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# BARRIERS TO REPORTING MISCONDUCT

Understanding power, intersectionality and context

This report concludes Oxfam’s research project on Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting, which began in 2019–20 by identifying specific barriers in Myanmar,<sup>1</sup> Iraq<sup>2</sup> and Ghana.<sup>3</sup> To test the integration of recommendations from this research, Oxfam then conducted two pilot projects in Iraq and Ghana from May 2021 to September 2022.

Oxfam in Iraq focused on survivors’ perceptions of justice, combating survivor shaming and working with partners to develop reporting mechanisms. Oxfam in Ghana also worked with partners to conduct a national campaign against gender-based violence, which included a reporting hotline and work to strengthen community awareness.

Lessons learned included the need for integrated programming and flexible funding, the importance of a feminist approach to monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning, putting survivors at the center of programming and building decolonial partnerships to ensure that survivors are able to report misconduct.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email [agaboune1@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:agaboune1@oxfam.org.uk)

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Cover image: A campaign poster on preventing survivor silencing and stigma. Credit: Oxfam in Iraq

# SUMMARY

In 2019–20 Oxfam conducted research on Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting, which identified barriers to reporting in Myanmar,<sup>4</sup> Iraq<sup>5</sup> and Ghana<sup>6</sup> that required unique and contextually specific programmatic mitigation measures. Building on this, Oxfam invested in two pilot projects in Iraq and Ghana, running from May 2021 to September 2022, to test the integration of recommendations from the research.

Oxfam in Iraq invested in research on survivors' perceptions of justice, carried out a campaign to combat survivor shaming and worked intensively with partners to co-develop reporting mechanisms.

Oxfam in Ghana worked closely with partners to carry out a national campaign to combat gender-based violence. It also developed a central hotline for reporting misconduct and worked alongside partners to strengthen community awareness of misconduct and how to report it.

The pilots generated extensive learning. The main lessons learned were the needs to ensure integrated programming and flexible funding, make use of Oxfam's intersectionally-feminist approach to monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) and ensure that survivors remain at the center of programming. An additional key finding was the importance of building decolonial partnerships to ensure that survivors, and people who have experienced misconduct, are able to report misconduct.

Key recommendations include: standalone flexible funding to mitigate and dismantle the barriers that impede reporting of misconduct, programmes requiring an integration of power, intersectionality, and context, and unpacking what we as a sector mean by confidentiality, community resolution and reparative justice.

## A NOTE

If you or anyone you know has experienced misconduct (including but not limited to sexual misconduct) from Oxfam, staff, partners or affiliated people please report directly using Oxfam's SpeakUp system: <https://oxfam.clue-webforms.co.uk/webform/misconduct/en> and/or email [speakup@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:speakup@oxfam.org.uk)

Please note that this report will make mention of sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (SEAH) as well as mention of child abuse. Please be aware that the report may be triggering to those who have experienced SEAH and/or sexual and gender-based violence.

# INTRODUCTION

Oxfam is accountable for ensuring that those who suffer the consequences of misconduct by Oxfam staff, partners, or anyone else connected with the organization can report such incidents. Following Oxfam's safeguarding failures in Haiti 2018 and the necessary external and internal scrutiny that followed, Oxfam has sought to ensure that accountability is at the heart of all it does. Since that time, it has built or improved systems to manage, respond to and address cases of misconduct specifically and to mitigate abuse of power more broadly.<sup>7</sup>

However, it remains the case that members of the communities where Oxfam works prefer not to speak to Oxfam representatives directly, and where they do speak up they usually speak to frontline staff, many of whom do not report these experiences appropriately or use formal systems.<sup>8</sup> When people do report abuses directly, they do so predominantly to front-facing staff – staff working on monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL), for example. Aside from the technical issue of how to safely collect misconduct reports through MEAL platforms, there is a bigger question: if Oxfam has set up misconduct reporting systems, why do people still not report, and if they do, why do they prefer to report through their own community or traditional mechanisms?<sup>9</sup>

This question led to Oxfam commissioning three research studies on Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting in Myanmar,<sup>10</sup> Iraq<sup>11</sup> and Ghana, which were conducted in 2019–20.<sup>12</sup> This culminated in a meta-analysis which introduced a gender-transformative and power lens and drew out key sector-wide recommendations aimed at ensuring that misconduct, particularly sexual exploitation and abuse, was understood comprehensively from a survivor's perspective.<sup>13</sup>

# THE PILOTS

The research, and especially the meta-analysis, led to some key recommendations on how to integrate findings into programming. For example, Oxfam's researchers found that survivors felt unsure about who to report to and what would happen if they reported incidents of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH). The meta-analysis recommended integrating an intersectional power analysis into programming activities to unpack what 'awareness' means for different groups of survivors and for communities more broadly. Designing a power analysis, implementing it, and training Oxfam staff and partners on awareness-raising activities requires dedicated programming which requires time, money and resources. Oxfam invested in mitigating and continuously identifying barriers facing survivors when reporting misconduct through the pilot projects, which aimed to create tangible activities that would achieve this.

The findings were used by team leads to design pilot projects that addressed the key recommendations from the research. These flexible and iterative pilots were delivered between May 2021 and September 2022 in Iraq and Ghana. The main objective was to ensure that Oxfam was able to adapt to how survivors were experiencing its programme activities and mitigate the specific contextual barriers they faced when reporting misconduct. Since the barriers differed in scope and scale across the research and meta-analysis, for the purposes of the project the barriers were categorized as relating to a) empowerment b) adapting systems and c) systemic drivers.

*'I'd never heard that I/NGOs have reporting channels to report against their own employees about harassment.'*

Female participant in an FGD in Iraq from the pilots in February 2022

## DECOLONIAL METHODOLOGY

The first step in designing these pilots, and in introducing comprehensive programming, was to align them with Oxfam GB's framing of racial justice and decolonial partnerships – as described in its Transforming for a Radically Better World paper.<sup>14</sup> Decoloniality is the act of delinking from the colonial matrix of power with a focus on disrupting the legacies of colonialism which remains in mindsets and belief systems and which can show up in everyone regardless of race. Understanding how this work fitted within this framing was necessary but difficult, as it involved re-examining how the research was understood and framed, and how misconduct more broadly is experienced with other forms of abuse such as bullying, fraud and corruption. When we look at management culture, or how systems and language barriers are experienced, local cultures reduced to simple narratives and how shame is understood as being exceptional within certain religious cultures rather than a globalized experience of survivors of SEAH, we can begin scratching the surface of how race, racism, and whiteness are intertwined with the work of preventing misconduct, specifically sexual misconduct.

We can then appreciate that race and coloniality are tied to abuse of power and cultures of impunity in the INGO sector, and more broadly in other sectors. The exercise was less about a theoretical exercise of alignment and more about broadening Oxfam's understanding around what has driven abuses of power and the nature of power in international development. It is clear that white supremacist working cultures, within an international context, have driven and will continue to drive incidents of misconduct – and specifically sexual misconduct – as we have seen.

The modality for how both projects were designed was consciously decolonial in approach. An open shared governance model was put in place where both Oxfam in Iraq and Oxfam in Ghana were able to determine funding allocations. This is in contrast to usual approaches in the sector that determine allocations of funding for UK INGOS at UK office levels. Similarly, during the mid-term review, the teams were able to reallocate funding to one another based on implementation needs. Outcomes were co-designed and could be adapted based on what projects discovered in coordination with survivors, community members and partners. Resourcing, including staffing, was recognized as a key need, acknowledging that protection from SEAH and anti-fraud and corruption efforts often rely on non-specialist staff focal points who contribute a small percentage of their time to work on preventing and addressing misconduct, which increases staff workload. Staffing was also necessary as the skillsets and expertise required for implementation were highly specialized. In practical terms, this meant creating a flexible fund for each of the team leads in Iraq and Ghana, to enable them to address and mitigate each barrier in turn.

At the heart of this approach was a need for joined-up programming that integrated all the areas that Oxfam works on in each country, incorporating a unified approach to ending gender-based violence (GBV), transformative intersectional feminist approaches, decolonial partnerships, flexibility on risk, community protection work and an adaptive approach to MEAL. It also requires explicit programming around whistleblowing to ensure this is not added as an afterthought.

People's lives do not fit into neat separate boxes defined by INGOs, and neither should Oxfam's response. When we are truly survivor-centered, we adapt to how survivors experience Oxfam. A person approaching an Oxfam staff member does not necessarily identify them as a Water Sanitation Hygiene (WASH) specialist or an accountability lead, but just as an Oxfam representative. People in general tend to report to MEAL staff as these teams work on community feedback and become familiar within communities and/or are present at key distributions. There is a dual issue of communities preferring to report to someone (or a group) that they have had prior contact with and perhaps not knowing who the dedicated focal point is to report misconduct. The main driver for these pilots was to ensure that people's experiences were met with sound, safe and professional, informed responsiveness from Oxfam and its partners.

*'If I come to you and tell you something that is worrying me, bothering me, and you don't give me a listening ear, next time it happens I will not feel comfortable coming to you.'*

Community member,  
Ghana

# INTERSECTIONAL AND ADAPTIVE MEAL

The pilots used adaptive and intersectional approaches to MEAL. The baseline was the human-centered design research, which put survivors and their experiences at the heart of the project. The MEAL framework for the pilots was co-created by the different teams but was kept flexible for each to adapt to the needs and preferences of survivors, communities and partners in each area of implementation. The teams facilitated listening exercises, focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews to better understand shifts in community perceptions of barriers. The teams then came together during a learning review held in March 2022.

An approach of non-retraumatization of those who experienced misconduct, including survivors of SEAH was used. In practice, this meant ensuring that any MEAL approaches, methodologies, and practices centered survivors and those experiencing misconduct. This meant preferring survivor-led conversations rather than asking for or requiring specific information that may contribute to re-traumatization of survivors. Specifically, this meant listening more than being extractive and accepting the information that communities were wanting and willing to share on communally identified themes and outcomes. This approach alongside non-extractive MEAL practices were employed to ensure that teams were able to explain signs of change in whatever way they wished to.

## OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

Overall objectives
a) Reduce and mitigate barriers to reporting facing women, girls, boys and men in Iraq and Ghana;
b) Contribute towards reparative justice for survivors of misconduct.

The overall objectives of the pilots were co-designed by the team leads. One of the biggest barriers identified was the lack of perceived justice, or of just outcomes, for survivors of misconduct. It is difficult to encourage reporting without meaningful survivor support, support for those experiencing misconduct and ultimately reparative justice.



# OXFAM IN IRAQ

Oxfam in Iraq determined that access to justice, social stigma of survivors and partner support would be the areas of focus for its pilot project.

The pilot collectively addressed the barriers identified in Salah Al Din and Nineweh. Specifically, Oxfam in Iraq felt that integrated gender programming (and GBV programming in particular) and tackling survivor stigma could address barriers of reputation, feelings of resignation, shame, normalization and gender.<sup>15</sup> The Iraq team also highlighted the importance of working in collaboration with partners. Partners had expressed a need to co-develop and test reporting mechanisms, strengthen community awareness of misconduct and ensure better visibility. Community resolution, the most frequently identified barrier in Iraq, required more engagement with authorities and community representatives, and an in-depth awareness of how the justice system worked informally in the Iraqi context. The team also identified challenges around confidentiality as requiring the most complex support through programming.

**Table 1: Summary of barriers identified in Iraq**

<i>Personal</i>	<i>Interactional</i>	<i>Structural</i>
Gratitude	Rejection	Visibility
Shame	Attitude	Awareness
Resignation	Loss	Incentive
Trust	Uncertainty	Community resolution
Reputation	Gender	No perceived action
Confidentiality	Normalisation	Quality of service

*'It is men's responsibility to report misconduct.'*

Male participant in FGD in Iraq

**Note: This table is a summary of the barriers identified in Iraq. Items that are greyed out are barriers that were identified in other countries but were not relevant in Iraq. For more information and detailed descriptions of these barriers, see annex.**

## KEY ACTIVITIES

Oxfam in Iraq highlighted the need for dedicated staff who could work full-time on the pilots, rather than having a percentage of their time dedicated to mitigating barriers. It hired key staff, including two roving misconduct officers to work with partners and communities directly. Through extensive listening sessions across different areas of operations, the team identified a need for research on survivor stigma, and commissioned research to better understand drivers of misconduct and to hear from communities about their perceptions of justice following incidents of misconduct.

*'We cannot trust the unknown.'*

Female participant in an FGD in Iraq, with agreement from the other participants

This led the team to design a campaign (including the distribution of posters) on countering the stigma faced by survivors. The stigma identified

(also described as shame in the table of barriers) was perceived as a survivor's 'shame' in having experienced sexual misconduct. Although often internalized by an individual, predominantly women and girls, the stigma was also faced by families, collective communities and broader society for allowing the act of sexual misconduct to take place.

The approach used was to hear from key community leaders, formal and informal women's collectives, and groups of survivors themselves to better understand the narratives of stigma. The campaign targeted leaders, groups of men and groups of women in sharing the message that survivors who experience sexual misconduct or broader misconduct do not carry shame or blame. The stigma was also due to the 'unspoken'; several members of the community groups felt that misconduct, and specifically sexual misconduct, could not and should not be discussed publicly. The campaign therefore led to the targeted community, but especially women, feeling more comfortable speaking up and countering survivor-blaming practices against women and girls in their communities. This had a ripple effect in the Iraqi communities, where community leaders felt pressured to align with their communities who were discussing these issues openly.

Both the research and the campaign integrated intersectionality into understandings of how perceived race, ethnicity and other socially constructed concepts contributed to disparate power dynamics and therefore helped create an enabling environment for misconduct. These dynamics contributed to survivors feeling unsafe, unable to use reporting mechanisms and sometimes, due to language differences, unaware of them.

Community resolution mechanisms require nuanced programming. This barrier was flagged across all the areas of research and was linked to survivors' preferences for using justice systems that they know and trust for reporting. In Iraq, however, using trusted systems means that survivors could be at risk of death (themselves or other family members) or forced marriages with perpetrators. Forced marriage, across many contexts globally, is viewed as part of dispute resolution and preserves honor in the eyes of the community. Some communities view it as justice for the survivor, although it can still be perceived as punishment by the survivor themselves.

The team found that it was not a case of those who experienced misconduct simply using a community resolution mechanism or not using it. It is also not as simple as the allegation reaching specialist support outside of the community, or only within. There is nuance in how community resolution, partnership, and Oxfam interventions are used by survivors, and those experiencing misconduct more broadly. Some people will report to a community leader and explore options of reporting to Oxfam.

*'Many people would discourage you to report to avoid negative outcome because blaming the survivor is common.'*

Female participant from partner organisation in Iraq  
September 2021



Oxfam in Iraq countering survivor-shaming poster urging people to not blame the survivor and to say no to harassment. Credit: Oxfam in Iraq

Stigma and confidentiality remain the greatest concerns, along with the perception of justice. Oxfam in Iraq held multiple listening sessions across governorates to better understand how communities would perceive just outcomes for survivors. Many felt there could be no justice without clear systems of resolution, even if that meant perceived unfair outcomes for survivors of sexual misconduct specifically. Others felt that justice was tied to individual and collective perceptions. This meant that whatever the community and the individual themselves needed should be considered justice if their expectations were met. Most agreed that stronger support was needed for survivors of sexual misconduct specifically, and more broadly following experiences of misconduct.

Oxfam would like to further explore working with different allies within the community, those who champion just outcomes and already work extensively on survivor support. Community resolution mechanisms themselves are not inherently barriers to reporting, or to survivor support. There are community leaders, women's rights organisations and community collectives who are already doing work with which Oxfam needs to better align - especially on key issues of forced marriage and challenging the concept of 'honor' within our societies. There is a need to explore more what pathways exist for survivors and where Oxfam can coordinate further. This

*'Everyone within the NGO knows the details when a safeguarding case is reported, and it turns into gossip.'*

Male participant from a partner organization in Iraq  
November 2021

would allow for a nuanced understanding of community resolution mechanisms and community justice, underpinned by Oxfam’s decolonial partnership approach, which seeks to not essentialize contexts while also acknowledging that localization without accountability is irresponsible and dangerous.

**Box 1: Highlights from Oxfam in Iraq’s pilot project**

- Research on what constitutes ‘justice’ for survivors in Iraq.
- Research on gender and power dynamics in Iraq.
- Comprehensive training and accompaniment for eight key partners (with ability to scale to all 21 partners) on identifying and reporting misconduct.
- Integration of the pilots within existing projects on protection and countering GBV.
- Provision of equipment to the partners to support in applying community feedback mechanisms and reporting.
- Training existing safeguarding focal points on collective approaches to address barriers to reporting.
- Training with Oxfam in Iraq’s management on responsiveness and handling reports of misconduct.
- Stronger relationships of trust between partners and Oxfam on safe programming and reporting misconduct.
- Design and distribution of posters challenging stigma and survivor blaming.
- Key feedback mechanism established to hear from partners on project activities (partner feedback listening tool established, using periodic discussions with partnership focal point).

# OXFAM IN GHANA

Oxfam in Ghana sought to develop national campaigns targeting harmful gender norms around the acceptability of GBV. It felt that this would be a start to mitigating barriers around shame and perceived consequences. Uncertainty, trust, awareness, and access were highlighted as key barriers to address through partners and by developing stronger connections with community members.

## KEY ACTIVITIES

As a result, Oxfam worked with partners to develop training and awareness sessions. The team also developed a comprehensive mapping of existing traditional and non-traditional protection and GBV resources for referrals for partners and community members to be able to report SEAH and GBV collectively. Finally, along with key partners, the team tested national communication channels, notably TV and radio.

**Table 2: Summary of barriers identified in Ghana**

<i>Personal</i>	<i>Interactional</i>	<i>Structural</i>
Gratitude	Rejection	Visibility
Shame	Attitude	Awareness
Resignation	Loss	Incentive
Trust	Uncertainty	Community resolution
Reputation	Gender	No perceived action
Confidentiality	Normalisation	Quality of service
Perceived consequences	Hierarchy	Access
Independent fact finding	Hidden power	

**Note: This table is a summary of the barriers identified in Ghana. Items that are greyed out are barriers that were identified in other countries but were not relevant in Ghana. For more information and detailed descriptions of these barriers, see annex.**

*‘While most safeguarding approaches concentrate on individual incidents of abuse or discrete projects and programmes, the feminist approach to safeguarding necessitates the adoption of a systemic lens and the recognition that the ultimate goal is the transformation of larger power imbalances and oppressive systems.’*

Oxfam in Ghana

With support from its partners, Oxfam in Ghana organized sensitization discussions about safeguarding on local radio and television stations: Radio Kitawoln in Saboba and Zaa Radio and Sagani TV in Tamale. The team also held radio discussions to raise awareness about reporting SEAH. The radio discussions were conducted in Likpakpaanl, Dagbani and English, while the TV broadcasts were in English. The team also developed two national hotlines to report SEAH, using telephone and WhatsApp channels.

This campaign was highly effective in its reach, resulting in ministries across regional and national levels making direct requests for Oxfam to support them in developing similar reporting mechanisms. Oxfam, as well as line ministries, also received calls following their campaigns. However, it is important to note that reporting misconduct is highly dependent on having strong systems to respond to and meet the needs of those experiencing misconduct. The campaigns were effective at ensuring reporting was taking place, but the team would like to work more strongly alongside line ministries in Ghana.

The campaign was linked to Oxfam International's 'Enough' campaign, which seeks to end violence against women and girls.<sup>16</sup> This initiative supported efforts by Oxfam in Ghana to better understand concepts of masculinities in the country. The research fed into the national campaign, and key learning was used to mitigate social barriers to reporting.

*'While watching an interview on Sagani TV where Oxfam and its partners elaborated on their pilot program on safeguarding to encompass sexual harassment and exploitation and how to deal with this menace. Oxfam's emphatic statement on how they are working on having a system that will protect their beneficiaries from harm such as SEAH is worth commending and emulating'.*

Following TV campaign Oxfam in Ghana received a request for support from the Office of Women's Commission of the University of Development Studies Tamale Campus

Another two community campaigns were organized: one through the media and the other with traditional authorities, including queen mothers and chiefs, and youth in the communities of Sawla and Tarkwa, where the research was carried out. This activity was made possible by collaboration with partner organizations and was complemented by community awareness-raising training on the reporting mechanisms used by Oxfam and its partners. This was a key recommendation from the original research to identify barriers. Posters and information, education and communication (IEC) materials were developed specifically for each location in Ghana and made contextually relevant through language and imagery.

Some barriers to reporting misconduct were identified by the participants of the discussions that confirmed the barriers identified during the research. These included:

- Lack of trust in the institutions;
- Lack of knowledge on where and who to report misconduct or any protection concern;
- Family ties;
- Shame;
- Fear of attack by perpetrator;
- Lack of confidence by the survivors in the systems available;
- Lack of personal confidence to use the reporting systems
- and fear of losing benefits or services.

At the end of the sessions, the Oxfam reporting mechanism was discussed and campaign posters on safeguarding with Oxfam reporting lines were checked with the community members. There were many discussions on the relevance, necessity, and appropriateness of the images and choice of wording for each community. During later discussions these were then distributed to the participants.



A poster designed for awareness on safeguarding in English distributed in Ghana. Credit: Oxfam in Ghana

*'The feminist approach to safeguarding required the participants to recognize that we are all capable of harm and complicity in systemic oppression, and that we can all practise taking accountability for our roles in the perpetuation of oppression and violence.'*

Oxfam in Ghana

Oxfam in Ghana also worked to address trust, awareness and access in areas where it delivers education programming. Traditional authorities and groups of young people developed action plans to sensitize their communities and schools on issues of misconduct; actions ranged from sensitizing school management committees or parent/teacher associations and churches and mosques on what safeguarding is and what behavior constitutes a safeguarding concern to reporting mechanisms and the support services available to survivors.

Oxfam in Ghana also integrated intersectionally feminist training for partners and staff: this focused on feminist influencing but also included key components of reflexive practice. The team carried out additional training for safeguarding focal points, including on feedback mechanisms (and further training on MEAL), risk matrices and data protection, which included consent for data collection and data management practices.

*'The assistance provided has been demonstrated by one of the partners, who have made safeguarding a core component of their organizational culture. They provide safeguarding training to all of their partners and youth groups, including reporting on safeguarding in all of their report templates for all activities and including safeguarding slides in all of their PowerPoint presentations and templates, among other key safeguarding efforts. Also, they have developed flyers, pull-up banners and posters on safeguarding and these are visibly displayed in their office.'*

Oxfam in Ghana

Partnerships were a key focus for Oxfam in Ghana. The team established partner focal points, including a roving officer who worked directly within partners' offices to support them in the creation of misconduct policies and led awareness sessions. A key point around visibility was a lack of awareness among community members about where and to whom they should report incidents.

As part of the pilot, Oxfam in Ghana undertook a mapping of traditional and non-traditional GBV and child protection actors available for referrals. This mapping was then translated into all the key languages used locally and distributed by partners to communities for discussion on how to report safely. Additionally, partners were supported in flexible requests relating to strengthening safeguarding systems and community trust. These were flexible, in that they were not predefined, and they were given the space to adapt to partner needs. Partners were provided with direct support for any requests they had, including the creation of policy and building reporting systems.

#### **Box 2: Highlights from Oxfam in Ghana's pilot project**

- Sensitization campaigns on misconduct on local radio stations and national TV channels.
- Launch of ENOUGH campaign and link to challenging harmful norms on gender-based violence. GBV drives SEA as these norms are interlinked. Team focused on deconstructing masculinity.
- Community campaigns in Sawla and Tarkwa (where research was conducted) with authorities, discussions on acceptability of sexual misconduct and identifying harmful behaviors. The team also discussed awareness of reporting mechanisms with community members.
- Contextualization of awareness raising materials- testing with different communities in different languages across Ghana.
- Training and engagement on intersectional feminist principles with partners, Oxfam staff, and communities.
- Partnership strengthening approaches, including flexible support for partners on identifying, reporting, and challenging misconduct.
- Mapping of services for survivors and those experiencing misconduct, with a focus on sexual misconduct. This includes formal/informal, and collectives focused on ending GBV.



# LEARNING

Addressing barriers to reporting requires an understanding of how contextual, power-based and systemic factors interact to drive misconduct. The main learning from the pilots was, above all, the need to **center survivors in programming**. Reimagining how Oxfam is navigated by survivors from the global majority, in all the nuance and complexity of life, ensures that the organization can adapt its programming, and ultimately its systems, to ensure that they are fit for purpose. This, coupled with **ensuring a decolonial methodology for MEAL and project management**, ensured that these pilots were in line with Oxfam's decolonial framing.

Addressing barriers means adapting to the context and continuously learning what exactly constitutes a barrier. **Oxfam learned that one barrier might not translate exactly elsewhere**. A particular barrier could be a blocker in one context but in another might offer a more nuanced opportunity to provide meaningful support to survivors.

For instance, while it is the case that community resolution mechanisms are preferred by members of the communities where Oxfam works, Oxfam should adapt and make use of opportunities to work alongside community structures and community collectives, especially those who already work on support for those who have experienced misconduct. This could provide an opportunity to further develop projects to work alongside key women's rights organizations (WROs) or racial justice activists on reparative justice for survivors and highlights the need for more work to be done on reparative justice for survivors.

This programming could be done through the provision of survivor-support projects with flexible funding, which are highly adaptive to the specific contexts in which Oxfam operates. Although the activities undertaken by the Oxfam in Ghana and Oxfam in Iraq projects may look similar on the surface, the specific activities involved demonstrated the contextual specificity of the barriers being addressed.

Both teams worked alongside and with partners. **Working with partners is key, especially as Oxfam continues to center decolonial partnerships across its programming**. Partnerships, and mitigating barriers to reporting, require the building of trust between Oxfam, partners and communities in a way that is not always straightforward. It requires time, emotional intelligence and awareness of power to build trust and demonstrate accountability. Team leaders in Ghana and Iraq ensured that staff were embedded alongside partners, and **that partners were provided with adequate and flexible budgets** to strengthen internal systems for reporting and accountability.

Both teams carried out further research on intersectionality, power and gender norms to better respond to the systemic barriers that had identified. **This allowed them to work with other teams, specifically gender justice,**

**protection and MEAL teams, and helped to embed the prevention of misconduct in programming.**

Overall, both Oxfam in Iraq and Oxfam in Ghana were able to design adaptive programming to flexibly address the barriers they identified during the research in 2019–20.

To summarize:

- Intersectionality matters. People are more able to share information and feel comfortable about expressing challenges in their community when they are divided by age, language group, etc.
- Partners are key. In Ghana, for example, their expertise and experience in connecting with TV and radio outlets had a significant impact on increasing awareness and the reach of key messaging.
- Overcoming barriers requires context specificity. Every single community and area has different power dynamics, with traditional and informal leaders, and this contributes to creating different barriers that survivors face. Each community also has a different relationship with Oxfam and its partners.
- More investment is needed to strengthen trust with partners and community members and ensure that Oxfam works alongside survivors to support them over the medium and long terms.

# CHALLENGES

The Oxfam in Iraq and Oxfam in Ghana teams had challenges in common. They both identified that the **limited time and budget for the pilot projects** meant that they were not able to work with all partners as closely as they would have liked. During the report writing period, both teams received more direct requests for support from partners, which they had to turn down.

One key barrier was visibility: in certain areas Oxfam is not the face of programming but rather partners are. **Community members reported that they did not know who to report to, while partners were unable or unsure of how to handle reports.** Although this in itself is not automatically a challenge, as it demonstrates that trust exists between community members and partners and also the quality of partners' community engagement, it still raises challenges in terms of identifying and reporting misconduct. It also raises issues around Oxfam's accountability obligations to communities.

Staffing remained a challenge. Many of the safeguarding and misconduct focal points working on the mitigation and prevention of misconduct were doing so only part of the time, as a percentage of their substantive roles. Increasingly Oxfam needs to continue investing in named safeguarding, and anti-fraud and corruption advisers based regionally; however, it is a very specific skillset to have the technical knowledge required as well as programmatic expertise. **These roles, as well as partnership expertise, require investment from Oxfam.**

The role of community resolution mechanisms, and mitigation of this barrier for survivors, **requires a power analysis rooted in an understanding of racial justice, and decolonial framing.** This requires time and flexibility to navigate, alongside partners, community members, religious authorities and informal justice systems. Oxfam can develop red lines and principles to engage community resolution mechanisms in line with its stated objectives to be anti-racist, intersectionally feminist, partner-led and safe, but this requires additional time and investment.

A final and interlinked set of challenges involved perceptions of confidentiality and survivor support. Survivors continue to perceive confidentiality, or the lack thereof, as the greatest obstacle to reporting misconduct. They are also not confident that they will receive adequate support through the process of reporting misconduct and beyond. There are real consequences to sexual misconduct, and this requires substantive ongoing long-term support. This requires investment from Oxfam on programming focused on survivor-support which is contextually specific and deals with the immediate, medium-term, and long-term implications of survivor-support alongside partners and communities where Oxfam works.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## POWER, INTERSECTIONALITY AND CONTEXT

**Barriers are highly context-specific and to tackle them, those designing programmes need to integrate an understanding of racialized power.**

Barriers to reporting misconduct need to be understood alongside key drivers of misconduct, and these vary significantly in every community. There are also systemic drivers of misconduct that align with global systems of oppression, specifically white supremacy and coloniality.

What is considered SEAH will differ substantially in different contexts; however, it requires micro- and macro-analysis to name and mitigate it. To tackle these issues, the following actions are needed:

- Every community in which Oxfam and its partners operate should be included in future power analyses, due to the differences in context in each area;
- Power analyses should be integrated in the naming of barriers, ensuring that these are understood through the lens of intersectionality;
- GBV sessions targeting men, authorities and traditional and informal groups should be delivered. This was recommended by the women who participated in the pilots, as they had witnessed improvements in the community where such sessions had been conducted;
- Awareness sessions on survivor blaming, child marriage and the prevention of forced marriage to perpetrators should be conducted at the community level;
- National campaigns that challenge the acceptability of SEAH should be integrated into influencing strategies for future work.

## DECOLONIAL PARTNERSHIPS

**Barriers to reporting misconduct can only be meaningfully mitigated by working alongside Global South actors within equitable partnerships.**

These partnerships need to include accountability, with actors like Oxfam mitigating their asymmetric power in the form of resources, access to financial institutions and global influence. There is also a need to acknowledge that the way risk is constructed is unequal, with smaller partners embedded within their communities bearing most of the programmatic risk and yet not being seen as credible actors in terms of risk management. Survivors will approach the systems, organizations and

people they trust most, and Oxfam's partnership approach needs to enable this to take place.

- Increased, long-term support is needed for other Oxfam partners that have not been targeted through this project (either within Iraq and Ghana or more broadly globally). Partners, in all their diversity, should have access to consistent support to strengthen reporting systems that work best for survivors. Partners can come in multiple forms (individual activists, birth attendants, healers, informal groups of women, small formal organizations) and Oxfam should work alongside groups that are trusted, especially from an intersectional perspective.
- Budgets should be allocated for similar projects to develop specific and relevant misconduct reporting channels jointly with partners.
- Oxfam should develop mechanisms to better learn what is and is not working in its partnership model, and more specifically in its system requirements for partnership and how these affect survivors.
- Support should be allocated to enhance confidentiality in misconduct reporting when working in partnership. Support for survivors, and their experiences, should be central to everything. It must be remembered that a lack of confidentiality can result in immediate threat to life for survivors reporting to Oxfam.

## INTEGRATED PROGRAMMING

**Programming should be integrated to better support the mitigation of barriers to reporting.**

Programming designed to counter GBV and promote protection (especially community protection), accountability, community engagement and economic security should be linked to mitigate systemic and personal barriers to reporting.

- It should be ensured that safe programming, accountability and feminist programming are mainstreamed across all areas.
- Awareness sessions on I/NGOs' codes of conduct and relevant policies should be conducted with all groups working alongside and with Oxfam.

## CONFIDENTIALITY, COMMUNITY RESOLUTION AND REPARATIVE JUSTICE

**Confidentiality and community resolution were barriers that the pilot projects identified as requiring the most long-term investment to address.**

Both these barriers require a nuanced understanding of community power dynamics and the building of trust. They do not have simple fixes but require long-term investment.

- More projects on safe programming and accountability should be created to better understand the risks associated with reporting and how

confidentiality is understood across Oxfam, its partners and the places where it works.

- Red lines for Oxfam on community resolution, confidentiality and partnership that put survivors at the center should be established. These should allow for nuance to ensure that survivors have meaningful agency and ownership over the support they receive, while being transparent about what Oxfam and partners can and will do.
- Community and partner consultations to better record understanding of survivors' reporting journeys should be designed. Community perceptions of what would constitute justice for survivors, across multiple demographics as relevant, should be listened to. Community resolution mechanisms should be co-designed with survivors.
- Develop and resource survivor support for Oxfam and partners.

## FAIR AND EQUITABLE RESOURCING

Resourcing and funding streams for the prevention of misconduct are largely embedded within compliance processes, and therefore are largely funded through cost recovery in projects.

There is very little documented evidence on integrating risk mitigation, survivor support and the mitigation of barriers to reporting through programming. **This report seeks to make the case for stand-alone funding for survivor-centered programming. However, this requires funding from donors and a cross-sectoral approach, especially in tackling systemic barriers facing survivors.**

- Increased risk appetite is required for funding to trial solutions involving community resolution mechanisms and that center survivors.
- Oxfam should work alongside funders who are willing and able to fund survivor support over the short, medium and long terms to realistically tackle barriers to reporting for survivors.
- There are specific staffing needs for these kinds of projects, which require specialized survivor support and intersectional skillsets. Expertise is also required to identify and mitigate barriers using intersectional power analysis. Oxfam should invest in training in these areas as well as provide resourcing.
- Junior staff across Oxfam and in partner organizations need adequate resourcing to be able to carry out the vital functions they are tasked with. Often these staff members work alongside (or are from) the communities in which Oxfam and its partners work. They need to be better supported, with fair and equitable wages and access to resourcing.

# CONCLUSION

Oxfam has an opportunity to meaningfully shift how the sector understands misconduct reporting. Putting survivors at the center of programming, in ways that reduce the barriers they face to reporting, has knock-on effects in reducing GBV, strengthening partnership practices and adapting both funding models and Oxfam systems for the better.

For too long, programming and systems have existed separately when it comes to misconduct. Community members, partner organizations and people who interact with Oxfam more generally deserve justice and accountability. Programming of this kind is a step in the right direction.



Poster distributed for campaign to end survivor-shaming. 'You can help me to end sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse'. Credit: Oxfam in Iraq

# GLOSSARY

This paper makes use of extensive labor undertaken to develop the Oxfam Decolonial Partnerships Strategy and Racial Justice Framework (publishing 2023). As this work on challenging misconduct requires naming systems of oppression, it needs to use explicitly anti-racist language.

This case study also uses technical terms that refer to SEAH (sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment) which come from a countering gender-based violence framework. This is in the acknowledgement that sexual misconduct refers to a specific type of sexual violence and has subsequent specific implications for language. For some, these terms may be unfamiliar or carry different meanings. A short glossary to clarify what Oxfam means by these terms is included here, see also [Oxfam's Inclusive Language Guide](#).<sup>17</sup>

**Anti-racism** is more than being non-racist. Anti-racism recognizes racism has systemic and structural elements, and actively takes steps to combat them.

**Coloniality** refers to the imbalance of power resulting from colonialism. It still infiltrates societies worldwide and is underpinned by the racial hierarchies imposed by colonialism.

**Colonialism** is the domination by one country over another through violence – to gain political control, occupy the land with settlers and exploit it economically. Many people may feel this no longer exists. But the domination over different countries' cultures, languages, religions, and economies remains.

**Decolonization** is the act of achieving independence from colonialism and undoing the harm it caused. For the purpose of our work in international development, it's an ongoing process of shifting decolonial power back to Black, Indigenous and People of Color, who are calling for agency over their political and economic structures – as well as culture, society, education, language and voice.

**Decoloniality** is the act of delinking from the colonial matrix of power with a focus on disrupting the legacies of colonialism which remains in mindsets and belief systems, and which can show up in everyone regardless of race.

**Employees and representatives** include all employees of Oxfam GB. The term also includes board members, volunteers, interns, and international and local consultants, day laborers, in addition to individual and corporate contractors of these entities and related personnel. This includes non-Oxfam entities and their employees and individuals who have entered into partnership, subgrant or sub-recipient agreements with Oxfam.

The terms **Global South** & **Global North** help us to discern majority BIPOC countries from rich, mainly white countries that colonized them. They're imperfect terms due to geography (e.g. Australia is in the Global South), and



how they overlook the differences in contexts and cultures. But they're relatively easy for a wide audience to understand, and we lack a better alternative.

**Intersectionality** recognizes how various parts of our identity – like race, sex, gender, sexuality, class and ability – overlap to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. It was created to understand how Black women face both racism and sexism. Nowadays, it's applied more widely to other aspects of identity, and it's vital that race is always the starting point.

**Racial justice** is the systematic fair treatment of people of all races, with equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. It goes beyond 'anti-racism'; it isn't just the absence of discrimination and inequities, but also the presence of deliberate systems that redistribute racial power.

**Sexual abuse** refers to the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions. This would include forced marriage and sexual slavery and includes sexual activity with a child (any person under the age of 18).

**Sexual exploitation** is 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. Oxfam recognizes that the terms sexual abuse and exploitation represent a wide spectrum of behaviors and is not limited to the act of sexual intercourse.

**Sexual harassment** is any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favor, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behavior of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another. Such conduct is also considered sexual harassment when it interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. While typically involving a pattern of behavior, it can take the form of a single incident. Sexual harassment may occur between persons of the opposite or same sex. Both males and females can be either the victims or the offenders.

**Survivor** is the term to refer to any survivor of sexual harassment, exploitation or abuse allegedly perpetrated by Oxfam GB employees or representatives, or as a direct result of Oxfam GB's work. Survivors may include victims of modern slavery, adults and children, Oxfam staff and people from the communities in which it works.

A **survivor-centered approach** is one where the wellbeing and the wishes of the survivor of an incident are put at the center of all actions taken. This includes ensuring:

- The safety and security of the survivor, any dependents, witnesses, or whistleblowers;
- Assurance is given that issues will be handled in confidence;
- The survivor's wishes (self-determination) and best interests are taken into account;

- The survivor is treated with dignity and respect, demonstrating belief and trust;
- The individual, their family, friends, and community are empowered;
- There is a timely response at each stage;
- There are no limitations on who reports or when they report;
- An individual can report a concern or incident at any time after it happens. Everyone is able and encouraged to report.

**Whiteness** is a culture that opens doors for white people and excludes Black, Indigenous and People of Color. It exists worldwide, where white people feel their race is the norm. It affects our power, how society accepts us, and access to things like jobs, education and political voice.

**White saviorism** defines how people want to 'fix' perceived problems in nations mainly populated by Black, Indigenous and People of Color. It wrongly paints BIPOC as poor, helpless and needy. It puts power in the hands of white people, and assumes they've all the knowledge, experience, and tools. At Oxfam, we recognize its harm and commit to moving from saviorism to solidarity.

**White supremacy** refers to the deep-seated and, at times, subconscious belief that white people are superior to Black, Indigenous and People of Color. It exists worldwide and is more than the behavior of individuals. Instead, it is a system of exploitation and oppression of which we are all part.

# ANNEX

In 2019, Oxfam began developing a set of research to better classify and understand barriers to reporting from a survivor's perspective. Alongside Sonders Collective, the research developed a methodology to divide barriers identified into three categories. These are:

1. Personal e.g. I react based on what is expected, and accept that this is the way things are
2. Interactional e.g. I am afraid of losing status, privileges or access to services
3. Structural e.g. I make decisions based on my immediate environment.

Personal factors are most closely tied to how someone innately thinks and feels. They include factors that can be seen as intrinsic, or belonging naturally to an individual, and are most strongly tied to their sense of self. Personal factors can be thought of as intangible characteristics, such as a person's belief system, the values that they hold and the lived experiences that they carry with them.

Interactional factors are more identifiable and are more visibly the result of an interaction between a person and their social network or environment. Interactional factors include the negative consequences in relation to other people and/or organizations that can occur as a result of speaking up.

Structural factors refer to the tangible elements or the formal systems and structures in an individual's immediate environment that shape the choices that are and are not available to them.

Decision-making behavior in any environment is dynamic and can never be fully distilled down to its individual components. Similarly, behavior relating to safeguarding and misconduct reporting in the Iraqi or Ghanaian social environment cannot be deconstructed in its entirety. For that reason, the above framework was utilized as a guide to orient thinking, with the understanding that the various influencing factors overlap and can strengthen or diminish the weight of each other.

## GHANA

### 1. PERSONAL FACTORS

These are the factors that are most closely tied to how someone innately thinks and feels.

- 1.1 **Perceived consequences**; If I report, I will have to face repercussions.
- 1.2 **Independent fact-finding**; I must obtain all the information before reporting.
- 1.3 **Trust**; I don't have trust in individuals or reporting systems.
- 1.4 **Shame**; I don't wish to bring shame upon myself or others.

## 2. INTERACTIONAL FACTORS

These are the factors that are more visibly the result of an interaction between a person and their social network or environment.

- 2.1 **Hierarchy**; It is important to go up the reporting line and not skip the line.
- 2.2 **Hidden power**; The organization would never harm us.
- 2.3 **Uncertainty**; I am unsure what will happen when I report.

## 3. STRUCTURAL FACTORS

These are the tangible elements or the formal systems and structures in an individual's immediate environment that shape the choices that are and are not available to them.

- 3.1 **No perceived action**; No action will be taken if I report.
- 3.2 **Awareness**; No information is shared with us. We don't know how to report and whether any mechanisms exist for doing so.
- 3.3 **Community resolution**; It should be dealt with at the local level.
- 3.4 **Access**; There is no reporting channel we are able or willing to access.

# IRAQ

## 1. PERSONAL FACTORS

These are the factors that are most closely tied to how someone innately thinks and feels.

- 1.1 **Reputation and honor**; The way I am viewed by people and by my community is important for me and my family.
- 1.2 **Confidentiality**; I do not know who to trust, talk to or confide in as this issue is so sensitive.
- 1.3 **Resignation**; I can't change my situation, this is the way things are here and now.

## 2. INTERACTIONAL FACTORS

These are the factors which are more visibly the result of an interaction between a person and their social network or environment.

- 2.1 **Gender**; Reporting is a man's role, and a woman's role is to be supported.
- 2.2 **Attitude**; I cannot approach the staff as they are impatient, harsh and disrespectful.
- 2.3 **Loss**; I am afraid of losing my life, job and/or access to services and privileges that I rely on.
- 2.4 **Normalization**; Corruption and misconduct are normal to us.

### 3. STRUCTURAL FACTORS

These are the tangible elements or the formal systems and structures in an individual's immediate environment that shape the choices that are and are not available to them.

3.1 **Visibility;** We don't know who works for which NGO, and we don't know the difference between all the different NGOs.

3.2 **Awareness;** I don't know what should be done or how to do it.

3.3 **Quality of service;** Issues with services we receive come first, before we can discuss misconduct.

3.4 **Community resolution;** My challenges will be resolved by appointed community members, through a collective decision-making process.

3.5 **No perceived action;** Nothing is ever done when we report, so we are left hopeless.

# NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Oxfam. (2019). *Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting in Kachin, Myanmar*. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/factors-influencing-misconduct-reporting-in-kachin-myanmar-620893/>
- <sup>2</sup> Oxfam. (2020). *Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting in Saladin and Nineveh, Iraq*. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/factors-influencing-misconduct-reporting-in-saladin-and-nineveh-iraq-620929/>
- <sup>3</sup> Oxfam. (2019). *Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting in Sawla and Tarkwa, Ghana*. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/factors-influencing-misconduct-reporting-in-sawla-and-tarkwa-ghana-620946/>
- <sup>4</sup> Oxfam. (2019). *Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting in Kachin, Myanmar*. Op.cit.
- <sup>5</sup> Oxfam. (2020). *Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting in Saladin and Nineveh, Iraq*. Op.cit.
- <sup>6</sup> Oxfam. (2019). *Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting in Sawla and Tarkwa, Ghana*. Op.cit.
- <sup>7</sup> Misconduct at Oxfam includes fraud and corruption, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, child abuse, and issues relating to human resources (staff behavior, bullying and harassment). Although this report refers to broader misconduct, it acknowledges that sexual misconduct is a unique and specific type of misconduct which carries consequences on trauma, and long-term stigma. Where possible the report will refer to sexual misconduct specifically- and in doing so will refer to those who have experienced sexual misconduct as survivors.
- <sup>8</sup> See Oxfam's Policy and Practice. *Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting: A meta-analysis*. July 2020. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/factors-influencing-misconduct-reporting-a-meta-analysis-621022>
- See Oxfam International. *Tackling fraud and corruption at Oxfam and Integrity at Oxfam* report for April–September. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/tackling-fraud-and-corruption-oxfam>
- <sup>9</sup> See Oxfam's Policy and Practice. *Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting: A meta-analysis*. Op.cit.
- <sup>10</sup> Oxfam. (2019). *Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting in Kachin, Myanmar*. Op.cit.
- <sup>11</sup> Oxfam. (2020). *Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting in Saladin and Nineveh, Iraq*. Op.cit.
- <sup>12</sup> Oxfam. (2019). *Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting in Sawla and Tarkwa, Ghana*. Op.cit.
- <sup>13</sup> Oxfam. (2020). *Factors Influencing Misconduct Reporting: A meta-analysis*. Op.cit.
- <sup>14</sup> Oxfam. (2022). *Transforming for a Radically Better World: Oxfam's commitments to anti-racism, feminism and shifting power*. [https://www.oxfam.org.uk/documents/558/Transforming for a radically better world 1.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org.uk/documents/558/Transforming%20for%20a%20radically%20better%20world_1.pdf)
- <sup>15</sup> **Resignation** refers to the feeling expressed by survivors that what happened to them did not necessitate a reaction. A common feeling amongst survivors of complex trauma, resignation is linked to a lack of perceived agency following a traumatic event.
- Reputation** (often expressed as **shame**) refers to a need to uphold honor and reputation of the self and the collective. Survivors describe their reputation as being linked to that of their family and their broader community. Consequently, reporting would mean demeaning their reputation and their family's reputation in turn.
- Normalization** refers to the sheer volume of misconduct that takes place and communities are subjected to, when it becomes so common that an internalized sense of apathy develops. This is another common response to complex trauma.
- Gender** here refers to an internalized misogynistic belief expressed by many community members that men are more to be trusted in their communities as safekeepers of honor and justice.
- <sup>16</sup> Oxfam International. *Say 'Enough' to violence against women and girls*. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/take-action/campaigns/say-enough-violence-against-women-and-girls>
- <sup>17</sup> Oxfam. (2023). *Inclusive Language Guide*. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/inclusive-language-guide-621487/>

# OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of 21 organizations, working with its partners and allies, reaching out to millions of people around the world. Together, we tackle inequalities to end poverty and injustice, now and in the long term – for an equal future. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit [www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org).

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