

# Breaking the silence on sexual aggression

**Emily Hough** speaks to Purna Sen about a call to set up an independent panel to review problems and set out a road map to address sexual aggression at – or in the name of – the United Nations. This, she says, would also be of benefit for other organisations, including NGOs and INGOs



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**T**he *Whistleblowers: Inside the UN*, is a powerful BBC documentary that provides first-hand accounts of people describing events after they reported allegations of wrongdoing at the United Nations. According to the BBC their stories: “Reveal a culture of untouchability that reaches the highest levels of the organisation.”

Those featured in the documentary say they attempted to raise concerns about a number of issues, from releasing a list of names of Uyghur activists due to attend a human rights council meeting to the Chinese Government, compromised tendering processes for the construction of a power plant in Kosovo and money laundering in an environmental programme in Russia, to the leaking latrines at a UN base in Haiti that caused a cholera outbreak in which it is estimated that 10,000 people died.

The whistleblowers further allege a wide range of sexual abuse and corruption across many agencies, including the Human Rights Council, UN Development Programme, the World Food Programme and Uniaids.

The documentary features a particularly harrowing interview with Djordjina Sejour, who was raped by a UN Peacekeeper when she was a schoolgirl. And then we have the toxicity of sexual harassment and assault in the very heart of the UN itself, with sobering accounts of routine harassment, employees being accosted and even attempted rape. The gruelling documentary talks about sexual exploitation and abuse, both of employees working within the UN, and as it pertains to civilians – those outside of the organisation who are sexually harmed by people acting in the name of the UN – including in humanitarian, disaster and peacekeeping contexts.

What links all of these cases is the apparent culture of silence and protection of those accused of such abuses. The force and intensity of the ‘retaliation’ – a word that should have no place in an open and transparent organisation whose very *raison d’être* is to promote peace, security and social progress, to improve living standards and advance human rights – against those who report wrongdoing is disconcerting. The UN employs more than 35,000 people; most are immune from local legislation when they are employed by the UN, meaning that staff complaints are investigated internally; although this is, for most workers, limited to the performance of their duties.

All of those in the documentary say they hoped that they would make a positive difference to the world by working for the UN, with one person who worked at the Human Rights Council for ten years saying: “Whistle-blowers are often presented as somehow hating the UN altogether and wanting it to be disbanded, and nothing could be further from the truth. We just want it to be better.”

Purna Sen, PhD, worked at UN Women from 2015 to 2020, initially as Director of the Policy Division and then as Executive Co-ordinator and Spokesperson on addressing sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination and was one of the participants in the documentary. I ask her about sexual harassment. She explains: “It is an open secret, but there’s little formal

recognition and talk about what is going on. There are quiet conversations where one woman might say to a newcomer, perhaps a junior or intern, ‘Oh, are you going for a meeting with him on your own? I’ll just be out here if you need me.’ There are these quiet conversations going on all the time and everywhere.”

When I ask her about the scale of the problem within the UN, she is emphatic: “A staff survey was conducted, sent to everyone who had a UN email. About 33 per cent of those who responded said they had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the previous two years. A subsequent question asked about sexual harassment during the respondent’s entire time of working at the UN. The figure for that question was higher at 36 – 37 per cent.

“The survey instrument tool was intended to anonymise respondents, but it asked for a certain amount of information that people felt could identify them easily – I know a number of people who did not reply because they felt they could be identified,” she warns, explaining that as this was the first survey of its kind, there was no sense of expectation as to what the outcome would be. “I am absolutely certain that the figure is much higher.”

## Sense of disjuncture

This is deeply troubling, because the UN advocates for addressing gender inequalities. “There’s analysis and language about exploitation, abuse of authority and unequal power relationships when the UN and other international organisations discuss sexual exploitation and abuse, but there’s a reluctance to think what that means in an internal context – it is much harder to change your own organisation than it is to tell others to change,” Sen comments.

Furthermore, the sense of disjuncture between what is said and what is done provides a: “Real cloak for those who are abusers, because they speak that language. And they are the advocates of those messages.”

She provides one very stark example: “A woman came to me about an incident that took place a long time ago when she was very young and new, although she was still in tears about

it when she spoke to me. She worked for someone quite senior who used to give speeches about gender equality and abuse. She typed his speeches.

“He was the one who grabbed her breast at her desk.”

As with many other organisations, such as the church and the military, it is difficult to question hierarchy and distribution of power. Such hierarchies are: “So entrenched and so rigid that they cause a climate where it is hard to be publicly critical of your seniors,” Sen explains. “In that context, you get the sort of conditions in which not only is sexual harassment possible, because seniors are so trusted and command such great loyalty, but those who are reporting harassment are more junior or are marginalised in some way, so their voices are not seen as truly credible.” These similarities between organisations that are built on strict hierarchies where such abuses apparently thrive have common features: “The first

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thing is that these are organisations of trust; they are supposed to lead this work and they have rigid hierarchies. What we know is that within these contexts, research shows that there are higher levels of abuse,” she says.

Certain groups of people are more easily targeted, Sen notes: “The social dynamics of inequality carve out who is believable and who is not. Some groups have lower status and back-up resources. In some countries, this is immigrants; in others it is LGBTQI+; and among those with disabilities, reports of sexual abuse are hardly ever treated with credibility.”

The common factor is that primarily: “Abusers are male, targeting men, women or children. On sexual harassment and abuse we talk about trends following the contours of inequality. You can draw those dynamics along the dimensions of who has power in unequal relationships because this is what sexual abuse is about – it is committed by people with more power in a relationship against those with less power,” she explains.

When asked about the contrast between the zero tolerance for sexual harassment and abuse messages that the UN promulgates, versus the experience of many people who work for it, Sen notes that: “The tension between what is said and what is experienced is very powerful and very troubling.”

She adds that the barriers to addressing these issues properly are bounded by case management: “People are

constantly told that they must report, that nothing can be done if they don’t report incidents. But that is a real pressure; it is a burden on those who have been abused.” Sen continues: “It is also fundamentally a misconception of what is needed to address sexual harassment. The problematic starting point is that of requiring people to report, which is a misunderstanding of the situation. It is not just a few bad apples who are misbehaving and who need to be dealt with. It is a question about the conditions in which it is possible to abuse and not be held to account. It is about how power operates within organisations, which voices are seen as credible and whose positions are viewed as needing to be defended. Those are things that you can tackle without a single report.” Sen also highlights that people who hear of reports that were not dealt with in a timely manner, or if they see that others were not believed, are influenced as to whether to come forward with their own experiences.

### ‘Troublemaker’ label

And there are more subtle ways in which people who have been abused are undermined and beaten down. “Stigma tends to attach to people who have been abused even if – and this doesn’t happen often enough – the abuse is investigated and the abuser is brought to justice. The person who brought the complaint is followed by the label of troublemaker. And if that sticks to you as a young

person, you feel you won’t get the career you have been looking for, which is a very high cost to bear.” Illustrating the issues of inequality, power and the construction of the person who has been abused as somehow being at fault, the victim-survivor can be blamed, with questions such as: “Why did she not know better? Why did she put herself in that position? Such questions divert attention from those who are doing the abusing,” she says. Gaslighting undermines people’s accounts; the veracity of their narratives is challenged and this can also be done by: “Sleight of hand, through a slippage of words.”

Sen elaborates: “When they talk about numbers of cases brought and upheld, instead of saying, ‘This number of cases was not upheld,’ I have heard the term ‘false allegations’ being used.” The elision between cases that were not upheld and their being termed ‘false’ creates the narrative that people tend to make false reports.

“Constant gaslighting makes people doubt themselves, especially when you have been harmed by an organisation in which you believed and came to work for, and then your own account is undermined by those very people who possibly motivated you to join in the first place,” she says. This compounds the damage to younger people who are already reeling from what has happened to them.

So, what is the way forward? The first thing is to centre those who have been abused, according to Sen. “We have come at the problem from a very expert-focused angle, but that is incomplete without the additional input from victim-survivors.” They too are experts.

“There is an issue for us in the humanitarian, disaster response and assistance world. We have these categories of ‘experts’ and ‘vulnerable’ populations, which is a way of distancing ourselves from those who we are there to help. It smacks of saviour syndrome, which is extremely unhelpful. To a troubling degree, this replicates colonial exploits and relationships, which are often mirrored in large development and humanitarian works,” she continues.

“It is important to name and undo these dynamics, recognising not only that those who have been abused have something to say, but also that they have a particular knowledge of how these issues are handled. And this is crucial to the bigger picture of working out what we need to do. They can tell us what went wrong, what didn’t work, what could have been better and why they didn’t report the abuse. All these aspects are not sufficiently integrated into mapping; in other words, understanding and setting out what needs to be done.”

Her ideal solution would be to establish a body that is separate from the UN, and which could be relevant for NGOs and INGOs: “It is crucial that this is not tied up in the dynamics and reciprocity of favours or support that are inherent in these organisations. We need to be free from those dynamics. That, for me, is a survivor-driven initiative; such work isn’t about making the UN or any INGO look better, it is about making a difference and creating the conditions in which such abuse does not happen any more.”

Sen emphasises that this is not a pie in the sky ambition, it is what organisations have already signed up to in the form of conventions to end discrimination and several of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Participation in the documentary is a major step

in efforts to address the problem: “We have put a call together, saying this is what is required, whether we are talking about sexual exploitation in the name of the UN, of people within it, or those who are outside of the organisation. We want to address inequality, power and the construction of the person who has been abused as being somehow at fault,” she says. The powerful call is signed by several of those who took part in the documentary – Martina Brostrom, Kirstie Campbell, Jeremie Dupin, Malayah Harper and Djordjina Sejour.

“We want to make sufficient noise and bring about work that shapes what needs to be done to make fundamental and lasting change, and we must ensure that victim-survivors are key to shaping that,” Sen says. “Wherever we are, whether we are talking about the military, the UN, other NGOs, we are all

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dealing with the same conditions of inequality that are facilitating the conditions for these things to happen. Let’s not pretend that any of us is immune.

“An intergovernmental organisation like the UN sits above national processes and dynamics, it has its own justice system and can protect its staff from national systems of accountability. That is not true for others in the same way, so we need to think specifically about what that means. Let’s join hands, voices and intellects to say this is not tolerable. We need action, not just in words, but in practice, and we need to put our best efforts and best thinking into making this happen.”

■ The Whistleblowers: Inside the UN, can be viewed on BBC iPlayer or more details can be found at [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk)

■ A Call for States to support an External, Independent Panel to chart out system-wide work towards ending sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment at the United Nations can be found at: [purnasen.org.uk](http://purnasen.org.uk)

### Author



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