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**Subject:** Protection from SEA during COVID response – Joint message from the ERC, IASC Champion on PSEA (UNHCR) and UN VRA

**Joint message from the Emergency Relief Coordinator, IASC Champion on PSEA and Sexual Harassment UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and UN Victims' Rights Advocate**

Dear Humanitarian Coordinators,

We are reaching out to you to reinforce the importance of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) during the COVID-19 pandemic, recalling the role of Humanitarian Coordinators in [leading interagency PSEA efforts at the country level](#). Experience from similar recent episodes including the outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD), demonstrates that the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) escalates during public health emergencies.

As you are aware, the Secretary General's recent Policy Brief on [The Impact of COVID-19 on Women](#) notes with concern that "as the COVID-19 pandemic deepens economic and social stress coupled with restricted movement and social isolation measures, gender-based violence is increasing," and economic impacts are felt most severely by women and girls. The economic devastation of the pandemic is leaving women and girls from affected communities, already in vulnerable situations, at greater risk of SEA. SEA complaint mechanisms have become even harder to access due to the rise in self-isolation measures, such as physical distancing policies, curfews and quarantines. School closures have not only interrupted education, but also affected school-based services for children at risk and placed additional childcare responsibilities on women, further restricting women's access to livelihoods and economic security. As the crisis continues, children can also be expected to face separation from their families due to illness, death and quarantine, leaving them, particularly girls, at risk of sexual abuse.

On 31 March 2020, the IASC issued a Technical Guidance Note on [PSEA during the COVID-19 Response](#), available in Arabic, French, Spanish, Russian and English on the IASC website. This outlines core actions that we need to take at the outset of the public health response, such as the early identification and mitigation of SEA risks arising from isolation measures and in healthcare settings, the establishment of PSEA Focal Points and complaints mechanisms in healthcare delivery points, and implementing PSEA training and recruitment safeguards during any expedited hiring of health workers. As in-person SEA reporting channels may be suspended due to physical distancing measures, it is critical that we consult with affected communities, particularly women and girls, on their preferred alternatives to in-person complaints, whilst updating communities of any changes in reporting mechanisms. More broadly, the leadership and meaningful participation of women and girls must be promoted in all decision-making on ways to address the pandemic. Decisions must be informed by gender- and gender-based violence considerations.

We would like to highlight the following high-level priorities:

- **Prioritize access to safe and accessible services for SEA victims/survivors** through established gender-based violence and child protection programming, and advocate for these programmes to be

fully funded. At the country level, this requires verifying that services are functional, of an appropriate standard, and accessible to victims/survivors in light of isolation measures and movement restrictions.

- **Consult affected communities**, particularly women and girls, on all aspects of SEA prevention and response, including ways to address barriers to accessing services and reporting mechanisms.
- **Integrate PSEA in other sector-specific guidance** on COVID-19.
- **Support and engage states at all levels** to strengthen PSEA in national systems, including in the health sector.
- **Secure the commitment of all humanitarian stakeholders**, including NGO partners, to prioritize PSEA throughout the pandemic response.
- **Promote Inter-Agency Codes of Conduct** to ensure clear and coherent binding standards of conduct, particularly as there may be a rapid increase in new humanitarian providers.
- **Include PSEA in COVID-19 funding appeals**, with attention to supporting dedicated PSEA staff and technical expertise.

Drawing on the lessons learned from prior health emergencies, the IASC is developing a five-point checklist to supplement the IASC Technical Guidance Note, which should be of particular use in remote settings. The IASC will continue to support your PSEA focal points to share emerging developments, experiences and good practices.

Thank you for your efforts.

Best wishes,

Mark Lowcock, Emergency Relief Coordinator

Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees and IASC Champion on PSEA and sexual harassment

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