

Background Note: Briefing to the Executive Board, Annual Session 2026

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

1. Pursuant to UN-Women Executive Board decision 2025/10 and UNICEF Executive Board decision 2025/11, UN-Women, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS jointly prepared a summary outlining progress and shared challenges in preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment (SH).
2. As reflected in the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) Review of policies and practices to prevent and respond to SEA in the UN system, JIU/REP/2025/2, and informed by the work of the UN Executive Group to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Harassment (Executive Group) including the Chief Executives Board for Coordination survey on SH reporting, progress includes strengthened policy frameworks, increased organizational attention to preventing and responding to SEA and SH, expanded training and outreach, stronger engagement and risk management with implementing partners, and continued efforts to embed a victim/ survivor-centred approach across all related actions.
3. Nonetheless, System-wide challenges remain, including inconsistencies in policy language, gaps in screening and vetting, delays in investigations, and the need for sustained culture change. The Comprehensive Assessment commissioned by the Office of the Special Coordinator on improving the UN response to SEA (OSCSEA) further underscored that predictable financing and sustained leadership commitment are critical to meeting protection obligations.
4. Further, recent funding pressures across the UN system have heightened community vulnerabilities, potentially increasing SEA risks, particularly for women and children. Reduced resources have affected technical capacity and inter-agency coordination, while financial constraints on gender-based violence and protection programmes have strained victim/survivor assistance, referral pathways and community-based services, including women-led organizations. These shifts in humanitarian and development financing pose risks to the sustainability of protection from SEA and SH (PSEAH) efforts and reinforce the need for predictable, gender-responsive funding.
5. UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNOPS and UN-Women adhere to the collective inter-agency approach and the workstreams established in 2026 to address the JIU recommendations, to be undertaken under the guidance and overarching leadership of OSCSEA and the Office of Victim Rights Advocate (OVRA), as well as with the workstreams under the 2026 workplan of the Executive Group. Across both processes, specific workstreams will be led by participating entities including UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS and UN-Women. Together, these efforts will help address systemic challenges and advance a more coherent, effective, and sustainable approach to PSEAH.
6. This background note outlines UN-Women’s continued commitment to a victim/survivor-centred approach, while highlighting progress in strengthening its safeguarding framework across institutional processes, partnerships, and system-wide engagement. Over the past year, key developments include the transition to ClearCheck 2.0, the launch of the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme (MDS), and an enhanced focus on community outreach.

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

7. In 2025, UN-Women’s formal reporting mechanism, through the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), for SEA and SH, as well as its informal reporting mechanisms for addressing SH, continued to uphold a victim/survivor-centred, safe, accessible, and confidential approach, with support provided from the moment a report is made.

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

8. OIOS ensures multiple confidential channels are in place to formally report SEA and SH, including a hotline, secure online form, and physical mail. According to the 2025 UN System Perception Survey results, over 90% of UN-Women personnel indicated awareness of the procedures and channels available through which to report. Once received by the organization, allegations of SEA are recorded in the UN iReport SEA Tracker, enabling transparency through real-time, publicly available monitoring of cases.
9. Across its global presence, UN-Women works collaboratively with other UN agencies to support Community-Based Complaint Mechanisms (CBCMs), ensuring safe, accessible, and trusted channels for communities to raise concerns. The maturity of these reporting mechanisms differs by context, ranging from early-stage pilots to well-established, operationalized systems. The role of UN-Women PSEAH Focal Points varies, with some operating as technical leads, while others have co-developed the CBCM and referral pathways, or have contributed technical inputs to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).
10. In addition to formal channels, the organization also offers informal options for addressing SH, including through supervisors, human resources focal points, the Ombudsman, and the Staff Council.

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

11. UN-Women’s PSEAH Focal Points lead country-level community awareness, often through inter-agency networks. The 2025 PSEAH Focal Points Survey indicates that a majority of respondents are aware of outreach efforts and operational CBCMs in their duty stations. As an example of this outreach, in 2025, UN-Women’s country office in Guatemala conducted extensive community awareness-raising, engaging and educating 1160 persons on SEA prevention, risks, reporting mechanisms, and victims’ rights, 500 of which were community members and 660 of which were community leaders and authorities.

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

12. The investigation of sexual misconduct remains a priority for UN-Women. Under its hybrid model, OIOS and the entity’s internal investigation function (IIF) within the Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services (IEAIS) are entrusted with providing investigative services, with IIF investigating cases referred by OIOS. This model supports timely and effective case handling, ensuring a sensitive and respectful process.

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

13. OIOS investigators are trained to conduct SEA and SH investigations, with SH cases handled by female investigators. Investigations by both OIOS and IIF follow established procedures and a victim/survivor-centred approach, ensuring dignity, confidentiality, access to support services, and regular updates on case progress and

outcomes. Furthermore, HQ organizational PSEAH Focal Points serve as dedicated guides, accompanying those affected throughout the investigation process and beyond, ensuring continuity of support, informed decision-making, and sustained attention to their well-being.

14. As part of continuous capacity-building of PSEAH Focal Points, UN-Women undertook targeted outreach on investigation processes in 2025, including raising awareness through the Community of Practice (CoP) on key guidance, such as *the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Investigator's Manual: A victim-centred approach to investigation of sexual exploitation and abuse complaints*, and convening dedicated sessions.

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

15. All details related to investigation activities are included in the 2025 Report on Internal Audit and Investigation Activities, which will be presented during the Executive Board Annual Session. The Executive Director has also issued the 2025 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 2025. 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, and is shared with all personnel via email and made publicly available on UN-Women's accountability website. In 2025, UN-Women took all appropriate measures to address received allegations, as per established rules and procedures for dealing with cases of staff misconduct.

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

16. UN-Women continues to integrate PSEA safeguards across its partnerships to promote safe and accountable programming environments. Implementing partners remain central to this effort, with continued emphasis in 2025 on strengthening their capacity and ensuring the consistent application of clear standards and accountability mechanisms.

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

17. PSEA is systematically integrated across the partner management framework, spanning partner selection, capacity assessment, and ongoing monitoring throughout the partnership lifecycle. This includes risk-based PSEA capacity assessments, the integration of PSEA considerations into quarterly partner monitoring, and the identification and follow-up of potential concerns. In 2025, the proportion of civil society organizations (CSOs) and Government partners assessed on PSEA capacity under Programme Partner Agreements increased from 67% to 82%.
18. Programme partner management is further strengthened through a comprehensive policy and procedural framework, supported by knowledge-sharing, CoPs, system enhancements, and secondary oversight mechanisms, including audits and spot checks. UN-Women also remains actively engaged in inter-agency efforts, including through the Interagency PSEA Implementing Partner Protocol Working Group (IPPWG). In 2025, the IPPWG contributed to strengthening safeguarding systems for implementing partners, including through capacity-building initiatives such as the development and roll-out of tools and training to support PSEA capacity assessments.
19. Efforts to further reinforce capacity development and knowledge-sharing have continued through the Programme Partners Management Network (PPMN) Learning Café, led by the Programme Support Management Unit (PSMU), which delivered 40 learning cafés during the year, reaching over 4,000 personnel. This was complemented by a CoP on Partner Management with more than 3,800 members, supporting over 30 information-sharing communications.

20. At the System-level, engagement with the UN Partner Portal (UNPP) has been further strengthened through participation in system-wide meetings and contributions to the upcoming Risk and Capacity Profile module, alongside continued service as co-chair of the UNPP Executive Review Board. Internally, targeted efforts have supported partner registration and verification.

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

21. UN-Women addresses PSEA and SH risk through prevention efforts, including awareness-raising, conducting comprehensive risk assessments, and ensuring programming is risk-based. Strengthening these efforts continues to be a core institutional priority.

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

22. As part of the 2025 risk review cycle under the Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) framework, SEA and SH risks were comprehensively assessed across operations and programmes. Integration into risk registers remains at 98% of risk-owning units, ensuring mitigation and response measures are embedded within overall risk management processes, alongside continued efforts to strengthen and optimize the framework.
23. Against this backdrop, the 2025 PSEA Perception Survey findings indicate strong awareness and risk responsiveness among personnel, with 96% agreeing that the organization actively promotes awareness on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse beyond formal training. This is reflected in 88% of respondents reporting clarity on the actions to take when confronted with risks of SEA, demonstrating a solid foundation for early risk identification and response.

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

24. UN-Women's network of PSEAH Focal Points continues to serve as a central pillar of internal coordination and inter-agency engagement. The expansion to 127 Focal Points has further strengthened coverage across all regions, with Focal Points strategically distributed across organizational presences to ensure a responsive presence in countries where UN-Women operates.
25. To reinforce this approach, the Executive Director, through the regional and country-level annual certification exercise, requires Regional Directors and Country Representatives to appoint PSEAH Focal Points, thereby reinforcing leadership accountability across all duty stations.
26. Focal Points are supported by a dedicated PSEA and SH specialist and the Workplace Relations Advisor. In 2025–2026, informed by pulse survey findings, UN-Women strengthened engagement by introducing additional forums, including regional PSEA and SH Brown Bag sessions and PSEA clinic hours. Preparations are underway for a global conference in late 2026 to convene Focal Points and external experts.

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

27. All UN-Women personnel are required to complete the mandatory training within six months of joining. As of December 2025, completion rates were 85% for PSEA and 83% for Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Authority. The 2025 PSEA Perception Survey indicates that in addition to mandatory training, 71% of personnel reported receiving virtual or in-person PSEA training within the past 12 months. Among those who undertook PSEA training, nearly 100% reported strengthened knowledge and understanding of PSEA and SH.

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

28. To strengthen recruitment due diligence, UN-Women has implemented ClearCheck 2.0, expanding misconduct screening beyond SEA and SH to include racism, racial discrimination, and other forms of serious misconduct, and extending coverage to all personnel, as well as standby personnel. In 2026, a pilot of the MDS was launched across four settings. Designed for the humanitarian and development sectors, the scheme enhances safeguarding by enabling information-sharing between organizations and helping prevent individuals with a history of sexual misconduct from moving between workplaces.
29. Building on the complementary roles of ClearCheck 2.0 and the MDS, and in line with Executive Board decision 2025/10, UN-Women will, in 2026, support system-wide efforts to better align approaches to vetting. This includes engagement in the inter-agency working group on screening and vetting led by OSCSEA. Parallel discussions are also underway within the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC) Technical Advisory Group (TAG) on SEA and the Executive Group, to which the organization will contribute.

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

30. Through its expanded network of 127 global PSEAH Focal Points, 72% of whom are specialists in ending violence against women (EVAW), gender, or related programmatic work,¹ UN-Women delivered victim/survivor-centred support for individuals affected by SEA and SH in 2025, in partnership with GBV providers and civil society partners.

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

31. In line with the victim/survivor-centred approach and the UN Victims Assistance Protocol, UN-Women provides prompt assistance to consenting affected individuals, tailored to country contexts and cultural sensitivities. As outlined in their Terms of Reference, PSEA and SH Focal Points facilitate this access to support, whether provided by the organization, or by referring victims/survivors to inter-agency assistance mechanisms or GBV referral pathways. To further build the capacity of Focal Points, in 2025 UN-Women developed a resource on engaging respectfully with victims/survivors from the first point of contact and continues to promote sharing of lessons learned.
32. The Entity continues to work closely with the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate (OVRA), including with in-country Senior Victims' Rights Officers and Focal Points for Victims' Rights, to strengthen provision of assistance mechanisms.
33. The 2025 PSEAH Focal Points Survey indicated that 83% of respondents reported the presence of dedicated referral pathways within their duty stations. Of these, 36% were either UN-Women-led or both inter-agency and UN-Women-led. 54% of respondents reported that referral pathway information was updated at least annually or more frequently in their duty stations. Respondents also indicate the most widely available services for victims/survivors across country offices include psychosocial support (77.6% of respondents), medical care (68.7%), safety and protection services (59.7%), and legal assistance (58.2%). By comparison, 34.3% of respondents indicated availability of child protection or family support in their duty stations.

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

¹ Data obtained from the 2025 PSEAH Focal Points Survey demographic questions.

34. The UN Victims Assistance Protocol, accessible to all personnel through UN-Women’s Policy, Procedure, and Guidance repository, was reinforced through outreach with PSEAH Focal Points in 2025, reaffirming commitment to its principles five years after its establishment.
35. At the country-level, PSEAH Focal Points operationalize the Protocol and have identified best practices and lessons learned through the 2025 PSEAH Focal Points Survey. Many offices have developed SOPs based on the Protocol, delivered sensitization sessions for personnel and partners, and integrated training on its principles into engagements with government and law enforcement agencies. Focal Points report that applying the Protocol, alongside the designation of case managers familiar with its provisions, has helped clarify inter-agency referral pathways and improved the handling of disclosures and support to victims/survivors.

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

36. In 2025, UN-Women continued to actively contribute to inter-agency coordination at the global level by providing technical expertise through various workstreams. At the country level, the organization’s PSEAH Focal Points engaged in inter-agency networks and worked to jointly raise awareness and implement key initiatives.
37. As administrator of the UN System-Wide Action Plan for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-SWAP 3.0), in 2025 UN-Women oversaw the first year that reporting against Performance Indicator 14 on PSEA and SH became mandatory. The resulting data provides comparable system-wide evidence on institutional performance with regard to SEA and SH for the first time, creating a foundation for reflection and targeted action, enabling the UN System to move beyond compliance reporting toward concrete, risk-based, and victim/survivor-centred institutional responses.

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

38. The 2025 PSEAH Focal Point Survey found that 92% of UN-Women Focal Points engaged in in-country, inter-agency PSEA(H) networks, with the organization reportedly leading or co-leading these networks in 21 offices. Focal Points made substantive contributions across multiple areas of PSEA implementation within these contexts, including the development and refinement of country-level inter-agency PSEA action plans, the delivery of community outreach, and training initiatives, and the provision of victim assistance.

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

39. Throughout 2025, UN-Women continued to actively contribute technical expertise to several working groups, including the High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM) Executive Group, the IASC TAG on SEA including the practitioners and prevention sub-groups, and the SEA Working Group led by the OSCSEA.
40. Furthermore, within the HLCM Executive Group, UN-Women led a dedicated workstream on knowledge-sharing and collaboration to consolidate system-wide evidence, identify gaps and good practices, and enable more coherent and coordinated action across UN entities. It strengthened the UN system-wide Knowledge Hub on Addressing Sexual Harassment by enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities and translating the platform into all six official UN languages. Engagement with the Hub reached record levels, averaging 20,000 monthly clicks, and it has become the central entry point for information, system-wide tools, and support. The organization generates efficiencies and facilitates knowledge management across the UN System by consolidating and standardizing system-wide resources in one place, thereby ensuring coordinated

efforts. As part of this work, UN-Women also conducted a comprehensive cross-sectoral review of common UN System tools to prevent and address SH, identifying practicability challenges and promising practices from beyond the UN System to inform future strategic actions.

41. Beyond these inter-agency efforts, the organization continues to support multi-sectoral partners to develop and implement strategies to end SH in urban, rural, online, workplace, humanitarian, and other settings. This includes technical accompaniment to partners working to prevent SH, strengthen redressal mechanisms, and support government and women's rights and other civil society organizations to deliver quality health and other essential services for women victims/survivors in collaboration with WHO, UNODC, and through global initiatives such as Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces and Essential Services.
42. UN-Women also provides global technical guidance, compendia of practices, and training modules to support capacity building of a range of partners, including governments, civil society organizations and businesses, and engages in joint global advocacy with UN partners to support organizational culture change to prevent SH. Good practices are regularly shared, including through global and regional community or practice to inform broader UN-led frameworks on transportation, road safety, public spaces and UN-Women's recent strategy on ending technology facilitated violence against women, and UN-Women's Global Sport Strategy. This work ensures that knowledge, tools, and global guidance developed through these initiatives continue to inform UN internal processes and good practices to prevent and respond to SH, adapted to reconfigured work settings.

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

43. In line with UN-Women 2026–2029 Strategic Plan, efforts to strengthen organizational culture are advanced through initiatives promoting inclusive leadership, ethical conduct, disability inclusion across all areas of work, and personnel well-being.

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

44. A safe, and inclusive organizational culture grounded in core values and standards of conduct is central to addressing the root causes of SEA and SH, preventing misconduct, and reinforcing zero tolerance. This is critical as SEA and SH stem from power imbalances and systemic inequalities, particularly gender inequality and intersecting forms of discrimination.
45. Further details on UN-Women's efforts to strengthen organizational culture are set out in the 2026 Background Note on Organizational Culture, and Anti-Discrimination presented at the First Regular Session 2026 of the Executive Board. In accordance with Executive Board decision 2026/3, the organization will continue to report on progress in this area in 2027.

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

46. The 2025 PSEA Perception Survey, administered by OSCSEA, provided insights on SEA, as well as other workplace-related issues, reflecting broader dimensions of organizational culture and highlighting areas of progress and opportunities for improvement. In addition, UN-Women participated in the CEB Executive Group Survey on Sexual Harassment, enabling benchmarking within the broader United Nations system.
47. The Ombudsman for Funds and Programmes serves as an important avenue for personnel feedback, including through its annual report, identifying systemic issues arising from workplace concerns and informing recommendations to strengthen organizational practices.