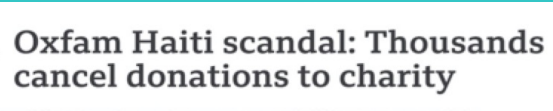


Teaching Cases

Oxfam Sexual Misconduct: how did the organisation respond?

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Oxfam Sexual Misconduct: how did the organisation respond?

In the face of whistleblowing over sexual misconduct by members of staff working in the emergency response team in Haiti, Oxfam chose to take a ‘business as usual approach’, covering up the extent of allegations made against the organisation. The charity sector is expected to be the standard bearer of good practice – transparent, responsible, accountable. When Oxfam failed to deliver, it paid a heavy price.

Key questions:

- Was the sexual misconduct structural?
- Were the operational structures at Oxfam a problem in themselves?
- Did the problem lie in response to an extraordinary set of circumstances presented to Oxfam?
- Has Oxfam been unfairly judged due to an expectation that charities will act differently and ‘better’ than other sectors?

Timeline of the Oxfam sexual misconduct scandal

2011

- (6 Sep) ✓ Oxfam boss in Haiti stands down after staff misconduct

2012-2017

2018

- (9 Feb) ✓ Oxfam accused of covering up use of sex workers by aid workers
- (12 Feb) ✓ Oxfam deputy chief executive resigns in wake of Haiti scandal
- (13 Feb) ✓ Charity commission launches investigation into Oxfam over safeguarding claims
- (14 Feb) ✓ Over 1,200 direct debits to Oxfam cancelled since Haiti scandal
- (16 Feb) ✓ Ex-Oxfam Haiti director denies use of sex workers
✓ Oxfam publishes internal report from 2011 about Haiti incidents
- (19 Feb) ✓ Oxfam withdraws from applying for DFID funding
- (23 Feb) ✓ Haitian government suspends Oxfam GB as it investigates charity
- (16 Mar) ✓ Oxfam appoints independent commission to review its safeguarding
- (6 May) ✓ Mark Goldring to stand down as chief executive of Oxfam
- (11 Jun) ✓ European commission resumes awarding grants to Oxfam
- (18 Jun) ✓ Oxfam to cut programmes after sexual misconduct costs it £16M
- (27 Jul) ✓ Oxfam training 119 more safeguarding investigators

2019

- (17 Jan) ✓ Independent commission publishes interim report into Oxfam
- (14 May) ✓ Oxfam fires 43 staff following abuse investigations

Source: Modified from Civil Society Media
<https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/voices/timeline-of-the-oxfam-sexual-misconduct-scandal.html>

Introduction

On the 9th February 2018, British newspaper *The Times* published a front-page article, with shocking allegations about senior staff at Oxfam GB—one of the most prominent international humanitarian organisations—of sexual exploitation during Oxfam’s Haiti earthquake recovery programme in 2010. The article also claimed that the organisation subsequently sought to cover the exploitation up.

At least 8 employees left the organisation as a result of the events. Following an internal investigation in Haiti, four of these individuals were dismissed for gross misconduct, which included: failing to protect staff; bullying and intimidation; and misuse of Oxfam property and equipment, including hiring sex workers at residences. Oxfam did not report the allegations or results of the investigation to regulators, nor its public or organisational donors. As such, the misconduct was managed privately within the organisation.

In brushing the problem under the carpet and in seeking to minimise its fallout, Oxfam brought the entire charity sector into disrepute. More than corporate leaders, directors of charities are expected to act ethically and accountably, with transparent organisational operations. The incidents that unfolded placed Oxfam’s reputation in question.

The initial misconduct was compounded by the complacency of Oxfam leaders in addressing the issue. As trust reached a new low, Oxfam—who boasted a 76-year history—faltered. Ten days after news of the sexual misconduct allegations broke, it was reported that more than 7,000 individual donors, with donations worth £14 million, cancelled their regular donations. Alongside withdrawal of a significant portion of government funding, companies such as Heathrow, the Co-Operative Bank, VISA, and Marks and Spencer expressed intention to withdraw financial support. Additionally, famous figures such as the actor Minnie Driver, and human rights activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu, resigned as ambassadors. Oxfam reportedly made £16 million worth of cuts in response and was prevented from applying for any new government funding until it had thoroughly investigated and taken appropriate action to ensure adequate safeguarding was in place. In June 2018, Haiti withdrew Oxfam’s right to work in the country.

Senior leaders at the charity repeatedly apologised for the scandal and announced new safeguarding policies. In the aftermath, Penny Lawrence, Vice President of Oxfam, who was Programme Director during the Haiti earthquake in Haiti resigned. Mark Goldring, Oxfam CEO in 2018, stepped down from his position after taking responsibility for the misconduct.

Oxfam senior leadership faced increased public scrutiny during interviews and questioning by the International Development committee, as well as accusations of hypocrisy and mismanagement in mainstream media.

Who is Oxfam?

In 1942, Oxfam was founded by a group of academics, social activists, and Quakers as a committee for famine relief. However, it was not until 1960 that Oxfam made its mark as a major international non-governmental aid organisation, after a new branch was founded in Canada. Oxfam International was formed in 1995 by multiple independent non-governmental organisations, with the aim of international-level impact to decrease poverty and injustice. Alongside these overarching aims, Oxfam has incorporated a rights-based approach to its work, which includes: the right to a sustainable livelihood; the right to basic social services; the right to life and security; the right to be heard; and the right to an identity. The organisation now comprises twenty independent charitable organisations, and has worked with more than 90 countries over the last 70 years.

Protecting women’s rights is, and has, long been one of the main visions emphasised by Oxfam. With severe gender discrimination and oppression still present throughout the world, Oxfam has expressed its willingness to defend the human rights of poor and marginalised women, taking the lead in making a better world “where women and girls live free from violence and discrimination”.¹

In line with the vision, Oxfam believes that “there is no economic, social, and environmental justice without gender justice,” and sets a goal of “work[ing] with communities before, during, and after crises to build their resilience, save lives, and together address the root causes of conflict and disaster”.²

As with many NGOs, people expected Oxfam to be open and transparent about its activities, funding, and internal operations. In particular, as Oxfam was viewed as a leading INGO, it was assumed that they operated under the highest ethical standards, and in line with their founding visions. Oxfam’s strong brand image as a ‘moral’ organisation may have led to the belief that abuse would not occur within the organisation.

However, the actions of Oxfam staff in exploiting vulnerable women, and the subsequent organisational cover-up, fell well short of Oxfam’s own vision and goals.

What happened in Haiti?

In January 2010, Haiti was hit by a devastating earthquake. Following this disaster, organisations across the world started to provide humanitarian aid. Oxfam mobilised its international network, which had been operational in Haiti since 1978. An influx of Oxfam resources and personnel arrived in Haiti, providing food and shelter to help mitigate the severe impact of the earthquake. Clean water was also distributed, and compromised water supplies were fixed. Oxfam described the situation as the “worst [they had] ever faced”. It was reported that Oxfam reached 300,000 people in the first three months of operations.

Oxfam also aimed to offer sustainable and long-term solutions through “international development programmes”, such as supporting residents to make a living, and other regional development aims. In line with such goals, the organisation intended to integrate disaster risk and climate change into its development and humanitarian programmes in Haiti. Furthermore, Oxfam specifically stated that it would promote the establishment of cooperative relationships with the local communities to support the vulnerable effectively, and invest in various initiatives to improve Haitians’ self-reliance.³

However, in July 2011, Oxfam GB senior officials received an email from a whistleblower on the Oxfam staff, alerting them to an incident of concern. The email contained accusations of sexual misconduct against staff who had been supporting on-the-ground operations in Haiti. It was claimed that aid workers, including the then Director of Operations in Haiti, Roland Van Hauwermeiren, had engaged in sexual relations with groups of underage women in a villa being paid for by Oxfam. A second email was received in August of the same year, further detailing these allegations.

These were the first instances in which the Oxfam CEO was individually, and specifically, informed of the allegations and situation in Haiti. However, this was not the first that Oxfam had heard about this. In November 2010, a whistle-blower made contact with Oxfam’s Human Resources department. They were concerned that field staff seemed to be unaware of their obligations to protect against physical and sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA). This was later identified in a 2019 internal report, which highlighted poor organisational practice with reference to: oversight; staff recruitment and training; and procedures in relation to misconduct. In these investigations further findings emerged, including the news that before becoming Oxfam’s Country Director in Haiti, Van Hauwermeiren had been fired from another charity over allegations of sex parties while working in Chad.

¹ According to Oxfam International Web-page (2023) - Available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/about/what-we-believe>.

² *ibid.*

³ Oxfam International (2011) - Available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/haiti-progress-report-2010>.

The cover-up

Following the 2011 email, an internal investigation was conducted. Evidence was gathered from some 40 witnesses, which led to the dismissal of 8 employees for ‘gross misconduct’. These internal procedures were reported to the Charity Commission at the time, but Oxfam did not disclose the full circumstances of the allegations which had led to this inquiry. Roland Van Hauwermeiren—who admitted to sexual misconduct—was allowed to quietly resign without further consequences.

It seems that for Oxfam, risk management was not about identifying, and mitigating against, the risks that vulnerable people could face, but rather about protecting their reputation and brand.

Oxfam’s first safeguarding coordinator, William Anderson, said “safeguarding was only valued in the abstract and was about ticking boxes rather than seriously looking at the dynamics that foster abuse”.⁴

The Charity Commission launched a formal investigation into Oxfam, conducted over a period of 18 months, during which the organisation lost £20 million in government funding. Published in June 2019, the Inquiry uncovered a series of opportunities where Oxfam’s leadership team, and organisation as a whole, failed to comprehensively and transparently investigate the allegations of sexual misconduct. The report concluded that only limited steps had been taken to address the allegations of misconduct which, in themselves, were deemed to be insufficient.

The misconduct cover-up

Would Oxfam have covered up the misconduct had they been led by their values? Oxfam had several opportunities to go public about the situation in Haiti. They could have stated clearly to the Charity Commission what the accusations were, and could have been more transparent with the Haitian government when they were made aware of the misconduct. Faced with a choice, Oxfam decided to protect its reputation, rather than protect the rights of vulnerable women.

Each of the three CEOs who have led Oxfam GB since reports of abuse in Haiti first came to the organisation’s attention have spoken publicly about the affair. Barbara Stocking (CEO from May 2001 until February 2013) defended Oxfam’s response in a 2018 BBC Newsnight interview, stating that she did not think there was improper behaviour on the part of the organisation. She said her priority had been to prevent the offenders from continuing to engage in misconduct or, in her own words, “to make sure that the whole thing was shut down, as fast as we could possibly do it”. According to Stocking, the response that would be reasonably expected from any organisation in this situation is to “investigat[e] fully”, and prevent offenders from further misconduct by “getting them out” of the organisation. In her view, this is the approach that Oxfam took.

Mark Goldring (Oxfam CEO from March 2013 to January 2019) alluded to concerns that exposing these abuses would have threatened Oxfam’s public image to the extent that they might not have been able to continue activities in Haiti. In an interview with *The Guardian* newspaper in 2018, shortly after the story broke, Goldring defended this decision, stating,

“I believe it was done in good faith to try to balance being transparent and protecting Oxfam’s work. I don’t think [Oxfam] wanted to promote sensation and damage the delivery of [the Haiti] programme.”

While Goldring was “deeply ashamed about Oxfam’s behaviour”, he was unwilling to jeopardise the Haiti programme. He said,

“What I am apologising for is that nine Oxfam staff behaved in a way that is totally unacceptable and contrary to our values, and that led to more responsible staff to make decisions that are now being seen, by some, as marginal or inappropriate. But I am not apologising for the fact that Oxfam tried to continue its work in Haiti.”

Stocking pointed to the normalisation of such incidents of abuse taking place in other organisations and in society. Her view was that the events did not confer specific responsibility on Oxfam to highlight and publicly condemn the actions of their employees. As she stated in an interview with the BBC Newsnight television programme, “as you know, these sorts of things are around in all sorts of parts of the world”. Goldring echoed these sentiments, “Let’s be clear, it happens in every aid organisation” he said, before attempting to minimise Oxfam’s culpability. He suggested that the public response was not proportional to the scale of the crimes and the failures of Oxfam. He said, “The intensity and the ferocity of the attack makes you wonder, what did we do? We murdered babies in their cots? Certainly, the scale and the intensity of the attacks feels out of proportion to the level of culpability.” Goldring later apologised for this statement, saying to a government committee, “It is not for Oxfam to judge issues of proportionality or motivation,” and “I wholeheartedly apologise for those comments, and commit to work in the greater public interest.”

Dhananjayan “Danny” Sriskandarajah (CEO of Oxfam GB from January 2019 until December 2023) wrote an article in April 2021 arguing that any organisation, “particularly where there are huge disparities of power”, is vulnerable to incidents of abuse. He pointed further to the nature of the environment in which the abuses took place—which was also indicated by both Goldring and the UK’s Charity Commission—stating, “The greater the need, the greater the risk of exploitation.” He elucidated his perspective on what would constitute a sufficient response from an organisation such as Oxfam, adding that the organisation needed to change so that, “culture and processes make (incidents) much less likely to occur, and that if they do, they are identified and rapidly and properly addressed.”

Whilst Stocking and Sriskandarajah agree that, having fully investigated, any offenders should be fired; where they differ, is that Sriskandarajah centralises the organisation’s systems and cultures, rather than focusing on isolated incidents. Sriskandarajah notes that Oxfam had long been focused on singular events or, in his words, “bad apples”, rather than addressing “inherent risk” in the type of work that Oxfam is undertaking.

Long-term impact for Oxfam

Oxfam has set out to rebuild its collapsed trust by applying moral leadership principles and coming up with measures to ensure that sexual abuse does not happen again.

Winnie Byanyima, executive director of Oxfam International, told *The Irish Times* Women's Podcast that "We had to work hard, and we are still working hard, to restore that trust". She also said "that meant we needed to take a hard look at ourselves and say 'Why did this happen?'" ⁵

So what did they do to earn back the trust that they lost?

- Oxfam highlighted the changes in organisational culture. In other words, they admitted that there were weaknesses in the way they investigated and handled the misconduct.
- Oxfam commissioned a group of human rights leaders to look at their internal operations. "We've trained investigators, we've put in place systems for capturing, reporting and investigating, but we know that ultimately it's not [...] policing people that will make us the organisation that we want, it is a culture of the staff," Byanyima said.
- Oxfam has ensured that its staff has received safeguarding training and followed a 10-point action plan which includes strengthening internal processes and its "focus on gender justice externally". Sriskandarajah highlighted these factors as critical to addressing the leadership and cultural failures which led to misconduct in Haiti.
- In response to the Charity Commission's findings on safeguarding and culture, Oxfam hired Kate Sayer as its first Integrity and Ethics Director in 2020 to create Oxfam GB's Ethics Compliance Programme. This position integrates existing roles on ethics, risk management, compliance, and corporate responsibility. An Oxfam spokesperson said they hope strengthening compliance with regulations and internal procedures will assist Oxfam with approaching these issues more systematically.
- For 3 years between 2018 and 2021, Oxfam was operating under terms of strict supervision from the Charity Commission, and were not able to apply for UK aid funding during this time. They were released from these terms after incorporating most of the 100 recommendations made by the Commission.

Although Oxfam lost much of its funding in 2018, the organisation has managed to maintain its status as a leading international NGO, operating programmes of work globally. This suggests that they have managed to obtain sufficient alternative funding streams since the misconduct.

However, a new sexual exploitation and bullying scandal relating to Oxfam's work in the Democratic Republic of Congo came to light in April 2021. This, yet again, resulted in scrutiny by the government, media, and public over the organisation's integrity. The charity was again excluded from applying for UK aid funding for several months while events were investigated. The story unravelled to similarly reveal a deeper web of unresolved allegations.

Oxfam—and the aid and humanitarian sectors more broadly—remain vulnerable to abuses committed by their employees and to the failures of the organisations to safeguard vulnerable people who can be subject to sexual crimes and abuses of power. By failing to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable people over risk to their reputation, organisations such as Oxfam are compromising their founding values.

