

Background Note: Briefing to the Executive Board, Annual Session 2025

“Update on UN-Women policies and procedures to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment”

1. This background note provides an update on UN-Women’s continued prioritization of the prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment (SH) across its policies, procedures, and operations, as well as within the broader United Nations system. Grounded in its mandate to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, the update highlights key areas of focus, including safe, victim/survivor-centred reporting mechanisms; the timely provision of quality support to victims/survivors; consistent safeguards with implementing partners; and the systematic integration of SEA and SH risk assessments within the organization’s Enterprise Risk Management framework.

2. UN-Women recognizes that addressing SEA and SH is essential to strengthening its organizational culture and fostering a safe, inclusive, and accountable work environment. This commitment was reaffirmed during the 2025 Executive Board First Regular Session, reflecting the Executive Board’s decision to elevate organizational culture as a standalone strategic priority.

3. Furthermore, pursuant to Executive Board decisions 2023/7 and 2024/8, UN-Women continued to report using the harmonized progress reporting template jointly developed in 2023 with UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, and UNOPS. In 2024, further adaptations were made to enhance alignment with the reporting formats of sister agencies and to ensure coherence with UN-Women’s SEA and SH action plans.

4. Inter-agency collaboration was further strengthened to enhance coordination, promote shared accountability, and ensure a more cohesive response to common challenges. The UN system remains united in addressing persistent barriers to effective SEA prevention, recognizing the critical importance of sustained resourcing, timely and victim/survivor-centred assistance, and continuous risk assessment across all operational contexts.

Outcome 1: SEA and SH reporting mechanisms are safe, accessible, and survivor-centred

5. In 2024, UN-Women’s formal reporting mechanism, managed by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), continued to uphold a victim/survivor-centred, safe, accessible, and confidential approach. Victims/survivors, and complainants were able to report concerns through multiple channels offered by OIOS, including a confidential hotline, secure online form, and physical mail.

1.1. Safe, accessible mechanisms for reporting SEA and SH are in place and are victim/survivor-centred

6. According to the 2024 UN System Perception Survey, over 90% of UN-Women personnel reported knowing how and where to report cases of SEA and SH. Additionally, it is important to note that all SEA allegations reported to OIOS are systematically entered into the UN iReport SEA Tracker, a tool that enables real-time case monitoring and strengthens transparency across the UN system.

7. For cases of SH, UN-Women also maintains informal reporting pathways in addition to the formal, including through supervisors, human resources focal points, the Ombudsman, or the Staff Council. Informal mechanisms are accessible to all personnel, and no time limitations apply, in line with UN-Women’s Policy on the Prevention of Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Discrimination and Abuse of Authority.

1.2. Community engagement and awareness raising on PSEA is carried out in each community receiving and/or affected by United Nations assistance

8. UN-Women’s PSEA Focal Points, in coordination with inter-agency PSEA networks, play a central role in delivering awareness efforts at the duty station level. To support their work, UN-Women developed a practical field guide aimed

at enhancing the impact and consistency of SEA awareness sessions with communities and civil society organizations. The guide provides key messages and practical guidance for use during community outreach activities, with a strong emphasis on safety, dignity, and the protection of victim/survivors' rights. To ensure accessibility, the guide and its core messages are currently being translated into French, Spanish, and Arabic.

9. In this context, according to the 2024 UN system-wide SEA Perception Survey, over 82% of UN-Women personnel, reported awareness of PSEA community outreach efforts in their respective duty stations and 61% were aware of country-level community-based complaints mechanisms.

Outcome 2: Investigations are survivor-centred, timely, and result in appropriate accountability measures

10. OIOS has been entrusted with providing victim/survivor-centred and timely investigative services to UN-Women. To complement this arrangement, UN-Women has adopted in April 2024, a hybrid investigation model through the establishment of its own internal investigation function, assumed by the Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services (IEAIS). This internal mechanism is mandated to investigate cases transmitted by OIOS, thereby enhancing operational effectiveness and reinforcing institutional sustainability.

2.1. Investigations are victim/survivor-centred, including by keeping the victims/survivors informed and supported, in line with their wishes.

11. OIOS conducts SEA and SH investigations led by trained investigators specializing in sexual misconduct. In line with its standard procedures, OIOS ensures that victims/survivors are treated with sensitivity and respect, acknowledging the challenges of coming forward. SH cases are handled exclusively by female investigators. The process prioritizes confidentiality, facilitates access to support services, involves clear explanations of each step, and includes regular updates to victims/survivors on the status and outcome of their case.

2.2 Investigations are carried out in a timely manner and appropriate accountability measures are taken.

12. All details related to investigation activities are included in the 2024 Report on Internal Audit and Investigation Activities, which will be presented during the Executive Board Annual Session.

13. The Executive Director has issued the 2024 Report on disciplinary measures and other actions taken in response to misconduct by UN-Women staff members, affiliate personnel or third parties and cases of possible criminal behaviour, 1 January–31 December 2024. The report, prepared in accordance with the UN-Women Investigation and Disciplinary Process Policy, outlines the organization's actions in response to allegations of misconduct across all personnel categories.

14. In 2024, UN-Women acted promptly and in accordance with its zero-tolerance approach; however, the reporting period saw no disciplinary cases involving staff members, affiliate personnel, or third parties. The report is shared with all personnel via email—alongside information on available reporting mechanisms and support services—and is also made publicly available on UN-Women's accountability website.

Outcome 3: Adequate safeguards and appropriate actions ensure the effective tackling of SEA when working with implementing partners

15. UN-Women aims to integrate PSEA safeguards across its partnerships to promote safe and accountable programming environments. Implementing partners are essential collaborators in this effort, and in 2024, the organization focused on building their capacity and ensuring that clear standards and accountability mechanisms were consistently applied.

3.1. Implementing partners have adequate PSEA safeguards in place and action is taken related to sexual exploitation and abuse

16. At the country level, PSEA focal points supported implementing partners through targeted training, awareness-raising activities, and in some instances, guidance on PSEA risk assessment using the IASC SEA risk assessment tool (SEARO). They also developed induction materials and facilitated sessions on survivor-centred case management and referral pathways.

17. UN-Women has integrated all provisions of the United Nations Protocol on Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse involving Implementing Partners into its risk-based capacity assessment template for government and civil society partners. As a result, 67% of government and affiliated partners were assessed on their PSEA capacity in 2024, with follow-up support provided where needed to strengthen safeguards.

18. Moreover, the Monitoring of Programme Partners Procedure requires UN-Women project managers to systematically monitor the PSEA capacities of implementing partners as part of quarterly partner reviews. UN-Women also contributes to system-wide coordination as an active member of the PSEA Implementing Partner Protocol Working Group.

Outcome 4: Efforts to address SEA and SH across the organization are continuously strengthened including through reinforced capacity, evidence-based and risk-informed approaches

19. UN-Women continues to strengthen its efforts to prevent and respond to SEA and SH through a combination of capacity-building, evidence-based tools, and risk-informed programming.

4.1. Regular SEA and SH risk assessments inform prevention and response strategies

20. As part of the risk review process embedded within UN-Women's Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) framework, the organization conducted a systematic assessment of SEA and SH risks across its operations and programmes in 2024. 98% of risk-owning units integrated SEA and SH into the risk registers, ensuring that appropriate mitigation and response measures are in place and aligned with broader organizational risk management efforts.

21. UN-Women developed a SEA risk assessment template and accompanying guidance to provide practical support to Risk Owners, and Risk Focal Points/PSEA Focal Points in conducting SEA and SH risk assessments for their respective offices, in coordination with relevant personnel. The tool adopts a streamlined approach across three key dimensions—contextual, prevention, and response risks—facilitating the design of context-specific prevention and mitigation measures. It was piloted in August 2024 during the Training of Trainers (ToT) for PSEA Focal Points in the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office.

4.2. PSEA/SH focal points and/or dedicated PSEA/SH specialists are appointed at HQ, regional and country level

22. The global network of 118 focal points, positioned across all UN-Women offices, remained a central pillar of UN-Women's internal and inter-agency PSEAH coordination. Regional Directors and Country Representatives are responsible for appointing a PSEAH Focal Point in their duty stations. HQ organizational Focal Points including the PSEA and SH Specialists and the Workplace Relations Advisor provided technical support, facilitated knowledge exchange, and delivered training.

4.3. All staff and related personnel complete the mandatory training and/or briefing on PSEA and SH

23. Compliance with mandatory training remains a critical element of prevention, ensuring that all personnel are equipped to recognize, prevent, and respond to misconduct. All UN-Women personnel are required to complete the SEA and Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Authority training modules within six months of joining the organization. In 2024, completion rates reached 83% for the SEA module and 82% for the Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Authority module.

24. Furthermore, UN-Women's Human Resources, in collaboration with PSEA and SH Focal Points, continued to deliver in-person and virtual scenario-based training sessions in multiple languages. In August 2024, a three-day ToT workshop

was held for in-country focal points from the Eastern and Southern Africa region, aimed at further strengthening internal capacity.

4.4 Reference checking and vetting for prior misconduct is systematically carried out as part of recruitment processes

25. In 2024, UN-Women continued to vet all candidates through the existing ClearCheck database for any prior history of SEA and SH, and/or through reference checks, as part of its recruitment procedures. The organization is preparing to transition to ClearCheck 2.0, which has been expanded to cover not only SEA and SH but also racism, racial discrimination, and other forms of misconduct.

26. In parallel, and in line with its commitment to strengthening recruitment processes and safeguarding measures, UN-Women has advanced its engagement with the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme (MDS), holding consultations with its coordinator, the CHS Alliance, and learning from early adopters such as UNHCR and UNFPA. UN-Women plans to pilot the MDS by the end of 2025.

Outcome 5: Quality, victim/survivor-centred support is operationalized

27. In 2024, UN-Women maintained its commitment to supporting victims and survivors of SEA and SH, placing strong emphasis on rights, dignity, and survivor agency, in line with the United Nations Protocol on the Provision of Assistance to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. This work was informed by the organization's expertise in ending violence against women and was carried out in close collaboration with GBV service providers and civil society organizations.

5.1. Assistance for victims/survivors of SEA and SH is provided in accordance with established protocols and standards

28. Assistance was promptly provided with the consent of the affected individual, in line with established protocols and a victim/survivor-centred approach. Support was tailored to local contexts, addressed access barriers, and prioritized inclusive, culturally sensitive services rooted in respect and equity.

29. PSEA and SH Focal Points play a critical role in facilitating access to support for victims/survivors, as outlined in their Terms of Reference. They are responsible for ensuring timely referrals to established inter-agency victim/survivor assistance mechanisms or GBV referral pathways, while fully respecting consent procedures. This enables individuals to access medical, psychosocial, legal, and other essential services without delay. To strengthen this role, UN-Women continues to build the capacity of Focal Points and foster meaningful dialogue through the Community of Practice (CoP), with a strong focus on avoiding re-traumatization of victims/survivors.

5.2. The implementation of the UN Victims Assistance Protocol is strengthened at country-level

30. The United Nations Protocol on the Provision of Assistance to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse has been integrated into UN-Women's Policy, Procedure, and Guidance repository, enabling its operationalization and ensuring accessibility for all personnel. At the country-level, PSEA Focal Points are responsible for supporting its implementation. To reinforce their capacity, targeted briefing sessions are conducted, including those in collaboration with the UN Victims' Rights Advocate.

Outcome 6: Interagency coordination and collaboration on PSEA and SH are strengthened

31. In 2024, the organization actively contributed to inter-agency efforts by providing technical expertise, co-developing tools, and engaging in joint policy initiatives.

32. UN-Women contributed to the development of Performance Indicator 14, which focuses on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and sexual harassment (SH). The indicator is evidence-based and grounded in a victim/survivor-centred approach, aiming to enhance accountability and measure meaningful progress across the UN system. It forms part of the updated UN System-Wide Action Plan for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

(UN-SWAP 3.0) and aligns with the Gender Equality Acceleration Plan, helping to integrate safeguarding into broader efforts to advance gender equality and strengthen organizational culture.

33. In collaboration with UNFPA, UN-Women co-facilitated consultations with women-led civil society organizations in nine countries to strengthen survivor-centred and community-informed approaches to PSEA prevention, within the joint UN-Government PSEA Framework for PSEA.

6.1. Entity actively contributes to the improvement of inter-agency coordination and collaboration on PSEA at country-level, including through the development and implementation of UNCT PSEA Action Plans and participation of the PSEA focal points in the inter-agency PSEA coordination structures

34. According to the 2024 PSEA focal point survey, 86% of UN-Women focal points engaged in in-country PSEA(H) networks led by UN Country Teams or Humanitarian Country Teams. Their contributions included drafting PSEA action plans, delivering awareness-raising and training sessions, mapping victim/survivor support services, and shaping inter-agency procedures. This engagement strengthened the alignment of UN-Women’s internal safeguarding measures with broader inter-agency accountability framework. In 2024, UN-Women also continued to co-chair inter-agency PSEA networks in eight countries.

6.2. Entity actively participates in and contributes to the work of PSEAH coordination structures at global level

35. UN-Women continued to be an active member of the SEA Working Group, the IASC-Technical Advisory Group (TAG) and the UN Executive Group (UNEG) to prevent and respond to sexual harassment multiple workstreams.

36. As part of its leadership role within UNEG, UN-Women—through the Office of the Focal Point for Women in the UN System—continues to strengthen system-wide collaboration. A key initiative is the UN System-wide Knowledge Hub on Addressing Sexual Harassment, now accessible in all six UN languages and to persons with disabilities. Hosting over 230 resources, the Hub averages 9,600 monthly clicks and is promoted through targeted webinars and briefings.

37. UN-Women leads the Knowledge Sharing and Collaboration Workstream under UNEG and is coordinating a comprehensive report on policy implementation, good practices, and capacity-building, in collaboration with the UN System Staff College. The Office also supports a global network of 600+ Gender Focal Points and delivers training on victim/survivor-centred approaches and upstander intervention. Additionally, the Enabling Environment Guidelines continue to promote safe, inclusive workplaces across the UN system.

38. Moreover, through catalytic policy and programme action, UN-Women continues to support public and private partners in developing and implementing evidence-informed strategies to end sexual harassment in urban, rural, online, workplace, and other settings. This includes building women and girls’ trust and access to safe reporting channels and quality essential services, in collaboration with WHO, UNODC, and global initiatives such as Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces, gender-responsive policing, and essential services.

39. UN-Women also strengthens the capacities of national and local governments, businesses, women’s rights organizations, and UN partners through regular training, technical guidance, and global advocacy. These efforts are grounded in good practices for organizational culture change and are integrated into broader UN-led frameworks on infrastructure, climate justice, transportation, and road safety. This work ensures that knowledge, tools, and global guidance developed through these initiatives inform UN internal processes to prevent and respond to sexual harassment.

Outcome 7: Culture change that addresses the root causes of SEA and SH is advanced

40. UN-Women continues to strengthen its organizational culture through initiatives that promote inclusive leadership, ethical conduct, and personnel well-being, as reported during the First Regular Session.

7.1. Organizational culture and behaviour change to end sexual misconduct are actively promoted and form an organizational priority

41. A safe and inclusive organizational culture fosters trust, accountability, and ethical behavior—key to preventing SEA and SH. It encourages safe reporting, supports survivor-centred responses, and reinforces zero tolerance for misconduct.

42. Comprehensive information on UN-Women’s efforts to strengthen its organizational culture is provided in the 2025 Background Note on Organizational Culture, Anti-Discrimination, and Anti-Racism, which was presented for the first time during the 2025 First Regular Session of the Executive Board. In line with Executive Board decision 2024/6, the organization will continue to report on progress in this area in 2026.

7.2 Staff perception and engagement surveys inform the actions to improve organizational culture

43. Surveys and personnel feedback serve as key instruments for gathering colleagues’ insights on organizational culture. As such, the Global Workforce Survey continues to support equity and action plans. Similarly, and the 2024 PSEA Perception Survey provided insights not only on SEA-related issues but also on broader aspects of organizational accountability.

44. Moreover, UN-Women Internal Task Force on SH serves as a platform for sharing practices, addressing challenges, and coordinating efforts to prevent and respond to sexual harassment.