

Best Practices for Handling Sexual Harrassment, Abuse, and Assault Within a Host Country



Sarah arrived for her two-year assignment full of hope. By month three, the comments from men in the market had become background noise. By month nine, she realized she'd stopped telling anyone about them—not because they'd lessened, but because she'd learned no one would do anything about it anyway.

When we looked over the data from the sexual harassment, abuse, and assault on the field survey, two different kinds of experiences, which we labeled as two buckets, came to light. Bucket One—internal and policy-governed—addresses experiences that happen within an organization. Most organizations already have policies in place around these issues. Bucket Two—host-culture, and procedure-and-best-practice-governed—addresses experiences that happen within the host culture. We have found that many organizations do not have practices or procedures in place around this bucket. This handout is a starting point in addressing procedures and best practices your organization can adapt to fit your context and have a plan for Bucket Two.

Note: The dog bite / mosquito bite framing we use, along with the full research behind it, is explored in detail in the paper [*Let's Talk About It: Sexual Harassment, Abuse, and Assault on the Field*](#). This handout pulls the practical pieces out for easy reference.

Two Kinds of Experience Within a Host Culture

Dog bites happen out of nowhere. You're not expecting it, and then it happens, and it throws you. Sometimes for a minute, sometimes for a long time. A small nip and a serious bite are both still dog bites, but they don't need the same response.

Mosquito bites are different. You know they're coming, so you prepare, but knowing doesn't make them harmless. You barely notice one or two bites, but we all have a tipping point. This is what frequent harassment can feel like: the comments, the stares, getting touched in a crowd. Expected enough that people brace for it, and it still wears you down.

In the survey, almost half of people described their experience with sexual harassment, abuse, or assault as rare, like a dog bite, a couple of times a year. The other half described it as just part of life on the field: like mosquito bites, monthly, weekly, or daily. Same call to serve, two different realities that both deserve support.





Sexual Harassment, Abuse, or Assault Procedures to Follow: Dog Bites (Sudden, Unexpected)

- A nip is startling but doesn't leave lasting harm. Check in and let the person talk it out. They may just need a minute, and someone to notice.
- A bite is real but contained. This calls for a debrief with someone trained to listen, not just a sympathetic ear. Document what happened while it's fresh, and make sure there's a specific person, by name, who will follow up with them again in a week.
- A deep bite is serious and may be life-altering. Safety comes first, always. From there, it may mean medical care, informing officials, and counseling, depending on what the person needs.
- For a deep bite, the follow-up must go further and last longer: months, not days. That can look like scheduled check-ins (one week, one month, three months, six months); a named point person who owns the follow-up start to finish; practical accommodations that shift as needed (schedule, travel, living situation, distance from the person or place involved); counseling access that's consistently checked on rather than offered once; and a real, ongoing conversation about whether it's still safe or healthy for the person to stay where they are.

Sexual Harassment, Abuse, or Assault Procedures to Follow: Mosquito Bites (Ongoing, Everyday)

- Give people language for naming it: "This is still harassment," even when it's common where they live.
- Build in regular check-ins that ask about this sexual harassment, abuse, or assault directly, instead of waiting for someone to bring it up.
- Create space to vent before it piles up. A peer group, a standing debrief, someone whose job it is to ask.
- Watch for the tipping point, when the ordinary stuff stops being shrug-off-able. That's a signal to move someone into more direct support, not proof they should've said something sooner.

Best Practices: Across the Board

- **Prepare people before they arrive.** Build location-specific case studies for your context. What harassment tends to look like in *this* place, so people aren't caught off guard by something that's common there but unfamiliar to them.
- **Train together.** Do training with men and women in the room together, not separately. Everyone needs to understand what everyone is facing, and we all, together, have a role in the response.



- **Default to belief.** When someone shares, believe them. Assume they're underreporting, not overreporting. The data consistently shows people share less than what's truly happening, not more.
- **Say it out loud: all of it will be taken seriously.** A mosquito bite doesn't get waved off because it's "just how it is here." A dog bite doesn't get minimized because no one saw it coming. Before anything happens, people need to hear that whatever they bring will be met with a serious and real response.
- **Build in regular time away.** Make it normal—not a red flag or failure—for people to get out of the environment periodically. Distance gives perspective and recovery time that daily immersion doesn't allow.

Use This Handout, Don't Just Read It

This handout isn't meant to sit on your desk or desktop. Adapt it, cut and paste it, make it yours, whatever gets it into organizational practice.

- **Incorporate it into training.** Don't just hand this out. Walk through it with your team, together, so people know what to expect and who to go to before they ever need to.
- **Gather your own location-specific case studies.** What does harassment look like where your people serve? Build real examples from your own context and use them in training.
- **Name real people.** Every point person or person to report to in this document needs an actual name attached to it within your organization, not a placeholder.
- **Set a date to revisit these procedures.** Six months from now, come back and ask what's actually being used.

Your organization has covered Bucket One, incidents within your organization, with your policy. Now you can cover Bucket Two, what happens within a host culture, with these procedures. When people know they'll be believed, supported, and never left to handle sexual harassment, abuse, or assault alone, they can do this work with a whole heart.

If you haven't gotten the full report, you can get *Let's Talk About It: Sexual Harassment, Abuse, and Assault on the Field* at [Global Trellis under the "research" tab](#).