

168th SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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STATEMENT BY THE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE PAHO/WHO STAFF ASSOCIATION

1. The PAHO/WHO Staff Association would like to thank the Members of the Executive Committee for their interest in matters related to current staff working conditions in accordance with the provisions of the international civil service. On behalf of the staff, we reiterate our commitment to the mandates of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau (PASB or the Bureau). The working relations between the Association and Executive Management are characterized by cooperation and mutual respect.
2. The COVID-19 pandemic is not under control yet and most of the countries in the Region of the Americas are working to restore the health of their populations, provide vaccines, manage their financial recovery, and address challenges to reduce the historical inequality gaps that characterize our Region, making a positive difference in people's lives.
3. The staff members of the Bureau wish to express their solidarity with Member States in this situation and, above all, with the health workers who are caring for their populations. They recognize that the mission of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) is more important and pressing than ever.
4. In this statement to the Executive Committee, the Staff Association addresses the following subjects: *a)* respectful workplace; *b)* gender equity and the creation of professional opportunities; *c)* attraction and retention of personnel; and *d)* safety and well-being.

Respectful Workplace

5. The Respectful Workplace Initiative needs to be revamped and adjusted to the new reality of the virtual workplace. Telework is a flexible modality of work that was fully implemented during the pandemic. The results reported have been very positive. A respectful work environment boosts employee morale and creates a more positive, productive workplace. We aim to make professionalism a habit and demonstrate respect by encouraging communication and civility and by empowering personnel to speak their mind without prejudice or bias. A respectful workplace enables people to work as teams. The Staff Association reiterates its explicit commitment to staff and to the Director with respect to this initiative and considers that this initiative should be renewed and updated to
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address the new modality and conditions of working remotely through telework. It is also important to mention that 2020 was a very challenging year and several initiatives were delayed or postponed because of more pressing priorities.

6. The Office of the Ombudsman has been responsible for this initiative in the Bureau. Given its role as part of the informal conflict management and resolution system, we believe that it will make a positive contribution toward individual and institutional responsibility in creating and maintaining a work environment that promotes trust in the staff, with emphasis on the prevention and early resolution of disputes before they escalate to higher and more formal levels.

Gender Equity and the Creation of Professional Opportunities

7. The Staff Association has been advocating for gender equity and the creation of professional opportunities for several years. Now that PASB has decided to adopt a new Human Resources Strategy, the Association feels that the promotion and creation of opportunities for women should be at front and center of the debate. As stated in the final report of the 158th Session of the PAHO Executive Committee held in June 2016, the Association reiterates the need for explicit policies and practices that facilitate the promotion of women working in the Organization. The recent emergency has demonstrated that teams have been working with one goal in mind—namely, to do everything possible to respond to and support the Member States during the pandemic. Our female colleagues worked tirelessly to adapt their families to the new telework environment. We are not saying that our male colleagues were not doing the same; however, we recognize that certain traditional roles continue to be part of the social and family structure in our Region.

8. The Staff Association had the opportunity to hold a meeting with several professional women at which it was emphasized that a few corrective actions can have real impact in improving not only parity but also opening up opportunities. For example, it takes a woman five years longer than a man to rise in professional category in the workplace. It is important to train managers to detect and avoid partiality when identifying or selecting possible candidates for posts with managerial responsibility. Staff development assignments can also facilitate acquiring experience in certain areas. Adjustments to policies and measures that support gender equity can foster an enabling working environment that promotes gender balance. And finally, specific measures can be adopted that will help to change attitudes and eliminate prejudices that perpetuate inequality between men and women. We have great interest in the new PAHO Human Resources Strategy.

Attraction and Retention of Staff

9. One of the main areas in which the Association is working jointly with the Administration is the attraction and retention of staff. This area requires review in light of the new experience with telework. Certain critical positions in the Organization should be fixed-term positions, while others can be linked to expected results agreed in the

PAHO Strategic Plan. However, we need to recognize that highly specialized skills and competencies require a different job classification. The structure should allow some degree of flexibility in this regard in order to attract and retain staff. Through the experience of telework we have learned that sometimes it is not just the grade or salary that attracts or creates opportunities to retain valuable staff; other factors, such as duty station and flexibility are also important, especially for those with young families or dependents need to remain in a given location.

10. Note is taken of the changes to the compensation package for professional staff recommended by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC), approved by the United Nations General Assembly, and currently in the process of being implemented—changes that are on the agenda of the 168th Session of the Executive Committee. The capacity to attract staff for technical cooperation in the area of public health and senior management will be affected if we fail to create or take advantage of opportunities such as flexible and simplified selection processes for certain locations or areas of work. The most important issues in any selection process are transparency and accountability.

Safety and well-being

11. Along with the lessons learned from the current working experiences during the pandemic, it is important to mention the efforts made by the Bureau in relation to the safety and well-being of personnel. The duty of care was an integral part of the business continuity plans at every PAHO location and was closely monitored. The Association has been working in close collaboration with the Health and Wellbeing Unit, especially in relation to awareness of mental health issues. Personnel have shown on several occasions and are demonstrating yet again—through their rapid adaptation to new forms of work and the high demands imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic—that they are willing to explore innovative ways of working and continuing to provide technical cooperation to countries at the level of excellence characteristic of the Organization. Occupational health strategies have been crucial for the management of issues related to ergonomic workstations (in our homes), managing family and work in a telework environment, mental health concerns, medical issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and stress in general.

12. This review of the four areas covered above reflects some of the lessons learned in the new virtual working environment.

Action by the Executive Committee

13. The Staff Association submits this report to the Executive Committee for its comments and requests that it promote these proposals and recommendations.

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