

# IASC Definition & Principles of a Victim/Survivor Centered Approach

**Purpose:** The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is committed to applying an end-to-end<sup>1</sup> victim/survivor-centred approach to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment (SH). This guidance sets out a common definition of a victim/survivor<sup>2</sup> centered approach, its underlying principles and key actions and is designed to assist IASC members to adopt and implement a victim/survivor-centred approach in their formal and informal processes, policies and procedures in relation to SEA and SH.

SEA and SH are forms of Gender-Based Violence. This document builds on and is consistent with previously issued guidance, including those developed under the IASC and within the United Nations system (see Annex 2).

**Audience:** This guidance is aimed at all IASC members.

**Definition:** A victim/survivor-centred approach places the rights, wishes, needs, safety, dignity and well-being of the victim/survivor at the centre of all prevention and response measures concerning sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment (SH).

## Principles & Key Actions:

**Safety, Security & Well-Being:** Ensure the safety and security of the victim/survivor as a primary consideration, taking into account their familial, social and cultural context. Adhere to the principles of “Do No Harm” and refrain from any action that jeopardizes the safety, security and emotional well-being of the victim/survivor. Assess potential risks for victims/survivors and ensure all contact, communication and support to a victim/survivor is provided in a manner which seeks to uphold their rights, needs, safety, dignity and emotional well-being and protects them from stigmatization, discrimination, retaliation and re-traumatization.

**Confidentiality:** Confidentiality covers the identity of those who have provided the information, as well as the information itself. Victims/survivors have the right to choose to whom they will or will not tell their story, however, victims/survivors must be informed of the limits of confidentiality, including informing them when mandatory reporting procedures are in place and what these imply. Outline the information that may be transmitted, to whom, and for what purpose, as early as possible and before the victim/survivor shares their personally identifiable information and incident details. Explain any implications on the scope and conduct of a possible investigation of a victim/survivor’s choice to keep information confidential. Ensure that robust data protection measures are in place.

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<sup>1</sup> **End-to-end** refers to a full process from start to finish. An end to end victim/survivor-centred approach and key principles of a victim/survivor-centred approach apply to all IASC member entity policies and procedures and practices, including prevention, response and accountability measures. The perspectives, rights, needs and victims must be considered in all interactions.

<sup>2</sup> **Victim/Survivor:** this document uses the term “victim/survivor”, acknowledging that the individual terms “victim” or “survivor” are preferred in certain contexts, including by individual victims/survivors themselves. While the two terms are often used interchangeably, “victim” is more prevalent in the legal and medical system, and “survivor” is more prevalent in psychosocial support sectors.

**Dignity & Respect:** All actions taken should be guided by respect for the dignity, choices, wishes, needs, rights, culture and values of the victim/survivor, and consider their informed choices as a central priority. Treat the victim/survivor with courtesy, empathy, and professionalism.

**Non-discrimination & Inclusion:** Victims/Survivors should receive equal and fair treatment. Be gender-responsive and inclusive. Do not discriminate on the basis of race, colour, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, language, religion, belief, political or other opinion, national or social origin, disability, property, birth or other status. Acknowledge intersectional discrimination and be aware of personal bias.

**Ask, Listen and Engage:** Ask questions, engage with and listen to the victim/survivor without bias or judgement, using a trauma informed approach. Show empathy in all interactions with a victim/survivor. Do not assign guilt or responsibility but empower the victim/survivor to share, should they wish to, and at their own pace. Consult with victims/survivors and create the opportunities and channels for them to actively participate in decisions and processes that affect them.

**Transparency & Information:** Provide the victim/survivor with regular, timely information in a language and format that is accessible, to enable them to evaluate and understand the consequences, including the benefits and risks of a course of action and make informed choices. Explain the due process rights of the alleged perpetrator(s) to the victim/survivor at the earliest time possible, allowing the victim/survivor to understand how this may affect them.

**Informed Consent/Choice:** Consent is based upon the victim/survivor's clear appreciation and understanding of the facts, implications and potential consequences of an action. Actively seek consent from victims/survivors on the possible use of the information they provide. Endeavor to make no information disclosure at any time to any party without the informed consent of the victim/survivor. Inform victims/survivors about their right to engage or not to engage in a process and the fact that the IASC entity may decide to pursue management action, without their consent and participation, to prevent further harm. A victim/survivor can withdraw their consent to participate in the process at any time, without impacting their right to assistance.

**Support & Assistance:** Offer holistic assistance and support to all victims/survivors irrespective of whether the victim/survivor initiates or cooperates with an investigation or any other accountability or resolution procedure. Should they wish, facilitate accompaniment of victims/survivors through any accountability processes, via a dedicated support person or other manner. In line with their wishes, accessible and quality services, including but not limited to medical, psychological, socio-economic support, and legal services, must be offered or referrals made, for as long as is appropriate and in line with the entities' and applicable inter-agency policies and standards<sup>3</sup>, and tailored to their particular circumstances.

**Redress:** Respect victim/survivor rights to seek remedies from perpetrators, via formal and informal processes as appropriate, including restorative justice and, as needed, support the victim/survivor to access these remedies. Facilitate the pursuit of paternity and child support claims for victims/survivors, where desired and legally applicable, in cooperation with the relevant State.

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<sup>3</sup> These include: [GBV AoR/UNFPA, \*Interagency Minimum Standards for GBV in Emergencies Programming \(2019\)\*; United Nations Protocol on the Provision of Assistance to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse \(2019\)](#); and the [Technical Note on the Implementation of the United Nations Protocol on the Provision of Assistance to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#).

**Feedback:** Seek feedback from victims/survivors on ongoing processes and procedures and seek to learn from every situation. Should any of the above principles be breached, victims/survivors have a right to complain, and/or provide feedback using individual IASC entity processes, as appropriate, or via the UN Ombudsman and Mediation Services and/or the Office of the Victim’s Rights Advocate.

**Provision on Child Victims/Survivors:** Assistance and support to child victims/survivors (persons below 18 years of age) must be provided in a manner consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), in particular the principle of the “best interests of the child”, as per article 3 of the CRC. Children have the right to have their best interests assessed and considered as a primary consideration in all actions or decisions that concern them. In addition, children shall be assured the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with the child’s age and level of maturity, as per article 12 of the CRC. For children who are too young to understand information about their rights and service options, this information should also be shared with their trusted adult who can support the child to participate in making a decision.

**Notes on:**

**Prevention:** IASC members must take robust measures to promote an environment free of SEA and SH in which all people are treated with respect, where perpetrators are held accountable, where all personnel feel comfortable to speak out, and have confidence that SEA & SH allegations will be addressed in line with the above-mentioned principles.

**Community Engagement & Participation:** Conduct awareness-raising activities and educational, preventative outreach efforts to ensure aid recipients, local populations and personnel are aware of prohibited aid worker conduct<sup>4</sup>, safe working environments, their rights, reporting mechanisms, and available support services. Establish, strengthen and/or utilize victim/survivor centered accessible, trust-worthy and adapted complaints mechanisms and support services.

**Accountability:** IASC members have an organizational responsibility to ensure that measures are in place for ensuring accountability, through investigations, the application of disciplinary measures, and promoting criminal investigation by States when appropriate, and to learn from cases and revise policies as appropriate, in line with the above-mentioned principles.

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<sup>4</sup> As outlined by UNSG 2003/IASC 2002 and 2019 <https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/content/policies-and-protocols>

## Annex 1: Definitions

**Sexual exploitation** is 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 sexual exploitation of another.

**Sexual abuse** is the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions.<sup>5</sup>

**Sexual Harassment** is any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected, or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation, when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. Sexual harassment may occur in the workplace or in connection with work. While typically involving a pattern of conduct, sexual harassment may take the form of a single incident. In assessing the reasonableness of expectations or perceptions, the perspective of the person who is the target of the conduct shall be considered.

Sexual harassment is the manifestation of a culture of discrimination and privilege based on unequal gender relations and other power dynamics. Sexual harassment may involve any conduct of a verbal, nonverbal or physical nature, including written and electronic communications. Sexual harassment may occur between persons of the same or different genders, and individuals of any gender can be either the targets or the perpetrators. Sexual harassment may occur outside the workplace and outside working hours, including during official travel or social functions related to work. Sexual harassment may be perpetrated by any colleague, including a supervisor, peer or a subordinate.<sup>6</sup>

**Victim/Survivor** is a person who is or has been sexually exploited, abused or harassed.

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<sup>5</sup> *Secretary-General's Bulletin: Special Measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (ST/SGB/2003/13)*, Section 1.

<sup>6</sup> This comes from the definition and explanatory notes in the [UN System Model Policy on Sexual Harassment](#), which serve as a guide. It is understood that different IASC members may define sexual harassment differently.

## Annex 2: Victim/Survivor Centered Approach and Resources

This guidance builds on existing guidance, including the Survivor Centered Approach as defined in the Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action (2015), endorsed by the IASC. It also builds on the work of the CEB Taskforce on Advancing a Common Understanding of a Victim-Centred Approach to Sexual Harassment, the draft Victims' Rights Statement prepared by the Office of the Victim's Rights Advocate Victims' Rights Advocate, UNHCR's Policy on a Victim Centered Approach in Response to Sexual Misconduct, the OECD DAC's Recommendation on Ending Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance: Key Pillars of Prevention and Response and the work of individual agencies and IASC Members Entities. A full list of references is included.

1. GBV AoR/UNFPA, *Interagency Minimum Standards for GBV in Emergencies Programming (2019)*
2. Chief Executives Board (CEB) Taskforce on Addressing Sexual Harassment Within the Organizations of the United Nations System, *Advancing a Common Understanding of a Victim-centred Approach to Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the United Nations*
3. United Nations Protocol on the Provision of Assistance to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (2019)
4. OECD, *Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Recommendation on Ending Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance: Key Pillars of Prevention and Response*
5. UNHCR, *Policy on a Victim-Centred Approach in UNHCR's Response to Sexual Misconduct*
6. Office of the Victim's Rights Advocate, *Victim's Rights Statement*
7. InterAction, *Core Standards for Survivor-Centered Support of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment*
8. *Policy on Integrating a Human Rights-Based Approach to United Nations Efforts to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*
9. CHS Alliance, *Foundational Paper on Victim/Survivor-Centred Approach to Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment in the Aid Sector*