

# ANNUAL REPORT 2021



New York (HQ) Bangkok Copenhagen Dakar Istanbul Panama

Working together  
to find solutions



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As the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic stretched into a second year in 2021, the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes continued to serve its community by honing virtual mechanisms. It is encouraging that the ombudsman and mediation teams were able to deal effectively with an increase of 27 per cent in the number of cases brought individually and as a group to the attention of the Ombudsman. Moreover, in the outreach and training activities, the teams were able to offer virtual master classes, webinars and modules in capacity-building for conflict-management skills to a global audience in the six official languages, with some interventions tailored to specific needs raised by country offices or at the regional level. In all, the Office facilitated more than 100 virtual sessions; those offered to the Respectful Workplace Facilitators and the pilot certificate programme in conflict-management skills for leaders are particularly noteworthy. Detailed information on these aspects of the work of the Office in 2021 are presented in chapter I.

The Ombudsman received exemplary logistical support and facilitation from the five organizations served to establish regional offices. This meant finding appropriate locations for these offices and facilitating communication to raise awareness about the services provided, which resulted in turn in a wider variety of countries in 2021 accessing the services of the Office of the Ombudsman. The Office cannot continue to function as intended without the sustained timely support from the five organizations that it serves. The experience gained from virtual operations in the reporting period will stand the Office in good stead when the team members are once again able to travel to country offices to address incidents of serious workplace conflict. Face-to-face contact has in the past proven to be the most effective and expeditious means

of resolving issues, especially the most serious. In the meantime, the team members, staff and management of the five organizations have all been exposed to the full potential of bringing together parties in conflict through virtual modalities and will continue to benefit from lessons learned during this challenging time.

Throughout the year, the Office worked with its counterpart in the United Nations Secretariat to upgrade the case-management system, in place for over five years and in need of changes to make it fit for purpose. This offered an opportunity to review intake and case-management processes in order to increase efficiency and effectiveness in addressing complaints. The new system promotes a more digital way of working in a decentralized manner while retaining confidentiality. The system is scheduled to go live in 2022. In addition, the Office began work on an application to guide the workforce on where to go to address a concern at work. The application presents a list of resources available based on data that users enter anonymously and guides them to where they can find help. The main advantage of this application is its unified platform providing information for the five organizations; this is especially useful since contractual modalities and hiring procedures differ from organization to organization. The application will be available in the three working languages: English, French, and Spanish.

During the reporting period, the Office of the Ombudsman continued to engage with multiple stakeholders on anti-racism efforts within the organizations. The Office conducted presentations and information sessions for focus groups and staff representatives on how the Office addresses informal complaints of racism. There are a number of options available to staff to address informal complaints about racism, including management, human resource departments and the ethics offices. The Ombudsman provides an independent, neutral and confidential safe space where dialogue can take place in a trusted environment and relations can be repaired. There is a reluctance, however, to engage in informal resolution of complaints about racism because such behaviour is a recognized form of misconduct and therefore requires

**The experience gained from virtual operations in the reporting period will stand the Office in good stead when the team members are once again able to travel to country offices**

## **Ombudsman interventions are more effective in addressing complaints about racism when there is a concerted effort by other offices within the organization.**

formal investigation and disciplinary action. Ombudsman interventions are more effective in addressing complaints about racism when there is a concerted effort by other offices within the organization. Informal dispute resolution, although successful for the individual parties, cannot be sustained if the environment or climate within the organization remains toxic and divided because of racism and other forms of misconduct.

Observations and recommendations emanating from the work of the Office in 2021 are presented in chapter II of the present report. Working away from the office fostered different perspectives on interpersonal differences and included issues such as diversity, inclusion, disability, racism, and gender-orientation. The findings

and recommendations in these domains are contained in [section II.A](#). Underperformance and performance management plans were also of concern during the reporting period; an analysis is presented in [section II.B](#). The working conditions during the pandemic also gave rise to serious concern regarding burnout and mental-health issues, which are addressed in [section II.C](#).

The progress in mediation services is described in [section II. D](#).

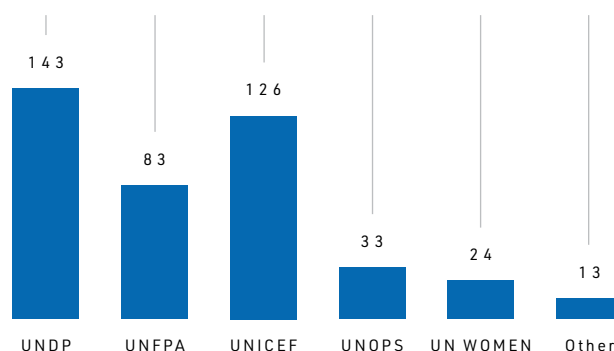
The Office team made notable progress in 2021 in the wider implementation of the Respectful Workplace Facilitators Programme. More than 50 nominees for the programme completed the virtual training and were ready to assume their duties by the end of the year. They reacted very positively to the training and, like many colleagues in the United Nations system, looked forward to the time when face-to-face interaction will return. Full details are provided in [section II.E](#).

In [chapter III](#)., the plans for the future are shared.

## A. Overview of cases

During the reporting period, the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes (the Office) received 422 cases. Figure 1 shows that 143 cases were from UNDP, 83 from UNFPA, 126 from UNICEF, 33 from UNOPS, 24 from UN-Women, and 13 from other entities. Figure 2 shows that 87 per cent of the cases were from offices away from headquarters and that 13 per cent were from headquarters locations. Figure 3 shows the issues raised during the reporting period by percentage. The three main issues reported to the Ombudsman were the evaluative relationship category (the supervisor/supervisee relationship) – 35 per cent of the cases; job- and career-related issues – 26 per cent; and compensation and benefits – 9 per cent. Chapter II of the present report contains an in-depth account of the types of issues that staff faced in the main categories at a time when the majority of staff worked remotely.

**Figure 1. Cases received from 1 January to 31 December 2021, by organization**



422

Total cases received

27%

Increase from 2020

**Figure 2. Cases at offices away from headquarters and at headquarters, by percentage**

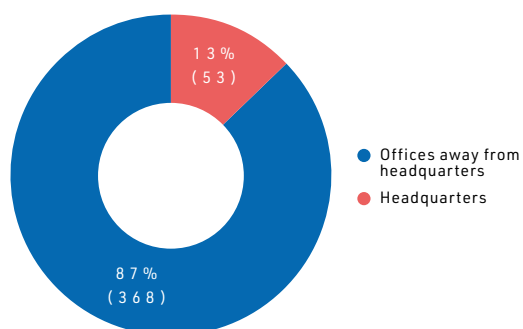
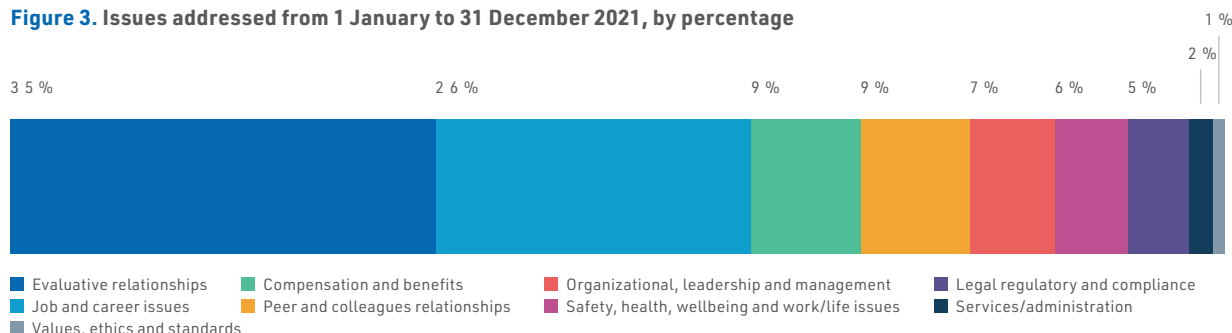
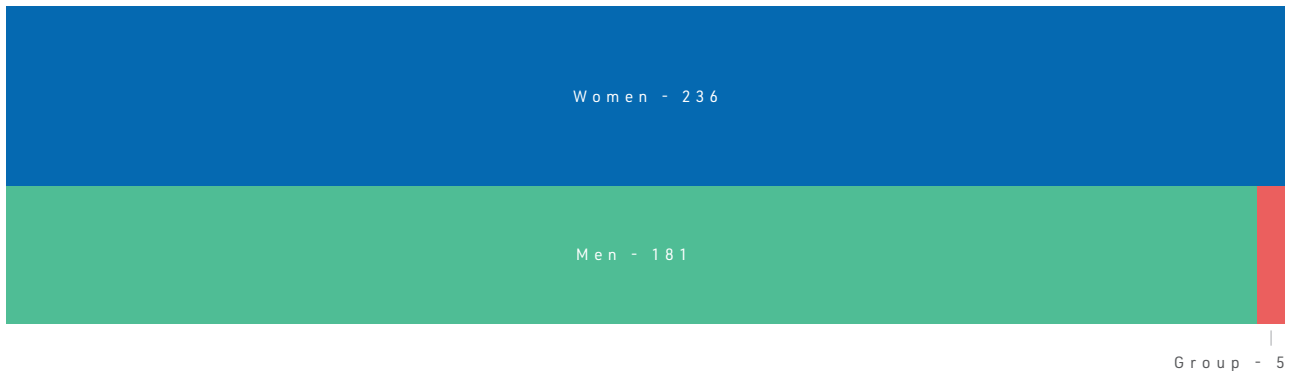
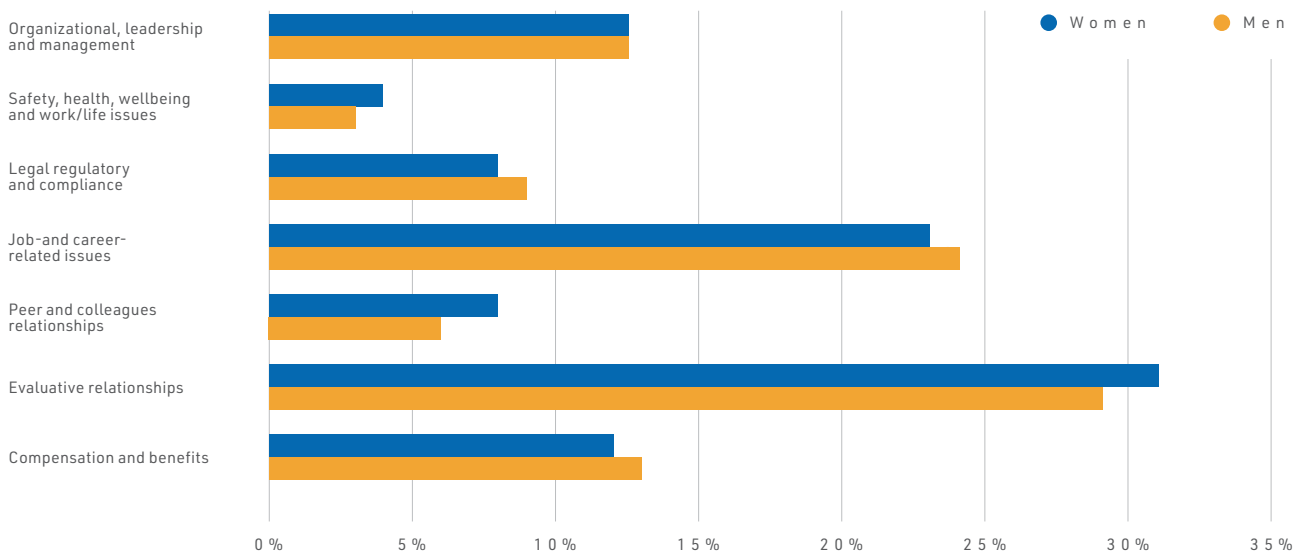


Figure 2 shows that offices away from headquarters accounted by far for the largest percentage of cases, in keeping with field-based organizations where more than 80 per cent of personnel work in the country offices.

A gender breakdown reveals that the Office received 236 cases from female staff and 181 from male staff with 5 group cases, as shown in figure 4. An analysis of the types of issues that women and men faced can be seen in figure 5. Female staff reported more issues in the evaluative relationship category and male staff reported more in the job and career category.

**Figure 3. Issues addressed from 1 January to 31 December 2021, by percentage**



**Figure 4. Cases, by gender****Figure 5. Breakdown of issues, by gender**

There was a total of 45 mediation cases (an increase from the 40 cases in 2020) with 97 per cent reaching a mediated solution (see [section II.D](#) for details).

## B. Training and outreach activities

The Ombudsman is well aware that most workplace conflicts are best addressed at the immediate level in the office where they originate. Unfortunately, some conflicts are not addressed at all and managers and staff alike often let conflicts escalate or ignore them, hoping that they will vanish. Of course, they do not disappear but tend to grow and worsen over time.

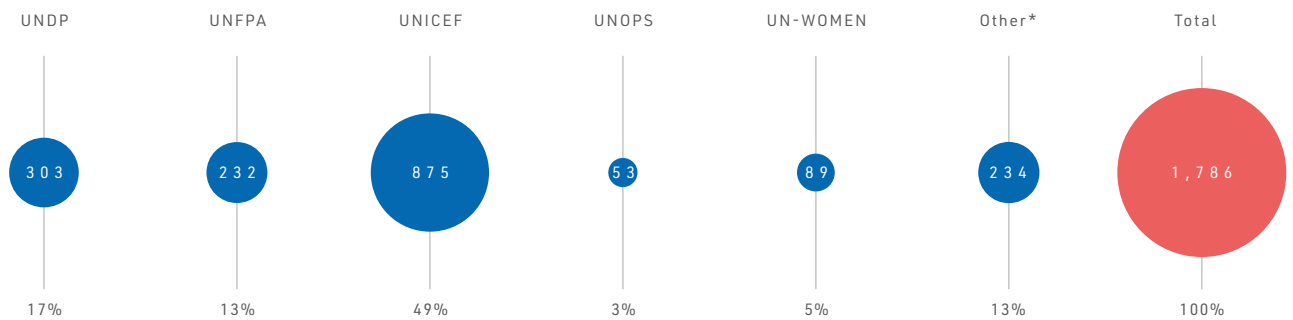
In addition to its core conflict-resolution services, which address ombudsman and mediation cases, the Office further achieved its mandate by continuing to offer capacity-building in a wide range of conflict-coaching, conflict-prevention and conflict-management topics. The main purpose of the training arm of the Office is to hone skills for staff members and managers to engage with conflict at earlier stages and prevent escalation whenever possible. This in turn helps to achieve the goals of developing trust and psychological safety, building thriving teams and creating a more harmonious workplace.

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During 2021, aligned with the global circumstances, most of the capacity-building efforts by the Office were undertaken virtually. While sacrificing some of the benefits of in-person training, remote webinars and training sessions provided an opportunity to offer a wider array of topics, languages and facilitators and to reach more geographical regions. This multifaceted approach, continually enhanced, also takes into account that colleagues may be suffering from information-overload arising from the array of other professional training opportunities offered in the five organizations served by the Office.

Building on its success in 2020, for example, the Office launched webinars targeting capacity-building in two series during 2021, one in the first quarter, and one in the third quarter. Offered to all staff of the five organizations, the webinars targeted regions based on language accessibility and time zones. The topics presented were “Intercultural Interactions”, “Psychological Safety in Teams”, “Introduction to Mediation”, “Complexities of the Formal Dispute-resolution Mechanism (Arbitration)”, and “Getting to Know Your Ombudsman”. Sessions were presented in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. Figure 6 shows participation by organization.

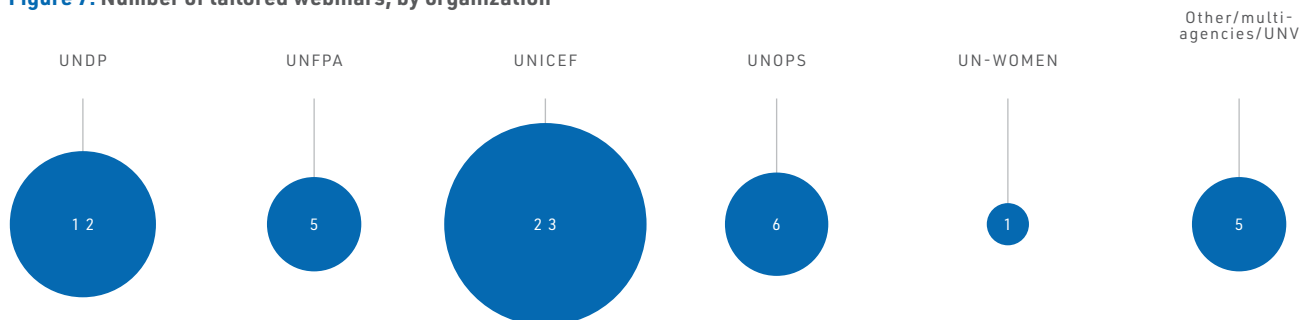
**Figure 6. Participation in the 35 capacity-building webinars offered in 2021, by organization**



\*These participants did not indicate their organization

The second set of webinars in 2021 offered tailored sessions in response to colleagues who contacted the Office for specific training or as a result of the outreach efforts of the Office to introduce its services. The Office delivered over 50 of these webinars as shown in figure 7.

**Figure 7. Number of tailored webinars, by organization**



In addition, the Office has continued to develop and enhance its catalogue of e-learning sessions, which are available to colleagues on the Office website ([fpombudsman.org/training](https://fpombudsman.org/training)) and through the learning-management systems of the five organizations served. There are now four asynchronous training sessions available: “Managing Conflict Effectively in the UN Workplace”, “Challenging Conversations at Work (and Beyond)”, “Mediation as an Effective Way of Resolving Disputes”, and “Managing Emotions at Work: Fundamental Concerns”. Two further learning opportunities in the e-learning modality are planned for the first semester of 2022: “Psychological Safety in Teams” and “Intercultural Interactions”.

Finally in 2021, in cooperation with UNFPA senior management, the Office developed and launched a certification course in conflict management for leaders. In view of the tremendous impact that good leaders have on the workplace environment and psychological safety of their teams, this

course will be expanded to enhance training opportunities for capacity-building in conflict management available to the five organizations.



# III. Observations and Recommendations Concerning Conflict in 2021

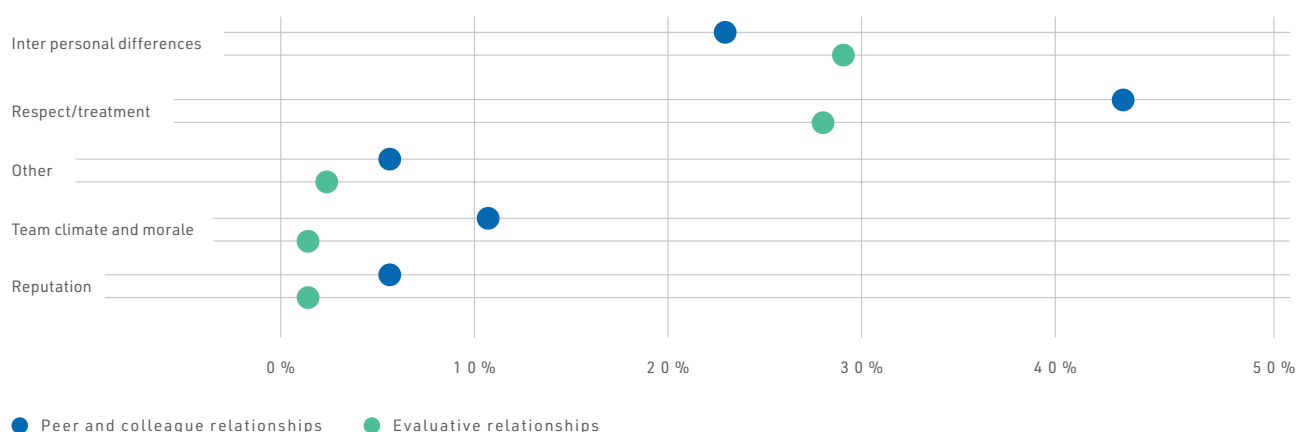
## A. Interpersonal differences at work

In many previous annual reports, the Ombudsman has addressed interpersonal conflict and how it affects the workplace. While face-to-face interpersonal contact was greatly

diminished during the first year of the pandemic since most of the workforce in the funds and programmes had to adapt to working away from the office, remote work did not make managing interpersonal conflict any easier. Figure 8 shows that the Ombudsman addressed cases where respect/treatment and interpersonal differences were the main complaints about supervisors and peers. The Ombudsman reiterates that interpersonal conflict left unaddressed can poison a workplace and cause great inefficiency.

**The Ombudsman reiterates that interpersonal conflict left unaddressed can poison a workplace and cause great inefficiency.**

**Figure 8. Breakdown of issues in the evaluative and peer-relationship category**



Interpersonal relationships at the general office level and within teams have evolved during the ongoing pandemic. To build trust, teams require sustained, continuous interaction and dialogue for all members to understand the team's mission, their respective roles and expected contributions. However, colleagues report that diminished physical interaction, the shift to virtual meetings and a fluid work life have had a very damaging effect on the concept of trust within the team. Consequently, many visitors have said that they find themselves in unknown territory and losing control, all of which has led to reports of increased levels of stress and anxiety, which in turn exacerbate interpersonal differences.

The Ombudsman team learned that these poor interpersonal relationships manifested themselves through communication breakdowns, misuse of authority and power, harassment and cases of discrimination. Furthermore,

communication-related conflict was due to perceived excessive communication, notably a high volume of emails outside of working hours and during weekends, lack of clear or inconsistent instructions, withholding of work-relevant information, and disrespectful communication styles. Visitors shared allegations of being criticized and patronized during staff meetings as well as occurrences of shouting and threatening, and other forms of aggressive and intimidating behaviour.

Allegations of misuse of power and authority concerned decisions or actions ostensibly based on positional and functional power rather than on more explicit, operational reasons. If managers are not held to account, this trend has the potential for serious ramifications as it risks escalating into impunity for inappropriate management style. Some cases causing interpersonal strife because of positional power involved posts being

## One of the hallmarks of any effective management strategy is the creation of an open environment...

abolished or duties changed without prior notice, unforeseen contract terminations, hounding, aggressive behaviour, and verbal abuse. The impact of these types of allegations has been particularly hard on staff, with many visitors manifesting severe emotional distress. It is of concern that a dispute between a supervisor and supervisee is often a driver for termination of a contract or leads to separation.

Some visitors hold a strong belief that complaints against managers and supervisors are not only never resolved in favour of the complainant but may also expose the complainant to retribution and therefore those affected have little motivation to report abuse of positional power. Conflict between peers also occurs from efforts to assert power and authority in the office as well as from perceived closeness with managers. If these conflicts are not resolved, they grow and can encompass the entire workplace, as reported to the Office in some cases.

In the reporting period, new interpersonal issues were spotlighted within the five organizations on diversity, inclusion, disability, racism, and gender-orientation. There was a slight uptick in cases of discrimination and racial bias. Visitors alleged being treated differently, with the two most common factors being race and gender orientation. While sexual harassment affects both men and women in the organization, female staff continue to report more cases of harassment of a sexual nature than males, including allegations of inappropriate proposals and comments. Cases regarding gender orientation concerned those affected being treated differently, excluded or targeted by demeaning comments. One of the hallmarks of any effective management strategy is the creation of an open environment that encourages team members to talk about these strategies willingly. The Ombudsman therefore encourages continued dialogue on these aspects of the workplace at all levels of the organizations.

### Recommendations

The Ombudsman recommends that the five organizations redouble their efforts to hold abusive managers to account for their behaviour and to encourage efficient communications and inclusive management styles.

The Ombudsman recommends that the five organizations continue efforts to raise awareness and promote dialogue on issues of diversity, inclusion, disability, anti-racism, and gender-orientation to ensure diversity in the workforce.

## B. Underperformance and performance-improvement plans

Performance management remains a principal concern for visitors to the Office of the Ombudsman. Despite the operational challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, in some cases there were managers who still expected staff to discharge certain duties and responsibilities such as in-person field visits, meetings with partners and organizing live events. Staff have had to make adjustments to their lives as partial or full-time work from home arrangements were implemented and this may have had a negative impact on the performance of some staff. The existing performance-

management approaches were developed for a different context, one that has changed with the pandemic and may therefore require a new approach that acknowledges these changes in order not to inadvertently penalize staff.

A closer look at some of the performance-related cases reveals that disagreement over performance was often symptomatic of an underlying problematic relationship between the two parties. The discord pervades the planning process and the mid-term and annual reviews. In some cases, the important step of a mid-term review was omitted altogether to avoid confrontation, which unfortunately denies the supervisor the opportunity to provide feedback

and the supervisees the opportunity to receive feedback and discuss any performance concerns. This lack of dialogue can lead to conflict during the final performance appraisal if not addressed earlier.

### **...greater value is generally given to the results achieved at the expense of considering how the staff achieved those results.**

With respect to ratings, greater value is generally given to the results achieved at the expense of considering how the staff achieved those results. Supervisors seem to put more emphasis on technical or functional results over behavioural and people-management competencies. Staff are accordingly not held to account for underperformance in these competencies, which could in turn lead to behavioural impunity. Some cases in 2021 suggest that managers overlook aggressive or abusive behaviour of high-performing staff as long as they are delivering good results. Allegations of perceived high performers making belittling remarks or questioning the competence of other staff in front of peers and at team meetings were common. Other concerns raised included a lack of trust on both sides, micro-management, terms of reference being changed without prior notice and the unforeseen requirement of a performance-improvement plan (PIP).

The PIP was introduced as a tool to address performance gaps and help staff to make improvements in areas that are not deemed satisfactory or that require improvement. The plan and process to achieve it are clearly established: targets, the need for close supervision, and regular performance discussion on progress. However, in some cases received, the PIP was associated with punitive measures, notably the

termination of a contract, causing excessive mental, psychological and emotional stress. It is disconcerting that in many cases, staff were not aware of the PIP, the process, or available recourse measures. While all the organizations have made great strides to add value to the performance-management exercise, training and awareness-raising need to be maintained to ensure staff are well informed.

There is a strong belief among staff that PIP cases always work against supervisees and therefore once issues arise, they are inclined to start looking for a new job and separate from the Organization. Staff informed the Ombudsman about one aspect that causes stress and anxiety as they go through this process: the recruitment process requires a reference from a former supervisor. They further have the impression that the PIP process gives undue power over a candidate's chances of being hired or even damages career prospects.

The Office also received cases from consultants about delays in receiving their payments, some of which extend to delays of several months. In situations where a consultant has completed the assignment satisfactorily, payment should be effected in an expeditious manner. Some consultants do underperform but the matter should nonetheless be dealt with promptly and any payment that is due to the consultant paid as quickly as possible..

In addition, some consultants were not aware of the final performance-appraisal process. Some hiring units fail to provide these appraisals and consultants may have to insist on receiving them. The final appraisal is important as it establishes a consultant's reputation and chances of being rehired. The Ombudsman is also aware that appraisal practices vary from office to office and organization, which can make it difficult to evaluate a consultant's performance objectively and in a uniform manner.

## **Recommendations**

The Ombudsman recommends that all five organizations:

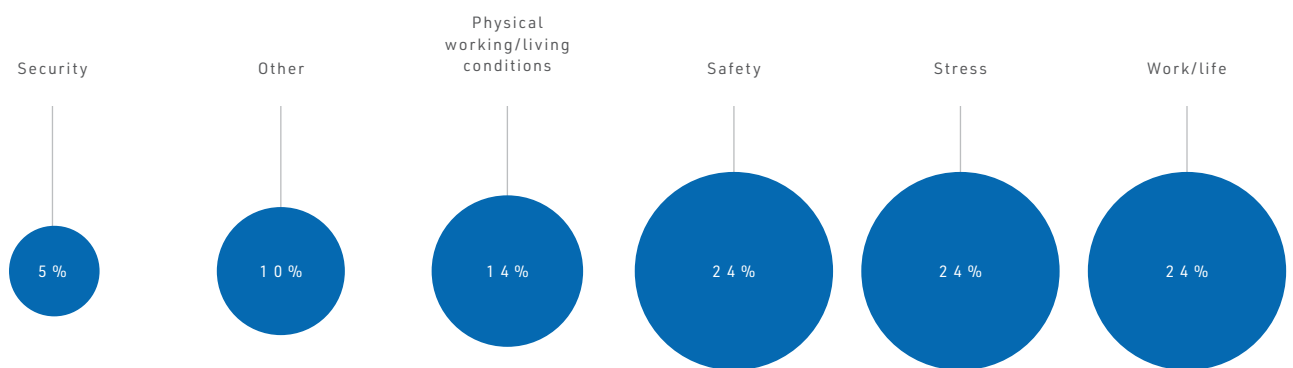
- Strengthen behavioural competencies for managers and staff.
- Continue promoting training, coaching, and other skill-building activities that increase the ability to give and receive feedback in a positive, constructive manner.
- Align the appraisal process for consultants and ensure systematic enforcement of the process.
- Ensure the timely payment of consultants for their services.
- Promote the use of mediation as a tool to achieving a more effective performance-management system.

## C. Burnout and mental health at work during the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic has shown that it is possible for organizations to deliver on their respective mandates even when staff must telecommute. Indeed, there have been some advantages in working in a virtual environment, in particular the negative impact of toxicity and workplace conflict has not been so direct. Physical distance has meant that staff experiencing conflict can avoid direct confrontation with a colleague, for example, or disengage from harmful gossip more easily. This does not mean that the toxicity or the effects of a dysfunctional office disappeared during the pandemic; on the contrary, avoiding a persistent interpersonal problem often means that the problem manifests itself in other ways, as indicated in [section II.A](#) of the present report. The Ombudsman has also received reports that one of the major consequences of managing conflict in

a virtual workplace is higher levels of burnout and stress. The need to continue to meet obligations at work and at home has compounded stress and caused a sense of helplessness for some. Staff have mentioned, for instance, that they have to work more hours than before and the opportunities to take leave have been few and far between. Consequently, work-life policies have not always been fully respected: leave-monitoring, a mechanical exercise, involves minimal human interaction and even when records show that staff have failed to take time off or have neglected to communicate their telecommuting preference, managers may not have taken action that could help to reduce stress levels. It is important to note that the Ombudsman has also received complaints about the disparity in making work-life principles available to all contract-holders including other affiliated personnel. Figure 9 shows that most of the complaints in the working conditions category had to do with work-life balance and stress.

**Figure 9. Breakdown of cases in the safety, work/life balance, stress category**



### ...complaints of burnout and stress were widespread, affecting staff at all levels

In the 11<sup>th</sup> Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), the World Health Organization defines burnout as an occupational phenomenon “resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”. During the reporting period, complaints of burnout and stress were widespread, affecting staff at all levels. Even though supervisors may encourage staff to address burnout using available organizational resources, they often do not follow their own advice because of workload and pressure to deliver in the pandemic. This sends mixed

messages to staff, who are hearing that their well-being is important but at the same time observe management’s non-adherence to best practices regarding work-life balance.

Further, the Ombudsman has received complaints from staff who have been labelled lazy or ineffective because they have taken time off or have taken advantage of the tools in place to manage work-life balance. Staff have shared with the Ombudsman that they fear to request time off or for more managerial compliance with established working hours. However, the stigma of appearing inefficient is so strong that they prefer to remain silent.

Supervisors have complained to the Ombudsman of presenteeism, i.e., when staff are disengaged at work or are delivering less than they did in the past because of the lack of face-to-face interaction. Supervisors have approached the Ombudsman to explore options on how to hold staff accountable when they opt for telecommuting or other remote-work tools but are not meeting performance standards. Teleworking and telecommuting arrangements require staff and supervisors to agree on tasks, assignments and deadlines. These arrangements must be in writing and communicated to the leave monitor and human-resources representatives. The Ombudsman has observed that this practice is not always observed by supervisors or staff. Frequently, the telework arrangement is communicated by email or electronic messaging and remains between the supervisor and the staff. This makes it difficult to hold the staff accountable when there is non-performance but also creates a perception of favouritism or unfairness in the workplace. In such situations, the Ombudsman has coached

staff to have conversations about accountability and misuse of the teleworking arrangements. Conversations about work-life balance should be more frequent and structured to foster trust and respect at work.

The Ombudsman is encouraged by the efforts of organizations to raise awareness about burnout and stress. Organizations have conducted webinars, increased the number of staff counsellors and revitalized their policies to allow for more flexibility in managing work-life balance. The Ombudsman has observed that in some offices, leadership has focused on strategies to increase connection and a sense of belonging among its workforce, two factors that have been shown to reduce burnout and stress. As the organizations adapt to working remotely and the workforce copes with blurred lines between their personal and work obligations, the need for professional counselling at work is acute. Staff counsellors are equipped to help to prevent stress and other challenges relating to mental health. The Ombudsman has observed that mental-health resources, although available to staff, are overstretched as requests for assistance increase. Indeed, it is not unusual to find that mental-health professionals are themselves suffering from burnout and stress.

### **Conversations about work-life balance should be more frequent and structured to foster trust and respect at work.**

#### **Recommendations**

The Ombudsman recommends that as part of their duty-of-care obligations, the five organizations encourage all staff to use the mechanisms in place to help to manage work-life balance.

The Ombudsman recommends that the five organizations continually assess mental-health resources available to staff to ensure that they are adequate and fit for purpose.

#### **D. Mediation**

The Office continued to make progress in the mediation initiatives despite the challenges of working remotely during the pandemic. Successes included responding to increasing requests for mediation, maintaining a high rate of satisfaction among those who participated in mediation and the development of new projects.

The Office responded to 154 mediation requests in 2021, of which 45 resulted in mediation, a slight increase over 2020; settlements were achieved in 94 per cent of the cases concluded. Those requests that were not suitable for mediation were addressed through other conflict-management channels such as ombudsman intervention, shuttle diplomacy, and conflict-coaching.

## ...92 per cent of the parties would recommend mediation as a means of addressing concerns regardless of the outcome.

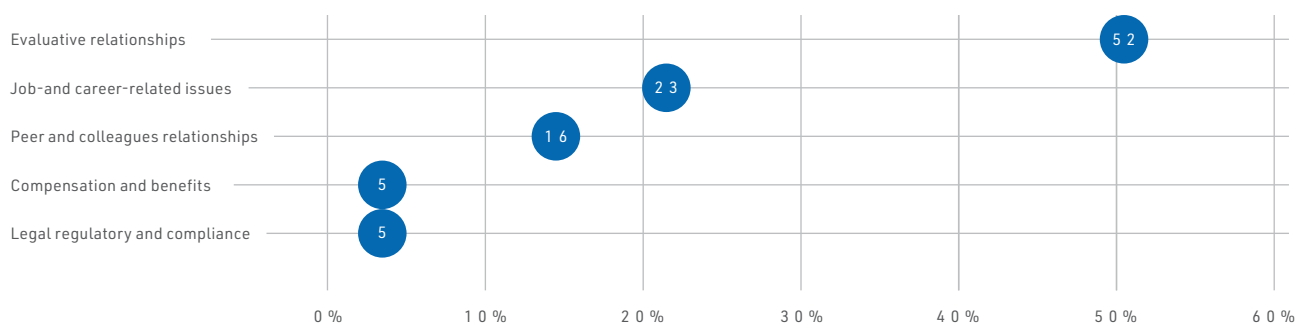
The Mediation Pledge, signed by all five organizations, helped to raise awareness of the potential of mediation. In addition, the Office launched the “A Conversation with a Mediator” programme for 30 country offices in all seven regions with the participation of over 750 colleagues from the five organizations served by the Office. Fourteen mediators of the Global Mediation Panel were involved in mediating cases, mainly in the co-mediation modality, representing 45 per cent of the mediations while 55 per cent of the cases were handled directly by the Office staff. In addition, 31 mediators participated in other mediation activities of the Office, including training and awareness-raising. It is important to note that based on the responses to the surveys conducted by the Office, 92 per cent of the parties would recommend mediation

as a means of addressing concerns regardless of the outcome. The surveys also showed that 84 per cent of cases took less than 16 hours to conclude once parties entered into mediation.

Experience and results have shown that mediation is a very effective tool to address some of the work-related issues between supervisees and supervisors, especially during the time of performance evaluation, when underlying issues surface. In fact, as in previous years, most of the mediation cases involved evaluative relationships between supervisees and supervisors. The breakdown of issues of the conducted mediation cases is presented in figure 10.

Despite the growing use of mediation, the Office observes that some members of the workforce are concerned about retaliation when considering this option. To alleviate these concerns, the Ombudsman recommends that the organizations further strengthen policies that encourage the choice of mediation, including applying the provisions of the Mediation Pledge.

**Figure 10. Mediation cases in 2021, by category**



## Mediation resources

In 2021, the Office published four editions of the “Mediating Around the World” newsletter, which included articles by the members of the Global Mediation Panel and of the International Advisory Board, as well as by colleagues from the five organizations. The newsletters are available on the Office’s website at <https://fpombudsman.org/what-we-do/mediation/>.

“A Conversation with a Mediator”: this programme included training for and e-visits to 30 country offices followed by confidential intake sessions. Mediators from the Global Mediation Panel participated in these sessions to raise awareness about mediation and to offer support to personnel in managing their potential conflicts. Participants rated the usefulness of the programme at 8.34 out of 10.

The Office also started a new project, “Peace at work”, with the aim of producing a series of short interviews with international mediators and other conflict-management professionals to promote greater understanding of the benefits of workplace mediation. The full list of the interviews is available on the website of the Office: <https://fpombudsman.org/what-we-do/mediation/>

## Global Mediation Panel

In 2021, the Office continued to expand the Global Mediation Panel, which currently includes 70 mediators worldwide.



## Recommendation

The Ombudsman reiterates the recommendation that the five organizations set up policies to address practices that discourage personnel from mediating conflicts amicably, including concerns over retaliation and encourage managers to become advocates for mediation.

## E. Respectful Workplace Facilitator Programme

Significant progress was made during 2021 in the Respectful Workplace Facilitator (RWF) pilot initiative in operational and programmatic areas, including capacity-building, expansion and infrastructure. The value and sustainability of the initiative will be assessed against these factors.

Training the RWF nominees to perform their role was a top priority for the Office during the reporting period. In view of the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the management team decided to train RWFs virtually instead of in person, as originally envisaged. This required a transformation of the in-person training curriculum, with close attention to retaining and emphasizing the practical elements of the training: active listening, listening with neutrality, asking open and non-directive questions, and helping the visitor to set goals through role-plays, exercises, and self-reflection assignments. The cohort size was capped at 24 to optimize learning. Due attention was also paid to schedules of both the RWFs and their supervisors by offering the sessions over several weeks with two sessions per week. In all, 72 RWFs (55 women and 22 men) participated in 24 hours of live instruction. The virtual training was launched in September, facilitated in English, French, and Spanish, presented in multiple regions and presented to four cohorts.

Anonymous feedback from the training evaluation survey was largely positive: RWFs commented that the training was useful for their new role, their professional development, and their personal lives. RWFs shared keen insights into how the training could be improved: they requested more practice time and more information on organizational resources to which they can refer colleagues in the course of their

work as RWFs. While the virtual delivery of the platform was understood and accepted in the context of the pandemic, the RWFs did request that in-person refresher courses take place in the future. RWFs also suggested that the training be done over a shorter period with longer sessions, noting the challenges of attending sessions because of competing priorities and last-minute work requests. RWF attendance and engagement were tracked throughout the training and the training team found that, in addition to competing priorities, unstable internet access was prohibitive for some RWFs. The training team also coordinated and facilitated make-up sessions for colleagues who had missed sessions, and the recordings and presentation materials of the sessions were regularly distributed to the RWFs. At the end of the training, 52 of the 72 RWF nominees slated to participate in the third quarter 2021 training completed the course and assumed their roles. The remaining RWFs have been incorporated into the 2022 first-quarter training.

The RWFs demonstrated a high level of skill growth during the virtual training, as did those who participated in the 2020 in-person training sessions. While it can be concluded that the training is effective and useful, the logistical challenges for the RWFs, their competing workload, and problematic internet access cannot be understated. Without attending and actively engaging in the training, RWFs are not permitted to assume their roles. The training team will coordinate more closely with RWF supervisors and in this respect, the Ombudsman urges participating office leadership for greater support in allowing RWFs to attend the training sessions so that the function can be operationalized and RWFs can begin serving their communities.

Priority was also given to expanding the initiative and the team consequently collaborated with RWF programme partners at UNDP, UNFPA and UN Women. At the close of 2021, there were 78

participating offices (UNDP - 40; UNFPA - 22 and UN Women - 16), with 158 RWFs (current, former, fully trained, partially trained and to be trained), as shown in figure 11.



**Figure 11. Offices participating in RWF programme, by country and organization, 2022<sup>1</sup>**

● UNDP ● UNFPA ● UN-WOMEN

Country/Office		Number of RWFs in country
Afghanistan	●	2
Armenia	●	2
Bangladesh	●●●	8
Bangkok Regional Hub	●	2
Barbados	●	2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	●	2
Botswana	●	2
Brazil	●●	4
Burkina Faso	●	2
Cambodia	●	2
China	●	2
Colombia	●	2
Côte d'Ivoire	●	2
Djibouti	●	2
Egypt	●●	4
Ethiopia	●●	4
Fiji Multi-country Office	●	3
Georgia	●●	4
Guyana	●	2
Iraq	●	2
Jordan	●●	4
Kenya	●	2
Kuwait	●	1
Kyrgyzstan	●	2
LACRO Regional Office	●	2
LACRO Subregional Office	●	3
Liberia	●	2
Libya	●	2
Malaysia	●	2

Country/Office		Number of RWFs in country
Mali	●	2
Mexico	●●	4
Morocco	●	2
Mozambique	●●	4
Nepal	●	2
Niger	●	2
Nigeria	●●	4
North Macedonia	●	2
Pacific Subregional Office	●	3
Pakistan	●●	4
Panama	●	2
Papua New Guinea	●●	5
Peru	●	2
Republic of Moldova	●	2
Samoa	●	2
Saudi Arabia	●	1
Senegal	●	2
Sierra Leone	●	2
South Africa	●●	2
South Sudan	●	2
Sri Lanka	●●	4
Sudan	●	3
Tajikistan	●	2
Tunisia	●●	4
Turkey	●●	4
Uganda	●	2
Ukraine	●●●	7
Uzbekistan	●	2
Zimbabwe	●	2

<sup>1</sup> Includes all participating RWFs (current, former, fully trained, partially trained and to be trained)

## ...the prospect of a local, informal, and confidential resource appeals to the office community.

As in previous years, the participating offices facilitated nomination and voting processes to determine which colleagues would take up the voluntary role, with 33 offices completing the nomination process before the conclusion of 2021. Throughout the nomination process, the training team communicated with focal points to ensure clarity and to provide any support required. Multiple focal points reported that competing priorities – often relating to pandemic and crisis-response issues – delayed the nomination process. Other sources of delay arose when nomination processes were facilitated incorrectly, when there were limited eligible colleagues to perform the role, and when there were concerns about the potential additional workload for the RWFs. This useful feedback will help the Office to streamline the nomination processes. Further feedback indicates that the nomination processes have a positive, energizing impact on morale and bring colleagues together while the prospect of a local, informal, and confidential resource appeals to the office community. Although the delays in the nomination process impeded implementation, the nomination process was effective in locating colleagues who met the required eligibility criteria and had suitable personalities and dispositions for the specifics of this role. The Ombudsman appreciates the efforts and support of the

nomination focal points for without them, the RWF programme would not exist.

As mentioned in the 2020 annual report, the restructuring of the Office has benefited the RWF programme. Regional ombudsman specialists and regional office presences have enabled the Office to support RWFs in the regions. RWF regional focal points support RWFs in, for example, operationalizing the mechanism, addressing cases, assisting in community-building, and coordinating Office capacity-building initiatives. Stakeholders such as participating office leadership, nomination focal points, and RWFs have expressed appreciation for this support.

On a positive note, RWFs have reported that the more their colleagues understand the mechanism the more comfortable they are in trusting and utilizing it. In those offices where colleagues are reluctant to use the RWF mechanism, the RWFs still make themselves available to those colleagues to explain their role, and listen to their concerns – thus continuing to build trust in the mechanism. The active RWFs reported 26 cases in 2021, a slight increase from the 23 cases in 2020. Cases covered a range of issues with the three major issues dealing with respect and treatment between supervisors and supervisees; returning to the office after the pandemic; and job-related concerns. There was one case of sexual harassment

### Recommendations

The Ombudsman recommends that more support be given to focal points to facilitate the nomination process for Respectful Workplace Facilitators in participating offices.

The Ombudsman also recommends closer coordination between supervisors of personnel nominated for Respectful Workplace Facilitator positions and the leadership of participating offices to ensure that Respectful Workplace Facilitators are able to attend all virtual training sessions.

As the United Nations system is cautiously resuming post-pandemic operations, the Office of the Ombudsman team looks forward to more in-person contact with colleagues in the resolution of workplace conflict and in its outreach activities. The past two years have presented many new challenges in the international workplace, not least in the kind of conflicts and concerns brought to the attention of the Office, as detailed in the present report. Constrained by the limitations on travel during the pandemic, the Ombudsman team has nonetheless learned how to maintain services remotely and virtually to the members of its constituency, many of whom are vulnerable and in need of the empathetic yet impartial intervention that ombudsman and mediation services can provide. The new skills that the team has acquired during these unprecedented times will be a valuable professional complement to the team's interpersonal perspectives that are essential to the constructive resolution of workplace conflict as the United Nations moves forward.

The gradual return to the workplace, replacing the modality of working away from the office, will also create new challenges. Colleagues have brought to the attention of the Office the apprehension that they experience as they prepare for post-pandemic arrangements. The Office team has in turn discussed these challenges in depth at many levels and is prepared to assist in the months ahead in the most constructive ways possible. These will include building on the webinars, master classes and other instructional materials that have kept colleagues informed and in touch with the services offered by the Office. On-site visits to address office conflict face-to-face are planned as official travel restrictions are eased and all members of the workforce of the five organizations are encouraged to contact the Office as soon as possible – as often noted, conflict is more efficiently resolved in the early stages, before positions harden.

The mediation pledge signed by the Executive Heads makes it mandatory for all the organizations to consider mediation as a way of resolving disputes. The Office will continue to build capacity around the pledge to foster a mediation culture within the organization. This will involve proactively engaging with disputants at the decision-making stage prior to proceeding with the informal or formal options of resolution. Increased engagement with individual staff members as they contemplate how they will resolve their complaints will in turn strengthen and empower other staff to manage conflict effectively.

The team of the Office of the Ombudsman is ready to assist in the adjustments that all colleagues will have to make as they return to working in the office. The creative ways in which individuals and organizations have continued to maintain the high standards, responsibilities and productivity of the international civil service during the COVID-19 pandemic will stand everyone in good stead: the Ombudsman team foresees that the creativity of the past two years will help to establish new norms in the United Nations workplace. This will inevitably involve diverse views and lead to conflict, but as pointed out many times in the annual reports of the Office, and regularly reiterated by the team members, conflict is a normal part of human interaction and, when addressed competently, can be a powerful catalyst in bringing about change. In this process, the Office team will bring to the new workplace its specialized, professional expertise in conflict management whenever called upon. The team will also continue to reach out to the entire community of the five organizations through electronic means, and increasingly face-to-face, with suggestions on how to find solutions by working together – the motto of the Office, which has not changed and which reflects the reality of ombudsman and mediation services.

**...the Ombudsman team foresees that the creativity of the past two years will help to establish new norms in the United Nations workplace.**

INDEPENDENCE  
NEUTRALITY  
CONFIDENTIALITY  
INFORMALITY

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