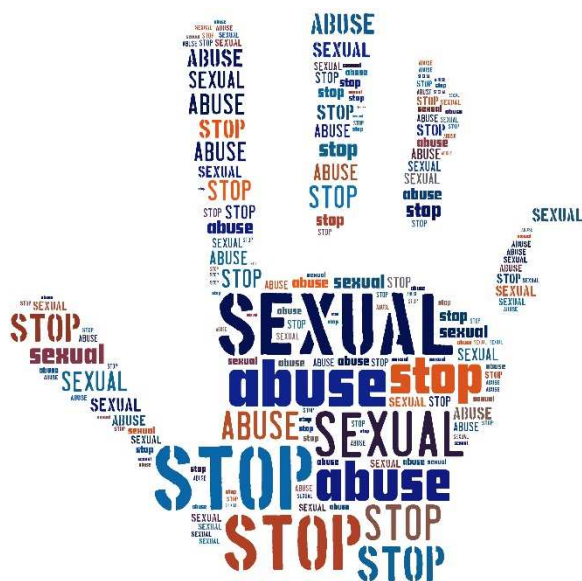


KoGe-Blog # 9: Fighting against SEAH strengthens our reputation!



The KoGe together with its partners is breaking the taboo of sexual harassment and abuse! “In the past, much was swept under the carpet because organisations were afraid that it might damage their reputation. But it is exactly the other way round: if we are showing that we actively fight sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH), we strengthen our reputation”. In this interview, Luise Ammerschuber tells us how she is fighting against SEAH together with the working group on good governance.

Madeleine Bolliger (coordinator of the KoGe): Luise, you are our KoGe Focal Point for Good Governance. How comes the working group on Good Governance decided to focus on the subject “Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH)”?

Luise Ammerschuber (Focal Point Good Governance): Sadly, the topic gained presence recently through both the #metoo debate and the Oxfam scandal. There is a momentum that we would like to use. What is interesting though is that the group had taken up the topic much earlier. We worked on a study on complaint mechanisms in 2016 and 2017 and published it last year. In the course of my research for this handbook, I discovered that cases of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (SEAH) account for an important proportion of complaints. For example, I interviewed an organisation where SEAH cases accounted for up to 70% of all complaints in certain countries! Those affected by sexual abuse and violence need specialised complaint mechanisms and support. They are particularly vulnerable, and they often need access to psychological and medical help. For all these reasons, we decided that we would like to deepen the subject of PSEAH. We hadn't expected that the subject would soon become so topical. However, I am not surprised, because SEAH is more widespread than one might think.

We hadn't expected that the subject would soon become so topical. However, I am not surprised, because SEAH is more widespread than one might think.

How important is the topic to you personally?

When I was 19, I worked in South Africa in houses for abused women and children of the Salvation Army and another organisation. The work in these women's shelters has shaped me a lot. I saw there what sexual violence means and what long-term consequences it has for those affected. I sometimes observed a certain fatalism in society: this is just the way it is, people would tell me! But for me this is not something that "just happens"! It is something you can change! In South Africa I learned: you can do something about it. SEAH can be reduced.

What can you do? What works to reduce SEAH and what concrete measures have proven successful?

Let's take again the example of the organisation I mentioned above. In this case, the introduction of the complaint mechanism had ultimately led to a massive decline in cases. This was an organisation active in refugee camps where people have already experienced the worst. The introduction of the complaint mechanism was accompanied by a sensitisation campaign which, by the way, targeted women and men separately. People started to know about it and they got to know their rights. They suddenly had the opportunity to act, to defend themselves very concretely. The silence was broken. On the other hand, every complaint was investigated, and a zero-tolerance stance was taken. The word spread fast. SEAH was reduced successfully!

I interviewed an organisation where SEAH cases accounted for up to 70% of all complaints in certain countries!

For me, this example shows that it needs both: prevention and reaction!

Exactly! PSEAH programmes are particularly successful when you combine both. In prevention, we should keep in mind to work with both, girls/women and boys/men. What are the predominant images of women and men in the concerned society? What impact do they have on sexual violence? Successful prevention programmes work with these images. The international programme *No Means No* for instance successfully offers self-defense courses to both girls and boys. It also teaches young men how to protect others and how to intervene when something happens.

It is equally important to work with the police and local government to ensure that the perpetrators are held accountable for their actions. In many countries, nothing happens when affected persons turn to the police. Sometimes they are even accused of being responsible themselves. This must change! We want to help reduce the number of cases and better enforce the sanctioning of perpetrators.

What can we as organisations do concretely?

The key words are *prevent, detect, react!* Firstly, we need rules, then these rules must be made known. We need to promote an organisational culture in which women and men are strengthened, in which both have equal opportunities and where people are empowered to speak up. This applies to our organisations here in Switzerland as well as to our partners in the South, right up to the beneficiaries in the communities. Second comes the reaction: How do you recognize cases and how do you deal with them? Is there an external counselling organisation where those affected are heard and given support? Is there perhaps even an internal complaint mechanism? Last but not least, come the consequences. Sanctioning the perpetrators is part of any zero-tolerance policy. Sanctions range from a warning to the termination of employment to reporting serious cases to law enforcement.

In the past, a lot was swept under the carpet because organisations were afraid that it might damage their reputation. But it is exactly the other way round: if an organisation can show that it is actively fighting against SEAH, this can strengthen its reputation!

There are other important questions, such as: what do we communicate externally? Are we talking about these cases? Do we, for example, inform our donors?

These are difficult questions. What do you recommend?

There are no simple answers. The fact is that there is a great need for support and measures in the area of sexual harassment and violence. It is something that occurs in many organisations. In the past, a lot was swept under the carpet because organisations were afraid that it might damage their reputation. But it is exactly the other way round: if an organisation can show that it is actively fighting against SEAH, this can strengthen its reputation!

What is the objective of the KoGe working group on good governance in the area of SEAH? Are you planning concrete activities?

We would like to be able to offer concrete services to our partner organisations both in prevention as well as in the response to such cases. We would also like to network our partners with other organizations. In short, we would like to serve as a hub where organisations can gather information, where they can learn from others who have experiences to share. We are not alone, we are a network and we can move forward together!

You mention concrete offers. Do you have an example?

Yes, and I am extremely happy about it! Starting 1st of January 2019, we will be able to offer all employees of our KoGe partner organisations an external advisory service, which will also be a contact point for help. Advice will be offered on three levels: to persons affected by sexual harassment, to managers on best practices in the prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace at organisational level as well as to programme officers on best practices in mainstreaming PSEAH in programme work. This advisory and consulting offer will be presented at the KoGe PSEAH Workshop on 13th of December 2018. The sexual harassment counsellor will moderate the morning session of the workshop and answer questions about her offer. The offer covers a six months pilot period after which it will be evaluated.

Starting 1st of January 2019, we will be able to offer all employees of our KoGe partner organisations an external advisory service, which will also be a contact point for help.

By the way, we are currently preparing a flyer. Maybe you will soon see the poster hanging in the break room of your organisation!

I thank Luise for the interview!

Bern, 26.11.2018