

IASC Senior Focal Points meeting on Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Aid Workers

Summary Note - 13 October 2017

- 1. On 13 October 2017, IASC Co-Champions on Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Aid Workers Lindsay Coates (President of InterAction) and Kate Gilmore (Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights) held a teleconference with IASC Senior Focal Points on Sexual Harassment and Abuse (SHA) in the humanitarian sector.**¹ The teleconference was convened as part of the process of reviewing existing policies and practices to prevent and tackle the issue within individual organisations, and identifying steps to address gaps and increase governance and response systems.
- 2. In her opening remarks, IASC Co-Champion Lindsay Coates stressed the importance of the process and added that with the upcoming first anniversary of the creation of the Co-Champion roles on SHA, full support and engagement from individual organizations was critical to shape a proactive common agenda.** She recalled the article published by Devex in June 2017 and noted the important reaction it had triggered on social media, reiterating that the issue of SHA resonated with many. She said that momentum should not be lost and that agencies should be careful not to only take reactive measures, but instead demonstrate collective progress and take a proactive stand.
- 3. IASC Co-Champion Kate Gilmore proceeded with the presentation of an analysis of existing policies and mechanisms within individual organizations.** This was done on the basis of the information shared by Senior Focal Points with reference to a checklist elaborated in May 2017. The Co-Champion underlined the duty of care of organizations, noting that the aim of the snapshot was to show where we stood and identify challenges to be addressed. She expressed concern at the lack of engagement of a number of organizations, stating that only 12 out of 17 organizations had provided information. She further noted that as a group the organizations were behind where they should be, and stressed that creating evidence of due diligence was urgent. She concluded that the SHA agenda should move forward without the need for a major crisis to trigger an enhanced response.
- 4. Going into more details about the results of the analysis, Kate Gilmore noted that most organizations had zero tolerance policies and codes of conduct in place. She added that they were offering training to staff, some forms of assistance to victims, and that they had provisions to hold perpetrators accountable.** The Co-Champion gave examples of good practices implemented by organizations, such as translating policies and training modules in various languages, providing guidance on whistle-blower protection policy, or providing visual information on reporting mechanism and remedies. Turning to identified gaps, she noted the challenge of data collection and analysis, including issues linked to confidentiality and privacy, and the need to gather better information about circumstances in which SHA happened, what worked to prevent it, and what actions could be taken as a response. She further mentioned the inconsistent approaches taken with regards to staff awareness and accessibility of remedies, victims assistance, training of investigators and actions to hold perpetrators to account, including implementing partners and contractors. She suggested that the next steps could include facilitating good practices replication and collective action in the gaps areas.
- 5. Participants acknowledged the importance of moving the agenda forward, including by learning from each other and trying to bridge collective gaps.** They recognized that serious

¹ IASC Secretariat [Nuhad al-Alfi, Dolly Baruah, Katja Laurila], ICRC [Ayooshee Dookhee], IFRC [Victoria Stodart], InterAction [Lindsay Coates, Lauren Rajczak], IOM [Shabnam Mossaheb], OCHA [Elizabeth Eilor, Veera Haapaniemi], OHCHR [Kate Gilmore, Veronica Birga, Nathalie Migeotte, Kwinraj Chand], SCHR [Kate Halff], UNDP [Irina Stavenscaic], UNHabitat [David Thomas], UNHCR [Helmut Buss, Myriam Baele, Mélanie Senelle], UNICEF [Eva Mennel].

challenges had to be overcome to deal with SHA in a strategic manner, and that good practices sharing was important. Concern was expressed at the lack of clarity within organizations about work flows and division of labour around issues related to SHA (with overlaps between units in charge of human resources, gender equality, ethics, humanitarian action, etc.). There was also a call for further reflection on how SHA was interconnected with questions of organizational culture and behaviour change, with the recognition that problems did not only arise from failures in protocols and policies implementation, and that efforts should be made to establish a “speak up” culture (as an example, reference was made to an upcoming study on violence against UNHCR staff members and to an IOM annual report on disciplinary measures taken against perpetrators). Participants further noted that clarity was lacking around what zero tolerance meant, and that organizations needed to amplify the zero tolerance message, including through awareness-raising on internal justice systems (reporting mechanisms, sanctions applied, etc.).

6. **Kate Gilmore reiterated that if a culture change was necessary, it was also essential to agree on concrete steps to shift the culture of responsibility for change from within individual organizations to the sector as a whole, creating a sense of urgency and accountability.** Participants noted that buy-in by senior management could be a serious challenge and had a high impact on policies implementation. Another issue to address was staff’s perception about the effectiveness of policies in place.
7. **The two Co-Champions presented a number of potential steps to be taken to advance the SHA agenda.** Lindsay Coates proposed to present data gathered through the snapshots in a written report to the IASC Principals in view of their December 2017 meeting. She added that further steps could include having every organization with a zero tolerance policy by March 2018, identifying effective data collection systems, carrying out an in-depth analysis of promoting practices to tackle SHA, and identifying champions within organizations to spur further action on this. She also noted that InterAction could conduct a desk review within the NGO sector. Kate Gilmore stressed that buy-in and additional efforts were needed to exchange good practices, and agreed that talents should be identified inside organizations.
8. **Participants supported the idea of having a common action plan, with enhanced support from IASC Principals.** They agreed that more openness was needed in terms of information sharing, that structural barriers had to be addressed, and that leadership development was key for success. They illustrated the kind of actions to be included in the work plan with a number of examples, such as looking at existing hotlines mechanisms or conducting perception surveys to showcase the extent of the problem. IASC secretariat representative also noted that a draft page with the description of the Co-Champions and Senior Focal Points’ work is now available at: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-senior-focal-points-sexual-harassment-and-abuse-aid-workers>. Colleagues were welcomed to send their feedback on the page to IASCcorrespondence@un.org.

PROPOSED NEXT STEPS BY IASC CO-CHAMPIONS

- IASC Co-Champions to share with IASC Principals a report on the activities of the group of IASC Senior Focal Points on SHA in 2017, covering the outcome of the analysis undertaken through the snapshots, and to seek their endorsement of a common work plan for 2018.
- IASC Co-Champions to convey the message that a strong signal is needed by IASC Principals to enhance commitment within individual organizations and empower colleagues with specific mandates/tasks on the issue of SHA.
- Individual organizations to contribute to the 2017 report to IASC Principals.