

EVENT REPORT SUMMARY

Realizing zero tolerance through joint leadership: Launch of a publication on preventing and eliminating sexual harassment 28 October 2021

Background

The event on **“Realizing zero tolerance through joint leadership: Launch of a publication on preventing and eliminating sexual harassment”** (28 October) was the fifth and last peer-to-peer learning dialogue held in 2021 as part of the Chief Executives Board Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the UN system’s (CEB Task Force) ongoing efforts to engage actors from within and outside of the UN to strengthen approaches and actions to eradicate sexual harassment. The Task Force’s **Outreach and Knowledge Sharing workstream is co-led by Assistant Secretary-General Martha Helena Lopez for Human Resources in the UN Secretariat and Assistant Secretary-General Anita Bhatia, Deputy Executive Director of UN Women**. The meeting was jointly organized by the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment, the UN Secretariat, UN Women and the Member States Group of Friends to Eliminate Sexual Harassment. Sign language interpretation 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 distinguished speakers and **over 140 participants** from UN entities, Member States, civil society and academia. She thanked the sign language interpreters for their work to make the event inclusive and accessible, and informed participants that the event adhered to the [Code of Conduct to prevent harassment, including sexual harassment at UN System Events](#). The Code of Conduct was shared with all participants.

In line with the preceding peer-to-peer learning dialogues, Ms. Pehrman outlined the three-fold **purpose** of the event: One, to **inform** UN Member States and the UN system about efforts to address and prevent sexual harassment within the UN system; Two, to foster **peer-to-peer learning** on good practices and efforts undertaken to tackle sexual harassment across the world, including in academia, the private sector and international organizations; Three, to deepen the dialogue on continued **joint efforts** to prevent sexual harassment.

She emphasized that the focus of the dialogue was on the **importance and impact of leadership in addressing and eliminating sexual harassment**, specifically the actions leaders can, should and must take within their sphere of influence. In addition, Ms. Pehrman noted the event would **launch a new publication**, [“Making zero tolerance](#)

[a reality: Peer-to-peer learning to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment in the UN and beyond](#)”, which reflects on the lessons learned and recommendations from the previous peer-to-peer dialogues.

Welcome from the Group of Friends and Launch of the peer-to-peer dialogues publication

On behalf of the Group of Friends to Eliminate Sexual Harassment, **H.E. Mr. Gilad Erdan**, Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations, thanked the CEB Task Force, the UN Secretariat and UN Women for organizing the dialogue. **The Group of Friends is a platform for knowledge sharing and discussing common issues, both as Member States and within the UN system.** The Group of Friends has become an integral and leading voice in the efforts to address, prevent and ultimately eradicate sexual harassment, both at the UN and beyond. H.E. Mr. Erdan noted that this dialogue was an opportunity for all participants to learn from the speakers about their experiences and best practices in tackling sexual harassment. He observed that although much remains to be done on this issue, this event is evidence of the progress that has already been made. H.E. Mr. Erdan expressed that **the most critical contribution of Member States to this effort is through the sharing of national experiences.** He gave the example of Israel, the first country to adopt legislation to prevent sexual harassment and abuse online by criminalizing non-consensual sharing of intimate materials.

H.E. Mr. Erdan further introduced the publication, [“Making zero tolerance a reality: Peer-to-peer learning to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment in the UN and beyond”](#), produced by UN Women and the CEB Task Force, noting that it **outlines the discussions from the four dialogues which were held during the past year, and will be a valuable tool to eliminate sexual harassment.** He expressed that we can make great strides towards realizing our vision of zero tolerance to sexual harassment and eliminating sexual harassment everywhere by broadening our horizons and adopting best practices. Every one of us plays an important role in this mission, but only through working together and learning from each other will we be able to achieve our goals. On behalf of the Group of Friends, H.E. Mr. Erdan **encouraged all participants to continue working together and to jointly implement the recommendations of this critical publication.**

Overview of the work of the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment

The Chair of the CEB Task Force and United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees, **Ms. Kelly T. Clements**, addressed participants via video message. She thanked the Group of Friends, participants and panelists for their engagement in the dialogue and noted that their support is needed to address the scourge of sexual harassment in the UN system and beyond.

She informed participants that the efforts of **the CEB Task Force are moving in the right direction with regards to strengthening a victim/survivor-centred approach, implementing and monitoring existing tools, providing training with a focus on country level outreach, and sharing knowledge practice and collaboration horizontally across the UN system.** The Chair of the Task Force outlined the **common tools developed by the CEB Task Force** since its inception in 2017, including a UN [Model Policy](#) on addressing sexual harassment; a [Code of Conduct](#) for UN system events, the [ClearCheck](#) screening database to avoid the re-hiring of perpetrators throughout the system, and an [Investigator’s Manual](#). Most recently, the Task Force has adopted the document, [“Advancing a](#)

[Common Understanding of a Victim-centred Approach to Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the United Nations](#)". The Chair urged UN entities to make use of both these documents which are publicly available. Furthermore, she acknowledged that the UN has much work to do to roll out these documents across the system and identify where efforts need to be targeted.

She advised that the **results of an annual survey on reporting of sexual harassment conducted in 2020** with self-reported data from UN system entities will inform forthcoming work. The data re-confirmed the well-known reality that **sexual harassment remains a gender issue and one of power imbalances**. In addition, the Chair of the Task Force highlighted the **measurable progress** made in the UN: all entities in the system now allow for reporting of cases by all personnel and the UN is becoming more victim/survivor centred, with all entities making a wide range of measures and protective support available. Nevertheless, she highlighted that there are areas where the data indicates that the UN can benefit from redoubled effort and investment such as the timeliness of investigations and disciplinary processes, and making use of the ClearCheck database to the fullest extent possible. The Chair noted that the Task Force will take stock of both achievements and challenges and embark on a bold, visible and impactful next phase in the coming year.

The Chair praised the panel of leaders speaking at the event and asked participants to contribute their own experiences to the dialogue, to **spark a sense of coalition and take a step forward towards the common goal of preventing and addressing sexual harassment**. She underlined that **the learnings shared during these dialogues and reflected in the publication are crucial for the future work of the CEB Task Force**.

Keynote

H.E. Mr. Patrick F. Kennedy, Ambassador and Senior Advisor of the United States Mission to the United Nations for UN Management and Reform commended the dedication, commitment and tenacity of the participants and those working within the UN system who continue to contribute their expertise towards the collective goal of eliminating sexual harassment in the UN system.

Moreover, he expressed his gratitude for the efforts of the co-hosts in convening this series of critical peer-to-peer learning dialogues. **The recommendations in the publication "[Making zero tolerance a reality: Peer-to-peer learning to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment in the UN and beyond](#)" offer a clear vision of what we, collectively, must achieve in our efforts to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment in the UN system**. He also noted that they serve as a powerful reminder of the work ahead of us to translate this vision into a safer and more inclusive workplace. This requires leadership at every level. He defined **leadership as the ardent ability of an individual to motivate and guide others by determining what must be improved and then decisively rallying people to move towards this better vision**.

He expressed **that real leadership is working in partnership with one another, leading together in order to reach our goals**. He noted **that leadership means setting an example for others and establishing the right tone at the top**. Leaders at all levels must not shirk their responsibility to address and combat sexual harassment immediately and decisively, whenever and wherever it is discovered.

H.E. Mr. Kennedy **commended the numerous critical steps that have already been taken to address sexual harassment in the UN system** including progress on the implementation of the UN system Model Policy on Sexual Harassment, expansion of the ClearCheck database, efforts of the Victims' Rights Advocate to ensure a survivor-centred approach, efforts to bolster the UN's investigative capacity and many more. He highlighted the importance of **accountability** in addressing sexual harassment. The ultimate test of the effectiveness of joint leadership on addressing sexual harassment will be the degree of confidence staff have in the UN's ability prevent and respond to sexual harassment and hold perpetrators accountable for their actions. **Only when all personnel experience a truly safe and inclusive working environment, will they have full confidence in both prevention and response efforts, and our joint vision of zero tolerance for sexual harassment will become a reality.**

Peer-to-peer learning

Ms. Anita Bhatia, Assistant Secretary General and Deputy Executive Director (DED), UN Women, opened the dialogue by thanking the distinguished speakers for their participation in the event. She noted that UN Women has developed several [publications](#) to address sexual harassment. DED Bhatia thanked the **network of over 400 Gender Focal Points** who are crucial to the UN's efforts to eliminate sexual harassment and implement these policies and products on the ground.

In discussing the Outreach and Knowledge Sharing workstream of the CEB Task Force to Address Sexual Harassment, DED Bhatia shared that its objective is to ascertain **how the UN can make change both within and outside the system, to better understand sexual harassment and strengthen approaches to address it.** This means that the UN is working to ensure that policies which exist on paper, are more actionable and transparent.

DED Bhatia informed participants that **the series of peer-to-peer learning dialogues held this year were organized to harvest good practices from across the system, as well as outside the system.** They aim to expand the knowledge base within the UN system, by learning from good practices being implemented outside the UN system, capturing these lessons and disseminating them across the system. The preceding dialogues have covered 30 different speakers and reached over 600 members of the international community.

DED Bhatia expressed that the publication provides an overview of the discussions and seeks to capture the common themes that have emerged. She provided an overview of the key recommendations from the publication, noting that one core theme is the need to **build and safeguard an inclusive working environment** to prevent sexual harassment. A strong piece of learning that emerged was that **policies and procedures need to be accompanied by a culture of respect and trust within the organization.** DED Bhatia particularly referred participants to the [Enabling Environment Guidelines](#) developed by UN Women.

She emphasised several recommendations. One is the **need to address gender parity** and have women in positions of leadership and decision making at all levels of the organization. She highlighted the importance of addressing the systemic and structural barrier of power imbalances and adopting an intersectional lens to understand overlapping forms of discrimination. Another recommendation is the importance of implementing a **victim/survivor-centred approach**, referring to the document "[Advancing a Common Understanding of a Victim-](#)

[centred Approach to Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the United Nations](#)". DED Bhatia further emphasized the need to **provide clear and regular guidance, implement existing policies and tools, strengthen accountability, provide mandatory training to build a safe and enabling working environment and engage male colleagues as allies and create a specific male allyship strategy** as an effective way to address sexual harassment.

DED Bhatia 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
- **Ms. Kate Jenkins**, Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission
- **Ms. Hannan Sulieman**, Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director, UNICEF
- **Professor Scott Westfahl**, Director of Executive Education and Professor of Practice, Harvard Law School
- **Ms. Kanti Joshi**, Founder, TEAM SASHA
- **Mr. Aritha Wickramasinghe**, Director – Equality Law, iProbono

The panelists emphasized the importance of **leaders making a strong commitment to tackle sexual harassment**. Assistant Secretary General (ASG) Sulieman provided the example of UNICEF's Executive Director taking a firm stance against sexual harassment, which had a significant impact at the country level for program staff and partners. This was reiterated by Professor Westfahl who added that when leaders identify why sexual harassment is significant to them on a personal level, it has a notable impact on staff's commitment. As such, panelists pointed out that while leadership commitment is crucial, all staff must work together to fight the scourge of sexual harassment. ASG Lopez and ASG Sulieman noted that leaders alone cannot affect change; organizations can make significant strides when staff and stakeholders stand together to speak up about sexual harassment.

Another common point raised was the **importance of leadership being open to learn and understand from the data on sexual harassment**. Professor Westfahl expressed that leaders need to use the data on the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment to inform organizational approaches. This was echoed by Commissioner Jenkins who shared the findings [from "Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report \(2020\)"](#), the world's first national inquiry into sexual harassment at Australian workplaces, which found that, in 2018, 1 in 3 Australian workers had experienced sexual harassment in the last 5 years. Furthermore, she cited the Deloitte Access Economics report ["The economic costs of sexual harassment in the workplace: Report for Sexual Harassment National Inquiry"](#) which estimated that workplace sexual harassment cost the Australian economy \$3.5 billion in 2018. She expressed that these findings informed the Australian government's decision to shift from a reactive approach to a proactive approach in addressing sexual harassment.

Panelists also expressed that **leadership must foster a workplace culture which promotes open communication, inclusion and respect**. Ms. Joshi provided the example of a leader who ensured open lines of communication with all staff by regularly meeting with employees in small groups to discuss the working environment, and ensuring that all staff understand and are aware of the values of the organization. Both Ms. Joshi and ASG Sulieman noted that leaders should promote open and frank communication in vernacular languages, recognizing the diversity of employees and their different languages and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, Professor Westfahl emphasized

that leaders need to ensure that all employees feel psychologically safe and included in the organization, as this is essential to foster an environment in which they are able to speak up and initiate conversations about sexual harassment.

The panel discussed the need to **bridge the gap between policy and practice in implementing sexual harassment policies**. For example, Mr. Wickramasinghe noted that although the LGBTIQ+ community may be protected in sexual harassment policies which are formulated in the Global North, the criminalization of this community in over 70 countries around the world means that these policies are unequally applied on the ground. He urged leaders to lead by example in creating a safe and inclusive workplace for LGBTIQ+ employees and hold managers accountable for how these policies are implemented. He and Ms. Joshi stated that conducting **regular annual training for all staff that tests their knowledge** is critical to ensure that policies are put into practice. As an example of a practical policy, Professor Westfahl gave the example of a private company which sets clear rules regarding dating between employees: an employee who is not in a supervisory relationship can ask a fellow employee on a date but if this is declined, the employee cannot ask them a second time.

The importance of **accountability and transparency** was also discussed. Professor Westfahl expressed that it is crucial for leaders to be transparent about the consequences of sexual harassment to gain employees' confidence and trust. ASG Lopez shared the good practice of the [ClearCheck database](#) being used to prevent a perpetrator being rehired. Professor Westfahl provided the example of a consulting firm which publicly announced that 12 partners were let go from the organization due to issues of sexual harassment. In addition, Mr. Wickramasinghe expressed that in the case of international or multinational organizations, tailored accountability mechanisms need to be established in regional and country offices to ensure that policies are effectively implemented in accordance with local legislation. ASG Sulieman added that while leadership is responsible for holding people accountable, individual responsibility is just as important; all employees have a responsibility to take action if they witness sexual harassment.