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Programa Mundial de Alimentos  
برنامج الأغذية العالمي

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## **Annual report of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services for 2020**

### **Draft decision\***

The Board takes note of the annual report of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services for 2020 (WFP/EB.A/2021/4-C).

### **Introduction**

1. Without doubt 2020 was a year of upheaval. COVID-19 disrupted the world and affected millions of people already made vulnerable by food insecurity, malnutrition, and the effects of conflict and climate change. The world watched the #blacklivesmatter protests following the death of George Floyd in the United States of America, which created a global movement for racial justice.
2. At WFP, the year 2020 saw further developments and initiatives shaping the process of cultural change in the organization, starting with the nomination of a Senior Advisor to the Executive Director on Workplace Culture, followed by the establishment of the Workplace Culture Department and the subsequent appointment of an Assistant Executive Director. Under her leadership, and in collaboration with several stakeholders and employees, WFP's values have been reaffirmed and, together with anti-racism, diversity and inclusion, have become prominent topics and cornerstones of policies and practices such as the new people

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\* This is a draft decision. For the final decision adopted by the Board, please refer to the decisions and recommendations document issued at the end of the session.

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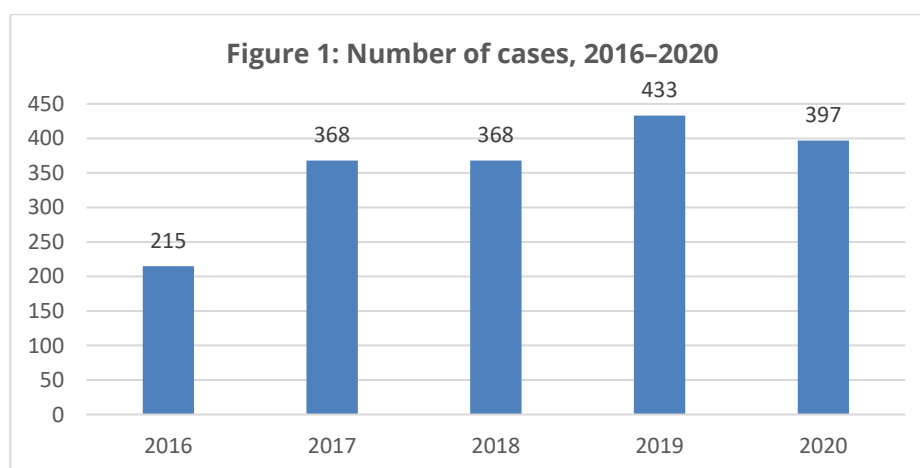
policy. The organization has begun to lay the foundations for a more inclusive and people-centred workplace.

3. This report provides a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the matters brought to the attention of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services and an overview of the work undertaken in 2020.
4. The Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services (hereafter, the “Office”) promotes an improved workplace environment, and thus a more effective organization. It does so by providing confidential conflict resolution services to WFP employees and by identifying systemic issues within the organization. The Office is guided by the principles of confidentiality, informality, independence, neutrality and impartiality.

## Overview of main issues

### Statistics and issue categories

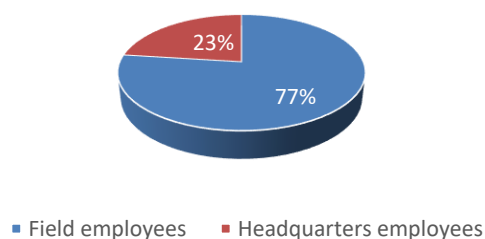
5. During 2020, the Ombudsman registered 397 visitors. COVID-19-related travel restrictions prevented the Office from making in-person visits to countries, which increase access to its services; in normal times, around one third of the Office’s visitors come forward during field visits. Nevertheless, there was just an 8 percent drop in the number of employees who contacted the Office in 2020 compared with 2019; whereas visitor numbers rose as much as 18 percent between 2018 and 2019.



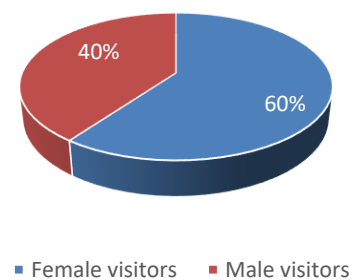
6. The share of Office visitors who work in the field rose from 68 percent in 2019 to 77 percent in 2020; 23 percent of contacts in 2020 were made by headquarters employees<sup>1</sup> compared with 32 percent in 2019. As in previous years, the Office received more female than male visitors (figure 3).

<sup>1</sup> Consistent with previous annual reports, “headquarters employees” refers to employees based in Rome, Italy.

**Figure 2: Field vs. headquarters-based visitors, 2020**

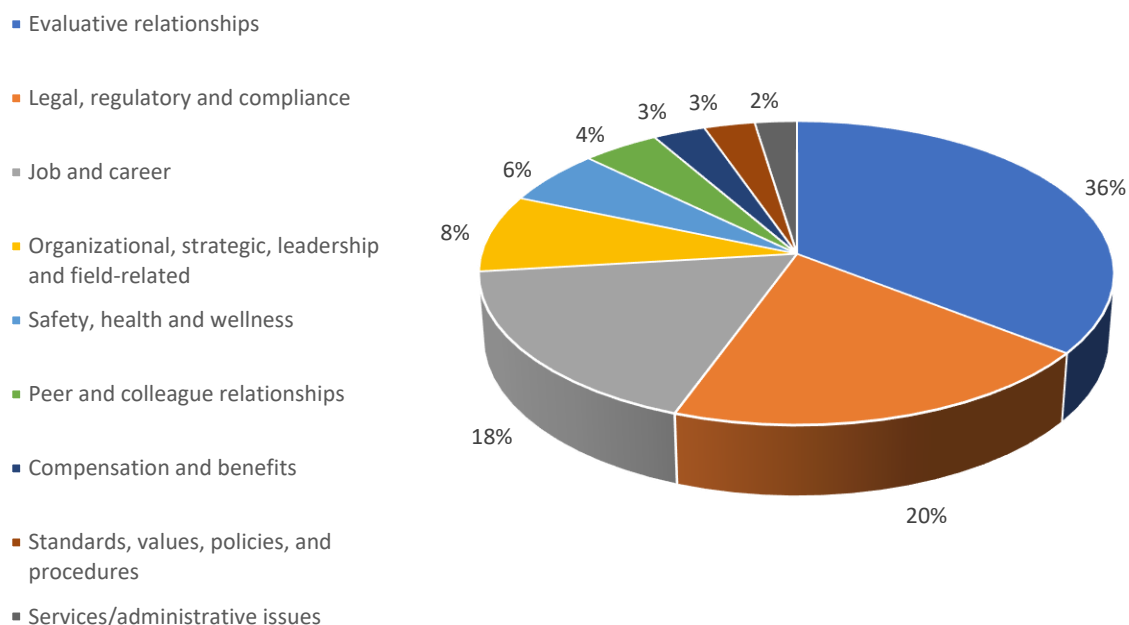


**Figure 3: Gender of visitors**

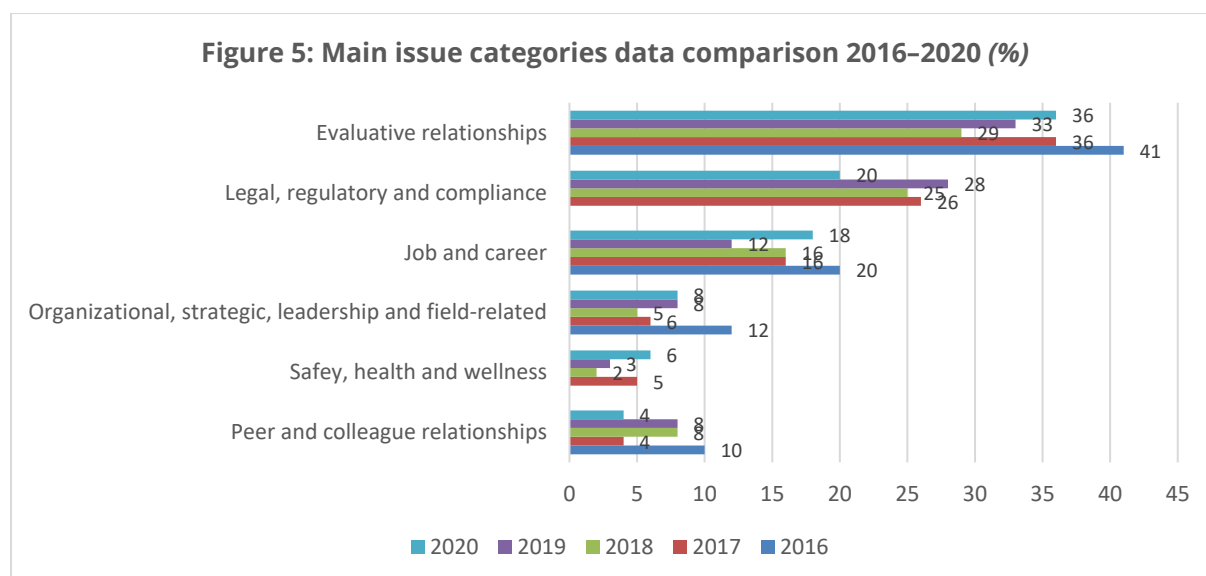


7. In the cases brought to the Ombudsman, 994 issues were identified (compared with 1,180 in 2019 and 852 in 2018).<sup>2</sup> Consistent with the previous three years, the top three issue categories were **evaluative relationships** (36 percent); **legal, regulatory and compliance** (20 percent); and **job and career** (18 percent). **Organizational, strategic and leadership and field-related** was again the fourth largest category (8 percent). The category **safety, health and wellness** entered the top five for the first time, encompassing 6 percent of issues compared with 3 percent in 2019 and 2 percent in 2018. Further details are provided below.
8. Figure 4 provides a breakdown of 2020 issues by category; figure 5 gives an overview of the most prevalent issue categories from 2016 to 2020.

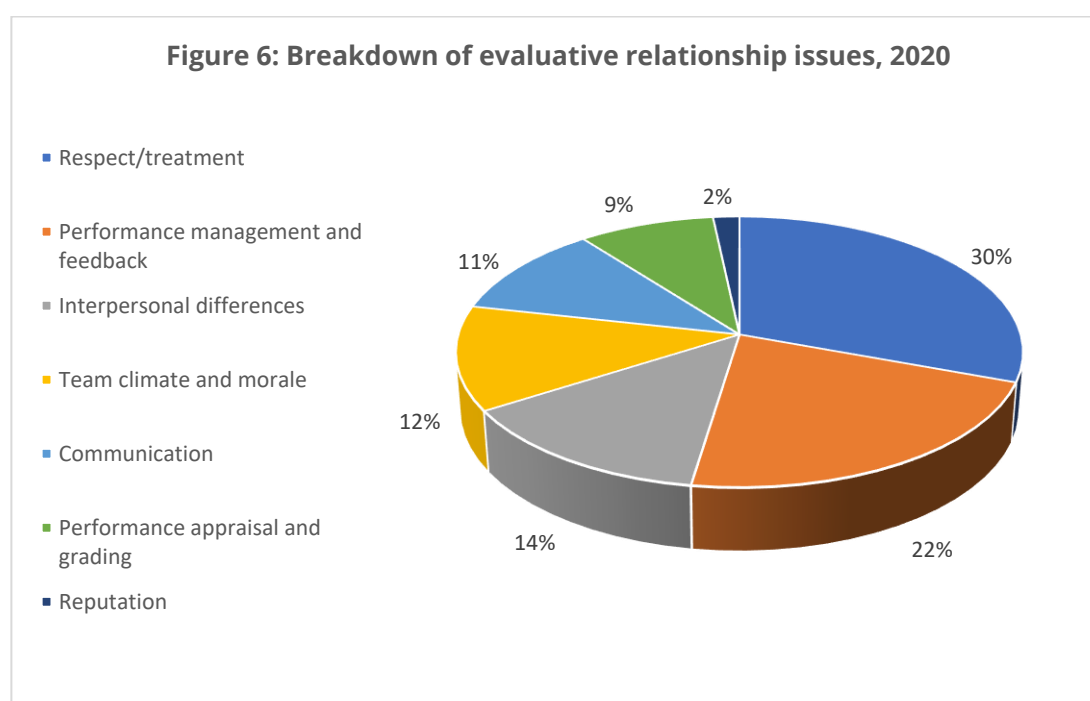
**Figure 4: Issue categories, 2020**



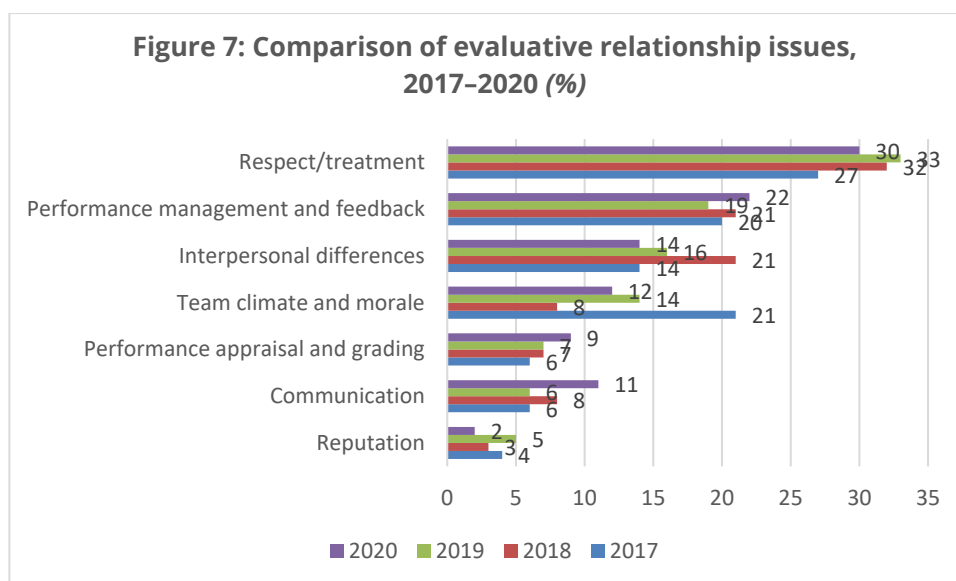
<sup>2</sup> When an employee gets in touch with the Office, this “visitor” brings a case to the Ombudsman. Each case can comprise one or more issues. The Ombudsman classifies the issues using the International Ombudsman Association Uniform Reporting Categories, each of which is broken down into sub-categories.



9. **Evaluative relationships** emerging as the most prevalent issue category is consistent with the data of other ombudsman offices worldwide (see figures 6 and 7). This category encompasses issues brought by supervisors and supervisees and includes interpersonal differences, issues of respect and treatment, performance management issues and concerns related to team climate and morale. Within this category, respect and treatment (30 percent) have been the most commonly raised issues for the past four years. Respect and treatment issues relate to incivility and comprise behaviours that range from micro-aggressions<sup>3</sup> and unprofessional behaviour to rudeness and aggressive communication.



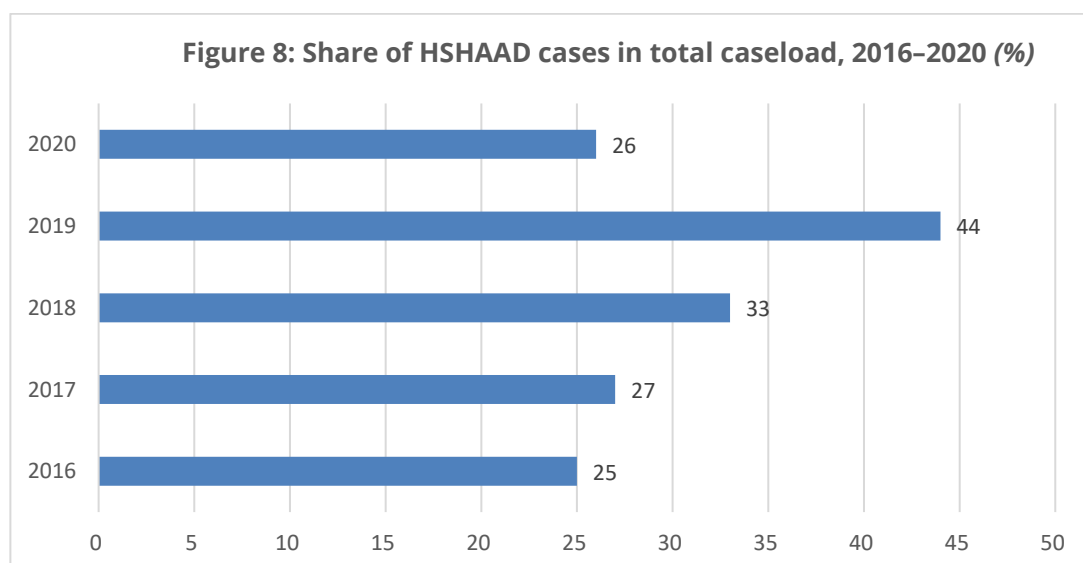
<sup>3</sup> Microaggressions are the everyday slights, indignities, put-downs and insults that members of marginalized groups experience in their day-to-day interactions with individuals who are often unaware that they have engaged in an offensive or demeaning way (Dr Derald Wing Sue).



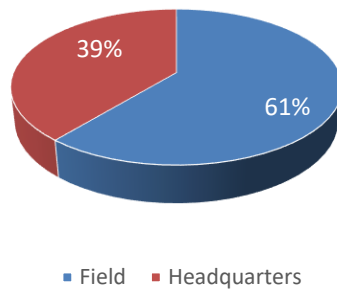
10. **Legal, regulatory and compliance** was the second most prevalent issue category; it comprises issues that may create a legal or reputational risk for the organization. Seventy-five percent of these issues were related to abusive conduct (harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of authority and discrimination). Ethics and integrity issues accounted for 14 percent, as in 2019.

***Harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of authority and discrimination***

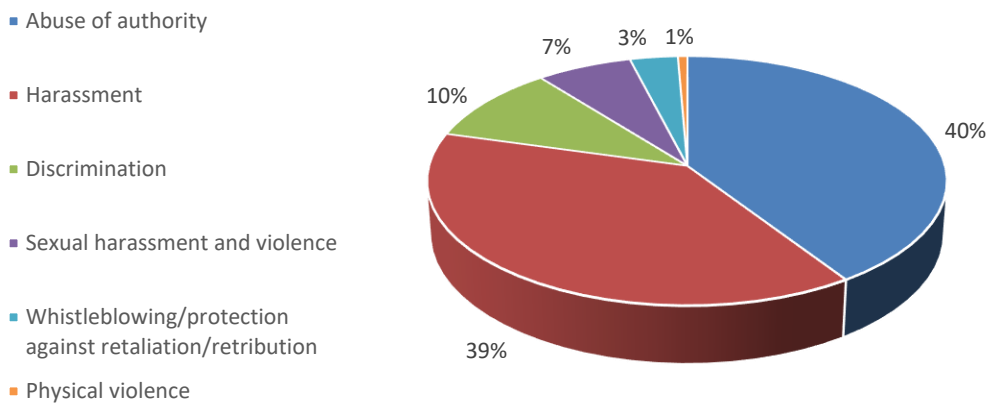
11. The Office registered 101 cases related to harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of authority and discrimination (HSHAAD) in 2020, accounting for 26 percent of the total caseload. This is a remarkable decrease compared with 44 percent in 2019 (see figure 8), which could be partly explained by the shift to remote working. A greater share of HSHAAD cases came from the field (61 percent) than in 2019 (53 percent). Abuse of authority and harassment were again the most prevalent HSHAAD issues, followed by discrimination and sexual harassment. The number of sexual harassment cases remained stable, at 10 in 2020 compared with 11 in 2019.



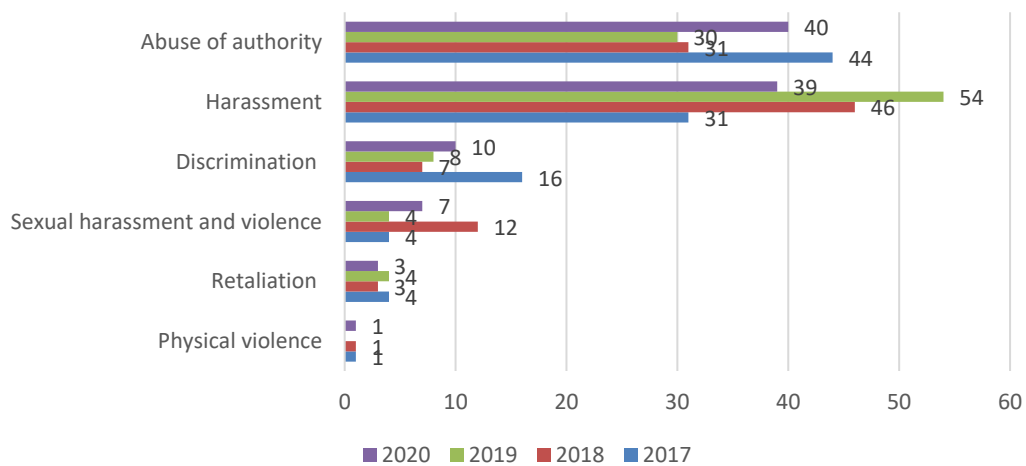
**Figure 9: Share of HSHAAD cases in the field and at headquarters, 2020**



**Figure 10: HSHAAD issues 2020**



**Figure 11: Comparison of HSHAAD issues, 2017-2020 (%)**



12. Within the **job and career** issue category, the three most prevalent areas in which issues arose were terms and conditions of contract and contract type (18 percent), career progression and promotion (15 percent), and job application and selection processes (12 percent), which together represented 45 percent of issues in this category. This percentage was lower than the 81 percent recorded in 2019 because of an increase in other issues such as non-renewal of contract (10 percent), rotation and duration of assignment (9 percent) and discrimination in career progression (6 percent), which added up to 25 percent of issues in this category in 2020, compared with 13 percent in 2019.
13. During 2020 the Ombudsman saw an increase in visitors sharing experiences related to **safety, health and wellness**; mental health was the most widely identified issue in this category (64 percent).<sup>4</sup> Undeniably, there is a link to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted work and family lives and created challenges for most employees, especially those separated from their families, faced with unanticipated caring responsibilities for their loved ones or forced to home-school their children.
14. Visitors shared instances of behaviours in the workplace that they experienced as negative and that had a detrimental impact on their emotional wellbeing. These included microaggressions, sustained hostile peer interaction and incidents of harassment and sexual harassment. Several visitors shared that incivility-related stress had resulted in acute or chronic health issues; others mentioned that they had received little or no support from their supervisors during periods of sickness, injury or temporary disability, which in turn had negatively affected their emotional wellbeing, causing them to feel alone or misunderstood.

### Visitor survey results

15. Visitors are asked to complete a survey, which provides valuable feedback on their experience with the Office. The survey is confidential and anonymous and had a response rate of 48 percent in 2020, compared with 35 percent in 2019. The results confirm the benefits that the Office provides to WFP employees and the organization:
  - 83 percent of respondents said they were satisfied with the services they had received;
  - 86 percent said they would recommend the Office to their co-workers;
  - 62 percent said that their interaction with the Office had given them more clarity and made them feel more comfortable in addressing workplace issues in the future.

## Contribution to WFP's cultural change process

### Collaboration with the Workplace Culture Department

16. The Office welcomes the establishment of the new Workplace Culture Department and its inclusive and consultative approach to creating change. The Office collaborates with the Department and shares its specific insights about WFP's functioning and provides suggestions to improve workplace culture, systems, practices and policies. The Office remains in alignment with the universal Ombudsman principle of independence and continues to report to the Executive Director.

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<sup>4</sup> Other issues in this category are security, safety, work-life balance, sickness and disability.

**Beginning anti-racism conversations**

17. The Office has received reports of concerns and queries about racism at work from several employees who are African or of African descent. The Ombudsman has engaged in conversations with stakeholders, in particular with the new Workplace Culture Department, to explore how to implement an anti-racism action plan.
18. The #blacklivesmatter movement and growing tensions globally led to self-reflection and the beginning of conversations about race at WFP. The Office has initiated a series of internal team training sessions on racism and colonialism, followed by discussions on how the work of the Office can become more inclusive and anti-racist. This process of self-education is ongoing.
19. The Office addressed racism in its presentation of its 2019 annual report at the 2020 annual session of the Executive Board and in its informal briefings of the Board in July and October 2020. The President of the Board twice invited the Ombudsman to participate in Executive Board Bureau meetings to further explore this very important matter with WFP leadership.

**Capacity building programme**

20. After a successful pilot in 2019, the Office launched its capacity building programme in February 2020 with the aim of laying a foundation for WFP's envisioned change towards a more harmonious and inclusive workplace. The training enables managers and employees to improve their understanding of the dynamics of work relations and conflict and to acquire insights and skills for preventing and resolving conflicts in collaboration with the other persons and stakeholders involved.
21. In 2020, the Office conducted 29 training sessions reaching 900 employees in the four official WFP languages (Arabic, English, French and Spanish). In addition, the Office set up a series of global training sessions for human resources officers on conflict competencies.

**Team climate assessments**

22. The Office launched team climate assessments in 2020 as a new service to managers in WFP. The assessment process consists of collecting anonymous feedback from team members on leadership, cohesion and morale within a team, which provides concrete data giving insight into areas that may need to be improved.

**Enhanced access and stronger internal justice**

23. In recent years the Office has improved its access to employees in the field by increasing the number of its visits to field offices and providing its services in the four WFP languages. To bring the Office closer to regional stakeholders and improve access for employees in the Middle East and Northern Africa region, an ombuds officer (consultant) was hired in May 2020 and based in Amman, Jordan.
24. Internal justice has been strengthened over the past few years, for example through the issuance of the 2018 Executive Director's circular "Protection from harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of authority and discrimination" (abusive conduct) and the enhancement of the WFP investigation, Human Resources Division and Legal Office's capacity. In addition, various tools need to be offered to employees and managers who are faced with situations of conflict or abusive conduct. The Office has therefore advocated greater use of mediation, and at its 2020 annual session the Executive Board endorsed its proposal that if one party to a dispute requests mediation, and the Ombudsman deems mediation to be appropriate



to the case, the other party is obliged to participate in an intake procedure and one mediation session, after which the parties decide whether to continue the mediation.

25. The Office has also introduced the concept of “team climate coaching” whereby managers whose style is perceived to be abrasive receive coaching to improve their supervisory, communication and team building skills. This model has been positively received by the other members of WFP’s Inter-divisional Standing Committee, who will pilot it in 2021.

## **Providing Ombudsman services during the COVID-19 pandemic**

### **Going virtual: country visits, capacity building and respectful workplace advisor training**

26. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief the importance of personal access to the Ombudsman and mediation services for employees who seek to avail themselves of WFP internal justice mechanisms. Although video and telephone conversations were regularly used before COVID-19, during lockdowns, closed offices and travel bans they became the only way to communicate, and the lack of in-person contact has undermined the sense of psychological safety that encourages individuals to share their concerns. Furthermore, the inability of the Ombudsman to visit regional bureaux, country offices and sub-offices has made it harder for the Office to gain insight into interpersonal and office dynamics, which is important to the ability of the Office to provide appropriate support.
27. To ensure continued employee access to the internal justice system during the pandemic, the Office rapidly developed virtual country visits and redesigned its capacity building programme and the respectful workplace advisor (RWA) foundation training for virtual delivery. Since the introduction of travel bans in March, four virtual missions, 29 virtual capacity building sessions and three RWA training sessions were conducted in 2020.

### **Strengthening outreach**

28. The Office expanded its communication activities in 2020 and recruited a communications consultant based in Nairobi. The communication strategy aims to provide WFP employees with insights into the tools for informal conflict resolution on offer. Key 2020 communication activities were the relaunch of the online presence of the Office on WFPgo; increased communication by the Ombudsman to all employees via email; and more visibility for the RWAs through a series of articles on the WFP intranet.

### **Ombudsman communication on COVID-19 and workplace-related issues**

29. The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on employees all over the world, generating insecurity, stress and tension over a protracted period and on a global scale. When working from home became the norm, the Ombudsman issued messages in which she highlighted the need to accommodate varying individual situations and appropriate responses to new circumstances and emphasized care, compassion and communication as key elements of managerial effectiveness during COVID-19.

*“I am deeply touched our organization releases this kind of message, so caring, so human...and so useful and encouraging!”*

Response from a WFP employee to COVID-19 related messages from the Ombudsman

### **Ongoing Office services**

30. Despite the COVID-19-related limitations, the Office continued at all times to offer its services to WFP's employees, including:
- confidential and informal one-on-one conversations;
  - facilitations and mediations;
  - shuttle diplomacy between colleagues;
  - coaching of employees; and
  - feedback to leadership, management, country directors and other stakeholders.
31. More detailed information on these services is available on the WFPgo Ombudsman pages.

### **2020 key systemic issues**

32. The Ombudsman enjoys a unique perspective and ability to bring issues to the attention of the organization. Systemic issues are identified through conversations with employees, management and stakeholders; data analysis; and observation. The annual report reflects on themes that are pertinent to the commitment to create cultural change that WFP made in 2019. The organization is invited to reflect upon the recommendations presented.

### **Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging**

33. Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging constitute a vast topic. This report does not aim to provide an exhaustive analysis but reflects insights and elements that have surfaced or have been channelled to the Office. Workplaces that create cultures of belonging allow employees to thrive simply by being who they are every day. This requires taking individual responsibility for expanding one's mindset and reflecting on one's decisions and actions. This section looks at gender and racial biases; equality and equity; and the organization's anti-racism activities; it also introduces the subjects of mental health and neurodiversity.

### ***Gender and racial biases; equality and equity***

34. In last year's annual report the Ombudsman made the following recommendation: *"Making sure equal opportunities are provided to both women and men as well as people from all backgrounds and regions is an important step in diversifying the workforce. This would necessitate obtaining insights on personal and policy biases and working to overcome them."*
35. Throughout 2020, concerns about racial and gender bias, prejudices and gendered expectations continued to be brought to the attention of the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman observes that as a result of the value campaigns and related workplace culture activities, employees are recognizing bias or discrimination earlier and speaking up more. While it is positive to see an increase in the number of employees speaking up, the spotlight inside and outside WFP on equality and equal treatment has led to heightened frustration when staff experience management actions and decisions as biased or perceive a gap between intentions and behaviour.
36. Globally, workplaces and work culture tend to be male dominated, which has negative ramifications especially for female employees; WFP is no exception in this regard. Over the past five years, the Ombudsman has regularly heard from women who feel they are not regarded or treated in the same way as men. For example, several women have shared experiences about being expected to take on a supporting or secondary role in relation to their male colleagues and supervisors; or about being passed over for interesting and career-advancing project opportunities, temporary missions or assignments. Others have

- shared experiences of not being acknowledged for their contributions, or of their male supervisors or colleagues taking credit for them.
37. Another similar concern comes from female employees who have felt that during changes and transitions the needs and suggestions of their male colleagues have been regarded as more important than theirs, or as more important than the interests of their offices or the interests of beneficiaries.
  38. These instances of perceived unequal treatment of women go hand-in-hand with another issue occasionally cited by women and confirmed in external research about inequality and power at work, of feeling silenced and feeling that they should not rock the boat or challenge situations that are ambiguous or questionable. Women share that they fear or experience repercussions if they speak up, including being pushed or framed to take the blame for problems.
  39. These instances of unequal treatment and biases against women are also experienced by black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC<sup>5</sup>) colleagues. In addition, several employees have contacted the Ombudsman to ask what they can do if they witness as bystanders situations of gender or racial bias or of abuse of power.
  40. **Recommendation 1.** The Ombudsman acknowledges that the envisioned organizational change process requires time to be fully implemented, especially with regard to changes in mindset or behaviour. Nevertheless, more effort could be made to raise awareness particularly of gender and racial biases both in individual behaviour and in policies; in addition, measures could be taken to prevent such biases from influencing decisions.
  41. **Recommendation 2.** Gender parity is in itself a good starting point, especially if it is achieved at every level of the organization, because throughout the United Nations system women are underrepresented at the higher levels and overrepresented at lower levels.
  42. That said, the unequal treatment of women at work is not addressed by gender parity, and there is an underlying assumption that bringing more women on board will change the culture. This puts the onus for change on women, whereas it is the leadership, culture and systems that need to change. Gender equity is a more ambitious and even-handed goal, and it is more likely to bring about the desired equality and ultimately change the culture.

### **Anti-racism**

43. The Ombudsman welcomes the commitment from leadership to making WFP an anti-racist organization. This will require a change in leadership, culture and systems, which in itself will require a process of listening, learning, reflection and introspection, as well as data analysis. This process is under way and will result in an action plan that will be presented in 2021.
44. The issues related to racism that have been brought to the Ombudsman's attention involve BIPOC colleagues feeling that their contributions are ignored, having to prove themselves more at work than do their white counterparts, feeling discriminated against in their career paths, having their concerns dismissed, suffering microaggressions and blatantly racist remarks, being excluded from informal networks and at times from panels, committees and similar bodies, and having to fit into a leadership model that they consider shares characteristics with the white male stereotype, such as being perceived as a doer, as taking charge, and coming across as confident.

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<sup>5</sup> This acronym has become prevalent in the wake of the #blacklivesmatter movement.

*"In WFP your colour and gender limit you".*  
Female staff member of African descent

45. **Recommendation 3.** In anticipation of the anti-racism action plan, recognizing that it takes time to determine appropriate action, leaders and managers need to educate themselves and their teams. This includes engaging in non-judgmental listening. Creating a safe space where BIPOC colleagues and all other colleagues who experience racial discrimination can speak out and share their experiences is essential for healing and awareness. Leaders and international professionals must become anti-racist role models and work to become aware of their own racial biases and privileges and how they affect their behaviour, decisions and the way they interact with BIPOC colleagues, other vulnerable groups or beneficiaries.
46. Racial bias does not just exist in behaviour; it can also exist in systems such as recruitment, promotion, staff assessment and reassignment processes. To better understand how this bias can influence staffing decisions and how to make impactful changes, the collection and sharing of related data (as mentioned in recommendation 6 below) are necessary in the context of an anti-racism action plan.

### **Mental health and neurodiversity**

47. The rise in the number of wellness and mental health issues brought to the Ombudsman and the impact of abusive conduct and incivility-related stress on physical and mental health is highlighted under the Overview of main issues earlier in this report. Other emerging issues, albeit present in a smaller number of cases, are related to neurodiversity and mental health conditions. Mental health conditions or disorders, as categorized by the World Health Organization, include depression and bipolar disorder. Neurodiversity is the idea that variations in the human brain are the result of normal, natural variation in the human genome and that they have a stable prevalence in human society. Examples of neurodiverse conditions are attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism and dyslexia. Advocates of neurodiversity argue that there are positive aspects of brains that function differently and they urge society to see them as valuable variations rather than an indication of disease or a disorder.
48. Regardless of how one approaches these two subjects, and there is no universal consensus, the Office has observed a need for greater awareness of neurodiversity and mental health issues in the organization and prevention of the stigma often associated with them.<sup>6</sup> The Wellbeing Platform launched by the Staff Wellness Division in March 2020 was in part designed to talk openly about psychological risk and mental health and features a video outlining the psychological risks associated with working for a United Nations organization.
49. To become an "improved, inclusive and respectful workplace", WFP needs to acknowledge that not all employees are "wired the same way". Celebrating diversity will be an important step towards creating inclusive workplaces where all individuals can contribute their skills and talents in the best possible way. In the cases reported to the Ombudsman, visitors often encountered a lack of understanding of their "otherness", and employees who experience mental health issues and/or have mental health needs often felt criticized for not living up to the ideal of being a humanitarian "superhero". Disability inclusion experts warn that if

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<sup>6</sup> "The task of changing societal attitudes is complicated by the fact that neurological difference is invisible. It's hard for the general public to embrace an unseen thing that produces unexpected behavior with no obvious explanation beyond 'acting bad'. Some people think neurodiversity acceptance means accepting what are otherwise socially unacceptable behaviors in the name of embracing difference. I don't agree with that idea at all. All of us need to act right (ethically, morally, humanely) toward one another." John Elder Robison, College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, member of the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee of the Department of Health and Human Services (United States of America).

employees with mental health conditions are not supported sufficiently and negative attitudes towards neurodiversity at work persist it can have a disabling effect on those employees in the long-term.

50. **Recommendation 4.** The organization is encouraged to further promote openness about mental health challenges and to increase positive messaging on the topic in order to both demystify it and lift the associated taboo. It is particularly important to further increase awareness of prevalence and risk factors for employees in managerial positions.<sup>7</sup>
51. **Recommendation 5.** The organization is encouraged to incorporate neurodiversity in its diversity and inclusion efforts; to create awareness of its existence and prevalence through learning and development initiatives; and to explore how to build skills and tools for supporting and accommodating employees with neurodivergent needs. Supervisors, managers and human resources officers should be given the tools and skills needed to better identify, support and accommodate employees with different, often invisible, needs.

### Transparency

52. The workplace culture changes that WFP leadership and management aim to achieve in response to the report of the Joint Executive Board/WFP management working group on harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of power and discrimination (2019) and the global movements #MeToo and #blacklivesmatter are laudable and welcomed by WFP employees. Transparency is crucial to nurturing trust and engagement in this process of change. Transparency in the sense of sharing data and information leads to increased learning and to more understanding of the necessity of change or of the changes being made. If employees receive the information relevant to achieving the desired change, they will obtain greater clarity and understanding of their role in the change process, what is required of them and what to strive for in their own behaviour. Transparency regarding data and processes creates accountability, as is seen for example in the progress made towards achieving gender parity in country offices.
53. Transparent decisions are decisions based on shared and known criteria; as such they are explainable, defensible and more consistent and provide a clear basis for holding decision makers accountable.
54. When aspiring to behavioural change whether on an individual or a corporate level, some of the issues that need to be brought up and examined will create discomfort or spark confrontation; indeed, without this there is a risk that no real change will take place. If flawed or dysfunctional matters are not brought to light there can be no improvement; change will remain merely a lofty ambition, and WFP stands to lose the engagement and trust of its employees. Transparency about such matters is a prerequisite to moving forward, even more so for bureaucracies that are likely to be impersonal by design and therefore tend to be characterized by a greater distance between managers and employees.

*"[I]t is fundamental that employees' trust in the organization be restored, which starts with management acknowledging the problem, recognizing any mistakes made in the past, or the shortcomings of ongoing actions...."*

"Report of the joint Board/management working group on harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of power and discrimination" (WFP/EB.2/2019/9-A), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> The Ombudsman notes that the Staff Wellness Division addresses point prevalence rates of mental health issues in employees during the country director induction programme and that it will do the same in its heads of office training programme module, which will be launched in June 2021.

55. **Recommendation 6.** To better understand and raise awareness of the current imbalance in gender and racial equality at WFP, and to facilitate informed decisions about effective measures, more data needs to be collected and shared. Examples of valuable data in this respect are the gender and racial balance of all applicants for a vacancy compared to those shortlisted; their turnover rate once on board; performance assessment ratings by gender, race and role, in order to identify bias (for example, another organization found that women were systematically receiving lower performance reviews in male-dominated roles); and average number of years before promotion, disaggregated by gender and race.
56. **Recommendation 7.** Cultural change towards an improved, inclusive and respectful workplace would benefit from looking at what does not work in that regard and from identifying patterns that exclude certain people, discriminate against their achievements and ignore their needs. Being transparent and sharing data and information about such patterns bring an essential humane element into change processes and make them more likely to succeed.

### Internal system of justice

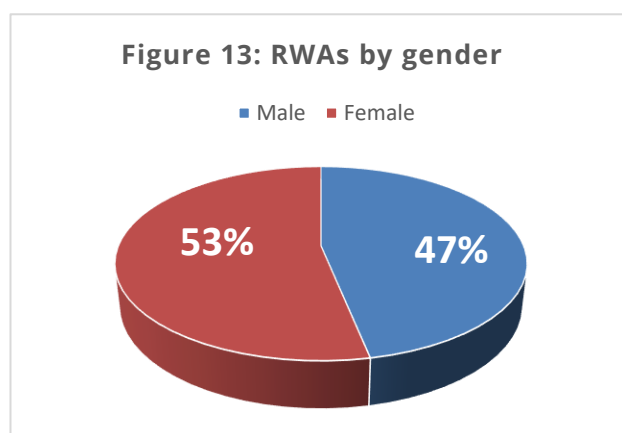
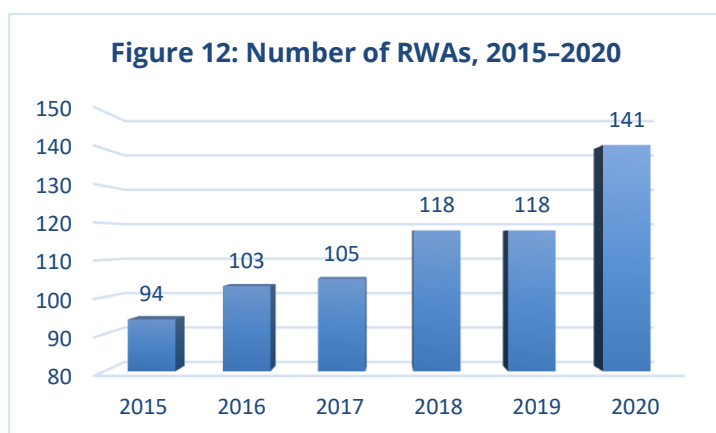
57. The statement “zero tolerance for abusive conduct” creates expectations of decisive action. The Inspector General has defined this to mean that action is taken on formal reports of abusive conduct (harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of power or discrimination); however, this does not automatically mean that action is taken against the alleged perpetrator of the abusive conduct. It is understandably difficult to prove abusive conduct and for cases of abusive conduct (other than sexual harassment), the combined process of concluding an investigation and assigning disciplinary measures can take up to two years; one out of every five reports of abusive conduct that are formally investigated was substantiated in 2020.
58. “Justice delayed is justice denied”, and once an alleged perpetrator has left the organization, disciplinary measures can no longer be administered.
59. Employees who have spoken up about abusive work situations or who have had the courage to submit a formal report to the Inspector General risk feeling demoralized and losing their faith in management and processes. In addition, by the time an employee lodges a complaint the stress caused by abusive managers has probably already damaged their health and their relationships at work and at home.
60. The 2017 annual report of the Ombudsman recommended that WFP “address abusive management before it escalates to a formal complaint or investigation” and “establish a standard process to address instances of abusive managerial behaviour in an effective way, especially when the manager in question is unaware of the impact of their behaviour”, as the investigative process is not the sole solution to abusive conduct and does not solve interpersonal disputes. A safe and respectful workplace (Joint Board/management working group on harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of power and discrimination) requires quicker (disciplinary) action, tailor-made interventions, skilled dialogues, and the provision of opportunities for learning and building bridges. An enhanced approach to internal justice will support an “improved, inclusive and respectful” workplace.
61. **Recommendation 8.** The Ombudsman has noticed among managers and supervisors more willingness and motivation to address abusive conduct. However, this is at times paired with a lack of insights, skills or tools needed to effectively deal with such situations. Managers and supervisors need to obtain insights and skills to be able to identify strenuous work relationships early on and to intervene effectively when there are signs of abusive conduct; they also need to know where to turn to for support and be given tools with which to take action.

## Conflict resolution support from colleagues: respectful workplace advisors

62. Since its creation in 2007, the RWAs programme has grown to a network of approximately 140 RWAs worldwide. As an extension of the Office, RWAs provide confidential and impartial support directly in their country offices or sub-offices to colleagues facing workplace issues. Since 2011 RWAs have served as “Ethics Ambassadors” and raise awareness of the WFP Code of Conduct and related policies. RWAs are nominated by their peers and perform their role on a voluntary basis, in addition to their regular functions.
63. A key function of RWAs is to help employees explore options for addressing issues in a solution-oriented manner, focusing on self-help approaches and empowerment. Their role in early conflict resolution is pivotal to organizational success and an important contribution to the WFP comprehensive action plan for the implementation of the recommendations of the joint Board/management working group on harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of power and discrimination.

*"In a situation where I had prior felt unsupported and undervalued, your support allowed me the space to understand my work-related issues and what my options were for moving forward, always reassuring that I was in the driver's seat and guided with clear solutions...I am really grateful"*  
RWA visitor

64. In 2020, 141 RWAs lent an ear to their colleagues – the highest number since the creation of the programme; 53 percent of them were female and 47 percent were male.



## Support for the workplace culture initiative and the Respect campaign

65. In 2020 the RWAs supported WFP’s cultural change process through various activities: many provided information, gave presentations and encouraged their colleagues to participate in the “See the difference” campaign, the process for redefining WFP’s values and the related outreach activities such as the values jam sessions and “values talk live”. Many RWAs provided thematic input and shared their experiences through these activities. In addition, the RWAs continued to serve as facilitators for WFP’s global “Respect Each Other” campaign, in collaboration with the Internal Communications and Engagement Unit.

*"The respectful workplace advisors are more than just an informal and confidential source of assistance to employees facing difficult workplace issues. In fulfilling their role, they are part of a strong network and are critical stakeholders for workplace culture improvements across WFP."*

Assistant Executive Director, Workplace Culture Department, Gina Casar

### Bringing the services to headquarters and strengthening the reach in the field

66. RWAs were originally conceived as a field-based programme because employees at headquarters have direct access to the Office facilities in Rome. The 2019 external review showed that HSHAAD issues were prevalent in headquarters, and in 2020 14 employees became RWAs at headquarters after being trained in the core elements of informal conflict resolution and relevant organizational policies and mechanisms. In addition, 19 RWAs were appointed at duty stations in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

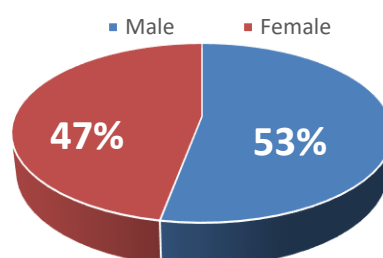
*"I learned a lot from the training...to be able to listen without giving advice and not to put any judgement. Through the various sessions, I also learned to remain calm and be empathetic throughout the process of supporting a colleague"*

Saskia Hicks, newly appointed RWA at headquarters

### RWA caseloads

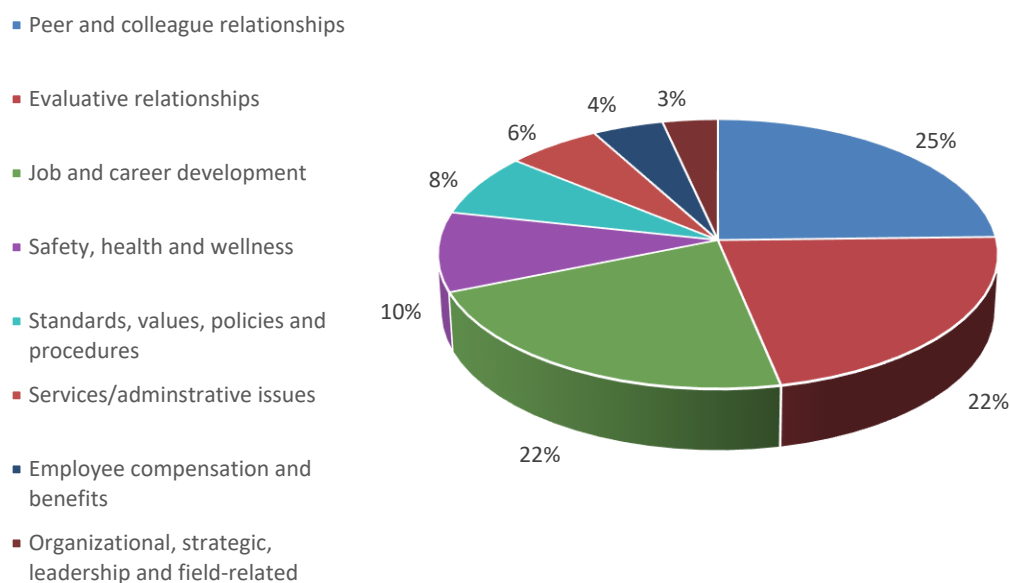
67. RWAs handled 199 cases in 2020, 9 percent fewer than in 2019. This drop can be explained by the impact of remote working arrangements, which made it more difficult for RWAs to meet their peers in person; the need to set up videocalls and inadequate internet connections created barriers.
68. Cases in the category **peer and colleague relationships** were less prevalent than in 2018 and 2019: 25 percent of all cases in 2020 fell into this category, compared with 28 percent in 2019 and 30 percent in 2018. RWAs emphasized that harassment and abuse of authority, which are captured under the categories **peer and colleague relationships** and **evaluative relationships**, remained of great concern. Their visitors cited verbal abuse, marginalization and disrespectful behaviour from colleagues and managers as reasons for seeking RWA support. This is consistent with Office findings that the proportion of incivility-related cases remains high.
69. Issues under the categories **job and career** and **evaluative relationships** increased compared to previous years: 22 percent of all visitors who contacted an RWA in 2020 had concerns related to these categories, compared with 16 percent in 2019 and 15 percent in 2018.

Figure 14: RWA visitors by gender, 2020

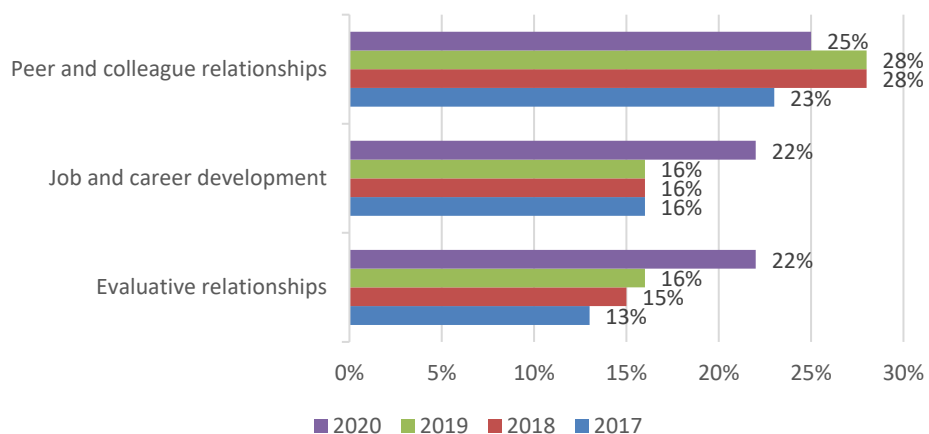




**Figure 15: Issues reported to RWAs by category, 2020**



**Figure 16: Comparison of issues reported to RWAs by category, 2017–2020**



**Ban Alkasat, RWA in Erbil, Iraq, is selected to receive the Nobel Peace Prize**

*“I’m sincerely honoured to represent WFP and all my colleagues who are in the field sacrificing their lives to end hunger and I hope I can inspire other young women to serve humanity”.*

## Looking ahead

70. While the movement restrictions related to COVID-19 remain in place, the Office will continue to use virtual means to reach employees at headquarters and in the field and provide access to Ombudsman and mediation services. In-person visits will be resumed when feasible.
71. Last year's restrictions may remain in place for an unknown period of time, and the Ombudsman expects that a certain emotional exhaustion will affect the workplace. The strain of working from home while taking on additional care tasks and being physically disconnected from family and friends is being compounded by the continuing uncertainty about what the future will bring, including health, job and career-related concerns.
72. Strengthening the internal justice system and increasing access to it remain on the agenda of the Office and of the Inter-divisional Standing Committee. The Ombudsman for United Nations funds and programmes has agreed that the WFP Ombudsman may use the global network of United Nations mediators. The Office will conduct an outreach campaign to promote the process of mediation and its benefits.
73. To enhance access to Ombudsman and mediation services directly in the Eastern Africa region and strengthen cooperation with regional stakeholders, the Office plans to recruit an ombuds officer to be based in Nairobi.
74. The Office will continue to deliver its capacity building programme in order to enhance conflict prevention and resolution capacity within WFP and will continue its collaboration with the Human Resources Division on management training modules, as well as support the integration of neurodiversity in learning and development programmes.
75. In 2021 the Office will conduct an impact assessment of its services. The assessment will involve stakeholder engagement, benchmarking against relevant frameworks and best practices in other international organizations, and data collection and analysis.

**Acronyms**

BIPOC	black, indigenous and people of colour
HSHAAD	harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of authority and discrimination
RWA	respectful workplace advisor