

EVENT REPORT SUMMARY

Making zero tolerance a reality: Tackling sexual harassment in the field and beyond

26 May 2022

Background

The dialogue “**Making zero tolerance a reality: Tackling sexual harassment in the field and beyond**” was the seventh peer-to-peer learning dialogue organized by UN Women. These dialogues are conducted 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. So far, the seven dialogues brought over 1300 participants from the international community together to share good practice on key topics such as intersectionality, leadership and advancing a victim-centred approach.

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 Group of Friends to Eliminate Sexual Harassment, the UN Secretariat and UN Women. Sign language interpretation was provided for this event, and the recording can be accessed [here](#) using the passcode: **\$Y!Ri6wN**

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 120 participants** to the seventh dialogue bringing together the UN family and the international community to eliminate sexual harassment. She introduced the publication, “[Making zero tolerance a reality: Peer-to-peer learning to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment in the UN and beyond](#)”, which was launched in October 2021 and summarizes the key lessons learned and recommendations from the first four peer-to-peer learning dialogues. 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 sexual harassment in the field by UN actors, Member States, civil society and academia;
3. to deepen the dialogue on continued **joint efforts** to prevent sexual harassment.

As the Focal Point for Women in the UN System, Ms. Pehrman represents a system-wide network of over 450 UN Gender Focal Points in the CEB Task Force. UN Gender Focal Points support their leadership and UN organizations to implement the Secretary-General's System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity. They promote diverse, inclusive, and respectful working environments, which includes implementing the organization's tools and policies to prevent sexual harassment. As many Focal Points work in the field, they are essential agents of change in making zero tolerance a reality in the UN system around the world.

Opening remarks

H.E. Rabab Fatima, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations, delivered the opening remarks at the dialogue. She expressed her thanks to the Group of Friends to Eliminate Sexual Harassment for their efforts to raise awareness of sexual harassment such as through co-hosting this peer-to-peer learning dialogue.

H.E. Ms. Fatima noted that the prevalence of sexual harassment runs counter to everything the UN stands for. She expressed that despite the many policies and measures taken, the problem persists across the UN system. She commended the UN Secretary-General for taking a tough stand on this issue and demonstrating strong political commitment to eliminate sexual harassment. She further commended the CEB Task Force for the progress made in the formulation of policies and guidance to combat sexual harassment, including the [UN System Model Policy on Sexual Harassment](#), the [Code of Conduct to Prevent Harassment, including Sexual Harassment at UN System Events](#), the [Guide for Managers: Prevention Of, and Response to Sexual Harassment, in the Workplace](#), and [Advancing a Common Understanding of a Victim-centred Approach to Sexual Harassment](#). Given the many policies and measures already in place, H.E. Ms. Fatima underlined the importance of ensuring their effective implementation system-wide as the UN is expected to lead by example.

Drawing on the national context in Bangladesh, she noted that there has been a rapid rise in women's participation in the workforce which has transformed the traditional work environment and culture. H.E. Ms. Fatima discussed the legal and regulatory mechanisms enacted in Bangladesh to tackle sexual harassment, as well as measures to bring about changes in mindset. This includes the criminalization of sexual harassment in the laws of Bangladesh, as well as the establishment of sexual harassment complaint committees in all government offices and initiatives to raise awareness on sexual harassment in the workplace in accordance with the Guidelines issued by the Supreme Court of Bangladesh. While these are important steps, H.E. Ms. Fatima acknowledged that more needs to be done to eliminate sexual harassment.

H.E. Ms. Fatima noted that addressing sexual harassment requires strong political commitment and the support and collective efforts of all stakeholders. She underlined that women must be able to participate as equals in decision making processes. As an example, H.E. Ms. Fatima expressed that Heads of Missions and Permanent Representatives have a responsibility to foster such practices in their respective organizations, creating an environment of mutual respect and zero tolerance for sexual harassment. Moreover, H.E. Ms. Fatima discussed the impact that the oversight functions of the Executive Board of the UN agencies, funds and programs can have in this regard. She stated that the Executive Boards play an important role in addressing sexual harassment in the field, such as in UN Country Teams (UNCTs) and where UN has large humanitarian or peacekeeping operations. Further, good practices to prevent sexual harassment within the UN can be a source of inspiration and a model for Member States to develop stronger policies in their own national contexts. The regular sharing of good practices between the UNCTs and Member States can add great value to the collective fight against sexual harassment. She concluded by stating that the UN has both a responsibility and an opportunity to lead this movement and make the fight against sexual harassment a truly universal one.

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, panelists, and participants for their engagement in the dialogue. The Chair underlined that the learnings from the series of peer-to-peer dialogues have been extremely valuable for CEB Task Force.

The Chair of the Task Force shared three reflections from survivors of sexual harassment working in remote and high-risk locations. First, although sexual harassment can happen anywhere and, in any environment, the risks are greater in more remote operations. Personnel who lack security, connectivity and access to facilities are more vulnerable, such as those working in emergency operations where there is high turnover. Second, she reminded participants that, for survivors, the difficulty of speaking up about sexual harassment can be due to highly personal feelings of shame, a loss of control over their own lives and often concerns about safety, the risks to which can be personally, culturally, and organizationally specific. As a result, the Chair underlined that addressing sexual harassment across all of the UN's operational contexts requires understanding the varying costs of speaking up and how they differ from person to person and location to location. Third, survivors often describe a misuse of the hierarchical structures of the UN as the root cause of sexual harassment. She emphasized that the UN needs to pay attention to those less equipped to navigate complex organizational structures and implement approaches that deconstruct rather than exacerbate such perceptions.

Looking ahead to the third phase of work for the CEB Task Force, the Chair outlined behavioural science and prevention of sexual harassment as the first area of work. She noted that the focus of this workstream will be to examine the impact of the UN's trainings, workplaces and offices on people's actions and the organization's ability to create safe working environments globally. The Chair identified victim engagement and support as the second area of work. This workstream will analyze the experiences of victims/survivors to understand if more individually based approaches are required to eliminate sexual harassment. The third area of work outlined by the Chair was data and results, focusing on indicators to measure the UN's impact, including in operations, and progress in tackling sexual harassment. The Chair stated that enhanced cooperation will be the fourth area of work, looking

at how the UN's many approaches to address sexual harassment can be carried out in a more coordinated and collaborative manner across the system.

The Chair noted that preventing and responding to sexual harassment in every location where the UN serves is a high priority for the CEB Task Force. She underscored the importance of communication in raising awareness of the progress made by the UN to address sexual harassment and to build confidence in the efficacy of this change. She further highlighted that while communicating and engaging with all personnel on this topic is challenging, particularly in remote and high-risk operational contexts, the Task Force is committed to carrying this work forward. The Chair invited participants to share their ideas, reflections and lessons during the dialogue to help the Task Force in its endeavor.

Peer-to-peer learning dialogue

Ms. Anita Bhatia, Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director (DED), UN Women, opened the panel discussion and thanked the distinguished speakers for their participation in the event. She echoed H.E. Ms. Fatima's remarks on the importance of remaining committed, aware, and united to move the needle to eliminate 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 six dialogues held thus far have been a key forum for knowledge sharing and have engaged actors from within and outside the UN system, including civil society, academia, and international financial institutions. DED Bhatia informed participants of the key learnings from the dialogues. First, policy formulation alone is insufficient; implementation and accountability are key to eradicating sexual harassment. Second, more women are needed in leadership and decision-making roles to advance gender parity. Third, an intersectional focus is essential as aspects of individual's identity such as disability and sexual orientation can create unique vulnerabilities and lead to further oppression and discrimination.

DED Bhatia moderated the following panel:

- **Ms. Martha Helena Lopez**, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources, Department of Management, Strategy, Policy and Compliance, United Nations
- **Ms. Jane Connors**, Assistant Secretary-General and United Nations Victims' Rights Advocate
- **Mr. Edward Kallon**, United Nations Resident Coordinator in Zimbabwe
- **Mr. Maxime Houinato**, Regional Director, UN Women East and Southern Africa Regional Office
- **Ms. Emily May**, Executive Director, Right To Be
- **Mr. Ravi Verma**, Director - Asian Regional Office, International Centre for Research on Women

Mr. Kallon shared some of the key challenges faced in tackling sexual harassment in UNCTs with the participants. He discussed the difficulty in translating policy into practice by implementing concrete actions; the need to strengthen investigative capacity; the limited awareness of sexual harassment and reporting mechanisms; fear of retaliation; and the silos inherent in the UN system. These points were emphasized by Mr. Houinato as well who underlined the importance of promoting understanding and awareness of sexual harassment among personnel.

In addition, he discussed the need to integrate reporting mechanisms and accountability tools into workplaces to create an environment in which personnel are aware that actions have consequences. ASG Connors noted that all leaders need to be aware of how to support victims/survivors to report sexual harassment through formal channels. Moreover, she addressed the fear and lack of trust among victims/survivors in reporting sexual harassment and underlined the need to frame victims/survivors as agents of change to create confidence in the system, especially in the field.

Mr. Houinato discussed the importance of leadership and senior management in setting the right tone in the organization and creating an environment of zero-tolerance for sexual harassment. This was echoed by ASG Connors who stated that, especially in the field, leadership is essential in acting proactively and practically to address sexual harassment by taking into account the concerns and fears of victims/survivors. She emphasized that this should be cascaded from the top through all levels of leadership and leaders should prevent the reoccurrence of stigma and retaliation against personnel who report such cases. Mr. Kallon further noted that fostering a transparent organizational culture in which personnel can have an open dialogue with leadership is needed to address issues related to sexual harassment. This was also discussed by Mr. Verma who stated that safe spaces need to be created where difficult conversations on these issues can be raised, to generate critical thinking, especially among men, and tackle the norms and attitudes which provide a sense of security and culture of impunity for men in the workplace.

ASG Connors informed participants of her role in strengthening a victim/survivor-centred approach to sexual harassment as the UN Victims' Rights Advocate (VRA). As part of this work, the VRA has developed key tools, including the principles to [Advancing a Common Understanding of a Victim-centred Approach to Sexual Harassment](#), which must be operationalized system-wide, and an exit survey to capture the experiences of victims/survivors who report sexual harassment and ensure their feedback informs the organization's work. In addition, ASG Connors shared the good practice of appointing dedicated Victims' Rights Advocates and Senior Victims' Rights Officers in the field who champion the rights and interests of victims/survivors. ASG Connors noted that the UN must base its work on the feedback of victims/survivors to learn from their experiences and develop context-specific methodologies and indicators to measure progress. ASG Lopez and Mr. Kallon stated that a collaborative and holistic effort is required to make concerted progress in eliminating sexual harassment.

Moreover, the need to engage men and boys as allies to tackle sexual harassment was raised by Mr. Verma. He discussed the importance of structural intervention to address the power differentials and organizational hierarchies which drive sexual harassment. Mr. Verma shared with the participants that the International Centre for Research on Women works to intervene in spaces such as schools, universities and in sports to engage men and boys as allies. Similarly, Ms. May briefed participants on the [5D's of bystander intervention](#), which are five strategies bystanders can use to intervene in cases of sexual harassment. Ms. May shared that these steps enable bystanders to step into their power when they witness sexual harassment occurring. Research by Right To Be found that 76% of the people who were trained in bystander intervention reported that they would intervene if they encountered sexual harassment.

ASG Lopez updated participants on the efforts taken to prevent the employment of perpetrators of sexual harassment in the UN through the ClearCheck database. The database is a centralized platform into which UN entities can enter potential candidates to verify that they do not have established allegations of sexual harassment and sexual exploitation and abuse. ASG Lopez shared some key statistics on the success of ClearCheck; more than

180,000 screening requests have been received from 17 participating UN organizations and two individuals were prevented from being hired due to previous cases of misconduct. She further noted that ClearCheck is in the process of being linked to the UN's talent management systems, and the platform is being expanded to other stakeholders outside the UN system, including partners. Mr. Kallon reiterated the importance of conducting reference checks on candidates and shared that the UNCT in Zimbabwe vets external candidates during recruitment to minimize the risk of hiring perpetrators of sexual misconduct.

Closing remarks from the Group of Friends to Eliminate Sexual Harassment

H.E. Mark Zellenrath, Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the United Nations delivered the closing remarks at the event. On behalf of the Group of Friends to Eliminate Sexual Harassment, H.E. Mr. Zellenrath underlined the Group's commitment to supporting the UN to eliminate sexual harassment. He noted that the Group of Friends comprises of over 50 countries, and they engage with the UN to deliver on the promise of zero tolerance for sexual harassment. He underlined that there are no shortcuts to end sexual harassment as zero tolerance requires persistence. He emphasized that the focus should not only be on zero tolerance for sexual harassment, but also on zero tolerance for inaction towards sexual harassment.

In his remarks, H.E. Mr. Zellenrath discussed the importance of leadership fostering a safe and supportive environment in the workplace through a bottom-up approach. As part of this approach, it is vital that personnel feel supported to communicate and openly exchange ideas with leadership. As an example, H.E. Mr. Zellenrath outlined three actions taken by the Netherlands Mission to create an enabling working environment. First, the Mission has created a dilemma game which is used to initiate conversations about issues faced in the workplace, such as sexual harassment and integrity, and how these should be addressed. Integrating sexual harassment into broader conversations on integrity have been effective creating a safe space for employees to speak up about difficult topics. Second, the Mission conducts civility cafes where employees are given the opportunity to discuss issues of civility and what a supportive working environment means to them in a safe space. Third, the bystander intervention tool of distract, delegate, document, delay and direct is utilized by the Mission to ensure that all employees are active bystanders and are equipped to tackle toxic behaviour in the workplace.

Additional resources

- [Making Zero Tolerance a Reality: Peer-to-Peer Learning to Prevent and Eliminate Sexual Harassment](#)
- [Enabling Environment Guidelines for the UN System](#)
- [Field-specific Enabling Environment Guidelines for the UN System](#)
- [How to address online sexual harassment during COVID-19](#)

UN Women [publications](#) on addressing sexual harassment:

- Publication: [What will it take? Promoting cultural change to end sexual harassment](#)
- Publication: [Stepping up to the challenge: Towards international standards on training to end sexual harassment](#)
- Publication: [Bridging the gap: Sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment \(SEAH\)](#)
- [Webinar series on sexual harassment](#)
- [Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces](#)
- [Spotlight Initiative](#)
- Publication: [Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit](#)