



WGH Statement on Report of the Independent Commission on Allegations Sexual Abuse and Exploitation in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Protecting not abusing the vulnerable people WHO serves

Today the report was released of the Independent Commission on the review of the allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation made against WHO staff in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The findings of the Independent Commission are truly shocking: alleged exploitation and abuse by WHO staff of vulnerable women and girls - including nine rapes, countless demands for sex for jobs and even one demand for sex in return for a basin of water. Dozens of women and a girl of 13 became pregnant, had miscarriages and abortions (some forced) and a reported 22 children were born. This grotesque behaviour reported to have been perpetrated by around 22 men working for WHO, has broken the lives of women and girls trying to survive conflict, poverty and disease.

Nothing can be more shameful than well paid men in powerful positions, sent into a humanitarian emergency, using their power and privilege to sexually abuse and exploit women and girls from the communities they were sent to serve. The perpetrators of this sexual abuse and exploitation took advantage of the emergency response to Ebola in North Kivu and Ituri provinces to prey on women and girls who were already extremely vulnerable. The majority of the women and girls abused had little or no education, whereas several of the reported abusers were highly educated men, including medical doctors. This is a dark day for WHO. Particular shame attaches to men who use the humanitarian mandate of the United Nations to commit such rights abuses and bring the UN system into disrepute, in this case undermining the mandate and work of the WHO. WHO staff working on Ebola were killed in attacks in the area and such abuse sullies the memory of their service.

We cannot dismiss this case by saying that a few abusive men may slip through the screening net in emergencies when experts must be deployed fast into areas of social chaos. It is precisely in humanitarian contexts where the host population needs the highest degree of protection. Fixing this means getting inside the minds of men who think this behaviour is OK, who probably do not behave like this at home and have no empathy for the women and girls they abuse. In fact, their behaviour shows complete contempt for the people who have invited them into their country. Coercing impoverished women to trade sex for jobs seems to have been an organisational sub culture and must have been an open secret in the area. The abuse was recorded over a two year period and in the end, was uncovered by the media and not by WHO staff. Fixing this therefore also requires colleagues and managers to see rooting out sexual abuse and exploitation as their duty, not someone else's business.



The DG WHO, Dr Tedros, apologised at the press conference for the harm done and lives ruined. WHO and the UN system had policies and people in place in DRC to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse but they failed. Following the investigation, the hard work must begin of sanctioning the guilty (none of the alleged abusers now work for WHO), strengthening measures to ensure prevention and culture change, and implementing a survivor centred approach, which will include reparations for the women and girls abused in DRC. There is no one magic bullet to solve sexual exploitation and abuse but the presence of women at all levels from leadership down, makes an immediate difference because women rarely commit such abuse. It is noteworthy that of the 2,800 staff on that WHO Ebola programme, 73% were men and men held 77% of leadership roles. If women had been the majority of staff and held the majority of leadership roles, we believe this would have been a more positive story.

The IP report concludes there is no evidence that the DG WHO, Dr Tedros, had any knowledge of this abuse before it appeared in the media. At the press conference Dr Tedros said 'what happened should never happen to anyone, it is inexcusable' and promised support, protection and justice for survivors. We expect that after such a shock to the system Dr Tedros will now deliver on his promise to drive wholesale reform of WHO structures and culture to ensure that such abuse is never repeated. This year, Women in Global Health will co-host a series of town halls with WHO as a platform for open discussion on the drivers of sexual exploitation and abuse and on institutionalising organisational culture change. We will do our part to support WHO in the context of WHO stepping up under the DG's leadership with commitment, resources and iron resolve to drive out sexual exploitation and abuse.

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