

Background Note: Briefing to the Executive Board, Annual Session 2024

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

1. UN-Women has put in place strong policy and governance structures to address Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) and Sexual Harassment (SH) through targeted actions to implement the recommendations of the independent, victim/survivor-centred review of UN-Women’s policies and procedures, followed by continued enhancement efforts. Robust, victim/survivor-centred policies and procedures, aligned with UN standards, govern UN-Women’s prevention and response to sexual misconduct. Dedicated resources and structures ensure the effective operationalization of UN-Women’s Protection from SEA (PSEA) and SH frameworks. Competent action plans guide the implementation with progress regularly assessed within existing reporting channels.

2. Since its last presentation to the Executive Board, UN-Women has taken targeted actions to operationalize its PSEA and SH frameworks, using a victim/survivor-centred approach at country, regional, and HQ levels and further realize its commitment to unequivocal leadership and accountability to tackle sexual misconduct within UN-Women and across the UN. This background note provides an update on these efforts to prevent and respond to SEA and SH in UN-Women’s policies, procedures, and operations. The information is presented in line with the uniform template developed jointly with UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, and UNOPS, as requested by Executive Board decision 2023/7. The full table is included in Annex I.

i. SEA and SH reporting mechanisms are safe, accessible, and survivor-centred/ Investigations are survivor-centred, timely, and result in appropriate accountability measures (outcomes 1 and 2)

3. UN-Women’s reporting mechanism, operated by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), offers a confidential platform for reporting SEA and SH. Reports can be submitted via hotline, online form, or physical mail, ensuring accessibility and safety. Complainants may choose to remain anonymous. For SH allegations, an informal reporting channels are available to all personnel via any supervisor, HR Focal Point, Ombudsman, or Staff Council. No time limits apply to either mechanism.

4. Information on all formal reports of SEA and SH received by OIOS for 2023 is available in the Report on Internal Audit and Investigation Activities for the period from 1 January to 31 December 2023. In addition, all SEA reports received by OIOS are included in the UN system-wide iReport SEA tracker, which is publicly accessible and updated in near-real time.

5. A key factor for the accessibility of UN-Women’s SEA reporting mechanisms consists of community awareness of where and how to safely report SEA when it does take place. Encouragingly, 81% of UN-Women personnel, as per the latest UN system-wide P SEA Perception survey, are aware of PSEA community awareness efforts in their duty stations. To further enhance these endeavors, UN-Women has compiled a repository of awareness resources, adaptable for in-country focal points. Additionally, practical guidance on conducting awareness campaigns will be introduced by year-end.

6. All UN-Women investigations of SEA and SH follow OIOS standard investigation procedures, which use a victim/survivor-centred approach. This requires that investigators are trained to conduct SEA and SH investigations and that SH investigations are handled by female investigators exclusively. OIOS ensures that all victims/survivors are informed about reports and receive updates on investigations. Details on investigation activities are provided in the 2023 Report on internal audit and investigation activities.

7. In June 2024, UN-Women will contribute to enhancing investigation capacity for SEA and SH across the UN system by participating in the Meeting of Investigatory Bodies on PSEA and SH, jointly organized by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the UN Executive Group to Prevent and Response to Sexual Harassment (Executive Group on SH).

8. To promote transparency on UN-Women's accountability for allegations of SEA and SH, as well as other types of misconduct, UN-Women's Executive Director Sima Bahous published the 2023 Report of the Executive Director of UN-Women 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 2023. The report is shared with all UN-Women personnel via email and made publicly available on UN-Women's accountability website.

ii. Adequate safeguards and appropriate actions ensure effective tackling of SEA when working with implementing partners (IPs) (outcome 3).

9. UN-Women has operationalized the UN Protocol on Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Involving Implementing Partners through inclusion of PSEA Assessment and Capacity Strengthening in its Risk-based Capacity Assessment, and is now modifying its Selection of Programme Partners Procedure to use the Inter-agency Common Assessment Tool available on the UN Partner Portal for Programme Partners.

10. UN-Women's in-country PSEA and SH focal points have also for the past year provided training and support to IPs in understanding their PSEA related obligations across all stages of programming.

11. In addition, UN-Women continued to actively participate in the inter-agency working group to set up a global PSEA framework for cooperation with governments, which establishes a shared PSEA commitment between the UN and the governments, promotes a system-wide approach and streamlines UN engagement with governments.

iii. Efforts to address SEA and SH across the organization are continuously strengthened, including through reinforced capacity, evidence-based and risk informed approaches (outcome 4).

12. The continuous strengthening of UN-Women's prevention and response to SEA and SH have remained a top priority for the organization.

13. To guarantee that SEA and SH safeguards are embedded into UN-Women's operations and programmes, UN-Women's 2023 risk review exercise, which forms part of the organisation's Enterprise Risk Management framework, included the systematic assessment of SEA and SH risks and establishment of response plans. 100% of UN-Women's risk units included SEA and SH within their risk registers.

14. Moreover, central to UN-Women's efforts to operationalize its PSEA and SH frameworks is UN-Women's network of in-country and regional PSEA and SH Focal Points, which as of April 30, 2024, encompasses 118 appointees. These focal points are strategically distributed across all organizational presences, with 100% of UN-Women's duty stations having a dedicated assignee, thus ensuring a responsive presence in all countries and regions the organization is active.

15. To bolster the capacities of in-country PSEA and SH focal points and to provide a space for exchange of knowledge and good practice UN-Women continued conducting its practical regional capacity-building brown bag series, tailored to meet the distinct needs of each region on a bi-annual basis.

16. UN-Women requires that all staff complete the online trainings on PSEA and SH within 6 months of assuming their duties. To complement these mandatory trainings, UN-Women continued over the past year to facilitate in-person workshops with real-life scenarios adapted to the different local contexts in collaboration with regional Human Resources Business Partners, thereby enhancing awareness and practical knowledge across the organization. Additionally, a half-day peer review session was held in Ecuador in November 2023 with UN-Women Elimination of Violence Against Women focal points from 18 countries to improve interactive activities in scenario-based workshops on addressing SH. Materials were updated based on received feedback.

17. To ensure that all potential new hires are vetted for prior history of SEA and/or SH, UN-Women continued also in the past year to screen all job applicants for past incidents of sexual misconduct, through Clear Check database and reference checks prior to issuing employment contracts. To further improve SEA and SH recruitment safeguards, UN-Women is actively engaging in UN system-wide exploration efforts on additional candidate screening processes, including the complementary between Clear Check and the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme, under the leadership of the UN Secretary-General as per [General Assembly Resolution 77/278](#).

iv. Quality, victim/survivor-centred support is operationalized (outcome 5)

18. Victims/survivors assistance, prioritizing their rights and dignity, was promptly offered by UN-Women during the last year as soon as UN-Women was made aware of an allegation, upon consent of the affected individual, adhering to the victim/survivor-centred approach and established protocols and standards.

19. For SEA victims/survivor, this assistance, in line with United Nations Protocol on the Provision of Assistance to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, includes referral to legal support, as well as safety, medical and psychosocial support, which is facilitated through UN-Women's in-country PSEA focal points, along with Elimination of Violence Against Women specialists, via the UN Country Team (UNCT) or Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) established victim assistance mechanism/Gender-Based-Violence referral pathway. For persons affected by SH, the support available may include, but is not limited to, access to medical care; psychological support; advice and referral to services specializing in SH; safety, security, and well-being measures; support to restore an equal, safe, and harmonious work environment; as well as review, where appropriate, administrative actions taken in connection with SH.

20. Recognizing the pivotal role of focal points in delivering victim/survivor-centered support, UN-Women organized a specialized victim assistance workshop, with the aim to equip them with practical skills to effectively and compassionately provide that assistance.

v. Inter-agency coordination and collaboration on PSEA and SH are strengthened (outcome 6)

21. Acknowledging inter-agency coordination and collaboration as key for the effectiveness of PSEA and SH, UN-Women remained actively involved in enhancing UN-wide efforts against sexual misconduct over the past year.

22. At country-level, 89% of UN-Women PSEA and SH focal points regularly participate in their respective in-country PSEA networks, led by their UNCT/HCT. Their contributions include developing and implementing UNCT PSEA Action Plans, conducting awareness activities and trainings, mapping victim/survivor assistance resources, and providing technical inputs to standard operating procedures. As of May 2024, UN-Women also co-chairs 8 in-country PSEA networks, demonstrating PSEA leadership in these contexts. UN-Women Human Resources continues to provide bilateral support to focal points for the fulfillment of their inter-agency functions as needed.

23. At global level, UN-Women remained purposefully involved in all global coordination structures on PSEA and SH.

24. As part of UN-Women's co-leadership to enhance cooperation in the CEB Task Force on Addressing SH in the UN System (CEB Taskforce), the Office of the Focal Point for Women in the UN System, in collaboration with the UN-Women's Information Systems and Telecommunications team, launched the [UN System-wide Knowledge Hub on Addressing Sexual Harassment](#) in June 2023. Hosting over 230 resources on preventing and addressing SH, this Hub facilitates knowledge sharing and enhances efficiency across the UN system. The Office has conducted introductory webinars and briefings to key stakeholders, including UN Gender Focal Points, to raise awareness of the platform which has received an average of 9,600 clicks per month. These efforts will continue as part of UN-Women's leadership of the Knowledge Sharing and Coordination Workstream within the Executive Group on SH, which has replaced the CEB Taskforce in January 2024.

25. Moreover, UN-Women supports the development and implementation of comprehensive multi-stakeholder action to end SH and increase women and girls trust in systems to safely report and access quality essential services in cases of SH and with a victim/survivor-centred approach. UN-Women also works to strengthen the capacity of partners from UN agencies and national and local governments, to businesses, women's rights organizations, and other community partners to address SH in urban, rural, work place, online, and conflict affected settings. In doing so, UN-Women ensures that this rich accumulated experience and knowledge, catalytic results, and global guidance and tools produced under UN global initiatives on data on violence against women and girls, essential services and safe cities/safe public spaces help to inform UN internal processes to end this universal challenge.

26. For the specific context of the CEB taskforce, UN-Women leveraged this experience and experience, stemming from its policy and programmatic work, combined with its holistic Human Resource competence, to meaningfully contribute to other workstreams of the CEB taskforce, focusing on sustainability of prevention efforts and result measurement through data collection. This included developing the "Behaviour Design and Intervention Guidance," aimed at supporting UN entities in applying behavior change to SH prevention training practically. UN-Women will continue to utilize its knowledge and acumen, arising from its triple mandate, as a participant in the Executive Group on SH.

27. In addition, over the past year, UN-Women enhanced its involvement in the SEA Working Group, led by the Office of the Special Coordinator on Improving the UN Response to SEA, and the IASC PSEA Technical Advisory Group. This included participation in the IASC Global PSEA workshop in April 2024. UN-Women contributed to system-wide deliverables of both groups, such as the updated PSEA Coordinator Deployment Package, the comprehensive assessment of PSEA across the UN system, and the revised IASC Principals Statement on PSEAH. This has established UN-Women as a key stakeholder in PSEA within the UN system.

28. Additionally, the Office of the Focal Point for Women in the UN System leads and coordinates a network of over 500 UN Gender Focal Points, providing capacity building on implementing a victim/survivor-centred approach and on upstander/bystander training. The Office has also continued its collaboration with OIOS and the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services to familiarize UN Gender Focal Points with the support services available and the avenues for reporting harassment. The Senior Advisor and Focal Point for Women has represented the UN Gender Focal Points network in the CEB Task Force since 2018, as Gender Focal Points have been identified as a key stakeholder in accelerating the implementation of policies and tools developed by the Task Force. UN-Women also promotes inclusive and safe working environments through the [Enabling Environment Guidelines](#) and [Field-specific Guidelines](#), offering concrete recommendations for fostering diversity, inclusivity, and respect, with ongoing support for their implementation and reinforcement.

29. Alongside these efforts, UN-Women continue to convene with UN partners (e.g. FAO, ILO) global policy advocacy sessions that share good practices to end SH, and is working jointly with the President of the General Assembly to support missions through the launch of campaigns in New York (May 2023) and Geneva (February 2024) focused on preventing SH in the workplace.

vi. Culture change that addresses the root causes of SEA and SH is advanced (outcome 7).

30. UN-Women recognizes that to effectively tackle SEA and SH across the UN, a culture change that challenges individual mindsets, beliefs, and behaviors, while addressing overarching societal norms concerning gender and violence, along with the systems and structures supporting them, is imperative. Consequently, UN-Women's commitment to nurturing an empowered workforce and an inclusive culture in its 2022-2025 Strategic Plan explicitly includes PSEA and SH as a priority area, with a corresponding key performance indicator to ensure that progress is measured.

31. Guided thereby, UN-Women undertook a set of targeted actions over the past year, spanning inter-personal skills, conflict resolution, mental health and well-being, leadership, as well as diversity and inclusion, for which linkages to the tackling of SEA and SH were created wherever possible.

32. UN-Women continued to roll out its scenario-based and interactive organizational culture training across all regions. The training frequently served as an entry point for a PSEA and SH workshop that was facilitated as a follow up and which built on the shared understanding about UN-Women’s values and competencies discussed therein.

33. To safeguard the mental health and well-being of its staff, UN-Women has carried on offering access to in-person and online psychosocial support and stress management resources for all personnel. Moreover, through UN-Women’s partnership with Peace on Purpose and Headspace, UN-Women personnel were again provided with mindfulness and wellness webinars and tools to help them create habits that alleviate stress and promote well-being. Furthermore, UN-Women remained an active member of the UN System Workplace Mental Health and Well-being Strategy Implementation Board.

34. To help offices and their managers to cultivate high performing, healthy and inclusive teams in the delivery of results, UN-Women offers custom-designed leadership and team development support to offices. This includes co-designing and co-creating retreats and workshops with teams. Moreover, UN-Women is an active facilitator of leadership development training in inter-agency networks such as the UN Together Mentor programme (which is also offered to UN-Women staff).

35. To enhance Diversity, Inclusion, and Shared Leadership, UN-Women provided direct support to divisions, regions, and countries by leveraging collaboration through tailored Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) briefings. Targeted sessions with managers created an opportunity to translate insights into actionable steps and effectively communicate survey results and improvement strategies. The drafting of the DEI Action Plan, which is disability inclusive, was led by UN-Women’s Global Equity and Inclusion Advisory Group in preparation for consultation and promulgation in 2024.

36. To promote Disability and Inclusion in the workplace, UN-Women leveraged system-wide collaboration with UN Agencies, Organization of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), and other institutions to learn good practices in Disability and Inclusion that can be applied to UN-Women and continues to build a strong presence of Disability Inclusion activities. UN-Women is leading a number of joint programs at both country and global levels to ensure thematic mainstreaming of disability in both gender and intersectional programming and policy advocacy. In addition, it makes available various training initiatives including “United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy - Putting Words Into Action”, “Disability Inclusion: Building an Inclusive and Accessible United Nations”, as well as “Disability Orientation, Web Accessibility Training and Inclusive Communication”. Further the Disability and Inclusion Policy and Reasonable Accommodation will be revised in 2024 to ensure alignment with lessons learned and good practices.

Annex I: Harmonized PSEA and SH Progress Reporting Template

Outcome	Outcome Progress	Benchmark	Benchmark Progress	Indicator	Target	2023 Result
1. SEA and SH reporting mechanisms are safe, accessible, and survivor-centred	95%	1.1. Safe, accessible mechanisms for reporting SEA and SH are in place and are victim/survivor-centred	100%	UN-Women's formal SEA and SH complaints mechanism is accessible via 3 different methods of submission (online form, hotline, and mail), by anybody, allows for anonymous reporting, and has no deadline.	Yes	Yes
				UN-Women's informal complaints mechanism for SH is accessible via 4 different resources and all personnel, irrespective of their contract type, and has no deadline.	Yes	Yes
		1.2. Community engagement and awareness raising on PSEA is carried out in each community receiving and/or affected by United Nations assistance.	90%	Rate of personnel who acknowledge PSEA community awareness raising efforts in their duty station.	90%	81%
2. Investigations are survivor-centred, timely, and result in appropriate accountability measures	100%	2.1. Investigations are victim/survivor-centred including by keeping the victims/survivors informed and supported, in line with their wishes.	100%	All investigators are trained in SEA and SH investigations and for SH investigations are handled by female investigators	Yes	Yes
				All victims/survivors are informed about the receipt of a report and updates on investigation status are provided.	Yes	Yes
		2.2 Investigations are carried out in a timely manner and appropriate accountability measures are taken.	100%	Information regarding investigations, including allegations of SEA and SH and on the disciplinary measures are provided during the Annual Session (AS) Agenda Item 5, and the reports can be accessed on the AS website .	Yes	Yes
3. Adequate safeguards and appropriate actions ensure the effective tackling of SEA when working with implementing partners	100%	3.1. Implementing partners have adequate PSEA safeguards in place and action is taken related to sexual exploitation and abuse	100%	UN-Women's Partner Selection Procedure includes all provisions of the United Nations Protocol on Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse involving Implementing Partners	Yes	Yes
4. Efforts to address SEA and SH across the organization are continuously strengthened including through reinforced capacity, evidence based and risk informed approaches	98%	4.1. Regular SEA and SH risk assessments inform prevention and response strategies	100%	Rate of risk units who performed SEA and SH risk assessments	100%	100%
		4.2. PSEA/SH focal points and/or dedicated PSEA/SH specialists are appointed at HQ, regional and country level	100%	Rate of duty stations with dedicated assignment of PSEA and SH focal point	100%	100%
		4.3. All staff and related personnel complete the mandatory training and/or briefing on PSEA and SH	92%	Rate of UN-Women staff who have successfully completed the mandatory online PSEA and SH trainings	85%	78%

Outcome	Outcome Progress	Benchmark	Benchmark Progress	Indicator	Target	2023 Result
		4.4 Reference checking and vetting for prior misconduct is systematically carried out as part of recruitment processes	100%	Rate of prospective candidates who have been vetted for previous cases of sexual misconduct within the UN system, using Clear Check and/or checked for previous cases of sexual misconduct outside of the UN system through reference checks and required disclosures, in line with relevant procedures	100%	100%
5. Quality, victim/survivor-centred support is operationalised	100%	5.1. Assistance for victims/survivors of SEA and SH is provided in accordance with established protocols and standards [including the UN Victims Assistance Protocol, victim/survivor-centred approach, and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) referral pathways]	100%	Rate of victims/survivors of SEA allegations and formal SH allegations, that were brought to UN-Women's attention and who chose assistance, were provided with support, in line with a victim/survivor-centered approach and established protocols and standards	100%	100%
				All types of support services specified by the UN Victim Assistance Protocol are available to victims/survivors of SEA by UN-Women through established protocols and standards	6	6
				All types of support services specified by the UN Model Policy on SH are available to victims/survivors of SH by UN-Women through established mechanisms	6	6
		5.2. The implementation of the UN Victims Assistance Protocol is strengthened at country level	100%	Annual capacity building workshop on victim/survivor assistance conducted for in-country PSEA focal points	Yes	Yes
6. Interagency coordination and collaboration on PSEA and SH are strengthened	95%	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	89%	Rate of focal point participation in in-country PSEA networks, which oversee the development and implementation of the UNCT PSEA Action Plans	100%	89%
		6.2. Entity actively participates in and contributes to the work of PSEAH coordination structures at global level [including the SEA Working Group, IASC PSEAH Technical Advisory Group, and the Executive Group on Addressing SH]	100%	UN-Women is a participant in the SEA Working Group, the IASC PSEAH TAG and the EG on Preventing and Responding to SH	Yes	Yes
7. Culture change that addresses the root	100%	7.1. Organizational culture and behaviour change to end sexual misconduct are	100%	UN-Women's 2022-2025 Strategic Plan explicitly includes PSEA and SH	Yes	Yes

Outcome	Outcome Progress	Benchmark	Benchmark Progress	Indicator	Target	2023 Result
causes of SEA and SH is advanced		actively promoted and form an organizational priority		Number of scenario-based trainings on organizational culture facilitated across the organization	12	28
		7.2 Staff perception and engagement surveys inform the actions to improve the organizational culture	100%	UN-Women's Global Workforce Survey informs equity and action plans to enhance an inclusive workplace culture	Yes	Yes