



Orly Stern

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## Shades of grey in 'sexual exploitation and abuse'

2 comments

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*In a personal piece reflecting on her work as a gender violence specialist in northeast Nigeria, Orly Stern highlights the complexity of the relationships of women living in displaced persons camps.*

The elders were worried about the numbers of pregnant women in the camp. Women should not have been getting pregnant, since most of them were married – albeit to men who had been in military detention for well over two years. A few years back, the Nigerian military, embroiled in a fight with Boko Haram, arrested military-age men, detaining them as possible collaborators. The women had received no word on their husbands' whereabouts, or if they were even alive.

So, the pregnancies should not have been happening, the elders thought. Yet the growing ranks of pregnant stomachs revealed that something was going on. They decided action must be taken. A patrol was formed – a group of men, a camera – and sent out at night to rove between tents, seeking to catch misbehavior.

Around midnight on a Saturday, the patrol caught a pair “red handed”. They burst in, snapping photographs of a woman frantically covering herself. Her lover sat beside her. They looked shocked by the late-night intrusion. When questioned, they said they had been in a relationship for months, they loved each other and wished to marry. The elders were angry that the couple had entered their relationship without following procedures – seeking elders’ approval, informing camp management – especially since she was technically still married. The man worked on a sanitation project funded by an international humanitarian organization. For this reason, I was called in.

I work on northeast Nigeria’s humanitarian response, a growing operation catering to an ever-worsening crisis. I’m a gender violence specialist, hired to work on “sexual exploitation and abuse”, a type of gender violence focused on abuse of power by humanitarians over beneficiaries. We’d heard terrible things about levels of exploitation in the camps; of men conducting food distributions and only giving ‘tokens’ to girls who’d allow them to ‘visit’ at night; of areas of the camp with few young women being bypassed for assistance; of teenagers snuck out of camps to nearby hotels to ‘service’ local men. Girls traded sex for biscuits, milk or a dollar or two – speaking to immense levels of desperation. When cases of exploitation by humanitarians are reported, my role is to investigate and act.

My first reaction when briefed on this case was irritation. With the shocking exploitation we know to be going on, I was being asked to investigate a case that seemed to me to be two adults having consensual sex – albeit sex that had angered the elders. I felt uncomfortable travelling there, the foreign woman with the notepad, to ask intrusive questions to an

already humiliated woman. My job is to prevent abuse, not to police sexual morality. Yet, my job is to take reports of exploitation seriously, so off to the camp I went.

First, a note on how challenging this is. While the camp is mere hours by road from Maiduguri, where the humanitarian response is centered, it's not just a matter of driving there. Maiduguri, where Boko Haram hailed from, is under military control, with strong military presence allowing relative safety and movement. Yet, drive half a kilometer out in any direction and its *wild west* – where Boko Haram roams freely and heavily armed military convoys come under frequent deadly attack. A helicopter had to be authorized days ahead, security clearances attained, word sent to those meeting me, in a place with no phone coverage – just some of the challenges in investigating abuse in places so remote and inaccessible.

I recognized the woman from the half-naked photo that had been taken by the patrol. A complicated three-way translation ensued, with one man translating my English into Hausa, the next translating it into her local dialect, awaiting her response, then back again – not the way you want to be asking sensitive questions to an embarrassed woman. I apologized for the personal questions, explained that we were trying to help her, then proceeded with a line of carefully worded, yet invasive questions about her relationship and her motivations for being in it. Everything about this felt icky.

She told me she had met the man at the water pumps. He had helped her on a number of occasions – allowing her to skip the queue, saving her hours of waiting. He promised he would buy her food and clothes, which over the coming months he did. When I asked why she became involved with him, she said it was because she and her children needed assistance, which he could provide. They grew close, saw each other every day and began discussing marriage.

After the patrol burst in, they were forbidden from seeing each other. I asked how she felt about their relationship ending. She began to cry. She said, "I feel very bad, because since then I do not receive any assistance

from him. Now I have no one to assist me.” She explained how badly women with no husbands struggle. This is why she, like many, have relationships with NGO men – so they might “stand up for them” and help them find what they need in the difficult camps environs.

My discomfort was rising. Clearly her stated motivations revealed an exchange – a relationship entered into for humanitarian assistance – putting this squarely within the realm of ‘sexual exploitation and abuse’. In the binary thinking of gender violence practitioners, “violence = bad = should be stopped”. Here, the ‘violence’ in question had been terminated, yet she sat before me sobbing at having had this thing taken away, that she had worked so hard to get, that she so badly needed. She ranted angrily about how unfair it was that she was being prevented from seeing him. There was no semblance of a violated women grateful for being saved from further violation.

Sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian crises is an area fraught with complexity. Don’t get me wrong, men exploiting women is bad and must be addressed and punished. Yet consider the other side: women make fully informed decisions to be ‘exploited’, revealing that they have weighed up their options, considered the implications of doing or not doing, and have decided that entering the relationship is to their benefit. Who are we to say their decision is wrong? In terminating these unions, the women lose – and everyone feels worse for it. On the other hand, exploitation is harmful and can have terrible consequences. I’m not for a moment arguing it should be allowed.

I write this piece, because I don’t know the answer – to this case or others like it. While there are cases of exploitation that are obviously harmful, violent and wrong – others present in shades of grey. I feel confused about my role and how to fight this grey ‘violence’. I hate that I was called in because the authorities were upset about sexual practices they perceived as violating traditions – and that in labelling something ‘sexual exploitation’, they got a quick international response. I hate that this seemingly consensual, even loving relationship, did turn out to have

exploitative or transactionary underpinnings. I hate that us putting an end to this 'exploitation', left the 'victim' more vulnerable, and devastated – and that in her eyes the harm had actually been committed by us, who had stopped her. I can't think of another area of gender violence programming that has left me so unsettled, so unsure about what we are doing, so unclear of right or wrong.

Humanitarian crises turn mores and judgements on their heads. I sit here in northeast Nigeria, not at all sure what I achieved this week – whether I helped, or whether, as the tears running down the woman's face suggest, we collectively may have done more harm than good.

*The views, thoughts and opinions expressed in this blog post are those of the author(s) only, and do not reflect LSE's or those of the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security.*

### About the author



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Orly Stern (@orlystern) is a researcher, consultant and international lawyer, focusing on armed conflict, gender, security and law. Orly has worked and researched in countries including Iraq, South Sudan, northern Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Central African Republic, Jordan, Uganda and South Africa. She has consulted for various international organisations, research institutions and NGOs, and has published extensively in her field. Orly is a senior fellow with the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. She holds a PhD in law from the London School of Economics and a Masters in human rights law from Harvard University.

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