Background Note: Briefing to the Executive Board, First Regular Session 2026
"Update on Risk Management and Principal Risks facing UN-Women"

Summary: *In accordance with Executive Board decision 2025/4, this document presents an annual update on the risk profile of UN-Women, including principal risks, risk appetite, and management and mitigation of critical risks for the upcoming year.*

I. Overview

1. The global context in which UN-Women operates is marked by political polarization, economic uncertainty, climate and humanitarian crises, rapidly evolving digital threats and shrinking civic space, all of which heighten the Entity's exposure to risks. Constrained fiscal space and declining official development assistance (ODA) undermine the stability and predictability of financing needed to deliver on the UN-Women Strategic Plan 2026–2029. Worsening planetary crises, armed conflict, and growing resistance to gender equality and women's rights constrain programme delivery and affect the safety and agency of women and girls. Simultaneously, the ongoing transformation of the multilateral system—including UN80 and funding pressures—require UN-Women to sharpen its value proposition, adapt its business model and maintain strategic positioning within an evolving global landscape. The accelerated digitalization of services, operations and communications brings both opportunity and heightened cybersecurity vulnerabilities, including exposure to misinformation, cyberattacks, and data breaches. Across all these dimensions, heightened scrutiny of multilateral institutions and increased risks of misconduct, misuse of funds, or lapses in safeguarding underscore the critical importance of maintaining robust accountability and reputation management systems to sustain trust, credibility, and impact.
2. This background note outlines the principal risks facing UN-Women and the measures the Entity is undertaking to mitigate and manage these risks within its area of control:
    a. **Financial sustainability risk**: Decrease in the quality, level and/or type of funding, affecting programme delivery and strategic objectives.
    b. **External environment risk**: Adverse changes in the external operating context, including political, economic, climate and/or humanitarian crisis impacting UN-Women's operations.
    c. **Strategic positioning risk**: Challenges in advancing UN-Women's triple mandate in a competitive and evolving multilateral environment (e.g., UN80).
    d. **Cybersecurity risk**: Exposure to cyberattacks, data breaches, and/or digital disruptions that compromise operations, information integrity or service continuity.
    e. **Accountability and reputational risks**: Loss of stakeholder trust or reputational damage due to perceived or actual lapses in accountability, transparency, or ethical conduct.
3. This background note also outlines recent enhancements to UN-Women's Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) framework aimed at advancing the Entity's risk management maturity and promoting a culture where risks are integrated into planning, monitoring and reporting.
4. Risk management is closely intertwined with the Executive Board's overall responsibility to oversee strategy and performance. In accordance with the Joint Inspection Unit review of the governance and oversight functions of Executive Boards and global best practice, Executive Boards play a key role in

providing oversight of the organization's risk management framework. It is also responsible for satisfying itself that the overall arrangements for risk management are adequate and understanding the organization's risks.[1]

II. Introduction

5. Since inception, UN-Women has significantly expanded its global footprint, programme delivery, and partnerships, operating in more complex environments and delivering impact at scale. As UN-Women has grown, ERM has played an increasingly critical role in ensuring that strategic ambitions are matched with strengthened governance, accountability and assurance mechanisms. This maturing ERM approach has enabled UN-Women to take informed risks in pursuit of greater impact, while safeguarding the Entity's people and resources.

6. In response to the request for a systematic and organization-wide approach to risk management as an integrated part of the planning process, UN-Women has embedded governance, risk management, safeguarding and strategic oversight into the core architecture of its Strategic Plan 2026-2029. The design of the Plan was informed by extensive consultations, the midterm review of the previous Strategic Plan, evaluation findings, audit recommendations, and forward-looking trends and risk analyses. Risk considerations are now incorporated throughout corporate planning instruments, including Strategic Notes, and are anchored in strengthened accountability structures such as the Risk Management Committee. All major risks are managed under the Risk Management Policy framework, with preparations under way to establish Regional Risk Management Committees in 2026 to reinforce consistency and ownership across decentralized offices.

7. The Strategic Plan 2026-2029 applies a risk-informed approach to advancing gender equality by prioritizing solutions that address structural drivers of inequality and strengthen the norms, laws, policies and institutions that uphold women's rights, while expanding women's agency and access to services, resources and assets needed to realize those rights. This is complemented by a strong emphasis on partnerships—with governments, the United Nations system, civil society, international financial institutions and the private sector—to promote coherent action and collective mitigation of emerging geopolitical, financial and social risks. Consistent with the UN 2.0 and UN80 reform agenda, the Strategic Plan also leverages data, digital transformation, innovation and strategic foresight to enhance resilience and strengthen institutional accountability. Together, these measures ensure that risk management is not a parallel process but a central, integrated element of organizational planning and delivery.

8. Management applies ERM as an integral component of organizational governance to ensure that UN-Women can effectively achieve its strategic objectives. Embedding risk management into decision-making and oversight processes enables systematic identification, assessment, treatment and monitoring of risks that may affect the achievement of results. ERM provides a structured approach to managing uncertainty, recognizing that both risks and opportunities must be addressed to advance the Entity's mandate. UN-Women acknowledges that fulfilling its mission requires taking informed and balanced risks, while ensuring that sound controls, monitoring mechanisms and clear accountability frameworks are in place to keep exposures within the established risk appetite and to ensure that benefits continue to outweigh potential risks.

[1] Hunte, C., Report of the Joint Inspection Unit, Review of governance and oversight of the Executive Boards of the United Nations Development Programme/United Nations Population Fund/United Nations Office for Project Services, the United Nations Children's Fund and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, JIU/REP/2023/7, United Nations, Geneva, 2023.

9. ERM is operationalized through UN-Women's established governance and accountability structures. The Executive Director has ultimate accountability for the establishment and management of an effective risk management framework, while country offices, regional offices and headquarters divisions implement the ERM framework in alignment with corporate standards. The Risk Management Committee regularly monitors corporate risks and mitigations and is complemented by the newly established Regional Risk Management Committees, which support Regional Directors to regularly monitor regional and country-level risks and ensure compliance with the ERM framework. The Internal Audit Services and other assurance providers contribute to independent review and validation, ensuring that the risk management process remains effective, transparent and aligned with UN-Women's internal control system. This integrated approach reinforces the Entity's ability to anticipate, respond to and manage risks that may affect the delivery of results and the achievement of strategic objectives.

10. UN-Women applies a comprehensive risk assessment approach that spans strategic, operational, programme and partnership dimensions, enabling the Entity to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of its interventions across diverse contexts. By embedding risk management within its planning, monitoring and reporting framework, UN-Women ensures that potential challenges and opportunities are identified early and factored into programme design, prioritization and resource allocation. This alignment enables business units across global, regional and country levels to make more informed decisions and adapt proactively to changing contexts, while also ensuring that significant risks are escalated to senior management and, where appropriate, to the Executive Board for consideration. As a result, risk management becomes a driver of better performance, resilience and delivery of results in support of UN-Women's Strategic Plan.

11. Taken together, this framework strengthens UN-Women's internal control system, enhances organizational accountability, and provides assurance that risks are proactively managed and transparently reported.

III. Principal risks facing the organization

A. Financial sustainability risk

12. UN-Women faces a significant financial sustainability risk stemming from a decline in the quality, level and type of funding, coupled with increased demand and heightened expectations of key stakeholders. In 2024, the Entity received regular resources totalling $153.2 million (a decrease by 6.6 percent), while other resources increased by 10.7 percent to $429.9 million. In addition to the overall funding volatility, the increasing concentration of earmarked and short-term contributions constrains UN-Women's ability to maintain a balanced, predictable resource base. The share of regular resources to total voluntary contributions received in 2024 was 26 percent, the lowest in UN-Women's history and falling short of the Funding Compact threshold. This directly affects the scale and continuity of programme delivery and poses challenges to achieving the results set out in the Strategic Plan, including the full implementation of the integrated triple mandate. Sustained financial pressure also threatens the Entity's capacity to invest in innovation and institutional strengthening for sustained impact. In addition, the current liquidity crisis of the United Nations has adversely impacted the assessed contributions UN-Women receives from the Regular Budget, with a 20 percent reduction in 2025 and an expected 15 percent reduction in 2026. Given its lean structure, with the Regular Budget representing less than 2 percent of UN-Women's overall budget, any reductions in the Regular Budget have disproportionate impact on the Entity's ability to deliver on its normative intergovernmental functions, which in line with its founding resolution shall be funded from assessed contributions.

13. To mitigate these interconnected risks, UN-Women continues to strengthen its integrated resource mobilization and partnership strategies, aligned with organizational priorities and donor interests to secure

more predictable and flexible funding. UN-Women has intensified engagement with key contributors through structured financing dialogues and enhanced transparency and communication on results and resources. Key examples include the development of an integrated end-to-end results management system linked with the Enterprise Resource Planning system (Quantum); the development of global programming frameworks that clearly articulate UN-Women's programmatic offering in priority results areas; enhancements to UN-Women's external Transparency Portal, with AI-powered search functionality and dedicated pages per funding partner; and increased visibility and reporting on results achieved from regular resources. Efforts are also underway to diversify the donor base, leverage multi-partner trust funds, and expand private-sector and national-committee contributions. Within the resource constrained environment, punctuated by stagnating regular resource contributions, UN-Women's pivot to regions and countries initiative is expected to bring further efficiency gains, including through the relocation of key corporate functions from New York to lower cost-duty stations. Internally, UN-Women is safeguarding financial resilience through stronger expenditure discipline, enhanced corporate guidance to support the full implementation of the revised Cost Recovery Policy, and the consolidation of financial and budgetary functions within a single division to promote integrated financial resource management and oversight.

B. External environment risk

14. The external operating environment presents considerable risks to UN-Women's ability to deliver on its mandate, as political instability, shifts in ideological trends such as the rise in populism and nationalism, erosion of democratic institutions, economic downturns, climate shocks, and humanitarian crises increasingly threaten progress on gender equality and women's empowerment. The accelerating impacts of climate change heighten economic and social vulnerabilities, pushing more women and girls into poverty and exacerbating pre-existing gender inequalities. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by crises, facing heightened gender-based violence, loss of livelihoods, and reduced access to essential services, while assuming greater care burdens and facing increased risks of food insecurity. At the same time, growing backlash, rollback of gender equality gains and shrinking civic space restrict women's rights and limit the ability of women's organizations to engage in public life, further complicating partnerships, implementation modalities and access to communities. The increasing frequency and complexity of crises—including conflict, displacement and climate-related shocks—create rising demand for humanitarian action, while UN-Women's ability to scale its response remains constrained by limited regular resources. These interconnected risks undermine programme delivery, heighten reputational and operational challenges, and may impede UN-Women's ability to achieve sustainable results, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

15. To mitigate rapidly evolving external environment risks, UN-Women works through multi-stakeholder partnerships to strengthen cross-sectoral and global-to-local alliances, promote women's leadership across the development, humanitarian and peace continuum, and ensure that gender equality is embedded in United Nations-wide coordination mechanisms for all these contexts. UN-Women presence at the country level enables close monitoring of shifts in political and civic space, providing timely analysis to Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams and leading the UN system's advocacy to counter regression on women's rights. Globally, UN-Women continues to support the advancement of global normative commitments, including through efforts to revitalize the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) as the central intergovernmental forum for gender equality. To address climate- and crisis-related risks, UN-Women integrates disaster preparedness, climate resilience, and gender-responsive risk reduction across its programmes, ensuring that national policies and contingency plans reflect women's and girls' needs. Internally, the Entity continues to strengthen its operational readiness by leveraging strategic foresight, data and innovation; new policy frameworks for crisis response and grant-making; and streamlined decision-making, including fast-track procedures to ensure rapid mobilization in emergencies. These measures also support strengthened preparedness for protracted crises, ensuring that UN-Women can sustain programming and partnerships in contexts marked by prolonged instability or recurring shocks. In

2024, UN-Women reached 5.3 million crisis-affected people, including 1.13 million directly affected (80 percent women and girls), with humanitarian assistance and services across 43 countries.

C. Strategic positioning risk

16. As the multilateral landscape continues to evolve, UN-Women faces both challenges and opportunities in advancing its integrated triple mandate of normative support, United Nations system coordination, and operational work. The increasing focus on efficiency, coherence, and the delivery of joint results, including in the context of the UN80 reform initiative, underscores the need for UN-Women to continue clearly articulating its unique value-add proposition within the broader UN system. Alongside its strong normative leadership and global presence footprint, UN-Women's leadership role in driving accountability for gender equality and women's empowerment across the UN system positions it well to drive sustainable system-wide gender equality results. However, this also highlights the importance of UN-Women's ongoing efforts to diversify its financing base and ensure an appropriate blend of regular and other resources, with the former especially critical to fund the Entity's normative and UN system coordination functions.

17. To navigate this evolving landscape, UN-Women is strengthening its strategic clarity, institutional agility and value-added positioning, through integrated and focused delivery of its triple mandate. In fact, as ODA continues to decline and the UN development system increasingly operates in middle-income and upper-middle-income contexts, traditional service-delivery models are becoming less financially viable. UN-Women's triple mandate offers a forward-looking model for this environment, with upstream integrated programming that focuses on translating norms and standards into gender-responsive policies and programme results at country level. As articulated in its Strategic Plan 2026-2029, UN-Women is leveraging its normative and convening roles, broadening and deepening partnerships with governments, UN entities, civil society, international financial institutions and the private sector as key drivers of sustainable impact. It is also revamping its communications and advocacy strategies to secure broad-based support for its mandate and position UN-Women as a leading voice, partner of choice and brand for gender equality, including through the recent establishment of a dedicated Division of Communication and Advocacy.

18. Within the United Nations system, accountability tools such as the UN-SWAP and the UNCT-SWAP, which form part of UN-Women's core service offering, represent distinct opportunities for UN-Women to leverage its leadership role to ensure that gender equality and women's empowerment remain at the heart of system-wide reform processes, including through the implementation of the Gender Equality Acceleration Plan and the UN80 initiative. Finally, UN-Women is bolstering its operational efficiency and country-level impact through its ongoing pivot to regions and countries, which aims to strengthen delivery of the triple mandate, including supporting increased uptake of normative commitments through increased proximity to partners, while also generating cost savings. Through these efforts, UN-Women is positioning itself to capitalize on the opportunities emerging from institutional reforms to further strengthen its contribution to system-wide objectives and catalyse measurable impact for women and girls in a rapidly evolving global environment.

D. Cybersecurity risk

19. While advancing technologies are enhancing UN-Women's operational efficiency and ability to deliver on its mandate, the Entity's increasing reliance on digital platforms and external networks also elevates its exposure to a range of cyber- and digital-risk vulnerabilities. Globally, 72 percent of organizations report rising cybersecurity risks, with evolving threats such as ransomware, supply-chain attacks and AI-enabled

intrusion becoming more sophisticated and strategically targeted.[2] For UN-Women, these dynamics translate into risks including misinformation, data-privacy breaches, service disruption, and reputational damage, especially as operations extend into challenging environments and depend on third-party service providers and partner networks.

20. To mitigate this risk, UN-Women has embedded robust cybersecurity and digital-risk governance. Measures include secure software development, vulnerability management, secure use of personal devices, strengthening security for cloud applications, and a review of UN-Women's IT infrastructure, systems, structure, governance and information security. At the same time, UN-Women recognizes the disruptive potential of generative AI and other emerging technologies; while such tools bring new risks and heightened vulnerabilities to bias, misuse, and gender-based harms that must be proactively managed as part of the risk landscape, they also present new opportunities for increased efficiency, effectiveness and impact. Recognizing this significant potential, UN-Women is leveraging digital tools and innovations to modernize and streamline its business processes, enhance organizational resilience, strengthen data quality and accessibility, and improve evidence-informed decision-making as a key mitigation driver.

E. Accountability risk

21. UN-Women faces accountability arising from perceived or actual lapses in transparency, ethical conduct, or compliance with established standards, which may erode stakeholder trust and contribute to reputational risks. These risks—heightened in periods of constrained funding when the likelihood of fraud increases—manifest through both internal and external dimensions. Internally, they may stem from misconduct, such as sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), sexual harassment (SH), data privacy breaches, or failures in oversight, as well as risks related to safety and, security of personnel, assets and operations, and organizational duty of care obligations. Externally, risks may arise from the misuse or diversion of funds by implementing partners, suppliers or other third parties, or from unintended harm to individuals, communities or the environment. While risks related to misuse of resources or other forms of misconduct are inherent to UN-Women's operating environment and must always be balanced against the imperative to act in support of women and girls, including in crisis settings, the Entity maintains its unwavering commitment to zero tolerance for any forms of wrongdoing. This commitment entails taking strong preventive actions through strengthened quality assurance mechanisms, capacity building and trainings, risk analysis and mitigation, strict internal controls and monitoring, and prompt response measures whenever concerns arise.

22. To mitigate accountability and reputational risks, UN-Women applies an integrated approach focused on strengthening integrity, safeguarding people from harm—including SEA and SH—and ensuring the responsible use of resources. UN-Women enhances stakeholder confidence through rigorous due diligence of project documents, programme partners, targeted personnel and partner training, independent oversight, and grievance and investigation mechanisms that ensure timely and transparent follow-up on incidents. In line with its mandate, UN-Women maintains a survivor-centred approach to preventing and responding to SEA and SH, emphasizing safe reporting, access to quality support services, and consistent safeguards with implementing partners. Safety and security risks are managed through the organization's Framework of Accountability, aligned with the United Nations Security Management System Framework of Accountability, ensuring personnel safety and operational continuity in all duty stations. To prevent misuse of funds, UN-Women employs a risk-based approach to implementing partner engagement and management, including capacity assessments and the introduction of mandatory implementing partner risk registers. Following recommendations from the internal audit of the anti-fraud programme, a revised Anti-Fraud Policy was issued in 2025, further reinforcing accountability and prevention measures. UN-Women

[2] Available from the World Economic Forum website at https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/05/cybersecurity-cyber-risk-national-policy/, retrieved on 17 December 2025.

also continues to integrate social and environmental sustainability standards into programme design and operations, improving the quality, effectiveness and ethical footprint of its interventions.

IV. Risk appetite

23. UN-Women recognizes that achieving its mandate requires taking informed and deliberate risks, particularly when working in fragile or high-need environments where opportunities for impact are significant. UN-Women's Risk Appetite Statement (adopted in 2023) guides decision-makers in determining the types and levels of risks that are acceptable in pursuit of strategic results, balancing the opportunities to achieve its goals with the duty to safeguard people and resources. UN-Women is therefore generally prepared to accept higher contextual and strategic risks when responding to crises or delivering in unstable settings where its presence is most critical. At the same time, the Entity maintains a low appetite for safety and security, fiduciary, safeguarding and accountability risks, reflecting its obligation to uphold the highest standards of integrity and accountability in all operating contexts.

24. Communication and consultation are essential to ensuring that risks remain within UN-Women's established risk appetite and its ability to manage them. Relevant personnel are expected to actively monitor risk exposure, apply predefined tolerance boundaries, and promptly escalate risks when they approach or exceed established thresholds. This includes transparent dialogue with senior management and oversight bodies to enable timely mitigation, resource reallocation, and informed decision-making. Through the consistent application of the Risk Appetite Statement and related escalation protocols, UN-Women supports a positive risk culture in which necessary risk-taking is enabled, early warning signals are heeded, and the achievement of results does not come at the expense of unacceptable risk.

V. Risk management capabilities

25. Building on the information shared with the Executive Board in the update on continuous work to improve UN-Women's system of enterprise risk management (February 2025), UN-Women has implemented several key initiatives in 2025 aimed at strengthening the Entity's risk management capabilities.

26. UN-Women continues to strengthen its ERM framework through regular review and revision of its key internal governance documents, including the Risk Management Policy and Risk Management Procedure which were revised in September 2025. Updates are informed by lessons learned from implementation, oversight recommendations and evolving organizational needs, to ensure that ERM practices remain current, agile, and aligned with international standards. Importantly, UN-Women recognizes that risk is driven not only by external conditions and operational choices, but also by internal dynamics. Organizational culture, including values, incentives, leadership behaviours and willingness to engage in open dialogue, is explicitly considered as part of risk assessments to better understand root causes and support targeted interventions that reinforce a positive risk culture across the Entity.

27. UN-Women places strong emphasis on maintaining an up-to-date and accurate view of its risk profile through regular monitoring at all levels. A combined bottom-up and top-down approach ensures that operational insights from country and regional offices are systematically integrated with entity-level strategic analysis to inform decision-making. As part of this effort, the Risk Management Committee institutionalized "risk deep dives" in 2025 for priority risk areas. These deep dives focused on underlying drivers, effectiveness of existing controls, and the alignment of mitigation measures with strategic objectives. This structured, recurring review process supports continual improvement and reinforces accountability for managing risks within UN-Women's risk appetite.

28. Systems and tools are in place to support systematic identification, assessment, and management of risks across programmatic and operational functions. Unit-level risk assessments occur in close collaboration with the strategic planning cycle, with all HQ, Regional and Country Offices completing Strategic Note (SN) risk assessments as part of their 4-year planning process. These assessments are informed by a wide range of micro risk assessments, such as implementing partners, private sector engagements, social and environmental scanning, safety and security, and fraud. Furthermore, the revised Risk Management Policy includes detailed guidance on key risk indicators which each office should consider when assessing the mandatory risk labels. This approach ensures UN-Women's risk assessments are grounded in evidence and tailored to the operating context of each office. Additionally in 2025, with the launch of the new Performance and Results Integrated System for Management (PRISM), the integration of risk management with UN-Women's planning, monitoring and reporting processes enables end-to-end alignment between risk registers, performance monitoring, and management reporting, improving visibility of risk exposure and enhancing the quality of assurance available to leadership.

29. To ensure compliance with ERM requirements, UN-Women employs a multi-layered approach that includes quality assurance reviews of Strategic Note risk assessments, standardized training and capacity-building for personnel, and clear guidance on escalation protocols. Monitoring tools such as the Quarterly Business Review (QBR) further reinforce accountability by tracking key organizational risks and the timely implementation of mitigation actions. At the regional level, the introduction of Regional Risk Management Committees in early 2026 will enhance risk identification and management at the regional level and support localized compliance monitoring across Country Offices. These mechanisms help ensure that risk management practices are applied consistently and contribute to improved performance, oversight and decision-making.

30. UN-Women also maintains oversight of compliance by programme partners. Mandatory risk registers for all programme partners will be introduced in 2026 to ensure systematic identification and monitoring of inherent and residual risks throughout the programme partner lifecycle. This requirement aligns with and strengthens the processes described above, supporting early detection of delivery challenges and enhancing the effectiveness of risk-based assurance across implementation arrangements.

31. UN-Women actively contributes to UN system-wide risk management coherence, including through participation in the High-Level Committee on Management's Risk Management Forum and through collaborative workstreams on risk-sharing and harmonization of partner-level assurance. UN-Women also engages with donors and key partners on risk-informed approaches to programme design and delivery, ensuring alignment of expectations regarding risk-taking in high-impact contexts. These efforts support collective accountability for results while fostering a more enabling environment for responsible innovation in support of gender equality and women's rights and empowerment worldwide.