
UPDATE ON PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN PAHO

Background

1. The Pan American Sanitary Bureau (PASB or the Bureau) is continuing its efforts to strengthen its policies and mechanisms to prevent and respond effectively to any form of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment—also referred to as sexual misconduct—both within and outside the workplace. Effective protection from sexual misconduct for both personnel and the communities served by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) remains a priority, and PASB sees this not only as an obligation to promote ethical behavior but also as an important occupational health issue.
2. In 2019, the International Labour Conference adopted Convention 190 on the elimination of violence and harassment in the workplace, specifically recognizing the right of everyone to a workplace free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and sexual harassment. This Convention is ground-breaking because it codifies violence and harassment as an issue of equality and occupational health and safety, and makes it clear that employees have the right to a healthy and safe working environment as a fundamental condition of employment.
3. In 2022, the International Labour Organization published the first ever survey on violence and harassment in the workplace and estimated that 6.3% of people globally (around 205 million people) and 11.8% of people in the Region of the Americas have experienced sexual violence and harassment while at work, with women being particularly vulnerable (1).
4. This report highlights the actions taken by PASB during the period from January 2023 to May 2024 to prevent and respond to sexual misconduct through policies, procedures, and operational activities, as well as in collaboration with other entities across the United Nations system.

Analysis of Progress Achieved

Investments to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Misconduct

5. The selection processes for the new P-5 Senior Advisor on the Prevention and Response to Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (PRSEAH) at Headquarters and P-4 Advisor in Venezuela were completed in 2023, and the 2 incumbents began their assignments in January and March 2024, respectively. Both posts are financed by the World Health Organization (WHO).
6. PAHO has established a network of PRSEAH focal points and there is now at least one focal point in every PAHO/WHO country office and center. The investment in time of these focal points for activities related to the prevention and response to sexual misconduct has been estimated at approximately US\$ 624,000 in 2023. Three PAHO/WHO country offices have also allocated dedicated

funding in 2024 from their own regular budgets for PRSEAH activities. The Bureau plans to develop regional and country level workplans to ensure that sufficient funds are allocated for this important activity in all country offices and centers.

Capacity-building

7. One of the strategies utilized by PASB to raise awareness about the importance of preventing and addressing sexual misconduct is requiring personnel to take a training course developed by the United Nations. This course, entitled “Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse,” has been completed by 94.8% of PAHO personnel to date.
8. The Bureau is investing significant time and resources to foster an effective PRSEAH focal point network. In February 2023, the first PRSEAH focal point workshop was convened in Brasilia, Brazil and involved 60 participants. The objectives of this inaugural workshop were to train the focal points so that they were aware of the scope of their role, PAHO’s zero tolerance policy for any form of sexual misconduct, the internal reporting mechanisms of the Organization, and the resources available to support personnel and victims.
9. A second focal point workshop was held in Cartagena, Colombia in May 2024, and was attended by the United Nations Special Coordinator for Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, the WHO Director on the Prevention and Response to Sexual Misconduct and senior officials from the United Nations Office of the Victims’ Rights Advocate, UN Women, and PAHO. The objective of this second workshop was to further strengthen the knowledge and capacity of the focal points to enhance their effectiveness.
10. Following these intensive workshops, the PRSEAH focal points returned to their duty stations with increased knowledge and expertise and were able to educate and inform their colleagues about PAHO’s zero tolerance policy for sexual misconduct, the requirement to report suspicions about possible sexual misconduct, and how to obtain information, advice and support should someone become aware of suspected sexual misconduct.
11. Numerous training sessions on PRSEAH were also carried out during the past year, including in-person sessions in Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico, and Trinidad and Tobago, as well as virtual sessions in Brazil, Chile, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Suriname. In addition, focal points from 23 countries conducted training sessions for the personnel in their offices, and seven country focal points also participated in inter-agency training events with other United Nations agencies. In 2024, 25 country offices have training activities planned for PAHO personnel, and eight country offices also have training activities planned for PAHO partners.
12. The Bureau participated in the 2023 WHO Stakeholder Review Conference for the prevention and response to sexual misconduct, held in Geneva, which brought together stakeholders from the United Nations, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, civil society organizations, Member States, donors, academia, media, and experts. The conference objectives were to reflect, learn, address challenges, and commit to action, ensuring that development and humanitarian personnel do not perpetrate sexual misconduct.

Allegations of Sexual Misconduct

13. Three allegations of sexual harassment were received by the PASB Investigations Office during the reporting period. All three allegations were investigated and two were substantiated, resulting in the termination of the two perpetrators. A decision on the third case is expected shortly. No allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse were received.

Policy Development and Transparency

14. The Bureau issued its *Policy on Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse* in 2021 and updated its *Policy on the Prevention and Resolution of Harassment in the Workplace* in 2023. An important change in the latter policy was the elimination of the time limitation for filing an allegation of sexual harassment. As a result, victims of sexual harassment can now submit an allegation at any time, irrespective of when the incident(s) occurred.

15. In accordance with best practice, PASB will develop in 2024–2025 a comprehensive policy on the prevention and response to sexual misconduct. This policy will replace the existing *Policy on Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse* and subsume the provisions dealing with sexual harassment, which are currently contained in the *Policy on the Prevention and Resolution of Harassment in the Workplace*. Consequently, this new policy will combine in a single policy the provisions to address every type of sexual misconduct, including sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, both within and outside the workplace.

16. To enhance accountability and transparency and demonstrate that action is taken in response to allegations of misconduct, PASB will develop PAHO's first public dashboard in 2024 showing the nature, status, and outcome of investigations of misconduct, including sexual misconduct.

Collaboration with the World Health Organization

17. The Bureau continues to collaborate closely with the WHO Secretariat on initiatives and activities related to the prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. PASB staff actively participate in the PRSEAH Task Team's meetings, the PRSEAH Senior Coordinator meetings, and the focal point training sessions and meetings. Senior officials from the WHO PRSEAH Department, including its Director, participated in the focal point workshops in Brasilia and Cartagena. A cross-regional exchange was also held with the African Region of WHO, and two PRSEAH focal points from the country office in Brazil actively participated in a 5-day training of trainers held in Guinea-Bissau.

Risk Management

18. All country offices and centers will be required to conduct a comprehensive risk assessment and mapping exercise on sexual misconduct, which will be integrated into PAHO's overall risk assessment processes. This will help to identify areas and circumstances where sexual misconduct could occur, including PAHO workplaces, communities, health emergency settings, and other locations and situations where vulnerable populations are affected.

Due Diligence and Background Checks

19. The Bureau has continued using the Clear Check screening database to vet candidates under consideration for all fixed-term, short-term, and non-staff assignments. This centralized database permits the sharing of information among United Nations agencies about former United Nations personnel who have been terminated for engaging in sexual misconduct with the aim of preventing their reemployment elsewhere within the United Nations system. However, the Clear Check database has certain limitations since it only includes individuals who have previously worked in the United Nations system and only relates to findings of sexual misconduct. It does not include individuals who have committed misconduct outside of the United Nations system, including of a sexual nature, or individuals within the system who have engaged in other types of misconduct.

20. To address this gap, PASB instituted worldwide background checks in November 2023 with an outside service provider, including criminal background checks and sex offender registry list verifications. To date, 95 background checks have been carried out on candidates undergoing the recruitment process for fixed-term and short-term positions. Consideration is being given to extending the background checks to other types of appointments and contracts, including for consultants.

Reporting Mechanisms

21. The Bureau took several steps in 2022 and 2023 to make it easier for people to report allegations of misconduct, including allowing allegations to be made verbally and reinstating the telephone component of the Integrity Helpline. The Helpline reporting page is also being redesigned to make it even simpler to use and will be relaunched in 2024.

22. At the country level, seven countries have inter-agency helplines that are administered locally and accessible to local communities. The Bureau is participating in this effort on a cost-sharing basis and is undertaking an evaluation of these helplines to ensure they are being administered according to best practice, are fully operational and easily accessible, are available around the clock, and can effectively complement PAHO's Integrity Helpline.

23. PAHO's Investigation Protocol was revised in November 2022 to require that all allegations of sexual misconduct be looked into and a report sent to management. This change ensures that all allegations of sexual misconduct are properly considered at different levels of the Bureau and action taken, as appropriate.

Action Needed to Improve the Situation

24. Through the establishment of the focal point network, PASB has invested considerable staff time to support work on the prevention and response to sexual misconduct. However, further investments are needed to generate a more effective and sustainable response to benefit country offices and centers, partners, and communities. As the regional and country mitigation plans are developed in 2024, further funding opportunities will be explored with a view to integrating the prevention and response to sexual misconduct into PAHO's projects and programs, and to strengthening victim/survivor assistance services and mechanisms.

25. Accountability throughout PASB will also be strengthened and prioritized through an accountability framework that outlines the roles and responsibilities at all levels of the Bureau. Transparency will also be enhanced through the development of a public dashboard to enable people both within and outside of PASB to readily access information on the number, type, and status of misconduct cases.

Action by the Executive Committee

26. The Executive Committee is invited to take note of this report and provide any comments it deems pertinent.

References

1. International Labour Organization, Lloyd's Register Foundation. Experiences of violence and harassment at work: A global first survey. Geneva: ILO; 2022. Available from: <https://researchrepository.ilo.org/esploro/outputs/report/995318827002676>.
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