



# Act Before Harm Is Done: Preventing Abuse in Disaster Zones

## *Lessons Sharing from Indonesia for Myanmar and the Region*

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When disasters strike, people are at their most vulnerable — they've lost homes, loved ones, livelihoods. In these moments, humanitarian organizations step in with shelter, food, water, and comfort. But there is another responsibility that comes with that power: ensuring we do no harm.

Unfortunately, the risk of sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (SEAH) is real — especially in the confusion of an emergency. These forms of misconduct can happen not only to affected communities, but within the humanitarian workforce itself. When communities are displaced, services stretched, and many new volunteers and responders arrive, power imbalances multiply, and protective systems are often missing or weak. While survivors in communities face coercion and exploitation, aid workers — particularly those in junior positions, on short-term or volunteer contracts, or with less institutional power — are also at risk of harassment and abuse. Reporting systems are often unclear, inaccessible, or distrusted, leaving many to choose silence. Indonesia's experience shows that awareness alone is not enough. It takes intentional action, context-sensitive strategies, and most importantly a shift in culture — from silence to safety, from shame to accountability.

The humanitarian sector has often treated SEAH as the result of “bad apples.” But sexual abuse doesn't occur in a vacuum. It thrives in environments where hierarchies go unquestioned, accountability is weak, and the culture favors silence over challenge. They are rooted in structural inequality, gendered power dynamics, and organizational cultures that tolerate silence or normalize harm. SEAH is not just a protection issue — it's a structural and public health crisis. It increases the risk of HIV, STIs, unwanted pregnancies, and long-term psychological harm. In many cases, survivors are retraumatized by the very systems meant to help them. And when abuse is not addressed, trust in humanitarian action erodes — for good reason. Preventing abuse must be about more than policies and codes. It's about changing the system conditions that allow abuse to happen — and persist.

### **Silence Is Not Consent: Cultural Norms Can Enable Harm**

In Indonesia, as in many cultures, **people are taught to be grateful for any help they receive — even when that help is below standard, inappropriate, or comes with conditions.** Aid is often seen as a gift, not a right. In this dynamic, it becomes incredibly difficult for survivors to speak up about misconduct, coercion, or mistreatment. Complaining, even about abuse, may be seen as disrespectful or ungrateful. Similarly, aid workers may tolerate inappropriate behavior, including sexual harassment, as part of “just how things are”. Victims may not recognize certain behaviors

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as misconduct or may feel reporting won't lead to change. Bystanders may stay silent, unsure whether their concerns will be taken seriously or worried about retaliation.

After the Cianjur earthquake, assessments showed that many community members and aid workers did not feel safe or confident in raising concerns. Some even felt that accepting mistreatment was a trade-off for receiving assistance. This deeply rooted mindset makes the job of preventing SEAH not just a technical issue, but a cultural one.

### **What We've Learned: Start with Awareness, Follow with Action**

Indonesia's progress on PSEAH has come through practical, community-grounded efforts:

- The PSEAH risk and capacity assessment contributed to identifying key risks and strategic opportunities to strengthen prevention and response efforts.
- Awareness-raising sessions and community dialogues helped demystify the topic and reduce stigma
- Involvement of local leaders and women's groups helped build trust in reporting pathways
- Establishing simple, clear reporting procedures — even SMS or verbal — increased access
- Identify existing referral services for survivors (medical, legal, psychological) to ensure real follow-up. If there is limited capacity, the emergency gender-based violence prevention and response programs and PSEAH interventions should strengthen these referral services.
- Protection for whistleblowers and survivors helped reduce fear of retaliation
- Support and supervision for frontline volunteers, who are often the closest point of contact

Efforts by organizations in Indonesia like UNFPA Indonesia, UN OCHA Indonesia, CRS Indonesia, Oxfam in Indonesia, Save the Children Indonesia, and the Indonesian Society for Disaster Management (MPBI) have helped introduce localized, survivor-centered approaches to prevention and response. By working together as part of the PSEAH Network provided opportunities to expand the voices and share the resources.



*Figure 1. Training and awareness raising about PSEAH for volunteers and aid workers involved in Cianjur Earthquake response (2022)*

True prevention means going beyond surface-level inclusion. It means designing programs that actively redistribute power, challenge discriminatory norms, and center the leadership of women

and marginalized communities. This also means recognizing that SEAH doesn't just occur because people don't know the rules — it happens when systems protect the powerful and silence the vulnerable. Power must be intentionally shared, not just acknowledged.

### **A Call to Action for Myanmar and the Humanitarian Community**

As countries like Myanmar mobilize massive post-earthquake operations, this is the moment to get PSEAH right — from the beginning. We call on:

- Organizations working in the response efforts to embed PSEAH into recruitment process, pre-departure orientation, daily briefings, and supervision routines — especially for volunteers and frontline workers
- Coordinating bodies to ensure survivor services (health, psychosocial, legal) are available and mapped early
- Donors and funding agencies to go beyond policy statements — by requiring organizations they fund to demonstrate PSEAH compliance, real implementation, and staff capacity, and by supporting them to strengthen these systems
- Community actors to be supported not just as beneficiaries, but as co-designers of protection systems

Because PSEAH is not just about preventing harm — it's about building trust, reinforcing dignity, and ensuring that the power we hold as humanitarians is used responsibly.

### ***We welcome your thoughts.***

*This article is part of a series reflecting on Indonesia's experience in disaster response, aimed at contributing to shared learning and regional dialogue — particularly in the context of the Myanmar earthquake response. We warmly invite others to share their perspectives, experiences, and ideas.*

*For comments or contributions, please contact the MPBI Secretariat at [mpbi.sekretariat@gmail.com](mailto:mpbi.sekretariat@gmail.com). To learn more about our work, visit [www.mpbi.info](http://www.mpbi.info).*