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برنامج الأغذية العالمي

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## Annual report of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services for 2023

### Draft decision\*

The Board takes note of the annual report of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services for 2023 (WFP/EB.A/2024/4-C).

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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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#### Focal points:

Ms D. Gómez-Morán  
Director a.i.  
Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services  
email: [dolores.gomezmoran@wfp.org](mailto:dolores.gomezmoran@wfp.org)

Mr T. Kettner  
Outreach and Ombuds Officer  
email: [tobias.kettner@wfp.org](mailto:tobias.kettner@wfp.org)

## Introduction

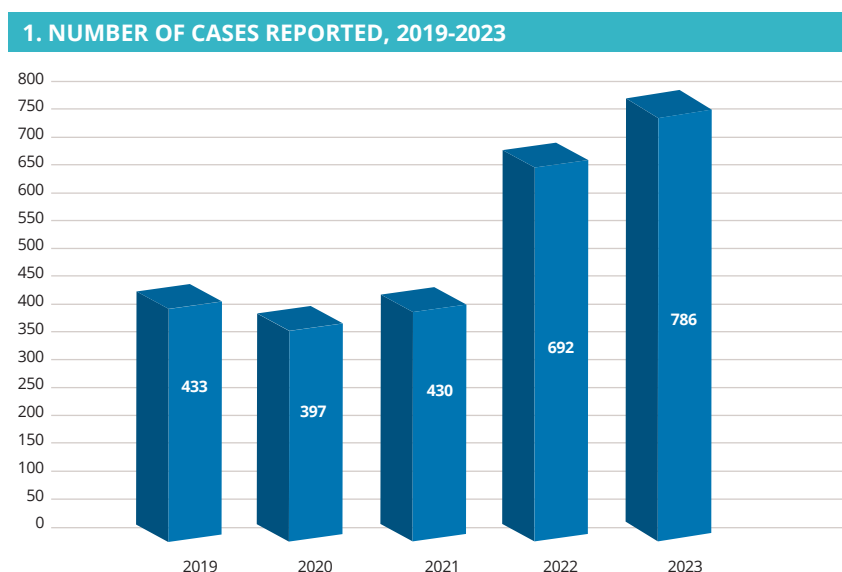
1. This report covers the activities of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services (OBD) in 2023, identifying trends and major systemic issues within WFP along with opportunities for addressing those issues.
2. While the number of people in need of humanitarian support continues to rise, the resources available for responding to their needs are shrinking. WFP employees have demonstrated extreme resilience and dedication in the face of very challenging circumstances, and their remarkable commitment to the mission of WFP, along with their work ethic, has been inspirational in these difficult times.
3. The theme of this annual report is “navigating change in uncertain times”, reflecting the transition process that WFP is currently undergoing and the resulting uncertainty among employees regarding the future. For many employees with concerns, OBD is the first stop for advice and support. By exploring solutions and assisting individuals in making informed decisions with lasting and positive results, OBD empowers employees to adopt productive problem-solving techniques.

## 2023 at a glance

### Overview

4. In 2023, OBD saw a notable increase in the number of employees seeking informal conflict resolution services. A total of 786 employees sought support, an increase of 14 percent since 2022 and of more than 80 percent compared with previous years (figure 1).
5. The increase is rooted in various factors, including the growth in WFP’s workforce from 20,100 employees at the end of 2020 to almost 24,000 at the end of 2023. Another important factor is the changing workplace culture; OBD has observed that employees are increasingly willing to address situations that make them uncomfortable, while seeking help in such situations is no longer viewed negatively. In addition, the expansion of OBD has allowed the office to offer its services more effectively to employees worldwide.

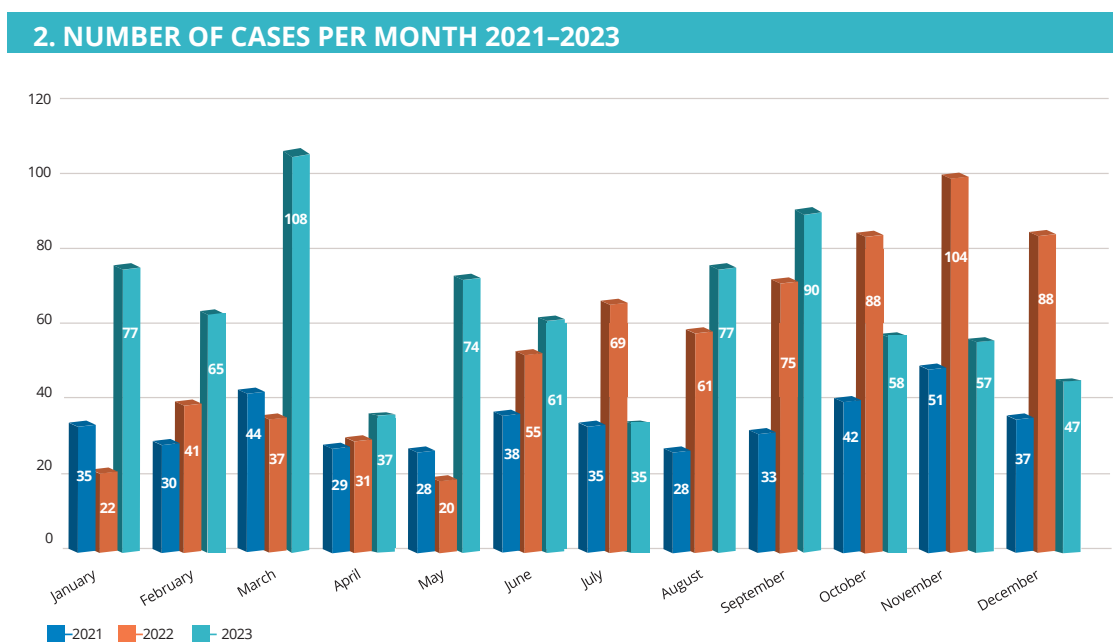
**Figure 1: Number of cases reported to OBD, 2019–2023**



6. OBD staff have observed that in-person contact is essential in building the necessary trust for employees to seek informal conflict resolution services, as confirmed by the numbers of cases received per month over the last three years. As shown in figure 2, when OBD was

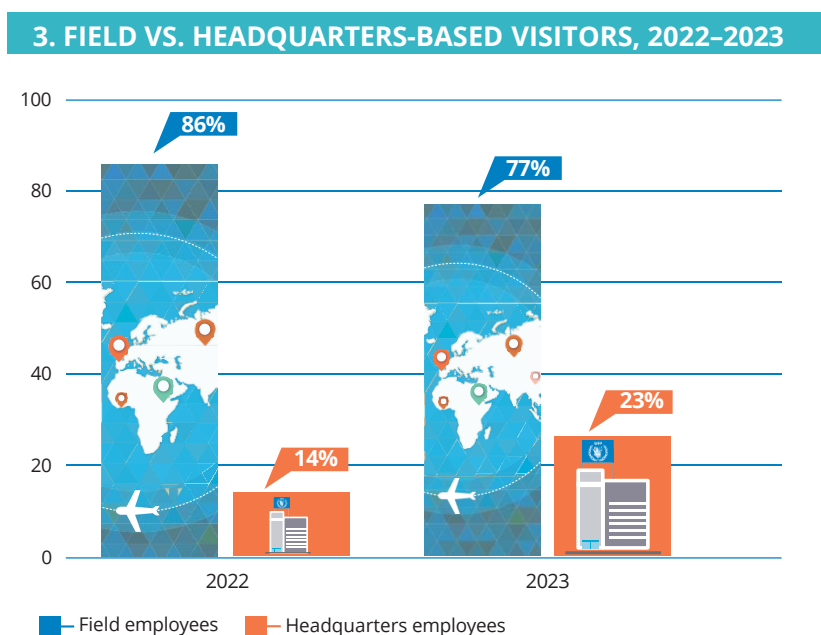
able to resume in-person visits to the field in June 2022 – after the height of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic – the number of employees seeking support increased significantly.

**Figure 2: Number of cases reported per month, 2021–2023**



- 7. In 2023, the proportion of visitors<sup>1</sup> to OBD who worked in the field fell to 77 percent, from 86 percent in 2022. In 2023, the proportion of visitors to OBD who worked in headquarters increased to 23 percent, from 14 percent in 2022. This increase could reflect discontent at WFP headquarters regarding management’s plans to bring all employees back into the office for five days per week, along with the recruitment freeze announced on 6 October 2023 for staff in headquarters, regional bureaux and global offices.

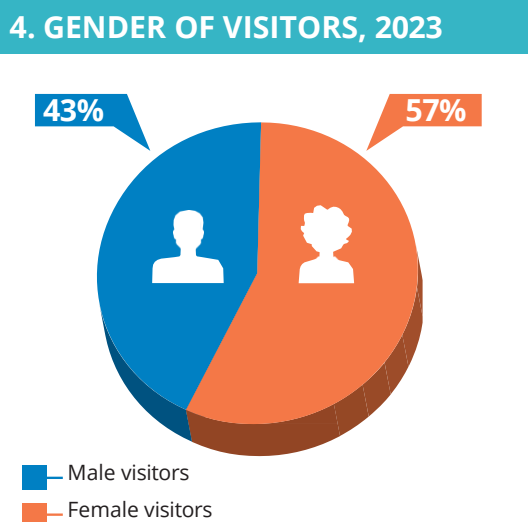
**Figure 3: Field-based versus headquarters-based visitors to OBD, 2022 and 2023**



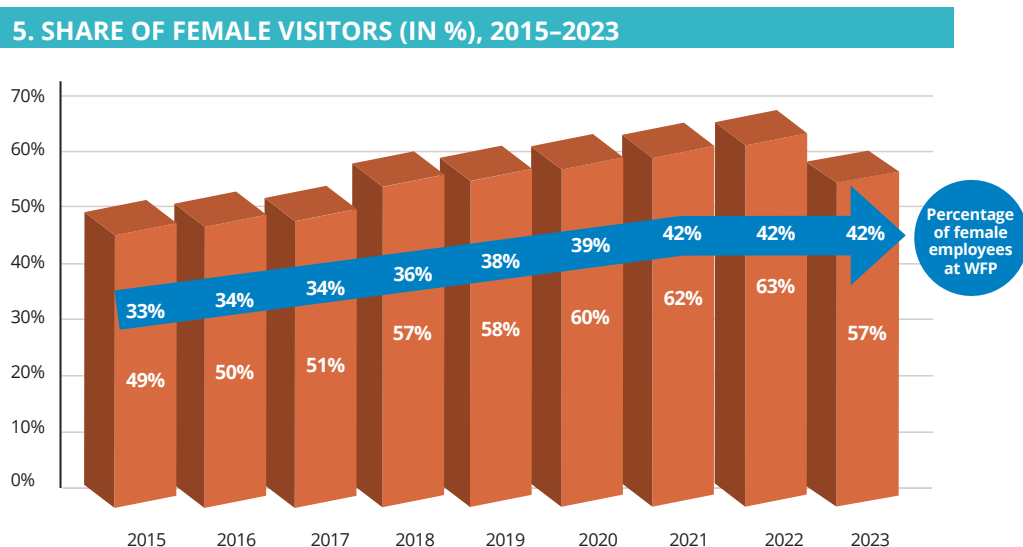
<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, the term “visitor” refers to an employee who contacts OBD for support.

8. Figure 4 shows that in 2023, 57 percent of visitors were women and 43 percent, men. As in previous years, more women than men sought support from OBD, but the gender gap was significantly smaller than in previous years, as shown in figure 5.

**Figure 4: Visitors by gender, 2023**



**Figure 5: Share of women visitors, 2015–2023**

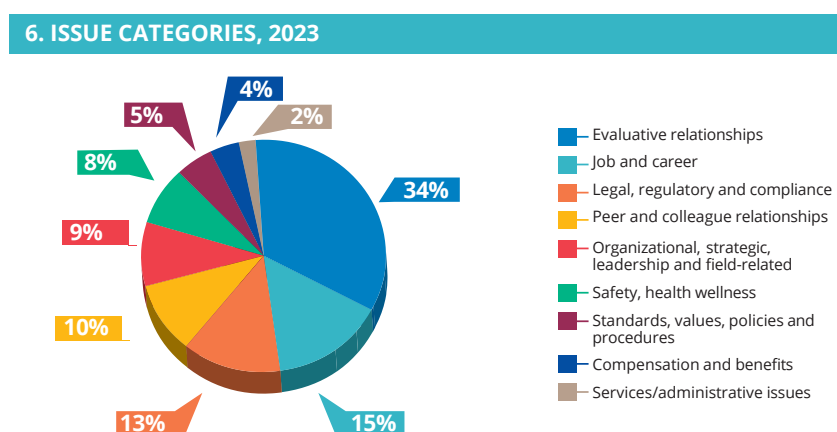


9. There are several potential causes of this change: on the one hand, OBD observes that WFP's efforts to achieve gender parity and gender equality across its staff contingent create a sense among some men employees that they are being put at a disadvantage, which may have contributed to the increase in men contacting OBD; on the other hand, however, those same efforts may be helping to empower women employees because WFP has become a more comfortable working environment for them.
10. The decrease in the proportion of women contacting OBD in 2023 can also be attributed to the specific locations where OBD missions were conducted, as a larger proportion of the country offices visited in 2023 had higher numbers of men employees than women.
11. To assess whether this trend is sustained, OBD will continue to observe the situation over the coming year.

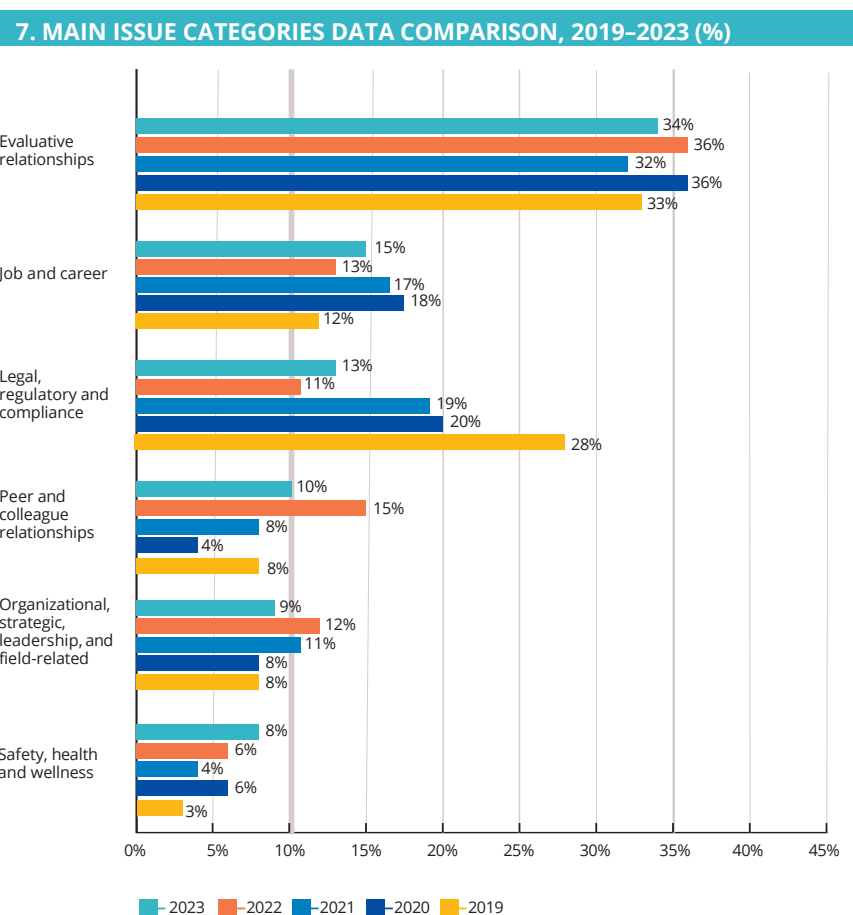
**Main issues**

12. When an employee contacts OBD with a case for the Ombudsman this case comprises one or more issues of concern that are classified according to the reporting categories of the International Ombuds Association. By categorizing issues, OBD can identify dynamics and patterns that may indicate systemic issues and new trends within WFP, thereby creating a picture of the organizational climate.
13. In 2023, the top three categories were *evaluative relationships* (accounting for 34 percent of total cases), *job and career issues* (15 percent) and *legal, regulatory and compliance issues* (13 percent). A breakdown of all issues by category is shown in figure 6.

**Figure 6: Share of cases by category of issue, 2023**



**Figure 7: Main categories of issue reported to OBD, 2019–2023**

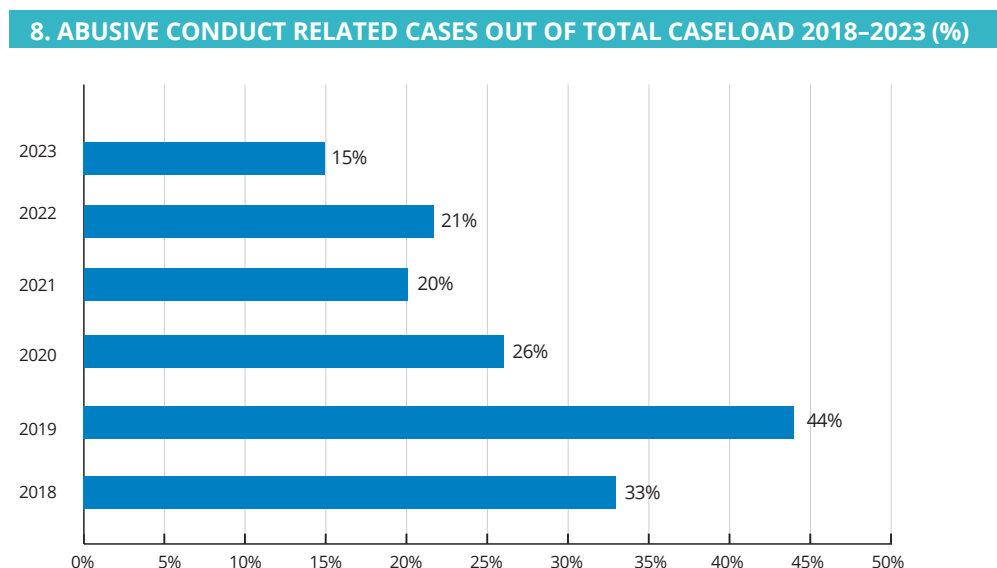


14. In 2023, the reasons for employees reaching out to OBD followed the trends of previous years, as shown in figure 7. *Evaluative relationships* remained the main cause of employees' visits. This category covers the issues of concern that arise between people in an evaluative relationship, such as between supervisors and supervisees.
15. The share of issues of concern reported in the *job and career* category increased slightly in 2023. Owing to WFP's current budget situation, an increased number of employees were worried about their futures in terms of career possibilities and the probable termination or non-extension of their contracts.
16. The share of issues of concern in the *peer and colleague relationships* category decreased in 2023 compared with 2022, which might be an indication of the normalization of interpersonal relationships after the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic period: in 2022, many employees returned to their offices and had to renegotiate relationships, which sometimes led to friction.
17. The proportion of issues reported under the third main category, *safety, health and wellness*, also saw an increase in 2023. This category includes, among other issues, those related to the mental health of employees, such as stress and anxiety, and concerns regarding work-life balance and flexible working arrangements.
18. For a closer look at the categories of issue, please see the section on systemic issues on page 8.

### Abusive conduct

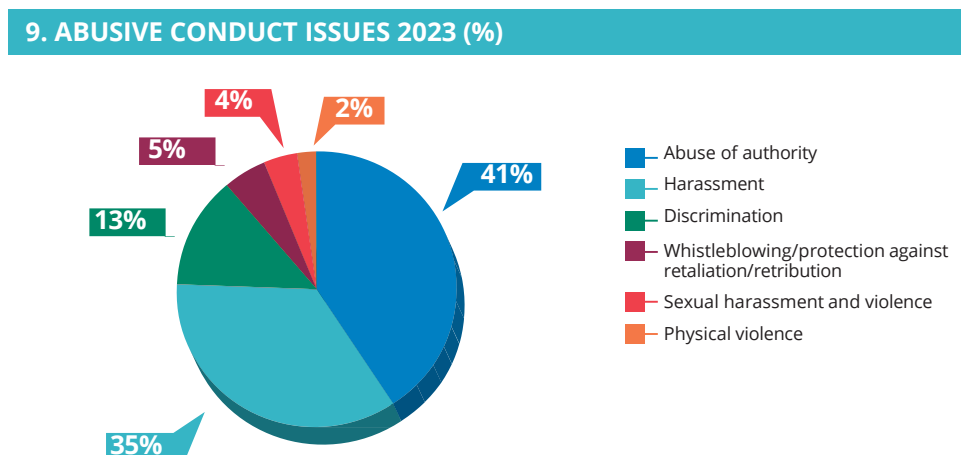
19. An analysis of OBD data shows the continuation of a positive trend that started in 2020. In 2023, the percentage of cases related to abusive conduct continued to decline. Of the total cases received by OBD, 15 percent were related to allegations of abusive conduct – encompassing harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of authority and discrimination – marking a strong decrease from 21 percent in 2022.
20. This trend can be explained by two factors: in 2018 WFP issued a new policy on protection from abusive conduct and carried out an intensive communication exercise on the topic. This led to a significant increase in the number of cases reported in 2019, while the office closures of 2020 and 2021 (when employees worked from home) generally reduced the opportunities for conflict among employees. The second main factor contributing to the trend is WFP's ongoing work on creating a more respectful workplace culture.

**Figure 8: Shares of cases related to abusive conduct, 2018–2023**



21. Among the issues related to abusive conduct, those that occurred most frequently were abuse of authority, accounting for 41 percent of the total, harassment (35 percent) and discrimination (13 percent). Sexual harassment and violence accounted for 4 percent and physical violence, 2 percent (see figure 9).

**Figure 9: Cases related to abusive conduct, 2023**



### Capacity building

22. In 2023, OBD conducted 81 in-person training events in Arabic, English, French and Spanish for approximately 3,000 employees from all WFP regions. The OBD training programme aims to enhance the essential conflict management and resolution skills of WFP employees by providing practical knowledge, skills and insights that they can apply immediately in a range of challenging work situations. In 2023, OBD overhauled key elements of its training products to adapt them to changes in the WFP workplace. The adaptation included incorporating new policies into the training programme, which lay the foundation for the new organizational culture at WFP.
23. OBD's training events continue to receive very positive feedback from participants. On average, 95 percent of respondents in post-course surveys agreed or strongly agreed that the course content increased their understanding of conflict resolution and that they would recommend this course to colleagues.

*Comments made by participants in the "Conflict resolution through effective communication" course included*

*"The training provides individuals with valuable skills to navigate and resolve conflicts in a constructive and respectful manner."*

### Facilitation and mediation

24. Facilitation and mediation are confidential processes in which employees with a strained working relationship or a dispute seek improvement or resolution with the assistance of a neutral third party. Facilitated conversations and mediation can greatly benefit all categories of employee, including supervisors. They enable participants to identify underlying issues that need attention but have not been recognized and help to restore working relationships, resulting in better team cohesion and productivity. In 2023, OBD conducted 12 mediation exercises involving 26 employees; several of the exercises were conducted during field missions.

### Team climate assessments

25. In 2023, OBD conducted six team climate assessments involving 105 employees across WFP regions and at headquarters. Launched in 2020, the assessments help managers to understand the atmosphere in their teams and the perception that supervisees have of their leadership style. Team climate assessments involve seeking feedback from team members regarding leadership, cohesion and morale within the team and help managers to find workable solutions to issues.

### Team climate coaching

26. Team climate coaching supports supervisors in addressing the issues identified in their teams and serves as a possible follow-up to a team climate assessment. In 2023, OBD provided seven team climate coaching sessions to supervisors, mainly in middle management positions in the field and at headquarters.

*Comments received from participants in the coaching included*

*"I am writing to express my sincere appreciation of the exceptional one-on-one coaching in team management that you provided me with. The concepts and techniques that you shared have not only reshaped my approach to leadership but have also left a lasting impact on how I interact with my team. Your emphasis on creating a culture of empowerment and autonomy resonated deeply with me. The idea of allowing team members to feel confident in sharing their thoughts and brainstorming collectively was a game-changer."*

## Systemic issues and trends

### Mandate of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services

27. OBD's observations on systemic issues and trends are derived from various sources, including one-on-one conversations, interactions with stakeholders, missions to WFP country offices and direct observation. Its positioning and inherent mandate gives the office a unique outlook on workplace issues within WFP. The insights garnered from such observations should be construed within the broader spectrum of data on the workplace, serving to support policy and decision makers in the organization.

### ***Unsettling times – "what will happen to me?"***

28. In 2023, OBD's visitors often asked: "What will happen to me?". This question arose in respect of various issue categories affecting different layers of the organization, from individual concerns about issues in the *job and career* or *safety, health and wellness* categories (including work-life balance), to concerns about issues at the organizational level, such as *organizational, strategic, leadership and field-related* matters, which accounted for 18 percent of OBD's caseload. While organizational realignment is a constant feature of WFP operations, the large-scale transformation that WFP embarked on in 2023 in a bid to become more agile and adaptive to emergencies and funding reductions created a feeling of uncertainty among many employees around the world.
29. Many visitors to OBD expressed the fear of losing their jobs and had concerns about potentially unfair and preferential treatment because decisions regarding which positions to retain and which to abolish are taken mainly by employees' direct supervisors and management. Employees in leadership positions expressed feelings of uncertainty about their own jobs, while at the same time having to take tough decisions regarding which employees to discharge. OBD also noted an increase in concerns among employees in the international professional staff category, often related to uncertainty regarding the reassignment process at the end of 2023, which for many employees affected important decisions such as where to move their families. As international professional staff members



hold most of the leadership positions in WFP, their uncertainty sometimes had a trickle-down effect on the morale and motivation of entire teams.

30. Several female visitors also expressed the concern that pregnancy, combined with pre-existing challenges in team dynamics, might have contributed to the decision to terminate rather than extend their contracts. Questions were raised regarding the duty of care of an organization in such circumstances, especially the duty of care towards consultants, whose limited contractual rights and desire to leave WFP “on a positive note” often influenced their decisions and behaviour in the last weeks of their contract period. In addition, employees who were able to keep their jobs often felt strong sympathy for the colleagues who lost theirs, while also worrying about the additional workload generated by reductions in staffing numbers.

### ***A need for clear communication***

31. In 2023, WFP’s new executive leadership team acted to address the rising humanitarian needs and crisis conditions resulting from the conflict in the Sudan, the discovery of food diversions in Ethiopia and Somalia, the war in Gaza, the situation in the Sahel and other conflicts around the world, combined with challenges related to donor fatigue, rising operational costs and the subsequent budget deficit for WFP operations.
32. In crisis situations, communication becomes vital, even though there often seems to be no time for it. OBD’s visitors often said that they perceived decision making regarding organizational transformation as inconsistent, rushed and lacking in proper planning. Many said that their greatest need during this moment of uncertainty was for open, proactive and transparent communication and, in cases of staff downsizing, clear articulation of the process to be followed and objective criteria to guide the related decision making.
33. In some instances, leaders described how they were instructed to reach certain objectives of the organizational change, particularly by downsizing their offices, while indications of how to do so were not provided until later in the process. The time gap between the receipt of directions and assistance provided created anxiety among those leaders, who felt that they had been left to deal with the situation alone.
34. Employees on short-term contracts described how, despite being aware that they had never been promised a stable position at WFP, they felt strongly connected to WFP, particularly after working for the organization over a long period. Being among the first employees to be affected by the downsizing led to a sense of disappointment and bitterness among those employees. It should be noted that in late 2023 and early 2024, WFP pooled resources from many of its offices to support employees affected in this way, and such efforts were much appreciated by the employees concerned.

### **Opportunities for improvement**

- 1) WFP’s leadership and management should enhance communication channels so as to provide clear and timely updates regarding organizational changes, especially those related to restructuring and downsizing. This will help to ensure that employees understand the reasons behind such changes and the impact that the changes will have on their roles and responsibilities. Ensuring openness, transparency and clear step-by-step procedures would help to manage the change process and reduce the stress on WFP’s workforce.
- 2) *Enhancing the support provided to employees by WFP’s leadership:* A culture of stability and resilience within the organization can be fostered by emphasizing the importance of empathy, value-driven decision-making and solidarity among colleagues. WFP ought to encourage its leaders to prioritize the well-being of both employees and beneficiaries.

***Flexible working arrangements – can “one size fit all”?***

35. In 2023, OBD witnessed an increase in the proportion of cases involving *safety, health and wellness* issue categories, which rose from 6 percent in 2022 to 8 percent in 2023. Among other issues, this category includes matters related to work–life balance and flexible working arrangements. While the increase in cases is clearly linked to the general mood among employees described in previous paragraphs, developments in the arrangements for remote working and working from home have also contributed.
36. OBD’s visitors have been expressing confusion and frustration regarding working-from-home provisions ever since WFP asked many of its employees to return to the office after the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, the organization launched pilots of a “new ways of working” project aimed at creating “a modern, diverse, family-friendly, innovative, highly collaborative, productive and agile working model that embodies the organization’s core values”.<sup>2</sup> At that time, most employees in regional bureaux and country offices were required to work almost entirely from their offices, while many at headquarters were allowed more flexibility. OBD observed that working-from-home arrangements were handled differently from office to office, often depending on the personal convictions of the individual managers concerned.
37. Employees in the field expressed discontent with the need to seek approval for working from home, which was often viewed as acceptable only under exceptional circumstances requiring justification. Some visitors shared a perception of bias in the approval process, with colleagues who had families and children, or who were international staff members, seeming to be more likely than others to have their requests for remote working approved. Women were particularly concerned about the ability to balance work and family obligations in the absence of flexible working arrangements. Managers also reported that employees abused working-from-home modalities or did not satisfy the conditions of such arrangements.
38. Key arguments in favour of working-from-home arrangements are that they can enhance work–life balance, contributing to higher job satisfaction and reduced levels of stress. The use of remote working arrangements can also widen the talent pool, enabling WFP to hire qualified individuals regardless of their geographical location. This can foster diversity and inclusion while also reducing the overhead costs associated with maintaining a physically present staff contingent. Such benefits were confirmed by a survey with 3,000 participants from across the organization, which WFP conducted after its year-long piloting of the hybrid working model.<sup>3</sup> Also in 2023, the Joint Inspection Unit issued a report on remote working and provided recommendations on flexible working arrangements in the entities of the United Nations system.<sup>4</sup>
39. Office-based work also has advantages, however. Without the in-person interactions facilitated by office environments, communication barriers may arise, leading to misunderstandings, delayed decision making and decreased team cohesion and engagement. In addition, the blurred boundaries between work and home life in remote settings can lead to challenges in maintaining work discipline and separating professional obligations from personal responsibilities, hence affecting productivity.

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<sup>2</sup> WFP. 2022. [Webpage on New ways of working](#). Accessed in April 2024.

<sup>3</sup> WFP. 2023. [WFP working arrangements: What we’ve learned from the hybrid pilot model](#).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Joint Inspection Unit. 2023. [Flexible working arrangements in United Nations system organizations](#).

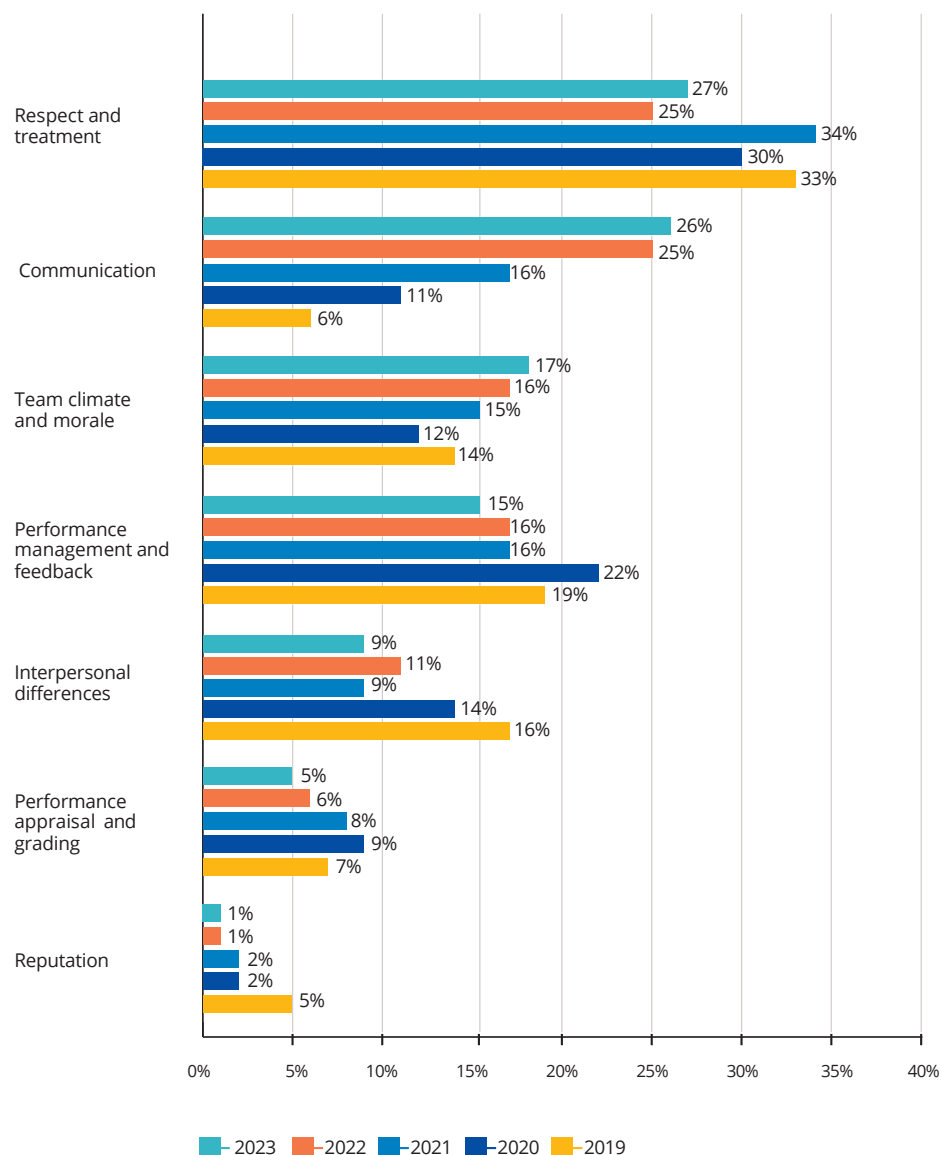
40. In July 2023, an announcement mandating a return to the office for a minimum of three days a week for all headquarters staff was met with discontent among many employees. The decision marked a shift away from the flexibility to which most employees had grown accustomed. Visitors to OBD expressed a feeling that WFP was not delivering on the promise of embracing new ways of working that it had announced in March 2022. While WFP had created a process for testing potential solutions for flexible working, the final decision was felt to have been made without regard to the findings of the pilots and advantages that the hybrid working modality had demonstrated. OBD's visitors also perceived communications related to this decision as often reflecting only one side of the issue and lacking in evidence and transparency.

#### **Opportunities for improvement**

- 3) To recognize the diverse needs and situations of employees in different locations and roles, management could consider exploring more flexible working arrangements, including options for hybrid working models that combine remote and in-office work. The recommendations in the Joint Inspection Unit's report provide a basis for developing a coherent approach to the mainstreaming of flexible working arrangements and new ways of working.
- 4) WFP employees would benefit from more open and transparent communications about remote working policies and decisions.

#### ***The dynamics of supervisory relationship***

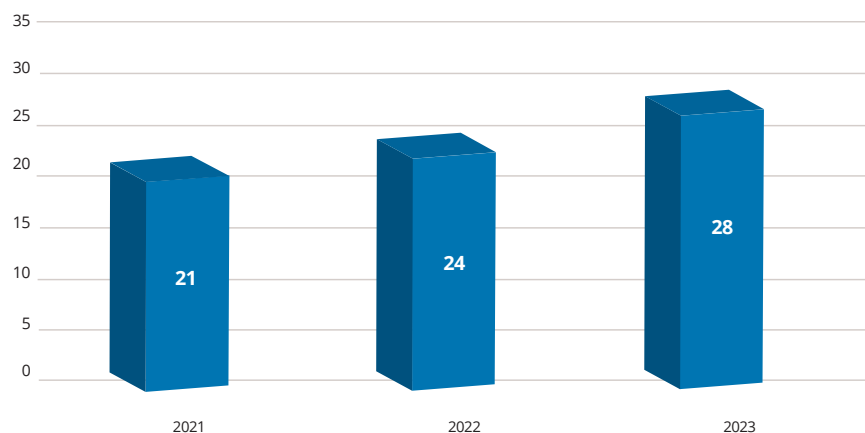
41. In 2023, 34 percent of all cases brought to OBD were related to issues between supervisors and supervisees. Such issues fall into the *evaluative relationships* category which, of all the categories of issue, accounts for by far the largest number of employees' requests for informal conflict resolution services. This predominance has been consistent over the years both within WFP and among other ombuds offices inside and outside the United Nations system.
42. Within the *evaluative relationship* category, the largest proportion of cases has consistently related to *respect and treatment* issues, followed by *communication* issues between supervisors and supervisees. Figure 6 above provides an overview of the main categories of concern reported to OBD, and figure 10 provides details on the main types of issue reported within the *evaluative relationships* category.

**Figure 10: Cases related to evaluative relationships by type of issue, 2019–2023****10. EVALUATIVE RELATIONSHIPS DATA COMPARISON, 2019–2023 (%)*****Increasing numbers of cases brought by leaders***

43. Of all the cases related to evaluative relationships that OBD received in 2023, 28 percent were brought by supervisors seeking support on questions related to leadership issues. This figure reflects a trend that OBD has observed in recent years: while in the past, ombuds offices were often seen as catering mainly to employees who had issues with their supervisors, more and more employees in leadership positions are now seeking support on managerial issues. One of the reasons for this increase is rooted in the cultural change that WFP is currently undergoing, as outlined in WFP's people policy and leadership framework, which is making managers feel increasingly responsible not only for producing good results within their teams, but also for exploring the ways in which those results are achieved.

**Figure 11: Evaluative relationships: percentage of visitors seeking support on issues with their supervisees, 2021–2023**

**11. EVALUATIVE RELATIONSHIPS - % OF VISITORS WHO ASK FOR SUPPORT ON ISSUES WITH SUPERVISEES**



***Difficulties with formal feedback mechanisms and fear of retaliation***

44. In 2023, OBD was approached by many supervisors asking for support in dealing with underperforming supervisees. A frequent concern was the fear of being accused of abusive conduct in cases of the termination or non-renewal of a contract or when giving critical feedback, particularly when the feedback was reported in a supervisee's annual performance and competency enhancement (PACE) assessment.
45. Such concerns reflect the growing pressure on leaders, who are being encouraged to manage performance more proactively and are responsible for ensuring that WFP delivers "more with less". At the same time, OBD observes that some employees perceive being held accountable for their actions by their supervisors as constituting abusive conduct. Such a culture of low acceptance of accountability for performance is reflected in certain country offices, where a "cosmetic" approach to the PACE system results in underperforming employees expecting and demanding "outstanding" performance appraisals. While some supervisors may resist such demands, others see themselves as unable to change a situation that has been perpetuated over the years.
46. The situations described above are also a reflection of the very different workplace cultures that exist among WFP's duty stations. In some offices, harmony among employees is so highly valued that difficult conversations are avoided and critical feedback is perceived as "losing face"; in others, open discussions and feedback are seen as crucial elements of a merit-based organization.
47. Supervisees frequently expressed concern about their supervisors' "micromanagement" and inability to communicate empathetically and directly. Several reported that their PACE assessments were the first indication that their supervisors were not satisfied with their performance, indicating issues with the use of feedback within their teams. Other supervisees were surprised to receive critical feedback on their performance, having always been rated by previous supervisors as "outstanding" in performance reviews.

48. In their conversations with OBD, employees often expressed a high degree of fear in raising concerns with their supervisors, stating that attempts to address issues are often seen as “rocking the boat” and perceiving such attempts as leading to negative consequences for themselves. The main fears expressed by these employees included receiving negative comments in their PACE assessments, being excluded from meetings or tasks, not having their contracts renewed, or not being supported in seeking advancement in their careers.
49. Imbalances of power and divergence between employees’ self-perceptions and the perceptions of others are a recurring element in conflictual relationships between supervisees and supervisors. Friction can also arise because most WFP employees are confronted with a new supervisor, and thus a new leadership style, every two to four years, and large numbers of employees are on short-term contracts with very little protection and job security. Fear of retaliation – combined with the limited opportunities for finding alternative employment in many duty stations and the comparatively high remuneration of WFP employees – reinforces employees’ reluctance to address issues with their supervisors, preferring instead to endure unpleasant situations.

### **Opportunities for improvement**

- 5) WFP would benefit from investing further in a culture of accountability in which leaders are held accountable for leading their teams in a respectful and effective way, and employees are held accountable for delivering on agreed results. While WFP’s leadership framework provides good guidance on what this means in practice, OBD observes that the framework is underused in many duty stations. WFP could thus increase its efforts to make the leadership framework a common point of reference and ensure that employees know about the framework and how to adapt and use it in their offices. Giving more weight to supervisory skills in the PACE assessment, and ensuring a consistent tone at all levels that emphasizes accountability could drive further improvement in this area.

### **“Living” the WFP values**

50. In 2023, 18 percent of cases brought to OBD related to concerns about organizational culture and the application of WFP core values in daily work interactions. Of these cases, 5 percent related to the *standards, values, procedures and policies* category of issues and 13 percent concerned *legal, regulatory and compliance* issues. WFP’s core values – integrity, collaboration, commitment, humanity and inclusion – guide employees’ interactions and work, but despite the inclusive process through which these values were developed, cultural differences across locations sometimes hinder the uniform adherence to them and influence how they are translated into daily operations, creating challenges for the creation of a respectful organizational culture.
51. Culture, understood as the set of customs, traditions and values of a society or community,<sup>5</sup> plays a pivotal role in international organizations such as WFP, influencing operations, strategies and interactions. Cultural diversity enriches perspectives, fosters innovation and promotes inclusivity, but it also influences decision-making processes, communication styles and conflict resolution methods, with impacts on the effectiveness of collaboration between different teams. Conflicts often arise from culturally insensitive leadership styles or difficulties in understanding local work cultures. The staffing structure of WFP, with its separation of national from international employees, exacerbates these dynamics. OBD has observed that particularly challenging situations may arise in offices where informal communications and “corridor chats” are the norm.

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<sup>5</sup> See definition of “culture” in the [Cambridge English dictionary online](#).

52. OBD's visitors have expressed opposing viewpoints regarding the different situations of national and international employees: while national employees feel that some aspects of "United Nations culture" require them to avoid certain locally accepted behaviours, international staff find it difficult to manage teams where local cultural tendencies impinge on WFP's core values. From both of these viewpoints, OBD heard concerns regarding differences in respectful communication practices, the use of authoritarian or more egalitarian leadership styles, and behaviours that are deemed discriminatory with respect to age, gender, racial or LGBTQI+ dimensions.
53. In 2023, OBD observed that in some country offices, often those in challenging environments, practices that are contrary to WFP's policies but entrenched in the local culture led to serious concerns among employees. In this regard, visitors described instances of colleagues having very close connections to particular communities, vendors or government partners; cases of conflict in the office; or occasions when employees used their connections to local communities to intimidate their colleagues or used customary dispute resolution practices to address an issue. Some managers reported hesitating to address issues effectively owing to fears for their personal safety and security or the risk of mobbing. Particularly when matters were not straightforward, managers often chose to ignore an irregular practice until it could be addressed at a future, "safer" time.
54. Recognizing and respecting cultural differences enables organizations such as WFP to cultivate respectful relationships, thus fostering a positive and inclusive working environment while achieving globally shared goals. WFP has established a set of organizational values that are widely accepted and deeply rooted in the value systems of very diverse cultural groups. Those values are common to all cultures but are interpreted and "lived" very differently. While WFP has implemented policies and frameworks that shape its culture,<sup>6</sup> there is room to improve the incorporation of its values into everyday operations. Addressing cultural divides requires the fostering of cultural competency and sensitivity.

### **Opportunities for improvement**

- 6) Continuous monitoring and evaluation: Establishing mechanisms for the continuous monitoring and evaluation of cultural dynamics, diversity and inclusion initiatives throughout WFP would assist the organization in assessing the effectiveness of cultural integration efforts and identifying areas for improvement.
- 7) Enhanced cultural awareness at all levels: Cultural differences often play an underlying role in conflicts between supervisors and supervisees. WFP's leaders would benefit greatly from additional support in developing further cultural awareness, which would enable them to manage cultural differences more effectively. At the same time, WFP could build more understanding among national employees of what working for a United Nations organization entails. These steps would help to bridge existing gaps, in particular between supervisors in the international professional staff categories and national staff, strengthening the overall organizational culture and identity.

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<sup>6</sup> These include the [WFP Code of Conduct](#), the [WFP People Policy](#), the WFP leadership framework, the [United Nations Culture Change Innovation Challenge](#), the diversity framework, the Speak Up series and the Respect+ campaign.

## **Creating impact: the added value of an ombuds office**

### **Informal channels as a first step in dispute resolution**

55. In resolution [A/RES/77/260](#) of December 2022, the United Nations General Assembly reaffirmed that informal dispute resolution is a crucial element of the system for administering justice and emphasized that “all possible use should be made of the informal component of the system in order to avoid unnecessary litigation”. The resolution emphasizes that the use of an informal system is an efficient and effective option for addressing workplace conflicts because it encourages dialogue and collaboration. The General Assembly asserts, and OBD observes in its daily work, that conflicts are resolved most effectively when people come together to talk and listen to one another voluntarily and outside formal processes.

### **The added value of an ombuds office to WFP**

56. OBD is a key element of WFP’s internal justice system. The existence and use of the office helps to ensure that WFP’s core values and code of conduct are truly an integral part of the organization’s culture. OBD serves as a knowledgeable contact point for employees who are experiencing difficulties at work and – with the employee’s consent – it can rapidly connect those employees to the people who have the authority to act. Owing to the freedom that it offers employees in discussing their concerns openly without fear of retaliation, judgement or a mandated reaction, OBD is also a unique resource for expanding management’s insights into workplace culture. Rapid dispute resolution services that are provided informally save a significant amount of time and avoid the wasted energy that many employees expend when conflicts linger and are unresolved for extended periods.
57. Through its confidential conversations with employees, OBD serves as the early warning mechanism for leadership because it can observe and monitor trends and quickly report to WFP’s leadership any relevant systemic issues that it identifies. Such systemic issues are far-reaching and often rooted in discrepancies in the ways in which policies and procedures are implemented or in gaps in communication and interpretation.

### **Laying the foundation for change and saving costs**

58. The use of an ombuds office can mitigate the high cost of conflict in the workplace. Unresolved conflicts consume enormous amounts of time, energy and finances in terms of employee resignations, absenteeism, the stress that hampers productivity, and the costs incurred from high employee turnover, which necessitates the training and career development of new staff members, who may – in turn – leave the organization if issues remain unresolved.
59. An ombuds office and the organization that it supports are successful when employees are able to contact the office for a listening ear and a brainstorming session in which the options for resolving a conflict are considered. This enables an employee to clarify their perception of the conflict, while the variety of options available for its resolution gives them a sense of empowerment.
60. Informal conflict resolution is highly cost-effective for WFP in that it creates efficiencies and saves time, particularly compared with formal mechanisms. On completion of their consultation with OBD, visitors to the office are provided with a survey: in 2023, 22 percent of survey respondents said that they were likely to have used a formal channel, such as the Office of Inspections and Investigations, to address their concerns if they had not been able to contact OBD.



61. When talking with visitors, ombuds officers apply a coaching approach that aims to enable visitors to deal effectively not only with their current issue but also with any similar challenges in the future. Responses to the survey statement “Through my interaction with the office, I feel more comfortable to address workplace issues in the future” therefore provide OBD with an indicator of its success in empowering visitors and the possible lasting impacts of its services. In 2023, 74 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. In addition:
- 89 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable discussing their concerns with an ombuds officer;
  - 72 percent agreed or strongly agreed that, through their interactions with the office, they could more easily identify options for addressing their concerns;
  - 87 percent said that they would recommend OBD to colleagues;
  - 34 percent said that if they had not contacted OBD the issue would have escalated; and
  - 30 percent said that they would have left or thought of leaving WFP if they had not contacted OBD.

*One visitor to OBD said*

*“Your contribution has made the difference to resolve in a peaceful and appropriate way the differences that arose with my supervisor. Thank you very much for your support.”*

### **The respectful workplace advisor programme – tackling conflict directly when it arises**

62. As an extension of OBD, respectful workplace advisors (RWAs) provide confidential and impartial support directly to colleagues facing workplace issues in their country offices or sub-offices. RWAs are nominated by their peers and perform their role on a voluntary basis, in addition to their regular duties.
63. RWAs are crucial in mitigating the risk of conflict escalation by tackling issues at their source. They also serve as an early warning system for the leadership of WFP, as they can identify and report any systemic issues that they see in the field and, as “ethics ambassadors”, they work to raise colleagues’ awareness of the WFP Code of Conduct and related policies. More specifically, RWAs:
- serve as a first point of contact for employees who are unsure of where to seek help with workplace issues;
  - provide information on the resources and options for navigating WFP policies and procedures;
  - conduct training sessions on various aspects of conflict prevention or resolution, using materials produced by OBD and the Ethics Office; and
  - promote WFP values.

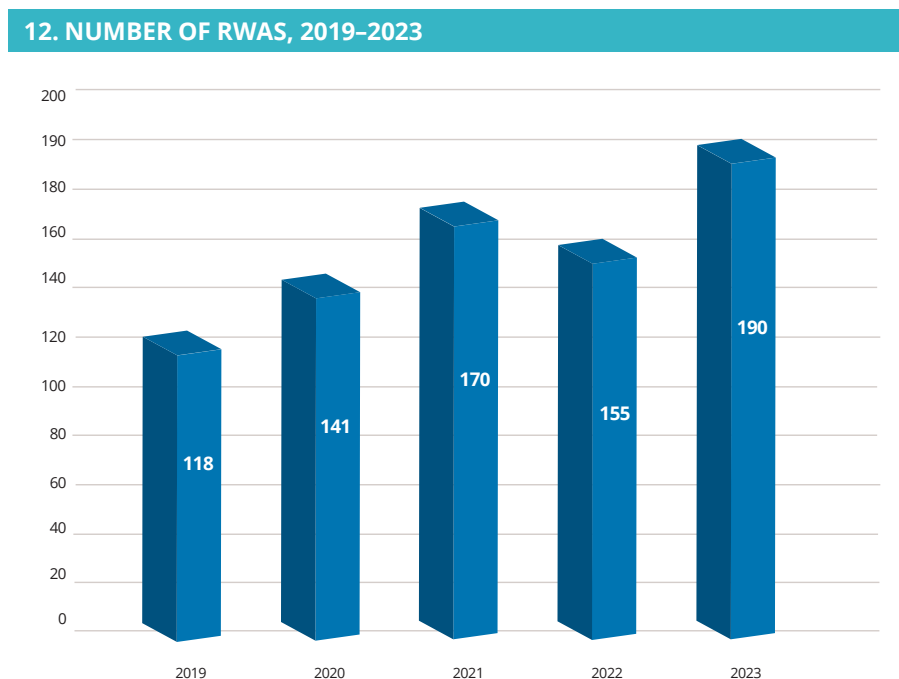
### **Support during the organizational change**

64. In light of WFP’s ongoing organizational change, the role of the RWAs became even more important in 2023. Over the course of the year, a total of 318 employees contacted RWAs for informal and off-the-record consultations and, in many duty stations, RWAs were instrumental in providing employees with information related to the organizational change process. RWAs also often promoted or led Respect+ campaigns in their offices.

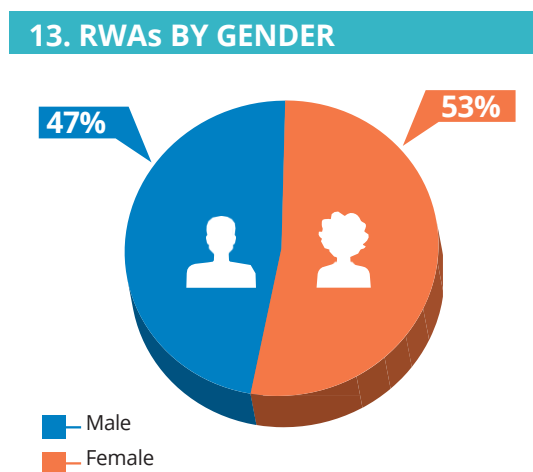
## A growing network

65. Recognizing the value of RWAs, many offices requested the appointment of additional advisors. During 2023, the RWA network grew from 155 to 190 members, and it is expected to comprise 200 or more RWAs by the end of 2024. In 2023, OBD conducted two foundation training courses in Rome for new RWAs.

**Figure 12: Number of respectful workplace advisors, 2019–2023**



**Figure 13: Respectful workplace advisors by gender, 2023**

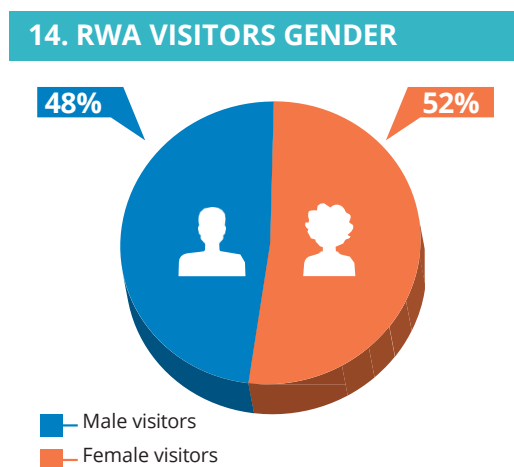


66. The key contributions and success of RWAs can be measured in terms of not only the number of consultations that they hold but also the awareness that they create among employees and the information that they provide. RWAs are engaged in induction programmes, staff retreats and other activities, promoting respectful behaviour and providing information to staff.

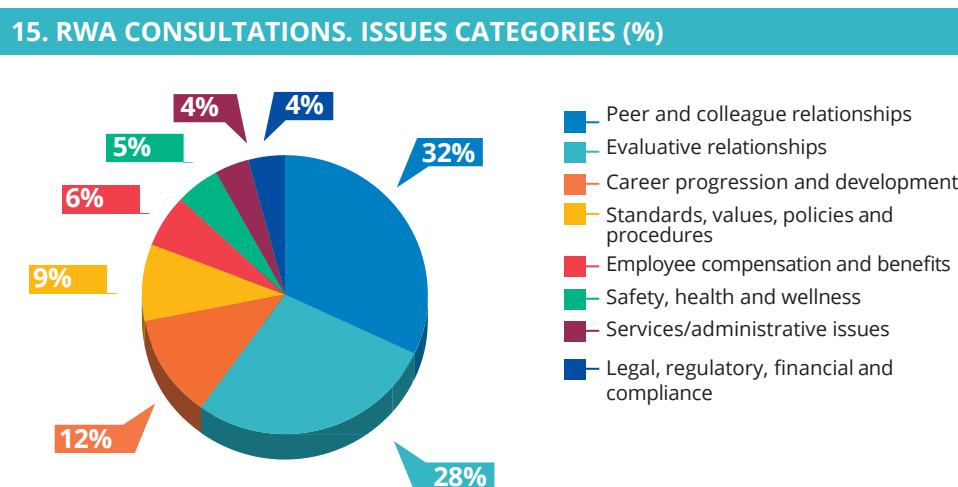
### The main reasons for consultations with respectful workplace advisors: issues between peers and with supervisors

67. In 2023, issues with peers was the main reason for employees to consult RWAs, with 32 percent of all consultations falling into this category. In addition, 28 percent of consultations related to *evaluative relationships* issues and 12 percent to *career progression and development* issues.

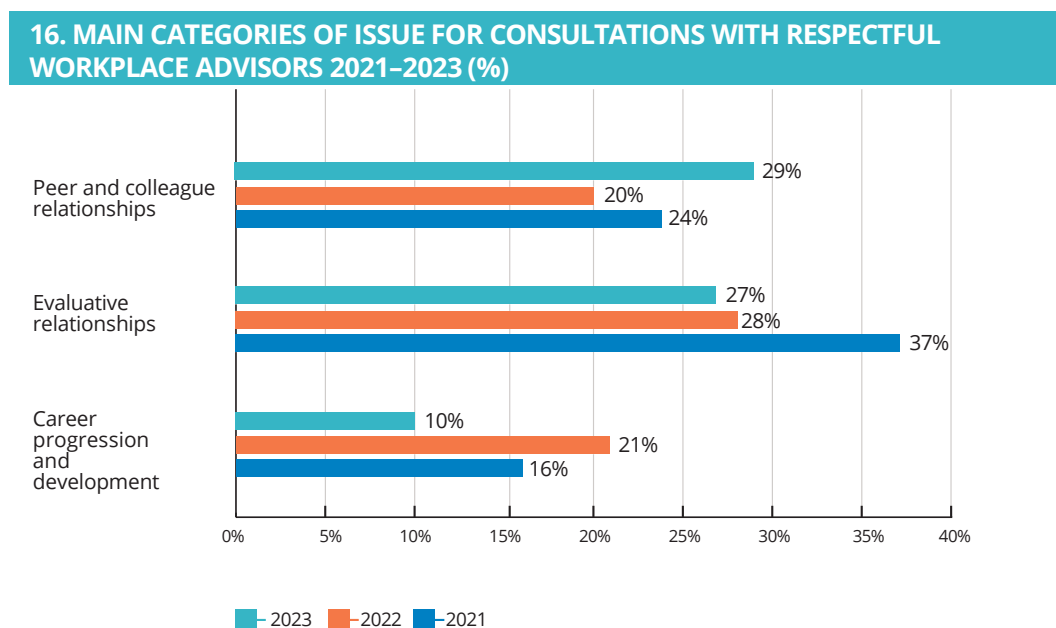
**Figure 14: Consultations with respectful workplace advisors by gender, 2023**



**Figure 15: Proportion of consultations with respectful workplace advisors by category of issue, 2023**



**Figure 16: Main categories of issue for consultations with respectful workplace advisors, 2021–2023**



## Looking forward: the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services in 2024

### The Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services in WFP's new organizational structure

#### *Advancing a more proactive dialogue with leadership*

68. With the introduction of WFP's new organizational structure, OBD, as an independent, informal office, has a direct reporting line to the Executive Director. The new structure provides greater clarity and improves the flow of information, giving OBD the opportunity to serve more effectively as an early warning system by providing continual feedback on systemic issues and new trends in WFP.

#### *Breaking down "silos"*

69. With all the offices involved in WFP's internal system of justice now reporting directly to the Executive Director, OBD is looking forward to breaking down the "silos" between them and increasing internal collaboration. OBD staff are confident that this will help to increase the impact of the internal system of justice, thus serving employees better and enabling WFP to provide better services to its beneficiaries.

#### **Better access for WFP employees in the field**

70. In recent years, OBD has been transformed from a headquarters-based office to an office with a strong presence in the field through its outposted ombuds officers in the regional bureaux for the Middle East, Northern Africa and Eastern Europe; Eastern Africa; and Western Africa. OBD plans to strengthen its services for employees in Asia and the Pacific in 2024 by recruiting an outposted ombuds officer for the regional bureau in that region. Ombuds officers provide effective support to field staff through ad hoc missions, outreach activities in field locations, the leveraging of technology to provide virtual support services and the establishment of partnerships with local stakeholders to facilitate tailored assistance.

**Providing services to more country offices**

71. Analysis of the cases brought to OBD consistently shows that the impact of the office's services is greatest when office staff meet WFP employees in person because this builds rapport, helping employees to overcome their anxiety about reporting issues. OBD is therefore committed to reaching country offices that it has not visited over the past four years. In 2024, OBD plans to conduct 30 in-person support missions across all WFP regions.

**Strengthening mediation**

72. OBD is currently revising WFP's mediation framework, which will replace the current Executive Director's circular on mediation services and has the aim of modernizing WFP's approach to mediation and increasing the use of mediation throughout the organization. In the second quarter of 2024, OBD plans to hold wide-reaching consultations with stakeholders on the draft framework. Once the framework has been adopted, for the remainder of 2024 OBD will start to implement outreach, visibility-raising, training and promotion activities, while developing internal standard operating procedures.

**Maximizing the benefits of the respectful workplace advisor network**

73. OBD is in a process of revamping its network of almost 200 RWAs in the field with the aim of providing more support at the regional level, thereby enabling RWAs to better assist their colleagues in dealing with the challenges linked to reduced funding and WFP's ongoing internal transformation.