

## **Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations**

1. This statement is presented to the Executive Board on behalf of the staff associations of WHO, IARC, PAHO and UNAIDS, which represent the views of over 10 000 staff members of the United Nations system. It highlights staff concerns as well as progress made on the current systemic issues identified during the last 12 months that impact the ability of staff to deliver on our shared mandate to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable.

2. We, the staff associations, would first like to congratulate Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on his nomination by the Executive Board to serve a second term as the Director-General of WHO. We strongly welcome this nomination.

3. We would like to reaffirm our appreciation for the commitment, leadership and support demonstrated by senior management and the Director-General to nurture a healthy staff-management relationship and collaborate to tackle issues that concern and affect staff. The Director-General's continued commitment to meet regularly with staff representatives and engage actively with us demonstrates his willingness to find solutions that benefit both the Organization and its workforce.

4. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to the health and wellbeing of all peoples across the globe, including our workforce. The future of work is changing and as the leading public health authority in the United Nations Common System, WHO has been very much focused on the response to the global health crisis. The evolving nature of the pandemic has impacted us all in one way or another, and the uncertainty it has provoked has fuelled the need for new and additional support mechanisms to help the workforce cope effectively not only with new conditions of work, but also with existing challenges, which have sometimes been exacerbated by the new normal.

5. In this statement, we will highlight the seven following key areas and issues of concern, and also point to opportunities for further collaboration:

- (1) Staff Health and Wellbeing.
- (2) Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI).
- (3) Respectful working environment.
- (4) Racism and racial discrimination.
- (5) Prevention and response to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PRSEAH).
- (6) Internal justice system.
- (7) Contractual conditions of work.

## **STAFF HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

6. The health and wellbeing of our workforce is fundamental to the Organization's ability to achieve its strategic goals. The pandemic has underscored the need for more targeted care and workplace wellbeing support to effectively support our workforce to deliver WHO's mandate. We recognize that in 2021, the Departments of Mental Health and Staff Health and Wellbeing, offered some initiatives to support staff across the three levels. However, staff across the three levels of our Organization have access to very few counsellors. As the leading public health authority, WHO can further strengthen access to diverse options for psychosocial support for all members of the workforce, particularly at country and regional levels. The world continues to confront an aggressive pandemic, together with other challenges including conflicts in several regions. More than ever before, the Organization has a duty of care to prioritize the mental, psychological, and emotional wellbeing of staff. Thus, the staff associations call for sustained investments and financing to support mental health services, to ensure access to quality services for all staff, especially in regions where these services are not readily available.

7. Simple actions such as encouraging wellness breaks and rest periods will allow staff to see these pauses as acceptable and enable them to take breaks as needed. Our leaders set the tone to ensure a healthy work environment for all. Leading by example and with empathy is essential.

## **DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION (DEI)**

8. We recognize the recent commitment to improving diversity and inclusion at WHO, following the launch in June 2021 of the one-year project "Listen, Learn, & Act Together". The Human Resources Agenda for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for the WHO Workforce, and its action plan, is also being launched in this context. We remain strongly committed to working with the administration to create an enabling environment for DEI. When we actively honour and respect diversity and equity, and ensure inclusion, we build trust and create an empowered, thriving workforce. No one should come to work forced to leave an aspect of their identity at the door. We call for all efforts on DEI to be meaningful, bold, practical, sustainable, current, and operational, avoiding any tokenism. WHO needs to nurture and sustain a respectful workplace culture.

9. We, the staff associations, recommend that commitment to sustained DEI efforts are prioritized through the allocation of concrete funding, resources, and capacities.

10. To create behavioural change and transform the workplace into an environment where all workforce members thrive, we propose that the Department of Human Resources and Talent Management take leadership on implementation of the following:

- Acknowledging all forms of discrimination. Ensure that WHO is an inclusive workplace, free from discrimination, harassment and bullying in all its forms.
- Setting the intention: Policies must ensure that zero tolerance to all forms of discrimination is enacted. The Human Resources DEI Agenda documents should reference and detail how staff facing racism and racial discrimination can seek support and redress.
- Ensuring that there is an adequate legal framework to prevent all forms of discrimination and to support victims. Allegations of discrimination must be investigated and dealt with swiftly and as a matter of priority.
- Capturing human resources data related to DEI to develop benchmarks, set goals, and publicize progress.

- Understanding that each individual will have a different experience. Values, lived experience, and personal understanding of structural and systemic discrimination vary widely from individual to individual.
- Equipping managers and leadership to lead and be accountable for progress on DEI. Actions could include setting performance management development system (PMDS) objectives requiring leaders to promote conscious inclusion and fair and equitable access to opportunities for all with accountability for the continuous progression of diverse talent in the workplace.

## **RESPECTFUL WORKING ENVIRONMENT**

11. A respectful workplace is one that encourages trust and where the entire workforce feels respected, that their rights are protected, that they are treated fairly and are able to achieve their full potential. It is a place where the value of diversity is appreciated, where open and courteous channels of communication thrive and where there is a culture of empowerment and cooperation.

12. We, the staff associations, remain strongly committed to working, with the full support of the Director-General and senior management, to organize activities under the Joint Staff/Management Respectful Workplace initiative. In particular, to ensure that these respectful workplace activities encompass DEI, PRSEAH, and Preventing and Addressing Abusive Conduct (PAAC) and promote systems and mechanisms to address harassment, discrimination, racism, and bias.

13. We call for sustainable resources and funding to be identified to ensure long-term coordination of these activities across all levels of WHO.

14. We further call on all staff and management across all regions to actively contribute to building a more respectful working environment. We expect the staff associations to be consulted and, where appropriate, to jointly lead on programmes of work in this area.

## **ZERO TOLERANCE ON DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM**

15. We are all responsible for maintaining a workplace free of any form of discrimination, including racial discrimination, harassment, microaggressions, abuse of power and authority. We each need to play our part in stopping such conduct and, if it occurs, take swift and appropriate corrective action. We must also support those targeted by such conduct and protect them from all forms of retaliation for having sought redress.

16. We note that in January 2022 the Secretary-General of the United Nations shared the Strategic Action Plan (SAP) on Addressing Racism and Promoting Dignity for all in the United Nations Secretariat. The SAP recognizes that racism in the workplaces of the United Nations can also take the form of harassment, abuse of authority, exclusion, marginalization, indignities and lack of respect, implicit bias and microaggressions.<sup>1</sup> We have also expressed our concern that to date, WHO has not implemented the United Nations-wide survey on racism, taken by several agencies in 2020 and 2021. We strongly encourage the administration to consider this as a strategic priority.

17. Our Organization and the United Nations are founded on the principles of the dignity and worth of the human person, and the right of everyone to enjoy equal human rights and fundamental freedoms,

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic Action Plan on Addressing Racism and Promoting Dignity for all in the United Nations Secretariat, January 2022. (SAP Infographic Summary (un.org) accessed 12 April 2022).

without distinctions of race, sex, language, ethnic or national origin. Racial discrimination and racism violate the United Nations Charter and WHO values, affecting staff morale and undermining efforts to deliver mandates. Being against racism is a core value of being an employee of the United Nations Common System. Anti-racism initiatives require lifelong commitment and demand action every day, at every level, in every society.<sup>1</sup> Addressing racism and racial discrimination in our workplace requires engagement and leadership at all levels. Dialogue and conversations around racism are important because when we seek to understand different perspectives we set the tone for a more respectful workplace.

18. We recognize and thank the Director-General for the resources and efforts made available to help eliminate many forms of harassment and discrimination, through mandatory training and campaigns. However, the staff associations would like to encourage commitment towards training and prevention of all forms of discrimination, including racial discrimination, racism, harassment, microaggressions, and abuse of power and authority. Our recommendations to further nurture a harmonious and respectful work environment include:

- **Acknowledging all forms of discrimination**  
The impact discrimination issues have on the workforce is profound. Trauma resulting from repeated exposure to microaggressions and discrimination can have devastating effects on the physical and mental health of those who suffer from it. Discrimination also affects the Organization's reputation and time is lost when spent on addressing issues and investigations.
- **Nurturing a “speak up” culture**  
Safe spaces to speak up respectfully and be heard without fear of retaliation, allowing all levels of the workforce to contribute, are essential to building a strong WHO. When we call out problematic behaviour, we actively build trust and create space for a respectful workplace to be the priority. Different marginalized groups should feel safe and able to access relevant channels.
- **Developing targeted training**  
To foster a culture of trust, open dialogue, and training to build skills on how to be an active bystander, unconscious bias training would benefit all staff.
- **Being accountable**  
Senior management should apply a zero-tolerance policy to discrimination. Data should be made available regarding diversity and inclusion across all offices.
- **Strengthening the internal justice process**  
Access must be ensured to grievance resolution mechanisms that address racism and racial discrimination, coupled with improved capacity to investigate claims, and access to swift justice.
- **Putting in place measures to prevent bias during the hiring process**  
In the spirit of inclusivity, mechanisms should be established to avoid sameness in a team (especially during recruitment) and to foster inclusion and innovation.
- **Gathering data to develop benchmarks and set goals**

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<sup>1</sup> Secretary-General's Remarks to General Assembly event on the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, March 2022 (<https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/262463>, accessed 8 April 2022).

Collect baseline diversity data that will be reported, measured, and compared every year to understand the trends. Setting benchmarks helps to assess future performance and highlights existing barriers. A defined set of success indicators must be adopted, that establish effective measures and mechanisms to address all forms of discrimination.

## **ZERO-TOLERANCE CULTURE ON SEXUAL EXPLOITATION, ABUSE AND HARASSMENT (SEAH)**

19. We recognize and thank the Director-General for the resources made available for investigating and preventing SEAH through mandatory trainings and campaigns such as the #StopSEAH, #NoExcuse, and the mandatory SMART team objectives in ePMDS. Establishing a Department for PRSEAH that enables investigations to be set in motion and resolved in a timely manner, has helped restore staff members' trust in the Organization's commitment to accountability. We believe that making the Organization's accountability more visible reinforces WHO colleagues' sense that their workplace is both supportive and protected.

20. The staff associations applaud the strong commitment and actions taken in preventing and responding to SEAH. However, we also believe that more awareness and dialogue are needed in view of the diverse cultural, sociodemographic factors that impact our work environment. The commitment by the Organization on PRSEAH, must also be matched by the individual commitment of each staff member. To create an environment where the goals of PRSEAH are understood and become a collective aim, it is important for the Organization to:

- Create opportunities for staff members to learn and understand, not only through PMDS discussions, but through specific webinars and trainings where experts can impart knowledge on PRSEAH that breaks through cultural barriers and stereotypical mindsets.
- Incorporate a victim-survivors centred approach on prevention, detection, and response, not concentrating solely on perpetrators' accountability for their actions.
- Encourage informal platforms of discussion on SEAH topics.
- Promote pertinent initiatives, including an active bystander campaign.

## **INTERNAL JUSTICE**

21. We are pleased to see a review of the internal justice system taking place; that can only strengthen its purpose. For an internal justice system to work efficiently, it is essential that it is trusted by its staff. We need a stronger and more robust internal justice system, which staff are not sceptical of, or afraid of engaging with, but rather one that is transparent, trusted and brings swift resolutions to allegations as well as protection for victims, including removal from abusive supervisors. Integrity is the cornerstone of our Organization and a WHO value, and as such we must empower our staff to come forward when they witness or experience any wrongdoing.

22. A review of components of the WHO internal justice system, in place since 2016, is continuing. The staff associations wish to raise two main concerns:

- The panel of the Global Board of Appeal (GBA) should have five-members. A three-member panel – the current practice – is simply not reassuring staff that GBA deliberations are sufficiently robust. Furthermore, the staff representatives on each of the GBA panels should be

selected by the respective staff association rather than selected by the GBA Chair or Deputy-Chair.

- There is need for fairness regarding who is placed on administrative leave for abuses of power, misconduct, egregious behaviour etc. We have noticed that whilst investigations take place, some staff are placed on administrative leave while other, often senior, staff members are allowed to continue to work.

23. In a respectful workplace, the internal justice system is fair and effective, and conflict and problematic behaviour are addressed swiftly and fairly.

## **CONTRACTUAL CONDITIONS OF WORK**

24. During the regular meetings with the Director-General in the first quarter of 2022, we acknowledged efforts made by the administration, and led by the Department of Human Resources and Talent Management, to review the existing contract modalities and propose recommendations to ensure WHO contractual conditions are aligned with best practice and appropriate for the all the WHO workforce, including staff, consultants, and interns. We also shared openly our expectation that while the report of the Contract Modalities Taskforce is pending, we will continue to work with Administration on the interim arrangements to avoid unfavourable practices.

## **SUPPORT TO STAFF WHOSE SALARIES ARE DIMINISHED AS RESULT OF CURRENCY DEVALUATION.**

25. We would like to draw your attention to another worrying development for staff regarding the devaluation of local currencies in a number of duty stations. This has had a devastating impact on both the salaries of serving staff, and on the pension of retirees in the affected duty stations. Our Organization is responsible for ensuring that when staff are paid in local currencies, they do not lose their purchasing power.

## **FINAL OBSERVATIONS**

26. We acknowledge that our workforce has been resolute and dedicated to our programme of work despite being under immense pressure since the onset of the pandemic. We further appreciate the significant efforts of our senior management, led with vigour and strength by the Director-General, to make lasting progress in areas of concern to staff. We ask that these efforts continue and for the administration to create safe spaces that support leaders and staff to have courageous conversations on staff health, respect, DEI, racism, SEAH, internal justice and conditions of work. Managers set the tone for how a team should behave and have a responsibility to lead by example, in order to cultivate a workplace that fosters productivity and where team members are treated courteously, with dignity and respect.

27. We, the staff associations, are fully committed to continuing the constructive dialogue with management to uphold the rights of staff members and to achieve our Organization's mission successfully. We thank you for your support and encouragement and look forward to the continued support and guidance of the Executive Board.

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