

**82<sup>nd</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee  
15-16 September 2021**

**Agenda item 2(b)  
Oral update on integrity in UNHCR**

UNHCR is a diverse and multicultural organization, driven by a mandate that often sets its work in some of the most difficult and challenging environments. To deliver protection and assistance for displaced people with dignity and respect, UNHCR has a responsibility to ensure strong systems are in place that provide an open, respectful working environment free from exploitation, abuse, and harassment. It also has an obligation to prevent, mitigate the risks of, and appropriately respond to, misconduct in all its forms. This begins with understanding the risks and addressing the underlying factors rooted in organizational culture, including power differentials, gender inequalities, unconscious bias, race, contractual status, age and hierarchy. How these differences manifest themselves can have direct implications on the kind of working environment that is being created and the extent to which individuals feel safe to report misconduct and victims receive the assistance they need. To this end, UNHCR has set an ambitious agenda to enhance its organizational and workplace culture to ensure adequate protection for persons of concern to the organization and personnel alike.

The Office has taken action to set the tone on a healthy workplace culture from the top. At the same time, it aims to provide a safe space for grassroots initiatives to shape and have a voice in organizational positioning on initiatives and issues related to integrity, values, leadership, and accountability.

UNHCR recognizes that work around organizational culture is granular, needs long-term investment, and often requires numerous targeted interventions. As such, various initiatives have taken shape to highlight the importance of engaged staff and committed leadership in encouraging an open and inclusive dialogue culture where colleagues are comfortable to contribute and speak-up.

**Identifying and addressing integrity risk**

UNHCR maintains a strategic risk register, a repository of the most significant organization-wide threats and opportunities, through which risks related to a culture of accountability, integrity, and ethical conduct have been identified. It is critical for the organization to be able to comprehensively prevent, detect and respond to potential breaches of integrity and misconduct (including sexual misconduct), and to reinforce a culture and practices on accountability. UNHCR has, therefore, launched several initiatives to proactively strengthen its work in these areas. The strategic risk register helps bring these initiatives together and monitors progress made in addressing them.

Sexual exploitation and abuse are among the most damaging risks the organization faces – causing irreparable harm to victims and their communities, and undermining UNHCR’s credibility to serve them. Therefore, identifying and addressing such risks at the outset is of paramount importance. To guide these efforts, UNHCR has developed a **risk management tool for tackling sexual exploitation and abuse**, which is available in multiple languages, to support its workforce in effectively identifying, mitigating and monitoring such risks. It aids operations in identifying the causes and consequences of risks related to sexual exploitation and abuse and provides necessary measures to reduce and mitigate those risks. Similar tools were also developed to respond to risks related to procurement and fraud. These dedicated efforts have resulted in increased capacity by country operations to identify and actively manage integrity related risks through country-level risk registers.

UNHCR has recently launched a five-year “Risk management 2025 strategy”, which will guide the organization’s work in strengthening risk management in all operational and management areas. This new strategy continues to emphasize the key importance of managing cultural, ethical and integrity related risks and opportunities.

**Strengthening a healthy workplace culture**

Strengthening an organizational culture to mitigate integrity risks requires learning from past experiences and analysing successes and failures. Creating a healthy and ongoing dialogue with colleagues who can be confident that they can speak up and that managers will listen and act, is part of UNHCR’s broader risk management and victim-centred approach.

In 2019 and 2020, UNHCR’s mandatory annual Code of Conduct sessions was adapted to become an engaging dialogue for self-reflection and critical thinking, grounded in value-based management. Themed “Values in action

– trust and collaboration,” the **Code of Conduct dialogues** are intended to employ innovative methodologies to equip personnel to respond to challenges with conscious, ethical, and risk-aware decision-making in line with the values and principles that define UNHCR’s culture. In 2020, 120 operations participated in locally-led Code of Conduct dialogues using adapted online material with the support of 199 trained facilitators.

The organization’s senior leadership has taken an active role in establishing different fora for dialogue and engagement on issues relating to organizational culture, values, sexual exploitation and abuse, sexual harassment, abuse of authority, and workforce empowerment. This is intended to encourage personnel to speak up, participate, and hold leadership to account. This has taken shape in a variety of forms as is outlined below.

In recent years, UNHCR’s leadership has organized **townhall meetings** and other forms of engagement with the workforce. These allowed the High Commissioner and Deputy High Commissioner to have informal exchanges with all personnel on various thematic areas, such as institutional structure and planning, as well as the organization’s work and policy positioning. They have included discussions on culture, values, race, and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and sexual harassment (SH). This platform has provided an easily adaptable method of dialogue across the organization on new and emerging issues, with the most recent example being discussions with the workforce on the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on UNHCR operations and personnel. During these meetings, colleagues can ask questions and raise issues, either anonymously through a “pigeonhole”, in person or via a livestream. By providing the option of anonymity, personnel around the world can raise difficult issues and ask tough questions to senior management in a safe space where they are acknowledged and heard.

UNHCR established the Global Advisory Group on Inclusion and Diversity, which serves as a sounding board and advisor to the High Commissioner and the Senior Executive Team, providing informed perspectives and recommendations. The group also proactively identifies initiatives to foster greater inclusion and equitable, diverse participation in UNHCR’s workforce, tackling discrimination and bias. Its membership reflects the diverse profile of UNHCR’s workforce and capitalizes on the work of personnel-led groups such as the “Women and Change” initiative, Men4Change network, and the Stronger Together movement. These are all informal platforms promoting dialogue on sensitive issues in a safe environment with which UNHCR’s management has engaged in a concerted effort to foster and protect an independent space for personnel to have a meaningful voice. These and other networks, including the multifunctional Working Group on Prevention and Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment, work in a complementary manner to tackle overlapping and crosscutting issues that help define and reshape UNHCR’s workplace culture.

Complementing the effort to ensure that personnel at all levels of the organization are heard and their voices respected, the **reflective leadership dialogues initiative** was launched in 2018 and brought online in 2020. It focuses on encouraging managers to identify and challenge the attitudes, biases, and behaviours that are at the root of toxic and abusive work environments and that often contribute to sexual exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment. It also aims to empower managers to promote an open and inclusive workplace culture through self-reflection and self-awareness. To date, 858 managers have participated in the programme, with over 100 additional participants registered for the fall. UNHCR also introduced People Management Advisors to provide mutual support and enhance people management skills for first time managers to instil best management practices that are beneficial for their career development.

In 2019, UNHCR launched the **storytelling & culture** project, whereby colleagues shared positive stories to foster open and healthy working environments and focusing on themes such as inclusion, internal courage, and achieving an anti-racist workplace culture.

UNHCR’s efforts to promote a culture of dialogue are strengthened and promoted through various global networks of colleagues, including some 400 Code of Conduct dialogue facilitators, approximately 400 Peer Advisors, some 300 risk focal points, and more than 350 PSEA focal points. These networks provide peer support to personnel as well as an avenue for shared learning, including collaboration among different networks. For example, Peer Advisors who are trained and supported by the Psychosocial Wellbeing Section, the Ombudsman’s Office and the Ethics Office, deal with issues such as conflicts and grievances in the workplace, the wellbeing and psychosocial concerns of colleagues, and ethical decision-making; while PSEA focal points focus on issues relating to sexual exploitation and abuse and share support and experience across different contexts and operations. The risk focal points play a crucial role in ensuring that operations have regular, open and inclusive discussions on emerging risks and opportunities, and that appropriate measures are in place to address these. UNHCR operations are increasingly identifying integrity risks through their risk management process, which is a sign of increasing awareness.

Since its launch in 2018, the **SpeakUp! Helpline** has provided UNHCR's workforce with an independent and confidential external hotline for reporting misconduct, including sexual misconduct, and raising other concerns and grievances, anonymously if preferred. Increased outreach and training to strengthen prevention have ensured that colleagues are better informed of the relevant channels and policies to deal with the workplace dilemmas they face. The SpeakUp! Helpline received 51 reports from different regions in 2020. The top four reporting categories were: abuse of power; harassment; sexual harassment; and human resource issues, such as recruitment procedures, contracts and assignments.

### **Ensuring a victim-centred approach and a culture of confidence**

A critical element in UNHCR's work to strengthen its organizational culture, particularly in tackling all forms of exploitation, abuse, and harassment, has been in instilling that the needs of victims and survivors of sexual harassment are a central and guiding principle in prevention and response efforts. In December 2020, UNHCR issued a **policy on a victim-centred approach**, the first ever of its kind in the United Nations system to protect the safety, rights, well-being and expressed needs and choices of victims when responding to sexual misconduct. In 2021, the policy has been operationalized through consultations with various entities and colleagues in the field to outline how to respond to victim needs under the key principles of the policy.

In an effort to strengthen this approach and ensure dedicated capacity in this area, a **Victim Care Officer** provides confidential support and guidance to victims and survivors within UNHCR's internal processes and services. She also advises managers. In 2020, the Victim Care Officer provided psychosocial support to 50 victims of sexual harassment and accompanied them throughout the processes they chose to pursue, including 5 cases that were referred by the SpeakUp! Helpline. Victims and witnesses are accompanied through what can often be a difficult process, and this approach guarantees that they understand the procedure towards the resolution or support they seek and builds confidence in reporting.

In addition to formal mechanisms to respond to serious forms of misconduct, UNHCR also provides an independent, informal, confidential and impartial alternative dispute resolution service to address workplace disputes, grievances and conflicts. The Ombudsman provides information, advice, conflict coaching, "shuttle diplomacy" (relaying messages between parties in conflict) and individual and team mediation. Confidence in this alternative dispute resolution channel is demonstrated by the 226 per cent increase in personnel approaching the Ombudsman's Office from 2016 to 2020. Twenty per cent of them indicated in feedback surveys that they would have pursued a formal dispute resolution mechanism if their issue had not been solved informally. Informal resolution at earlier stages of workplace conflicts promotes a culture of resolving differences through constructive dialogue and mutual understanding and can therefore be a better option for both the individual and the team. Furthermore, informal dispute resolution reduces reputational risk and costs for the organization. A key change ahead is creation of two posts for conflict resolution and mediation officers in the field in 2022 to capacitate and regionalize the Ombuds function. They will also help build trust with and better serve the decentralized workforce closer to their duty stations.

To further strengthen the confidence in reporting and accountability mechanisms, an **administrative instruction on protection against retaliation** was issued towards personnel reporting misconduct and other protected activities. The Ethics Office is mandated to receive requests for protection against retaliation and initiates temporary measures to protect the colleague from retaliation or to mitigate retaliation risks. In 2020, the Ethics Office received 55 inquiries relating to protection against retaliation, with 6 colleagues who filed a formal retaliation complaint and 9 with an identified risk of retaliation. Of the 55 inquiries, 7 cases had a sexual harassment element, and half (3) of the formal requests for protection against retaliation were related to sexual harassment. A key change to improve and follow up on individual workplace challenges will be the implementation of an Ethics Office-led triage mechanism. This will ensure that the actions of the specialist entities are better aligned. It will leverage the strengths, mandates and independence of each of them, while guaranteeing that real or perceived threats of retaliation are always considered.

### **Inter-agency engagement**

Recognizing the crucial importance of collective action across the system, particularly on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, the organization has committed its continued support to, and collaboration, with other United Nations agencies and partner personnel to prevent, identify and respond to sexual misconduct. It is committed to utilizing new and innovative PSEA and SH tools, including learning programmes, partner assessment guidance and investigation training programme. As outlined in the 2020-2022 Strategy and

action plan on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, UNHCR has also demonstrated strong leadership in inter-agency efforts to tackle root causes of misconduct and abuse, and to promote efforts around organizational culture.

As the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Champion on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, the High Commissioner launched several initiatives to support organizations in their efforts around leadership and culture. This included the development of a communications package for IASC principals on holding meaningful dialogue with their teams on misconduct; the facilitation of sessions on attitudes, values, and culture with senior leaders across the system; the development of a facilitators guide for such sessions; and the publication of an inter-agency collection of promising practices on organizational culture change<sup>1</sup>.

Facilitated dialogues on values, attitudes, and organizational culture were held with leaders across the system, including with IASC principals hosted by the High Commissioner; with the United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination's Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment within the organizations of the United Nations, which is chaired by UNHCR's Deputy High Commissioner; and with the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinators across the world. This collective journey to eradicate misconduct forms part of the organization's broader efforts of safeguarding and integrity.

Despite the progress made, much more remains to be done and UNHCR is committed to staying the course to tackle abuse, exploitation and misconduct, as well as the increasing number of integrity risks within the ever changing and challenging operational environment.

*UNHCR, 7 September 2021*

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<sup>1</sup> See [A Selection Of Promising Practices On Organizational Culture Change](#), 2021.