Why sexual harassment and abuse cases continue at UN

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<http://www.nation.co.ke/oped/opinion/sexual-harassment-abuse--UN/440808-4194090-wi7fps/index.html>

Movie stars are finally lifting the lid on sexual harassment in the film industry, thanks to a New York Times exposé on Harvey Weinstein, one of Hollywood’s most powerful producers, who is alleged to have sexually molested several women.

The so-called “Weinstein Effect” has led famous actresses, including our very own Lupita Nyong’o, to come out and speak about the unwanted sexual advances they were subjected to by powerful men in the movie business.

**EXILE**

Many said that they did not have the courage to speak about this before because they feared that they would not be believed or that their careers would be destroyed, especially in cases where the harasser was an influential movie mogul.

Meanwhile, Weinstein’s wife has left him and he has gone into “self-imposed exile” to Europe. It is clear that his reputation is irreversibly tarnished and his career in Hollywood is over.

These revelations have prompted other women in other fields to come out. It is as if a new women’s movement is emerging and gaining strength.

Women are no longer afraid to talk about an issue that has been swept under the carpet, not just in Hollywood, but also in the corporate world, including tech companies in Silicon Valley, where women have recently come out and spoken about sexual harassment at their places of work.

These companies are finally taking their female employees seriously.

Uber’s CEO has resigned and several employees have been fired because of reports of sexual harassment implicating them.

**ALLEGATIONS**

However, the United Nations is one place where such complaints rarely get a hearing, and where the perpetrators are likely to get away scot-free.

This is because the UN is not only imbued with a culture of silence and hypermasculinity, but because staff members enjoy immunity from prosecution.

In 2004, for example, when a UN staff member in Geneva accused Ruud Lubbers, the then-UN High Commissioner for Refugees, of sexual harassment, her allegations were underplayed by the then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan, even though investigators had found a consistent pattern of sexual harassment by Lubbers.

Cynthia Brzak did not relent and even took her case to the US Supreme Court, which dismissed her case on the grounds that UN staff members enjoy immunity from prosecution. (Lubbers eventually resigned when the report by the investigators was leaked to the media.)

In essence, UN staff members who are sexually harassed or discriminated against are on their own.

There have been a few cases where staff members have been disciplined or fired for sexual misconduct, but the UN’s lengthy appeal processes and highly ineffective internal justice and oversight mechanisms often work against the victims.

And like all sexual harassment cases, the burden of proof often lies with the person being harassed.

**VICTIMS**

When I worked at the UN headquarters in Nairobi, I often heard stories of women being sexually harassed by their bosses or colleagues, but few of the victims bothered reporting these cases because they feared further victimisation.

In an environment where the person accused of harassment can make or break your career, there is a temptation not to report these cases for fear of retaliation or dismissal.

The UN is also likely to cover up such cases because of the fear that if they are made public, or if the UN admits to them, the organisation’s reputation will be tarnished.

However, sexual harassment is only one part of a wide spectrum of sexual abuse perpetrated by UN personnel. An investigation by the Associated Press early this year revealed 2,000 allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation, including the rape of children, by UN peacekeepers in troubled parts of the world.

The UN this year also admitted that last year alone, there had been 145 incidents of sexual abuse involving UN personnel.

The high number of cases could be because employees stationed in war-torn countries have more opportunities to sexually exploit women and children as it is easier to engage in transactional or forced sex in such environments.

Although peacekeepers can be tried in their own countries, few, if any of the hundreds of accused of sexual abuse or exploitation have been fired or court martialed.

Despite the UN’s stated “zero tolerance” for sexual abuse, such cases continue unabated. And because UN employees enjoy immunity from prosecution, most of the victims will probably never obtain justice.