

Prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment

Report of the Programme, Budget and Administration Committee of the Executive Board to the Seventy-fifth World Health Assembly

1. The Secretariat introduced the report on prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment,¹ highlighting the extensive action being taken at all levels of the Organization to combat the issue and rebuild trust in WHO.
2. The Committee expressed recognition for the progress made since June 2021 to prevent and respond to cases of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment and gave its full support to the zero-tolerance policy adopted by WHO. The Committee welcomed the introduction of mandatory workforce training and capacity building, but noted the importance of combining such training with corresponding hiring and promotion policies in order to guarantee long-lasting behavioural changes among staff.
3. The Committee fully supported the Secretariat's commitment to deliver on the WHO management response plan and drive culture change within the Organization, and welcomed the comprehensive victim- and survivor-centred approach that had been adopted to preventing and responding to cases of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment wherever they occurred.
4. The Committee urged the Secretariat to continue to: align itself with the practices of other United Nations organizations and civil society in respect of actions to bring about institutional, policy and cultural change; maintain the programmatic and operational progress made on building stronger, more responsive systems; and provide greater transparency and enhanced oversight regarding delivery towards key milestones, such as addressing the investigation backlog.
5. The Regional Director for Africa said that great progress had been made in the Region to stamp out sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment and increase the number of positions held by women, particularly at the senior level and in the field. A regional coordinator for the prevention of sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment had been appointed in March 2022 and five experts would shortly be deployed to high-risk countries to offer their support. Identified victims of sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment during the tenth outbreak of Ebola virus disease in the Democratic Republic of the Congo had been receiving assistance, and memoranda of understanding had been signed with UNFPA and several nongovernmental organizations to ensure that those victims had recourse to appropriate psychosocial and legal services.
6. The Director-General thanked Member States for their ongoing support for and recognition of the progress made by the Organization to prevent and respond to alleged cases of sexual exploitation, abuse

¹ Document A75/29.

and harassment. WHO senior management had a key role to play in addressing the issue and was taking every action to support survivors and victims, including through the establishment of an US\$ 2 million fund.

7. The Secretariat, responding to a number of issues raised during the discussion, assured the Committee that no effort would be spared to guarantee the swift and thorough investigation of cases of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. The 120-day investigation period would serve as a benchmark and any allegations that required further action beyond that limit would be considered on a case-by-case basis.

8. Pursuing a complete change of culture at all levels of the Organization would take time and there remained a number of challenges requiring the adoption of an orchestrated approach between WHO, the United Nations and other key actors. They included: the availability of referral services for victims; the integration of prevention and response activities in all WHO operations; the strengthening and sustaining of reporting and investigation capacities and monitoring of the appropriateness of the 120-day benchmark; engagement and cooperation with implementing partners; and the building of global capacity to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment at all levels.

9. The Secretariat confirmed that it had forwarded all reports on allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse relating to the tenth Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services for investigation. Regarding other cases brought to the attention of the WHO Ethics Office, the Secretariat assured the Committee that all misconduct allegations are transferred immediately to the Investigation team and that it did not close any reports itself.

RECOMMENDATION TO THE HEALTH ASSEMBLY

10. The Committee, on behalf of the Executive Board, recommended that the Health Assembly should note the report, and proposed, as guidance for the Secretariat's implementation of existing mandates, that the Secretariat should:

- (a) maintain a strong focus on building solid and effective prevention strategies (such as screening of staff and review of promotion and human resources management policies), and internal justice and control systems;
- (b) pursue cultural change across the Organization and further invest in staff surveys, studies of organizational culture and other initiatives that can gauge the impact of actions on the level of trust among the workforce in strategies, policies, and approaches on the prevention of and response to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment;
- (c) pursue a policy of zero tolerance and ensure that accountability for the prevention of and response to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment is clearly defined, and that capacity and systems, including for investigations, are built to meet that ambition;
- (d) continue transparent reporting of and follow-up to allegations, conclude investigations into all relevant cases and allegations of managerial misconduct related to the Independent Commission's report, and ensure that perpetrators are held to account;
- (e) further strengthen efforts for a better gender balance and for diversity, equity and inclusion within the Organization;

- (f) highlight the importance of leadership and ensure that all Regional Directors provide updates on progress made in their respective regions; and
- (g) ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to achieve the ambition of zero tolerance and sustain it thereafter.

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