UN sexual misconduct chief was promoted while facing harassment claims

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The official tasked with tackling sexual misconduct within the [United Nations](https://www.theguardian.com/world/unitednations) was promoted to her position as undersecretary general for management while subject to a harassment investigation.

Jan Beagle, who now leads the UN’s special taskforce on sexual harassment, was investigated over harassment claims last year while working as deputy executive director of UNAids, which spearheads the global fight against HIV and Aids.

In September 2017 the UNAids’ executive director, Michel Sidibé, recommended the case be closed following an internal investigation that found the allegations were unsubstantiated. However, the complainant involved in the case, Sima Newell, a former director at UNAids, said her claims had not been properly investigated. Newell has written to the chair of the UNAids programme coordinating board to request that the inquiry be reopened by an external, independent body.

Last month it was announced that a separate investigation into sexual harassment and assault claims against another UNAids deputy executive director, Luiz Loures, [would be reopened](https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/27/us/united-nations-reopens-sexual-assault-investigation-intl/index.html). The investigation into Loures has been widely criticised, with [campaigners calling for](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/apr/13/un-agency-chief-michel-sidibe-under-pressure-to-quit-over-handling-of-sexual-assault-inquiry-luiz-loures) the resignation of Sidibé over his handling of the case.

Though subject to an investigation at the time, [Beagle was promoted](https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sga1735.doc.htm) in June by António Guterres, the UN secretary general, leaving UNAids to become undersecretary general for management across the UN. In November it was announced Beagle would lead the organisation’s [high level task-force](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2017-11-22/elimination-violence-against-women-remarks) on sexual harassment, which is charged with improving support for sexual harassment victims and strengthening internal investigations.

Stéphane Dujarric, spokesman for the secretary general, said in a statement that Beagle was fully vetted before her appointment as undersecretary-general for management. “She has the full backing of the secretary general, who very much appreciates her work, especially her leadership of the UN system-wide task force on combating sexual harassment,” he said.

While working for UNAids, Beagle [led a programme](http://www.unssc.org/sites/unssc.org/files/casestudy4.pdf) to increase the number of women working in senior positions across the agency.

Newell alleges that she was isolated and bullied by Beagle between September 2012 and August 2015. She claims that she was instructed by Beagle not to talk to colleagues, given extreme workloads that set her up to fail, expected to work during leave, and says responsibility for her performance management was delegated to a more junior colleague.

Newell said she was subsequently signed off work for burn-out due to professional stress, for the first time in her 18-year career at the UN.

Beagle vigorously denied that she had harassed or acted unfairly towards Newell. She said in a statement that that the investigation had been thorough and had found all the allegations to be unsubstantiated.

“These allegations … have all been found to be unsubstantiated, as is clearly indicated in the confidential report from the external investigation concerning the case. This investigation included review of hundreds of pages of documentation and extensive interviews of a wide range of individuals, on which basis the investigation determined unequivocally that Ms Newell’s claims against me and other colleagues were unfounded,” she said.

In a letter to the UNAids programme coordinating board, Newell, who worked for UNAids for almost a decade, said her allegations had not been fairly investigated and that she had lost her job after submitting a complaint. Newell claimed her contract was terminated with two working days’ notice, while she was on sick leave with work-related stress.

The inquiry, and her subsequent treatment by UNAids, was marked by numerous failings, said Newell, including: “Sidibé’s and the senior ethics officer’s failure to recuse themselves when they had conflicts of interest in my case.” She added that a witness statement supporting her allegation had been ignored, and that not all witnesses she suggested had been interviewed, nor all allegations investigated.

Newell is appealing against the investigation’s findings, and its handling, in a case before the administrative tribunal of the International Labour Organization. She has put a case to the global board of appeals at the World Health Organization and also to the WHO’s administrative committee on compensation claims.

In documents related to the appeal cases, Newell said the UNAids ethics officer, who is tasked with offering protection to people for reporting misconduct, could not make an unbiased decision about her case because he reported to Beagle. She argued that Sidibé’s position as the final decision-maker in her inquiry was also compromised because he had been wrongly informed by the UNAids senior ethics officer that Newell had also made a complaint about him.

In her letter to the chair of the UNAids programme coordinating board, Newell wrote:“following nearly a decade of exemplary performance at UNAids, UNAids executive director Michel Sidibé summarily demoted me into a position with a lower reporting line and no responsibility; this new post was then abolished nine months later”.

She added that Sidibé later overruled the recommendations of an internal UNAids panel, which suggested Newell be posted to an alternative position in Geneva. Newell said she was instead instructed to relocate to Johannesburg, even though Sidibé knew such a move was impossible for her and her family.

Sidibé has also faced criticism over his role in a recent investigation into Loures. The complainant in the case, Martina Brostrom, has alleged that Sidibé [attempted to bribe her](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/apr/30/un-suspends-key-witness-miriam-maluwa-unaids) to drop her complaint by offering a promotion. Sidibé has denied the claim, but admitted to WHO investigators that he had met with Brostrom to suggest they “see how we can really find a way out without making it a big problem for all the organisation and for the credibility of the organisation, for yourself”.

In her letter to the UNAids programme coordinating board, Newell asked for her claims she that has been retaliated against by the UNAids leadership to be investigated by an independent, external body.

She has asked to know whether the secretary general was informed that there was a pending harassment complaint against Beagle at the time he agreed to her promotion. “If the secretary general is sincere in his position of zero tolerance, he will also suspend Ms Beagle from leading any functions in this regard; and he should suspend Ms Beagle during the course of the external investigation,” she added.

UNAids declined to comment on the case.