



**Media Release**

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**Forensic Review Recommends Independent Reporting Scheme after Identifying Gaps in Sexual Misconduct Reporting in Aid NGO Sector**

An independent review from the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine (VIFM) has recommended a statutory Reportable Conduct Scheme for incidences of sexual misconduct after it identified information gaps in reporting amongst Australia's international aid NGO-members of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID).

Commissioned by ACFID – Australia's peak-body for aid and development NGOs – in order to evaluate its members' practice and response to sexual misconduct, the Review identified some capability gaps in the sector and has recommended that the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), with support from the Commonwealth Government, establish a Reportable Conduct Scheme for Australian charities undertaking international aid work.

Such a scheme would give the regulator and other interested parties such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and ACFID access to de-identified data which could inform prevention and response measures.

Sexual misconduct, constituting sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and sexual harassment is common in all societies and sectors.

The Review identified the most significant concern to be a lack of meaningful and available information on sexual misconduct incident reporting by Australian aid organisations and a related lack of central understanding about the nature, location and patterns of reported behaviours and an inability to effectively monitor organisational responses.

Co-author of the review, Dr Maaïke Moller, a forensic physician from the VIFM said that ACFID Member Organisations are committed to improving safeguarding for staff and program beneficiaries. "In many ways the Australian aid sector is well prepared because of the strong child protection framework imposed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) on all international development and humanitarian response work it funds".

"Aid organisations have to withstand significant scrutiny from donors and the public. They are under constant pressure to do more with less, to maximise service delivery and minimise overheads," Dr Moller said.

"Reputation is critical to an aid organisation's ability to function. This is why developments in the UK aid sector reverberated so powerfully through the global aid community. When an organisation that purports to do good through its work in assisting the people most at risk is found wanting, it is a hard road to recover public trust and respect," she said. Dr Moller added that it is important that sexual misconduct reporting is encouraged. Organisations which encourage a reporting



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culture should not be vilified when they do receive reports. It is only through receiving and responding to reports that organisations can support victim/survivors and ensure proper investigation processes and justice outcomes if the matter is substantiated

The Review has made a number of recommendations for both ACFID and its Member Organisations which will strengthen their ability to prevent and respond to sexual misconduct on- and offshore. Some recommendations relate to governance and the need for senior management and governing bodies to pay close attention to all forms of sexual misconduct and to do so with a focus on support for the victim/survivor.

“We also recommend that organisations become more comfortable in talking about sexual behaviour and conduct with their staff, particularly those who are deploying to field work; and extending these conversations to in-country national staff and staff in implementing partners. The ACFID Code of Conduct and related policies have to be animated and understood through frank conversations” she said.

Dr Moller said the Review also emphasised that the needs of the victim/survivor must be the primary concern in all responses to sexual misconduct incidents. Support must be immediate and sustained and the wishes of the victim/survivor identified and respected.

The Review found a reluctance to report serious sexual misconduct to law enforcement authorities in international jurisdictions because of concerns about the capability of local authorities. The Review recommends that this should be a development priority for Australian aid. Australia has excellent expertise in the investigation of sexual violence in adults and children in police services, victim/survivor support services, medico-legal services and in prosecution and judicial systems which could be deployed to areas of defined need.

Dr Moller said she was confident that ACFID and its members have the commitment to undertake concrete steps to improve safeguarding in their workplaces and programs.

“This is occurring at a time when DFAT has also stated its commitment to improving safeguarding through its funding and programs and the ACNC is focusing on the offshore conduct of the charities it regulates. The national regulator, the key national government agency and the peak industry body, form a powerful and committed group, which together with ACFID Member Organisations have a significant opportunity to collaborate to develop and support a world class safeguarding system” she said.

The full review is available on line at <http://www.vifm.org/2018/08/independent-review-begins-into-prevention-of-sexual-misconduct-2/> and [ACFID](#).

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