



United Nations  
Office of the Victims'  
Rights Advocate

# Frequently Asked Questions

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- On the scope and duration of assistance for victims of sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations staff and non-staff personnel

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Got a question?

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All complainants and victims of sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations staff and non-staff personnel have the right to receive assistance and support in accordance with their individual needs, regardless of sex, gender, age, status, or other personal circumstances. In most cases, there are no clear-cut criteria for determining the scope and duration of assistance and support. The merits of each case should be considered by the United Nations entities involved. The United Nations should prioritize the rights and dignity of victims in a manner that fulfils its duty of care and responsibility taking account of the services available in a country where it operates.

This document provides guidance from the Victims' Rights Advocate on the victims' rights approach to the scope and duration of assistance for victims. For further information contact the United Nations Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate at [ovra@un.org](mailto:ovra@un.org).

## General framework

In 2007 the United Nations Comprehensive Strategy on Assistance and Support to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by United Nations Staff and Related Personnel (Comprehensive Strategy) ([A/RES/62/214, annex](#)) was adopted by the General Assembly. It provides the basis for the assistance and support victims of sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations staff and non-staff personnel should receive from the United Nations.

The [United Nations Protocol on the Provision of Assistance to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#), endorsed by the High-level Steering Group on sexual exploitation and abuse in 2019, sets out a policy framework to create a coordinated, system-wide approach to the provision of assistance and support, which prioritizes the rights and dignity of victims, regardless of the affiliation of the perpetrator. The Protocol builds on the Comprehensive Strategy and broadens its scope to cover victims of sexual exploitation and

abuse by members of non-United Nations international forces and personnel of implementing partners. It also delineates the roles and responsibilities of United Nations system organizations' personnel.

The Comprehensive Strategy and the Protocol make clear that assistance should:

- address the individual needs of complainants and victims arising directly from the incident(s) of sexual exploitation and abuse.
- include, but not be limited to, medical care, legal services, psychological support, immediate material care, such as food, clothing, and emergency and safe shelter, as necessary.
- be provided on a specific/case-by-case basis.
- be provided in an appropriate, reliable, and timely manner.
- be gender-sensitive and appropriate to the circumstances of each location, taking account of host country legislation.
- be provided in a manner that does not increase the trauma suffered by the complainants and victims as well as children born as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse, nor cause further stigmatization.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## ■ When should provision of assistance begin?

The Comprehensive Strategy indicates that it is imperative that the Organization respond quickly and effectively when sexual exploitation and abuse occur. United Nations entities are expected to provide assistance and support as soon as information indicating that an individual may be a victim of sexual exploitation or abuse is received in any way or form, such as, for example, where a complaint of sexual exploitation or sexual abuse is made known to a person who works for a United Nations entity. Victims are generally members of a local and/or displaced population in situations of vulnerability. Victims are not limited to beneficiaries of assistance and may include United Nations personnel, as well as individuals who are in close proximity to, or interact with, United Nations staff and non-staff personnel.

## ■ What are the immediate needs of victims?

Victims should receive assistance and support in accordance with their individual needs directly arising from sexual exploitation and abuse. The immediate needs of victims may include, but are not limited to, medical care, psychological support, and other material care, such as food, clothing, and safe shelter. The needs of each individual victim should be considered on their merits and considering the victim's individual circumstances.

Assistance is to be offered even where victims come forward many months or years after the incident took place. This is especially the case in respect of needs relating to children born as a result of the sexual exploitation and abuse, for example, those suffering from illness or congenital conditions.

### ■ **If a victim initially declines assistance when they report, may they request it months or even years later?**

Yes. Victims have the right to refuse assistance or support at any time, including after they have begun to receive it. This does not prevent them from requesting assistance and support at a later stage.

### ■ **Is provision of assistance and support to the complainant or victim contingent on an investigation into the allegation?**

When the United Nations, or any of its entities, receive information indicating that an individual may be a victim of sexual exploitation or abuse, such as through a complaint of sexual exploitation or abuse, it will refer it for investigation and provide assistance and support. However, the right of a victim to assistance and support is unconnected with, and independent of, an investigation. Whether an investigation has been initiated does not affect the victim's entitlement to support, nor the scope or duration of that support. Victims should receive assistance and support as soon as a complaint is made. Provision of assistance and support does not depend on whether, or how, they cooperate with any investigation or accountability process.

### ■ **Does the provision of assistance and support to the victim end if the case is found to be unsubstantiated following an investigation?**

Where the allegation is not substantiated following an investigation (e.g., due to lack of corroborating witnesses and/or documentary evidence, or if the facts did not amount to the prohibited behaviour), assistance and support

may continue if warranted, such as where sexual exploitation and abuse are not established, but a child has been born. The duration of assistance and support should be determined on a case-by-case basis.

### ■ **When does assistance for victims of sexual exploitation and abuse come to an end?**

Neither the Comprehensive Strategy nor the Protocol provides a timeline for the duration of assistance and support. The [Interagency Gender-based Violence Case Management Guidelines](#) and the [Interagency Guidelines for Case Management and Child Protection](#) provide guidance to determine when to end support to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse: '(1) *when the survivor's needs are met and/or their (pre-existing or new) support systems are functioning; (2) when the survivor wants to close the case; (3) when the survivor leaves the area or is relocated to another place; (4) when you have not been able to reach the person for a minimum of 30 days.*'

These Guidelines also make suggestions on how to assess when case closure may be appropriate, or when reopening a case may be required, emphasizing the importance of gaining informed consent and prioritizing the best interests of the child. A longer period, perhaps at least 90 days might be more appropriate for victims of sexual exploitation and abuse to enable sustained and reasonable efforts to locate a victim particularly in contexts of insecurity, conflict, natural disasters, or health emergencies.

Some victims decide to move within the country or relocate to neighbouring countries or further afield. Assistance and support should continue to be provided to the extent possible through other United Nations entities located in the new country of residence.

Support for mothers with children born as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse should continue as long as paternity and child support claims remain outstanding, but longer depending on the circumstances of the individual

mother and child. The needs of the mother for longer-term assistance and support should be taken into consideration.

### ■ **What happens when a victim is abusive towards United Nations staff?**

Victims may express frustration towards the United Nations. It is important to understand the impact of harm suffered by victims by sexual exploitation and abuse and how these wrongs have been dealt with by United Nations staff. Sometimes victims may threaten or behave violently toward United Nations staff. These behaviours should be brought to the attention of the Victims' Rights Advocate and be addressed in consultation with all concerned stakeholders on a case-by-case basis which may decide that support may cease.

### ■ **What kind of livelihood support are victims entitled to receive, and for how long?**

Victims of sexual exploitation and abuse should be provided with tools to recover from the wrongs they have experienced so they can rebuild their lives, including through strengthening their capacity to sustain themselves financially. Victims able to sustain themselves regain dignity, can support themselves and their children and contribute to their families and communities. This bolsters their self-esteem and reduces vulnerability to further victimization and has a protective effect. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, victims who received skills training in tailoring, maize flour production, mushroom farming and basket weaving through projects supported by the [Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#) (Trust Fund) have been able to generate an income as they have goods to sell. Some women use their income to expand their income-generating activities, contributing to the well-being of their families and communities. Victims in Haiti who acquired skills through Trust Fund projects were able to open small businesses.

The provision of livelihood support may range from short-term interventions to those that extend over several months. Limited financial support can be provided through peacekeeping and special political mission budgets in line with the Secretary-General's instruction (A/70/729, para 77). This is encouraged by the Victims' Rights Advocate. United Nations entities in non-mission settings are encouraged provide similar support. Longer-term livelihood assistance and support projects can be delivered through sustainable income-generating projects funded by the Trust Fund or other funding sources available through United Nations agencies, funds, and programmes.

### ■ **Does assistance and support for children born of sexual exploitation and abuse 'time out' when the child reaches majority?**

This depends on the specific case. Individual needs should be addressed in line with the specificities of the case and the child's best interests. The Comprehensive Strategy provides that children born as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse should receive, in accordance with their individual needs, assistance and support addressing the medical, legal, psychosocial consequences directly arising from sexual exploitation and abuse in their best interests. This can include support for school fees and ancillary costs. These children may face short-term or longer-term health-related consequences, including as a result of disability, requiring medical care. Assistance and support should be provided in a manner that does not increase their trauma or cause further stigmatization.

The United Nations may facilitate the access of children born of sexual exploitation and abuse to education and legal services after they have reached the age of majority, including for resolution of paternity claims. In line with international human rights law, they have the right to know the identity of their fathers and access ancillary rights, such as citizenship.

### ■ **Is there a difference in the scope and duration of support available to victims of sexual exploitation and victims of sexual abuse?**

No. The Comprehensive Strategy makes no distinction between victims of sexual exploitation and abuse in terms of the scope and duration of assistance and support. In some cases, victims may not wish to receive assistance and support and these should not be imposed.

### ■ **Which service providers provide support to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations staff and non-staff personnel?**

The Comprehensive Strategy and the Victims' Assistance Protocol indicate that assistance and support to victims should be provided, first and foremost, through existing services, programmes and their networks, which are usually based on partnerships, bilateral agreements or other arrangements between United Nations entities and service providers. Most services are provided through regular gender-based violence and child protection programming (although these may not exist, particularly in remote areas). Services may be provided through Governmental, international, or national civil society organizations. Where needed, the United Nations is encouraged to consider development of new services, while not developing duplicative structures (Comprehensive Strategy, A/RES/62/214, para 10).

### ■ **How can the Organization ensure that service providers to which victims are referred can deliver appropriate support of adequate quality?**

The pilot mapping project undertaken by the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate revealed that services for victims of sexual exploitation vary in quality, and may be limited or unavailable in some contexts, such as remote areas or those affected by conflict or health emergencies. Services

may not be accessible to all populations, including for example, refugees, stateless and internally displaced persons. Services should be identified and routinely mapped as in the case of gender-based violence and child protection mappings. The quality of those services should also be analyzed on a regular basis, including by listening to victims who are recipients of those services. The Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate is currently developing methodologies to gather feedback from victims, which adheres to the victims' rights approach. This is an important addition to mechanisms that have already been developed to improve accountability to affected populations.

The Victims' Rights Advocate encourages all United Nations Country Teams to carry out sexual exploitation and abuse risk assessments using available risk planning tools and clarify the role and capacity of State authorities to facilitate access to services for victims, ideally through Common Country Analysis and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework with host Governments. These frameworks can serve as entry points to working with the host Government to advocate for improvements in the provision and quality of services for all victims.

The Victims' Rights Advocate encourages United Nations entities to ensure that service providers can offer specialized care, including through providing victims with a choice of women or men doctors, who follow gender-based violence best practices and are familiar with the needs of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. Gender-based violence referral pathways should also be up-to-date so that referrals to specialized care can be made promptly.

### ■ **What is the scope of medical care for victims?**

The Comprehensive Strategy states that victims should receive medical care in accordance with their individual needs directly arising from sexual exploitation and abuse, and as necessary. The Victims' Assistance Protocol specifies that in cases of sexual abuse this includes informing victims of

the importance of seeking medical care within 72 hours and providing the referral to services, including HIV post-exposure treatment, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) and reproductive and sexual health care, as needed and desired. United Nations entities should take a flexible approach to provision of medical support to victims, recognizing that medical conditions related to sexual exploitation and abuse can emerge long after these wrongs, and victims may not be able to afford care.

Senior Victims' Rights Officers and other staff directly in contact with victims facilitate the provision of ante-natal, maternity and post-natal care for victims who become pregnant as a result of sexual exploitation or abuse, as well as long term medical care for children born of these misconducts. There may be a need for psychosocial support to address the significant negative health and educational outcomes for children who experience long term effects, including in the absence of other support.

Senior Victims' Rights Officers and other United Nations staff have facilitated transportation and accommodation costs for meetings and transportation costs from hospitals or medical centres caring for victims through petty cash drawn from mission budgets, in accordance with paragraph 77 in the Secretary-General's 2016 report on special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse ([A/70/729](#)). All United Nations entities are encouraged to follow this practice.

Facilitation of reproductive health care, such as abortions for pregnant women or pre-natal care for mothers who may not be legally married may be affected by the local context and legislation. These cases should be addressed on a case-by-case basis. The Victims' Rights Advocate can provide advice.

## ■ What is the scope of psychosocial support for victims, including children born of sexual exploitation and abuse?

The Comprehensive Strategy states that victims should receive support to deal with the psychological effects resulting directly from incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse, as necessary and in accordance with their individual needs. Given the trauma sexual exploitation and abuse cause, all victims should be offered psychosocial support. This may include psychological first aid and psychosocial counselling, peer-to-peer support, reconnecting victims with family members, friends, and neighbours, and/or fostering social connections and interactions through existing community networks or referrals to more specialized mental health care, as needed.

Given the stigma that sexual exploitation and abuse may cause, practitioners assisting victims should ensure that their services do not increase trauma nor cause additional harm. They should be aware that victims may face violence from their families, lose their income or homes, or be ostracized by their communities, particularly in countries where sex outside of marriage is a crime under national legislation. Practitioners should take steps to maintain confidentiality and refrain from providing services at a victim's home, place of work or school.

Online psychosocial support may be a viable option for victims if available and they accept it. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) may also address trauma among victims and can provide therapy that can be deployed quickly and can address language barriers and low literacy levels. Appropriateness of support depends on local conditions and contexts.

## ■ What is the scope of legal services to be provided to victims?

The Comprehensive Strategy provides that victims of sexual exploitation and abuse should receive legal services in accordance with their individual needs directly arising from the sexual exploitation and abuse as necessary. This



may support the pursuit of accountability in countries of jurisdiction. Victims should receive information from the United Nations on how to access legal assistance, including paternity and child support claims. Victims should have access to legal assistance at the time they report an allegation so they can be informed of options such as pursuit of civil proceedings or reporting to local authorities and time limitations relating to potential claims.

The United Nations should cooperate with Member States to facilitate claims. Many victims are not able to access legal services themselves, especially in host countries of alleged perpetrators, so the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate has developed a roster of *pro-bono* lawyers and legal aid organizations to whom victims can be referred.

Senior Victims' Rights Officers and other staff in contact with victims facilitate access to legal services for them by establishing contacts with national focal points, lawyers, legal aid organizations and national human rights institutions. In United Nations peacekeeping missions, the United Nations has covered the costs of transport for victims, judges, prosecutors, and investigators, including in respect of *ad hoc* mobile courts martial in countries where allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse were made.

### ■ What support should children born as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse receive?

The Comprehensive Strategy provides that children born as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse should receive, in accordance with their individual needs, assistance and support addressing the medical, legal and psycho-social support, in the best interests of the child. This may include support for school and ancillary fees, medical care including for illnesses which may develop at a later stage of the child's life. Paternity/child support claims are governed by national laws, and the processes of the State or States which have jurisdiction related to the claims. The United Nations cooperates with Member States and victims to facilitate these claims.

### ■ What safety and protection measures should be available to victims?

Victims should be protected from any harassment, intimidation, and retaliation for reporting allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse. The United Nations should take action, including by cooperating with Member States and civil society, to protect people from further trauma and re-victimization. Emergency safe shelter may be provided. Subject to a risk-assessment and the victims' consent and best interests, it may require relocation support where necessary and appropriate. The capacity of the United Nations to provide protection is limited, so expectations of victims should not be raised as to the possibility of implementation of safety and protection measures.

The responsibility for advising victims of non-United Nations forces operating under a Security Council mandate on rights-based victim support and assistance and protection assessments and measures lies with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Protection is expected to be provided by the Host State's authorities or United Nations military or police in peace operations.

### ■ Which entity is responsible for conducting a personal risk assessment of victims and witnesses?

The United Nations Department of Safety and Security may conduct a personal risk assessment on an ad-hoc basis where it has capacity to do so. The safety response should set out roles and responsibilities, as well as capacities of designated or other actors. Subject to a risk assessment, and based on the victim's consent and best interest, the safety or protection plan may include relocation support.

The United Nations may cooperate with Member States to secure protection measures in national proceedings. Victims should be made aware of the



limits of United Nations capacity to provide protection so they can make informed decisions on how they wish to proceed with their case.

### ■ **How should expectations of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse be managed?**

Senior Victims' Rights Officers, Victims' Rights Focal Points and other staff in contact with victims are responsible for determining the type of assistance that victims should receive as outlined in the Comprehensive Strategy. As the quality and availability of services for victims vary within and among countries, including the capacity and resources of United Nations actors, expectations need to be managed through regular communication with the victims. The capacity to offer specific forms of support may depend on the cultural context of the country.

It may be helpful to provide the victim with an engagement letter at the outset that sets out the assistance the victim is entitled to receive. The engagement letter should be written in language the victim understands. Where victims cannot read, a witness, whose name and contact information should be noted in the letter can explain the content of the engagement letter to the victim. The victim should be provided with a copy of the letter. The engagement letter provided is not connected with, and is independent of, any investigation.

### ■ **Why is a system-wide tool to track victims important?**

A victim assistance tracking system has been operational in United Nations peace operations and special political missions since late 2019. A system-wide tool to track victims, the assistance they receive, and available service providers is required, including because victims do not distinguish among different United Nations entities when they report allegations or seek assistance. Victims may seek assistance from more than one United Nations entity or service provider and move across countries or borders.

### ■ **Does the United Nations provide compensation or reparations for victims?**

Reparations include restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition in accordance with the Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law (A/RES/60/147). The United Nations does not provide compensation nor reparations for victims of sexual exploitation and/or abuse. The United Nations Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse established in March 2016 by the Secretary-General (A/69/799) provides funding for project-based activities in communities at risk of sexual exploitation and/or abuse, which can serve to restore victims' dignity, including through economic empowerment. Projects financed by the Trust Fund have included literacy and numeracy training programmes as well as income generating training activities involving basket weaving, bread-making, dressmaking, and hairdressing farming/animal husbandry.

### ■ **What are the sources of funding available for assistance and support to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse?**

No funding has been allocated by the General Assembly to implement the Comprehensive Strategy. It provides that assistance and support should be provided through existing services, programmes or their networks, although where necessary the United Nations should consider supporting the development of new services, while not developing duplicative structures. The Victims' Assistance Protocol states that gaps should be met through United Nations entities' internal resources.

In his report on special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (A/70/729, para 77) the Secretary-General indicates that in mission settings in the absence of any other immediately available means, timely support will be provided through mission budgets. The Victims' Rights

Advocate encourages all United Nations entities to take this approach. She also urges colleagues to explore opportunities for joint pooling of funds by United Nations Country Team members and through external funding facilities and mechanisms to finance such services.

The [Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#) addresses gaps in services for victims. The Trust Fund does not compensate individual victims, nor provide direct financial support: it assists in the provision of the specialized services required by victims of sexual violence, including psychosocial support, medical care, legal services, income generation, and awareness-raising projects.

Other sources of funding for assistance and support to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse are set out in a document prepared by the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate available on the internal United Nations PSEA Knowledge Gateway. For example, the Spotlight initiative, a global, multi-year partnership between the European Union and the United Nations directed to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030 may provide support. At the country-level, the Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator coordinates and oversees the implementation of the Spotlight Initiative programmes with United Nations agencies and partners (<https://spotlightinitiative.org/>).



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