

How to address online sexual harassment during COVID-19

In the Enabling Environment Guidelines for the United Nations, created by UN Women in 2019, one of the main topics is Standards of Conduct.¹ These standards include guiding principles that encourage value-based behavior to reduce misconduct and abuse of power as well as creating a workplace of respect and accountability. Here, we focus on addressing online sexual harassment during COVID-19.

As defined in UN System Model Policy, **sexual harassment is any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offense or humiliation, when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.**² Sexual harassment may occur in the workplace or in connection with work. While typically involving a pattern of conduct, sexual harassment may take the form of a single incident. In the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s Violence and Harassment Convention (2019) uses "the term "violence and harassment" in the world of work refers to a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices, or threats thereof, whether a single occurrence or repeated, that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm, and includes gender-based violence and harassment."³

Workplace harassment can and does occur online. Cyber sexual harassment can impact colleagues', particularly women's ability to participate in online spaces.⁴ Adapted from the Enabling Environment Guidelines, here are ways that organizations, managers and individuals can address online sexual harassment during COVID-19.

A **non-exhaustive list of examples of online sexual harassment** is: threatening physical sexual violence, showing or discussing pornographic materials, making sexist jokes, commenting about bodily appearance or sexual experiences, sending sexually suggestive communications, making inappropriate sexual gestures, repeatedly asking a person for dates or asking for sex, rating a person's sexuality, and making derogatory comments about someone's sexual orientation or gender identity.⁵

The mass teleworking during the COVID-19 crisis offers the UN community an opportunity to further strengthen its efforts to address online sexual harassment and improve standards of conduct. Achieving and sustaining gender parity at the UN depends on transforming the organizational culture so that it fosters a safe and respectful environment in which all have equal access to opportunities. **The whole UN community has a responsibility to create and support a culture of respect, zero tolerance and accountability for discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment and abuse of authority.**

¹ UN Women (2019). 'Enabling environment guidelines for the United Nations system' in support of the 'Secretary-General's system-wide strategy on gender parity'. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/02/supplementary-guidance-on-the-enabling-environment-guidelines-for-the-united-nations-system>

² United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB, 2018). UN System Model Policy on Sexual Harassment. 12 January. <https://www.unsystem.org/content/un-system-model-policy-sexual-harassment-0>

³ International Labour Organization (2019). Convention 190. Violence and Harassment Convention. https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190

⁴ UN Women (2020). Online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19#view>

⁵ (CEB, 2018); UN Women (2020). Supervisor Guidance: Prevention of, and Response to, Sexual Harassment in The Workplace.

For the organization

- ❖ **Show leadership and sustain messaging to raise awareness of the zero-tolerance approach and the importance of accountability** via regular email updates and Town Hall meetings.
- ❖ **Provide Clear and accessible resources** to guide personnel in preventing, recognizing and reporting misconduct which includes online harassment. Resources include the organization's HR, the United Nations Helpline and Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) Investigations Division. Leadership can communicate messages through email, the intranet and Town Hall meetings.
- ❖ **Hold perpetrators accountable.** The usual mechanisms for holding perpetrators to account should and do apply in cases of online harassment. A victim-centered approach should likewise be applied.⁶
- ❖ **Apply the UN Model Events Code of Conduct at online events.** Include a copy of the Code of Conduct in event invitations and underline that all UN events are subject to the Code of Conduct.⁷
- ❖ **Conduct confidential surveys with specific questions on the prevalence of online harassment** in order to collect data to track misconduct.
- ❖ **Limit the ability of content of an inappropriate sexual nature being shared on corporate IT systems,** for example by implementing filters.

As a manager

- ❖ **Share information on policies and resources and reiterate the message that sexual harassment is unacceptable online and offline.** As well as sharing organizational information, consider sharing short articles or publications (such as this one) with team members.
- ❖ **Reiterate that harassment will not be tolerated** in any form including during meetings, events or other online communications. Regularly communicate this in email updates and at meetings.
- ❖ **Practice inclusivity** during online meetings. Encourage for transparency and participation of all personnel.⁸
- ❖ **Ask leadership and human resources of your organization about plans to address sexual harassment online** and advocate for awareness raising and data collection.

As an individual

- ❖ **Inform yourself** of your organization's policies and guidance on the prevention of, and response to, sexual harassment
- ❖ **Take collective ownership and be an effective bystander.** Establish what collective ownership looks like in the specific context and support its practice, such as if someone engages in unacceptable behavior online. Some reactions include publicly or privately calling out negative behavior; checking in on the affected individual; redirecting the conversation; or asking someone else to intervene.⁹
- ❖ **Take a victim-centered approach** if approached by an affected individual, as with all sexual harassment. Listen and inform affected individuals of the avenues for advice and assistance in a timely, sensitive and impartial manner and clarify issues of privacy and confidentiality.¹⁰
- ❖ **Contact your Gender Focal Point and Discipline and Conduct Focal Point** to support their advocacy.¹¹

⁶ For more guidance, see UN Women (2019). What Will It Take? Promoting Cultural Change to End Sexual Harassment. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/09/discussion-paper-what-will-it-take-promoting-cultural-change-to-end-sexual-harassment>

⁷ United Nations (2019). Code of Conduct: To Prevent Harassment, Including Sexual Harassment, at UN System Events. <https://www.un.org/en/content/codeofconduct/>

⁸ For more guidance, see UN Women (2020). 'Top Tips to Foster Inclusivity During COVID-19' product at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/02/supplementary-guidance-on-the-enabling-environment-guidelines-for-the-united-nations-system>

⁹ For more guidance, see UN Women (2019). What Will It Take?

¹⁰ For more guidance, see UN Women (2019). What Will It Take? and (CEB, 2018). UN System Model Policy

¹¹ For more information, contact the Office of the Focal Point for Women in the UN system: focalpoint.forwomen@unwomen.org