Survivors of Sexual Abuse at the U.N. Say Their Stories Have Been Ignored For Far Too Long

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Late one night in May 2009, Shannon Mouillesseaux, an American working for the United Nations Refugee Agency, awoke to a bang in her hotel room in Sri Lanka. A band of hooded, masked men in army uniforms kicked down her door, forced her to the ground, and proceeded to physically and sexually assault her so severely that she feared for her life.

Trained in assisting populations in crisis, Mouillesseaux knew what to do in the aftermath of a sexual assault. Her supervisors at the United Nations, as it turned out, did not.

Mouillesseaux, who recently [recounted her ordeal](https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-03-08/after-sexual-assault-former-aid-worker-found-little-help-un) in an interview with PRI’s The World, said that the U.N. offered her little support following the attack. It took seven hours for the U.N. to send a driver to Mouillesseaux’s aid in response to her distress calls. Afterward, she faced a series of invasive medical exams and police interrogations alone. The U.N.’s security office failed to properly investigate the crime scene, hampering her ability to bring a case against her attackers. The U.N. would later deny coverage of her medical costs associated with the long-term effects of the attack. Ultimately, after being shifted between multiple short-term contracts and offered a hardship post, she decided it would be best to leave the refugee agency, also known as UNHCR.

Mouillesseaux’s experience at the U.N. is not isolated. Despite its mandate to protect global human rights, the U.N. has a serious sexual assault problem, which shows little sign of abating despite repeated revelations of stories like Mouillesseaux’s and abundant criticism. With nearly $50 billion in annual revenue, and a workforce of more than 100,000 people, the U.N. neglects, and even punishes, survivors of sexual assault, according to staff, former staff, and experts interviewed for this article. A January [report in The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jan/18/sexual-assault-and-harassment-rife-at-united-nations-staff-claim) provided ample documentation of this pattern, finding that U.N. staff were either ignored or fired after reporting sexual harassment, assault, and rape, while perpetrators within the organization act with impunity.

An Intercept analysis of disciplinary actions taken against U.N. Secretariat personnel – some 40,000 people excluding peacekeeping troops, U.N. Police, and others — found that the U.N. did not punish a single staff member for sexually assaulting or abusing a colleague over more than a decade spanning from 2006 to 2017.

“The U.N. describes itself as paving the way for gender equality and a world without sexual and gender-based violence, but that’s only out of one cheek,” Mouillesseaux told The Intercept. “Out of the other, you’ll find rampant sexual harassment, abuse of beneficiaries, and downright, intentional neglect of staff who have endured abuse within the organization or while at work.”

Sarah Martin, a consultant on gender-based violence who has worked for U.N. agencies and NGOs for nearly 20 years, said that retaliation and stigmatization against survivors is common.

“There are unspoken rules to keep quiet and keep it in the family,” Martin said, comparing this aspect of U.N. culture to the U.S. military. “Sadly, I think the military may have advanced beyond the U.N. in this regard,” she added.

All available information suggests that the U.N. does not keep or share statistics on staff who are sexually assaulted, but experts believe the scope of the problem may be vast.

“Wherever you go [within the U.N.], you’ll find a patriarchal system that looks nothing like the world that the U.N. preaches it is striving for,” said Paula Donovan, a former U.N. employee and co-director of Code Blue, which advocates for an end to sexual assault at the U.N.

Donovan and others point to extensive data on widespread sexual assault and exploitation by U.N. peacekeepers as evidence of a culture of pervasive abuse and silencing of survivors.

The Associated Press last year [investigated](https://apnews.com/e6ebc331460345c5abd4f57d77f535c1) nearly 2,000 cases of sexual assault by U.N. peacekeepers from 2004 to 2012, finding that few perpetrators were jailed. In a statement to The Intercept, a U.N. spokesperson said the organization has created a new task force and is working to educate local populations about the risk of abuse, strengthen complaint mechanisms, and end impunity. Critics say the U.N. has taken similar steps in the past to little effect.

At the same time, however, the U.N. scarcely acknowledges sexual assault against its staff.

“The U.N. tries to separate sexual harassment (by U.N. personnel against other staff) from sexual abuse (against populations). We don’t see that separation,” said Donovan. “It’s just a continuum from sexual harassment right up to sex trafficking. The U.N.’s institutional culture is permissive of this behavior and covers it up.”

While the U.N. does not seem to keep system-wide, up-to-date statistics on staff sexual assault, over the years, the U.N. has produced several smaller studies that point to the same conclusion: This problem is endemic, and the U.N. mistreats survivors.

A 2013 report from UNHCR [found](http://www.unhcr.org/51f67bdc9.pdf) that 45 percent of staff had survived a life-threatening incident at work, a significant number of which likely involved sexual assaults. Sexual assault survivors said UNHCR stigmatized them and violated their confidentiality, and the report found that the U.N. provided them “inadequate” support and suggested the agency “knows what to do when a refugee is sexually assaulted, but not a staff member.” A 2015 internal UNHCR study [found](http://www.unhcr.org/excom/standcom/576ba8057/framework-future-gender-equity-diversity-inclusion-staffing-unhcr.html) only three in 10 women and four in 10 men agreed “most of the time it is safe to speak up in UNHCR.” (In a statement, a UNHCR spokesperson said the organization is planning to update its report on life-threatening incidents. A U.N. spokesperson said the U.N. Secretariat is also preparing a survey to quantify sexual harassment across the U.N., though they did not mention sexual assault.)

Several former U.N. employees who spoke with The Intercept said that consequences for reporting sexual harassment and assault could range from blame and ridicule to receiving low performance ratings, being “blacklisted” with limited options for continued employment, and even being fired. Few people were willing to go on the record, citing perceptions that doing so could lead to negative career consequences not just at the U.N., but across the humanitarian sector.

“There is this cowboy mentality,” Mouillesseaux said. “You definitely are viewed as being weak and not being able to fulfill your role, if you cannot be attacked and then go back [to work] the next day.”

“I had to fight for a temporary contract in Geneva, which a friend and colleague helped me obtain,” she said. “Not everyone has this luck. Many suffer the end of their contracts with no support.”

Rosalia Gitau, co-founder of the Humanitarian Women’s Network and a former U.N. worker, added that workers of color can face additional workplace discrimination, and more research is needed into “how intersectionality can compound challenges” for aid workers reporting abuse.

One U.N. Peacekeeping employee, a woman of color, said after reporting a sexual assault, she suspected that she was blacklisted by hiring managers. (As a current employee, she asked not to be identified.) She said her only option for continued employment following her attack was a hardship post, and though she sought help from senior colleagues and internal resources for U.N. employees, no one was able or willing to assist her. At her new post, she experienced severe flashbacks, depression, and insomnia. “My lesson learned from this is don’t get into trouble,” she said. “It’s a very cruel system.”

In response to a question about the U.N.’s handling of sexual assault against staff, the U.N. spokesperson said that Secretary-General António Guterres has created a task force on sexual harassment and enacted a zero-tolerance policy. Additionally, the U.N. established a working group on sexual harassment, and in February 2018, launched a sexual harassment helpline for aggrieved employees. The U.N. did not mention sexual assault in any of its responses.

In Mouillesseaux’s case in particular, the U.N. said “that the way the situation was handled at the time was not fully satisfactory and that she did not find the appropriate level of support.” They also acknowledged her contributions to improving the U.N.’s response to sexual assault: Mouillesseaux established a survivor support group and co-authored UNHCR’s first comprehensive sexual assault protocol. Mouillesseaux said UNHCR has never apologized to her for its mishandling of her ordeal.

A critical obstacle in seeking justice for sexual abuse is the U.N.’s diplomatic immunity, which critics say allows the U.N. — and perpetrators within it — to operate with near-impunity.

Since the U.N.’s founding, it has operated outside the jurisdiction of national courts. Meant to protect staff from capricious or corrupt local justice systems, a 1946 convention states that the U.N. “shall make provisions for appropriate modes of settlement of … disputes,” which has taken the form of an internal U.N. justice system. That system is the only one in which survivors can seek recourse if they suffer assault by a U.N. worker, retaliation by a U.N. actor for reporting assault, or even assault by an outsider, in cases where local authorities fail to act.

“I’ve litigated against the U.N. for 23 years, and it’s a systemically corrupt system,” said Edward Flaherty, an attorney who has represented whistleblowers, sexual harassment survivors, and other U.N. employees. “The U.N. claim to be humanitarians, but they’re anything but when it comes to their own staff.”

The U.N. spokesperson told The Intercept that the U.N. justice system maintains independence from the overall organization. Comprised of inspectors, judges, and attorneys hired by the U.N., the justice system has nonetheless often ruled against employees, including whistleblowers and sexual assault survivors.

The U.N. Appeals Tribunal has ruled in favor of the U.N. and against staff in approximately 70 percent of cases alleging various types of wrongdoing between 2009 and 2016, according to a study by the Government Accountability Project. “This shows bias quite clearly,” said Bea Edwards, a policy analyst with the group. Between 2006 and 2014, the U.N. Ethics Office launched reviews into 140 allegations of retaliation and found fully in favor of staff in just four cases, according to GAP.

In one of the longest-running cases in the U.N. tribunal’s history, the U.N. is seeking to dismiss charges that it improperly fired a former UNHCR investigator, Caroline Hunt-Matthes, for reporting that senior officials had obstructed a rape and harassment investigation. After an initial ruling in her favor, the U.N. appeals court overturned its judgment on a technicality in 2014. Hunt-Matthes is still awaiting a new trial nearly 14 years after her firing.

In January of this year, a subordinate employee accused Luiz Loures, an assistant secretary-general at the Joint U.N. Program on HIV/AIDS, of sexual assault and harassment. Possessing absolute diplomatic immunity, Loures is exempt from criminal proceedings. The employee’s claims were instead investigated by the U.N.’s internal justice system, and, in February, a panel of UNAIDS investigators declared Loures cleared of the charges, with the agency’s Executive Director Michel Sidibé making the final decision.

But Code Blue, Donavan’s organization, decried the case as “grossly mishandled,” citing Sidibé’s conflict of interest in acting as a witness and ultimate arbitrator in the process. Foreign Policy also recently obtained documents showing that investigators found inconsistencies in Loures’s testimony and that other witnesses corroborated his accuser’s account.

In late February, Loures announced he would leave his position, a decision he said was unrelated to the accusations against him. Other women have also come forward with allegations of sexual harassment and assault by Loures. The women [told The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/feb/24/un-former-employee-call-for-inquiry-sexism-bullying-harassment) that “they did not report what had happened because they did not trust the complaints system, or because they had also experienced sexual harassment at the hands of the senior personnel to whom they turned for support.”

Across the humanitarian sector, co-workers and authority figures are often the perpetrators of assaults, not outsiders, said Phoebe Donnelly, a researcher from the Feinstein International Center.

“In many cases, the person [the survivor] would report to was the perpetrator,” said Donnelly. “We heard very little about people actually being punished.”

An Intercept analysis of U.N. discipline of U.N. Secretariat staff members found the U.N. did not punish a single staff member for sexually assaulting or abusing a colleague between July 2006 and June 2017. The U.N. punished just 12 employees for sexual harassment in that time frame, including just three in the last five years.

The Intercept based its analysis on the U.N.’s annual information circular on disciplinary matters, a publicly available document containing all punishments of staff, for 11 annual cycles, dating from July 2006 to June 2017. The document does not list the number of complaints that were brought in a given year, nor how many are still under investigation, were dismissed, or settled without disciplinary action, a lack of transparency that makes it hard to form an overall picture of redress mechanisms.

Some of the U.N.’s disciplinary measures appeared extraordinarily lenient. In 2007, a staff member who sexually harassed a colleague received a write-up. In 2008, another staff member was demoted for having sex with a subordinate U.N. worker and attempting to promote her. The harshest punishment that The Intercept identified in recent years for sexual misconduct was “separation from service” with compensation.

Flaherty said providing effective redress would require creating an independent justice system and ending U.N. immunity. The U.N. justice system “is just barbaric,” he said. “Immunity just strikes at the heart of individual human rights and due process.”

Other advocates agreed that the U.N.’s recent efforts to limit retaliation and curb sexual harassment will not be adequate to address sexual violence against its staff. “The U.N.’s answer to this is, ‘We’re going to have a helpline,’ as though this would have triggered a different outcome. That is so preposterous,” said Donovan of Code Blue.

Donovan said an impartial court, independent from the U.N. system, should investigate and adjudicate abuse allegations, “whether it’s a claim of sexual harassment or a whistleblower’s claim of widespread violence, or anything in between.”

An overhaul of U.N. culture and leadership is necessary for change, added Martin. “Our corrupt management are not providing any leadership on this. They haven’t created a climate where people can come forward and talk about it honestly,” she said. “A wholesale culture change needs to happen.”