



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

HLPF 2025 Side Event

“Sexual Harassment as a Barrier to Achieving the SDGs”

Hybrid Format, 15 July 2025

UN Headquarters, Conference Room B

Event Summary

Organizers: International Association of Youth and Students for Peace (IAYSP), Global Forum on Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent, the UN Major Group for Children and Youth, and Women’s Federation for World Peace International

Overview

On July 15, 2025, during the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), the International Association of Youth and Students for Peace (IAYSP) convened a high-impact side event titled “*Sexual Harassment as a Barrier to Achieving the SDGs*.” The session explored how sexual harassment undermines progress on SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), with a focus on informal sectors, digital platforms, and creative industries. The event featured survivor testimonies, youth advocacy, legal perspectives, and policy-level insights, culminating in a collective call to action across sectors and institutions.

Opening Segment

John Koster, Program Director at IAYSP-USA, opened the event by introducing IAYSP’s mission of advancing peace through values-based education, service, and youth leadership. He thanked all co-sponsors for their support and framed sexual harassment as a cross-cutting issue that impedes inclusive and sustainable development.

Nagma Shrestha, UN Representative of IAYSP, followed with a powerful personal address that set the tone for the event. She recounted a past experience of sexual harassment and later, her leadership role during a serious workplace complaint as National Director of Miss Universe Nepal. She underscored the need for systems, not just good intentions to truly safeguard women and youth in professional and creative spaces. Ms. Shrestha emphasized that safety in the workplace is foundational to achieving the SDGs.

Recorded Messages: Legal and Institutional Grounding

Tej Dangol, PSEA Coordinator, UNRCO Nepal, highlighted the operation of the UN’s whole-of-system PSEAH (Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment)

framework in Nepal. She detailed inter-agency cooperation to localize protection, strengthen coordination, and ensure survivor-centered responses.

Manasa Pradhan, lawyer and human rights researcher, outlined Nepal's current legal mechanisms, including the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Prevention Act and the 2018 Penal Code. She noted critical gaps, particularly the exclusion of informal workers and advocated for the ratification of ILO Convention 190 (C190) to create binding obligations and close protection gaps.

Keynote Address: H.E. Lok Bahadur Thapa

His Excellency **Lok Bahadur Thapa**, Vice President of ECOSOC and incoming ECOSOC President, delivered the keynote address. He affirmed that sexual harassment is a systemic violation that obstructs sustainable development and violates basic human rights. Key points included:

- Promoting prevention through women and youth empowerment.
- Enhancing cross-border collaboration.
- Leveraging technology and disaggregated data.
- Prioritizing the informal sector and migrant workers.

He called for a moral and political commitment to building safe and equitable societies and emphasized Nepal's readiness to champion multilateral, inclusive solutions within ECOSOC.

Panel Discussion

This segment amplified the lived experiences and leadership of women working in unregulated sectors:

Sophie Fergi, Gen Z influencer, bravely recounted her experiences of coercion, exploitation, and trauma as a child in the influencer industry. Quoting her testimony: *"What happened to me can happen to anyone if there are no rules, no safety nets, and no one watching."* She advocated for concrete protections in digital workplaces and urged governments to ratify ILO C190.

Kathryn Travers, Policy Specialist at UN Women, contextualized Sophie's testimony by outlining existing frameworks like C190 and Beijing+30. She discussed the "continuum of violence" in both offline and online settings and stressed the need to bring youth and creatives into legal reform conversations. Kathryn acknowledged the challenge of extending protections beyond traditional workplaces, but also highlighted solutions: expanding coverage of C190, tailoring legal tools to informal and creative industries, and involving youth in shaping those frameworks.

Marina Roman, social media producer and pageant participant, spoke from her dual vantage point behind and in front of the camera. She described facing harassment online and in person,

and how confidence and community helped her reclaim space. Marina emphasized that “self-expression and safety shouldn’t be a tradeoff,” calling for more regulation and education on digital safeguarding, including content moderation standards and protective protocols for creators.

Alima Taal, Senior Rights Expert and Regional Youth Coordinator at GFoD Africa, focused on work and descent-based discrimination. She illustrated how generational hierarchies and social exclusion compound risks for women from marginalized castes or ethnic groups. She shared Africa’s progress with the Resolution of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights and called for integration of descent-based protection into sexual harassment laws, investment in education and data collection, and funding for grassroots youth advocacy.

Naveen Gautam, youth advocate from South Asia, spoke via recorded message. He highlighted how caste-based discrimination and lack of labor protections fuel conditions for exploitation. He emphasized education, intersectional policy development, and youth organizing as critical to protecting vulnerable workers.

Merly Barlaan, Vice President of Women’s Federation for World Peace International, concluded the panel by shifting the lens to prevention through family and values-based education. She called for equal investment in character-building as in STEM fields and recommended integrating family education into national development strategies. Her message: *“Without stable families, we can’t build stable societies.”*

Interactive Dialogue & Closing

The event concluded with a robust Q&A session, featuring questions from in-person and online participants. Key concerns raised included:

- How can women collect evidence and advocate for themselves in the face of legal and institutional discouragement?
- What role can men and allies play in dismantling systemic harassment?
- How do cultural norms within families and among women themselves perpetuate silence around harassment?
- How can we better educate communities where concepts of consent and dignity are under-recognized?
- What steps can governments take to ensure stronger implementation of anti-harassment laws?

These questions reflected the urgency of multilevel responses across policy, culture, and education, to ensure real protection and accountability.

Attendees were invited to continue the conversation at the UN Women, ILO, and ITUC Exhibit on Ending Violence and Harassment in the World of Work held later that evening. The session concluded with a collective reflection on the power of youth leadership, survivor voices, and intergenerational collaboration to transform systems and accelerate progress toward the SDGs.

Key Recommendations & Calls to Action

Member States

- Ratify and implement ILO Convention 190 with inclusion of informal, digital, and creative sectors.
- Ensure protections also cover descent-based, caste-affected, and marginalized communities.

Governments

- Integrate family-building, safeguarding, and values-based education into national curricula.
- Fund local family education centers and survivor resource hubs.
- Establish voluntary certification for marriage preparation and parenting.
- Adopt youth-led reporting mechanisms and national data tracking systems on SEA/H.

Private Sector

- Implement safeguarding policies and reporting systems for young workers, especially in digital platforms and cultural events like beauty pageants, fashion industry, and other such spaces.
- Mandate content moderation, protection protocols, and complaint procedures on social media platforms.

UN Agencies

- Expand PSEAH frameworks beyond humanitarian sectors to all youth-focused spaces.
- Promote survivor-centered, multi-sectoral responses.
- Provide technical assistance to countries implementing C190 and building data systems.

Civil Society & Youth

- Leverage storytelling, advocacy, and creative activism to shift cultural norms and influence legislative processes.
- Create safe online spaces and peer-led accountability networks.
- Collaborate with governments on localized education, outreach, and prevention efforts.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment is not just a workplace issue, it is a structural barrier to achieving gender equality, decent work, and just institutions. Through this HLPF 2025 event, IAYSP and its partners reaffirmed that prevention, protection, and policy change must be driven by the lived realities of those most affected. From survivors to policymakers, from creators to community leaders, a common message echoed:

Let us move from pledges to protection. From silence to systemic change. From isolated stories to collective transformation.