

Chapter 3 Human Resources

Sub-Chapter 3.11 Conduct and Disciplinary Measures

3.11.7 Preventing and Responding to Sexual Misconduct

Purpose

10. This policy establishes the standards, principles, and accountability framework for preventing and responding to sexual misconduct in the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO or the Organization), all forms of which are prohibited. Processes, reporting pathways, and operational procedures are set out in the related documents.
20. This unified policy defines the distinct types of sexual misconduct and, upon issuance, supersedes Policy 3.11.7 *Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse* (effective 6 October 2025) and all elements pertaining to sexual harassment that are included in Policy 3.11.6 [*Prevention and Resolution of Harassment in the Workplace*](#) (effective 6 October 2025).

Scope

30. This policy applies to all activities conducted across the Organization, at all times, both during and outside working hours, and to:
 - 30.1. **Personnel:** Individuals who work with PAHO, regardless of the location, grade, type, or duration of contract, including staff members, personnel hired through an employment agency, consultants, temporary advisors, UN or PAHO volunteers, interns, PAHO and national employees hired under local conditions of employment (CLTs), and individuals who are seconded, loaned, or assigned to PAHO, including from the Ministry of Health of Member States.
 - 30.2. **Collaborators:** Individuals or entities that have a formal relationship with PAHO.

Terms and definitions

40. **Sexual misconduct:** An umbrella term used by PAHO to address all forms of prohibited sexual behavior by personnel and collaborators towards other personnel, collaborators, or members of the public in any location where PAHO personnel and/or collaborators operate. The term encompasses all behaviors constituting sexual exploitation, sexual abuse (collectively referred to as “sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)”), and sexual harassment.
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- 40.1. **Sexual exploitation (SE):** Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from the SE of another.¹
- 40.2. **Sexual abuse (SA):** The actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions.² Any sexual activity with children (i.e., a person under the age of 18 years) constitutes SA irrespective of the age of majority or consent, as established by local law or marriage.
- 40.2.1. Examples of conduct that may constitute SEA include, but are not limited to, acts of sexual violence; exploitation of power, authority, trust, or vulnerability for sexual purposes; transactional sex (regardless of whether it is legal in the country where it occurs); and coercive or exploitative sexual conduct, including through threats, deprivation of goods or services, or abuse of authority. These acts may involve physical, psychological, or technological means and include conduct intended to coerce, control, punish, threaten, or humiliate another person.
- 40.3. **Sexual harassment (SH):** Any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offense or humiliation, when such conduct interferes with the work environment, is made a condition of employment, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment³ or other operational environment. SH can occur as a single incident or, more typically, a pattern of conduct.⁴ In assessing the situation, the perspective of the person targeted by the conduct must be considered.

¹ UN Secretary-General's Bulletin ST/SGB/2003/13, 9 October 2003.

² UN Secretary-General's Bulletin ST/SGB/2003/13, 9 October 2003.

³ UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, *UN System Model Policy on Sexual Harassment*, New York, 2018, as expanded for PAHO, aligned with the World Health Organization, and taking into account the analysis and recommendations of the Joint Inspections Unit of the United Nations in JIU/REP/2025/2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

- 40.3.1. Examples of conduct that may constitute SH include, but are not limited to, unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, such as sexual advances or physical contact; sexually explicit or suggestive verbal, written, visual, or digital communications; gender-based insults or jokes; and other behaviors that create an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment. Such conduct may be carried out in person or through technology, including social media, artificial intelligence, or other digital means.
- 40.3.2. SH may occur outside the workplace and outside working hours, including during official travel, in private settings, or at work-related social functions. Acts of SH may also constitute SEA.⁵
- 40.3.3. Victims of SH may include personnel, collaborators, and members of the public. SH may occur between people of the same or different genders.
- 40.4. All acts of sexual misconduct are prohibited under PAHO's policies, rules, and standards of conduct, regardless of their legality under national law. Certain acts of SEA or SH may amount to crimes under national law and may also violate international criminal, human rights, or humanitarian law.
- 40.5. **Safeguarding from sexual misconduct (PRSEAH – prevention and response to sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment):** The actions the Organization takes to prevent, actively manage, and mitigate the risk of sexual misconduct and respond appropriately when it occurs. Safeguarding includes taking all reasonable actions to protect local populations, personnel, and collaborators; proactively reducing the risk of sexual misconduct; creating or strengthening mechanisms for raising concerns; and responding swiftly and decisively to concerns and incidents, prioritizing the rights, dignity, and needs of victims.
- 40.6. **Subject/subject of allegation:** A member of PAHO's personnel or a collaborator who is alleged to have engaged in an act or acts of sexual misconduct. The terms do not imply that PAHO has decided to investigate or made a determination of misconduct.

⁵ SH may also fall within the definition of SE where it involves the abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust to coerce or obtain sexual acts, favors, or other benefits. SH may constitute SA when it involves non-consensual sexual contact of any form.

- 40.7. **Victim⁶:** A person who feels that they have been sexually exploited, abused, or harassed. Use of this term is intended to respect the dignity and integrity of complainants as a key part of PAHO's victim-centered approach (para. 50.2). It does not imply that PAHO has investigated an allegation of sexual misconduct or made any determination regarding the allegation. The Organization recognizes that an individual may not identify with the term "victim", and PAHO will respect an individual's preference for alternate terminology.

Core principles

50. PAHO's approach to preventing and responding to sexual misconduct is guided by the following core principles:

50.1. **Zero tolerance:** The Organization's position that there are no excuses for sexual misconduct, inaction against sexual misconduct (i.e., failure to take appropriate, timely, and reasonable steps to prevent, address, report, or respond when an individual knew or reasonably should have known of the conduct), and/or retaliation against anyone who discloses or reports sexual misconduct or participates in an investigation. By witnessing or being made aware of concerns of sexual misconduct, managers, personnel, and collaborators are required to take meaningful actions (*see*, Annex A: Accountability for the Prevention and Response to Sexual Misconduct for further details.). All reports or concerns about sexual misconduct will be taken seriously, reviewed, and followed up with appropriate action.

50.2. An approach that places the victim at the center of all prevention and response efforts concerning SEA and SH. At PAHO, this approach is guided by 10 principles: safety, confidentiality, respect, non-discrimination, non-judgment, informed consent, accountability, access to services, access to information, and participation⁷ principles and protect victims from stigmatization, discrimination, retaliation, and re-traumatization. Support services will be offered based on victim's needs and preferences.

⁶ In line with the current accepted broader UN approach, this policy uses the term "victim" while acknowledging that the term "survivor" may also be appropriate and is preferred in certain contexts.

⁷ United Nations Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate (OVRA) *Victims' Rights Statement*.

- 50.3. **Do no harm:** PAHO personnel and collaborators must act to avoid causing or increasing harm to victims, including through the handling of a disclosure, report, or response.⁸ This includes taking measures to prevent retaliation, re-victimization, and re-traumatization.
- 50.4. **Prevention:** The Organization takes a comprehensive approach to the prevention of sexual misconduct through safeguarding, screening of personnel, training, addressing root causes, and risk mitigation and management.
- 50.5. **Confidentiality:** Maintaining confidentiality is fundamental to protecting individuals who have experienced, disclosed, or reported sexual misconduct, or participated in an investigation.⁹ Confidentiality is also an important element of due process for the subject of an allegation of sexual misconduct.¹⁰

⁸ Prioritizing a do-no-harm approach includes (i) refraining from any action that could facilitate or perpetrate sexual misconduct towards colleagues and members of the public in locations where PAHO operates; (ii) not engaging in sexual relationships with the people who receive PAHO services or who are otherwise in positions of vulnerability as members of the public in locations where PAHO personnel and collaborators operate; (iii) preventing and mitigating secondary harm that may result from how victims are treated and/or protected from retaliation; (iv) prioritizing victim safety and well-being in actions and processes; (v) ensuring the “best interests of the child” are assessed and taken into account as a primary consideration in all actions or decisions that concern them. Children must be assured of their right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and their views must be given due weight in accordance with their age and level of maturity; and (vi) informing victims of options and services available to them, recognizing barriers to participation, seeking their views and prioritizing their preferences when possible.

⁹ Confidentiality may not be ensured in certain circumstances, such as when (i) there are reasonable grounds to believe that an individual is at an imminent risk of self-harm; (ii) there are reasonable grounds to believe that one or more persons in PAHO, or where personnel or collaborators operate, are at risk of harm; (iii) reporting is required by law (e.g., in the case of a child); (iv) in the conduct of an investigation of allegations of sexual misconduct where the identity of the victim and/or subject of the allegations is needed; (v) an individual has disclosed to, reported to, or filed a complaint with the local authorities; (vi) personally identifiable information of the parties, allegations, or evidence of sexual misconduct is available in the public realm; (vii) the possibility of confidentiality is limited and/or individuals have a legitimate need-to-know to address measures of protection, prevention, victim assistance, or support; or (viii) as part of legal proceedings, including before the Board of Appeal and/or the International Labour Organization Administrative Tribunal.

¹⁰ Following completion of an investigation and any applicable administrative and/or disciplinary procedure resulting in a finding of sexual misconduct, any decision on whether to anonymize the identity of the subject of the allegation should be made in light of the Organization’s duty to protect the victim and other participants from harm, stigmatization, retaliation, or re-traumatization, while also respecting due process and applicable confidentiality requirements. Confidentiality protections are intended primarily to safeguard victims, witnesses, and the integrity of the process, and are not designed to shield misconduct from accountability.

- 50.6. **Transparency:** PAHO strives to be transparent in its actions and processes while ensuring due process. This includes providing clear, timely, and accessible information to victims, witnesses, and subjects about what to expect during formal or informal procedures, and updating relevant dashboards, databases, and reporting mechanisms.
- 50.7. **Accountability:** PAHO will ensure that the necessary systems and processes are in place to prevent, report, and respond to sexual misconduct, and to protect parties, including witnesses, from retaliation. All allegations of sexual misconduct will be addressed promptly and with objectivity, fairness, and due process. PAHO personnel or collaborators who violate this policy are subject to appropriate administrative and/or disciplinary measures, and/or legal action, including referral to competent local authorities, where appropriate.

Reporting framework

60. PAHO has established reporting and disclosure mechanisms for sexual misconduct. The table below provides a snapshot of formal and informal reporting. Refer to SOP 3.11.7a *Report Sexual Misconduct* for details of the reporting and resolution process.

Aspect	Formal Reporting	Informal Resolution
Applicability	Applies to SEA and SH	Applies only to certain forms of SH; not available for SEA
Who can use it	Victims; PAHO personnel and collaborators; reports may also be made by managers, PRSEAH Advisor(s), or through local complaint channels (SEA & SH)	Available only to PAHO personnel who have experienced certain forms of SH and feel safe pursuing informal resolution. Witnesses may also use this mechanism; however, the victim's agreement is required for their participation.
Is reporting mandatory?	SEA: PAHO personnel and collaborators are required to report	N/A
Reporting channels	Speak Up! Reporting Portal or investigations@paho.org (SEA & SH)	Confidential discussion initiated with OMB
Anonymous reporting	Permitted (SEA reporting may be anonymous or non-anonymous)	Witnesses may want to use this option when a specific victim is unidentified or unwilling to participate.
Time limits	No time limit for reporting SEA or SH	No time limit

Aspect	Formal Reporting	Informal Resolution
Investigation	Formal process may lead to an investigation and disciplinary process (SEA & SH)	No investigation
Limitations on use	Always available for SEA and SH	Not permitted where SH involves abuse of power, SA, or SE, and is only available for certain forms of SH

70. Some forms of sexual misconduct may also constitute criminal conduct in the country where the incident occurred. Victims of sexual misconduct have the right to file a criminal complaint with local authorities if they feel safe to do so.

Victim services and support

80. The Organization will make every reasonable and proactive effort to promptly identify, mobilize, and coordinate available resources, both institutional and through partnerships, to ensure victims receive timely, appropriate, and comprehensive care, taking into account the safety, interests, needs, and wishes of the victim.
90. Victims of sexual misconduct will be offered assistance and support regardless of whether they make a formal report or engage in an informal resolution process.
100. The rights and best interests of victims will guide the design and provision of assistance and support. Assistance and support to child victims (under age 18) will be provided in a manner consistent with the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular the “best interests of the child.”
110. PRSEAH Advisor(s) and PRSEAH Focal Points can assist victims and anyone else impacted by incidents of sexual misconduct in identifying and referring them to appropriate services to address their needs.
120. Victims are not obliged to accept the intervention of or support from PRSEAH Advisor(s) and Focal Points or any of the available mechanisms and can choose to take another course at any point in time. While victims are encouraged to report, they also have the option to take no action.

130. There is no time limit for reporting sexual misconduct or for engaging in a formal resolution process (or, for certain forms of sexual harassment, an informal resolution process).

Support to victims of SEA

140. In line with its commitment to safeguarding and a victim-centered approach, PAHO is committed to ensuring that individuals affected by SEA receive appropriate guidance on how to access assistance and support.
150. **Access:** Victims can access existing services in the operating area or through partners, taking into account their safety, interests, needs, and wishes.
160. **Duration:** The duration of the assistance and support will be determined in accordance with victims' needs.
170. **Contacts:** PRSEAH Advisor(s) and Focal Points can be engaged to facilitate and support this approach in collaboration with inter-agency networks, gender-based violence and child protection specialists, and local partners.
180. Victims of SEA have the right to withdraw a report at any stage of a formal process. If a victim withdraws their consent to participate or requests to withdraw a complaint, PAHO will explain, in clear and accessible terms, the likely consequences and possible outcomes of doing so, including that PAHO may continue to look into an allegation to comply with its duties and obligations under this policy; its duty of care to personnel, collaborators, and community members; any applicable legal framework; and/or international law. In all cases, PAHO will take all reasonable measures to support and enhance the victim's safety and well-being. Withdrawal of a report does not affect any right to protection against retaliation or access to victim services and support.

Support to victims of SH

190. Victims of SH who are not personnel of PAHO can access information, support, and assistance by consulting with a PRSEAH Advisor(s) or Focal Point. However, since they are not PAHO personnel, they do not have access to the informal resolution pathway for SH allegations. These individuals may submit a formal report through the appropriate channels (*see*, paragraph 60).

200. To access expert advice, support, and assistance that take into account their individual circumstances, victims of SH are encouraged to consult the PRSEAH Advisor(s) when considering the available options to address SH. PRSEAH Advisor(s) will provide victims with information and feedback to support an informed decision moving forward.
210. The PRSEAH Advisor(s) can support victims throughout the process and provide relevant information.
220. In formal processes, the victim may be accompanied by a person of their choice in accordance with PAHO's Investigation Protocol (*see*, POL 1.6.5). INV will assess whether the support person identified by the victim has any conflict of interest in the ongoing investigation, to ensure the integrity of the process.
230. In circumstances where SH involves any actual or attempted abuse of a position of power or trust, or where the act could amount to SA or SE, informal resolution is inappropriate and inconsistent with this policy.

Additional support available to PAHO personnel

240. PAHO personnel who are victims¹¹ of sexual misconduct may consult the Ethics Office (ETH) or the Ombudsperson¹², and/or HRM on the available formal and informal resolution pathways.

¹¹ Victims may decide whether their identity is disclosed when reporting sexual misconduct. This choice will be respected to the greatest extent possible, except where disclosure is required by mandatory reporting obligations, safeguarding requirements, applicable law, or where there is a risk of serious harm. Where a victim does not consent to the sharing of personal information for investigation follow-up, PAHO personnel and collaborators must still submit a report and will record that consent to share such information was not provided at that time.

¹² The Ombudsperson can assist victims in understanding if informal resolution is appropriate and available to them in the given circumstances on a strictly confidential basis. Informal resolution is not appropriate to address concerns of SH that may also constitute SA or SE.

250. PAHO personnel may also seek support from the Health and Well-Being Focal Point. Health and Well-Being personnel are subject to standards of confidentiality. Obtaining support from the Health and Well-Being Focal Point is confidential, and no information is shared with any other PAHO office or personnel without the express consent of the victim. The Health and Well-Being Focal Point may also provide information on the formal and informal resolution options.

Intimate relationships

260. While sexual misconduct is strictly prohibited, PAHO also recognizes that intimate relationships may arise in the workplace and must be managed to prevent risks of coercion, abuse of authority, or conflicts of interest.
270. Intimate relationships among colleagues in the workplace or with collaborators must not impact professional responsibilities or the work environment. Such relationships must remain entirely consensual, without coercion, exploitation, or abuse of power.
280. Intimate relationships that involve a hierarchical or supervisory relationship, or that may give rise to a real or perceived abuse of authority or conflict of interest, must be disclosed to ETH at ethics@paho.org.

Protection from retaliation

290. PAHO has zero tolerance for retaliation and is committed to providing a workplace where everyone feels safe speaking up and reporting misconduct. Personnel and collaborators who raise good faith concerns about sexual misconduct or cooperate in an investigation or audit will be protected from retaliation in accordance with Policy 3.11.8 *Protection Against Retaliation*.

Roles and responsibilities

300. Preventing and responding to sexual misconduct is a shared responsibility among all PAHO personnel and collaborators. PAHO Leadership ensures that adequate resources, guidance, oversight, and a culture of respect and gender equality are in place, while upholding the duty of care, fair and impartial processes, and a victim centered approach to safety and support.

- 310. All PAHO personnel must uphold zero tolerance for sexual misconduct by adhering to standards of conduct, completing mandatory training, reporting concerns confidentially, and cooperating fully with investigations.
- 320. Managers and Supervisors carry heightened responsibility to model ethical conduct, maintain a safe and inclusive environment, ensure awareness and training, protect confidentiality, and integrate safeguarding and risk mitigation into operations.
- 330. PRSEAH Advisor(s) support implementation and monitoring of this policy, sexual misconduct risk mitigation, provision of victim assistance, and inter-agency engagement, while PAHO Partners and Collaborators comply with contractual safeguarding obligations, prevent misconduct, and promptly report and follow up on cases. *See, Annex A: Accountability for the Prevention and Response to Sexual Misconduct* for further details.

Preventing and safeguarding against sexual misconduct

- 340. PAHO is committed to safeguarding operations by preventing harm, creating safe environments, and responding effectively to sexual misconduct and related abuses. Addressing workplace culture and promoting behavioral change are integral to sustainable and effective prevention efforts that tackle the root causes of sexual misconduct. Regular awareness activities at Headquarters and Country Offices, led by PRSEAH Advisor(s), ETH, and PRSEAH focal points, reinforce organizational standards and promote a respectful workplace.
- 350. Safeguarding measures include mandatory screening and reference checks for all recruitments, promotions, and rotations. Personnel whose working relationship is terminated as a result of substantiated sexual misconduct will be entered into the UN Clear Check database in line with PAHO procedures. Personnel who refuse to cooperate with investigations will be subject to appropriate administrative and/or disciplinary actions in accordance with applicable PAHO policies.

360. Risk assessments for sexual misconduct and subsequent risk mitigation measures must be integrated into the program design and implementation process, as well as the Enterprise Risk Management system. PAHO collaborates with civil society organizations through the UN Partner Portal and works with governments and partners to integrate safeguarding measures in all contexts with the goal of aligning with the objectives of this policy. Feedback mechanisms and donor requirements strengthen monitoring and reinforce PAHO's zero-tolerance approach.
370. In view of the seriousness of an allegation of SEA or SH, provisional measures may be applied, including placing the subject on leave with or without pay, pending conclusion of an investigation and a final decision. *See*, Staff Rule 1120.

Monitoring, information sharing, and review

380. To ensure the effectiveness of the sexual misconduct policy framework, PAHO monitors implementation through periodic review and evaluation. A review of this policy and associated training and learning activities, led by PRSEAH Advisor(s), will take place three years from the effective date of this policy.
390. PRSEAH Advisor(s) will consider the results of staff surveys and feedback from victims, subjects, and bystanders, as well as periodic evaluations of PAHO's policy framework and the implementation and effectiveness of PAHO's prevention of and response to sexual misconduct, to identify gaps or elements of this policy that may be strengthened. Information will be shared with the Audit Committee as required. Failure to observe this policy will be brought to the attention of senior management and addressed through performance management or other appropriate action, ensuring that PAHO remains at the forefront of efforts to prevent and respond to sexual misconduct.
400. The Organization shall comply with all applicable internal and external reporting obligations relating to allegations or cases of sexual misconduct. Such reporting shall be conducted in accordance with established procedures, confidentiality and data protection requirements, and the principles of survivor-centered assistance, due process, and the protection of affected persons. Information disclosed shall be limited to that which is necessary to meet the relevant reporting obligation and shall be shared only through authorized channels and designated officials, as further detailed in applicable Standard Operating Procedures.

410. Formal reports to governing bodies and senior management are supplemented by regular updates to the misconduct and investigations dashboards of PAHO, the WHO, and the UN. These updates include (i) the monthly sharing by PAHO/WHO Country Representatives of anonymized information and referrals of allegations of SEA to UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators (UN RC/HC), and Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Coordinators to mitigate risk and inform leadership in country, (ii) UN system public dashboard on SEA allegations (ireport), and (iii) the annual certification by cost-center managers that all allegations of SEA involving PAHO personnel have been reported to the UN Secretary-General through the WHO. Regular reporting ensures that any concerns regarding the effectiveness of the sexual misconduct policy framework are acknowledged and addressed, and that PAHO's policy framework remains aligned with the safeguarding standards of the WHO and the UN.

Responsibility for this policy

420. ETH is responsible for administering this policy. For any questions or further information regarding this policy, contact hqprseah@paho.org.

Related documents

The following PAHO documents provide related material and should be read in conjunction with this policy.

[PAHO Staff Rules and Staff Regulations](#)

POL 1.6.5 Investigation Protocol

POL 3.11.2 Suspension, Disciplinary Measures and Clear Check

[POL 3.11.5 PAHO Code of Ethics](#)

[POL 3.11.6 Policy on the Prevention and Resolution of Harassment in the Workplace](#)

[POL 3.11.7 Preventing and Responding to Sexual Misconduct - Annex A - Accountability for Preventing and Responding to Sexual Misconduct](#)

POL 3.11.8 Protection Against Retaliation

[SOP 3.11.7a Report Sexual Misconduct](#)

Last reviewed by policy owner on 19 October 2026.