

**75th World Health Assembly
25 May 2022**

Item 21.4 - Prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment
Joint Statement delivered by the Netherlands

Thank you Chair.

- I am honored to deliver this statement on behalf of the member states of the Geneva Group of Friends to Eliminate Sexual Harassment –Albania, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Ecuador, Estonia, Fiji, France, Gambia, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, The EU, Ireland, Israel, Kenya, Latvia, Malta, Mexico, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Macedonia, Norway, Panama, Republic of Korea, Senegal, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, UK and northern Ireland, and USA well as Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.
- We, as a group, would like to state that we have zero tolerance for and strongly condemn any form of sexual exploitation, abuse, or harassment (SEAH), and strongly support a survivor centred approach in addressing the consequences, including the lasting, traumatic and deleterious physical and mental health consequences impacts on individuals and communities.
- Worldwide a large number of, mostly, women and girls report being sexually exploited, abused or suffered sexual harassment. The risk of SEAH undermines global efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” and calls into question the integrity of the international aid community and the credibility of aid itself.
- We also know that, due to social stigma and underreporting, actual numbers of victims and survivors is likely to be much greater than reported. Sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment thrive when not properly prevented and addressed. In this regard, we believe that WHO is in a unique position to take a leadership role within the global health sector and use its convening power to promote guidelines, norms and standards for change amongst all actors in the global health ecosystem, and to lead by example in the UN system going forward.
- We welcome the Director-General’s report presented to the WHA on the progress made by WHO to eliminate sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment across its operations, and the steps taken to build and strengthen the capacity and implement the institutional changes needed to sustain effective prevention and response to SEAH across all the organization levels.

- We welcome the constructive dialogues of the organization with member states and the quarterly member states briefings. We request continued regular updates, including at governing bodies, on the processes WHO is putting in place, including the package of support offered to victims and survivors, and the progress in the implementation of the IOAC subcommittee's recommendations and the Management Response Plan.
- In this regard, this week we learned of a communication sent in March by three UN special rapporteurs to the WHO regarding allegations of sexual exploitation and abuses during the 10th Ebola response in DRC. Although the reply by WHO was sent within the timeframe given, we note with concern that the existence of such communication was made public only this week by the authors.
- We expect the WHO leadership and senior management, like all UN organizations, to continue to engage on this matter, to strengthen and ensure WHO's approach of zero tolerance for sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment. We emphasize the importance of cultural change in this regard. We cannot accept inaction in preventing, detecting and addressing it.
- We continue to endorse the five priority action areas identified by the IOAC Sub-Committee in their report to EB150. We welcome the progress made, and the integration of the recommendations into the WHO Management Response Plan for SEAH, and the IEOAC matrix for oversight and implementation. We expect WHO to fully see through its commitments on PRSEAH made in Decision EB148(4) and the MRP and we encourage the WHO to implement also IEOAC recommendations and suggestions from the WHO staff associations.
- WHO's work in humanitarian contexts has grown significantly. We note that the SEAH Workplan has also accelerated the expansion of the WHO workforce and capacity building to address the challenges that come with them.
- We commend WHO for introducing a victim and survivor-centred approach into case management and case investigation, and the urgent medical and psychological support given to victims and survivors. Justice, from a human rights perspective, needs to be at the heart of any response, including by prioritizing medical, psychological, economic, social and legal support, as well as sexual and reproductive health-care services, to those impacted, including any children born as a result of SEA.
- We believe that a victim- and survivor-centred approach must be the ultimate guide for WHO's work on SEAH, including prevention. A victim and survivor centered approach must inform planning and design; support to victims and survivors must be tailored and sustained –this includes the setting up of easily accessible reporting instances, adapted to the local customs and preferences-; allegations must be promptly, safely and appropriately addressed; a policy for protection from retaliation must be in place; and perpetrators must be held to account. We welcome the progress made on these fronts in the recent report by the DG, and highlight the need to ensure sufficient capacity at all levels, focused on preventing

SEAH; processing and investigating reports safely and appropriately; and supporting victims, survivors, and whistleblowers.

- WHO must ensure and promote a safe, equal and inclusive working environment for all its personnel, and all communities it serves, particularly to women, youth and LGBTI people. WHO must ensure and promote gender-balanced work opportunities, including by encouraging the recruitment and career development of women in senior leadership and throughout the organization.
- With this in mind, action on sexual exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment, must be aligned, since all are rooted in the same power imbalances and gender inequalities that give rise to unacceptable behavior across the spectrum of sexual misconduct and crimes. Both deeply undermine the important work being carried out by WHO, and must be addressed both in its work in communities as well as within the Organization itself. In this regard, we also keenly await the outcomes of OIOS investigation into possible managerial misconduct and the related reaction by WHO.
- Current efforts to engage in SEAH inter-agency initiatives are encouraging. We expect to see ever-stronger inter-agency collaboration and alignment, in line with the United Nations Development System Reform, and working alongside the UN Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate and the Office of the Special Coordinator on Preventing SEA.
- We strongly encourage joint-up approaches by WHO and other UN agencies to strengthen PSEAH, including through joint awareness-raising activities and capacity building of staff and implementing partners' staff, and the setting up joint, easily accessible instances to whom allegations can be reported, with a victims-centered follow up.
- We call for the Secretariat to strengthen engagement with countries with WHO presence, including through gender-based violence referral services.
- Furthermore, we believe that successful implementation of the WHO management response plan (MRP) to prevent and address SEAH requires effective and transparent recruitment and performance management to prevent the hiring of perpetrators, together with a culture change, a multistakeholder approach, engaging with Civil Society Organizations, and particularly with community level women's rights organizations and women-led organizations. In this regard, we expect this to be considered in the development of the new three-year strategy on the prevention and response to SEAH.
- To conclude, we reiterate our support to WHO regarding all the measures taken to prevent, eliminate and respond to SEAH. This is our shared responsibility, so we stand ready to play our part.

I thank you Chair.