

# STAFF POLICY TO PREVENT AND RESPOND TO (SEXUAL) EXPLOITATION, ABUSE AND/OR HARASSMENT



*This policy applies to all staff employed by or working for Vision Save for Vulnerable Children and Women (VSVCW) D both during working and off-duty hours*

*Approved by the VSVCW's Board May 2019*

## **1. Introduction**

VSVCW applies a Human Rights Based Approach and a Gender Equality Perspective to all its work. A core value in our work is to create a positive environment with utmost respect for the human rights of rights holders, partner representatives and our own staff.

It is essential that VSVCW staff receive clear instructions and guidelines with respect to expectations regarding their conduct and are given space to reflect positively on how to stimulate an open, respectful and non-abusive work culture.

In addition, it is essential that VSVCW management is equipped with adequate authority, responsibility, monitoring tools and recourse to action in the event of any misconduct. The goal is to create an environment free of (sexual) exploitation, harassment and/ or abuse within VSVCW.

In keeping with VSVCW's commitment to respect human rights, this policy is based on internationally recognized human rights standards as contained in the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). VSVCW's policy is specifically informed by the United Nations Secretary General's Bulletin 2003/13, 9 October 2003; Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse). VSVCW's Policy is in keeping with the Code of Conduct for the Prevention of Misconduct, including corruption, fraud, exploitation and abuse, this Code of Conduct covers sexual misconduct in general and the safeguarding of children against sexual exploitation.

The main purpose of this policy is to promote greater accountability and outline the key responsibilities of staff. The aim is that the human rights of all staff as well as every stakeholder, beneficiary and community member whom VSVCW seeks to assist should be respected. All staff must be mindful that each and every action, including engaging romantically or sexually with a community member, in whatever/any context, can have repercussions for the fate of many.

The objective of this policy is to increase awareness and prevent misconduct, including (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment by providing clear guidance to address these issues.

The following standards apply to all staff, volunteers, consultants, interns, national as well as international staff, and any other individuals representing the organization.

## **2. Objective and scope of this policy**

The standards in this policy are based on internationally recognized human rights standards. Where a conflict exists between the standards in this policy and national law in a given country, VSVCW abides by the relevant Human Rights standards, using its leverage and dialogue where necessary to manage conflicts. Any deviations must be approved by VSVCW Senior Management in dialogue with the board.

## **3. Provisions**

### **3.1. Prevention of (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment.**

VSVCW maintains that (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/ or harassment of persons is an abuse of the human rights of these individuals. For the members of the communities, we work in, the dependency of affected populations on humanitarian and development agencies and their staff for their basic needs creates an ethical responsibility and duty of care on the part of the VSVCW staff to safeguard the human rights and dignity of these individuals.



VSVCW believes that an effective response to (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment must be informed by the context and be relevant; the response must be based on an accurate understanding of the communities in which VSVCW engages, the work environment of the specific VSVCW office or presence, and knowledge of the relevant international human rights standards.

When it comes to behavior in countries where VSVCW engages with humanitarian or development work, staff and managers must be aware of the following:

- a) lack of economic opportunities for locals, for refugees and for displaced populations may result in commercial and exploitative sex becoming one of the few options for income generation to meet basic needs;
- b) The impacted community may have a culture of gender-based violence, which may continue or be exacerbated;
- c) The usual social protections may no longer be in place or function.

### **3.2 Code of Conduct to Prevent (Sexual) Exploitation, Abuse and/or Harassment:**

As part of VSVCW's commitment to respect human rights, all VSVCW staff wherever they are based and whatever their position should act in the following manner within and outside working hours in keeping with the above-mentioned Human Rights Standards:

1. Respect and promote fundamental, internationally adopted human rights without discrimination of any kind and irrespective of social status, ethnicity, colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status, national origin, political affiliation or disability and act with integrity.
2. Respect internationally recognized human rights. Where national law is not in keeping with these recognized rights, staff must respect the international standards in this VSVCW policy, and any deviations must be approved by VSVCW senior management. Never exploit the vulnerability of anyone, regardless of their sex, age or sexual orientation or allow anybody to be put in compromising situations
3. Never engage in any kind of sexual activity involving children below the age of 18. Mistaken belief in the age of the child is no defense.
4. Never expose staff or staff in implementing partner organisations to any kind of (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment. Never commit any act or form of harassment that could result in physical, sexual or serious psychological harm to others.
5. Never use, possess, distribute or consume child pornography.
6. Never engage in sexual exploitation or abuse of beneficiaries - men, women, or children - regardless of their sex, age or sexual orientation. This prohibition includes exchange of money, employment, goods or services for sex including sexual favors.
7. Never accept, solicit, or engage in "buying" or profiting from sexual services (including in countries where prostitution is not forbidden by law).
8. Never abuse a professional position by withholding humanitarian assistance nor give preferential treatment with the intention of soliciting sexual favours, gifts and payments of any kind.
9. Sexual and/or romantic relationships with beneficiaries, volunteers and staff in implementing partner organisations are not compatible with an employment in VSVCW and therefore prohibited. Such relationships are based on inherently unequal power dynamics and can undermine the reputation, credibility and integrity of VSVCW's work. There can be certain exceptions to this, but



such relationships should always be declared, and VSVCW's management is then the sole decision maker on whether such a relationship is compatible with the employment and specific position in VSVCW.

10. An employee who engages in a sexual relationship with another employee or is required to inform his or her manager about the relationship. If the relationship creates work-related problems, management will decide on an appropriate measure to solve the problems. This could be either to transfer one of the persons to another unit or to terminate the contract of one of the employees involved.
11. VSVCW Managers are not allowed to have a sexual relationship with an employee who refers directly to them or is under their line-management. If the situation arises, it may be decided either to transfer one of the persons to another unit, to terminate the contract of the manager involved or take any other appropriate measure in response to the situation.
12. Members of the Senior Management Team and members of the VSVCW board are not allowed to have sexual relationships with any employee or volunteer in VSVCW. If they decide to engage sexually or romantically with a member of staff or a volunteer, they cannot retain their position in the board or the senior management team.
13. Ensure that all confidential information, including reports of breaches of these standards by colleagues, obtained from beneficiaries or colleagues are channeled correctly and handled with the utmost confidentiality through appropriate and contextualized reporting mechanisms.
14. Report immediately any knowledge, concerns or substantive suspicion of breaches to this VSVCW policy to management and/or to the complaints focal person at Head Office. When there is substantial suspicion of breaches of national or international law, VSVCW management will decide whether to transfer such cases to the appropriate national authorities for further action in accordance with principals and procedures for handling sensitive complaints.

### **3.3 Prevention and Response**

Crucial elements in VSVCW's overall response are prevention and awareness-raising, monitoring and evaluation, and establishing a complaints mechanism/contact person and a response mechanism.

The VSVCW policy should be made known to all VSVCW staff. VSVCW Managers with personnel responsibility are entrusted with authority to implement and monitor the active use of the policy. Furthermore, it is recommended that VSVCW also raise this issue with partner organizations. Additionally, VSVCW recommends that beneficiary's opinions on prevention of (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment are sought and incorporated by management into the respective VSVCW policy.

Roles and areas of responsibility are described in Annex 1 to this policy.

#### **3.3.1 Awareness-Raising**

VSVCW will raise awareness related to prevention of (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment consistently throughout the staff member's period of employment. The topic together with consequences of misconduct will be thoroughly addressed as a mandatory element during the introduction period in VSVCW. VSVCW is aware that this policy touches on personal behaviour and issues normally considered private. In the discussion on this policy, it is important to thoroughly debate how to secure an open, positive non-discriminatory and non-abusive working environment in each local context.



All staff have an individual responsibility to familiarise themselves and their dependents with the VSVCW Policy as well as on the Code of Conduct and its purpose.

This document automatically forms part of all contracts of employment.

### **3.3.2 Responding to suspected/alleged breaches.**

Any substantial suspicion of breaches of this VSVCW policy in terms of (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment can and should be reported to the VSVCW Complaints Handling Mechanism and will be handled according to procedures and processes for handling sensitive complaints.

All VSVCW staff act as entry-points to the VSVCW complaints mechanism and are required to report any knowledge, concerns or substantial suspicions of misconduct to the VSVCW Head Office complaints system immediately and without investigation.

Complaints can also be lodged directly with the central complaints mechanism and described on VSVCW's international website, via email ([VisionSaveVCW@gmail.com](mailto:VisionSaveVCW@gmail.com)), or to the relevant in-country access points (hotlines (+256703116339)

The complainant can choose whatever means he/she wishes to raise a complaint.

Once a complaint is received, the VSVCW complaints focal person is expected to take prompt investigative action. More information can be found on VSVCW's website.

In cases of suspicion, hearing rumours or experiencing any doubts related to potential misconduct, staff can seek advice from the HR Unit at VSVCW Head Office.

### **Non-retaliation and confidentiality**

Staff, rightsholders, community members and other stakeholders must be able to lodge their concerns without fear of reprisal or unfair treatment as a consequence of complaining. As far as possible, VSVCW will do its utmost to ensure that complaints are handled with confidentiality and without risking effects on employment or any form of reprisal and/ or harassment as a result of highlighting a genuine problem.

Confidentiality is crucial to achieving satisfactory results, because it protects the complainant, the subject of the complaint and other witnesses. The fact and nature of the complaints, the identities of those involved and documentation resulting from the investigation therefore remain confidential and are only shared on a need-to-know basis in order to conduct the necessary investigation or provide care/ expert advice.

### **Criminal records and former complaints**

Staff must notify VSVCW of any criminal convictions or charges of sexual abuse, exploitation or harassment. Staff must also notify VSVCW of any relevant former complaints made against them concerning suspected or substantiated misconduct related to sexual abuse, exploitation or harassment.

### **Disciplinary measures**

The complaints committee at VSVCW Head Office will handle the complaint according to VSVCW's investigation procedures, including decisions on actions and follow-up. Any upheld breach to this VSVCW policy will not be tolerated and may in accordance with relevant legislation lead to internal disciplinary action, including dismissal or even criminal prosecution.



Any staff purposely making false accusations of a breach to this VSVCW policy will be subject to disciplinary action.

#### **ANNEX 1: Division of responsibilities**

The Director and Senior Management Team at Office.

VSVCW Director and Senior Management Team at Head Office will take overall responsibility for prevention of (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment by the VSVCW staff by ensuring that:

1. A new staff member receives a thorough introduction to the VSVCW policy prior to signing a contract with VSVCW (possibly from the HR unit). The introduction ensues that staff understand the VSVCW policy to prevent (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment, as well as the consequences of any breach of the policy and the procedures to follow if a breach of policy is reported. (This includes ensuring that the mandatory online training sessions are completed within the first 3 months of employment).
2. Adherence to this VSVCW policy is monitored on a daily basis.
3. Implementing partners are also aware of the VSVCW policy to prevent (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment.
4. Communities are informed to the highest degree possible about expected standards of staff behaviour and relevant VSVCW complaints channels through which they can lodge complaints.
5. Staff, partners, communities and beneficiaries are aware of where, how and to whom they may raise complaints.
6. Allegations regarding (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment are reported in writing to the VSVCW complaints mechanism at Head Office. Common sense should be used, and employees have an obligation to report incidents that seem wrong.
7. All information is treated with the utmost discretion and confidentiality to ensure that victim(s), witness(es), subject of the complaint and others involved are not victimized in any way.
8. Procedural safeguards are in place in relation to staff under investigation during the course the investigation, including suspension if appropriate. This should be done in close correspondence with and as advised by the complaints committee at VSVCW Head Office.
9. When allegations of or concerns about (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment are raised, and the subject(s) of the complaint are identified, the subject(s) of the complaint should under normal circumstances be suspended from their position until investigations are finalized. This should be done in close correspondence with and as advised by the complaints committee at Head Office.
10. Appropriate disciplinary action is taken whenever (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment is adequately documented and proven.



### **The Complaints Committee at Head Office**

A complaints committee will be established as soon as substantial suspicion of (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment is reported to the Head Office complaints mechanism. The responsibilities of the committee are the following:

1. To make sure that reported allegations of (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment are handled, investigated and concluded according to VSVCW's procedures and processes for handling sensitive complaints.
2. When handling sensitive complaints, the complaints committee will consider the safety of both the aggrieved and the accused party as well as any other involved witnesses and stakeholders. The need for legal advice and support is also evaluated, including a consideration of whether the parties involved should have individual legal advice.
3. To decide on appropriate disciplinary action whenever (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment is adequately documented and proven.
4. In cases where a criminal act is suspected, to hand over the complaint to the competent authorities.

### **Human Resource Unit at Head Office**

The HR Unit is responsible for thoroughly explaining and ensuring that, prior to signing a contract with VSVCW, each VSVCW staff member understands the VSVCW policy to prevent (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment, as well as the consequences of any breach of the VSVCW policy and the procedures to follow if a breach of policy is reported. (This includes ensuring that the mandatory online training sessions are completed within the first three months of employment).

The HR Unit will act as a resource unit that offers support and guidance to all Managers, and employees, as necessary. The HR Unit will also be responsible for sharing good practice and lessons learned within VSVCW. Additionally, the HR Unit will interact or form effective partnerships with other organizations in order to prepare annual awareness-raising sessions and to share lessons learned with them, with other partners and with stakeholders. The HR Unit will further be responsible for monitoring and evaluating the VSVCW policy to prevent (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment on a regular basis.

### **Staff**

Each Individual must take responsibility for his/her own conduct after having read and consented affirmatively to adhere to the VSVCW policy to prevent (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment. Any allegation or concern regarding (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment should be reported, in writing, to the complaints mechanism/contact person for further action. If seconded to another organisation, the complaint should be registered in writing with the appropriate program authority and with the VSVCW complaints mechanism.

### **Everyone**

It is incumbent upon all members of VSVCW staff, board and general assembly to uphold the principles of this VSVCW policy and to make all possible efforts to share their knowledge and to contribute to a harassment and exploitation-free atmosphere in which prevention of (sexual) exploitation, abuse and/or harassment has the highest and continuous priority.

## **Definitions**

**Child or minor:** A person under the age of 18 (as defined by the Convention of the Rights of the Child).

**Corruption:** The misuse of entrusted power for private (or organizational) gain.

**Exploitation:** Use of one's position of authority, influence or control over resources, to pressure, force or manipulate someone by threatening or coercing them with negative repercussions such as withholding project assistance, not giving due consideration to a staff member's work support requests, threatening to make false claims about a staff member in public, among others.

**Misconduct:** Any breach by staff of applicable national or international law as well as contraventions of VSVCW's internal rules or policies, including this policy, regulations or other instructions issued by the relevant manager or authority that include contextualised security provisions and sexual harassment policies.

**Sexual abuse:** The actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, including inappropriate touching, by force or under unequal or coercive conditions (United Nations Secretary General's Bulletin 2003/13, 9 October 2003; Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse).

**Sexual exploitation:** Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power or trust for sexual purposes, including but not limited to profiting monetarily, sexually or politically from the sexual exploitation of another. This includes any exchange of money, goods or services against sexual activities and favours (United Nations Secretary General's Bulletin 2003/13, 9 October 2003; Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse).

**Sexual harassment:** Any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another, when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. While typically involving a pattern of behaviour, it can take the form of a single incident. Sexual harassment may occur between persons of the opposite or same sex. Both males and females can be either the victims or the offenders.

**Staff:** Refers to but is not limited to all permanent and temporary staff, interns, consultants, observers, volunteers, and all individuals working for or representing VSVCW.

**Volunteer:** Refers to volunteers that are under the Go Global Programme or other volunteers who under similar arrangements travel with VSVCW to one of our programme countries. When reference is made to volunteers it does not include volunteers assisting VSVCW's parish collections.