



Sexist remarks, sexual advances, violence: women working in the humanitarian field are also the victims of abusive behavior. Few, however, come forward and report the abuses of which they were the victims.

According to a study by the [Humanitarian Women's Network](#) (HWN), a grassroots network of professional development workers, many women working within the aid sector are affected by abusive behavior from male colleagues. Out of 1005 female respondents from 70 different organizations, 55 per cent indicated that they had experienced sexual advances from male colleagues throughout their professional career. Moreover, 48 per cent of all women reported "unwanted touching", while four per cent said that they had been forced to have sexual intercourse.

Rosalia Gitau, co-founder of the HWN, was surprised by the 4 per cent number when she spoke to us. "I did not expect the results we received on the sexual abuse side. Four per cent of all respondents indicated rape. That is 40 people, that is a lot" she says. The survey further showed that 60% of women choose not to disclose what has happened to them. "Four years ago, I was sexually abused by a colleague. I did not talk about it. I was too ashamed and afraid of putting my career at risk. I knew that lodging a complaint would lead to a lot of questions and a long enquiry. I did not feel strong enough to go through the process", explained a victim who used to serve in Africa and who accepted to talk to UNRIC about her ordeal.

For those that do speak out, for 47% of them there is no follow-up, and for 22% an enquiry is opened, from which 19% of assailants are punished.

On harassment, Gitau said that the numbers did not come as a surprise to her. In this part of the survey, almost 70 per cent of respondents indicated that they had received comments on their physical appearance and almost 50 per cent reported comments on women's intelligence. Nonetheless, Gitau says that she had expected the outcome on these types of micro-aggression. "It is part of the challenges we face as women working in aid", she states.

It was frustration with this situation that led to the founding meeting of the "Humanitarian Women's Network" in December 2015. During a dinner with colleagues in Guinea, Rosalia and three other women working in the aid sector decided to act upon their discontent. "I was simply tired of having this conversation" Gitau remembers. After a first informal meeting, they agreed to create a survey to collect first data on the little-researched issue.

"The response was overwhelming" according to Gitau. "We closed the survey after 50 days, in part, because we had so many respondents". Based on these first results the HWN now pushes for further research as part of their "7 asks". These requests, directed at the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), call among other things for acknowledgement of the problem and the establishment of an effective monitoring tool. The IASC is the central forum for the coordination of humanitarian assistance between different agencies.

"I am optimistic" says Gitau, "because there are so many women - and men – who care about this".

### **Additional links:**

- [Humanitarian Women's Network \(HWN\)](#)
- [International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women](#)

## **Study points to widespread sexual harassment and abuse of women in aid sector**

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