

## Evidence to IDC inquiry into sexual exploitation and abuse: next steps

### Spring 2020

... I am an aid worker and a former, long serving civil servant of the Joint United Nations Programme on AIDS (UNAIDS). I am a victim and survivor of sexual assault in the workplace. My sexual assault case has gained media attention in Britain and across continents. It has mobilised civil society, academics and legal experts alike. Some credit my case to have triggered a metoo movement in the United Nations.

[Details omitted.]

### Discussion

While my story has gained particular international attention, I am just one of many victims. A United Nations staff survey conducted in November 2018, reported that around 10,000 staff and contractors across the U.N. have experienced sexual harassment in the past two years. Only 17% of those eligible participated in the survey. This data does not capture non-staff victims of abuse perpetrated by UN staff with estimated rape numbers cited to be exceeding 60,000 women in the past few decades. Very few women dare to speak up about abuse they experience. The women who speak up are persecuted, ostracised and the organisation go after them in full sight to prevent others from speaking up.

In a staff survey from UNAIDS (2018) the reasons cited most frequently for not reporting ill-treatment, discrimination, abuse of authority or sexual harassment was not believing that corrective action would be taken, followed by being concerned about retaliation from a supervisor or colleagues, and not trusting the organization to keep the report confidential. This is precisely what happened to me so no surprise that U.N. data confirms low reporting of sexual abuse. The problem of sexual abuse by and in the UN is problematic for the whole aid sector. The United Nations is a norm setter in issues concerning human rights and gender that smaller actors and NGOs look to for standards and on which they model themselves. The UN is not however just the largest aid actor but also a subcontractor and important partner in the aid sector. Without addressing the underlying problems of systemic sexual abuse and cover up in and by the United Nations, more women will suffer.

The metoo, aidtoo has prompted a lot of policy changes in the sector. After my case went public the processes for filing a complaint of sexual harassment did change. For example the statute of limitation for reporting a complaint was removed, and a hotline and a registry for offenders were established. Several UN organisations commissioned independent expert panel reports as was done in UNAIDS and donor communities are now more aware of the problem of sexual abuse in the aid sector. Despite these changes however, my case demonstrates that such policy changes have no impact in practice and from the perspective of a woman who reports abuse, nothing has changed.

1. All cases are investigated internally ----so we need an independent oversight panel that would closely monitor and evaluate, in real time, the UN's response to individual allegations of sexualized offences, and make expert recommendations on UN policies and procedures.

2. There is no value of providing people with information on how to report abuse, if they do not dare to come forward for fear of retaliation ---- so we need better protection for victims and whistleblowers

3. Policy changes are good but only if implemented---- so we need to implement them systematically across the entire system, monitor their implementation, hold the leadership accountable and condition funding accordingly

4. We need to stop hiring and rehiring predators but also incompetent managers who by turning a blind eye move problems from one organisation to another and facilitate abuse

5. There must be accountability, compensation and reintegration of victims.

In UNAIDS it became impossible to retain the executive leadership. The Executive Director and two deputies left. But they went with golden parachutes and senior managers stayed in their jobs. These senior managers have invested themselves in the leadership and in such a dysfunctional system obtained their positions on loyalty not merit. Their loyalty (and pay back) remains even after the senior leadership has gone. My harasser was kept on payroll and even extended to stay home with full pay until he reached his optimal retirement date and could thus receive his full retirement benefit package. The same for the EXD who covered up the assault: he left with full retirement and took up the post of Minister in his home country.

By contrast, I was summarily dismissed with zero benefit overnight, no healthcare after they fabricated a series of false allegations- well knowing that it will take me 3-5 years to appeal the decision in an internal UN court. The investigation into my assailant is still ongoing after 4.5 years. I was found guilty of misconduct and dismissed in 14 days without knowing the allegations against me or ever being heard. The sherpas and friends of my assailants are still working for UNAIDS and continue to stalk and harass me on social media. The one who took the decision to fire me is a woman. A woman who came to replace my harassers and whom I had thought (naively) would solve the institutional problems of UNAIDS. The board, the member states settled with this leadership change, but no action was taken to reform the organisation in line with the recommendation of the independent expert panel and no one has been outraged by my case. Which woman would dare to speak up now after all they have done to me and in the public domain? The new Executive Director violated me again. So gender parity is not the full solution to problems of abuse in the aid sector. Because here was a woman leader, a selfproclaimed feminist who fired me without even considering meeting with me and listening to my history. In a nutshell, we need to push for leadership positions for women but it must be the right women.

### **The takeaway messages**

The world needs the United Nations, but it is a 70 year old patriarchal UN system that is currently designed to silence, and if unsuccessful, then defame and dismiss victims. The UN system which is supposed to be a norm setter, drive change and transformation needs to be reformed. From the value, gender and age composition of the leadership, to the internal judiciary system, to the composition of its board, and the conditionality of its funding. The UN must adhere and abide by its own policies and be the model of good governance and accountability that it purports publicly to be, and to furthermore ensure women staff protection from sexual abuse and discrimination so that this become the standard of conduct. If retaliation for sexual assault is permitted it will have a detrimental effect upon the willingness of individuals to speak out against abuse and discrimination;

The UN cannot be a safe haven for repeat sexual offenders. Those who commit such transgressions should be brought to justice and survivors should receive necessary services, support and they should be ensured the right to be free from discrimination and retaliation when it comes to career opportunities and career advancement.

Member states such as the UK have a responsibility to their taxpayers and the beneficiaries of such funds to ensure that funds are used for good, not harm or abuse. It is no longer possible to remain silent, passive donors. It is time to be active, vigilant partners. It is only when donors demand zero tolerance in practice that organisations will change. For now it is far too easy to put policies in place and then disregard them. The UK together with other

member states should establish independent mechanisms for reporting abuse of power and sexual abuse.

There is a real need for protection of victims and whistleblowers so that what happened to me does not happen to other women. The UK alongside other like-minded member states must watchdog the implementation of policies and ensure that the people who represent the UK on the board of various UN entities are well informed about the inside cultures of the organisations they fund, demand reform and do not settle for window dressing.

I am a mother of four, who have been abused, humiliated, vilified, and dismissed. But I am also a woman who refuses to give up not just for myself but for other women working in or stepping into the system. I will have to wait for justice and for accountability for the abuse and unfairness against me by my assailant, the boys club, the system that covered up and the woman who perpetuated their harm. I lost my livelihood and my career in the aid sector for refusing sex, for reporting my abuser, for speaking up about what happened to me and for not taking bribes.