



Leading Women's Rights Advocates Concerned about UN Secretary-General's Appointment

September 1, 2022 — Today, Christian Saunders begins his tenure as UN Secretary-General António Guterres' appointment for "Special Coordinator on Improving the UN's Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse" (SEA). Saunders will replace [Jane Holl Lute](#), whom Guterres [appointed](#) as the first Special Coordinator after an [independent review](#) exposed systemic issues in the UN's handling of SEA allegations. Little information can be gleaned from the announcement of Saunders' [appointment](#) about how he intends to fulfill his mandate, prompting women's rights advocates to call for further insight.

According to a 2021 [report](#) by the UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services, chronic impunity for perpetrators of UN SEA persists and UN support for victims – including claims for redress – is lacking. Advocates say part of the problem is that Lute – who Guterres appointed to the Special Coordinator position on an "as-needed" basis – was [largely unengaged](#), having not made a single public appearance or statement related to her role since 2018. The [conflict of interest](#) caused when Lute took on a new position – in addition to her UN duties – as non-executive director and spokesperson for Royal Dutch Shell, a giant in the fossil fuel industry the Secretary-General decries, compounded advocates' concerns. Lute also failed to follow through on [promises](#) she made in 2017 to meet with civil society organizations. Will Saunders immediately commit to addressing this failure?

The UN's refusal to grapple with these concerns is representative of its broader approach to UN SEA. Despite creating new positions in 2016 and 2017 purportedly to address claims of abuse by personnel under its watch – the Special Coordinator post and a small staff in the [Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate](#) – the UN has accomplished [very little](#) in terms of [redress](#) for victims and impunity for perpetrators. Further, for children born of UN SEA, the UN has acted as a [barrier](#) to victims' claims of paternity and child support, with Guterres' most recent special measures [report](#) revealing that 273 out of 305 paternity and child support claims have yet to be resolved. A client of the *Bureau des Avocats Internationaux* (BAI) – a Haiti-based human rights law firm representing victims in their child support claims – overcame these significant [obstacles](#) in 2020 when, after four years of litigation, a Haitian court [ordered](#) a UN peacekeeper accused of SEA to pay her child support. However, she still has not received any compensation because the UN refuses to implement a meaningful enforcement mechanism for such judgments. How does Saunders plan to address these concerns? Will he accept the invitation of experienced civil society organizations and lawyers to meet and discuss the development of a strategy for the UN to make the much-needed changes?

Advocates also emphasize how important it would have been to hold consultations regarding the appropriate skill base for the Special Coordinator role given Saunders' background. Will he have support from gender experts, lawyers, and country specialists and have real access to civil society in affected countries?

The Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti, BAI, AIDS-Free World, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, MADRE, Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, and Disaster Law Project call for clarity on Guterres' new appointment and Saunders' plans. However, for Saunders to be able to succeed in the task, Guterres himself must commit to [systemic change](#). The reputation and effectiveness of the UN is compromised by the ongoing failure to do so.