

**OSCE-ODIHR** organized an Online Dialogue on **Preventing and Addressing Harassment, Violence and Abuse within Armed Forces in the OSCE Region** over a two-week period from 5 to 16 October. The dialogue dealt with a wide range of topics, including:

- **Policies and codes of conduct**
- **Training and other preventive measures**
- **Reporting and monitoring mechanisms**
- **The role of medical checks**
- **Counselling and victim reparations**
- **Survivor and witness protection**

All discussions were conducted under Chatham House Rules.<sup>1</sup> When quoting participants, we fully acknowledge that they are speaking about their personal and/or professional experiences, that might not be applicable to all Armed Forces everywhere, nor to all individual members of the Armed Forces. Their views also may not represent to official view of their respective institutions.

<sup>1</sup> Chatham House Rules is a rule or principle according to which information disclosed during a meeting may be reported by those present, but the source of that information may not be explicitly or implicitly identified

## **Stereotypes and gender roles**

Stereotypes and gender roles still influence heavily everything related to harassment, violence and abuse within the Armed Forces. That sexual harassment, sexual violence, and abuse remain “taboo and a controversial topic for discussion” in many Armed Forces signals to all the work that remains to be done. Too often, prejudicial behaviour is dismissed as “ordinary barrack’s attitudes”, and the perpetrators do not face disciplinary consequences.

Gender disparities impact the process from the start. One participant described how fears by higher-ranking officers of being accused of harassment can hamper even the most basic privacy standards: “personnel’s private issues can be discussed with the direct supervisor/commander behind closed doors in a face-to-face meeting. This usually doesn’t apply to female personnel: in that case, the doors stay open and the commander is ‘assisted’ by a silent witness”.

One participant explained how, before reforms in their Armed Forces, it would always be the junior party that was removed from the operational environment after an incident involving harassment or abuse, since the loss of the higher-ranking party represented “the greater operational deficit”. In practice, since it is more common for the abuser to be a man of higher rank, and the abused a woman of lower rank, this practice of removing “the junior party” had a disproportionate impact on the victim. This had the result that “the victim was doubly victimized and isolated”. This has now been changed.

## Handling of cases

During the discussions it was indicated that not all roles and responsibilities are always clear and well established in context of addressing sexual violence, harassment and abuse. On occasion these are considered within the remit of GENAD, which can be problematic when it is the LEGAD and the different professionals e.g. in J1 who also have their respective responsibilities in addressing the issue. In worst case scenario others beyond GENAD would intervene primarily only when “there is a suspicion on the victim deciding to report the case through the civilian criminal law”, which would inevitably have a knock-on effect on the chain of command, in which case their involvement was often taken as “not to solve the issue but to protect the organization.”

In many instances, issues are solved at the “very tactical level”, through mediation by the commander on site, and therefore the issue may not escalate, nor leave behind a paper-trail. As a result many cases do not appear in statistics.

Even more commonly, incidents are simply not reported, either because the individuals impacted consider they can handle the situation on their own, they are afraid there will be no result -or they fear retaliation because of complaint procedures that are often “not transparent and not secret”. A participant pointed out that “many gender advisors, whom we have now within the system, are military and fully dependent on their commandment.”

Because of this, another participant asked if having few cases of harassment or abuse is a positive sign, or if on the other hand it just points to a lack of serious complaint mechanisms. Reinforcing this message, participants shared examples of cases that illustrate the urgency of the topic.

Once a complaint has been made, participants agreed on the importance of reaching a balance “between confidentiality and the degree to which others should be informed of the status of the investigation.” Since it is almost unavoidable that word of an allegation eventually gets out, commanders and investigators must find a way to avoid keeping others in the dark in a counterproductive way that fosters misinformation, while respecting the privacy of the victim.

Whereas sexual harassment and abuse takes place everywhere and is reflective of the discrimination against women in the societies in general, certain characteristics of military make the Armed Forces particularly susceptible, resulting from a “work environment, male-dominated, with hierarchical structure and exercise of power that is not collective but takes place from top to bottom.” Precisely because of this, engagement from military leadership is essential for an effective response. One participant adequately noted that “without every level of leadership being committed to implement change and eradicate gendered violence, incidents will find ways of remaining unsettled and unseen”. Some inspiring examples of leadership taking strong, unequivocal stances against abuse were shared. In order to mainstream a comprehensive approach to harassment, violence and abuse, one participant highlighted that it is important to give “some degree of local ownership to the leaders of the organization, to transform them into stakeholders.”

## **Training and education**

One of the clear instances in which the role of leadership is crucial is when trying to implement bystander training (training that is particularly focused on inciting a third-party response to intervene in case of witnessing any cases of harassment, abuse or violence). Implementation of bystander training programs may however be challenging due to heavily hierarchical structures where everyone has a fixed role and does not feel in the position to step out of it. A participant shared her ultimately unsuccessful experience trying to implement bystander training without having explicit support from higher up in the chain of command.

Beyond bystander training, training in general was seen, alongside leadership, as another key part of addressing harassment, violence and abuse. Examples of good practices and holistic approaches to training were shared, including conducting frequent workshops on “prevention on sexual harassment, abuse and gender-based violence [...] study and creation of a special handbook on Gender Equality in the Armed Forces [...] Education for male personnel about the acceptance of women, including in combat positions.” Providing clear information to female and male candidates about the work environment and requirements that this creates was also mentioned.

A way to maximise the impact of training addressing sexual harassment, violence and abuse is to include real stories of survivors. In the words of one participant:

“My experience was that, whilst the senior leaders were supportive of creating change, it was only after they had met with survivors of assault and heard their story during restorative justice processes that they became truly committed to eradicating sexual assault within the Armed Forces.”

Overall, early education and training, from the moment an individual joins the Armed Forces, came up repeatedly as among the best ways to tackle the “large number of elements that can affect the occurrence of harassment, violence and abuse”. Some of these elements were identified as “home education (attitude towards the weak, attitude towards women, previous experiences with violence, empathy...), personal character (ego, vanity, complexes...) and psychological characteristics (the way someone endures stressful situations, willingness to accept the specifics of life in the barracks...)”

## **External actors**

One participant pointed out that Armed Forces are “by nature a conservative environment”, and that often, pressure to change harmful stereotypes and practices will need to come from the outside, Activists, Equality Bodies, courts and International Organizations were noted among the key players in this regard. In particular, collaboration between the Armed Forces and National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) was deemed “essential as it contributes to transparency and accountability in the armed forces and helps in addressing systemic problems”; and the role of international organizations was seen as “crucial, helpful and meaningful” and key sources of guidance and good practices.

The important role played by unions was brought up, with concerns that measures like “a ban on trade union rights for military personnel” effectively impede the full protection of the human rights of members of the Armed Forces. The role of Ombud’s institutions

was also explored, with a participant advocating that members of the Armed Forces should have access to judicial or non-judicial remedies, including Ombud's institutions. Ireland and Germany were offered as examples of good practices where an independent armed forces ombudsperson exists outside of the military chain of command.

Nonetheless, it was acknowledged that sometimes there can be some reflexive resistance from the Armed Forces to sharing sensitive and confidential information with what they can perceive to be "outsiders". One way of overcoming this is stressing "that they aren't adversaries but working toward the same purpose: to make the military more capable of carrying out its mission". Good practices in Belgium, Georgia and the Netherlands, among others, were shared, though acknowledging that even in these countries with good mechanisms, there is space for further improvements.

Military associations and trade unions were also identified as important partners for the authorities when dealing with whistle-blowers in the Armed Forces. In the words of one of the participants, "blowing the whistle in the armed forces is particularly difficult due to restrictions imposed on freedom of expression/ speech, professional secrecy and national security concerns", but the whistle-blowers should still be protected, because of the important democratic role they play.

### **Medical checks and mental health**

In the Armed Forces of some of the participants, there are "few highly skilled medics", and they might be deployed in missions abroad. Even where there are protocols in place to deal with sexual assault, there might not be "any training nor protocol to collect evidence of sexual assault in the barracks' infirmaries", which of course hampers the whole process.

In the realm of mental health, the Interdisciplinary Center for Mental Health of the Armed Forces, part of the Hellenic National Defense General Staff, was hailed as an example of good practices, aspiring to reach both the reserve and the permanent staff of the Armed Forces, as well as their families by providing information, support and treatment. It also has "a 24-hour line for psychological support and crisis intervention, which consists of mental health specialists from all three branches of the AF".

Some incidents of harassment or abuse will be referred to counselling centres outside of the structures of the Armed Forces, where anonymity of the complainant is more easily preserved, a good example of how to improve the privacy of victims/survivors.

## Resources

Throughout the discussions, various resources have been shared or recommended:

- Megan Bastick/DCAF, Handbook on Gender and Complaints Mechanisms (2015)
- OSCE/ODIHR, DCAF, UN Women, Gender and Security Toolkit
- Corboz, J. Flood, M. & Dyson, S. (2016) Challenges of bystander intervention in male-dominated professional sport: lessons from the Australian Football League, Sage Publishing Vol.22, issue 3 2016. (a good article which discusses the issues of bystander training from the perspective of a male dominated area)
- The Research Centre for Gender Equality in Greece published a comprehensive handbook for doctors and health staff in order to give directions on how to handle cases of sexual assault and violence.
- Esther Bootsma, “Don't look the other way!: Lessons in leadership from a Dutch UN general” (2020)
- Jackson Katz's talk: “Violence against women -it's a men's issue”.

Michael Flood, one of the leading experts on violence and masculinities, kindly made available to the participants of the forum some key resources to assist with “bystander training” and education in gendered violence. He pulled together some resources and training onto this page. In it, you may find key guides to bystander intervention (in full text), videos, and academic scholarship. Few that were highlighted include:

- Talks on bystander intervention, including presentations .
- Compiled list of literature on violence prevention in military contexts.
- Chapter 9 in “Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention”, written by Michael Flood