



United Nations
Victims' Rights
Advocate

Annual Report 2019



‘My priority is
to give visibility to those
who have suffered,
including through connecting
with them personally.
I wish to amplify their voices
in a way that cannot be
ignored, and to support them
as they rebuild their lives’

Jane Connors

Victims' Rights Advocate

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Imprint

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Foreword



In the short time since the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate (OVRA) became fully operational, it has engaged in many activities to deliver on the Secretary-General's pledge to put victims at the centre of all United Nations efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse by its personnel. Concrete results for victims of these wrongs, as outlined in this report, were achieved in 2019, but much more must be done to ensure that appropriate resources for victim protection and assistance are available.

As we go forward in 2020, this will become even more challenging as the world grapples with a global public health and economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic affecting all aspects of our lives. During this time, our task of ensuring provision of support and assistance to identified victims of sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations personnel, as well as any new victims who may come forward, will face difficulties, but will be critical.

Conduct and Discipline Teams embedded in United Nations peace operations and some special political missions, Senior Victims' Rights Officers and Field Victims' Rights Advocates on the ground inform us that restrictions on their movement and those of victims and mitigation measures, such as curfews, are compromising maintenance of communication and interaction with victims. They also negatively impact on provision of services and support for projects which have been available for victims. Regrettably, projects supported by the Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse may be suspended, which will harm victims further.

My Office and our Senior Victims' Rights Officers in the field are working with all our partners to find ways to make sure that assistance and support to victims can continue and their rights realized. I count on your continued support in these particularly challenging times.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jane Connors".

Jane Connors

Victims' Rights Advocate

A United Nations framework for victims' rights

The Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate continued to make progress over the course of 2019 to put in place a system-wide and institutionalized effort to put victims at the centre of the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse.

This has involved ongoing advocacy and engagement with Member States, United Nations system partners, civil society and other stakeholders to realize the centrepiece of the Secretary-General's strategy to prioritize the rights and dignity of victims in our efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.

This is also central to global efforts to realize the United Nations 2030 Agenda to 'Leave No-one Behind' through promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, and to providing access to justice for all to build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (SDG Goal 16) and achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (SDG Goal 5).

Putting victims at the centre

The Victims' Rights Advocate convened a workshop on victims' rights in New York from 30 to 31 May 2019, bringing together over 50 experts from around the world to share information on best practices and lessons-learned in reporting and investigations, provision of assistance, protection for victims and

witnesses, communications and follow-up with victims, and access to justice.

Discussions at the workshop focused on a draft statement on the rights of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse proposed by the Victims' Rights Advocate. The statement aims to outline a common understanding of a system-wide victim-centred approach and underline the United Nations commitment to putting the rights and dignity of victims at the centre of its efforts. It is also intended to serve as a common point of reference for all personnel working under the United Nations flag and to provide clear guidance for victims to understand and claim their rights.

Taking into consideration the comments and feedback received during the workshop, and on the basis of subsequent consultation with individual experts, work continued on the draft statement throughout the year. The statement will be presented for wider consultation within the working group on sexual exploitation and abuse and transmitted to the United Nations senior leadership for possible endorsement in 2020.

‘The victims-rights approach means encouraging people to report allegations, investigating these claims with compassion, and holding perpetrators accountable’

United Nations Protocol on the Provision of Assistance to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

In close collaboration with the Conduct and Discipline Service of the United Nations Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance and UNICEF which led an initiative to create a [United Nations Protocol on the Provision of Assistance to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#) (the Victims’ Assistance Protocol), the Victims’ Rights Advocate supported its finalization in 2019.

The Protocol was endorsed by the High-Level Steering Group in December 2019 and will be rolled out system-wide in 2020. It aims to provide consistent direction across the United Nations system on the provision of assistance and support to victims. As elaborated in the Protocol, assistance and support will be provided with consideration of the best interests of the victim.

The Victims’ Assistance Protocol is firmly rooted in the principles and rights underpinning a victim-centred approach, such as safety, dignity and respect, care and treatment, privacy and confidentiality. The Victims’ Assistance Protocol marks an important step forward in the United Nations’ approach to victims and builds on the Comprehensive Strategy on Assistance and Support to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by United Nations Staff and Related Personnel adopted by the General Assembly in 2007. The Victims’ Assistance Protocol also reflects the experience and what has been learned since then.

Pilot mapping of services available to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse

In 2018, the Secretary-General requested the Victims’ Rights Advocate to undertake a comprehensive mapping of services system-wide, building on the work already undertaken in this area, in order to provide a clear overview of gaps, overlap, lessons learned and best practices. This followed the request made by the General Assembly to the Secretary-General in 2017 to conduct a holistic analysis of the United Nations inter-agency cooperation at the country level for the provision of assistance and support to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse.¹

Over the past year, OVRA has mapped services available to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, including legal, medical, psycho-social, safety, shelter and livelihood support for victims in 13 countries: Bangladesh, Central African Republic, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Greece, Haiti, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique and South Sudan. These countries include peace missions, humanitarian and development settings reflecting the system-wide nature of the OVRA mandate.

OVRA has developed online summaries of country profiles which provide an overview of services available created on the basis of desk reviews, answers to questionnaires circulated to United Nations entities, civil society organizations and service providers,

¹ A/RES/71/297, paragraph 12.

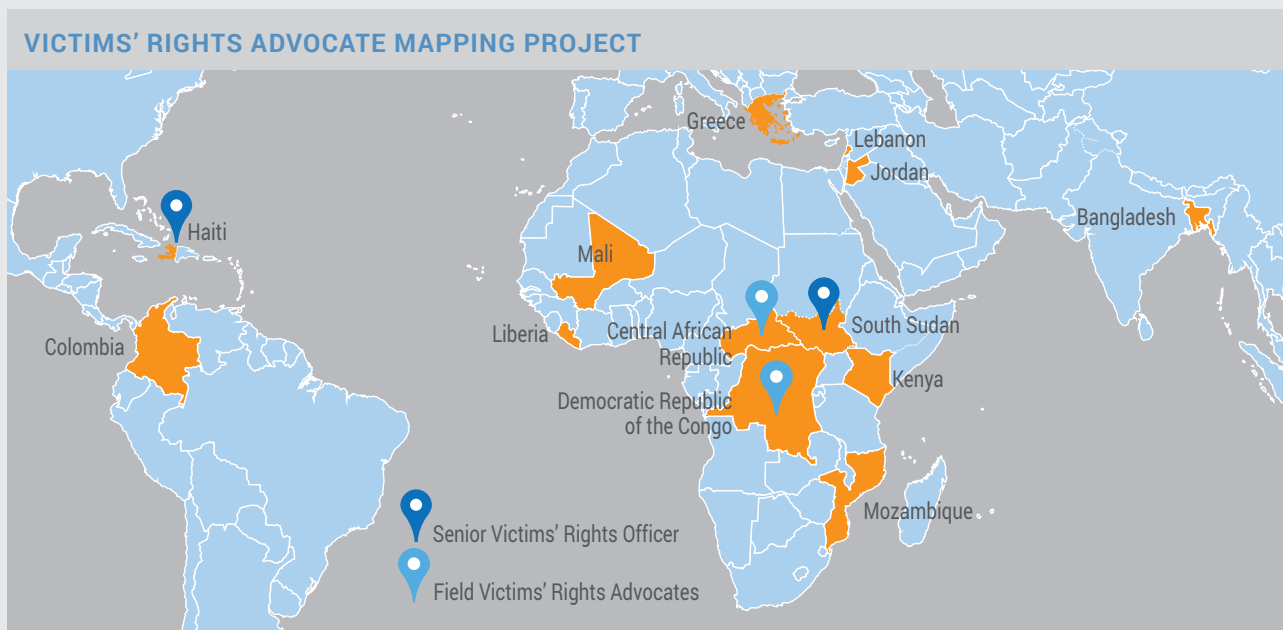
'A victims-rights approach means giving a voice to victims, to focus on their experiences'

and where possible, technical visits. Field Victims' Rights Advocates and Senior Victims' Rights Officers also supported the collection of information and contributed to the country profiles.

The findings indicate that services for victims of sexual exploitation and abuse are often rolled into existing programmes, most commonly for victims of sexual and gender-based violence. OVRA's findings also indicated that dedicated and specialized services for victims of sexual exploitation and abuse were either lacking or provided on an ad-hoc basis as a result of limited human and financial resources.

Particular gaps were found in the areas of legal assistance, livelihood support and provision of safety and protection. The findings also suggested that more was required to achieve consistency on data and information with regards to assistance offered

and provided to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse across the United Nations system on the ground. Furthermore, while the Victim Assistance Tracking System (VATS), developed by the Conduct and Discipline Section of the United Nations Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, has been rolled out in countries where conduct and discipline teams are in place, there is no system-wide tool to track victims and the assistance they may be receiving and the available in-country service providers. OVRA's pilot mapping exercise aims to provide a baseline for the future development by United Nations entities of victim-centred programmes and generate momentum for the expansion of such mapping exercises to be undertaken in other countries. Consultations with key stakeholders on the results of the mapping project and next steps will be held during 2020.





Colombia | Top: Victims' Rights Advocate's meeting with the UN Local Coordination Team, UNVMC Cúcuta office, Colombia, April 2019. UN Photo/Diego Morales. Bottom: Victims' Rights Advocate speaks with the head of the UNVMC local office in Cúcuta, Colombia, April 2019. UN Photo/Diego Morales.



Colombia | Poster on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse produced by the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia. Bogotá, Colombia, April 2019. UN Photo/Linda Manaka Infante Suruta.

Our work in the field

The Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate works to place the rights and dignity of victims at the forefront of United Nations efforts, and the field is where this happens. The Victims' Rights Advocate and Victims' Rights Officers in the field give visibility to those who have suffered and work to address the stigmatization and discrimination that victims often face. The Office works to facilitate victims' access to justice and to increase accountability, which remains elusive for the majority of victims.

Country visits

Since taking up the mandate in 2017, the Victims' Rights Advocate has conducted visits to the Central African Republic, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Lebanon, Jordan and South Sudan and has made recommendations for further action by United Nations actors to strengthen the support and assistance available to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. These countries include humanitarian response settings, as well as a special political missions and peacekeeping missions. During each of these visits, the Victim' Rights Advocate met confidentially and individually with victims - mainly women and children - to listen to and understand their concerns, and assure them that the United Nations stands beside them as they rebuild their lives.

During 2019, the Victims' Rights Advocate conducted three field visits to gain a first-hand understanding of how United Nations actors operate on the ground to assist and support victims. These field visits provided United Nations system actors with an opportunity to come together to assess how they are preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse, and facilitated stronger partnerships on the ground to make recommendations for further action to strengthen support and assistance for victims.

Central African Republic

In the Central African Republic (19 to 22 February 2019), OVRA convened the first global consultation of Field Victims' Rights Advocates and Senior Victims' Rights Officers. Issues discussed included the pilot mapping exercise of services available to victims

‘We need to appreciate what these wrongs do to victims and their communities; what these wrongs do to the very purpose of the United Nations’ work, because these wrongs do indeed fracture trust’

of sexual exploitation and abuse described above. The VRA also followed up on the implementation of recommendations from her first visit to the Central African Republic in October 2017. She met with victims and their children born as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse (at their request). OVRA recognized the commitment of the United Nations country team in the Central African Republic to victims’ rights as well as the efforts made to strengthen information-sharing mechanisms.

Initiatives undertaken included the finalization of pledge letters to be signed by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) supervisors and managers on preventing and addressing sexual exploitation and abuse, and the organization by the Force Commander of weekly meetings with troop contingents on prevention. The formulation and adoption of an Information-sharing protocol, now being implemented across the country team is also a significant step forward in balancing the principle of confidentiality with the need to exchange information in a timely manner for the benefit of victims.

Colombia

The VRA’s visit to Colombia (22 to 26 April 2019) included meetings in Bogotá with the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, members of United Nations country team, PSEA taskforce, State and Government interlocutors, including the Presidential Advisor for Women’s Equality, and the Director of the Unit for Comprehensive Attention and Reparation to Victims. The VRA also met with the Ombudsman and Chairperson of the Defensoría del Pueblo, the national

human rights institution. A field visit was conducted to Cúcuta, in the Norte de Santander Department where meetings were held with the Local Coordination Team and local implementing partners of United Nations entities. The VRA observed the situation of migrants and refugees on the border with Venezuela, including at the Centre for Transitional Assistance for Migrants, in the La Parada area, Villa del Rosario municipality, which houses Venezuelan migrants and refugees, supported by IOM and UNHCR.

The VRA’s recommendations arising from the visit included the need for improved coordination of a system-wide United Nations approach through a dedicated PSEA coordinator and a focal point for support and assistance to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. The VRA also recommended strengthening support for victims, including through the creation of more safe-houses and shelters; and dissemination of information on service providers; as well as enhanced capacity- building for civil society, national authorities and institutions.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

During her visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (22 to 29 November 2019), the VRA met with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), and other senior staff of the Mission, including the Force Commander and Police Commissioner, as well as heads and representatives of other United Nations entities, Government authorities and civil society interlocutors, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).



Democratic Republic of the Congo Trust Fund | Top: A woman buys a basket made through a project to support of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations personnel in Kavumu, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, December 2019. UN Photo/Alban Mendes de Leon. Bottom: Members of the Complaint-based Community Network (CBCN) of Sake, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo walk down the street after visiting one of the projects in their community supported by the Trust Fund in support of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, December 2019. UN Photo/Alban Mendes de Leon.

The OVRA ensures victims receive the practical assistance they need, such as access to medical and legal services, but also skills training so they can rebuild their lives

Field visits were conducted to Bukavu and Goma where the VRA met with service providers and visited the projects supported by the [Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#). She also met with beneficiaries and victims on a confidential basis.

Field Victims' Rights Advocates

Victims' Rights Officers are in place in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti and South Sudan. These Advocates are the main contact for all victims of sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by United Nations personnel, and ensure that a victim-centred, gender- and child-sensitive and non-discriminatory approach is integrated into all activities to support the realization of their rights.

Supporting victims on the ground

Victims' Rights Advocates in the field², and more recently dedicated Senior Victims' Rights Officers operationalize the role of the Victims' Rights Advocate³. Given their system-wide role, they monitor, oversee and coordinate the strategic vision for victim assistance and support with all relevant United Nations system actors on the ground, with a view to

ensuring that victims' rights are upheld. They are also the main contact point for all victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, maintaining close contact with them, following up on their cases, and keeping them abreast of progress.

Central African Republic

In the Central African Republic, the Field Victims' Rights Advocate works with the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) taskforce and the gender-based violence and child protection subclusters to facilitate referrals to appropriate service providers and coordinate assistance for victims across the system. The Field Victims' Rights Advocate has helped to resolve paternity claims and facilitate victims' access to services and assistance, such as opening bank accounts for the transfer of child support payments.

The Field Victims' Rights Advocate has also provided support to victims and witnesses during investigations of sexual exploitation and abuse ensuring that their rights, including to confidentiality, are protected and they were neither re-traumatized nor further stigmatized. The Field Victims' Rights Advocate in the Central African Republic is also continuing work on a project in partnership with the American Bar Association to provide legal support to victims.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Field Victims' Rights Advocate is working with MONUSCO's Conduct and Discipline Team to establish a protocol for victims' assistance with UNFPA and UNICEF.

² Field Victims' Rights Advocates are full time United Nations personnel with other functions who serve as focal points for victims support and assistance.

³ As of March 2020, there are two dedicated Senior Victims' Rights Officers in Haiti and South Sudan. A further two Senior Victims' Rights Officers will soon be deployed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic.

Large gaps remain in the services available to victims. More field victims' rights advocates are needed to establish a dedicated network across the peacekeeping, humanitarian and development sectors

This is intended to ensure that victims are provided with assistance within 24 to 72 hours of receiving an allegation, and with a dedicated support person accompanying the victim throughout.

The Field Victims' Rights Advocate also works with 42 Community-Based Complaint Networks, which have been established in locations where the mission has capacity to support the implementation of preventive measures and reporting protocols, as well as awareness-raising and training activities. In coordination with the Conduct and Discipline Team, the Field Victims' Rights Advocate supported the Government of South Africa convene courts martial in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in March and October 2019, respectively. With the FVRA's support, nine victims alleging sexual exploitation and abuse gave testimony in court.

Haiti

In Haiti, the Senior Victims' Rights Officer, part of the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH), but with a United Nations system-wide role, coordinates efforts, including with lawyers and legal aid organizations and lawyers, to provide victims with legal assistance to facilitate the resolution of pending paternity and child support claims. She ensures that victims are provided with information and updates on the status of their claims.

The Senior Victims' Rights Officer was critical in enabling the continuation of a joint United Nations country team project, initiated in 2018, which provides basic material, educational, psychosocial and livelihood support to victims and children born of sexual exploitation and abuse.

South Sudan

In South Sudan, the Field Victims' Rights Advocate continued to ensure throughout 2019 that timely assistance was provided to victims, including coverage of medical costs through petty cash provided by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the restoration of support payments from the father for a child born of sexual exploitation or abuse.

This work will be carried forward by a dedicated Senior Victims' Rights Officer deployed to South Sudan in March 2020.

The Field Victims' Rights Advocate worked with the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse taskforce to establish community-based complaint mechanisms throughout the country and provided training for focal points and community members on standards of conduct and reporting allegations. The Field Victims' Rights Advocate in South Sudan has also helped to resolve paternity claims and facilitate victims' access to services and assistance, such as opening bank accounts for the transfer of child support payments.



Kenya | Baskets made from recycled grain sacks of emergency aid woven by women victims of sexual and gender-based violence at MADE51 in Kalobeyei Integrated Refugee Settlement, Kenya. The facility is supported by BAWA Hope and United Nations entities providing livelihood opportunities for women victims of sexual and gender-based violence through skills development and market linkage. Visit to Kenya conducted for the OVRA mapping project, December 2019. UN Photo/Eric Anderson.



Haiti | Top: Port-au-Prince, 1 August 2019. Community engagement campaign in the streets of the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince against Sexual Exploitation and Abuses (SEA) led by UNPOL Conduct Discipline Team aimed to sensitize the population about the Zero Tolerance policy of the United Nations and transmit the information about the existing hotline to report cases of SEA. UN Photo/Leonora Baumann. **Central African Republic** | Bottom: The first visit of the Victims' Rights Advocate to Central African Republic with the Secretary-General in October 2017. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe.

Advocacy on victims' rights 2019

January

OVRA took part in a consultation organized by the United Kingdom contributing to the development of a policy on sexual exploitation and abuse and supported the integration of a victim-centred approach for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The NATO policy on preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse was adopted in November 2019.

May

At a conference on ending sexual and gender-based violence in humanitarian crises organized by Norway, the Victims' Rights Advocate led a panel session on the needs of victims and integrating a victim-centred approach in responses to sexual exploitation and abuse.

In May, the VRA also briefed United Nations Humanitarian Coordinators on their roles and responsibilities with respect to victims' assistance during their annual retreat.

September

The VRA engaged with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to ensure the integration of a victim-centred approach in its recommendation on ending sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment in development cooperation and humanitarian aid endorsed in September 2019.

October

The VRA briefed the General Assembly's Sixth Committee, which addresses legal matters, on the challenges faced by victims and the provision of assistance and support during its consideration of an item on criminal accountability of United Nations officials and experts on mission. The VRA also briefed over 500 humanitarian actors and organizations on a victim-centred approach to sexual exploitation and abuse in a webinar organized by the Peer 2 Peer Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) support team in October 2019.

November

The VRA engaged closely with the United Nations Development Coordination Office to provide advice and guidance on the roles and responsibilities of United Nations Resident Coordinators with respect to victims' rights and assistance, including at the Global Retreat of Resident Coordinators held in November 2019.

The Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate supported the inclusion of these responsibilities in the Management and Accountability Framework of the United Nations Development and Resident Coordinator System.

Roadmap to 2020

1. Guided by the results of the pilot mapping project covering 13 countries, OVRA will support the development of projects, programmes and interventions to address key gaps in victims' support and assistance in 2020.
2. OVRA will work with the United Nations Human Rights Office and UNICEF to explore ways to address a key gap in legal assistance for victims of sexual exploitation and abuse.
3. OVRA will work with key stakeholders to explore ways to establish a one-stop point of call to access funding for interventions for victims, including on an emergency basis, which would be accessible across the United Nations system.
4. To that end, OVRA will develop a training module specifically focused on victims' rights and assistance using the Comprehensive Strategy, the Trust Fund, the Victims' Assistance Protocol and the Victims' Rights Statement (pending finalization), which constitute the operational and policy framework for the United Nations system. Such a training module could also help further the development of a roster of trained focal points with victims' assistance responsibilities.
5. Another key area of work will be efforts to improve the United Nations' role in facilitating and supporting the resolution of paternity and child support claims so that victims are provided with the necessary support and information on the status of their cases in a timely manner.
6. While the four Senior Victims' Rights Officer positions approved by the United Nations General Assembly is a positive step in the right direction, most countries in which United Nations entities are present do not have a designated focal point to ensure that a victim-centred approach is taken in addressing sexual exploitation and abuse. In 2020, OVRA will focus efforts on increasing the number of Senior Victims' Rights Officer positions through extra-budgetary funding and work to help set up a global network of victims' rights focal points to join up efforts at the policy and operational levels in different settings and strengthen responses on victims' rights and assistance.
7. The Victims' Rights Advocate is prioritizing efforts in close collaboration with United Nations partners to mobilize support and additional contributions for her work, as well as for the Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. The Trust Fund, made possible by generous contributions from Member States, provides vital support for specialized services for victims. OVRA and the Conduct and Discipline Section of the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance (responsible for managing the Trust Fund) will be seeking to broaden and diversify the donor base for the Trust Fund.

Resources

Websites, reports, articles, videos

Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

<https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/content/victims-rights-advocate>

'More support needed for victims of sexual abuse by UN personnel', interview with Jane Connors, March 2020

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059401>

Secretary-General's report on special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse

<https://undocs.org/A/74/705>

'Victims of sexual exploitation and abuse rebuild their lives', YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxgbCYBBjEc&feature=youtu.be>

UN Conduct in the field missions

<https://conduct.unmissions.org>

'UN supporting abandoned Haiti mothers and children, urging others to come forward', March 2020

<https://news.un.org/en/audio/2020/03/1059351>

'Righting a wrong: UN Fund helps thousands of sex abuse survivors rebuild their lives', June 2019

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1041051>

Key terms

<https://conduct.unmissions.org/sea-overview>



United Nations
Victims' Rights
Advocate

'There is so much to do.
There have been some
positive outcomes,
but there is a lot more
work to do'

Jane Connors
Victims' Rights Advocate