



United
Nations



MAKING ZERO TOLERANCE A REALITY:

PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING TO PREVENT AND ELIMINATE SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE UN SYSTEM AND BEYOND

Overview of the reflections on the peer-to-peer learning dialogues organized as part of the outreach and knowledge sharing efforts of the Chief Executives Board (CEB) Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the UN System

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This publication is based on the peer-to-peer learning dialogues conducted in the context of Workstream 4 of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the UN system, co-led by Assistant Secretary-General Anita Bhatia (UN Women) and Assistant Secretary-General Martha Helena Lopez (UN Secretariat).

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INTRODUCTION


The Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) [Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the UN system](#) was established in 2017 by the Secretary-General to develop a common United Nations system approach to tackle sexual harassment by bringing together senior managers from across the organization. The [Chief Executives Board for Coordination](#) is the longest-standing highest-level coordination forum of the United Nations system. As the Task Force states: “Leaders of UN System organizations reiterate their firm commitment to uphold a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment; to strengthen victim-centred prevention and response efforts; and to foster a safe and inclusive working environment.”¹

The work of the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment is organized into five workstreams:

1. Implement: Support the roll-out of products endorsed by HLCM;
2. Strengthen: Advance a victim-centered approach to tackling sexual harassment;
3. Learning and Communication;
4. Outreach and Knowledge Sharing; and
5. Leadership and Culture.

The CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment has made substantial progress, including on strengthening investigations, developing a [UN system Model Policy on Sexual Harassment](#), creating a [Guide for Managers: Prevention of, and Response to, Sexual Harassment in the Workplace](#), launching the Code of [Conduct to prevent harassment, including sexual harassment at UN System events](#), and implementing the [ClearCheck](#) Screening Database. While the UN has taken important steps to develop policies and guidance, challenges remain with their implementation.

¹ [CEB Statement on Addressing Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of The UN System, 2018](#)



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

– Ms. Kelly T. Clements, Vice-Chair High-Level Committee on Management, Chair of the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the UN System



PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING DIALOGUES

To strengthen outreach and the sharing of knowledge, in 2021, the Outreach and Knowledge Sharing workstream of the Task Force hosted four peer-to-peer learning dialogues. This workstream is jointly led by Ms. Martha Helena Lopez, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources of the UN Secretariat and Ms. Anita Bhatia, Assistant Secretary-General for Resource Management, Sustainability and Partnerships and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women.

One advantage of the pandemic's push towards mass remote working has been the opportunity to bring together partners from all over the world in a virtual space. Collectively, the dialogues featured thirty different speakers and reached over 600 members of the international community. At these events, Member States, civil society actors and leadership from UN organizations and entities shared good practices and recommendations on how to work collaboratively to enhance accountability in addressing, preventing and ultimately eliminating sexual harassment in the UN system and beyond.

The peer-to-peer dialogues aimed to inform and inspire UN organizations regarding efforts to tackle sexual harassment within the UN system and beyond, as well as enable peer-to-peer learning. Specifically, the dialogues had a three-fold purpose: 1. **inform the international community** about efforts to address and prevent sexual harassment within the UN system; 2. **identify good practices** and efforts being undertaken to tackle sexual harassment by UN actors, Member States, civil society representatives, international financial institutions and the private sector; and 3. **deepen the dialogue** on continued joint efforts to prevent sexual harassment within the UN system.

The first dialogue took place virtually in February 2021 together with the Group of Friends to Eliminate Sexual Harassment and provided an update on the work of the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment. Given its success, subsequent dialogues were expanded to include the wider international community. In March, the second dialogue took place alongside the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, with the focus on learning from civil society partners. The third dialogue was held in May and concentrated on driving cultural change within the organization to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment. The focus of the fourth dialogue in June was on addressing online sexual harassment.

All dialogues were hosted by UN Women, the UN Secretariat and the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment. The Group of Friends to Eliminate Sexual Harassment joined as co-hosts of the February and March dialogues, while the Permanent Mission of Sierra Leone to the United Nations was another co-host of the March event.

In the spirit of modelling good practice, all dialogues adhered to the [Code of Conduct to prevent harassment, including sexual harassment at UN System events](#). Participants were informed of the Code, which was shown and referred to at the beginning of the meeting and the link was shared in the virtual meeting chat.

At the dialogues, Assistant Secretary-General Ms. Martha Helena Lopez updated participants on the Outreach and Knowledge Sharing workstream. Deputy Executive Director Anita Bhatia led the moderation of the peer-to-peer learning dialogue in each event. In the first three events, Deputy High Commissioner Kelly T. Clements, Chair of the CEB Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment, provided an update on the work and efforts of the Task Force. All the events were facilitated by Ms. Katja Pehrman, Senior Advisor and Focal Point for Women in the UN System, UN Women.

Each event comprised of a diverse range of speakers from the international community who engaged with each other and the audience. The speakers shared testimonies and common experiences from victims/survivors of sexual harassment. They expressed that the fundamental values of equality and diversity need to be practised and offered clear suggestions regarding how the United Nations can work together to properly address, prevent, and ultimately eradicate, sexual harassment in the UN system and beyond.

Speakers discussed insidious patterns of sexual harassment across professional sectors, geographic locations and time periods, as well the context-specific nature of sexual harassment in the UN and at this particular moment in history. For example, the phenomenon of remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the manifestation of sexual harassment in a variety of ways, including online platforms. As observed by the Chair of the CEB Task Force, Deputy High Commissioner Ms. Kelly Clements: “This is a timely moment for this dialogue, given emerging evidence that, like the virus itself, working remotely has helped sexual harassment mutate remotely, moving online in different forms that we are only beginning to understand. We also realize that many of the systems and the tools that we have built to support survivors and investigate allegations also need adaptation to our new ways of working. With disruption comes opportunity, and that is true in this context as well.” Indeed, these new ways of working have underlined the urgency of collaboration in tackling sexual harassment.

KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While each peer-to-peer dialogue featured a different focus, common themes emerged from the four events. A summary of the main points presented at these dialogues, and proposed actions to eradicate sexual harassment within the UN system are outlined below.



1. Build and safeguard an inclusive working environment to prevent sexual harassment

As the world's largest universal multilateral international organization, the United Nations inspires people from around the world to join its mission of maintaining peace, advancing human rights, and promoting justice, equality, and development. Its core values include integrity, professionalism, and respect for diversity. It is vital to create a culture, therefore, that fosters an **inclusive, enabling, and accountable working environment, free of sexual harassment**, where all colleagues feel welcome, respected, and valued for their contributions. It was recommended that policies and procedures are informed by a research-driven approach that ensures gender equality, diversity and inclusion, by including the experiences of marginalized groups in examples and case studies featured in training. Moreover, it was proposed that these **policies and procedures need to be accompanied by a culture of respect and trust** within the organization. Recommended resources include the [Enabling Environment Guidelines](#), its [Supplementary Guidance](#), and the [Field-specific Enabling Environment Guidelines](#).



2. Demonstrate leadership commitment to eradicate sexual harassment

It is critical that managers and other leadership set a clear tone and take action to prevent and eradicate sexual harassment. For instance, it is important to **ensure that all the tools available to address and tackle sexual harassment are clearly understood through communication, awareness-raising, and training**. An identified good practice in this regard is the signing of a gender pledge by every employee and making a visible commitment at the time of joining the organization. While it is the responsibility of **leadership in the UN system to lead by example and ensure adherence to the policies**, including taking corrective action, everyone has a responsibility to foster an enabling working environment free from harassment by individuals or groups.²

Panellists also suggest a **feminist leadership approach to address the root causes of gender inequality**. Such an approach moves from a 'power over' leadership model to one of 'power with', 'power within' and 'power to' by dismantling power relationships that enable and uphold the marginalization of individuals or groups within the organization. It questions existing structures of power and privilege, which often shape the experiences of sexual harassment, and brings attention to issues such as age, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and gender. Moreover, a feminist approach builds a culture of trust and accountability within the system for preventing, identifying and reporting sexual harassment.

² Resources include UN Women publications [Towards an End to Sexual Harassment](#) and [What Will It Take? Promoting Cultural Change to End Sexual Harassment](#).



3. Strengthen, advance and implement a victim/survivor-centred approach

Furthermore, as recommended, it is of utmost importance to strengthen, advance and implement a **victim/survivor-centred approach**. Key principles of this approach include placing the victim at the centre of all prevention and response efforts, respecting the integrity of the victim by listening without judgement, ensuring protection from retaliation and re-traumatization, re-prioritizing focus from protecting organization's reputation to ensuring victims' rights, practising confidentiality, providing information and support to victims, and focusing on prevention. In addition, it is critical to provide **trauma-informed training for investigators** and gain feedback from victims to improve processes.

Panellists recommended that sexual harassment should be seen as a system-wide issue of **workplace safety**, and that a victim/survivor-centred approach to prevention and response should be institutionalized throughout the United Nations. It is vital to mainstream a victims' rights approach across the UN system, enhancing coordination efforts at both policy and operational levels. Important steps have been taken towards achieving this, including the appointment of a Victims' Rights Advocate (VRA) to operationalize a victims' rights-centred approach; the implementation of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's "championship" strategy for addressing sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment; and the Victims' Assistance Protocol developed by UNICEF and the UN Secretariat's Conduct and Discipline Service. The second workstream of the CEB Task Force, "Advance a victim-centred approach to tackling sexual harassment", led by VRA Ms. Jane Connors, has developed the document [Advancing a Common Understanding of a Victim-centred Approach to Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the United Nations System](#). The paper aims to develop a common understanding of a victim/survivor-centered approach to sexual harassment, thereby enabling a consistent system-wide response.



4. Implement existing policies and tools

As highlighted in the dialogues, progress has been made on the implementation of the UN system [Model Policy](#) on Sexual Harassment; the [Code of Conduct](#) to Prevent Harassment, Including Sexual Harassment, at UN System Events; and the [Clear Check](#) Database, which allows for vetting and reference checking to avoid the hiring and re-hiring of individuals who were dismissed after an investigation determined they had committed sexual harassment.

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