

#WeAreProtected

How GIZ colleagues in Liberia protect each other against sexual harassment and promote a safe and respectful working environment for all.



GIZ Liberia staff make their stance clear: If it's unwanted, it's harassment. © GIZ Liberia

Introduction

Monrovia is famously the capital city with the most rainfall in the world but February is normally in the midst of the dry season. Yet in early 2017, participants of the annual GIZ Liberia country planning were sensing that a storm was brewing outside: a storm of sexual harassment and abuse scandals that would over the course of the following year and a half hit Hollywood ([#MeToo](#)), the global development community ([#AidToo](#)) and eventually Liberia. After a hard-hitting [article](#) on sexual abuse at a Liberian girls' school was published in US media in October 2018, Liberian women's rights activists started to mobilise under the [#WeAreUnprotected](#) banner to highlight a problem that was all too common but rarely talked about in Liberian society.

By that time, however, GIZ Liberia was already well prepared against such a storm because GIZ staff had collectively developed and implemented a sexual harassment prevention and response system. It is based on GIZ's global policy but tailored to local needs to ensure everyone feels protected. 97% of GIZ Liberia staff surveyed in November 2019 confirmed that they feel now indeed protected against sexual harassment at the workplace. And the system has informed efforts to protect GIZ staff in other countries as well as over 11,000 employees of Liberia's Ministry of Health.

Overview of the process and key elements of the system

GIZ has adopted a global corporate policy against sexual harassment. But colleagues in Liberia realised in 2017 that few knew about the policy, its provisions and, most importantly, how to prevent and respond to sexual harassment. We therefore decided to embark on a four-step process to develop and implement a system based on the global policy but adapted to our local needs and circumstances (see figure). The process was led by the country and project level Gender Focal Persons with full support from the Country Director.



We started with an anonymous **survey**. 32 national and international GIZ staff participated. 9% stated that they had experienced sexual harassment while working at GIZ. A majority did not feel sufficiently informed about GIZ's policy (60%) or how to report sexual harassment (62%). While more than two-thirds said they had a person within GIZ who they would trust and turn to in case they experience sexual harassment, 28% did not. We clearly had a case for action. The results of the survey implied that having the policy available on the intranet and a list of contact persons at head office was not enough. We needed to make the content of the policy and reporting mechanisms locally accessible.



At the core of the system are **local contact persons**. While colleagues affected by sexual harassment can approach their manager they might not always feel comfortable doing so and contact persons at head office are not very accessible, especially for national staff. We therefore decided to designate local contact persons including both men and women and both national and international staff.



These contact persons but also managers rarely have the expertise. They need clarity on procedures, their responsibilities (and limits) and practical tools and tips. Therefore, we developed a detailed **guidance note** that adheres to the principles and procedures of GIZ's global policy (and local laws) and provides practical advice to those handling cases as well as tools such as case recording forms to help them do so. It covers receiving a case (including tips on setting up a conducive setting, on recording facts, providing advice and counselling, and onward referral), handling an informal complaint, handling a formal complaint (including investigations and sanctions), and how to keep confidential records and do annual reporting.



The contact persons and managers received **training** on the guidance note (see above). The training was facilitated by an external expert provided by the Liberian women's rights NGO medica Liberia. The training focused on strengthening participants' understanding of sexual harassment and GIZ's policy as well as on the process of responding to sexual harassment claims, including practical tips and exercises.



A **communication strategy** guided the development of **information materials** for staff. Finally, we brought all 70+ GIZ Liberia staff together in **awareness events** to discuss the GIZ policy, explain the definition of sexual harassment, the rights and duties of staff and the role of the contact persons. Emphasis was put on giving practical examples (using both serious and humorous role plays) and on interactive elements to ensure staff of all educational backgrounds would understand the matter. Role plays also included cases involving partner representatives. The GIZ policy as well as brochures for all staff and posters for all offices were distributed.

The system aims to both enable the person affected to seek redress and support if he/she wants to and to enable GIZ Liberia to adequately react to cases of alleged sexual harassment. Above all, responsibilities, procedures and communication are designed in such a way that **the person affected by sexual harassment is at the centre of decision making** (see figure on the right).

The survey questionnaire, guidance note, recording and reporting forms, communication strategy, information materials (poster, brochure), agendas for contact person training and staff awareness events etc. are available in a [tool box](#).



Impact and lessons learnt

Two years after the first survey and one and a half years after the launch of the system, we did a **second staff survey** in November 2019 to find out what had changed and where we still needed to improve.¹ **97% of felt 'very much' or 'quite' protected against sexual harassment.** The share of respondents who had experienced sexual harassment was 6% (compared to 9% in 2017). 79% stated that they know someone in GIZ they trusted and would turn to in case they experienced sexual harassment (compared to 72% in 2017). **68% felt well informed about GIZ's anti-sexual harassment policy (compared to 40% in 2017) and 65% felt well informed how to report cases (compared to 38% in 2017).** In conclusion, the measures taken to raise awareness about the issue, GIZ's procedures and local contact persons clearly had a positive effect, although there is continuous need for information, including for new colleagues. This was also reflected in respondents' recommendations which mainly focused on the need to keep up regular awareness activities around the topic for all staff.

Lessons learnt from setting up a local anti-sexual harassment system in Liberia include the following:

- It is critical to **identify diverse (origin, sex, age), trusted and competent local contact persons** outside the formal hierarchy to lower the barriers to reporting. Contact persons and managers need practical guidance and training in basic counselling skills to be effective. This might require external expertise.
- **The system needs to be institutionalised** as part of HR (which has been challenging in Liberia due to the absence of a full-time HR officer in country), be included in the onboarding of new colleagues, and awareness raising efforts need to become regular.
- Given the nature of GIZ's work, **harassment of GIZ staff by partner representatives and on field trips** is a sensitive but important subject that needs to be considered.
- **Openness and strong leadership** from the Country Director and the Management Team as a whole is critical to assure staff that their concerns are taken seriously. And it needs a core team of committed colleagues to drive the process (e.g. gender focal persons, national staff association representatives or HR officers).

¹ The response rate was 42%. A higher rate was hampered by data protection requirements for an online survey, which de facto excluded a large part of support staff who are not sufficiently computer literate.

Uptake by others

Within GIZ, colleagues in **Sierra Leone** (which operates under a joint Country office with Liberia) used the tools developed in Liberia to also conduct a survey, designate contact persons and raise awareness among the 140+ staff. The [toolbox](#) developed in Liberia was then presented at the GIZ **Gender Network Meeting** in Bonn in 2018 and shared via the [IDA community](#) on preventing sexual harassment. It was again discussed at the Gender Network Meeting in Accra in 2019 and **colleagues from around Africa** have approached GIZ Liberia for advice on how to strengthen their local implementation strategies for GIZ's anti-sexual harassment policy.

But the uptake has not been confined to GIZ. **Within Liberia**, the 'More Than Me' scandal in October 2018 mentioned in the introduction led to a wave of reports of sexual harassment and abuse in many sectors, including in the health sector, as those affected found the courage to speak up. The **Ministry of Health** approached GIZ for help and through the project 'Employment-oriented support to women in the health sector', GIZ advised the HR division of the ministry on implementing the approach tested by GIZ Liberia. The guidance note was adapted to the ministry's needs and to civil service regulations, case reporting and investigations teams were trained and awareness events for managers and staff were held. The system now formally covers more than **11,000 workers** employed by the Ministry in all parts of the country although further awareness efforts are needed. The GIZ approach also informs ongoing improvements of anti-sexual harassment systems at three **private and public colleges/universities** with around **3,000 students** that partner with GIZ Liberia. What started as an effort to protect our own 70+ staff has become part of a nation-wide effort. While challenges in institutionalisation remain and attitudes and behaviour do not change overnight, we have contributed to turning a threatening storm into a 'wind of change' so that more and more Liberians can say: **#WeAreProtected**.



Raising awareness on sexual harassment: GIZ staff event; GIZ poster; Ministry of Health poster © GIZ Liberia

November 2019

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