

Punishing Whistleblowers at the United Nations

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Theme: [United Nations](#)

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The United Nations prides itself on exposing, monitoring and noting the travails and vicissitudes to be found on this troubled planet. It also prides itself on being the premier international institution that protects, or at the very least keeps an eye out for, the principles of the Charter that underpin its existence. But as with all bodies with mighty aspirations but skewed power, the grime of reality often supplies a different, less impressive picture.

Every organisation replicates its own rationale for existence, including mechanisms to cope with problems of its own making. Such problems are rarely resolved: they are inherent in the nature of the organisation itself, essential to its functioning. The United Nations, like many labyrinthine orders, has proven to be impenetrable, bureaucratic and dispiriting. For years, it has been dealing with a range of conduct issues regarding UN personnel and, for want of a better term, the workplace. Over that time, it has also sought to keep such misbehaviour, and in some cases blatant criminality, concealed, preferring to focus the ire upon those who spill the beans.

Consulting the range of measures supposedly in place does little to encourage optimism. In February 2016, we are told of Jane Holl Lute’s [appointment](#) as Special Coordinator on improving the UN response to “sexual exploitation and abuse” which, on first reading, looks like an encouragement rather than a counter. “Her role is to work across the United Nations systems’ many offices, departments and agencies to strengthen the UN response to sexual exploitation and abuse, wherever it may occur, from headquarters locations to the most remote field bases.”

The remit is a cool, procedural one, a case of making sure that the stars of administration align with the requisite paperwork. Lute’s task was to “align approaches, enhance coordination, cooperation and coherence system-wide through the development of aligned mechanisms and procedures, standardized protocols and tools.” This is the sort of language that murders the cause and obscures the victim, which is precisely the sort of rationale that thrives in New York and those “remote bases”.

But there is more. Jane Connors comes shooting up the ranks as the [appointed](#) Victims' Rights Advocate at UN Headquarters in August 2017. Her role: to "ensure that the United Nations provides tangible and sustained assistance to the victims of sexual exploitation and abuse."

These are but a few examples, and have done nothing to stem, let alone stop the rot. On June 21 this year, the BBC added its contribution with a [documentary](#) about whistleblowers within the UN and the malicious treatment they have received at the hands of their superiors. The test and merit of any organisation lies in how it treats those who expose defects and faults. The brave and the responsible will take such exposures to heart, punish those responsible for breaches and apply the appropriate treatments. Most, however, prefer to punish the well-meaning discloser while sparing the perpetrator.

The revelations in the documentary, informed by a number of whistleblowers, are disturbingly extensive. There is James Wasserstrom, who claims to have found evidence that the construction of a power station in Kosovo came from a tendering process compromised by generous kickbacks. There is John O'Brien, who brought attention to the fact that an environmental programme based in Russia had been tarnished by money-laundering.

In all these instances, organisational vindictiveness duly kicked in. Wasserstrom, despite being promised the protections one would expect for a whistleblower, had his name leaked to his accusers. O'Brien was accused of misbehaving in viewing nude photographs on his phone at work, the whistleblower as deviant.

All this pales before the crimes committed by the Blue Helmet peacekeepers in such countries as the Central African Republic and Haiti. Locals became prey to sexual assault, vulnerable quarry to be pursued rather than protected. Former assistant secretary-general Tony Banbury was particularly concerned about the welfare of a rape victim in CAR. He was left disgusted and despondent. "I needed the organisation to prioritise that girl. They prioritise the perpetrators."

Those reporting sexual misconduct by highly placed UN personnel became rich targets for retribution. Their careers were prematurely frustrated or ended. Purna Sen, who was appointed spokeswoman on harassment, assault and discrimination in 2018, could only [lament](#) to BBC Newsnight that there was "a real tension within an organisation which not only upholds and advocates for human rights, but is actually the birthplace of most of these human rights - yet hasn't learned to bring them home to the people who work for that organisation."

The Government Accountability Project, Transparency International and the Whistleblowing International Network [responded to the revelations](#) in the documentary by repeating their own concerns. "We again urge UN Secretary General António Guterres to immediately order an independent inquiry and use his power to remedy the harm caused to UN staff who have already suffered for trying to do the right thing." The three groups insist that, "Serious structural reforms are needed to bring the UN systems in line with international consensus for best practice principles and to ensure UN staff feel safe to speak up when they witness harmful conduct at work."

The core problem for such a body as the UN, like others wielding enormous and iniquitous power, is suggested by the proliferation of policies without action or spirit. They function

like economists in the service of a bankrupt state, with guardians and investigators merely serving as advisors who never solve the problem.

One such individual is spokesman for the UN Secretary General himself, Stéphane Dujarric, who seems to [genuinely believe](#) the piffle he is spouting. “We continue to do whatever we can to support victims and are focused on improving the systems and ensuring that people feel safe to report abuse.”

For those who seek change, punishment and banishment await. With that state of affairs, everyone, from leader to cleaner, will be assured that this will remain the ugliest of family affairs, ensuring that all whistleblowing will never perform the role it should.

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