Women in Syria 'forced to exchange sexual favours' for UN aid

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<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/02/27/women-syria-forced-exchange-sexual-favours-un-aid/>

Women in refugee camps in Syria have been forced to offer sexual favours in return for aid from the United Nations, a report has found, in the latest accusation to hit the sector.

Aid workers would allegedly regularly harass and abuse women and girls trying to [access humanitarian assistance](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/14/un-attacked-for-giving-control-of-aid-to-assad-regime-in-syria/) in the war-torn country, to the point that some stopped asking.

Some victims were allegedly forced to marry locally-hired officials working for the UN and other international charities for “sexual services” in order to receive meals.

The allegations have been published by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which conducted an assessment of gender-based violence in the region last year and concluded that aid was being exchanged for sex.

The UN had been warned of such activity three years before, but the report suggests the abuse was continuing until at least late 2017.

The report, entitled Voices from Syria 2018, claimed that aid distribution sites are often perceived by women as unsafe places which are dominated by men.

Women and girls “without male protectors”, such as widows and divorcees as well as female refugees, were regarded as particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

“We have heard about a few cases where women are exploited during aid distributions,” one woman told interviewers from the UNFPA. “Some distributors might ask for a woman’s phone number, or they might give her a lift to her house to take something in return.”

Examples were given of women or girls marrying officials for a short period of time for “sexual services” in order to receive meals; distributors asking for telephone numbers of women and girls; obtaining distributions in exchange for a visit to her home or “in exchange for services, such as spending a night with them".

“The more the girl gives to the distributor, the more aid she will receive.” a teenage girl from Idlib in northern Syria, added.

The sexual exploitation - and the threat of it - in some cases became a barrier to accessing humanitarian aid.

The teenage girl, whose identity has been protected, said some women had given up asking for aid for fear they would have to pay with their bodies.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC), headed by former British politician David Miliband, released its own survey more than two years ago which indicated similar abuse was happening in 2015.

It said about 40 per cent of those interviewed said sexual violence took place when they were accessing services in the southern Syrian cities of Daraa and Quneitra.

The report was presented at a meeting of UN agencies in Jordan, after which they agreed to tighten up their procedures.

The IRC said: "Within our own operations, we launched new programmes and systems to better protect women and girls in southern Syria. Those programmes continue to be funded by a range of donors, including DfID (the UK's Department for International Development)."

However, the latest UN report suggests agencies failed to put a stop to the activity. A DfID spokesman said it was not aware of any cases like this involving UK aid.

"There are mechanisms already in place to raise issues of abuse and exploitation," they said. "DfID partners in Syria use third party monitors to verify UK aid distributed in Syria."

"Sexual exploitation and abuse of women and girls has been ignored, it's been known about and ignored for seven years," said Danielle Spencer, a humanitarian adviser working for a charity.

"Somewhere there has been a decision made that it is OK for women's bodies to continue to be used, abused, violated in order for aid to be delivered for a larger group of people," Ms Spencer, who worked in refugee camps in Jordan three years ago, told the BBC.

Revelations earlier this month that [Oxfam workers paid for prostitutes](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/02/12/oxfam-scandal-deepens-allegations-sex-aid-abuse-charity-shops/) during Haiti's 2010 earthquake have exposed a widespread problem in the industry.

UN programmes are already viewed with deep suspicion by many in Syria.

The world body has been accused of [lacking impartiality in the conflict](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/14/un-attacked-for-giving-control-of-aid-to-assad-regime-in-syria/), effectively allowing President Bashar al-Assad to dictate where aid goes in the country.

In 2016, more than 70 aid groups suspended cooperation with the UN in Syria and demanded an investigation into its operations because of concerns the government was preventing assistance from reaching rebel-held areas.