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In the Spotlight: Reporting Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

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Harassment of any type is antithetical to the principles of the United Nations (UN), and sexual harassment in particular undermines its credibility and degrades its staff. Five years after the UN Secretary-General established the Chief Executives Board for the Coordination Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment (**Task Force**), addressing and effectively investigating sexual misconduct within the UN system remains a persistent challenge.

The Task Force is now in its third phase and has launched a number of initiatives which promote a more victim centred approach in addressing sexual harassment. This article provides an overview of the progress made in the last five years by the UN and the Task Force. It also assesses potential areas where further work is necessary to make reporting for victims more transparent and enhance coordination between different UN agencies.

What is the UN definition of sexual harassment?

As set out in the UN Secretary-General's Bulletin on Addressing discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority (ST/SGB/2019/8), the key features of sexual harassment are:

- ! Unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that takes place in the workplace or in connection with work;
- ! it can occur as a pattern of conduct or be a single incident;
- ! the conduct may be of a verbal, nonverbal or physical nature, including written and electronic communications; and
- ! it may occur between persons of the same or different genders and individuals of any gender can be either the targets or the perpetrators.

How do you lodge a complaint?

There is a comprehensive reporting system for sexual harassment in the UN. Reports can be made through various channels, including designated focal points within each UN entity, specialised units such as the Conduct and Discipline Teams, or through the UN's confidential helpline. This reporting system aims to provide a safe and supportive environment for victims to seek justice and hold perpetrators accountable. Reports may be submitted anonymously, information provided will be treated confidentially and will only be disclosed to those who have a legitimate need to know.

Generally, each UN agency will have its own reporting mechanism which can be found on the entity-specific Intranet. If there is uncertainty as to which entity the alleged perpetrator belongs to, staff can report incidents through the [UN Office of Internal Oversight Services \(OIOS\)](#) which offers a confidential helpline called [Speak Up](#). The 24-hour resource offers UN personnel the opportunity to speak confidentially with impartial and trained individuals, who can provide information on protection, support and reporting mechanisms.

Once a report has been made, the investigation team will start by making a *prima facie* assessment of the allegations to establish whether an investigation is warranted. If it is, the team will initiate the fact-finding process based on the agency's investigation manual. All staff members are required to cooperate fully with investigations. Based on the evidence gathered during the investigation, the team will put together a confidential report which should include their findings and whether they consider the allegations have been substantiated. The report might also include recommendations for potential disciplinary action.

The ClearCheck Screening Database

In order to increase transparency and prevent perpetrators from switching to a different UN agency after being found guilty of committing sexual misconduct, the UN developed the screening tool, [ClearCheck](#). ClearCheck is a highly secure and confidential centralised database. It permits UN agencies to share information on UN personnel against whom allegations related to sexual harassment have been established as well as those who were the subject of a pending investigation and/or disciplinary process and resigned before the investigation was completed. Importantly, the platform records individuals who had any type of contractual relationship with the UN whether on a long- or short-term contractual basis with the aim to prevent re-employing them within the UN system.

Launch of the UN Knowledge Hub on Addressing Sexual Harassment

Most recently, the Task Force launched a new [UN System-wide Knowledge Hub on Addressing Sexual Harassment](#). The Knowledge Hub serves as repository of resources from across the UN system on addressing sexual harassment and currently has 34 participating entities. It is intended to help enhance coordination between UN agencies and facilitate easier access to key documents for internal and external audiences, and is available to all UN personnel, Member States and civil society. The Hub offers a complete list of resources which includes the [UN Code of Conduct to prevent sexual harassment](#), the [UN Manual on Investigation of Sexual Harassment Complaints](#) as well as [resources](#) available to individuals affected by sexual harassment.

More work remains to be done

While efforts continue to be made by the UN, the investigation of sexual harassment incidents remains a challenge for the organisation and there is a need for substantial reforms to ensure a safer and more inclusive working environment for all staff members. Some of the key areas for improvement include:

Lack of accountability: Holding perpetrators accountable for their actions remains too often wishful thinking for victims. They are still faced with instances where individuals accused of sexual harassment face minimal consequences, are transferred to other UN missions without proper investigation or disciplinary action, or resign before investigations conclude so that their cases are closed.

Inadequate reporting mechanisms: While a lot of effort has been made to improve the UN's reporting mechanisms for sexual harassment, they still follow complex and bureaucratic processes. The average time for an incident to be investigated is 12 months from reporting. This leaves victims in a limbo for a significant time and often forcing them to face the perpetrator on a daily basis.

Slow response and lack of transparency: The investigation process has been criticised for its slow response in addressing sexual harassment allegations. Delays in investigations and lack of transparency in sharing information about the progress of cases have raised concerns about the UN's commitment to addressing the issue.

Power imbalances and culture of impunity: The hierarchical structure of the UN coupled with power imbalances has been identified as a contributing factor to the prevalence of sexual harassment. It is essential that managers and executives do not foster a culture of impunity where individuals in positions of power are protected and shielded from accountability.

Insufficient prevention and awareness programs: There is a need for comprehensive and mandatory training programs for all staff members, including senior officials, to raise awareness about sexual harassment, its impact, and the importance of reporting incidents.

Lack of diversity and gender parity: Lack of gender parity and diversity further contributes to an environment where sexual harassment is more likely to occur. Therefore, increasing the representation of women in leadership positions and decision-making roles is crucial to addressing the issue effectively.

It is important to acknowledge the improvements made by the UN and to recognise that investigating sexual harassment within the UN is highly complex due to its size, global reach and its limited resources. The introduction of a dedicated hotline for reporting sexual harassment, the creation of special units to deal with such complaints as well as the introduction of more checks and balances in the hiring process of UN personnel are all welcome steps in the right direction. However, concerns remain about the lack of transparency and accountability in addressing sexual harassment cases as well as a lack of consistency in the conduct of investigation across UN entities.

Importantly, UN staff should be regularly updated on policies and reporting mechanisms and encouraged to report serious conduct without fear of retaliation. Modulaw stands ready to support staff if they require assistance with filing complaints or during investigation and disciplinary processes.

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