

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE
HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME
STANDING COMMITTEE
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NGO statement

Integrity in UNHCR, including efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment

Dear Chair,

This statement is delivered on behalf of a wide range of NGOs. It has been prepared in close consultation with the NGO community, representing a diverse set of views and is focused on efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment.

We would like to commend UNHCR for its efforts in changing a culture of impunity, which permeated and still permeates our sector. We are particularly glad for UNHCR's transparency on its efforts to address protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (PSEA), with the release in 2019 of a review of good practices and actions.

As a sector we must remain committed to protecting all persons right to be safe and to live a life free from exploitation and abuse. All persons are entitled to this right, regardless of their circumstances. We welcome UNHCR's recognition that all forms of sexual misconduct are rooted in a culture of privilege based on gender inequalities and power imbalances. We also commend UNHCR on its clear stance that it takes changes in individual attitudes and behaviours along with changes in organisational cultures to truly eradicate sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH). An organisation's culture permeates and informs all aspects of its work, behaviour, and the experience of its stakeholders. In order to achieve a culture free from abuse, discrimination, and harm, UNHCR and the broader aid sector, must strive to:

- Reflect on status as members of the aid sector and acknowledge the power imbalance this creates within the organisation as well as between the organisation and the wider society.
- Analyse how individuals may be at risk of harm and abuse as a result of our work and the impacts on their particular intersecting identities (gender, sexual orientation, tribe, race, colour, disability, etc.); how we may be reinforcing society's power imbalances and toxic masculinity in the course and approach of aid efforts. Processes should be sensitive to gender and power imbalances, as well as to invest in staff training and capacity enhancement.
- Create safe spaces for our staff and those we work with, in all their diversity, where it is safe to challenge and address inequality, power and bias. For this purpose, it is imperative to have a leadership that is visibly committed to safeguarding in words and action.

The work to eradicate SEAH requires a conscious and continued effort to review our organizations' cultures and our ways of working to ensure that they are in line with intersectional feminist principles.

As efforts continue to prevent SEA, addressing power and privilege both internally and externally with beneficiaries is essential. We commend UNHCR's effort aiming to integrate these dimensions in its PSEA policy and its recent efforts to hold open conversations with staff from all levels. Therefore, we would like to encourage UNHCR to continue its efforts to create an enabling environment by tackling issues related to power and privilege, so everyone feels comfortable and not threatened to report.

We recognise that in all societies in which we work, gender inequality exists, our staff, associates, partners, and programme participants can ascribe to unequal gender norms and stereotypes. Also, the very nature of our work can create and maintain differential power and inequality. We, therefore, must adopt an intersectional approach to PSEA, which utilises appropriate measures to address gender bias and other forms of discrimination and violence which may arise as a result of a person's diverse identity and/or position in society. This will support the empowerment and inclusion of victims/survivors in the response process, in a manner that promotes equality, equity, and ultimately their increased safety and protection.

We would like to highlight that an intersectional approach to reporting mechanisms and information for beneficiaries on PSEA is key to ensure certain groups of refugees, stateless people, and internally displaced people are not left behind. Access to reporting mechanisms and information on PSEA is significantly more challenging depending on a person's age, gender, status, and diverse identity. Children, particularly those with disabilities, for example, might not be able to access traditional complaint mechanisms designed for adults. Also, for stateless persons and communities, their lack of legal status makes them unlikely to access justice systems, and they are at increased risk of becoming victims of human trafficking, exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. Therefore, we strongly advise UNHCR to ensure all mechanisms and information material be adapted to include people from different ages, gender, disability, and other diverse identities.

We know that in times of emergencies people's immediate protective environment weakens and their vulnerabilities greatly increase. Recently, the world and more specifically the aid sector has been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which demanded a big shift and adaptation on the way we deliver aid. Together with health-related risks, the measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic also caused a peak in gender-based violence and exploitation of vulnerable groups including children who are refugees, internally displaced people, or stateless.

With this crisis isolation measures created a number of SEA risks by limiting people's access to information on safeguarding and PSEA and restricting access of SEA victims/survivors and witnesses/informants to reporting channels and support services. Within this context, it is of utmost importance that measures to prevent SEA are adapted to this new reality, so we do not put the most vulnerable populations at a heightened risk.

We would like to highlight that it is essential to work with partners in the field to prevent, mitigate, and respond to PSEA. This means not only overseeing the conduct of implementing partners but also learning and working together to identify good practice and joint mechanisms for reporting, providing adequate resources in their budgets to support the partner's ability for PSEA implementation.

Thank you chair.