UN Secretary-General Guterres' Biggest Challenge: A Culture Of Impunity

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This time it was to be a [woman’s turn](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/dqX8BMf2Q80JCp). But no. Not yet. Still not yet. The United Nations (UN) rung in the New Year with another white man, [António Guterres](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/Dz34BlIq0J5KhD) from Portugal, taking over the reigns as secretary-general. Guterres has promised he will focus his leadership on ending human suffering. “You can’t imagine what it is to see levels of [suffering that are unimaginable](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/8J9GBATxqWNwc4),” he said speaking of his experience as high commissioner for the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/QQxmB0sv05eXi9).

If abating suffering is to be Guterres’ focus, [Syria](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/xN45B6uRn1d6TZ), of course, demands urgent attention, but Guterres must also tackle an entrenched UN culture of impunity for, largely, male employees who cause harm. Too many for too long have been silent about the patriarchy, misogyny and abuse within the UN where employees who attempt to protect people abused by staff are silenced, and female employees themselves are, all too often, abused.

Examples that come to mind include: former UNHCR High Commissioner [Ruud Lubbers](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/MdRlBYsv03n7ix), forced to resign after staff leaked reports of his [sexual abuse](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/O5zrBeFYxLoZsa) the UN had been hiding; [UNHCR](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/9XRYB3ukYZw7uG) and [Save the Children](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/lN6rBkuKOrqJu7) in [Mano River](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/zNDoBbu6n9MzsK) sexually abusing refugee children they were meant to protect; [Jos Verbeek](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/rx5GBehlqG5XtWL), director of UNICEF Belgium, and [Michael Felu](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/rx5GBehlqG5XtWL) operating a child sex ring from UNICEF’s office and producing child pornography on [UN computers](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/rx5GBehlqG5XtWL); more recently [four UN staff fired](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/Zpw0Boh6d3mxsZZ) for trading in child rape on their work computers; and last April reports emerged of French [UN peacekeepers](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/mm6ZBptwXZLgIYD) tying up [children to be raped by dogs](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/kJ6zBmTqLwXahDW) in the [Central African Republic](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/pV6pBYUg6pWAsE3). Prosecutors just announced they will not [charge, at least, six of these peacekeepers](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/LLE9BVTzDOdkcdb).

In 2016 a different white man, [Anders Kompass](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/GWd8BZTm093Qs35), refused to be silent about human suffering caused by UN employees. Kompass resigned from the UN citing a culture of “[complete impunity](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/Y1XWBghpZ938UOL)” and “[lack of accountability](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/Y1XWBghpZ938UOL).” While reports that Kompass pushed for accountability may shock many, I wish I could say I was surprised. Evidence of [peacekeepers raping and trafficking children](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/K2xOBLUa0xnvhRJ) has made headlines for [decades](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/enXQBOTdpwQnCJN). Yet another resignation in protest. Yet another report, “[Taking Action on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by Peacekeepers](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/WDeKBbUaoJYEhXW).” Very little, if any, action will be taken. Again.

Decades ago I joined the UN as a human rights specialist. I was filled with excitement that I might contribute to the ideals of the [UN Charter](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/0J3lBaT5p8O7I7q). Now, as I consider yet another white man will lead this great global institution that holds so much of my faith for a better world, I think of all the broken promises and all the people silenced trying to report abuse.

When I served as UNHCR’s first gender expert at the early onset of an emergency, there was a food-for-sex scandal. I raised this at a coordination meeting and was told by a senior official “this was not going to happen on his watch” and “ruin his career.” He ordered me to stay silent. I did not. Then my radio was stolen. I was pulled off UN planes. Food and water were denied. I was harassed and bullied. When I published a very sanitized version in [The New York Times](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/wXq0B2uYnNw4sn6) about the sexual abuse female refugees endure, I was told I would never work for UNHCR again.

When I was UNHCR’s gender advisor in the Balkans, a [senior administrative staff from Pakistan was arrested on child sex abuse charges](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/arX4B8Tnz4xXs28). He had purchased girls and chained them in his home to use as sex slaves. [The Financial Times](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/arX4B8Tnz4xXs28) reported he was running a sex trafficking ring. When I discussed this in mandatory staff training, senior staff told me to be silent. My response was to talk about this even more. This did not endear me to some colleagues.

During my time with UNICEF, creating programs based on recommendations in Sarah Murison’s famous report, “[Gender Parity in Senior Management at UNICEF](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/274rB6Tdpx4eCZE),” the work I, and others, did never saw the light of day. Instead, it was quietly shelved once the anger and people’s memories faded. Murison’s report detailed a “hostile” working environment UNICEF’s female staff endure. While references to Murison’s report [can be found](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/6RVpBgU3Al5bsb4), UNICEF lacked the courage to publish the report. Instead it is passed around on emails with notes like, “have you seen this?!”

UN whistleblower [Megan Nobert](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/NV7zBKUW0E9ZsxE), speaking of her [own abuse](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/bAXdBQT3xdwLslL) and those of many responding to her campaign, [Report The Abuse](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/NV7zBKUW0E9ZsxE), cites “a culture of impunity… when it comes to sexual violence against the employees of those agencies who are supposed to be protecting and helping affected populations.” How can the UN end suffering of vulnerable populations when female employees navigate hostile environments just by showing up for work, let alone when they attempt to raise issues of sexual abuse and exploitation by UN staff?

When I joined the UN, I believed passionately in the [preamble](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/JqxMBpfb46RZtnV) of UN Charter:

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.”

I thought I would be helping vulnerable women and children in war-torn areas achieve these fundamental rights. Little did I realize how much time I would spend fighting for my own dignity, and those of my female colleagues, within a UN system surrounded by too many male colleagues violating people they are mandated to protect and silencing those who speak out against the abuse.

Will Guterres end a culture of impunity for staff who cause suffering? Can he transform the United Nations into an organization that holds every employee accountable to the lofty UN Charter? Yes, Mr. Guterres, I can image what it is like to see levels of “[suffering that are unimaginable](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/8J9GBATxqWNwc4).” Too much of the suffering I have seen is perpetrated by UN employees, almost always men, who have enjoyed a [lack of accountability](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/Y1XWBghpZ938UOL) for too long. A commitment to ending human suffering as our newest secretary-general is a fine one to make. Let that start within the United Nations system itself.