



BRIEF

Facing resistance to safeguarding work and work to address GBVH^[1] or SEAH^[2] in workplaces

What is resistance and why do we face it?

When addressing gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) or sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) in the workplace, resistance can arise. This resistance, which often comes from those who benefit from current power structures, is usually driven by fear of losing power, privilege or influence due to changing gender and social norms. Such attitudes, held by people of all genders, are often deeply ingrained and may be expressed without awareness of their harmful impact.^[3]

[1] GBVH is gender-based violence and harassment and SEAH is sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

[2] PSEAH is protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

[3] This note has been adapted from the VicHealth (En)countering resistance: Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives, VicHealth (En)countering Resistance Report, Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, Learning Brief: Navigating resistance to gender transformative education in emergencies, 10 Tips for Practitioners and EIGE, Institutional Transformation: Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit, mh0716094enn.pdf

There are eight types of resistance, moving from passive to active:

Denial	Denying that there is a problem or a credible need for change. "GBVH/SEAH isn't a problem here, we don't get any reports"
Disavowal	Refusing to recognise or accept responsibility for change. "PSEAH/addressing GBVH isn't part of my role or in my JD, I don't have any responsibility to support this initiative"
Inaction	Refusing to implement a change initiative (and work to prevent and respond to SEAH/GBVH) "We don't have the money to do any work on safeguarding"
Appeasement	Trying to placate people promoting the PSEAH / addressing GBVH agenda to limit their impact. "We will address it but we have so many other competing requests so we will address it later / when we have more staff"
Appropriation	Stimulating PSEAH whilst covertly undermining it. "Of course we will promote women to managerial positions, but it is hard to find women with the right skills"
Co-option	Using the language of PSEAH to distract or provoke a reaction. "What about men? Men are also victims"
Repression	Reversing or dismantling PSEAH measures and initiatives. "We tried setting up a grievance mechanism but no-one used it/we got too many unrelated reports"
Backlash	Aggressive, attacking responses or actions. "If they send a report about us they deserve any abuse they get for going against our culture and reporting"

How to respond to resistance: 10 tips



1. Expect resistance and prepare for it. Resistance means that your work advocating for addressing GBVH or SEAH is getting traction.



2. Understand the type of resistance and respond accordingly. Use the table below as a starting point and adapt it for your work.



3. Tailor your messaging to who you are speaking to so that your messages land well and you address concerns and correct misinformation.



4. Listen, give respect and let people talk about their own beliefs, biases and fears without being shut down. Give respect and space for others, confirming that you take contributions seriously. With this, they are more likely to be open to your messages. Put guidelines in place on what you mean by safe and respectful and put guidelines in place for behaviour that is not allowed.



5. Be led by facts from your context and organisation.



6. Focus on those you can influence – focus on the ‘moveable middle’. There are some people who just won’t get on board.



7. Identify allies (others who are committed to PSEAH and addressing GBVH) to work closely with. Try to identify some allies who are also leaders.



8. Frame don’t shame – allow personal accounts to be shared to help people connect emotionally, not just rationally, to the concepts.



9. Practice self-care. Look after your own wellbeing, seek support and allow yourself space when you need it.



10. Celebrate the small wins. SEAH and GBVH work is addressing some entrenched and structural inequalities. This is a long-term process. Take time out to recognise and celebrate the small wins along the way.

Responding to specific forms of resistance

Type of resistance	Definition	Suggested response
1. Denial	Denying that there is a problem or a credible need for change. "GBVH/SEAH isn't a problem here, we don't get any reports" "Most of the reports are false anyway" "This is a donor-led, Western agenda, there is no need for this work here"	• Key message: GBVH happens in every country and across all sectors, with more than one in three women having experienced some form of physical or sexual violence during their lifetime. However, despite being widespread, it isn't always obvious or visible to those who are not experiencing or directly witnessing it. • Key message: Just because you don't get any reports does not mean that abuse is not happening. GBVH is widely under-reported. Based on prevalence data, we assume that more often than not, low or no reporting is an indicator that people are not reporting and that the grievance mechanism is not working, rather than no abuse is happening. • Stats to prepare: Share stats relating to violence against women and children, crimes against women and marginalised groups from your context. • Stats to prepare: While the statistics on false allegations vary – and refer most often to rape and sexual assault – they are invariably and consistently low. Adapt stats to your context. E.g. Research for the UK Home Office suggests that only 4% of cases of sexual violence reported to the UK police are found or suspected to be false. Studies carried out in Europe and in the US indicate rates of between 2% and 6%. Reference: Here's the truth about false accusations of sexual violence The Open University
2. Disavowal	Refusing to recognise or accept responsibility for change. "PSEAH/addressing GBVH isn't part of my role or in my JD, I don't have any responsibility to support this initiative" "With the recent changes in DEI"	• Key message: Responsibilities and related values to not cause abuse and harm are stated in a range of documents and levels (adapt to your country and organisation). • Organisation policies: Code of Conduct, Human Resource procedures, Job Description, Organisational Vision and Mission, Core competencies, Accountability framework etc. These responsibilities were also clarified in the mandatory trainings on PSEAH or GBVH. • National legislation: Your country may have ratified ILO c190, will have laws against certain forms of violence and abuse (to varying strengths), labour laws etc. • Regional and international standards: IFC performance standards, Regional standards, CAPSEAH etc. • Key message: On top of the stated responsibilities to your organisation and national laws, it is your responsibility to respect and uphold the human rights of others.
3. Inaction	Refusing to implement a change initiative (and work to prevent and respond to SEAH/GBVH). "We don't have the money to do any work on safeguarding" "Everyone is too busy to work on safeguarding, it's not a priority" "We have made so many staff cuts recently, we can't prioritise safeguarding" "We have ticked the compliance box, now we don't have to do anything else" "This is not how we work here; we do things differently – we don't need this Western, woke agenda"	• Key message: Policies, laws and standards are in place now. There is no need to wait. Expand with contextual examples. • Key message: Awareness and understanding of how to prevent and respond to GBVH / SEAH has increased in the past decade. We know how important it is to prevent and respond to GBVH/SEAH and we know how you can embed measures into your ways of working in a proportional and practical way. • Key message: There are plenty of free resources to support you to embed safeguarding in your work. There may be more work to develop a policy, design a grievance mechanism or create a risk assessment if you have not done this before. However, this leads to more accountable, efficient and effective work, providing long term benefits. • Key message: In today's working environment, change is a constant. Organisations have to adapt to an evolving environment and embrace a constant process of learning and growing. Corruption, fraud, security and data protection are compliance-led workplace initiatives that are now embedded across organisations. They once weren't. GBVH/PSEAH is a workplace requirement in 2025 and organisations need to change to embrace it. • Stats to prepare: Share stats relating to violence against women and children, crimes against women and marginalised groups from your context. • Clarifying statements relating to inaction in policies: "Zero tolerance to inaction" is widely used phrase in many organisational policies and global standards. The statement confirms that not only will SEAH itself not be tolerated, but any failure to prevent, report, or respond to it will also not be tolerated. This shifts the focus from just punishing offenders to also holding accountable those who fail to act—like managers, leaders, or colleagues who ignore or cover up incidents.

4. Appease-ment	Trying to placate people promoting the PSEAH / addressing GBVH agenda to limit their impact. "We will address it but we have so many other competing requests so we will address it later / when we have more staff"	As above. Key message: Policies, laws and standards are in place now. There is no need to wait. Expand with contextual examples. Key message: Awareness and understanding of how to prevent and respond to GBVH / SEAH has increased in the past decade. We know how important it is to prevent and respond to GBVH/SEAH and we know how you can embed measures into your ways of working in a proportional and practical way. Key message: There are plenty of free resources to support you to address GBVH or SEAH in your work. There may be more work to develop a policy, design a grievance mechanism or create a risk assessment if you have not done this before. However, this leads to more accountable, efficient and effective work, providing long term benefits. Key message: In today's working environment, change is a constant. Organisations have to adapt to an evolving environment and embrace a constant process of learning and growing. Corruption, fraud, security and data protection are compliance-led workplace initiatives that are now embedded across organisations. They once weren't. GBVH/PSEAH is a workplace requirement in 2025 and organisations need to change to embrace it. Stats to prepare: Share stats relating to violence against women and children, crimes against women and marginalised groups from your context.
5. Appropriation	Stimulating PSEAH whilst covertly undermining it. "Of course we will promote women to managerial positions, but it is hard to find women with the right skills" "We could invest in community grievance mechanisms, but no one in the community will use them" "Including safeguarding in our HR processes is a good idea, but it is too difficult to roll it out across the organisation"	This end of the spectrum is more active resistance. At first you may want to ask more questions and invite them to explain what they meant by that. Key message: Policies, laws and standards are in place now. There is no need to wait. Expand with contextual examples. Key message: Invest in how to deliver specific measures in a way that is safe and effective, e.g.: a) if you can't find women with the right skills, then identify how you can support women to build their skills; b) if you don't think a reporting mechanism will be used, identify mechanisms that are already in place that you can use or build on; c) if you don't know how to embed safeguarding in your HR work, brainstorm ways to do this with the right colleagues. Key message: Recognise that change processes take time: some women may take time to adjust to being managers; some grievances take time to build trust and be used; some new ways of working take time to remember. Stats to prepare: Share stats relating to violence against women and children, crimes against women and marginalised groups from your context.
6. Co-option	Using the language of PSEAH to distract or provoke a reaction. "What about men? Men are also victims"	This end of the spectrum is more active resistance. At first you may want to ask more questions and invite them to explain what they meant by that. Key message: Yes, men can be victims of SEAH and other forms of harm, including GBVH, however the overwhelming majority of victims of SEAH are women and girls (in communities). Stats to prepare: Share stats relating to violence against women and children, crimes against women and marginalised groups from your context.
7. Repression	Reversing or dismantling PSEAH measures and initiatives. "We tried setting up a grievance mechanism but no-one used it / we got too many unrelated reports from community members, so we stopped it"	This end of the spectrum is more active resistance. At first you may want to ask more questions and invite them to explain what they meant by that. Key message: A malfunctioning system is not the reason to stop putting in a system to prevent and respond to GBVH / SEAH. Invest time in understanding what will work in your context and how to put it into place. Key message: Don't over complicate or confuse your obligations and responsibilities. You are responsible for preventing and responding to harm caused in the delivery of your work. You are not responsible for harm that is already happening in society.
8. Backlash	Aggressive, attacking responses or actions. "If they send a report about us they deserve any abuse they get for going against our culture and reporting"	This end of the spectrum is more active resistance. At first you may want to ask more questions and invite them to explain what they meant by that. Key message: Policies, laws and standards are in place in and derive from your country. Expand with contextual examples. Key message: There are no social norms in your culture or in line with your religion that suggest that GBVH / SEAH are acceptable. (Adapt for context). Key message: If we are threatening abuse then it does suggest that there are some risks in this setting.