
Preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment

Report by the Director-General

1. At its 148th session, the Executive Board adopted decision EB148(4) on Preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. Within the context of the decision, this report provides an overview of both WHO's policies and the actions the Organization has taken to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, as well as further improvements needed and key next steps. Subject to Member State approval, suitable standing agenda items will be proposed for the Executive Board and Health Assembly to enable holistic discussion of the prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

2. WHO is committed to providing a respectful work environment, and to promoting and enforcing policies that respect the inherent dignity of all persons, including those we serve. WHO has an abiding responsibility to prevent and respond to discrimination, abuse of authority, and harassment, including sexual harassment and exploitation.

3. WHO's approaches to the prevention of and response to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment aim to reflect a United Nations system-wide common approach. WHO's policies, guidance and actions relating to prevention of and response to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment include: promotion of a safe and empowering environment; prevention of abusive behaviour; early detection and intervention; handling of formal complaints; provision of support to affected individuals; investigation of credible allegations; enforcement of disciplinary and judicial sanctions that are commensurate to the misconduct; and collection, use and reporting of anonymized data. Further action is required, and additional measures are being implemented across the three levels of the Organization, to ensure the full compliance and consistent implementation of these policies and guidance.

4. In addition to internal policies and actions, the Secretariat develops and promotes policies and evidence-based guidance for countries and supports their implementation in order to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment and to care for those affected, within the context of public health.

PROMOTING A RESPECTFUL WHO WORKPLACE

5. WHO has designated 2021 as the Year of the WHO Workforce, with initiatives and actions aimed at building a working culture and environment that is inclusive, safe and respectful. It not only aims to protect and empower staff but to also enhance the Secretariat's work in countries and the communities it serves. The activities for the Year centre around four themes: (1) promoting diversity, equity and inclusion; (2) creating an enabling working environment; (3) fulfilling the potential of the workforce; and (4) people caring about people. Strengthening these four areas will improve WHO's

ability to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment both within the Secretariat and in the communities that the Organization serves.

6. The Secretariat is in the process of developing a diversity, equity and inclusion road map for implementation across the Organization in order to create a work environment that is welcoming to all and where everybody feels valued and respected and performs at their best regardless of age, gender identity, disability, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation and any other status or affiliation. The road map will also sensitize staff to such issues in the communities they serve.

7. In March 2021, WHO launched a new policy on Preventing and Addressing Abusive Conduct¹ which updates and expands on the Policy on the Prevention of Harassment at WHO dating from 2010. The new policy adopts a survivor-centred approach and further clarifies actions for reporting, managing and responding to allegations of abusive conduct, including clarifying roles and responsibilities within the Secretariat as well as those who partner with the Organization.

8. In terms of training, the compliance rate for WHO's staff members remains very high for both the United Nations course on the prevention of harassment, sexual harassment and abuse of authority (93.3% compliance) and the United Nations course "To serve with pride – zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse by our own staff" (96.5% compliance). Additional briefings and training will be provided in due course, in particular to help managers and supervisors to deal with possible abusive conduct in their teams. WHO contracts and agreements across the Organization now include a clause pertaining to the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse and will be revised to make specific reference to WHO's policy on preventing and addressing abusive conduct. The Secretariat also expects its collaborating partners to adhere to WHO policies on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse when working together with WHO.

SAFE, ACCESSIBLE AND CONFIDENTIAL RESOLUTION MECHANISMS AND PROCEDURES

9. The new policy on Preventing and Addressing Abusive Conduct and WHO's Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct outline the procedures for the receipt and handling of both informal and formal complaints within WHO involving WHO staff members, non-staff personnel and collaborators. The policy and procedures set out in the WHO Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: Prevention and Response² issued in 2017 outline the resolution mechanisms related to complaints of sexual exploitation and abuse made against WHO staff members and collaborators towards third parties, referred to as "beneficiary" populations.

10. WHO's Integrity Hotline provides an independent and confidential reporting service for both WHO staff and non-staff personnel to report concerns of any wrongdoing in WHO, including sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. Additional work is needed to ensure that staff and non-staff personnel are aware of this service.

11. WHO affords high priority to assessing and responding to allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. In early 2021, the Secretariat assessed the Organization's capacity to

¹ WHO. Preventing and addressing abusive conduct: policy and procedures concerning harassment, sexual harassment, discrimination, and abuse of authority (<https://intranet.who.int/sites/paac/>, accessed 9 April 2021).

² https://www.who.int/about/ethics/sexual-exploitation_abuse-prevention_response_policy.pdf?ua=1.

manage sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment and to move forward with strengthening investigative functions, including recruiting more personnel. The Secretariat has also provided support to networks of sexual exploitation and abuse liaison officers at country level.

PREVENTING AND RESPONDING IN EMERGENCIES

12. Following allegations made in September 2020 of sexual exploitation and abuse during the response to the tenth Ebola virus disease outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2018, the Director-General established a special external independent commission to review these allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse; to investigate possible cases, to identify and support victims and to hold perpetrators to account. This novel approach also aims to identify the root causes and systemic weaknesses within the system and provide recommendations to WHO for action to strengthen the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. The Independent Commission is guided in its work by the principles of independence (both from WHO and the broader United Nations system), integrity, impartiality and transparency. The co-Chairs finalized the composition of the Commission by identifying three additional members and the Commission is supported by a secretariat, including a Coordinator, based in Goma since March 2021. The work of the Independent Commission is supported by an external supplier, selected by the Commission through a competitive bidding process. A multidisciplinary team of experts from the external supplier started the outreach, fact-finding and investigation mission in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo on 1 May 2021. A second mission is expected to be conducted at the end of June or beginning of July. The work of the external supplier is expected to be completed by the end of August 2021. The findings and files from the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services investigations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, relevant to allegations implicating WHO, as well as other relevant documents, were shared with the Commission's investigations team by WHO in a manner that respects confidentiality and process rights. The Commission submitted its first and second reports to the Director-General, respectively in January 2021 and May 2021. The work of the Commission is expected to be completed by 30 August 2021, at which time the Commission will submit its final report to WHO. Pending the outcome of the investigation, the WHO Secretariat is taking further action to strengthen its policies, practices, capacities and actions to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse, including in emergency settings.

13. The WHO Secretariat participated in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in October 2020, which recommended the establishment of a system-wide strategy for preventing sexual exploitation and abuse. The Director-General has committed himself to implementing these recommendations, which will contribute to ensuring an overall survivor-centred approach – in the deployment of vetted and sensitized personnel in emergencies, in reporting and investigating cases, in applying survivor protection measures, and enhancing an Organization-wide framework for accountability. To date the WHO Secretariat has deployed two prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse coordinators at the Inter-agency level, one in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and one in Ukraine to support the implementation of Inter-Agency actions for prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse under the coordination and leadership of the United Nations Population Fund.

14. To strengthen dedicated capacity for the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse in emergencies, a working group has been established in the Office of the Health Emergencies Response Division. Additionally, a Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Unit has been established in the Division, and the recruitment of three staff personnel has been initiated. The working group has mapped the implementation of prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse policies in WHO and

compared WHO's practices with those of other Inter-Agency Standing Committee partners in order to identify gaps and best practices. The recommendations of the working group will be used to strengthen policy implementation and monitor compliance during emergency operations. A rapid assessment of WHO capacities for prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse during graded emergencies was initiated on 31 March 2021 to prioritize immediate actions for mitigating risks related to sexual exploitation and abuse and to ensure that more sustainable preventive measures are developed. Existing training on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse across the United Nations system has been reviewed and a learning plan drafted with a modular approach for induction training of all WHO personnel and collaborators deployed. Modules on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment will be developed and integrated into all leadership training for health emergency personnel across all three levels of WHO.

15. The revised version of the Emergency Response Framework includes a new chapter on sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, which highlights all relevant policy issues, outlines actions and processes for integrating prevention and response interventions into broader emergency response operations and provides a framework for continuous monitoring and evaluation.

16. Prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse has been included as a standing agenda item for the emergency programme's monthly meetings with the heads of WHO country offices in fragile and vulnerable States. This regular consideration contributes to the strengthening of country programmes and the monitoring of progress to mitigate and prevent sexual exploitation and abuse as part of the WHO Accountability Framework,¹ including accountability to affected populations. The Secretariat has strengthened operational capacities for prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment in ongoing emergency operations and in fragile and vulnerable states, including for on-going emergency response operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

17. The Regional Office for Africa has been working with other United Nations agencies, including United Nations Population Fund and United Nations Children's Fund to conduct joint awareness campaigns in Butembo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, reaching over 300 members of civil society, non-governmental organizations and government personnel. A focal point for the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse has been deployed to emergency operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Guinea to systematically orient all staff and contractors and to regularly conduct briefings on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. In addition virtual awareness sessions have been provided for personnel in countries with complex humanitarian emergencies.

ALIGNING POLICIES AND PROCEDURES ACROSS WHO AND WITH THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

18. WHO is committed to aligning its policies and procedures with and implementing United Nations system-wide and Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) initiatives, policies, guidelines and recommendations, which promote a survivor-centred approach.

19. Specifically, WHO's policies and procedures are aligned with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Minimum Operating Standards for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse for

¹ https://www.who.int/about/who_reform/managerial/accountability-framework.pdf.

United Nations and Non-United Nations Staff,¹ the United Nations Protocol on Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse involving Implementing Partners,² and the United Nations Implementing Partner Protection from Sexual Exploitations and Abuse Capacity Assessment.³

20. WHO is also implementing the measures recommended by the Chief Executives Board for Coordination Task Force on addressing Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the United Nations system, including the use of the ClearCheck screening database.

PROVIDING GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT TO COUNTRIES

21. Sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, in their various forms, are public health problems affecting all countries and are associated with violence, unintended pregnancies, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, depression, anxiety and suicide. As a result of stigmatization and discrimination, individuals affected by sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment may experience barriers to accessing essential health services. The Secretariat provides support to countries to address this issue through high-level advocacy, collection and dissemination of strategic information, development of normative guidance and tools, provision of technical assistance for country implementation, and collaborative actions with partners and stakeholders.

22. The Secretariat collects, analyses and disseminates data relevant to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment; its work includes building the evidence base on the extent and type of violence against women in different settings and supporting countries' efforts to document and measure this violence and its consequences. Its analysis of prevalence data from 2000 to 2018 across 161 countries and areas found that 30% of women worldwide have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence or both.⁴ Globally, 6% of women report having been sexually assaulted by someone other than a partner. In 2018, The Secretariat commissioned a systematic review of violence motivated by perception of sexual orientation and gender identity.⁵ In 2020, WHO issued guidance for collection of data on the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls.⁶

¹ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/documents-public/guidelines-implement-minimum-operating>.

² https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/UN%20Protocol%20on%20SEA%20Allegations%20involving%20Implementing%20Partners%20-%20English_Final.pdf.

³ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-task-team-accountability-affected-populations-and-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/un-implementing-partner-psea-capacity-assessment>.

⁴ WHO, on behalf of the United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence Against Women Estimation and Data. Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018: global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021 (https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/documents/violence-prevention/vaw_report_web_09032021_oleksandr.pdf?sfvrsn=a82ef89c_5&download=true, accessed 9 April 2021).

⁵ Blondeel K, de Vasconcelos S, García-Moreno C, Stephenson R, Temmerman M, Toskin I. Violence motivated by perception of sexual orientation and gender identity: a systematic review. Bull WHO 2018; 96:29-41E (<https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/96/1/17-197251.pdf>, accessed 9 April 2021).

⁶ WHO. Violence against women and girls data: collection during COVID-19 (<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/violence-against-women-and-girls-data-collection-during-covid-19>, accessed 9 April 2021).

23. WHO Secretariat produces guidelines and implementation tools for strengthening health services relevant to the prevention, detection and management of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. For example, in 2020 it published guidance developed with the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on the clinical management of survivors of rape and intimate partner violence for use in humanitarian settings.¹ In recent years, WHO has produced multiple guidelines, tools and examples of good practice on the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections for key populations, including sex workers, transgender people, and men who have sex with men, with these key populations being at very high risk of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment.^{2,3} WHO's guidance and tools have been designed to empower health care providers to prevent female genital mutilation and to provide care for girls and women who are affected.⁴

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

24. Upholding, promoting, and enforcing zero-tolerance policies on sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment is crucial in all WHO's operations in all countries. Such policies are particularly relevant in the context of emergency operations, where recruitment needs to be processed rapidly and where decisions are taken quickly in order to perform life-saving humanitarian operations.

25. WHO promotes a holistic approach, applying measures to promote a respectful workplace and respectful engagement with communities; to prevent exploitation, abuse and harassment; to identify those affected and intervene early and provide them with care and support, through counselling, peer support mechanisms and enforcement of the whistle-blower policy; and to take appropriate action against those found to have perpetrated abuses.

26. WHO recognizes that sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment are global problems, requiring coordinated partnerships, multisectoral action at all levels and the engagement of communities to advance social and cultural norms that ensure safe and supportive environments for all. It is women and children, the poorest and most marginalized who are the most vulnerable and require the greatest protection. WHO promotes public health measures that play a key role in creating supportive environments, including those for populations at high risk of exploitation and abuse and for first responders and service providers for survivors, and in providing the crucial people-centred services required to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment.

¹ WHO, UNFPA, UNHCR. Clinical management of rape and intimate partner violence survivors: developing protocols for use in humanitarian settings. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2019 (<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240001411>, accessed 9 April 2021).

² WHO. Serving the needs of key populations: Case examples of innovation and good practice on HIV prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2017 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/255610>, accessed 15 April 2021).

³ WHO. Consolidated guidelines on HIV prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care for key populations, 2016 update. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2016 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/246200>, accessed 15 April 2021).

⁴ WHO. Care of girls and women living with female genital mutilation: a clinical handbook. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2018 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/272429>, accessed 15 April 2021).

ACTION BY THE HEALTH ASSEMBLY

27. The Health Assembly is invited to note this report.

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