



COCKUPS AND COVER-UPS: Why the #MeToo movement is unlikely to transform the UN

By Rasna Warah



A few months ago, when the #MeToo movement was gaining momentum globally, I wrote that the movement was not likely to have a significant impact on the United Nations because the global body is immune to criticism and because those UN staff members who have the courage to report sexual harassment or abuse are more likely to find themselves out of a job than to have their grievances heard.

This is exactly what is happening at the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the Geneva-based agency which, ironically, has been at the forefront of highlighting the link between women's rights and HIV/AIDS prevention. Miriam Maluwa, the country director for UNAIDS in Ethiopia and a key witness in a sexual harassment and assault investigation involving the UNAIDS deputy director, Luiz Loures, was suspended from her job in March, an action that smacks both of a cover-up and retaliation. Maluwa was told that she was not being fired but that she was being sent home so that UNAIDS could conduct a management and operational review of her office. Yet, hardly a week later, an interim country director was appointed to replace her.

This was after Michel Sidibé, the head of UNAIDS, told a staff meeting that people who complain

about how the agency is handling sexual harassment “don’t have ethics”. Blaming the victim is a common tactic in organisations that do not adequately deal with sexual harassment and other forms of bullying and intimidation. For instance, before the children’s charity Save the Children came under fire for not firing its CEO and deputy, who were accused of mistreating and harassing female staff members, the affected women claimed that when they tried to expose their bosses’ bullying tactics, they were dismissed as “mourners” or “difficult”.

The Code Blue campaign, which has been raising awareness about sexual abuse and exploitation by UN employees, says that Maluwa’s case is typical of what happens to women who report sexual harassment or abuse in the UN, where whistleblowers often face severe retaliation and where perpetrators of all manner of crimes are likely to get away scot-free.

Meanwhile, Loures was not suspended during the internal investigation on the sexual harassment allegations, though he did not renew his contract after the harassment complaints against him came out in the public. In essence, he has been allowed to retire quietly with full benefits. And Sidibé, the Malian head of the agency, is still in his job despite receiving pleas from several African women’s rights activists from South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe to resign because of the way he has handled sexual harassment cases under his watch.

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Sisonke Msimang, who used to work for UNAIDS in Johannesburg, says that she has been “angered and saddened” by the events unfolding at UNAIDS, especially because Sidibé had been an inspiration to junior African professionals like her. “Unfortunately, as various sources seem to indicate, Sidibe’s desire to protect allies and preserve patronage networks – so fundamental to the leadership culture of the specialised agencies of the UN, not only UNAIDS – seems to have kicked in,” she wrote on Al Jazeera.

These patronage networks have also kicked in at the UN’s highest echelons. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has largely ignored the storm brewing at UNAIDS; instead he has been lauding Sidibé for hiring and promoting women at the agency. This is hardly surprising at this highly political organisation (which claims neutrality) that is more concerned about its public image and reputation than about maintaining professionalism and integrity.

Quite often allegations of sexual harassment or other types of misconduct will be pushed under the carpet because the accused is from a powerful or influential country, or because vocal regional or other lobby groups protect the perpetrator. In 2005, for example, a widely reported case (which only became public because it was leaked to the media, not because the UN exposed it), revealed that the then UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the former Dutch Prime Minister, Ruud Lubbers (who died recently), had been accused of sexual harassment by Cythia Brzak, a staff member who also happened to be the staff union representative at the UN’s Geneva headquarters. Although the UN’s internal investigators found a consistent pattern of sexual harassment by Lubbers, the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, decided that “the allegations could not be substantiated” and dismissed calls for Lubbers’ resignation. Lubbers eventually did resign but only after the leaked investigators’ report was published in the media.

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Annan's response to the sexual harassment case against his buddy Lubbers reflects the boys' club mentality of male senior managers protecting other male senior managers, a practice that is pervasive at the UN and in the aid sector in general. This is the kind of mentality that led the organisers of an upcoming philanthropy event in New York to "uninvite" Monica Lewinsky after former president Bill Clinton (the man accused of having "sexual relations" with Lewinsky when she worked as an intern at the White House) accepted to speak at the same event. (It is too bad that the Clinton-Lewinsky saga did not happen now in the #MeToo era - if it did, she could have been its leading poster child, and who knows, Clinton might have been forced to resign.)

Many people don't quite believe me when I tell them that the UN is a highly male-dominated and hierarchical bureaucracy where women have few chances of being heard. It is difficult for them to contemplate that this much-revered organisation that promotes human and women's rights could have predatory males within it who make the lives of female employees unbearable.

But stories of bullying, intimidation and sexual harassment and exploitation - not just of female staff but also of females under the UN's care - are so rampant that they are almost treated as normal. When I worked at the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) headquarters in Nairobi, I heard horrific stories of senior managers sexually exploiting local staff and even procuring prostitutes in the city's red light districts. None of these managers were reprimanded for their actions. In one case, the Kenyan woman who was found in a compromising position with the manager in his office was fired; he went on to get a promotion. "Boys will be boys" is a common excuse given to explain these actions.

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Lorraine Rickard-Martin, a former UN employee, says that when she was working at a peacekeeping mission, a UN peacekeeper from a Western country "bought" a 16-year-old girl to live with him at the UN camp. And in the 1980s, an internationally respected UN colleague told her that there was nothing wrong with having sex with minors because it is "normal" in poor countries.

The case of Peter Dalglish is particularly disturbing. When the Canadian humanitarian and former UN official was recently arrested in Nepal over charges of sexually abusing Nepalese boys, the UN agencies where he had held senior positions, including UN-Habitat and the World Health Organization (WHO), quickly put out statements saying that there were no reports or allegations of sexual misconduct by Dalglish during his tenure. The UN was forced to make these statements after the arrest was widely covered in the international media, mainly because Dalglish is widely respected for his work with street children and also because he is the recipient of Canada's highest national award - the Order of Canada - for his humanitarian work.

However, none of the UN agencies have showed any interest in carrying out investigations to find out if he might have sexually abused children in Afghanistan and Liberia, where Dalglish had held senior UN positions. (Sexual predators, particularly paedophiles, often find work in war-torn or

fragile countries because it is easier for them to sexually exploit vulnerable children in these countries.) Even if the UN does carry out an investigation into Dalglish's conduct in these countries, it is unlikely that it will make its findings public or will seek out the abused children so they can be assisted or compensated.

While bullying and sexual harassment could be dismissed as an occupational hazard not just in the UN but in virtually every workplace, it is hard to understand why UN agencies would cover up or ignore cases where vulnerable beneficiary populations have been sexually abused or exploited by UN employees or their affiliates. For instance, despite being warned three years ago that internally displaced and refugee Syrian women were being sexually exploited by men delivering aid on behalf of the UN, the world body has done little to arrest the problem, even though the UN's Population Fund conducted a gender assessment last year that showed that Syrian women were being forced to engage in "food-for-sex" arrangements with aid workers.

A UNHCR spokesperson even had the audacity to say that "the mere suggestion that the UN can somehow control the situation in a war zone is rather simplistic and disconnected from the reality of what an aid operation looks like in an open and fierce conflict" - in other words, if NGOs or other organisations contracted by the UN's refugee agency to deliver food and other supplies to affected populations are implicated in sexual abuse or exploitation, it is none of the UN's business.

"The UN and the system as it currently stands have chosen for women's bodies to be sacrificed," Danielle Spencer, a humanitarian adviser working for a charity, told the BBC. "Somewhere there has been a decision made that it is OK for women's bodies to continue to be used, abused, violated in order for the aid to be delivered for a larger group of people," she said.

Meanwhile, famous Hollywood actresses, such as Ashley Judd and Angelina Jolie, who have championed the #MeToo movement, and who also happen to be UN goodwill ambassadors, have said nothing about this and other cases of sexual abuse and exploitation within the UN's various operations worldwide.

Guterres has promised to tackle the issue of sexual harassment and abuse by UN employees by putting in place various measures, including a special task force on sexual harassment and a confidential helpline, and this month even made public 54 allegations of sexual misconduct that were made against UN peacekeepers and civilian UN staff since the beginning of this year.

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However, those who know how the UN's internal justice system works (or doesn't work) have little faith in the UN's ability to police itself or to bring justice to victims of sexual harassment, exploitation or abuse.

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