

Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme
73d Standing Committee meeting

**Statement by Ms. Diane Goodman,
Senior Coordinator, Prevention of and Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and
Sexual Harassment**

**Agenda Item: 5. Any other business
20 September 2018**

Madame Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates,

Recent events have indicated that the culture of silence around sexual misconduct has been broken. This represents an enormous opportunity to seize, but also a huge challenge that requires the dedication and commitment of the entire humanitarian community. We, at UNHCR, have made it a top priority for our organization.

This is not something new, as we have been engaged in efforts to eradicate sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment for many years. At the same time, the past months have been characterized by a step change in our approach and engagement, and the strongest possible commitment, determination and concrete action from our leadership – led by the High Commissioner and the Deputy High Commissioner.

As stated by the Director of the Division of Human Resources yesterday, the overwhelming majority of our colleagues are deeply committed professionals, often working under very harsh conditions, and some even putting their own lives at risk to support those in need. However we have seen instances in which some members of UNHCR's workforce or partners have used their positions of power to exploit others. Those who engage in sexual misconduct undermine the very core values which we stand for, and have no place at UNHCR.

This is why we remain steadfast in our commitment to eradicate sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, and have put in place the organizational structure to address this in a holistic and comprehensive manner. Our Deputy High Commissioner has highlighted some recent achievements in her opening remarks yesterday. The list is long and we have tried to keep you abreast through communications, side events and briefings, which also reflects our first strategic objective on improving organizational accountability.

So I will take this opportunity to highlight only a few recent concrete examples of how we have been making a difference.

First of all, each initiative that we take is guided by a survivor-centred approach. We are determined to ensure that colleagues and refugees know and trust our reporting mechanisms, that they feel empowered to speak up, and are safe and protected if they do so.

On Monday we launched a Speak Up helpline, available to all colleagues who wish to report misconduct or obtain advice on what to do when in doubt. The helpline services are available 24/7 by phone and through a web form, and offer the possibility to report in complete anonymity. This is one important step in our aim to increase confidence and reporting.

For sexual harassment cases we want to avoid at all costs that those colleagues who find the strength and courage to come forward with a sexual harassment case feel overwhelmed by the

reporting process, and we have now established a psychosocial case management system to support victims and witnesses of sexual harassment if they wish.

Regarding persons of concern, we have continued to strengthen community based feedback mechanisms, including those whereby refugees can report sexual exploitation and abuse. We have recently conducted a survey across 41 operations to collect information on the most used communication systems and what challenges exist in collecting, using, and responding to feedback. This is how we know, for example, that in DRC a motorbike equipped with a radio speaker is an excellent way to reach out to the most remote places and inform people of their rights and ways to complain in case of abuse; in Mexico the preferred means of communication is face to face engagement; and in Lebanon a telephone helpline has been found to be very effective.

In the same line we have just launched an independent evaluative review of our policies and processes to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse. While we have been working on this for many years, it is appropriate that we also pause, take a step back, and have a close look at the efficiency and timeliness of these mechanisms: What are we doing well, where can we improve, where are new approaches needed, what can we learn from others? We are very much looking forward to the results to refine our 2019 strategy.

In parallel, and in line with our strategic objective to strengthen our investigation capacity and disciplinary processes, we are taking robust action against perpetrators of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment through effective investigations and strong disciplinary sanctions. Since January 2017 to date, three staff members have been separated on grounds of sexual harassment and two staff members on grounds of sexual exploitation and abuse. These measures were communicated to all colleagues directly by the High Commissioner – another demonstration of high level commitment and a deterrent to those going astray. We invested resources in our services as well, and have investigators specially trained to handle sexual misconduct cases, with allegations of sexual misconduct prioritized and assessed within 24 hours. Improving timelines and experience of the recourse is another crucial area for UNHCR, to ease the burden on those who have already suffered irreparable harm. New measures have also been adopted to protect and support those reporting misconduct, such as a new, expanded policy on protection against retaliation.

While reporting and investigations are essential building blocks of our safeguarding systems, our structures will not hold until we have strengthened their foundation. In humanitarian environments characterized by deeply-rooted power differentials and gender inequalities, a thorough reflection is required on our own attitudes and behaviours and how we use power and privilege.

At our Global Representative meeting in May, the High Commissioner and Deputy High Commissioner led a unique session on sexual misconduct, where there was deep and quite personal reflection by the Representatives on their behavior and accountability as individuals and leaders of the organization in this respect, resulting in commitments by Representatives to take strong, visible action to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment in their operations.

We also organized two global informal exchanges to discuss sexual misconduct: one in June and another just this week. These events were screened live in our offices across the world, and there were in total 2 300 (1500+800) contributions to an interactive platform. We have already

seen a shift from one event to the next in the nature of questions received; initially around seeking clarity on processes and existing protection measures, and lately more focused on how we intend to change our working culture to become more inclusive and get rid of everyday casual sexism and other behaviours in which sexual misconduct is grounded.

We also launched on Monday on our UNHCR Ideas Innovation Platform a challenge where we are asking colleagues for their suggestions on how to better prevent and respond to Sexual Harassment in UNHCR – this is another way to give all a chance to have ‘a voice’ on the matter and contribute to this much needed change of culture.

We will continue to support efforts of the Secretary-General in confronting unequal power relationships and gender roles through meaningful organizational culture change; which will be a key area of focus in our 2019 strategy.

Finally, and very importantly, UNHCR continues to cooperate closely and even lead efforts with other UN and civil society organizations to ensure a joined up approach on these crucial issues.

We have taken a number of measures in terms of vetting and reference checking both internally and through interagency efforts to ensure that perpetrators do not move within the organization or from one organization to another.

We have also been supporting the design of several tools such as a Protocol on Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse involving implementing partners; Guidelines for Investigations on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse; and a framework policy on Sexual Harassment

The High Commissioner will also take up in June 2019 the IASC Championship role on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment and continue to drive our engagement and coordination beyond the UN.

We very much appreciate the strong support expressed in the interventions by Member States yesterday for our efforts to eradicate sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment from our operations and our organization. As we continue to step up and deepen our efforts we are looking forward to your continued support in addressing sexual misconduct issues that cannot be resolved without long-term commitment, resources and sustained engagement by us all.

Thank you.