Response of DRC Ministry of Health to the Guardian article “Ebola vaccine offered in exchange for sex, Congo taskforce meeting told”

Dear editor,

We are deeply disappointed with your article titled “Ebola vaccine offered in exchange for sex, Congo taskforce meeting told”, published on your website this Tuesday 12th February 2019.

This article contains several false claims that are based on a deliberate misinterpretation of the preliminary findings of an unfinalized assessment conducted by the International Rescue Committee (IRC). You published the article despite the fact that several actors involved in the Ebola response, including the Ministry of Health, IRC and WHO clearly explained to your journalists why your assertions were wrong and did not reflect the preliminary findings.

In December 2018, IRC conducted an assessment to examine the effect of the ongoing Ebola outbreak and response on women and girls. In focus group discussions, some participants expressed concerns about women and girls being offered Ebola-related services in exchange for sexual favors. However, IRC clarified that the analysis of their raw data revealed that no specific Ebola-related services was mentioned during these discussions, not even vaccination. More importantly, no women reported individual cases of sexual exploitation to the IRC during the focus groups. These women and girls expressed their fears and concerns about the Ebola response considering the social and security context they live in.

The fact that you still decided to publish an article that deliberately misrepresents the preliminary findings of this survey even though you were aware of the elements cited hereabove is unethical, unprofessional and unacceptable.

The exploitation of vulnerable groups during crises is a serious issue that should not be treated as a clickbait. Vulnerable groups include women and girls, but also young boys, elderly and disabled people. The Ministry of Health and its partners regularly conduct field surveys and assessments to help us adapt and improve the Ebola response, especially regarding the protection of vulnerable groups. It is unfortunate that these important tools are being misused, misinterpreted and misquoted for dubious reasons.

There are way more important and valuable findings in this assessment regarding the impact of the Ebola outbreak and response on the lives and workload of women and girls in Beni. These findings will be publicly discussed when IRC publishes the final report.

In the meantime, could you please correct your article by taking into account all these elements that you already had?

Thank you,
The press team of DRC Ministry of Health