

Summary of Guidelines

Responding to cases of sexual harassment in the human rights movement

Front Line Defenders (FLD) recognises a growing trend where cisgender male-identified (but not always) individuals, who we are working with as Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), are being named or implicated as factual or suspected perpetrators of sexual harassment or violence. Given the complex global landscape of the #MeToo movement, the question we ask ourselves is what we, as a human rights organisation supporting human rights defenders, should and should not do to ensure a survivor/victim-centred response while continuing to support human rights defenders and their movements in the most impactful and thoughtful ways.

This summary of the FLD Guidelines is a review of our ongoing conversations as a response to and in conjunction with current needs within the global #MeToo movement, especially when human rights defenders are directly implicated. The Guidelines spell out FLD's position on the issue and set an internal procedure to deal with situations where HRDs known to FLD have been accused of sexual harassment or violence. Certain aspects of such an endeavour are particularly sensitive and require **a collective effort to continue learning and questioning our own deeply seated assumptions**. The below summary is not a substitute for the original document, which for the time being, is for internal use only due to confidentiality concerns.

The full Guidelines document covers cases where HRDs are accused of sexual harassment or violence *outside* of FLD spaces. We also have a Safeguarding Policy (available [here](#)) which covers situations where FLD is directly implicated, for example because a staff member has been accused of, or has experienced, sexual harassment or violence, because the conduct in question occurred in spaces for which FLD is responsible such as trainings, workshops or the Dublin Platform. Any allegations that were to arise regarding staff, board members or volunteers would fall under the Safeguarding Policy and the procedures outlined therein must be followed. The Guidelines on Responding to cases of sexual harassment in the human rights movement, have been developed specifically for cases of sexual harassment involving HRDs that are outside our Safeguarding Policy¹.

Although cases can vary vastly we are committed to a confidential survivor/victim-centred approach². Further steps will be always determined in consultation with those involved to prevent further harm.

Process

Anyone in FLD who receives information regarding allegations of sexual harassment by a HRD is required to share the information with the Safeguarding Team (appointed to handle internal and external cases) to receive guidance and support. It is important to make that clear to anyone who shares such accounts while reassuring the person that FLD can maintain confidentiality in the process. The FLD staff will have to make the initial determination on whether FLD should look into those allegations in the light of the past, present or potentially future relationships with the HRDs. When informed, the Safeguarding Team (currently comprised of Deputy Head of Protection, Head of Protection Grants and Deputy Director) decides how to proceed depending on FLD relationship with the HRDs implicated. We accept that there are situations when obtaining additional information might require substantial time and staff effort; in such cases, the Safeguarding Team will determine whether such steps are reasonable. We must also acknowledge that FLD is not in a position to investigate in detail allegations that do not fall within our Safeguarding Policy.

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- 1 Sexual harassment includes, but is not limited to, unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Sexual harassment is not limited to explicit demands for sexual favours, but may also include such actions as sex-oriented kidding, teasing or jokes; repeated offensive sexual flirtations, advances or propositions; obscene or sexually-oriented language or gestures; viewing on any computers, displaying, posting or circulation (including, but not limited to, by e-mail) of obscene or sexually-oriented printed or visual materials; and offensive physical contact such as grabbing, patting, pinching or brushing against another's body.
 - 2 <https://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/652-survivor-centred-approach.html>

The Safeguarding Team will consider:

- a) FLD relationship with the HRD named as perpetrator;
- b) the information available;
- c) the type of conduct;
- d) possible outcome and what to do in unclear cases;
- e) harm caused to survivor.

However, there are **cases that remain unclear**. In such cases, given the prevalence of sexual harassment and the statistically low level of false accusations,³ we should consider the allegation by the victim/survivor as credible. This is especially important when, for example, FLD's perceived engagement with or support for the HRD accused might result in exposing others to potential harm.

What does survivor-centred approach mean for us?

Any defender coming forward to us will be treated with sensitivity and confidentiality, and will be given a voice in advising FLD on how to respond to the case. We are committed to prioritising their safety and comfort and to inform them of any decisions we take. We will be clear about what we will do with the information. If the person who informed us is not the victim/survivor, we should communicate along similar lines as outlined above as appropriate, having consideration of the different role.

We will offer support to the defender who came to us, should they be open to and requesting it. The support can include (upon agreement with the Safeguarding team) psychosocial support, small solidarity grant, digital security support (if the harassment involved online harassment). We will remain in touch and offer support and input when appropriate and feasible.

Documenting

All documentation on specific cases is saved in a restricted folder. The Safeguarding Team also supports a consultative process to continue learning as an organisation in gender-sensitive ways and to ensure that the pressure to make decisions on highly sensitive cases is not on the individual staff.

Summary of the process

1. FLD staff receives information and
 - inform source of process/policy
 - inform Safeguarding Team
2. Safeguarding Team, in consultation with FLD staff member
 - assess information
 - gathers more info (consults with survivor as well)
 - decides what FLD can do
3. Safeguarding Team and/or FLD staff
 - inform survivor of the decision
 - inform perpetrator (if applicable)
 - document case in DB and shared

³ See <https://www.open.ac.uk/research/news/false-accusations-sexual-violence>: "While the statistics on false allegations vary – and refer most often to rape and sexual assault – they are invariably and consistently low. Research for the Home Office suggests that only 4% of cases of sexual violence reported to the UK police are found or suspected to be false. Studies carried out in Europe and in the US indicate rates of between 2% and 6%." See also <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45565684>.