

Patriarchy, Sexual Abuse and Impunity: As the Catholic Church Confronts Its Crisis, Will the UN Follow Suit?

In an unprecedented move, the Catholic Church, under the leadership of Pope Francis, has decided to finally address an issue that has plagued the church for decades: that of sexual abuse of women and children by priests, a scourge that has left many victims around the world broken. The bold step by Pope Francis to confront this uncomfortable issue – even at the risk of tainting the Catholic Church’s reputation – is one that even the aid industry, particularly the United Nations, has been reluctant to tackle head on, despite growing pressure from the #MeToo movement. Many observers, including yours truly, believe that recent efforts by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to address sexual harassment and abuse by UN employees could be merely cosmetic; they will not change anything because the UN has a strongly embedded culture of impunity. As one former UN staff member wrote in the *New York Daily News*, the UN has “an anti-MeToo culture” and is “an old boys’ club”.

Nine months ago, I wrote [an article](#) on why I believed that the #MeToo movement would have little or no impact on the United Nations’ male-dominated, highly hierarchical and secretive work environment. I was convinced that because the UN is generally unreceptive to criticism, it was highly unlikely that victims of sexual harassment or assault would come forward or be listened to. I showed, through various examples that UN employees accused of sexual harassment or assault are rarely reprimanded or punished. In fact, some of those implicated have been conveniently transferred or allowed to resign or retire quietly with full benefits – a practice that

the Catholic Church perfected when confronted with sexual abuse cases.

However, internal surveys and pressure from women's rights advocates may have finally forced the UN to take a good hard look at itself, and could bring about some changes in how the world body is governed and managed. An internal UN survey, conducted by Deloitte, whose results were released in January this year, found that a third of UN staff members surveyed had been sexually harassed. The survey noted that the most vulnerable targets were women and transgender personnel aged between 25 and 44. Two out of every three harassers were male and only one out of every three employees who were harassed took any action against the perpetrator. About one in ten women reported being touched inappropriately; a similar number said they had witnessed crude sexual gestures.

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Abuse of authority and defective leadership

However, the UN Staff Union says that sexual harassment is only one among many abuses of authority that take place at the UN. Results from its own survey show that sexual harassment makes up only about 16 per cent of all forms of harassment. Forty-four percent of those surveyed said that they had experienced abuse of authority; of these, 87 per cent said that the person who had abused his or her authority was a supervisor. 20 per cent felt that they had experienced retaliation after reporting misconduct: "The results confirm that this has a debilitating effect on staff morale and work performance, and that there are continued barriers to reporting, including fear of retaliation and a perception that the perpetrators, for the most part, enjoy impunity," admitted

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in a letter to UN staff.

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Findings from the two surveys come at a time when women's rights activists, including the International Center for Research on Women, the Center for Women's Global Leadership and Gender at Work, have been advocating for a more "Feminist United Nations" that fosters gender equality and parity, especially at the highest levels. The upper echelons of the UN are still predominantly male and no woman to date has served as the Secretary-General. The activists would also like to see the UN to take sexual harassment cases more seriously.

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However, he has not taken any action against senior officials accused of sexual harassment or against those who protect the perpetrators. For instance, no action has been taken against the UNAIDS Executive Director, Michel Sidibe, who has been accused of failing "to prevent or properly respond to allegations of harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying and abuse of power" at UNAIDS. An independent panel also found that Sidibe's "defective leadership" had fostered a dysfunctional work environment at the organisation where employees believed they could get away with anything. Meanwhile, Sidibe has not been fired by the UN Secretary-General though he has said that he will step down in June this year, a decision he made voluntarily without any pressure from the UN Secretary-General and without any sanctions.

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Systematic racial discrimination

A recent spate of revelations by whistleblowers at the World Health Organisation (WHO) shows how ineffective leadership allows abuse to continue. Three emails addressed to WHO directors, which were leaked to the Associated Press, complained of rampant racism at the organisation and theft of funds intended for Ebola victims. At WHO's headquarters in Geneva, stated one email, African staff members suffer "systematic racial discrimination".

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The emails also spoke of widespread corruption and mismanagement of funds. One whistleblower claimed that logistics and procurement officers at WHO are known to be corrupt and that during one Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo last year, a plane was hired to transport three vehicles from a warehouse in Dubai at the highly inflated cost of one million dollars.

Last year, Al Jazeera featured a documentary that showed how Big Pharma is also influencing the way WHO's senior management makes decisions about global public health crises. The documentary suggested that the 2009 swine flu pandemic might have been fabricated to benefit pharmaceutical companies manufacturing the swine flu vaccine. One former delegate to

the European Council stated: “The WHO officials have no idea about such things [pandemics]. They depend on scientists. And the scientists are allocated to them by the countries and by the organisations that finance the WHO. And many of them gave advice and made decisions that benefited the pharmaceutical industry.”

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Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO’s Director General, has promised an internal investigation into the recent racial discrimination and corruption allegations. While this is a good sign, we must also remember that the UN is essentially a political organisation and that influential member states and its biggest donors often have a greater say in how the organisation is run – and who gets punished – than those who have less influence and clout. There is also a general tendency to cover up a wrongdoing than to address it, and to punish those who expose the crimes committed.

Shooting the messenger

Guterres’ stated commitment to improve gender parity and to look more seriously into sexual harassment cases could just be a whitewashing exercise to calm down critics until the dust settles. This is what has happened in the past. For instance, not one company or individual has to this day been charged with diverting money or receiving kickbacks from the scandalous UN Oil-for-Food Programme in Iraq, which resulted in the loss of billions of dollars that were supposed to help the Iraqi people. By the time the Kofi Annan-initiated Volcker Commission came out with its findings on the programme and revealed names of those involved in the theft, Saddam Hussein had been deposed by American and British coalition forces, and

the programme had been closed.

Similarly, UN peacekeepers accused of raping or sexually exploiting displaced or refugee women and children in strife-torn countries suffer few consequences; recent such cases have not resulted in any convictions though there are now efforts to bar countries whose peacekeepers have been implicated in sexual abuse from serving in peacekeeping missions.

On the other hand, the majority of UN whistleblowers who have reported misconduct, including corruption, abuse of authority and sexual harassment and assault, have been fired, demoted or reprimanded. Few of their allegations are investigated, and even if they are, the findings are rarely made public. In 2014, for instance, Anders Kompass, the director of field operations at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, was suspended and even “investigated” after he revealed to French authorities cases of sexual abuse of displaced boys by French peacekeepers in the Central African Republic. Kompass eventually resigned from the organisation. He told a journalist that his ordeal had left him “disappointed and full of sadness”.

Those who have sought justice from the UN’s internal justice systems have hit a wall, which suggests that these systems were designed to protect the perpetrators and the UN’s reputation rather than to safeguard whistleblowers and to bring about remedial action.

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In my own research, I found that the emotional toll of whistleblowing in the UN is so huge that most whistleblowers never fully recover from their traumatic experience. The decision not to report wrongdoing is thus often based on self-

preservation.

The irony is that most UN whistleblowers don't even realise that they are blowing the whistle; most believe they are simply doing their job by reporting wrongdoing. It is only when the retaliation against them begins that they realise that they have stepped on some very big toes.

Those who are fired from the organisation or whose contracts are not renewed find themselves shut out of the closely-knit international development community, which blocks their future career development. Vindictive senior managers are known to blacklist whistleblowers and ruin their reputations, which results in the latter not being considered for jobs in similar organisations. One whistleblower who has for years been seeking compensation from WHO for a work-related injury told me that her ordeal was so harrowing that it had left her emotionally depleted and had ruined financially – this from an organisation that is committed to promoting global health!

Toxic work environment

Many people have asked me how an organisation that is so multicultural and which is devoted to the advancement of human rights can allow sexism and racism to thrive within its own corridors. I tell them that an organisation is only as good as its people; if you hire racists and sexists, you will end up in a racist and sexist work environment, regardless of the noble aspirations of the organisation.

And if the organisation does not have in place policies and practices that deter abuse and discrimination – and especially if these policies and practices are not followed diligently – then that organisation will simply reflect the negative values of the wider society (possibly at its worst because there are few or no penalties for those who demonstrate racist or sexist behaviour). This creates a highly toxic and unhealthy work environment, especially for women.

As someone who has worked for the UN for more than a decade, I can tell you that the people who work there are not superhuman, nor are they particularly interested in the progress and protection of human beings. Some, especially at the top echelons, are political appointments who come with the baggage and privileges that they inherited from their own particular social, political or cultural backgrounds. They are simply reflections of their societies. And because they are political appointees, they feel no need to follow the dictates of the UN or its global mandate. (This explains why representatives from countries with some of the most dictatorial and repressive regimes end up being voted into the UN Human Rights Council.) There is no test that UN staffers have to pass to show their humanitarian or development credentials. Most are simply careerists who seek a comfortable job abroad with generous tax-free perks. So what you are left with are cynical and paranoid bureaucrats whose only mission is their own career development.

In my own career at the UN, I have seen how senior male professionals will have no qualms about ganging up against a female colleague to intimidate her or to force her out of the organisation. They will even go to the extent of assassinating her character to support a member of their "boys club". The unwritten rule (which I found out about rather late) is that senior male managers will stick together and defend each other. In a highly publicised 2004 case, for example, the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, publicly stated that allegations of sexual harassment made by a Geneva-based UN staff member against his friend, the then UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Ruud Lubbers, "could not be substantiated" even though an internal investigation had confirmed her account.

It is possible that the recent push by the #MeToo movement and women's rights activists may finally turn the tide and make the UN a more egalitarian, woman-friendly workplace. It is possible that the UN is not completely beyond reform – that it

can put in place systems that minimise abuse of authority and weed out those who are doing most harm to the organisation and to its ability to fulfill its mandate of promoting human rights and justice around the world.

One reform measure would be to order thorough and credible investigations into allegations of wrongdoing and to punish the perpetrators. This is a tall order because, like the Catholic Church, the tendency at the UN's top echelons is to cover up the crime (especially sexual abuse and theft) rather than expose it, and also because the people who report wrongdoing are often junior or mid-level professionals who can be easily intimidated by their superiors and bullied into not speaking up. Unless the culture of retaliation against whistleblowers is stopped, there is little hope that whistleblowers will get any justice and that wrongdoing within the organisation will be curtailed.

Like the Catholic Church, the tendency at the UN's top echelons is to cover up the crime

The most effective method, both in the UN and in other large bureaucratic organisations like the Catholic Church, is for the leadership to take action against those committing offences. Even Pope Francis has acknowledged that this is an important deterrent – and is the kind of justice that victims of sexual abuse would like to see in the Catholic Church. Sexual abusers and their protectors and those who abuse their power should be fired and stripped of their titles. The UN Secretary-General can establish all kinds of hotlines and task forces, but unless he is seen to be going after those who are abusing their authority, sexually harassing employees or sexually exploiting and abusing vulnerable women and children in poor war-torn countries, nothing will change, and the UN will continue to remain a safe haven for sexual predators and bullies.

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This would be unfortunate, because in a world witnessing rising ultra-nationalism, fascism, misogyny and intolerance, the United Nations is perhaps the only hope for a more just and inclusive world order.