

## **Prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment**

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

1. Updating the report of the Director-General to the Health Assembly,<sup>1</sup> the Secretariat presented action undertaken by the Organization as it transitioned from the Management Response Plan to the new three-year strategy on preventing and responding to sexual misconduct, drawing attention to both key achievements and key challenges. The Committee was informed that progress on the implementation of the three-year strategy, communicated at quarterly Member State briefings, would be reported to the Committee's thirty-ninth meeting in January 2024.

2. The Committee commended the Director-General and WHO on the progress made thus far in prioritizing action taken to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. It welcomed the three-year strategy, and asked to be kept fully informed on its implementation. It raised some concerns regarding the delays in concluding the processes related to allegations made following the tenth Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, while acknowledging that these are attributed to delays within the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services in finalizing reports on those matters. The Committee wondered whether further cases of abuse might still emerge, and stressed the need for timely reporting on issues of sexual misconduct, underlining the need to prioritize prevention in crisis and emergency situations. In response to a question concerning the publication of the list of perpetrators of sexual misconduct, the Secretariat informed the Committee that an anonymized list was available publicly on the WHO dashboard on investigations into sexual misconduct that included the grades and regions of perpetrators. The Committee called for a comprehensive stock-taking exercise of all prevention and response actions, overseen by the Independent Expert Oversight Advisory Committee and the Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee for the WHO Health Emergencies Programme, to be completed no later than May 2025 in order to evaluate whether those actions have led to the intended results of the three-year strategy, including those for WHO's accountability systems and culture. In response to a concern expressed regarding the use of the term "sexual misconduct", which could obscure the gravity of certain behaviour, the Secretariat responded that in practice, the term sexual misconduct was proving to be easily understood by personnel, partners, those at risk and even the media, and that this was part of the Organization's victim- and survivor-centred approach where the term sexual misconduct puts the focus on perpetrators rather than on the victims.

3. In response to a concern regarding the risk of misconduct among WHO's implementing partners, the Secretariat informed the Committee that the Organization's awareness-raising and training activities extended well beyond the closed circle of WHO personnel, reaching to all institutions, agencies, nongovernmental organizations and others engaged in implementing WHO's programmes. However, the Secretariat cautioned that the Organization is still at the beginning of a long journey and that many

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<sup>1</sup> Document A76/7 Rev.1.

high-risk situations exist, especially in the area of health emergency response. The Secretariat drew attention to the need for allocations to be made in health emergency response funding in support of work on safeguarding from sexual misconduct.

4. The Director-General thanked the Committee for its inputs. The approach taken was a comprehensive one, based on zero tolerance; safe and trusted reporting; swift and credible investigations; and a victim- and survivor-centred focus. Zero tolerance implied ethical conduct based on WHO's values, noting that the WHO updated Code of Ethics and the new policy on Preventing and Addressing retaliation were now ready. The accountability framework was in the process of finalization. He invited Member States to propose alternative words to replace the umbrella term "sexual misconduct". Gender parity was another very important element of zero tolerance, and the Director-General informed the Committee that the percentage of Director-level positions at headquarters occupied by female staff had increased from 28.3% in July 2017 to 41.0% in May 2023, demonstrating the Secretariat's commitment to the policy of gender parity.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE HEALTH ASSEMBLY**

5. 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) conclude processes related to allegations around the tenth Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as soon as possible and ensure that full accountability of actors is achieved;
- (b) continue to request regular updates from the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services on its handling of outstanding investigations, as well as on whether any additional allegations of misconduct have been discovered while addressing the original cases referred;
- (c) analyse disaggregated data once investigation results are received from the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services to identify additional gaps in WHO systems and workflows;
- (d) once the majority of key actions and reforms have been implemented, but no later than May 2025, organize a comprehensive stock-taking exercise, conducted by an independent entity and overseen by the Independent Expert Oversight Advisory Committee and the Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee for the WHO Health Emergencies Programme, in order to evaluate whether those actions have led to the intended results for WHO's three-year strategy, including its accountability systems and culture;
- (e) finalize the accountability framework and ensure that it will be able to attribute accountability to individual staff and their functions; and
- (f) continue its efforts around open communication and transparency.

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