

FIGHTING SEXUAL MISCONDUCT IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC

2020 IN REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the ensuing movement restrictions, lack of access and concerns over the health and well-being of people of concern and colleagues, undoubtedly impacted UNHCR's efforts to eradicate sexual misconduct. Despite these challenges, 2020 also provided opportunities for advancing our fight against sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment (SH).


Building on its vision to provide a safe, trusted and inclusive environment for both the people we serve and colleagues, UNHCR's efforts placed greater focus on consulting and empowering victims/survivors as well as local actors, colleagues and partners, and ensuring adequate systems are in place to prevent and respond to sexual misconduct.

PREVENTING SEA IN THE COVID-19 CONTEXT

Past public health emergencies have shown that SEA risks rise in such situations, disproportionately impacting women and girls and making reporting mechanisms and response services harder to access.

Recognizing the critical need to join up forces in this context of heightened risk, UNHCR strongly supported inter-agency initiatives to support leaders, stakeholders, and practitioners engaged in protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) in the field.¹



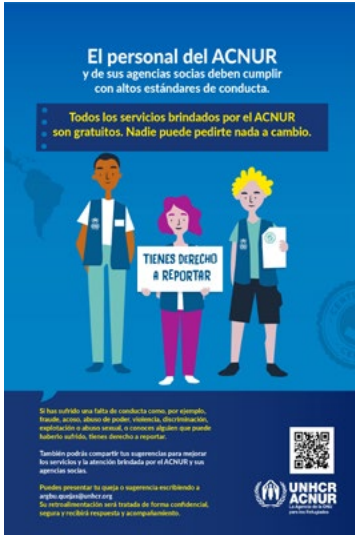
 Associazione Italiana Amici de Raoul Follereau (AIFO) organizes discussion sessions on PSEA to strengthen community awareness and engagement, particularly for people with disabilities. © AIFO Mozambique

UNHCR operations included PSEA awareness-raising in their public health messaging on COVID-19 and strengthened their efforts to protect those most hard-to-reach. In some locations, community members, particularly women, received additional training on child protection, gender-based violence and SEA. They helped liaise between communities and service providers, also playing a key role in protection monitoring when access was limited for our staff.

Teams also expanded remote engagement with communities by:

- ➔ Distributing mobile phones and phone/data credit to community-based organizations, gender-based violence focal points and women at risk
- ➔ Converting physical help centres to call centres
- ➔ Creating virtual communications channels such as SMS
- ➔ Strengthening prevention messaging through multiple channels (social media, TV, radio)

¹ The IASC developed a [Technical Note on PSEA during the COVID-19 Response](#) to provide guidance to colleagues in the field and a [Checklist](#) to help local actors verify that key PSEA systems remained functional and mitigate new risks.



Information, education and communication materials raise awareness and provide information on free access to services and reporting. ©UNHCR Argentina

A global stocktaking of PSEA awareness-raising materials was also finalized. It helped identify gaps and good practices and made recommendations on ways to strengthen engagement with communities.

Specific activities to mitigate SEA risks were included in the COVID-19 Risk Register, which was developed to ensure UNHCR could continue to deliver its mandate and minimize disruptions despite the pandemic.

MOVING TOWARDS A VICTIM-CENTRED APPROACH

Putting victims/survivors at the centre of our efforts requires that they feel safe, free to speak up and to seek advice and help. It also requires that we listen to them and provide support and assistance in a safe, sensitive and empathic manner.

In **December**, the High Commissioner issued a [Policy on a Victim-Centred Approach in UNHCR's response to Sexual Misconduct](#) – the first ever policy of its kind in the UN system. It focuses on the safety, rights, well-being and expressed needs and choices of victims/survivors when responding to sexual misconduct. It charts key principles which will guide its implementation in 2021.

In 2020, victims of sexual harassment continued to be supported by the Psychosocial Case Management Officer for SH. This support is now automatically provided to victims unless they choose otherwise, shifting the onus from the individual to the organization, while guarding the individual's well-being and avoiding potential re-traumatization.

UNHCR's **global network of 400 peer advisors** also provided critical support in the context of the pandemic, particularly in preventing and mitigating tensions and grievances, supporting colleagues, and promoting better workplaces.

The “**Reflective Leadership Dialogues**” were adapted and rolled out virtually, benefitting more than 370 managers across 154 offices. Using experiential learning methodology, they engaged managers to reflect on ways to strengthen their role in promoting more safe, inclusive, and respectful work environments.



Messages written by women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence are displayed in artwork on the walls of the Cotopaxi Reception House – a safe house for refugee and Ecuadorian women in the city of Salcedo, Ecuador. © UNHCR/Jaime Giménez



Visuals from case study videos used in UNHCR's new SEA/SH Learning Packages. © UNHCR/DÉTROIT

In 2020, UNHCR continued to encourage colleagues to report misconduct or raise concerns, including via the **independent and confidential “SpeakUp! Helpline”** which is available 24/7 in multiple languages and offers the option to remain anonymous.

We also undertook a comprehensive review of the tools in place to support and assist witnesses and victims. This will serve as a basis for identifying and building on good practices.

REINFORCING OUR FRAMEWORK

UNHCR launched its **new PSEA/SH Strategy and Action Plan (2020-2022)** which is guided by four overarching objectives:

- ➔ adopting a victim-centred approach
- ➔ equipping UNHCR and partner personnel with the tools and knowledge to prevent, identify and respond to sexual misconduct
- ➔ upholding UNHCR's accountability
- ➔ maintaining our inter-agency engagement

We also issued our new **Policy on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation, and Response to Gender-Based Violence (GBV)**. It emphasizes that fighting GBV and reducing the risks of GBV are institutional priorities of lifesaving importance and that SEA victims must be helped through GBV referral and support systems.

Strengthened internal awareness was demonstrated by the fact SEA was increasingly included in our risk management tools in 2020, including risks registers. A dedicated **SEA Risk Management Tool** was developed to help colleagues identify SEA related risks. It is available in English, French, and Arabic.

We reinforced our **clearances, reference checks, and checks against the ClearCheck SEA/SH database** to prevent known perpetrators of sexual misconduct being rehired. In addition, we included SEA and SH in two certification programmes for human resources personnel.

COMBATING SEXUAL MISCONDUCT ALONGSIDE PARTNERS

To strengthen the sector's approach as a whole, we partnered with sister agencies to develop a series of joint tools. This included a **Common Assessment Tool** that helps assess and strengthen partner capacity in a coordinated manner and was piloted in 11 operations.

UNHCR supported UNICEF in the development of a **mandatory PSEA e-learning course**. The improved course, which is being translated in Arabic and Russian, French, Spanish, will replace the widely used mandatory UN e-learning.

UNHCR's leadership has played a strong role in interagency efforts to tackle sexual misconduct. From September 2019 to December 2020, High Commissioner Filippo Grandi assumed the role of IASC Champion Protection from SEA and SH (see below) and Deputy High Commissioner has served as Chair of the **Chief Executives Board's (CEB) Task Force on Addressing SH within the organizations of the UN system**. In addition, UNHCR continued to co-chair to the **IASC Results Group 2 on Accountability and Inclusion**.



UNHCR delivered trainings including with modules on PSEA to different local actors who provide direct support to IDPs in the Nampula Province, Mozambique. © UNHCR Jorge Palamussa

In January 2020, the High Commissioner and UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore held a **joint virtual dialogue** for members of their personnel on organizational culture, collective action, and interagency cooperation in the fight against sexual misconduct.

UNHCR strengthened its engagement with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN). This led **UNHCR to adhere to specific standards on SEA and SH prevention and response, including the [OECD/DAC Recommendation](#)**.

Dialogues with partners were organized with the support of UNHCR's Senior Coordinator (PSEA and SH) and her team to discuss topics related to PSEA and SH, including on the impact of COVID-19, risk management, and organizational culture change.

We also maintained our **transparent approach with Member States** on sexual misconduct issues, including through oral and written updates. UNHCR participated in a United Kingdom Parliamentary Inquiry looking into progress on tackling the sexual exploitation and abuse of aid beneficiaries and submitted [written](#) and [oral](#) testimony.

DELIVERING ON IASC CHAMPIONSHIP PRIORITIES

As the 2020 [Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(IASC\) Champion on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment](#), the High Commissioner launched several initiatives to bolster prevention, expand safe spaces, and promote the respectful use of authority.

- ➔ An **interagency learning package for partners – [Saying NO to Sexual Misconduct](#)** - was produced jointly with IOM, WFP and others, to raise awareness among humanitarian workers on how to prevent, detect, and respond to SEA and SH.
- ➔ An **e-learning course on SEA investigations for partners** was developed to build partner capacity to conduct investigations on sexual misconduct. It will be launched in 2021.
- ➔ Partnering with the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), UNHCR launched [the Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Sexual Harassment Community Outreach and Communication Fund](#). **This initiative aimed at supporting local NGOs in their efforts to raise awareness and engage with communities.** With more than 1,600 applications received, the Fund resonated with local humanitarian actors and will, in light of its success, be maintained in 2021.



📍 Humanitarian Response Consortium (HRC) emphasizes community empowerment, awareness raising and zero tolerance for SEA. With support from the PSEA Outreach Fund, PSEA billboards were installed in the Tapihan and Lapok Shariff Aguak communities. © HRC Philippines

- ➔ To facilitate **organizational culture change**, the High Commissioner launched a **Communications Package** intended to help humanitarian leaders engage in discussions with staff on sexual misconduct issues. Dedicated virtual sessions on values, attitudes, and organizational culture were also held. One was hosted by the High Commissioner with fellow IASC Principals and another one by the Deputy High Commissioner for the [CEB Task Force on Addressing SH within the organizations of the UN system](#).
- ➔ A **collection of good practices on organizational culture change** will be published in the first half 2021, building on the innovative work done by different humanitarian and development organizations, with a focus on curbing power imbalances in the workplace.

2020 was a year of personal and professional challenges for many. Nevertheless, colleagues in UNHCR and partner organizations continued their efforts to eradicate sexual misconduct from their workplaces and their organizations. And, even more importantly, victims and survivors continued to speak up with remarkable courage. This journey continues.