

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE
IASC PRINCIPALS MEETING

Discrimination, Harassment & Abuse of Women Aid Workers: Survey Results and Way Forward

6 December 2016

Circulated: 23 November 2016

I Background

From January-March 2016, the Humanitarian Women's Network (HWN)¹ carried out a survey of their peers to better understand the experiences of women working in the humanitarian field. The survey sought to capture information about the demography of respondents in four broad categories pertinent to issues facing female humanitarians, namely: (1) Discrimination and Harassment, (2) Sexual Aggression and Assault, (3) Reporting, and (4) Impact on Professional and Personal Well-Being.

The results are very concerning, indicating that harassment and assault is widespread. The HWN looks to the IASC to agree to and pursue the necessary structural and cultural reforms to ensure that female aid workers are safe from discrimination, harassment and abuse in the workplace. Furthermore, there is a reputational risk imminent to the system. This is an issue of growing public concern and it is critical for the IASC to demonstrate its leadership in this pressing and increasingly public issue. Towards the end, this note provides an overview of the current challenges facing women working in aid, and proposes specific and pragmatic ways forward.

II About the Survey

The Survey is a snapshot of the level of discrimination and violence faced by women in the humanitarian sector. The 35-question survey captured both quantitative and qualitative information. Options were offered to respondents to share their experiences and some results were coded into qualitative data. The survey was conducted on SurveyMonkey in French and English, and participants were informed through word of mouth, social media, and professional networks.

The Survey methodology and analysis were guided by technical experts (PhDs) in qualitative and quantitative research. 'Snowball sampling' methodology was deliberately used to promote, to the extent possible, the representativeness of the sample. Statistical analysis of the data was conducted using SPSS and significance was assessed for every query response.

A total of 1,005 women from more than 70 organizations (UN and NGOs) responded over a period of 50 days. Respondents were very seasoned and educated aid workers with an average of 12 years of professional experience, 8 years of humanitarian experience and 7 field missions; 76 per

¹ The Humanitarian Women's Network is a grassroots network founded in 2015 in Guinea by professional female aid workers, membership of around 300 professional aid worker women from UN, NGOs, inter alia. The Steering Committee is comprised of five mid- to senior-level managers from UN and NGOs. The objective of the network is to achieve a work environment where women are able to work in the humanitarian industry free from discrimination, harassment and abuse. HWN offers its members community, mentorship, professional support and guidance. For information on the Network and its efforts, visit the website (www.humanitarianwomensnetwork.org).

cent hold Masters Degrees. The greatest number of respondents were based in Sub-Saharan African and Indian Ocean region, with 83 per cent of respondents being international staff and 17 per cent national staff.

III Results

Topline results show that: nearly 50 per cent of women respondents report having being touched in an unwanted way by a male colleague in the workplace and even more are subject to persistent sexual advances from their colleagues. Forty women who responded to our survey were sexually assaulted by a colleague. Over half of all physical aggressions were committed by a supervisor.

Half of women reported they are subject to ‘locker room’ talk at the office about sex, how they look, their intelligence, and their role in the workplace. Over half of women do not feel their organization is doing what it can to make them feel safe.

Further probing of the data illustrates that reporting systems are lackluster and do not sufficiently protect women aid workers. The vast majority (69 per cent) of women who experienced discrimination, harassment or abuse do not report it because of a fear of professional consequences, lack of trust in the system or an absence of a mechanism to report. Of the few who do report (only 31 per cent), nothing happens nearly 50 per cent of the time. Furthermore, there are more women who had to endure negative professional consequences for reporting (22 per cent) than perpetrators of these acts who were punished (19 per cent).

40 per cent of women respondents reported that these experiences of discrimination, harassment, or sexual assault have had a strong negative impact on their psychological wellbeing, and that over 25 per cent of women respondents reported that their experiences of discrimination, harassment, or sexual assault in the workplace have changed the course of their career.

IV Next Steps

The Survey provides insight into the prevalence of certain acts indicative of discrimination, harassment, and abuse. However, more research should be done to explore and further understand the patterns of this concerning trend. What we need to know urgently to make progress is: (1) frequency of abuses, (2) where they are occurring most and least; (3) the specific patterns around who the perpetrators are and who is most vulnerable; (4) best and worst practices for preventing these abuses; and (5) where reporting mechanisms break-down and/or succeed. Furthermore, the survey is heteronormative and focuses exclusively on the experiences of female staff in relation to their male colleagues. We recognize that men can be victims of harassment and assault and women can also be perpetrators, but exploring these dynamics would have been too ambitious for this initial survey. Despite and because of its limitations, the results available legitimize a call for a more in-depth prevalence study to be conducted.

A roadmap comprised of seven propositions for action points is proposed, specifying and soliciting agencies’ leadership per proposition. The roadmap is cognizant of the current financial and political climate: all requests come with little to no additional resource commitment.

The IASC Principals to:

1. **Acknowledge that there is a problem worth addressing:** appoint a high-level champion to pursue the issue and task a secretariat with follow-up, and ask for there to be dedicated conversations on this at the country level (i.e. at HCT meetings).

2. **Ensure that staff know their rights and responsibilities:** prioritize the issue at the country level by encouraging each organization to designate focal points. This focal point should be charged with (1) ensuring that staff understand the existing rules governing harassment, and abuse; (2) that they know the reporting mechanisms; and (3) that they are aware of staff care and support options. There should be simple guidance documents for staff translated into a variety of languages.
3. **Establish a system-wide review:** as this is a system-wide problem, the IASC and UNDG should take up this issue and conduct a system-wide review.
4. **Issue a Report Card:** commission an annual reporting of the problem across IASC institutions, outlining best and worst practices and grading performance across organizations.
5. **Establish a Monitoring Tool:** commission an on-online platform to encourage anonymous geo-located reporting to be able to target hotspots and understand trends regarding discrimination, harassment, and abuse.
6. **Reform workplace culture:** by re-committing to gender parity in hiring practices and ensuring staff training in gender sensitivity before and during field deployments.
7. **Invest more in resources for survivors of assault:** the resources available to survivors are inconsistent at best, and the quality of care someone gets should not be determined by their nationality or who they work for. This is especially important for mental health services.