# EVENT REPORT SUMMARY

# Making zero tolerance a reality: Preventing and eliminating sexual harassment online

## Background

The dialogue **on "Making zero tolerance a reality: Preventing and eliminating sexual harassment online"** (17 June) was the fourth peer-to-peer learning dialogue 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 and live-closed captioning was provided for this event.

## 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 150 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 introduced the event highlighting the **impact COVID-19** has had on the way we work, and the **new challenges** that we now face such as **online sexual harassment**. She shared the data gathered through the survey on the impact of COVID-19, which was conducted by her Office and disseminated through the network of the **UN Gender Focal Points**. The survey shed light on the subtleness of online sexual harassment, as a **10 per cent** increase in occurrence of sexual harassment was reported, but most Gender Focal Points stated that there were yet no means to assess the current situation of online harassment. Therefore, there is a need to explore effective ways to monitor and track online misconduct.

She then presented the objective of the dialogue to the audience: to collect recommendations and reflections to implement impactful change throughout the UN and better prevent and respond to online sexual harassment. In line with past peer-to-peer learning dialogues, this series aims firstly, to **inform** the members of the audience about efforts to address and prevent sexual harassment within the UN system; secondly, 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 lastly, to deepen the dialogue on continued **joint efforts** to prevent sexual harassment within the UN system.

Ms. Pehrman welcomed other important initiatives and proposals from civil society and the private sector to address online sexual harassment. 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 and moderation of the dialogue

**Anita Bhatia**, Deputy Executive Director (DED), UN Women, thanked the participants and provided a **brief overview of the work of the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment** on behalf of its Chair, **DHC Kelly Clements.** She referred to the **specific knowledge products** on addressing sexual harassment, including online, developed by UN-Women, and the work of the Gender Focal Point Network on creating enabling working environments, free from sexual harassment.

She underscored the adverse impact sexual harassment has on women's careers, citing that **46 per cent** of women who experience sexual harassment leave their jobs or switch careers after the incident. She introduced the work of the **CEB Task Force** and its focus on leadership, a victim-centered approach and transforming organizational culture. As co-lead of workstream four on **Outreach and Knowledge Sharing**, together with co-lead **Martha Helena Lopez**, DED Bhatia outlined the work being undertaken such as the creation of a **knowledge hub platform** to strengthen the internal and external exchange of communications. She also referred to past peer-to-peer dialogues which aim to harness good practice examples from UN entities as well as civil society organizations, the private sector and other international partners.

Expressing that the **COVID-19** pandemic has disrupted our lives and is impacting those with less power including women and girls, she made reference to the guidance documents created by UN Women: one on addressing online sexual harassment, and the other on how to foster inclusivity online during the COVID-19. She expressed that the UN must adapt its prevention and response efforts to **emerging challenges** of our new working arrangements and **online reality.** She then welcomed the panelists and opened the peer-to-peer learning dialogue on **online sexual harassment**.

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
- **Mr. Will Gardner,** CEO, Childnet International, Executive Board member of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety, and member of Facebook's Safety Advisory Board.
- **Ms. Seyi Akiwowo,** CEO and Founder, Glitch
- **Dr. Ranjana Kumari,** Director, Centre for Social Research, Chairperson of Women Power Connect
- **Mr. Neil Walsh,** Chief of Cybercrime, Anti-Money Laundering and Counter Financing of Terrorism Department, UNODC
- **Dr. Galina Goncharenko,** Lecturer, University of Sussex Business School, Member of the Future of Work Hub

The panellists introduced the concept of online sexual harassment and discussed **what constitutes such forms of harassment** and how international organizations can go about in

confronting the issue. Panellists expressed that online sexual harassment is often **overlooked and normalized** and stressed the need to dive deeper into this new challenge. As the world is reconfiguring the way we now work, it is of utmost importance to **develop a comprehensive understanding** of all the forms that online sexual harassment can take, thoroughly disseminate this new information in our organizations and develop new pathways to address the issue, including tackling the obstacles victims face in reporting the incidents.

Mr. Gardner defined online sexual harassment as **unwanted sexual conduct on any media platform** and highlighted the following forms it can take: 1) Non-consensual image taking and non-consensual image sharing; 2) Sexual threats and coercion; 3) Sexualized bullying; and 4) Unwanted sexualization. Mr. Walsh provided real life scenarios of online sexual harassment within the UN Organization, such as an incident of non-consensual sharing of pornography through WhatsApp by a government official, and the new term "Zoom Bombing" or the online attack during online meetings or trainings, where in this case violent pornography was shown.

One of the main challenges in responding to online sexual harassment is **underreporting.** Victims do not report these incidents due to **lack of knowledge** on what falls within the category of online sexual harassment, feelings of **shame** and fear of **retaliation**. Mr. Gardner shared valuable insight from research undertaken by his organization with young people, which shed light on the **widespread nature of online sexual harassment** and the fear victims have relating to their complaints therefore not being taken seriously. Mr. Walsh underscored that, due to the new nature of online sexual harassment, the organization is still gaining understanding of the extent of the repercussions it may have on the safety of UN personnel, and raised the question on how can the UN protect victims from retaliation and ensure that online harassment and online threats do not translate into real life incidents.

As is the nature of any form of gender-based violence, online sexual harassment affects people in different ways. The dialogue placed an important focus on i**ntersectionality**, and how women and minorities can be more vulnerable to continuously being victims of online sexual harassment. Dr. Kumari addressed the issue of underreporting by dissecting the impact of **cultural norms** on victims, and how these fuel retaliation and feelings of shame. Women, particularly in countries where **sexism** is pervasive, feel ashamed of coming forward in their employment settings due to fear of being alienated and being label "problematic". Spouses and families can even require them to leave their jobs as the incident can have an adverse social effect on the family unit, not only on the victim. Thus, women lack a **network of support** to encourage them to report harassment, particularly online.

Ms. Akiwowo emphasized the need to address online abuse through an intersectional framework that recognized the heterogeneity of women and the **particular issues women of colour and minorities face**. Glitch's research identified that online abuse against women increased **38 per cent** since the beginning of the **COVID-19 pandemic**. Furthermore, women are more likely to work under **precarious employment conditions**. Thus, many women victims choose to not report online sexual harassment in fear of losing their jobs, being labelled as "troublemakers" and that the incident might hamper their **economic well-being**. It is important to recognize that male and white counterparts are less likely to suffer from online sexual harassment, and this may lead to an **unconscious bias** where more duties and responsibilities are allocated to them as to avoid creating conflict in the workspace.

In order to effectively prevent and respond to sexual harassment, it is important to address, **organizational culture, accountability and harassment reporting technology**. Online sexual harassment tends to begin offline and, as Dr. Kumari stated, if sexual harassment is the norm both in the workplace and country-wise it will inevitably transfer online. Dr. Goncharenko stressed the importance of evaluating the "**workplace ecology**", referring to the analysis of the environment as either toxic or healthy. If employees feel unsafe or threatened offline, it is most likely this context will translate to online working culture. Both Dr. Kumari and Ms. Akiwowo applauded their countries efforts, India and the United Kingdom respectively, to produce legislation on online safety by defining the **liability** employers had on ensuring the online protection of their employees and setting clear legal consequences for perpetrators. Ms. Akiwowo pushes for online harassment to be recognized as a matter of **public health**, as the online space is a public health space and has a direct impact on the psychological and physical well-being of the population.

According to Glitch, only **9 per cent** of workers in the United Kingdom received some form of **training from their employers on how to stay safe online** since the beginning of the new working arrangements. Dr. Goncharenko underlines **accountability** as a key factor on creating environments free of online sexual harassment. Organizations should provide sufficient training to improve digital citizen education and address the current **deficit of knowledge on online safety** and the limited understanding of how gender-based violence plays out online. Moreover, new advancements in **harassment reporting technology** are optimistic and allow for reporting to be done in a more confidential manner while still being sufficiently efficient for thorough and prompt investigations. Dr. Goncharenko explained how this new technology can diminish the psychological trauma victims face when coming forward with their allegations and retelling their incidents. Dr. Kumari commends these new advances yet remarked that due to the ever-changing nature of harassment it is important to always maintain a human perspective on the reporting pathways.

The UN is adapting the way it prevents and responds to sexual harassment to our new technological realities. COVID-19 forced us to rapidly adapt to teleworking and online working culture. To address this new reality, ASG Lopez provided information on the **ClearCheck Database**, which prevents the rehiring of personnel proven to have committed either sexual exploitation and abuse or sexual harassment, online or offline, through its data repository. **Twenty-five entities** of the CEB Task Force have joined the initiative and have begun to input information on **380 individuals** so far. Mr. Walsh highlighted the urgent need to update the organization's **language on policies relating to sexual harassment** as it currently does not make any mention of online sexual harassment. He also stressed the need to revise the language relating to the frequency of online sexual harassment incidents. Currently, it defined as a pattern of conduct, however, online sexual harassment can happen in one single incident and have devastating effects for the victim. Thus, **updated and comprehensive language** is key to provide **impactful prevention and response efforts** to online sexual harassment and **bolster the confidence** of UN personnel in coming forward with their allegations.