

WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

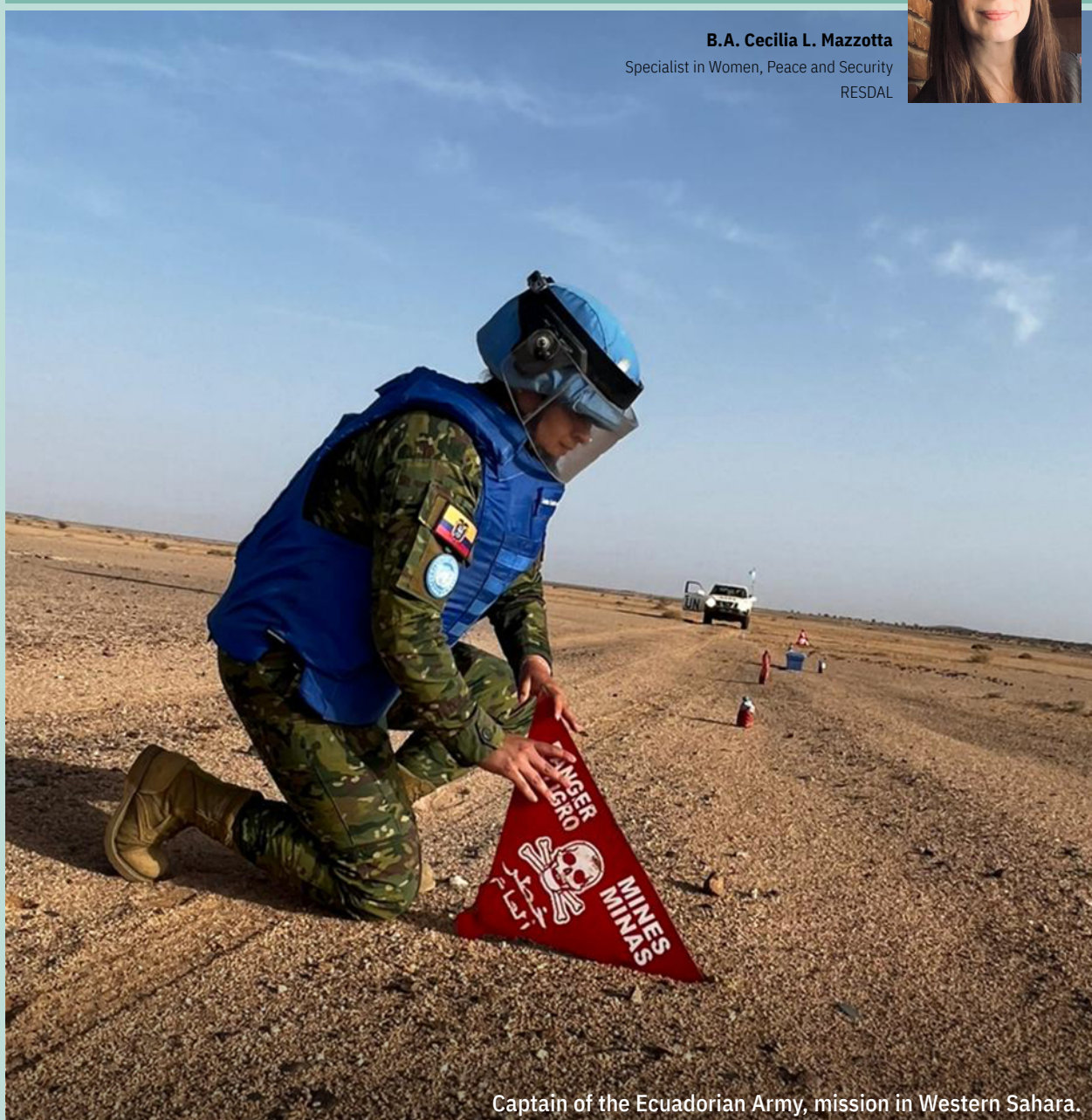
Sexual Harassment, Abuse and Exploitation in UN Missions

A Roadmap for the Global South



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1. The perspective on the issue within the United Nations (UN)

In recent years, there has been growing discussion about the need to distinguish between the issue of sexual harassment and sexual abuse (SH) and that of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) within the UN. According to the Organization, “Sexual harassment is the result of a culture of discrimination and privilege, and is based on certain dynamics of power and inequality in gender relations.”¹ In this framework, it is argued that “SH is sexual abuse between staff, while SEA refers to sexual violence perpetrated by UN staff (or those operating under a UN banner) against others outside of UN employment.”²

The distinctions between SH and SEA shape the political direction in the creation of internal structures within the Organization, which involve: the design of specific regulatory frameworks, the allocation of differentiated resources, different ways of involving internal and external agencies, the participation of specialized civil society organizations, and the implementation of registered complaint systems and forms of care for individual victims.

While these distinctions can lead to confusion, this paper aims to shed light on the main initiatives created within the UN framework, as well as the current mechanisms in place for prevention and response in peace missions. Some of the concerns that have been raised relate to how these issues are addressed by the agencies tasked with maintaining international peace and security: What aspects are being considered by the Department of Peace Operations (DPO)? What internal mechanisms of action exist within a peacekeeping mission? What is working—and what is not?

It is also worth asking: are the UN’s institutional developments being effectively applied within the jurisdictions of the Member States? Could national-level approaches be considered a preliminary step in preparation for the future deployment of troops by contributing countries participating (or set to participate) in peacekeeping missions? What national policy considerations could emerge from the approach taken by the United Nations?

This study will examine the dynamics and interaction of power and gender relations within the culture of the UN itself, within missions, and among members of the Armed Forces and Police from Troop- and Police-Contributing Countries (TPCCs), in order to identify practices that could foster safer environments for women deployed in the field.

Identifying a concrete path for action would increase countries’ ability to recruit and deploy more female military and police personnel. Moreover, a work environment free from sexual

1 United Nations System Coordination Chief Executives Board (CEB). *Statement on how to address sexual harassment in the UN system*, 3 May 2018. Available at: https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/imported_files/Note%20and%20CEB%20statement_FINAL_0.pdf.

2 UN Women. *Towards an end to sexual harassment: the urgency and nature of change in the era of #metoo*, 2018. Available at https://un.org.np/sites/default/files/doc_publication/2019-06/Towards-an-end-to-sexual-harassment-en.pdf.

harassment would also enhance their human and professional development, while strengthening ongoing gender policies. The premise is clear: a reduction in the factors that lead to SH and SEA would significantly improve the likelihood of a mission's success beyond its internal operations.

2. The UN's approach to SEA

The UN recognizes that SEA constitutes a system-wide problem (not one confined solely to peace operations). Several contributing factors have been identified as exacerbating its persistence. Some of them, it is raised, speak of a lack of awareness of the Organization's core values, insufficient compliance with established norms, and weak leadership in enforcing proper conduct and discipline. It is also acknowledged that there are inadequate background checks for prospective hires, flaws in investigation and disciplinary processes, and insufficient training of personnel. Furthermore, there has been a notable lack of consistency and sustained attention to the issue, both by the UN itself and by Member States.³

In light of this, since 2016 the UN has engaged in an intense process of redesigning its approach to the issue. In terms of assistance, in March of that year, the Secretary-General established the [Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#).⁴ Subsequently, in 2017, a renewed and more comprehensive strategy was launched, placing particular emphasis on prevention and aiming to ensure a more effective and efficient response to this phenomenon.

The focus is on four key areas:

- Prioritize victims.
- End impunity.
- Encourage the participation of civil society and external partners.
- Improve awareness and transparency.⁵

In this context, progress was also made on a bilateral basis with countries by inviting them to sign a novel instrument called the [Voluntary Pact between the Secretary-General and Member States to strengthen their commitment to the SEA](#). Focusing especially on those countries that collaborate in field operations, the pact seeks to reinforce commitment by calling for the extension of extraterritorial jurisdiction for crimes that may be committed by their nationals, while assigned to the UN or operating under its authority. It also encourages an internal search for best practices in prevention, victim assistance, investigation and accountability

³ Report of the Secretary-General, "Special measures to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse: a new approach", UN General Assembly, A/71/818, 28 February 2017.

⁴ The Fund is intended to support entities and organizations in providing medical support, economic assistance and recovery for women victims. Currently 24 countries contribute to this fund and 5 projects are under way. More information available at: United Nations, Combating Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, Initiatives of the Secretary-General: <https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/content/trust-fund>

⁵ Report of the Secretary-General, "Special measures to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse: a new approach", UN General Assembly, A/71/818, 28 February 2017.



Personnel of the Pakistani Army, mission in the Central African Republic.

within their own jurisdictions. By October 2024, 107 countries had signed the Pact. Similarly, the “Leadership Circle”, currently composed of 66 heads and Heads of State, was established to provide the high-level global political support necessary for success.⁶

Mindful of the existing institutional fragmentation in responding to this scourge, the most significant milestone was the establishment of the [Office of the Special Coordinator to improve the United Nations response to SEA](#). As part of the global leadership team, this office was created in light of recommendations emanating from various internal and external reports on peace operations and focuses its work on [Resolution 2272](#) (2016) of the Security Council, which urges the Secretary-General and Member States to take steps to end impunity for SEA acts committed by the organization’s personnel, including the eventual repatriation of the military/police units involved.⁷

⁶ Full list available at UN, Combating Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, Secretary General’s Initiatives: <https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/content/purpose>.

⁷ Some of these were the reports of the Independent High-level Panel on Peace Operations (S/2015/446 and A/70/357-S/2015/682); and the report of the [Independent External Expert Group’s Review on the UN Response to Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in the Central African Republic](#) of December 2015.

The initial objective of the Office of the Special Coordinator was to identify system-wide policies and procedures applicable to SEA, and to begin an analysis of overall gaps. Since then, year after year, a range of actions are developed, deepened and financed, depending on the initial diagnosis and the results that are collected. By 2025, the Office of the Special Coordinator is the hierarchical level within the system responsible for carrying out the agenda in this area. Some of the initiatives are summarized in the table below, which was prepared on the basis of the Reports on Special Protection Measures against SEA by the Secretary-General:

Measure	Objective	Expected Outcome	Report
Create a glossary to ensure consistency in terminology relating to sexual exploitation and abuse.	Prepare a standard notification and complaint form. Create uniform victim assistance protocols. Develop a basic manual on prevention and response.	Simplify and unify data collection. Increase coordination and reduce trauma to victims and witnesses during investigations. Provide guidance to field managers.	A/71/97 – Combating sexual exploitation and abuse – 23 June 2016 –
Create a centralized and confidential database of information on all cases.	Ensure that all parts of the UN system collect and present information in the same way. Regularize administrative and criminal investigation procedures. Provide empirical data from across the system for in-depth analysis.	Accelerate the provision of necessary assistance to victims. Understand patterns of misconduct. Design more effective prevention measures.	A/71/818 – Special protection measures against sexual exploitation and abuse: a new approach – 28 February 2017 –
Create a database of national legislation in the Member States.	Know the national legislation applicable to police officers and military forces.	Design strategies to support troop- and police-contributing countries.	A/73/744 – Special protection measures against sexual exploitation and abuse – 14 February 2019 –
Inventory the human and financial resources available for preventive action throughout the UN system.	Assess the perceptions of staff and affiliated staff on the implementation of the strategy. Assess complaint mechanisms.	Identify areas for improvement in training, and the implementation of risk mitigation measures. Identify how to address fear of reprisals following a complaint.	A/74/705 – Special protection measures against sexual exploitation and abuse – 17 February 2020 –
Consider the integration of SEA protection as a requirement in all UN activities and programmes.	Promote a shared understanding of the risk of such behaviour. Promote timely exchange of information across the system.	Facilitate the use of resources and capacities between different entities Include protection against SEA in security analyses of the environments in which the UN operates.	A/76/702 – Special protection measures against sexual exploitation and abuse – 15 February 2022 –
Visit the countries where missions are deployed.	Identify how the Organization can strengthen support and assistance to victims.	Assess the implementation of measures and recommendations on the ground.	A/76/702 – Special protection measures against sexual exploitation and abuse – 15 February 2022 –
Review the selection and deployment of uniformed personnel.	Analyse the seriousness with which a Member State takes its responsibility to address SEA on the basis of performance, prevention and response by its personnel.	Conduct technical briefings and online questionnaires to assess the status of legislation in Member States.	A/76/702 – Special protection measures against sexual exploitation and abuse – 15 February 2022 –

Measure	Objective	Expected Outcome	Report
Conduct an informal strategic dialogue with Member States.	Foster dialogues that strengthen prevention, response and accountability. Emphasize the need to create a culture of commitment, leadership and action.	Advance in depth with concrete actions together with Troop- and Police-Contributing Countries.	A/76/702 – Special protection measures against sexual exploitation and abuse – 15 February 2022 –
Update mandatory e-learning for all staff in place since 2016.	Relaunch an updated version in 2023, with special emphasis on the SEA chapter.	Translate the material into all official languages of the UN. Distribute to Member States as basic pre-deployment training material, and to those already deployed.	A/76/702 – Special protection measures against sexual exploitation and abuse – 15 February 2022 –
Provide the same funding for the post of Special Coordinator as for the posts at the Undersecretary-General level.	Advance the institutionalization of the Special Coordinator system-wide.	Allocate the post to the regular budget of the organization.	A/78/774 – Special protection measures against sexual exploitation and abuse – 14 February 2024 –
Develop a more comprehensive SEA risk management strategy.	Analyse performance for the sustainability of capacities and resource allocation.	Apply during the peace operation and after its closure. Conduct a deficiency review.	A/78/774 – Special protection measures against sexual exploitation and abuse – 14 February 2024 –
Analyse data from the UN monitoring tool and the harmonized system together with non-governmental organizations.	Identify key trends and encourage learning from aggregated data, thus providing critical insights to inform policies and strategies. Analyse trends holistically and report on evidence-based actions.	To introduce a unified data portal as a central repository of SEA-related information across the care sector in 2025. Merge peacekeeping and non-peacekeeping allegations	A/79/789 – Special protection measures against sexual exploitation and abuse – 17 February 2025 –

Source: Analysis based on the Secretary-General's Reports available at UN, Combating Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, <https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/es/content/secretary-generals-reports>

In 2022, the Secretariat took another significant step to give a clear demonstration of its institutional commitment. It was decided to strengthen the post of Special Coordinator by reviewing the terms and conditions of their appointment, to become a full-time post at the level of Under-Secretary-General, with corresponding funding.⁸

Since then, and thanks to the continued particular support of many Member States, one of the key tasks of the Office has been to visit field missions regularly. Evaluation of policy implementation, development of complaint procedures, harmonization of standards with the local population, transparency, collective accountability and the conduct of investigations, are part of the daily schedule of visits.

For its part, the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) is the operational arm of the UN in the field. The relation with the issue of SEA is first-hand and long-standing. With this in mind, we can find in the DPO a voluminous body of background for prevention, training and response, which constituted the raw material of the renewed approach at Headquarters. One of the founding instruments can be traced back to the 2003 report of the Secretary-General on [Gender Mainstreaming in Peacekeeping Activities](#), when it led to the then DPKO incorporating a

⁸ Report of the Secretary-General, *Special measures for protection against sexual exploitation and abuse*. United Nations General Assembly, A/77/818, 16 February 2023.

gender perspective into its own orbit. Similarly, the Windhoek Declaration, the Namibia Plan of Action, the 23rd special session of the General Assembly, the Brahimi report on peace operations, and the Millennium Declaration, formed the historical basis for the adoption of [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000](#), highlighting that it was imperative to encourage the participation of women where peace operations were conducted. The [Zero Tolerance policy](#), the first National Action Plans to implement Resolution 1325, the creation of Gender Focal Points in the Territory, among other actions, originated from the Department's own political directive.⁹ Focus was placed on improving levels of women's participation in the peace and security processes of the new millennium.¹⁰

However, despite the advances and the latest motorized push from UN Headquarters, in most of the visits it is still identified the existence of a persistent lack of trust between communities, UN staff, partners and some Member States. The eye of the storm focuses on the Organization's ability to ensure accountability. There remains concern that measures to hold perpetrators of SEA acts accountable remain inadequate and that leaders who fail to fulfil their responsibilities are not held accountable. The suspicion of impunity continues in the air.

The path forward regarding SEA, far from being consolidated, coexists with the urgent need for greater efforts to build trust in the system, to uphold the responsibility of management personnel to be accountable, and to ensure that all ongoing efforts extend beyond the institutional boundaries of the countries involved on the ground.

⁹ United Nations Department of Peace Operations, *DPKO Policy Directive: Gender Equality in UN Peacekeeping Operations*, (New York: UN, 3 November 2006).

¹⁰ Marcela Donadio and Cecilia Mazzotta, *Women in Military and Police Institutions: Resolution 1325 and Peace Operations in Latin America*, 2009, RESDAL, pp 23-27. Available at: <https://www.resdal.org/genero-y-paz/women-in-the-armed-and-police-forces.pdf>.

3. Addressing sexual harassment at the UN: a road under construction

Sexual harassment (SH) is a violation of human rights. This is how UN Women defines the problems that affect human beings throughout the world and that directly impact on projections of their potential human development.¹¹

Although sexual harassment has been discussed for three decades¹², the Organization's approach to the problem has changed radically in recent years. It was previously seen as more of an act or a mere one-off incident. It is now approached through an analysis of the origins of the behaviors exhibited by members within the organizations themselves.

The current unified definition set out in the [UN Model Policy on Sexual Harassment](#) is understood as: "any undesired conduct of a sexual nature which may reasonably be considered to cause offence or humiliation for another person, or is thus perceived, where such conduct interferes with work, becomes an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment. Sexual harassment may occur in the workplace or in connection with work. While it usually involves a pattern of behaviour, sexual harassment can take the form of a single incident (...)".¹³

With this approach, the notion that SH stems from the actions of an individual or group has been left behind, giving way to the recognition that its origins are closely tied to cultural and organizational patterns. These patterns are linked to discrimination, tolerance towards perpetrators, expectations of impunity, inequality in gender relations, the existence of a structure based on privilege and power for a given collective. All this is usually taking place in a context where the political and legislative structures of countries and organizations tend to reinforce and even deepen the above.¹⁴

One of the most notable initiatives in recent years was the creation in 2017 of the "[Task Force of the Chief Executives Board \(CEB\) to Address Sexual Harassment in United Nations System Organizations](#)", implemented by the current Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres. The CEB includes the 31 Executive Heads of all UN agencies, funds and programmes. Its creation establishes an umbrella under which all agencies must adapt their work on the subject. The work of the Task Force focuses on three key areas:¹⁵

Information: providing mechanisms to make complaints and offer support 24 hours a day; and establishing an international personnel preselection database to avoid re-hiring individuals who have committed acts of sexual harassment. This initiative is known as the [ClearCheck](#).

11 UN Women. *Towards an end to sexual harassment: the urgency and nature of change in the era of #metoo*, 2018. Available at https://un.org/np/sites/default/files/doc_publication/2019-06/Towards-an-end-to-sexual-harassment-en.pdf.

12 In 1992, the Organization defined it as "unconscionable sexual innuendo, solicitation of sexual favours or other forms of verbal or physical behaviour of a sexual nature, when they interfere with work, are required as a condition of employment or create an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment". Secretary-General of the United Nations. Administrative Instruction ST/AI/379: Procedures relating to incidents of sexual harassment, 29 October 1992. Available at <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n06/673/68/pdf/n0667368.pdf?token=dCR1I6TKRMuLADNPIP&fe=true>.

13 United Nations System Coordination Chief Executives Board (CEB). *UN System Model Policy on Sexual Harassment*, October 2018, page 2. Available at https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/imported_files/UN%20System%20Model%20Policy%20on%20Sexual%20Harassment_FINAL_0.pdf.

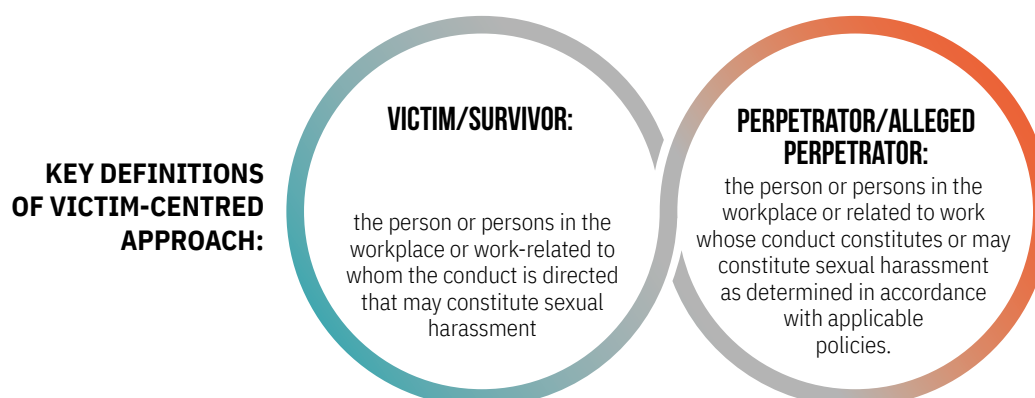
14 United Nations. *Victims' Rights First, Background*. Available at <https://www.un.org/es/victims-rights-first/background>.

15 United Nations System Coordination Chief Executives Board (CEB). *Statement on how to address sexual harassment in the UN system*, 3 May 2018. Available at https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/imported_files/Note%20and%20CEB%20statement_FINAL_0.pdf.

Investigation and decision-making: establishing rapid procedures for receiving and handling complaints, and recruiting specialized investigators.

Outreach and support: establishing mandatory training and providing guidance for managers to harmonize policies, and conducting staff perception surveys to learn from experience.

Following intensive work, in 2021 the Task Force released the document [Promoting a common understanding on the victim-centred approach to sexual harassment within the UN system](#). This study sets out the victim-centered approach of SH and adopts seven basic principles to unify processes, policies and procedures, and to adopt protection, investigation and accountability measures in all entities.



Source: Developed on the basis of the document Promoting a common understanding on the victim-centred approach to sexual harassment by the United Nations System Chief Executives Board (CEB). Available at: https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/A%20Victimcentred%20Approach%20to%20Sexual%20Harassment_ES.pdf



Source: Own elaboration. For the full list of recommendations, see: Promoting a common understanding on the victim-centred approach to sexual harassment by the United Nations System Chief Executives Board (CEB). Available at: https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/A%20Victim-centred%20Approach%20to%20Sexual%20Harassment_ES.pdf

This led to the creation of the [UN system-wide Knowledge Centre on SH](#) in 2023. Powered by UN Women, this Centre seeks to improve coordination across the entity, increase transparency, facilitate access to key documents, training modules and trainings for all hierarchical levels. Several procedural manuals were published as novel supporting documents, such as the SH Code of Conduct and the Manual for Complaint Investigation.¹⁶ An important development has been the decision to collect and systematize data and practices in all entities, generating interesting insights on good practices and challenges in this area.¹⁷

Code of Conduct to Prevent Harassment - Some examples of negative behaviour:

Make derogatory or derogatory comments about someone's sexual orientation or gender identity

- Use offensive or vexatious terms with sexual or gender connotations.
- Make comments of a sexual nature about the appearance, attire or body parts.
- Qualify a person's sexuality.
- Repeatedly soliciting dates or sexual intercourse from a person.
- Staring at another person in a way that implies sexual innuendo.
- Making unwanted touches to another person including intentional pinching, patting, touching or rubbing.
- Make inappropriate sexual gestures, such as lascivious waving.
- Tell sexual or lewd anecdotes or jokes.
- Send sexual communications in any format.
- Share or display sexually inappropriate images or videos in any format.
- Committing or attempting to commit an act of sexual assault, including rape.

Source: Developed on the basis of the Code of Conduct to Prevent Harassment, in particular Sexual Harassment at United Nations System Events. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/content/codeofconduct/>.

Consequently, since its creation, the work initiated by the Task Force has yielded positive results and progress in addressing the problem. Thus, according to the data reported in the last report, 97% of the institutions applied minimum standards of the Model Policy, 86% applied the Conduct Manual and 88% indicated that they used the ClearCheck (internationally).¹⁸

¹⁶ United Nations. Code of Conduct to prevent harassment, in particular sexual harassment at UN System events. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/content/codeofconduct/>. Also: United Nations System Chief Executives Board (CEB) for Coordination. Investigators Manual - Investigation of Sexual Harassment Complaints in the United Nations, March 2021. Available at: https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/Investigators%20Manual-March%202021_print.pdf.

¹⁷ Task Force of the Chief Executives Board (CEB). *Key Achievements*. Available at: <https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/CEB%20TF%20SH%20-%20Key%20Achievements.pdf>.

¹⁸ United Nations General Assembly. Improvement of the status of women in the United Nations system- Report of the Secretary-General A/78/206, 18 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/status-of-women-in-the-un-system-2023-en.pdf>. The next report will be published in the course of 2025.

a. With SH situations in missions, are there fewer women on the field?

The historical treatment of SH within missions reveals a first major turning point occurred in 2014. The *Inside the Blue* strategy aimed to create practical awareness for the first time, to make the work environment a place where every worker is treated with dignity and respect for diversity. The programme has consistently sought to keep the training of deployed personnel up-to-date by ensuring that it is compulsory. In May 2015, the Inside the Blue Team was established in the UNFICYP peace mission to take action on workplace harassment, including SH, discrimination and abuse of authority. Their actions added value in strengthening the areas of self-development and prevention of prohibited behavior (and also included the topic of SEA). In November 2017, the team launched the “#Respect” campaign to promote mutual respect within the UN mission and community in Cyprus by highlighting the positive influence that respect has on work, relationships and productivity.¹⁹

By 2020, while all UN agencies had surpassed the targets set in the [System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity](#),²⁰ it was acknowledged that, in the context of peacekeeping missions, the measures implemented up to that point had not significantly contributed to increasing the number of female military personnel. In this regard, it was noted that women represented:

- 7% of military observers and staff officers, compared to the target of 17%.
- 1% of individual police officers (non-formed units), compared to the target of 22%, and 7% of Formed Police Units, compared to the target of 10%.
- 2% of military personnel, compared to the target of 6.5%.

The 2020 report quoted: “Based on the pace of change over the past 10 years, it could still take 30 years to achieve gender parity for military personnel, 12 years for formed police units, 8 years for police officers and 7 years for military observers and military officers, provided that all other factors remain the same”.

As positive outcomes, UN Women highlighted that as of December 31, 2020, three women were serving in the highest-ranking military leadership positions in the field, and four women were leading United Nations police components—marking a historic record for women holding such senior roles within the organization. As of February 2021, women made up 48% of all Heads and Deputy Heads of Mission, representing a substantial increase compared to 20% in 2015.

However, contemporary analysis shows that achievements have not lived up to the aspirations emerging from the heart of the Organization. In the area of peace operations, efforts have largely been directed towards implementing UNSCR 1325 (and its sister resolutions) as the

¹⁹ The three-day campaign included banners, posters, videos from staff and senior management on the subject of respect, discussion panels, a Facebook campaign and articles in seek and Blue Beret magazine.

²⁰ UN Women. *Facts and Figures: Women, Peace and Security - Peacebuilding and gender-sensitive peace operations*, item 34. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/es/what-we-do/peace-and-security/facts-and-figures#_Toc85731440.

founding initiative to promote women's participation in missions, and respond to SEA scenarios. The [RCS 2242](#) of 2015 redoubled the bet, with a view to deepen the actions in favor of the empowerment of women, and established that the agenda of Women, Peace and Security is a central component to address the challenges of the new international context.²¹

Although the numbers have improved, the figures are not the only important thing. The need to remove from the shadows those aspects which do not allow progress in implementing an effective policy on the ground became evident. One of the initiatives launched to support all this work and the significant participation of women is the [Elsie Initiative](#), launched in 2017 by the Government of Canada within the framework of the ministerial conferences on peacekeeping, and supported by several Member States. The focus for the UN also turned inward: prevention and action against SH became another of the key aspects to be addressed in missions on the ground. Gradually, other tools have emerged aimed at guiding efforts and resources. Combining quantitative and qualitative information to develop indicators that shed light on everyday perceptions is where the United Nations is placing its focus. Specifically, it involves adopting a different perspective on what occurs but remains unseen.

As outlined at the beginning of this study, based on the broader conceptual approach to SH by the entity, one of the things that happen but are not seen is the dynamics of **power and hierarchy**. The abuse and harassment of women soldiers often occurs in a context of unequal power and hierarchy within the armed forces, police and peacekeeping missions. This can make women feel intimidated or afraid to report incidents for fear of reprisals or stigmatization. As UN Women puts it: *“Power gives authority and credibility, it is the ability to dismiss the words of others. (...) As sexual harassment is exercised by the more powerful, their denials and minimisation carry more cultural capital than the voices and accounts of the abused: the powerful enjoy credibility.”*²²

In this vein, the DPO recognizes the existence of **vulnerability** factors: *“Women may be worried about being isolated and vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation when deployed”*²³. Latent situations of harassment and abuse are present in the face of gender discrimination, multicultural and racial coexistence, lack of institutional support and exposure to hostile operating environments.

The **institutional culture** of contributing countries also plays a role on the ground. In some forces, abuse and harassment of women may be tolerated or even perpetuated, which further hinders reporting and accountability. In this regard, attention is gradually shifting toward employer responsibility, and the need for cultural change within organizations is gaining increasing momentum every day.

21 United Nations Security Council. Resolution 2242, 13 October 2015. Available at: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/311/13/pdf/n1531113.pdf?token=bdygr72fBUeHc6Ebfe&fe=true>.

22 UN Women. Towards an end to sexual harassment: the urgency and nature of change in the era of #metoo, 2018, page 10. Available at https://un.org.np/sites/default/files/doc_publication/2019-06/Towards-an-end-to-sexual-harassment-en.pdf.

23 DPKO at the UN, *Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018-2018*. Available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/uniformed-gender-parity-2018-2028.pdf>.

Lack of **resources and support** can also affect the ways in which female military and police personnel access available channels. This may include a lack of specialized counselling services, confidential reporting procedures, and victim support programmes.

While **training and awareness-raising** of all staff is essential, this does not necessarily translate into a reduction in SH cases. Even more, “Where employers are wary of litigation holding them to account for allowing or not addressing sexual harassment, training has at times become a tick-box compliance exercise, disconnected both from the wider equalities agenda where it was originally located and any serious ambition to change workplace cultures.”²⁴

With these assumptions on the horizon, the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) mandated the CEB Task Force to implement the *Organizational Culture Assessment in Peacekeeping Operations report*.²⁵ As part of the methodological strategy, surveys were conducted with personnel from 15 missions, and data was collected on the global presence of women in the field. The evaluation found that as of June 2023, women represented 34% of field operations personnel, and that 43% of them (including civilian mission staff) reported a lack of privacy and inadequate living conditions. Some also expressed an increased sense of vulnerability due to gender-related reasons.

Regarding how women experienced the workplace in their mission, the report states that the issue *“was perceived as a taboo issue, and some deeply problematic attitudes toward women surfaced: some contingents reportedly refused to collaborate or shake hands with female staff; one female chief complained of a contingent that only addressed her subordinate male colleague.” The presence of different military subcultures among female military personnel also led to situations in which, in some contingents, female officers were treated merely as “ladies.”*

To mitigate issues such as harassment and limited privacy, the report notes that women developed support mechanisms and networks to address these challenges—such as exclusive groups to encourage discussions on issues affecting them. Moreover, a gender-based analysis of deployment locations showed that female personnel were more likely to be stationed at mission headquarters and assigned to specific sections, rather than in areas where men were the majority or where a “macho culture” prevailed. In short, the assessment concluded that women working in mission environments face a range of specific challenges related to safety, and to the working and living conditions required.²⁶

24 UN Women. *What action should be taken? Promoting cultural change to end sexual harassment*. September 2019. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2019/Discussion-paper-What-will-it-take-Promoting-cultural-change-to-end-sexual-harassment-en.pdf>.

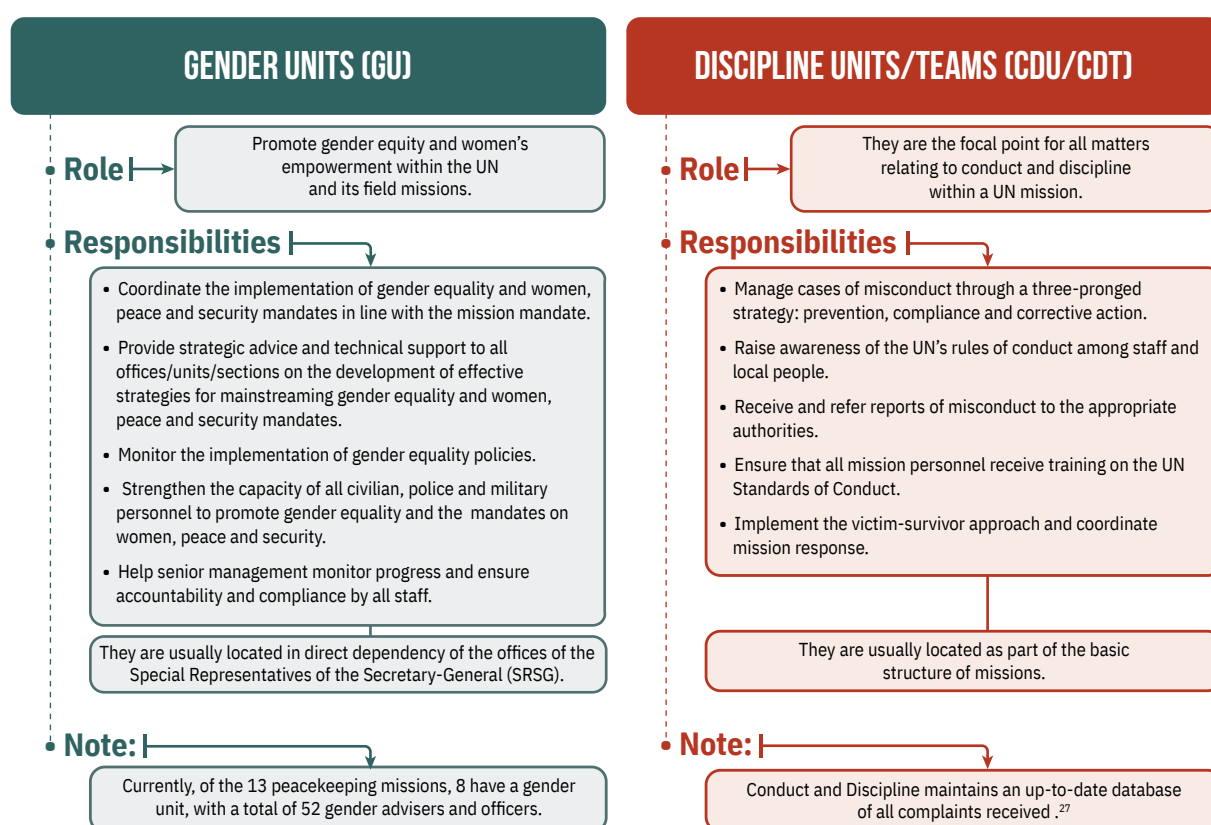
25 United Nations General Assembly. *Assessment of organizational culture in peacekeeping operations - Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services A/75/803*, 8 March 2021. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/75/803>.

26 In this field study, 72% of respondents agreed that achieving greater gender balance within the mission would lead to better outcomes. Additionally, 62% supported the practice of reserving gender quotas for mission personnel. A significant minority perceived gender parity as discriminatory, particularly among mid-level managers seeking promotion to higher positions. Conversely, many female executives felt that their selection was based on gender rather than competence. Some members also considered the rapid increases in gender parity to be overly doctrinaire, swift, or even undesirable. Notably, some staff officers praised the UN's efforts to incorporate a gender perspective, recognizing the positive changes it has brought to the armed forces of their countries.

One of the report's key recommendations is that integrating a gender perspective and effective responses to sexual harassment in the workplace must include the active engagement and commitment of male personnel at all levels of command. This is essential to accelerating a positive cultural shift within the organization. In this regard, Gender Units established in the field can serve as drivers of initiatives emerging from within the UN, while TPCCs can contribute by sharing lessons learned at the national level.

b. The Conduct Units and Teams

The Conduct and Discipline Units/Teams are located at Headquarters and in the field to complement each other. As it is, the Organization is determined to ensure that every agent to be recruited embodies its values, is professional, complies with established standards of conduct and is prepared to be accountable if required. In this regard, the cornerstone is based on three premises: efficiency, competence and integrity; zero tolerance policy towards SEA; and accountability of those in leadership positions, but for some reason do not enforce the rules of conduct.



Sources: : Own elaboration based on DPKO y DFS Policy on Gender Responsive United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. Available at: https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/english_gender_responsive_united_nations_peacekeeping_operations_policy_1.pdf; y ONU Mujeres https://www.unwomen.org/es/what-we-do/peace-and-security/facts-and-figures#_Toc85731440 y UN Conduct in UN Field Missions <https://conduct.unmissions.org/sea-data-introduction>

²⁷ Data recording and follow-up of complaints started in 2006. In July 2008, the then- Department of Field Support (DFS) launched the Misconduct Tracking System (SMI), a global restricted access database and confidential tracking system for all allegations of misconduct. The system, now called the Case Management Tracking System (SMC), is administered by the Conduct and Discipline Service (SDC) of the Department of Strategy, Policy and Management Compliance (DMSPC), and facilitates case management and information exchange between IMS and all Secretariat entities, including field missions. In the period 2010-2025, the number of substantiated allegations involving military personnel is 271, and for civilian personnel 100. Information available at <https://conduct.unmissions.org/data>.

It is well known that the misconduct of personnel working under the umbrella of the UN undermines the ultimate purpose of the Organization, which is to promote international peace and security alongside the implementation of human rights. As we mentioned earlier, misconduct harms the individual victims, the resident population and erode confidence in the institution. Prevention is at the core of the Organization's strategy to combat SEA (and also SH), and should be carried out in a comprehensive and proactive manner system-wide and in close cooperation with Member States. To this end, the key elements include²⁸:

- Improvement of selection processes, including a background assessment for misconduct in the various entities of the system of all candidates to be deployed in peace missions, seeking to ensure the application of the zero-tolerance policy and determining that anyone found/convicted of SEA cannot return to work for the Organization.
- Mandatory and regular training (before, during and after deployment) for all personnel on the UN Standards of Conduct.
- Outreach and awareness-raising to local populations on acceptable behaviour of UN staff and how to report violations through existing mechanisms.
- Regular risk assessment to identify and mitigate SEA risks, designing proactive measures on the ground to encourage safer environments and ensure compliance with the highest standards of conduct.

The Department of Strategy, Policy and Management Compliance (DEPCG) is responsible for implementing policies on conduct during peacekeeping operations. It works hand in hand with the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA). For the implementation of good conduct and discipline two levels of work are identified:²⁹

- The first is composed of the Conduct and Discipline Teams (CDT) in field missions. They are composed of experts focused on personnel conduct and discipline issues in a specific field mission, and their size varies according to the type of mission and its scope. Their leadership is supported by a team and together they are responsible for prevention initiatives and the development of outreach and awareness activities for the internal public and local communities. The CDT receive complaints, take them forward for investigation and follow up on cases within the mission.³⁰ They also engage in risk management initiatives and provide assistance to victims. Generally, this work is carried out in coordination with the Office of the Internal Oversight Service, the Office of the Ombudsman for Victims' Rights and the Office of the Special Coordinator to improve the UN response to SEA.

²⁸ <https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/en/content/prevention>.

²⁹ UN Today, *Conduct and Discipline Teams in Field Missions and the UN Secretariat*, available at: <https://untoday.org/conduct-and-discipline-teams-in-un-field-missions-and-secretariat/>.

³⁰ The website on conduct in missions defines allegations as uncorroborated information pointing to a possible misconduct. If sufficient information is available, an investigation will be initiated following the complaint. According to the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), complaints are counted based on the reports received. Information available at <https://conduct.unmissions.org/data>.

At the second level, there are so-called Focal Points for Conduct and Discipline, which are located in the various entities of the UN Secretariat. They are appointed and report to the head of their respective entity. They are responsible for providing advice and support, respond to individual cases of misconduct, and play a broader role in promoting awareness and preventing SEA and other forms of misconduct. This includes providing training to UN staff, engaging with local communities and partners, and promoting a culture of respect and accountability. Unlike teams, focal points do not conduct research.

Sanctions at the UN and in agencies of the system may vary depending on the severity of the behaviour and specific policies of the organization concerned:

- Disciplinary Measures: formal warnings, temporary suspensions, transfers.
- Corrective Actions: participate in training or education programmes.
- Restitution and Compensation: paying victims for damages.
- Legal Actions: civil or criminal actions, according to the laws of the country or UN rules.
- Prohibition of Employment and/or Dismissal: including prohibition to return to work for the UN system.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

In summary, these conduct units have an important role to play in ensuring that all UN personnel, whether civilian or military, comply with relevant rules, policies and procedures, including the zero-tolerance policy, prevention in all areas, corrective measures for possible misconduct and the adoption of a victim-centred approach to SEA.

4. The role of Member States in the UN's progress on SH and SEA: a clear road ahead?

Based on the analysis carried out so far, it would appear that the mechanisms for dealing with SEA are more consolidated than those linked to SH. Both have prevention as their starting point, although the focus of their development and implementation is discussed in different places: SEA as occurring outside the mission, and SH as an issue within it. For Member States and TPCCs, an intersection between the two (and also a starting point in the case) could be found in the unrestricted compliance with Conduct and Discipline Units during specific pre-deployment training processes and missions.

Documents incorporating the United Nations standards of conduct

Applies to all staff:

- *The United Nations charter.*
- [*Policy on accountability for conduct and discipline in field missions \(2015\).*](#)

Applies to Civilian Personnel (staff, volunteers, consultants, contractors):

- [*Staff regulations and rules of the United Nations \(2016\), regularly updated.*](#)
- [*United Nations financial rules and regulations \(2013\).*](#)
- [*Bulletin of the Secretary-General on the status, rights and duties of UN staff \(2016\).*](#)
- [*Bulletin of the Secretary-General on special measures for protection against sexual exploitation and abuse \(2003\).*](#)
- [*Bulletin of the Secretary-General on combating discrimination, harassment including sexual harassment and abuse of authority \(2019\).*](#)
- Other administrative arrangements, including those relating to the use of information and communication technologies.

Applies to uniformed personnel (military and police):

- [*Revised draft model memorandum of understanding between the United Nations and troop-contributing countries, incorporating the annex «We are UN peacekeepers» \(2007\).*](#)
- [*Bulletin of the Secretary-General on the Regulations Governing the Status, Basic Rights and Duties of Officials Other Than Secretariat Staff Members and Experts on Mission. \(2002\).*](#)
- [*Bulletin of the Secretary-General on the observance of international humanitarian law by United Nations forces \(1999\).*](#)
- [*Directives for disciplinary matters involving civilian police officers and military observers \(2003\).*](#)
- [*Ten Rules/Personal Code of Conduct for Blue Helmets.*](#)
- Other administrative arrangements, including the use of information and communication technologies.
- In addition, several missions have developed mission-specific codes of conduct.

Source: Own elaboration based on <https://conduct.unmissions.org/documents-standards>.

Good practices are still under development. However, there are a number of strategies that have proven to be effective and which Member States could benefit from:³¹

- Create an organizational culture where women are treated as equals and where mutual respect among colleagues is upheld.
- Generate strong commitments and demonstrate unequivocal and courageous leadership.
- Encourage and support bystander interventions. Bystanders can speak with the victim/survivor after an incident and also engage with their colleagues.
- Provide in-person, interactive training tailored to the workplace. This training should last several hours and be repeated regularly. Deeply rooted cultural norms about power and sexual behavior cannot be undone in a single online session.
- Promote (more) women and individuals from minority groups. Workplaces with greater female representation in leadership tend to report fewer cases of sexual harassment. These staff profiles also help reshape gender-based power dynamics.
- Ensure that individuals who commonly face discrimination (Indigenous peoples, LGBTQ+ individuals, racial minorities, younger and older personnel, and persons with disabilities) are placed in positions of authority within the organization. This can transform the ways in which power and authority are exercised.
- Encourage reporting by establishing multiple channels and designated individuals to receive complaints. Victims/survivors are more likely to come forward if they have several reporting options and someone, they feel comfortable speaking to. Enable victims/survivors to record the name of the harasser, times, and dates of abuse, with the option of formalizing the report later on.

With respect to the last point, at the global level the UN has expanded and unified methodologies for providing advice or making submissions on inappropriate conduct by one or more members of the organization, belonging to any agency, unit or programme. On the website of the [System-wide Knowledge Centre for Combating Sexual Harassment](#) of the United Nations, there is a button for submitting online reports. The launch of the Speak UP hotline is also listed as a 24-hour resource for staff to talk confidentially with impartial and trained people who can provide you with information on protection mechanisms, support and reporting.³²

Speaking of field missions, the vast majority have Gender Units and there is (or at least should be) a Gender Focal Point generally designated in each of the national contingents. There is also the Conduct Officer appointed in the field or through the same chain of command; they

³¹ UN Women, *Towards an end to sexual harassment: the urgency and nature of change in the era of #metoo*, 2018. Available at https://un.org.np/sites/default/files/doc_publication/2019-06/Towards-an-end-to-sexual-harassment-en.pdf.

³² UN Women and the Task Force of the Chief Executives Board (CEB), United Nations support mechanisms for victims and survivors of sexual harassment, available at: <https://shknowledgehub.unwomen.org/en/victim-survivor-centered-support>; and United Nations. Office of Internal Oversight Services, Report misconduct, available at <https://oios.un.org/report-wrongdoing> Other channels include the Office of the Ombudsman for Victims' Rights (OVRA), the Office of Legal Affairs (OLA), the Confidential Complaint and Advisory System (FCAS), the Ombudsman's Office (OMBUDS).

can be consulted. Victims could feel more secure by using other, more confidential channels, by turning to civil society organizations that work alongside the UN on the ground. They are a viable alternative, attentive to the fact that they are specialized in the subject, facilitate the exchange of information with the authorities, provide support to victims and contribute with their experience to improve institutional responses.

Reporting channels available to field missions:

Name	Function
Mediation and Advocacy Services (UNOMS)	Informal resolution, including conflict advice, identification and evaluation of options, referral within the system, diplomacy, facilitation of dialogue and mediation.
Office of Ethics	Ethical advice and protection against retaliation.
Conduct and discipline teams/focal points	Advice on UN rules and conduct.
Office of the Staff Counsellor/a	Mental well-being.
UN Secretariat Speak Up Helpline	A twenty-four-hour resource on existing policies and mechanisms.
United Nations Secretariat staff unions	Support on various labour issues and recommendation of available resources.

Non-exhaustive list. Source: UN Support Mechanisms for Victims/Survivors of Sexual Harassment available at <https://shknowledgehub.unwomen.org/en/victim-survivor-centered-support>

For those responsible for carrying out investigative procedures following a report of sexual harassment, the *Investigation Manual of the Chief Executives Board (CEB) Task Force on Sexual Harassment: Investigating Sexual Harassment Complaints* is available as a guiding resource.³³ This practical tool seeks to achieve the best standards of guarantees, justice, transparency and accountability by applying a victim/survivor-centred approach. In summary, it suggests a series of measures to lighten the burden on victims, ensure that all procedural steps are explained to them, identify a focal point that serves as a contact point, and respect informed consent and confidentiality.

The Investigation Manual is a guide to the handling of SH complaints from start to finish. It also cites case studies and how to conduct them. It includes:

- How to make a formal complaint
- Initial review
- Who should carry out the research
- Principles to be considered during the investigative process and data and facts collection
- Contents of the research report
- Assessment of credibility of the facts
- The post research

Source: Own elaboration based on the document *Investigators' Manual – Investigation of Sexual Harassment Complaints in the United Nations*. Available at: https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/Investigators%20Manual-March%202021_print.pdf

³³ United Nations System Coordination Chief Executives Board (CEB). *Investigators Manual - Investigation of Sexual Harassment Complaints in the United Nations*, March 2021. Available at: https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/Investigators%20Manual-March%202021_print.pdf

In its [Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018-2028](#)³⁴ the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) recognized that the creation of an enabling environment for uniformed female personnel is essential to sustaining all other efforts to increase women's involvement in the peace and security agenda and to enhance their participation in missions. In this regard, the DPO aims for women to make up 15% of military personnel and 20% of police units contributed by TPCCs by the end of this decade. To achieve this, the DPO is taking action and allocating additional resources to four critical areas: creating an enabling environment; recruitment and training; communication and outreach; and leadership and accountability.

The creation of an enabling environment is closely linked to a number of internal barriers that must be addressed. To promote an inclusive, gender-sensitive, and sexual harassment-free workplace, the following initiatives are being implemented at Headquarters, the General Command, and in field missions:

- Regular meetings between senior military, police, justice and prison officials and women officers.
- Provide clear and up-to-date information on mechanisms for reporting and addressing HS cases and ensure awareness of existing resources.
- Ensure that Focal Points are available to provide advice on specific concerns of women.
- Develop and implement strategies and actions to prevent SH within the military and police components.
- Introduce mentoring programs for women in high-ranking positions.
- Facilitate the creation of networks of uniformed women to empower female officers and liaise on their concerns with senior mission leaders.
- Where possible, locate at least two uniformed women in the mission's operating bases.
- Assess and improve camp housing conditions to meet women's needs, including the option of establishing "women-only" sections in UN military, police and civilian camps or in private compounds at missions.
- Conduct mandatory surveys, questionnaires and/or interviews in accordance with the UN System-wide Gender Parity Strategy.

Mindful of the foregoing, the UN has been working hard to pave the way for Member States. The focus on ensuring that uniformed women work spaces are free of violence within the missions is gaining more and more attention. As part of the parity strategy, DPO has been working closely with Member States and uniformed women to understand some of the current external challenges. The main ones are:

³⁴ DPKO of the UN, *Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018-2018*. Available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/uniformed-gender-parity-strategy-2018-2018-full-text>

- Women are unaware of many UN employment opportunities and lack female role models.
- Women report that some Member States restrict opportunities for deployment to male members through implicit or explicit gender bias.
- The need to generate policies that reconcile family and professional life in the Member States, especially for staff who are deployed for one year without the possibility of visiting their families. The pilot case being carried out in Uruguay, supported by the Elsie Initiative Fund, with six-month rotations, addresses this issue directly.³⁵
- The dissemination of opportunities in military and police training schools for women to receive courses related to qualification requirements for deployment. Progress is also being made in this area with support from the Elsie Initiative Fund.
- In some countries, the recent addition of women to the command corps in the case of military forces, and promotion to operational management positions in the case of police, makes it difficult for countries to provide women with this type of profile. Some Member States simply do not have numbers of women available or ready to deploy.
- Perceptions of gender roles exclude women from participating in national selection processes (for example, women as heads of families and carers).
- There are personal circumstances that act as a barrier to deployment, such as mission duration, distance, hostile environment, age of children, etc.

With all this said, the TPCCs have within reach the possibility of sowing strong seeds among their military and police forces if they resolve to redouble their efforts in carrying out diagnoses and analyses of the challenges faced by women uniformed. Overall, these actions would serve as a platform to increase recruitment and retention levels.³⁶

5. A road map for the Global South

In order to move forward and meet the standards required by the Organization, the initiatives and documents we have reviewed throughout this article can be taken as a roadmap for working in the national military and police fields. The contributions of UN Women, the CEB and the DPO among others would be possible practical inputs to address the treatment of SH, to comply with policies to combat SEA but also (and not least) to strengthen gender mainstreaming in the forces.

³⁵ Information on this subject can be found on the website of the National Ministry of Defence of Uruguay: <https://www.gub.uy/ministerio-defensa-nacional/proyecto-elsie>.

³⁶ The recruitment, training, education, professional development and reconciliation of family life policies provide a set of indicators to encourage women to enter and advance in the military career in the defence and security forces; but their analysis is not part of the present investigation.

The following are a number of recommendations as a guide:

IN POLICY DESIGN:

- Institutionally assume that the SH and the SEA constitute a violation of human rights.
- Define the SH and SEA including the intersection between gender and other factors of inequality.
- Recognize the SH as a form of unwelcome conduct in the workplace.³⁷ The occurrence may be of two types: 1) a work environment in which harassment is a widespread or persistent behaviour, or in which a single serious incident occurs, or 2) a proposal or execution of an exchange for a labor benefit or the loss thereof in exchange for sexual submission. Both are equally serious.

ATTENTION PROCEDURES (for consultations and/or complaints):

- Procedures must be simple, accessible, user-friendly, have multiple entry points, and create a welcoming and non-intimidating process that is not overly complex.
- They must be equitable and incorporate equality between the parties (complainant/respondent).
- Jurisdiction must extend to all individuals who may be subjected to or may commit sexual harassment within the employment system.
- Time limits for filing a complaint should be realistic or eliminated.
- Investigations must be independent of institutional power structures and must appear and operate independently from the chain of command.
- Procedural pathways must be trustworthy, clear, simple, accessible, and understandable.
- Interim protective measures must be available, effective, and implemented throughout the process.
- The process must be swift. Clear timeframes should be established and respected. One year from complaint to outcome is not considered timely.
- Data collected throughout the complaint process must be disaggregated by the intersectional identities of both survivors and perpetrators.
- Protection measures against retaliation for the complainant must be incorporated.
- Any division between available procedures—whether administrative, internal justice codes, or civil and criminal justice systems—must be explicit and coherent.
- Confidentiality must not be used as a means of secrecy or to protect the institution's reputation. However, confidentiality guarantees must be strong enough to protect victims/survivors, witnesses, and alleged perpetrators from rumor and reputational harm.
- Sanctions must be proportionate to the severity of the behavior being sanctioned.
- Those who adjudicate complaints, as well as advisors, must be trained experts.
- Hearings must be held that allow both parties to speak, preferably in a comfortable environment.

³⁷ The UN Women advisor and professor Catharine MacKinnon coined this term, which in English is “unwelcome.” In this sense, it is the victim-survivor who determines which behavior is unwelcome. For sexual conduct to constitute harassment, it must be “unwelcome.” The concept of “consent” is a criminal law term that is often met by acceptance of sex under conditions of power inequality, which is contrary to what is required by standards of equality. See: UN Women. *Towards an end to sexual harassment: the urgency and nature of change in the era of #metoo*, 2018. Available at https://un.org.np/sites/default/files/doc_publication/2019-06/Towards-an-end-to-sexual-harassment-en.pdf.



Captain of the Ecuadorian Army, mission in Western Sahara.

ASPECTS TO PROMOTE CULTURAL CHANGE:

- Recognize that policies are not exclusive responsibilities of the women's collective, nor of military women.
- It is crucial that leaders commit to all the fundamental elements and publicly reject and convey the gravity of SH often as something contrary to the institutional mission.
- Create a culture of zero tolerance for SH, with leadership that speaks out and acts consistently and proudly against abuse and in favor of victims-survivors.
- Promote women to high-power positions that meet the standards of equality, working on rigid and dominant hierarchical norms and levels for men.
- Prevention depends on transparent management, as well as the promotion of equality throughout the organization and system, and becomes impossible in environments of impunity or secrecy for personal convenience.
- Incidence and prevalence data should be collected and analysed to assess whether gender policies and procedures are working.
- Recognize that those who denounce the SH are actually helping them to meet their obligations in terms of equality and security.
- It is necessary to refuse to pre-judge those who denounce or consult, to label them as untrustworthy persons or as people with bad intentions.
- Take into account diversity and multicultural environments as perceptions of appropriate behavior can vary significantly between different groups of employees.

Source: Own elaboration based on Ending Sexual Harassment: The Urgency and Need for Change in the #MeToo Era. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/11/towards-an-end-to-sexual-harassment>

To conclude this study, it can be said that, in general, the challenges posed by the UN as regards the most recent concepts of SH and behaviour to prevent SEA are common to the internal reality of our countries' military and police forces.

In this regard, it is sensible and inevitable that efforts be made simultaneously and in coordination with the UN. A comprehensive, collaborative approach is required that involves all levels of the organization and external partners. This implies, for the contributing countries, unifying and coordinating the women's peace and security agenda among the various government agencies, especially between the areas of Defence, Security, Foreign Relations and Women. The role of civil society organizations can make a difference by bringing international challenges and national circumstances closer to the discussion, and establishing a homogeneous work agenda among the main actors.

It is also worth remembering that all policies are based on international agreements and treaties signed by countries. They have assumed institutional responsibility towards the international community. They are all equally important, from comprehensive agreements such as CEDAW to more specific ones such as adherence to Security Council resolutions, declarations, agreements between countries, alliances with civil society organizations, memoranda of understanding, etc.

Undoubtedly, we are moving towards the need for changes within the institutional culture. As stated in the research work published in 2009,³⁸ **female leadership, equity, and gender equality within the Armed Forces and Police have become an operational necessity to respond to today's strategic challenges to international peace.** The integration of a gender perspective across all activities and decisions related to military and police forces—including planning, implementation, and evaluation—is not a cliché or a trendy feminist agenda item. Driving change requires a certain artistry in designing innovative initiatives that are dynamic and moving, capable of reaching deep into institutional culture. While clear and coherent leadership messages help pave the way, they are not sufficient given the multifaceted and complex nature of the issue. It is time to work more on policies and written directives.

We will have to see how, in the future, the body of experiences and practices implemented within the UN framework permeates the military and police structures of Member States. Increasing complexities, the COVID-19 pandemic, and recent wars confirm that this is indeed the path forward—one that has been outlined, but which still (at least from the Global South) lacks the momentum needed to fully pursue it.

Organizations must develop efficient and effective ways to address gender inequalities and investigate cases of SH internally. Transparency and accountability are essential to leave a

38 Marcela Donadio and Cecilia Mazzotta, *Women in Military and Police Institutions: Resolution 1325 and Peace Operations in Latin America*, 2009. Latin American Security and Defence Network (RESDAL).

lasting mark on the cultural message conveyed by institutions and to encourage the retention of women in military and police forces. Male leaders—and even those who are not in leadership roles—must become active agents of change, with strong commitment required from the highest levels of political leadership down to the operational level, in order to promote a culture that discourages and sanctions inappropriate behavior related to SH and SEA.

Ultimately, we need to remain in action. Review policies, change what doesn't work, debate ideas, monitor results, identify obstacles, and share best practices. Rather than pointing fingers and looking down on others, we must have the courage to move forward.

Sexual Harassment, Abuse and Exploitation in UN Missions:

A Roadmap for the Global South

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Women, Peace and Security collection

The Latin American Security and Defence Network
(RESDAL)

Montevideo - June 2025



This publication was produced with the support of the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the project "Women in peace operations: supporting inclusive environments through interregional collaboration and national engagement".



ISBN: 978-9915-9648-5-0



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