA provided training on protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH) to 30 women leaders who welcome and accompany women and girls who are victims of violence. These leaders replicated this training for 200 women, girls and community leaders. For training participants who provide aid or who are in a position of power relative to the population when offering services, the training objective was to change their behavior so that they do not abuse their power. For the victims of the earthquake, the training

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objective was to help them know what they can do to request legal action and file a complaint in case they are victims of sexual assault or exploitation.

For this project, SOFA developed a curriculum on PSEAH in Haiti to raise awareness about this problem with community members. In collaboration with a telephone company, SOFA also created a radio spot that has been broadcast on community radio during the project and several months after the project ended, with the goal of raising awareness of members of the population on their rights and how to file a complaint.

The main challenge during this project related to insecurity in Haiti. Because of crime and violence on the roads, most travel to project locations had to be done by plane. SOFA established a remote supervisory system that enabled the SOFA team in Port au Prince to provide virtual support for the training development and roll out.

In the implementation of this project, SOFA and MCC learned that in the framework of humanitarian intervention in a small country like Haiti, organizations must focus on accompanying and training those who receive aid so that they know that they have rights and can complain if they are victimized, blackmailed, harassed or raped by those who abuse their power. When people do not know their rights or that someone is there to accompany them to complain, and they are desperate for assistance because they are in a very difficult situation, they are ready to accept all conditions to get help, including abuse.

Including both women and men in this project was also critical. It amplifies the impact when men join in raising awareness about sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, as it demonstrates that preventing SEAH in humanitarian work is a task for all people, both women and men.

*Muriel Chaperon is MCC Haiti program manager and safeguarding focal point.*

## Addressing the complex challenges of PSEAH in crisis settings in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a distressing issue in crisis-affected regions, including Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Survivors face numerous challenges when it comes to reporting incidents and seeking justice. However, the true extent of GBV incidents in many countries is difficult to ascertain due to underreporting and limited data. Preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH) by humanitarian organizations' own staff toward project participants must be approached from a cultural perspective. In this article, I examine cultural dynamics around PSEAH work in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

Many survivors choose not to report due to the prevailing cultural stigma surrounding GBV, which often places blame on the survivor rather than the perpetrator. This blame-and-shame culture perpetuates silence and discourages survivors from speaking out. Moreover, survivors may lack confidence in the justice system's ability to provide adequate support and protection, especially in crisis contexts in which institutions may be



Santanise Fleurinord in 2022 in her garden in Kabay, a community in the Artibonite mountains in Haiti. Fleurinord participates in agricultural trainings organized by MCC partner, Konbit Payizan. (MCC photo/Christy Kauffman)

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**“Survivors rarely feel safe reporting to formal structures due to fear of mistreatment, racism and injustice, particularly if the perpetrator belongs to the local community.”**

weakened or overwhelmed. Survivors rarely feel safe reporting to formal structures due to fear of mistreatment, racism and injustice, particularly if the perpetrator belongs to the local community. Lack of documentation and potential repercussions also contribute to their reluctance, along with a general lack of trust in governmental institutions.

In addressing PSEAH in crisis settings, organizations must establish effective complaint mechanisms that prioritize survivor safety and privacy. It is very important to secure and create confidential channels for reporting to ensure survivors feel protected. Developing such secure channels that people feel comfortable using can often prove challenging. We are working on prominently displaying hotline numbers and other contact information for survivors of SEAH to use to report incidents. Finding mechanisms that do not unintentionally expose survivors to additional risks is an ongoing challenge. Alternative reporting methods, such as anonymous communication through trusted community members or designated focal points, can help overcome these challenges. This approach allows survivors to share their experiences safely and receive necessary support and guidance.

Effective communication and collaboration with partners are vital in addressing PSEAH from a cultural perspective. While Lebanon, Syria and Iraq share geographical proximity, each country possesses its unique cultural nuances. Approaches to addressing PSEAH must be tailored accordingly, considering local customs, traditions and social structures. Cultural differences and variations within the countries themselves must be respected and considered during project development and implementation.

Working with partners in addressing PSEAH can present challenges, as they may resist certain interventions due to cultural norms, beliefs or power dynamics. For example, some partners may view PSEAH as a sensitive or taboo topic—addressing it may disrupt existing social hierarchies or challenge traditional gender roles. Additionally, partners might be hesitant to engage in discussions surrounding PSEAH due to fear of tarnishing their reputations or facing backlash from the communities in which they operate.

In such cases, a culturally sensitive and inclusive approach is crucial, with MCC staff taking time to build trust and rapport with partners through open dialogue, empathy and mutual understanding. Engaging in respectful conversations about cultural norms and beliefs can help identify areas of resistance and develop strategies to address them effectively. Furthermore, recognizing and valuing the knowledge and expertise of local partners can foster partners' ownership of the PSEAH agenda and enhance the sustainability of interventions.

Capacity building and constant trainings that incorporate cultural sensitivity are essential in addressing partner resistance and fostering a collaborative environment. By providing our partners with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate cultural complexities, they can better understand the importance of addressing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) and the potential positive impact prevention efforts can have on communities.

MCC sometimes faces resistance from partners in adopting PSEAH measures. Addressing that resistance can be difficult, yet at the same time it presents MCC an opportunity to highlight the intersection between culture, human rights and social justice. By framing PSEAH interventions

as aligned with cultural values of respect, dignity and equality, it becomes possible to bridge the gap between cultural norms and the need for change. This approach emphasizes that PSEAH is not an imposition of external values but rather a collective effort to protect the rights and well-being of all individuals.

Furthermore, community engagement plays a vital role in challenging partner resistance and promoting cultural change. By involving community leaders, religious figures and other influential stakeholders in discussions and initiatives about SEAH, it becomes possible to shift social norms and attitudes towards these matters. Community-led awareness campaigns, dialogues and workshops about PSEAH help foster a sense of collective responsibility in countering SEAH.

Addressing the complex challenges of PSEAH requires a multifaceted approach that considers cultural sensitivities, respects local contexts and navigates partner resistance. By establishing effective complaint mechanisms, providing comprehensive support and extensive training, promoting accountability and engaging with partners and communities, humanitarian organizations can make significant strides in addressing SEAH and supporting survivors.

Organizations like MCC must go further to address the gender imbalances at the root of SEAH. MCC and humanitarian organizations should integrate gender considerations into all programming, support grassroots approaches for addressing GBV, foster knowledge sharing and prioritize prevention efforts through awareness and policy support. Through these efforts, MCC can further contribute to survivor empowerment and tackle the underlying causes of SEAH.

Working within cultural contexts can be complex and progress may be gradual. Continued collaboration and dialogue between MCC and its partners and a commitment from MCC to cultural sensitivity can over time create a lasting impact. MCC in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq works hand-in-hand with our partners to prioritize survivor safety and dignity, striving towards a future in which all individuals, regardless of their circumstances, are protected from SEAH and its devastating effects.

*Dana Dia is gender and protection specialist and the safeguarding focal point for MCC Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.*

## Lessons from using MCC's partner safeguarding assessment tool

In September 2021, MCC rolled out a new assessment tool for programs to work through with partners to assess where partners are in the safeguarding journey, learn about partners' creative safeguarding approaches and better understand how MCC staff can support and accompany partners. The paragraphs that follow discuss what staff in MCC Uganda and MCC Bolivia have learned as they have used the assessment tool with partners.

**Learnings from Uganda:** MCC Uganda has prioritized safeguarding with all partners, raising awareness and orienting partners on how to work through the partner safeguarding assessment tool. We have used partner gatherings, annual general meetings and regular partner visits to discuss

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Four-month-old baby, Favour Nyawere is held by her mother Elizabeth Adikini in February 2022 as she waits to be weighed and measured at the Reach Out Mbuya Community Health Initiative (ROM) clinic in Kampala, Uganda. Community health worker Caroline Kobusingye (blue apron with ID) is in the background. (MCC photo/Matthew Lester)



how to assess organization capacity to address safeguarding. Partners were given ample time to work on the tool and send the completed tool back to the safeguarding focal point and the reps. The country program team then reviewed the assessment and scheduled a meeting with each partner to discuss partners' responses and understand better the partners' safeguarding strengths and the areas where further work is needed.

The safeguarding conversations prompted by working through the assessment have involved challenges. Not all partners had a dedicated staff person tasked with safeguarding, while some partners had appointed safeguarding focal points, but had not oriented them to the role. The discussion about safeguarding can also generate high expectations from partners of support from MCC. We have faced some cases in which partners viewed safeguarding as an MCC priority and therefore expected MCC to lead the process. Sometimes program officers and project coordinators embrace the safeguarding agenda, while senior management provide limited support—including dedicated resources.

Alongside these challenges, collaboration between MCC and its partners on safeguarding capacity assessments has also brought multiple benefits. Partners display greater awareness of what sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment are and of the importance of prevention efforts. Many MCC partners have embraced safeguarding and have committed themselves to address the gaps identified. Through the assessment process partners have realized the need to prioritize safeguarding in the programs they are implementing and to integrate safeguarding within project activities and during the different phases of the project cycle. Having a partner assessment tool in place helps partners evaluate themselves and set new targets. It spells out what partners are doing well alongside the gaps in partners' policies and procedures—this leads to the development of action plans to address the gaps. The assessment tool names persons responsible for the action points, including the time frame during which the action points will be done, with the expectation of reviewing the assessment in the future.

MCC Uganda has learned much through the process of working through safeguarding capacity assessments with partners. First, MCC should

continue supporting partners to prioritize safeguarding. The work of preventing sexual exploitation and abuse sounded new to some of our partners, yet most had some information but were not taking sufficient prevention measures. Second, partners need to appoint focal points to lead in awareness raising, managing cases and building their organizational capacity in safeguarding. Third, MCC's partners in Uganda are not all at the same level on safeguarding. Some have well-trained focal points and very good plans and reporting mechanisms while others do not. We therefore need to have deliberate plans for partners to learn from each other and to share best practices. Fourth, high staff turnover has affected safeguarding initiatives; organizations invest in building staff capacity, but many staff leave after a short period. We need to engage organizations to come up with staff retention plans. Fifth, some partners did not assess themselves accurately because they were afraid that they would lose funding if they graded themselves too low. MCC must foster trust with partners and encourage them to assess themselves accurately, since this will help them genuinely come up with ways to address the gaps. Sixth, some partners do not have safeguarding policies in place; this makes it very difficult to improve safeguarding. Partners need to develop policies to guide safeguarding issues, and then work deliberately to implement those policies. Finally, MCC must manage partner expectations for how MCC will support them. Encouraging partners to integrate safeguarding in routine project activities will help in raising awareness with minimal resources. MCC needs to accompany partners in this journey, support them with resources, skills, and knowledge and ensure sustainability.

 **Upon realizing the benefits of safeguarding in organizations, partners have embraced safeguarding and are willing to address the gaps identified.”**

**Learnings from Bolivia:** The safeguarding partner assessment, planning and monitoring tool was introduced to MCC Bolivia partner organizations during a two-day training in July 2022 that began an ongoing accompaniment process to support partners in their development and improvement of safeguarding in their organizations. This training was key for presenting concepts around safeguarding, contextualizing the topic for Bolivia and understanding where our partners are at regarding their own implementation of safeguarding. We came away from the training with an understanding that the tool is best used when it can identify concrete needs for generating an environment of safeguarding while also allowing for contextual and cultural adaptation.

Providing a tool or framework for safeguarding is necessary to establish signposts that clearly identify sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment that are common across all cultures and contexts. At the same time, a framework can narrow our vision of what safeguarding is if the tool itself is not adaptable to the diverse cultures and contexts in which our partners operate. How do we balance the need for being concrete in both our identification of abuse and response to abuse, while at the same time not pigeon-holing our partners into a rigidly enforced tool? MCC Bolivia's two-day partner training gave a glimpse into how the tool can be used in such a way to establish concrete needs for generating an environment of safeguarding while also allowing for contextual and cultural adaptation.

The first important step in planning for this training was identifying the Bolivian organization Fundación Una Brisa de Esperanza (FUBE), an MCC partner, as local experts in safeguarding and asking them to co-facilitate the workshop along with MCC Bolivia focal points. Through this collaboration, we were able to incorporate a contextual component into the training. During the planning stages FUBE compared MCC's safeguarding

partner assessment planning and monitoring tool to their own framework focused on risk management. FUBE imagines their organization and all the activities FUBE implements as being inside a big tent protected from risk. The tent is held up by seven principles that, when enforced, protect the participants in the tent. These seven principles are similar to the standards that make up MCC's safeguarding assessment tool, with some variations. Without compromising MCC's standards, we found that we could incorporate some additional principles from FUBE. For example, in the values and organizational culture standard of MCC's assessment, we added a component that calls for organizations to create a "culture that celebrates openness to different voices in all spaces allowing for the free expression of feelings and ideas, and timely action to be taken when appropriate." In the standard of safe and responsible programming, the planning team (including FUBE) added another component stating, "the organization encourages participants to be protagonists in the everyday life of the organization and its activities." Both additions speak to a more pro-active voice of creating positive spaces that will decrease risk and increase protection. This is a component that strengthens MCC's assessment tool by maintaining firm signposts that will call out abuse, but also responds to a different contextual voice in the Bolivian context.

During the training, another partner, Fundación Comunidad y AxióN (FCA), stated that the framework of safeguarding focused more on the negative aspects of the world that do us harm, rather than the positive aspects

that build us up as a community. Their preference was to talk about a policy of care, rather than safeguarding. They also prefer to focus more on the community together as opposed to the protection of individuals. They drafted what they called a *family care policy*, with the broad use of family to apply to all members of the organization and participants of FCA's projects. Additionally, while acknowledging the standards in MCC's safeguarding assessment, they added six more, with a focus on building an ethical and caring community. The important component here is that focusing on the more positive aspect of care does not compromise the ability to address serious risks and the protection that an organization must provide. These adaptations also reflect the reality that while it takes a community and all people in an organization to carry out safeguarding, a policy must address the impact that abuse and exploitation have on individual victims.

MCC's assessment and monitoring framework clearly identifies the signposts that are necessary for safeguarding, but as seen in the examples above, MCC Bolivia has been able to work with partners to adapt practices, organizational culture and policies to reflect contextual and cultural distinctives.

*Betty Bobo is MCC representative for Uganda and safeguarding focal point. Semei Kakungulu is program specialist and safeguarding focal point for MCC South Sudan, roles he previously had with MCC Uganda. Leidy Muñoz and Nathan Toews are co-representatives and safeguarding focal points for MCC Bolivia.*

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