

# UNAIDS Culture Transformation

Building a Workplace Culture of  
Equality—a Reflection on UNAIDS  
Culture Transformation Journey to Date

**CULTURE  
TRANSFORMATION**  
EQUAL, SAFE &  
EMPOWERING



**It takes all of us and all of me to transform UNAIDS organizational culture, a journey towards an ever more inclusive culture of equality, safety and empowerment for all.**

**This brochure shares learnings from our journey.**

All documents for UNAIDS Culture Transformation can be downloaded here: <https://linktr.ee/unaidst>

# Building a Workplace Culture of Equality—a Reflection on UNAIDS' Culture Transformation Journey to Date

Just as UNAIDS calls for ending inequalities to end AIDS, we are building an internal culture of equality through our Culture Transformation. This journey is grounded in intersectional feminist and anti-racist thinking and practice. It also provides reflective spaces, values introspection and offers opportunity to experiment with different ways of working and learning together.

In practice this means that colleagues were and are invited to share their individual stories and experience of working for UNAIDS, complementing qualitative survey data. In addition, the Culture Transformation team studied culture change initiatives at other organizations and identified promising practices. Importantly, the process included colleagues from across disciplines and locations to learn about each other's perspectives, build a shared understanding of "our UNAIDS" and, together, make it happen.

Back in 1996, UNAIDS became the only Joint Programme of the United Nations. The small team grew over the years leading and inspiring the world to advance its vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. Currently, some 650 staff members from over 120 nationalities work across 80 duty stations to end AIDS as a public health threat, as part of the Sustainable Development Goals.

**The Culture Transformation's purpose is to support UNAIDS staff through a change process, helping them to explore and test positive working practices that can be taken forward and embedded within organizational policy and practice.**

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## Vision and aspiration

UNAIDS aims to create an equal, safe and empowering workplace and, in May 2020, a two-person Culture Transformation team was set up. This culture change starts with each and everyone at UNAIDS and is owned by all staff collectively. It happens through us, not to us. And while we know our destination, we are creating our own collective path by continuously learning, unlearning and relearning. Therefore 14 Change Agents across UNAIDS biggest duty stations were nominated. In engaging with colleagues and their teams, over 55% of staff engaged with the change process.

The Culture Transformation team is using the analogy of a 'quilt in the making', borrowed from the powerful NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, to visually show the key concepts essential to an equal, safe and empowering culture. The NAMES project had stitched names on tiles combined to a quilt to show that hundreds of people had died of AIDS-related illnesses to honour them. The quilt became a beloved symbol for friends and family to remember their loved ones since social stigma had denied many people dying of AIDS a proper funeral.

Inspiring ourselves with such an iconic symbol, the Culture Transformation team created its own quilt showing the long-term journey necessary to transform and sustain a culture of equality and social justice.

UNAIDS' quilt includes a number of tiles, eight of them representing distinct concepts that are essential going forward. These were distilled and graphically captured from many conversations held with more than 500 staff members since the launch of the transformation process in May 2020. While much progress has been achieved, we acknowledge that transformative change is an ongoing effort that requires time to be fully embedded in UNAIDS' ways of working and being, as well as efforts to sustain it.

**Every story matters—and is an integral part of the whole.** Each story is symbolically represented by a tile and therefore the quilt remains a work in progress. As the change process evolves, new tiles will be added, others might fade or need repairing.

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## Concepts essential to driving UNAIDS Culture Transformation process:

1. Kindness
2. Inclusion
3. Human to human connection
4. Change happens through us, not to us
5. Head, heart and hand
6. Walk the talk
7. Safe space
8. Shared power



## Value Charters and Feminist Principles

COVID-19 dramatically shifted how, when and from where people work—and within this global disruption, the Culture Transformation process started. Think of it as a re-set button to ensure new “house rules” of sorts because teams no longer always work together physically in an office. Like many other people, UNAIDS colleagues found themselves in a completely new and unfamiliar situation. The need to re-establish team “norms” and agree upon necessary changes emerged as a clear priority to be addressed quickly. Therefore, teams were guided to co-create Value Charters. As people learned to navigate through the “new normal”, the value charters provided teams with house rules. All this to rebuild trust and improve day-to-day work experiences.

The Culture Transformation team aimed to instil that these rules evolve: Experiment, Reflect and Adapt.

## Map of UNAIDS Team Value Charters



More than 25 teams at UNAIDS globally co-created their team value charters based on what was important to them in their daily work life. These were like joint agreements on what is ok and what isn't. For example, one team specified their need to, "contribute to the friendly atmosphere at work," while another put at the top of their value charter, "respect each other by showing regard for the feelings, rights, wishes, culture and traditions of others in the team."

While each team's charter is unique to their needs, all agree that the process that led to the charter was meaningful. The genuine conversations helped team members reconnect and create a shared experience.

Looking at common themes across value charters and reflecting on the recurrent issues, the Culture Transformation developed a first set of feminist principles. Then, colleagues were invited to relate to these principles through their personal stories and what they meant to us collectively at UNAIDS in our being and our doing. These principles are to be integrated into policies, systems and processes that shape UNAIDS.

### UNAIDS Feminist Principles:

1. Intersectionality
2. Equality and Equity
3. Inclusion and Non-discrimination
4. Ecological and Environmental Harmony
5. Inter-generationality
6. The Personal Is Political
7. Practice of Peace and Non-Violence
8. Linked, Not Ranked
9. Practice and Use of Power

UNAIDS Feminist Principles is a [living document](#) that we adjust as our culture transforms.



## A new policy for a safe UNAIDS workplace

In addition to this work, in March 2021, UNAIDS launched its updated Policy on preventing and addressing abusive conduct. It clearly described unacceptable behaviours and gave concrete examples to illustrate what constitutes abusive conduct. The Policy also outlined steps colleagues can take when experiencing abusive conduct and how to prevent it.

The Culture Transformation team stressed that policies are important in drawing a red line but for policies to be effective, staff need to understand provisions and feel safe to seek redress. Therefore, [UNAIDS launched the #RESPECT campaign](#). It aimed to raise awareness of the policy and ensure that staff know what is considered to be abusive conduct and their responsibility in preventing and addressing it.

A core team of Culture Transformation and Internal Communications worked with People Management, Ethics, Ombuds and Staff Association, to produce guidance on support services and factsheets in different languages and engaged with colleagues through webinars and virtual roundtables to further unpack and discuss abusive conduct. Using close-to-reality scenarios, this helped start conversations and gauge levels of understanding among UNAIDS' multi-cultural workforce.

#### Through #Respect UNAIDS ensures that:

- Everyone is clear where the line is and when it has been crossed.
- Every victim knows where to turn to for support.
- Every witness is empowered to be an active bystander.
- Every manager is equipped to fulfill their responsibilities.
- No perpetrator can say they didn't know.



## Gender equality, diversity, and anti-racism

An internal culture of equality and social justice requires decisive action in addressing power dynamics, privilege and structural barriers that may disadvantage staff due to their age, class, race, ethnicity, gender identity, gender expression, sex, physical and mental ability, sexual orientation, HIV status or other factors and qualities.

Accelerating progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women is fundamental to ending the AIDS epidemic and it must start within UNAIDS. As a long-standing champion, UNAIDS launched its first [Gender Action Plan in 2013](#). Building on the progress made under that first plan, such as gender parity at senior-levels and being the [first entity that was fully compliant with the United Nations System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women \(UN-SWAP\)](#) we have much to celebrate. However, we recognize more can and needs to be done. In 2018, UNAIDS launched its [Gender Action Plan 2018–2023—A Framework for Accountability](#). It envisions a workplace with equal and active participation of staff across the gender spectrum at all levels—a workplace that not only mitigates gender bias but also maximizes the “positive power” of equality and diversity, where all staff are empowered to pursue a fulfilling career with the flexibility to meet their diverse responsibilities outside of the workplace, free of discrimination and harassment.

#### To accelerate progress towards this vision, the Gender Action Plan sets four targets:

- Target 1: 50 : 50 across all staff levels and categories.
- Target 2: 100% of staff at all levels set a work and learning objective on gender.
- Target 3: 100% of UNAIDS female staff eligible to participate in UNAIDS Women's Leadership Programme, and 100% of UNAIDS staff eligible to participate in Mentoring Programme.
- Target 4: 100% compliance with the [UN-SWAP 2.0 framework](#).

To reach these targets, the Gender Action Plan identifies four action areas that address the complexity of gender-responsive change and covers a wide range of interventions to shift policies, certain mindsets and attitudes. Concerted efforts in these areas will guide the Secretariat to truly transform organizational culture and our ways of working.

As an accountability and transparency measure, an independent [external evaluation of UNAIDS Gender Action Plan 2018–2023](#) was conducted. It took stock of what had been achieved and where progress was lacking. It explored relevant organizational developments and options to achieve and update the plan’s targets and its evolution into a comprehensive Gender, Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Framework.

UNAIDS cannot become an equal, safe and empowering workplace without also addressing racism and racial discrimination. Anti-racism is fundamental to Culture Transformation. UNAIDS must stand up against, undo, prevent and tackle racism at all levels: personal, interpersonal, cultural and systemic. Racism creates hierarchal social structures of racial identities, with white people usually at the top holding particular privileges and power, and Black, Indigenous and People of Colour on lower rungs of the societal ladder, experiencing oppression, discrimination and prejudice. Anti-racism seeks to disrupt all of these.

At UNAIDS, conversations on racism were held among each team in 2020 and an Anti-Racism Action Plan was developed. Applying the Head, Heart and Hands approach, it outlines priority actions towards building an anti-racist organizational culture.

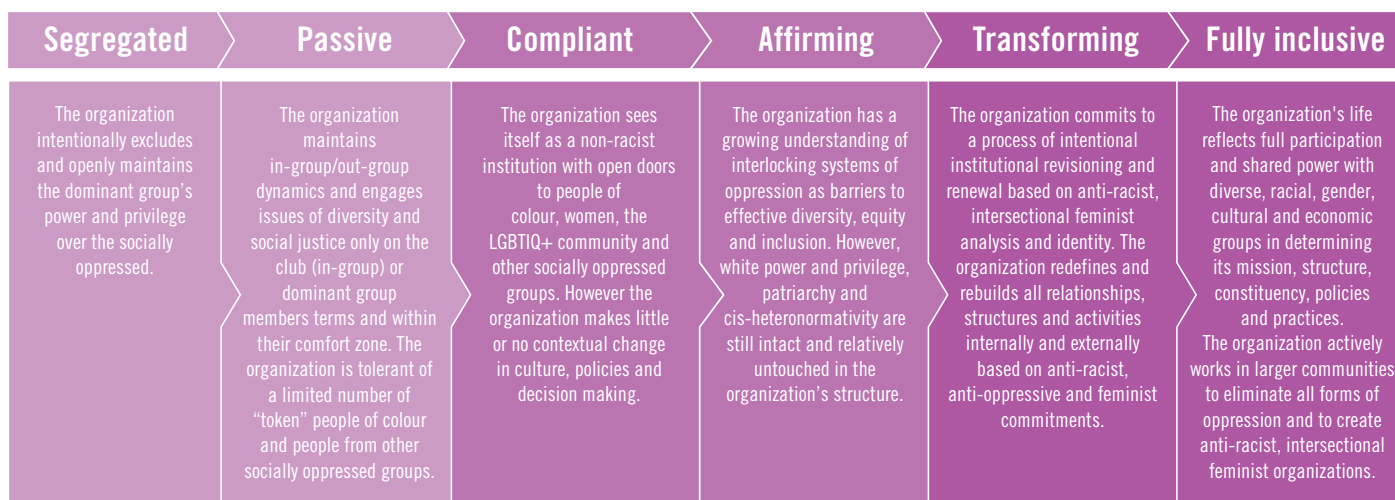
The Culture Transformation team has since convened frank conversations internally and held a session called “*Anti-racism and Decolonizing the HIV Response*” at the 2022 International AIDS Conference.

## Anti-racist, Intersectional Feminist Continuum

When racial, cultural and gender differences are:



Then organizations are:





In moving from rhetoric to action within UNAIDS, the team supported by external experts developed an Anti-racist, Intersectional Feminist Continuum as a structured and systematic organizational developmental pathway. It outlined six developmental levels from exclusive—when racial, cultural and gender differences are seen as a deficit—to fully inclusive—where these differences are seen as assets. For each level, indicators are defined. Based on studies, we determined four levels of accountability. Together, all these dimensions raise awareness, facilitate shared understanding and provide direction for the changes required at UNAIDS.

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## The four levels of accountability and change are:

1. Personal: What change are individuals personally responsible for that facilitates personal and systems change?
2. Interpersonal: What are leaders and staff members responsible for in their relationship with each other to shift unequal patterns in relationships?
3. Cultural: What organizational norms, values and written and unwritten rules need to be shifted?
4. Institutional: What organizational structures, systems, policies and practices must be changed?

As the Culture Transformation journey continues, the continuum will be used to benchmark UNAIDS against it, identifying the current state and committing to actions to progressively move towards becoming a fully inclusive organization. By that we mean an organization that has full participation and shared power with diverse, racial, gender, cultural and economic groups.

To facilitate further reflection, unlearning and learning, a visual dictionary called, *“Demystify Terms: Demystify Dynamics,”* is being finalized. It will serve as an organizational conversation starter. On its own, it explains a variety of terms related to power and privilege, race, sexuality and gender, inter-personal behaviours and shines a light on key populations (groups like men who have sex with men, transgender people, sex workers, prisoners, people who inject drugs). Within UNAIDS, we want to be intentional about utilizing language as a “liberatory tool”—as a basis for developing shared understanding and engaging directly with power imbalances in our organization and in the world.

## Team learning journey

*“You don’t change your culture through emails and memos. You change it through relationships... one conversation at a time.”*

Danny Steele

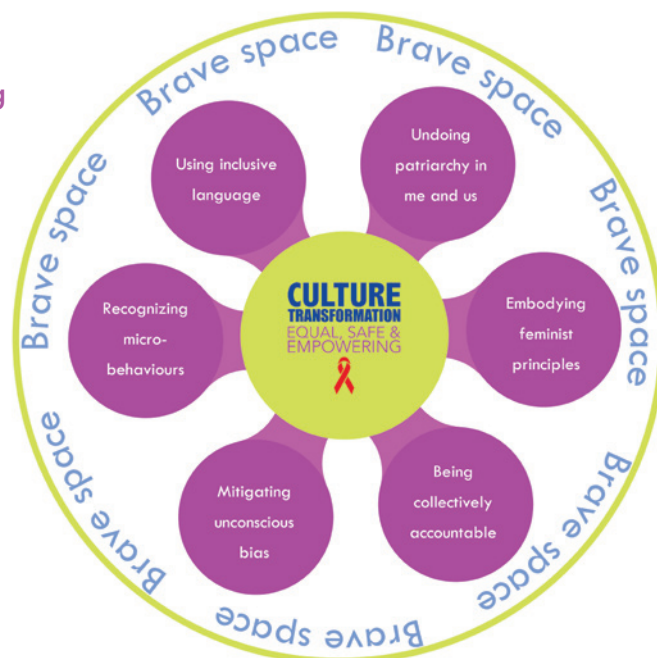
This essentially captures our approach to culture change: continuous learning and reflection on important issues that impact our work and lives. This is integral to build an equal, safe and empowering workplace.

The need for building staff capacity to act and behave in ways that are gender-transformative, anti-racist and inclusive has been highlighted for example in the evaluation of the Gender Action Plan and the Anti-Racism Action Plan. Therefore, all UNAIDS staff will undertake a year-long team learning journey. Contributing to behaviour change, it will deepen knowledge and build skills at the individual, team and organizational levels.

The team learning journey is also an important contribution to team (re)building, following the implementation of UNAIDS’ Realignment. It also contributes to fostering healthy relationships within teams. Establishing a team culture of open and respectful conversations can have a positive impact on individuals’ sense of belonging, engagement and resilience.

**The team learning journey starts with introducing practices that help build safe spaces for such conversations. Six modules deepen staff members engagement with the feminist principles and how to embody in every-day interactions**

1. Mitigating unconscious bias.
2. Recognizing micro-behaviours.
3. Using inclusive language.
4. Undoing patriarchy in me and us.
5. Embodying Feminist Principles.
6. Being collectively accountable.



Each module has three stages: reflection, conversation, action. Following individual learning and self-reflection, a team conversation is facilitated. Such a collective, conversational approach to learning is more likely to help people retain and apply new information. Team-level follow-up actions complement the learning and act as little nudges to reinforce the content and ensure application in real-world situations.

The team learning journey is the flagship activity for UNAIDS Culture Transformation in 2023.

*“Our Culture Transformation has been a journey. There have been ups and downs, cheerful moments and moments of tears, trials and errors. We have never shied away from difficult conversations. We are grateful for how far we have come—against the odds of the COVID-19 pandemic and the myriad of other changes happening at UNAIDS, among our societies and in the world. As we continue growing, as individuals and as an organization, we remain hopeful that an equal, safe and empowering workplace culture will soon be everyone’s lived reality.”*



Mumtaz Mia and Juliane Drews have led UNAIDS Culture Transformation since May 2020. Mumtaz is a Public Health expert with two decades of experience working to end AIDS. Juliane is a change management expert with 15 years of experience in developing inclusive and just organizations in which staff in all their diversity thrive.



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