The IRC Way

**The IRC’s commitment to safeguarding**

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Last year, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) supported 26 million people whose lives have been shattered by conflict and crisis.

43% of our global staff (72% of our UK staff) are women; the majority of our clients are female.  And as a leader in violence prevention and response in conflict areas, we are acutely aware of the challenges and the importance of creating a safe environment for all, in both our programming and our own operations.

The IRC has a strong commitment to creating a culture of zero-tolerance of sexual harassment and sexual exploitation and abuse in our workplace and in our programmes – as well as a safe environment for anonymous reporting. We are determined to protect our beneficiaries and staff from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment through prevention and, where misconduct is alleged, to address it without fear or favour.

**Putting strong policies in place and ensuring they are widely shared and understood**

Since 2003 a dedicated staff has been in place to address and prevent sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse at the IRC. We continue to strengthen the work they have delivered over the last 15 years. For example, this year the prevention of sexual misconduct is a particular focus of the IRC’s global “IRC Way” training. The IRC Way is the IRC’s Code of Conduct, which is expected to be understood and adhered to by all employees with disciplinary consequences for failing to do so. Based upon our three core values of Integrity, Service, and Accountability, it includes IRC’s policies on important safeguarding issues and how to raise concerns of suspected misconduct, including:

* Harassment-Free Workplace
* Beneficiary Protection from Exploitation and Abuse
* Combatting Trafficking in Persons
* Child Safeguarding
* Global Reporting Guidelines

The “IRC Way” training is an annual one-day event mandatory for all staff, including senior management.  The training is designed for IRC teams to explore and fully understand IRC’s values and the principles that guide our conduct. It also provides each staff member with examples and advice on how to align their behaviours with IRC’s commitments to colleagues, clients, donors, suppliers, partners, the organisation, and society. Available channels to raise concerns are explained as well as the availability of anonymity and the IRC’s anti-retaliation policy. In 2018, the IRC Way training emphasised safeguarding and the prevention of sexual misconduct with a module specifically dedicated to sexual harassment.

At the conclusion of the one-day training all participants are asked to sign an “Acknowledgement and Certification statement”.

**Demonstrating accountability to clients and survivors**

Given the difficult and complex environment within which the IRC operates delivering aid to the world’s most vulnerable people, encouraging beneficiary reporting to surface concerns and misconduct can be particularly challenging. However, the IRC is determined that this cannot be an excuse. Instead, we must work even harder to ensure the safeguarding of our clients as well as our staff.

Like all aid agencies, our systems are not perfect. But we are working to strengthen them through pilot projects and close analysis of what is working and what isn’t.

For example, the IRC has been piloting a client feedback and response mechanism (FARM) in the Middle East which aims to improve the rate of client feedback within our programmes. FARM enables community members to register their complaints, requests for information, requests for assistance, positive feedback and suggestions. Where we receive complaints or allegations raised that are in contravention of the IRC’s code of conduct, they are referred to the Ethics & Compliance Unit (ECU) for follow up and investigation. The focus of FARM is on unsolicited channels, encouraging feedback about any topic without having to be asked. The channels themselves vary across locations, including hotlines via SMS, WhatsApp & Viber, help desks, complaint boxes and emails. One of the important insights from the pilot is factoring in the impact of cultural norms in how we get clients to report. By addressing this we’ve been able to significantly increase the level of feedback we’re getting from the communities served by our Middle East programmes.

**Tackling gender equality with a step change in organisational culture**

Of course sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse affects both men and women, boys and girls. But we believe that striving for gender equality, in both our programming and within our operations, is an integral part of creating a healthy culture and one where those affected by or aware of misconduct can come forward safely to report it. Our 2020 Strategy makes an explicit commitment to ensuring that women and girls achieve the same outcomes as men and boys, and that our leadership is more gender balanced.

In 2016, the IRC established the Gender Equality Unit to act as a catalyst for change. The role of the unit, which has ten permanent staff, is to build capacity, provide advice and monitor IRC’s progress towards meeting its gender equality commitment. It works in close partnership with programmatic and operational leaders to help develop and share best practices for the organisation, and provide guidance in driving change. In the countries where we operate, the unit works closely with country leadership to create accountability structures and initiatives for gender equality. An example of these jointly developed initiatives include training staff globally and across all IRC offices on how to prevent, recognise and report sexual harassment.

There has also been a focus on supporting organisational change through creating local forums and mechanisms to advocate for, and create discussion about, gender equality. For instance, country programmes have identified local Gender Equality Champions, who organise discussions and activities focused on gender equality, women’s empowerment and sexual misconduct.

We encourage the creation of formalised communities that meet regularly to foster this space in country offices, to discuss issues for women in the workplace, propose changes to leadership, and be instrumental in their implementation.  For example, groups such as IRC Cameroon’s Women at Work (W@W) or “Femmes Fortes”, are comprised of IRC female staff who, supported by management, meet regularly to develop and implement concrete actions towards gender equality. Since their establishment they have put forward a number of new workplace policies, including separate male and female bathrooms in offices, private female-only prayer rooms, and day-care services at the office.

**Ensuring that concerns are heard and acted upon, so that it is safe for those affected to come forward**

Every IRC staff member is responsible for living IRC’s Values, protecting those we serve, our staff, donors and partners, and continuing to deliver high quality services for all of our clients. We encourage our staff to “Speak Up and Listen Up” when there is a concern, problem or issue, and to report misconduct, and cooperate with investigations.

The IRC has strong global reporting guidelines in place, advising all IRC workers on how to report violations of IRC policies or activities inconsistent with the IRC’s Standards for Professional Conduct. Key pillars include:

* IRC requires all workers to report direct knowledge and reasonable suspicion or concerns about conduct that is inconsistent with the “IRC Way”, breaches of IRC Organisational Policies, regardless of local laws. All reported cases are followed up on and may lead to an investigation, conducted by the IRC’s ECU.
* In accordance with the IRC’s Anti-Retaliation and Reporter Protection Policy, retaliation against a worker who has made a good faith complaint or report of an IRC policy violation or other improper conduct will not be tolerated. A worker who feels they are being retaliated against or who believes they have observed retaliation are advised to report the matter immediately, consistent with IRC’s Global Reporting Guidelines.

The IRC’s ECU operates under the direction of the organisation’s Chief Ethics and Compliance Officer and is responsible  ensuring that the IRC maintains and enforces effective policies, procedures, controls, processes and systems to prevent, detect and investigate alleged violations of our Code of Conduct, IRC policies and procedures, law, regulations, and any other relevant requirements. As the main point of contact  reporting misconduct and raising concerns, the ECU addresses allegations relating to the IRC’s activities, and those of third parties acting on IRC’s behalf.

The IRC maintains an independent whistleblower [**hotline**](https://www.rescue-uk.org/page/ethics-hotline-report-issue) (since 2006) and other mechanisms to provide staff with multiple pathways  raising concerns and reporting potential misconduct. This includes the option of anonymous reporting through EthicsPoint, a confidential telephone and web based system operated by a third party provider that provides for 24/7 reporting in multiple languages

**Integrating safeguards throughout the employment cycle to protect anyone who has contact with the IRC**

A key challenge for the NGO sector is to prevent perpetrators of sexual exploitation and abuse from working for another agency once their employment has been terminated for misconduct. Within current legal constraints, the IRC has strong procedures for hiring new staff. IRC’s reference and background check process is customised for role, organization level, information availability and legal jurisdiction. Where possible, our checks for field staff hire include a combination of 2 to 5 past employer references, education verification, and background checks that include reviews of databases on: Anti-Terrorism and Corruption,   criminal records, sex offender registry, driving records, and credit status. These procedures help us to ensure that our staff are not only well qualified for their roles, but also have the personal background to ensure that they will appropriately interact with staff and beneficiaries. We recognise that a number of challenges remain and continue to collaborate with other NGOs and the UK Government to strengthen our internal processes.

We know that we cannot rest on this issue. Our programmes are very much centered on ensuring equal access for women and girls who are often marginalised when crises strike. In every part of our work we are striving to narrow the inequalities between men and women and boys and girls, so that we build more equal opportunities for people. Every single man and woman who works for the IRC should feel confident and supported and safe in their work, and every single man, woman, boy or girl who we serve through our programmes should know that they are getting the best quality help because they have got an organisation that is on their side. This is why safeguarding has been and continues to be a priority for us.