

EVENT REPORT SUMMARY

Making zero tolerance a reality: Driving organizational culture change to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment

Background

The dialogue on **“Making zero tolerance a reality: Driving organizational culture change to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment”** (3 May) was the third peer-to-peer learning meeting as part of the CEB Task Force’s ongoing efforts to engage actors from within and outside of the UN to strengthen approaches and actions to sexual harassment. The Task Force’s **Outreach and Knowledge Sharing workstream is led jointly by Assistant Secretary-General Martha Helena Lopez for Human Resources in the UN Secretariat and Deputy Executive Director Anita Bhatia of UN Women**. The meeting was jointly organized by the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment, the UN Secretariat and UN Women. Sign language interpretation was provided for this event.

1. Welcome

The facilitator, Ms. **Katja Pehrman**, Senior Advisor and Focal Point for Women in the UN System at UN Women, welcomed the speakers and **over 100 participants** from inside and outside the UN System. She noted that the event adhered to the [Code of Conduct to prevent harassment, including sexual harassment at UN System Events](#).

She outlined the three-fold **purpose** of the event: one, to **inform** the members of the audience about efforts to address and prevent sexual harassment within the UN system; two, to **identify good practices and efforts** being undertaken to tackle sexual harassment by UN actors, Member States, civil society representatives as well as international financial institutions and private sector; and three, to deepen the dialogue on continued **joint efforts** to prevent sexual harassment within the UN system.

She emphasized that sexual harassment cannot be tackled without addressing and changing **organizational culture**. She noted that the UN has taken **important steps forward** on this. As an example, Ms. Pehrman leads the system-wide network of over 400 **Gender Focal Points** who each advocate for creation of enabling working environments in their respective UN entities. The Focal Points work to implement the [Enabling Environment Guidelines](#) for the UN system in support of the Secretary-General's [System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity](#). These guidelines provide concrete recommendations and good practices on how to build a safe and inclusive working environment, including through standards of conduct and clear policies and action to prevent sexual harassment.

Ms. Pehrman welcomed other important initiatives and proposals and, crucially, what actions we will, can and must take to change organizational culture. She also informed the members of the audience that based on the dialogues with different actors, recommendations and reflections will be presented to the CEB Task Force.

Opening Remarks

The Chair of the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the UN system **Kelly T. Clements**, thanked the participants and panelists for their engagement in the important dialogue.

Expressing that **COVID-19** pandemic has disrupted our lives and is **impacting those with less power including women and girls**, she quoted the Secretary-General who called gender-based violence the “shadow pandemic”. She expressed that tackling sexual harassment was a priority for the United Nations before the pandemic as it has been during and will be afterwards.

She mentioned that it was more important than ever to ensure that we foster more inclusive and accountable work environments, free of sexual harassment, where all colleagues feel respected and included, where difficult topics are openly discussed and everyone feels empowered to speak up. With disruption comes opportunity, and she believed that we now had **opportunities to tackle the root causes that underpin such behaviors**.

The Chair of the Task Force informed colleagues that the **Task Force was established in 2017** by the Secretary-General and UN leadership in the Chief Executives Board for Coordination to **develop a common United Nations system approach** towards sexual harassment, and brings together senior managers from across the system.

She outlined some of its progress: the UN system [Model Policy](#) on Sexual Harassment which is being implemented throughout the system; the [Code of Conduct](#) to Prevent Harassment Including Sexual Harassment at UN System Events; and the [“Clear Check” Database](#) which serves as a firewall by allowing for vetting and reference checking to avoid the hiring and re-hiring of perpetrators of sexual harassment, as well as sexual exploitation and abuse. The newly released **Manual for the Investigation of Sexual Harassment Complaints** will bolster investigative capacity and harmonize victim-centered investigations. While intended as a tool for the UN system, it will be shared widely.

While developing tools is important, the Chair noted that **implementing them is another challenge entirely**. The Task Force is developing training and communications materials, and looks forward to learning from other good practices to implement tools as well as crucially prevent sexual harassment.

The Chair expressed that there is a need to table the **underlying causes of sexual harassment** which includes **gender norms and power imbalances**. She also noted the importance of working closely **interrelated issues** such as especially sexual exploitation and abuse of authority, and racism.

She underlined the UN’s system-wide **victim-centred approach** that places the victim at the centre of all efforts to prevent and respond to any abuse of power, including sexual harassment, and its particular importance when working with **displaced and other vulnerable populations**.

The Task Force is engaged in tackling underlying causes with a focus on **organizational culture and leadership**. For example, the Task Force engaged in a session in culture change itself and is developing preparing on Facilitators Guide which will enable Task Force members to hold similar dialogues with leaders in their own organizations. She noted the **importance of holding each other accountable** to address and prevent sexual harassment.

The Chair of the Task Force made clear that addressing the root causes of sexual misconduct and creating workplaces of respect, inclusion and accountability, are tasks beyond the scope of any single Task Force. She expressed she was looking forward to **working collaboratively**, including through this dialogue, and urged all speakers and participants to share **best practices** in order to find **cohesive solutions** that would benefit not only the UN, but the international community as a whole.

2. Peer-to-Peer Learning Dialogue

Anita Bhatia, Deputy Executive Director, UN Women, reiterated the purpose of the event to **to learn from different perspectives and good examples** to foster **collective action and responsibility** to eradicate sexual harassment. As Co-Chair of the Task Force's **Outreach and Knowledge Sharing workstream**, she shared that the UN is working to improve transparency including through creating a **knowledge hub** and strengthening **communications internally and externally**. She noted that the remote working during COVID-19 had provided an opportunity to host and engage with many colleagues in virtual dialogues to learn from each other and we already have a rich catalogue of good practices and recommendations.

She moderated the peer-to-peer learning discussion with the following panel:

- **Ms. Martha Helena Lopez**, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources, Department of Management, Strategy, Policy and Compliance, United Nations
- **H.E. Richard Arbeiter**, Deputy Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations
- **Dr. Mary Ellsberg**, Executive Director and Founding Director, Global Women's Institute, George Washington University
- **Mr. Gary Barker**, Chief Executive Officer, Promundo
- **Ms. Sudarshana Kundu**, Co-executive Director, Gender at Work
- **Ms. Fatiah Touray-Diakite**, Senior Director Inclusion and Equity, NYU Abu Dhabi
- **Dr. Cleopatra Mugenyi**, Director, ICRW Regional Office Africa

The panellists pointed out that sexual harassment is a problem of organizational culture. Panellists expressed the need for organizations to recognise that **power imbalance** is at the heart of the issue. Ms. Kundu and Dr. Mugenyi explained that sexual harassment can be used as a mechanism to keep power and that it is a symptom and a driver of male dominance.

Ms. Kundu and Dr. Mugenyi expressed that many organizations create policies without real accountability and culture change. As a solution, Ms. Kundu and Ms. Touray-Diakite expressed the need for not just one-off training programs but **long-term capacity building** to transform power relations in organizations. Importantly, Dr. Mugenyi and Ms. Touray-Diakite expressed the need to create **context-specific frameworks and capacity building**. In addition,

Ms. Kundu and Dr. Mugenyi urged the practice of **feminist leadership** which moves from a 'power over' leadership model to one of 'power with', 'power within' and 'power to'. This means changing decision-making to be more democratic and creating spaces that allow staff to thrive.

Panellists expressed the importance of engaging men in transforming organizational culture. In particular, Mr. Barker recommended a specific **male allyship strategy**. Norms and rules should be visible and non-negotiable at all levels of the organization. He, Ms. Kindu and Dr. Mugenyi encouraged organization to move beyond male champions to real allies. Mr. Barker recommended **specific evidence-based bystander training**.

The panellists expressed the importance of **accountability** throughout the organization to address sexual harassment and transform organizational culture.

As an example of accountability, ASG. Lopez shared that **ClearCheck** is currently implemented by 25 CEB Member Organizations with over 300 subjects in the database. It has received over 80,000 requests over three years. She noted that there are ongoing efforts to try to include external organizations in the database with many colleagues, including INTERPOL, engaged to attempt to work through the legal and data protection challenges.

As another example of accountability throughout the organization, Deputy Permanent Representative Arbeiter shared that the UN mission has recently required the **gender pledge be signed by every employee**, not only Heads of Mission. Other good practices from the mission include having two gender champions, one at the ambassador level and one at the officer level, and carrying out **gender audits** every two years.

While practicing good standards of conduct is the **responsibility of everyone in the organization**, panellists, including Ms. Kundu and Ms. Touray-Diakite, expressed that **leadership has a particular power and responsibility** to shape organizational culture and lead by example to address sexual harassment and creating safe. As example of good leadership practice, as Chair of the UN Peacekeeping committee, Deputy Permanent Representative Arbeiter sets out **clear expectations of the conduct of delegates** during the negotiations, including provisions for zero tolerance of sexual harassment.

Panellists expressed the need to develop the **evidence-base of sexual harassment**. Dr. Ellsberg shared that the international community has developed good standards of measuring intimate partner violence which has found that 1 in 3 women around the world have experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner. The evidence is less robust comparable for non-partner violence, especially sexual harassment. The estimate is that 46% of women have experienced non-partner violence. Dr. Ellsberg expressed the importance of developing comprehensive and comparable definitions of sexual harassment, creating safe methodology and conducting studies globally. Dr. Mugenyi also explained that there is not much literature that demonstrates what works in terms of addressing sexual harassment so there is a need to work with organizations on culture change.

Panellists expressed the importance of **intersectionality** in addressing sexual harassment. Prevention and response efforts should be informed by the diverse experiences of victims and

their particular societal and cultural norms, which affect how sexual harassment is perceived and their ability to safely come forward with their allegations. For example, Ms. Touray-Diakite expressed that sexual harassment can manifest in different ways depending on multiple identities and power structures, such as racism and colonialism. Ms. Kundu urged organizations to consider multiple vulnerabilities within organizations including gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, disability. Dr. Ellsberg expressed the importance of research applying an intersectional lens to understand how harassment intersects with other forms of discrimination, as well as of understanding the different economic realities of different sectors of work. Ms. Touray-Diakite and Dr. Mugenyi specifically noted the importance of including the **experiences of sexual and gender minorities**.

In addition, panellists noted the importance of communicating the **benefits of transforming organizational culture to address sexual harassment** beyond the values of human rights and equality. Dr. Mugenyi emphasized the need to demonstrate the business costs of not addressing sexual harassment including productivity and retention. Ms. Touray-Diakite expressed that in our global environment that when not using a diversity, equity and inclusion lens, sexual harassment becomes a risk management problem. Mr. Barker expressed the importance of demonstrating that a workplace that values equality and does not condone sexual harassment is positive for men as well.