



Dialogue with UN Member States
Update on the work of the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment
8 February 2021 – Virtual Meeting

Statement by Kelly T. Clements, Chair of the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the UN System

A year into the pandemic, we are living through an exceptional moment in history, an unprecedented public health challenge, its socio-economic impacts, and the long-term effects on human development that are only starting to emerge. The needs are massive, our teams are working courageously to meet them, and it therefore remains incumbent upon us as leaders in the system to continue to work towards creating a more inclusive and accountable workplace for them, one free of sexual harassment and abuse of authority, and imbued with trust.

Thank you for taking the time to join us today for what I hope will be an honest and insightful discussion. Thank you as well to the Group of Friends for co-hosting the event, we look forward to strengthening our collaboration in the coming months and years. I am pleased to be joined today by two Members of the CEB Task Force, Anita Bhatia, Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, and Martha Helena Lopez, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources in the UN Secretariat. We hope to provide some perspective on the work we are advancing on behalf of the system and welcome your reflections and insights.

This is also a timely moment for this dialogue given emerging evidence that, like the virus itself, working remotely has helped sexual harassment to mutate, moving online in different forms that we are only beginning to understand. We also realise that many of the systems and tools we have built to support survivors and investigate allegations also need adaptation to our new ways of working. But with disruption comes opportunity, and that is true in this context as well.

One example of an emerging lesson is inappropriate behaviour on videoconferences. To that end, we pledge to implement the [Code of Conduct](#) to prevent sexual harassment, including for today's dialogue. The link to the Code of Conduct will be in the chat box for reference.

Last week I participated in the OECD Development Assistance Committee meeting on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, at which the Chair commented that that there was a good chance that every woman on the call had faced some form of harassment in her life. That is probably true in most settings. I am concerned not only of what that means for colleagues in New York and Geneva, but what risks exist on a day to day basis for our colleagues around the world, especially those in remote operations, many on less secure contracts and in positions of less authority.

To take a step back, for those less aware of the background, the Chief Executives Board Task Force was established in 2017 by the Secretary-General to develop a common United Nations approach towards sexual harassment. It brings together senior managers from across the system, and many of us have been engaged with this effort from its onset. We have identified lessons and exchanged best practices.

We are also conscious that there is an impression in some quarters that this has slipped in priority since the height of the #MeToo movement a couple of years ago, but as the Secretary-General emphatically stated in his opening address to the General Assembly last September, where he raised alarm about what he called a “hidden war” on women and girls in the pandemic, that is certainly not how we see it. We have made progress, but we also have a lot of work yet to do.

To recap quickly, the Task Force has already delivered several initial tools, building blocks as we call them.

First, the development of the [UN System Model Policy on Sexual Harassment](#) was a key step towards fostering a common response to sexual harassment not least a definition of same. UN agencies have made progress on integrating the Model Policy into their own frameworks, thereby contributing to reducing the complexity and fragmentation of the policy and regulatory environment. You will hear of the successful implementation of the Model Policy within the UN Secretariat from Ms. Lopez -- Marta Helena -- in a minute.

The second is the aforementioned [Code of Conduct for UN system events](#). As a UN system, we want to be crystal-clear that there is no place for sexual harassment in our system and this tool helps raise awareness of the standards of conduct expected at our events and on our premises. This tool will prevent harassment and support survivors by ensuring they are aware of the policy and know which steps to take if misconduct occurs. It is my hope that today is not the first time you have heard of the Code of Conduct.

The third tool aims to fix a key bug in our system, one which had undermined efforts at building accountability and trust. Because the UN is a massive, sometimes archaic bureaucracy, our human resource systems do not always talk to each other. To address this we developed the UN ClearCheck database, which allows for the UN to vet and check references to avoid the hiring and re-hiring of individuals who committed sexual harassment or separate prior to completion of the investigation or disciplinary process that would lead to dismissal. This is now our firewall against the recycling of perpetrators in the system. We aim to expand this collaboration to other partners in the future.

Finally, the release of a new Manual for the Investigation of Sexual Harassment Complaints is imminent. It will bolster investigative capacity, harmonize victim-centred investigations, and improve communications with survivors and other stakeholders during investigations. We thank the Office of Internal Oversight Services for leading this effort.

These tools are a good foundation, but our task is by no means complete. Change takes time. Therefore, we have identified **five priorities** for the next phase of our work.

Number one: we need to steer the UN towards always putting victims and survivors at the centre of our approach. Easier said than done. For reasons of fear, mistrust, and confidentiality, it can sometimes be hard to get the full perspective from them, and so we are developing a survey, voluntary and anonymous, to capture those experiences. This

information, coupled with UN-wide definitions and principles for a victim-centred approach, will help to ensure that the support we provide is appropriate for survivors.

Number two, we are working hard to get training and communication materials that are useful and build trust with teams and personnel around the world. Because sexual harassment cuts across the system, we need to reach everybody, from those here in headquarters to the last person in remote operations, who are often the hardest to reach and most powerless to speak up. We have a lot of materials already – now we will insist on their accessibility and use.

Number three, we need to start rolling out and monitoring the use of the existing common tools I have outlined previously. This may seem mundane, but it helps us promote accountability within the system and leverage emerging evidence from challenges with implementation to course correct where necessary, including to ensure everything we do is survivor-centred.

Number four is leadership and culture change. All the tools, trainings and briefings we do will have little effect if we do not address head-on underlying issues of values, attitudes, behaviour and culture. The Task Force held a dialogue with senior leadership from across the UN system, where we asked Task Force members to do something different. We asked them not to prepare talking points, but instead to reflect personally and speak candidly about what we can do individually and collectively to drive change in the system. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee held a similar session last month, and we are also looking to other parts of the UN system, such as the Task Force on the Future of the UN System Workforce, which are dealing with issues of organizational culture to ensure common approaches.

This brings me to my **fifth** and final point. Our clear intention is to work closely with others on sexual harassment and many interconnected issues, especially Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Authority with gender inequality and power imbalances at its core. We are committed to learning and applying best practices from each other in the UN system, but also from others, and this is why we are here today. We all have identified lessons, let's share them.

The UN system is not alone in grappling with these issues. No doubt, your governments experience similar challenges. While I have outlined our work and our plans, we are also here today to listen, especially on emerging evidence from the past year of the pandemic. We are excited to hear from you and the panellists about ongoing efforts to address sexual harassment. Good practices and challenges, opportunities and threats, let's hear them.

I would also submit that we are all in this together. We, as UN entities and Member States, work in the same locations and attend the same events. We work to serve the same people in need and towards the same objectives. And frankly, we employ many of the same people – a large percentage of UN personnel have government experience, and they all, by definition, are a national of at least one Member State. We work in the same bubble, albeit a virtual one right now.

So, while the primary message we want to clearly and unequivocally convey here today is that the UN system is wholly dedicated to eradicating sexual harassment, responding to every case, and taking a survivor-centred approach in support of every person, we also ask you to work with us, including on sanctioning perpetrators if and when we refer a case to national authorities for criminal accountability.

While the bulk of our work as a Task Force is focused on norms and standards, guidance and tools, and learning and culture, our credibility is also linked to justice for survivors. Nobody will trust a training package for a system without accountability. We know from our last survey that the majority of victims prefer reporting of the alleged conduct rather than resorting informal dispute resolution mechanism – although we want to ensure those are available and inspire confidence amongst survivors as well.

“Sexual harassment is a scourge in the workplace which undermines the morale and wellbeing of staff members subjected to it,” is how it was put in one Appeals Tribunal decision in 2018 that upheld the separation of a staff member. More recently, another Judge upheld a dismissal taking “into account the degree of odium with which the misconduct of sexual harassment is regarded today.”

These decisions build confidence in the system we have, encapsulate the gravity of sexual harassment in the workplace, and underline why we need your continued constructive engagement going forward, to hold us, as the United Nations, to account as we aim to improve, and to share your ideas and national lessons as we go. Thank you for your support.

Thank you.