**Side-event report**

**Event Title: Protection of Humanitarian Action: Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Aid Workers**

**Date, time and room:** Friday23 June 2017, 13.15-14.45, Room XXIII Palais des Nations

**Sponsors: IASC secretariat and IASC Co-Champions on Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Aid Workers**

**Objective:**

The nature of operating in conflict and disaster zones means that there are inherent dangers to humanitarian work. One critical risk that is not often discussed is that of sexual harassment and abuse of aid workers, despite growing evidence that sexual violence against aid workers is a genuine risk. This was highlighted by a recent survey conducted by the Humanitarian Women’s Network, by ongoing research from the Feinstein International Center, and through the work of the NGO “Report the Abuse”.

The IASC has committed to zero tolerance for discrimination, sexual harassment and abuse within all humanitarian work environments. IASC Principals have pledged to strengthen the overall institutional response on this issue, safeguarding the well-being of staff, addressing the climate of impunity and holding perpetrators to account, and strengthening policies, structures and accountability mechanisms.

The side-event aimed at enhancing all stakeholders’ understanding of existing IASC commitments, discussing actions taken by humanitarian agencies and Member States, highlighting good practices, exploring how to build on these, and identifying ways to ensure that all humanitarian staff are aware of, and comply with, their rights to and their responsibilities for maintaining inclusive and respectful workplaces, free from all forms of sexual violence.

**Panel Members:**

*Moderator*: Ms. Belinda Holdsworth, Chief of the IASC secretariat

*Panel composition*:

* Ms. Kate Gilmore, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, and IASC Co-Champion on Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Aid Workers, OHCHR
* Mr. Niels Scott, UN Resident Coordinator in Georgia, UNDP
* Ms. Megan Nobert, Director, Report the Abuse

*Video Clip*: Feinstein International Center: <https://fic.wistia.com/medias/w6259gdt6s>

**Discussion:**

Opening the discussion, **Ms. Belinda Holdsworth** referenced the momentum built around the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse agenda, which aims at protecting the beneficiaries of aid. While the protection of aid workers themselves is often discussed, too often this ignores the ‘hidden threat’ of their sexual harassment and abuse of aid workers by other aid workers. Recent surveys and reports from the Feinstein International Center, the the NGO, Report the Abuse, and the Humanitarian Women’s network have all highlighted staggering statistics on the extent of such abuse, the risk factors and ongoing research. Shocked by such findings, IASC Principals have already pledged to strengthen the overall institutional response on the issue, to safeguard staff, address impunity, and strengthen policies, structure and accountability mechanisms.

As newly-appointed IASC Co-Champion on this issue with Ms. Lindsay Coates of InterAction, **Ms. Kate Gilmore** acknowledged the pioneering and courageous work of the organizations which have already revealed that threats against humanitarian workers in the field include actions of abuse, violence and humiliation perpetuated by their own colleagues. She emphasized that the sector must not tolerate mismanagement, victim blaming, skepticism, silencing or cover-ups. She deplored the “toxic tolerance” on the issue, making clear that leaders were specifically accountable for upholding the very essence of humanitarian values, as well as ensuring that survivors know where, and how, to report and seek justice. Ms. Gilmore underlined that acts of sexual harassment and abuse were perpetrated where power was most stratified and accountability weak. She stressed that, after decades of advocacy and normative reforms, it was time to ensure that each employer ensure due diligence measures and fulfill their duty of care for all staff against sexual harassment and abuse. She expressed gratitude for the IASC’s intensified efforts to bring the issue forward. In concluding, she called for an essential cultural shift, and collective action and commitment, improving governance, policies, reporting mechanisms and accountability frameworks.

**Ms. Megan Nobert’s** moving interventionbrought home the personal and devastating impact of such abuse on survivors. She shared her own story and the graphic testimonies of others who have been affected. While the statistics cited, showing that 50-70% of field workers surveyed reported such abuse, she noted that such statistics do not pass on the feelings of fear and deception commonly experienced by survivors. She agreed that a change of culture was necessary and invited all relevant stakeholders to implement the recommendations of the Feinstein Center’s study. She concluded that clear and understandable policies were needed to create trust, to hold perpetrators to account, and emphasized the importance of training at all levels on this issues and enhanced knowledge about rights and obligations.

**Mr. Niels Scott** gave an honest overview of specific challenges that field leaders themselves face in their role to enhance the implementation of holistic responses to instances of sexual harassment and abuse of aid workers by aid workers. He suggested that the fear of ‘getting it wrong’ sometimes constrains action, while organizations’ leadership are sometimes challenged in balancing concerns on victims’ safety, contractual issues or reputational risks. He called for the necessary determination and coordination to ensure safe avenues for victims to claim their rights, with strong support mechanisms and sanctions to end impunity for perpetrators. Mr. Scott also referred to a number of policies and measures that had been adopted during the last decades, and some positive initiatives that have been implemented at field level. He noted good examples, such as the creation of a network on the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, funded through pooled funds in Liberia, and the establishment of a joint complaint and resources mechanism in Haiti. At the same time, he concluded that the existing policies alone were not enough; more efforts were needed to actually implement agreed measures, and resources must be prioritized for this.

During the **ensuing discussion**, representatives of Member States, United Nations agencies, international organizations and other stakeholders welcomed the opportunity through such an event to raise the visibility, and reinforce commitment, on this critical issue. They referenced a number of existing positive practices in terms of policies, mechanisms and provision of psychological and legal aid to victims. At the same time, they raised concerns on the availability of adequate resources, and the will, to implement policies and procedures at global and field levels. They stressed the need to ensure that staff of all genders are actively engaged in the global efforts to tackle the issue. Guidance and good practice is increasingly available, with Ms. Nobert noting forthcoming publication in August 2017 of such a compilation, while there is on-going work to develop guidelines also for the UN security management system. Mr. Scott emphasized the responsibility of Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators to adequately raise awareness about the issue at field level, and to promote transparency and accountability. Ms. Gilmore underlined that vulnerability was a social construction and expressed concern that, too often, organization and donor scrutiny is focused on budget implementation, rather than appropriate human resources support and management.

In their **concluding remarks**, the panelists stressed the urgent need to push forward the agenda on sexual harassment and abuse of aid workers by aid workers, ensuring concrete actions and policy guidance. Ms. Gilmore emphasized that better remedies and accountability were crucial, as was senior management engagement. Above all, all relevant stakeholders must stand up, speak up and ensure solidarity with survivors.

A Devex article, published following the side-event, titled “UN must end ‘toxic tolerance’ of sexual abuse of aid workers, top official says’, is available on: <https://www.devex.com/news/un-must-end-toxic-tolerance-of-sexual-abuse-of-aid-workers-top-official-says-90534>

   