

EVENT REPORT SUMMARY

Making zero tolerance a reality: Understanding and tackling the intersectional nature of sexual harassment in cross-cultural contexts

03 March 2022

Background

The dialogue “**Making zero tolerance a reality: Understanding and tackling the intersectional nature of sexual harassment in cross-cultural contexts**” (03 March) was the sixth peer-to-peer learning dialogue 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 led jointly by Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources in the UN Secretariat, Martha Helena Lopez and Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, Anita Bhatia**. 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.

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 150 participants** to the sixth dialogue bringing together the UN family and the international community to tackle sexual harassment. 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:

1. to **inform** UN Member States and the UN system about efforts to address and prevent sexual harassment within the UN system;
2. to **identify good practices** and efforts being undertaken to tackle the intersectional nature of sexual harassment by UN actors, Member States, civil society and academia;
3. to deepen the dialogue on continued **joint efforts** to prevent sexual harassment.

Ms. Pehrman noted that the publication, “[Making zero tolerance a reality: Peer-to-peer learning to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment in the UN and beyond](#)”, was launched in October 2021 and summarizes the key lessons and recommendations from the first four peer-to-peer learning dialogues. The importance of adopting an intersectional approach to addressing sexual harassment was emphasized in the previous dialogues. This means

understanding that certain groups will have particular vulnerabilities and experience differential impacts of sexual harassment. Ms. Pehrman expressed that this dialogue would be an opportunity to learn about important initiatives and actions we will, can and must take as leaders in our own spheres of influence.

Opening remarks

H.E. Jörundur Valtýsson, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Iceland to the United Nations, delivered the opening remarks at the dialogue, noting that it was an honor to speak on the topic of the intersectional nature of sexual harassment.

H.E. Mr. Valtýsson discussed the advances made by women and girls in Iceland, while acknowledging that more progress is needed to reach gender parity. For example, a recent study on harassment in the Iceland labor market found that people with disabilities are far more likely to experience sexual harassment in the workforce. This refers to the power imbalances which exist at the root of sexual harassment. H.E. Mr. Valtýsson highlighted important preventive steps taken by the government, including implementing the first comprehensive [Policy Brief on Iceland's Roadmap for Ending Gender-based Violence by 2026](#) which promotes sexual education and advocacy on the intersectional realities of sexual harassment. Moreover, in adhering to UN guidelines, Iceland requires all agreements enacted with UN partners to include a clause on abuse and harassment. In addition, Iceland has recently adopted a law which addresses discrimination against non-binary people by changing the binary definition of gender to allow individuals to define their own gender.

H.E. Mr. Valtýsson emphasized that, as responsible citizens and governments actors, we have to empower vulnerable populations through awareness creation and information sharing. He underlined that discussions such as the peer-to-peer dialogues provide colleagues with new and valuable ways to respond to sexual harassment.

Peer-to-peer learning dialogue

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 and contributing to a discussion on how to make intersectionality and gender equality possible globally. DED Bhatia informed participants that as well as working to achieve gender equality worldwide, UN Women works towards gender equality and parity within the UN system. The organization is committed to preventing and eradicating sexual harassment both within and outside the UN system and has developed several products to tackle sexual harassment.

DED Bhatia noted that the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment in the Organizations of the UN System was created in 2017 and aims to develop a common UN system approach to tackling sexual harassment. The outreach and knowledge-sharing efforts of the Task Force are coordinated by DED Bhatia and Assistant Secretary-General (ASG) Ms. Martha Helena Lopez. DED Bhatia shared that this series of peer-to-peer learning dialogues are a key forum for knowledge sharing and she expressed her appreciation to ASG Lopez on the successful partnership in this workstream. She noted that the purpose of the workstream was to understand how to move beyond policies and tools to capture knowledge from others throughout the system and through external actors.

DED Bhatia informed participants that there have been key learnings through all the dialogues. First, sexual harassment remains a pervasive problem. Experts worldwide recognize that this is a very costly issue, with costs to both victims and employers. Secondly, these peer-to-peer learnings have shown that clear guidance is needed on how to implement policies and strengthen accountability. In this regard, the Task Force has developed the [ClearCheck](#) screening database which has been very effective.

Thirdly, policy change alone will not be enough. It is important to focus also on the issue of culture change. DED Bhatia stressed that power differentials and unconscious gender bias need to be addressed. Fourth, leadership needs to set a clear tone, take action and follow through in eradicating sexual harassment. Fifth, it is of utmost importance to understand the intersectional and contextual nature of sexual harassment. It requires understanding the different aspects of sexual harassment, such as disability and sexual orientation that can create unique vulnerabilities.

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. Susanne Mikhail**, Regional Director for the Arab States, UN Women
- **Mr. Frank Dobbin**, Henry Ford II Professor of the Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Harvard University
- **Mx. Maria Sjödin**, Acting Executive Director, OutRight International
- **Ms. Ekaete Judith Umoh**, Country Director, CBM Global Nigeria

The panelists discussed how intersecting aspects of identity can exacerbate individuals' vulnerability to sexual harassment, such as gender, race, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability. ASG Lopez shared that when harassment intersects with race, it can take the form of indignities, marginalization, lack of respect, implicit bias and microaggressions. Mx. Sjödin touched on various types of harassment faced by the LGBTIQ+ community in the workplace, including inappropriate suggestions and questions regarding their bodies and personal lives, threatening to expose their gender identity or sexual orientation and the sexualization of LGBTIQ+ people. In addition, Ms. Umoh informed the participants that women and girls with disabilities are more vulnerable to sexual harassment as they have been socialized to believe they are unworthy. She highlighted that such abuse is usually perpetrated by people without disabilities which underlines the inherent power imbalance.

When designing approaches to prevent and respond to sexual harassment, Ms. Umoh emphasized that a one-size fits all approach is not effective. People with disabilities experience a variety of different impairments and harassment is impairment specific. Furthermore, the importance of leadership commitment to tackling sexual harassment was raised by ASG Lopez, in reference to the Secretary-General's Action Plan on Racism. ASG Lopez informed participants that leadership will be essential in the implementation of this plan by fostering an inclusive organizational culture, building trust among all UN personnel, holding perpetrators accountable for their actions and providing support to those who experience sexual harassment. Ms. Mikhail echoed the importance of management setting the tone from the top and leading by action. She referenced research which has shown that behavior is contagious; negative or abusive behavior can spread throughout the organization.

Ms. Mikhail shared that UN Women's Regional Office for the Arab States has signed the Women's Empowerment Principles with more than 360 private sector organizations in the Arab region. These principles focus on the health and safety of women in the private sector. UN Women works with the organizations to conduct a diagnosis to identify issues which exist in the workplace, including sexual harassment, and to develop a roadmap to address their specific issues, such as formulating a policy on sexual harassment or devising training programs to raise awareness of a sexual harassment policy.

On the topic of training programmes, Professor Dobbin noted that they are most effective when directed at managers as they engage managers in helping to solve the problem of harassment. Training managers to act as bystanders has proven to be highly effective as managers are provided with concrete strategies for intervening when harassment takes place. Mx. Sjödin further noted that online training programmes on sexual harassment tend to be ineffective; a personalized victim-centred approach which directly involves people is more consultative and promotes engagement and discussion. She stressed the importance of including issues related to sexuality, gender, disability, race and other aspects of identity in such training programmes.

Ms. Mikhail also shared several measures taken by the UN Women Regional Office for the Arab States to prevent sexual harassment. This includes one-on-one discussions with personnel about the Code of Conduct to prevent harassment and to raise awareness of the organization's expected standards of conduct, establishing a weekly meeting-free day to reduce stress and improve behavior, and providing a weekly open hour with the regional director to increase transparency and create a safe space to discuss issues related to sexual harassment. This crucial point was reiterated by Ms. Umoh and Mx. Sjödin who underlined the need to build a safe space where LGBTIQ+ people and women with disabilities can openly discuss the issues they face.

Moreover, both Ms. Umoh and Mx. Sjödin echoed the need for holistic harassment prevention programmes to address the additional vulnerabilities faced by marginalized groups. This includes adopting an intentional approach to tackling intersectional sexual harassment by calling out power imbalances, designing policies and programmes with an intersectional lens to ensure they do not take one-size fits all approach, and creating awareness of the different vulnerabilities faced by marginalized groups. Professor Dobbin also addressed the importance of establishing alternate grievance redress mechanisms. He shared that reporting sexual harassment using formal grievance procedures can result in retaliation for those who report, causing them to leave the organization, particularly in the case of women. Professor Dobbin suggested establishing an Ombudsperson or a dispute resolution system, such as a mediator, to allow the victim/survivor to discuss their experience and provide strategies for resolving the issue. He underlined that it is crucial to have multiple avenues of support for victims/survivors of sexual harassment.

In summary, the panelists informed participants of the need to adopt a nuanced approach when considering the intersectional nature of sexual harassment, as a one-size fits all approach fails to capture the diverse experiences of sexual harassment faced by individuals. The commitment of leadership, training managers to be effective bystanders, establishing alternative grievance mechanisms and providing a safe space for personnel to discuss issues with leadership were all identified as key measures to address, prevent and, ultimately, eliminate sexual harassment.