UN WOMEN
United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

Background Note: Briefing to the Executive Board, First Regular Session 2025

"Information note on the Joint Inspection Unit review of governance and oversight of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF and UN-Women: initial views of UN-Women management"

Summary:

In February 2023, the Presidents of the Executive Boards of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), United Nations Children's Fund, (UNICEF) and UN-Women (referred to as "Boards" or "Executive Boards" hereafter) requested the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) to carry out an assessment of how the Executive Boards execute their governance and oversight functions, with a view to ensuring that these functions are aligned with international standards and best practices. This request was prompted by the recent management failures and allegations of wrongdoing at UNOPS. Following consideration by the Joint Inspection Unit, the review was added to its programme of work for 2023.

The JIU report JIU/REP/2023/7 includes 10 formal and 21 informal recommendations that are focused on strengthening the governance and oversight functions of the three Executive Boards. To begin the change management process, it was recommended that an ad hoc committee of each Executive Board should be created to assess and prepare an action plan to address and implement those recommendations (recommendation 10).

Management's reflections on the JIU Report

UN-Women management has repeatedly expressed appreciation to the JIU for their insightful report and is pleased to submit its perspective on the JIU report (JIU/REP/2023/7) for the Executive Board's consideration as requested in its Decision 2024/3.

UN-Women finds the report useful in assessing and analyzing the strengths and areas for improvement of the oversight and governance function of the Executive Board.

As the title of the report indicates, this is a joint report assessing the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF and UN-Women's own Executive Board, keeping in mind that these Boards are overseeing fundamentally different organizations, differing by many standards including in size, mandate, and each bearing different organizational culture, strengths, and challenges. UN-Women also differ in its structure as it is a composite entity and not a fund or a programme of the United Nations, due mostly to its funding arrangements and its triple mandate spanning from operational response to UN coordination and the setting of normative standards. It is important to remember that the report under review was triggered by concerns raised by reported irregularities, potential financial losses, and alleged misconduct linked to the UNOPS Sustainable Infrastructure Investments and Innovation Initiative (S3i) investments programme. While UN-Women is indeed committed to the harmonization of the Executive Boards' proceedings, it is aware of significant differences between the five agencies and the 3 Executive Boards, which should be taken into consideration while responding to the recommendations contained in this report.

All throughout her tenure, the UN-Women Executive Director has made transparency and accountability her hallmark vis-a-vis the agency's relationship with its Executive Board, defined by several instances when the Executive Director briefed the Bureau on particularly sensitive matters and requested their views and support in dealing with these matters.

In turn, the Executive Board and its Bureau often expressed confidence and trust in UN-Women's leadership and operations. As an example, during the Bureau meeting held in July 2024, the President of the Executive Board and several vice presidents expressed views that most of the recommendations included in JIU/REP/2023/7 report were already fulfilled when it comes to the UN-Women Executive Board and to the Entity operations and procedures. It was said that UN-Women has fulfilled governance and reporting requirements in a transparent and compliant manner. The President of the Executive Board expressed at the Second Regular Session of 2024 her support and trust in the way UN-Women implements its mandate with a highly satisfactory level of transparency and consultation with Member States.

Another point to note is explicitly pointed out in the report paragraph 66, highlighting that "in the JIU survey, members of the UN-Women Executive Board had the highest level of satisfaction with meetings, while [another UN agency] was rated as least satisfactory", with respect to the organization of the Executive Board meetings. The survey revealed a prominent level of trust and confidence (about 80%) in the impartiality and reliability of its Executive Board Secretariat.

The good performance of the Executive Board Secretariat was confirmed in the JIU report "Review of management and administration in the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women)", **JIU/REP/2024/1,** where [quote: a majority agreed that services to the Executive Board and its Bureau were sufficient, impartial and independent of management influence. In terms of governance and guidance, members of the Executive Board felt that documentation and information presented by UN-Women management was sufficient to support decision-making processes.]

This is a serious vote of confidence on UN-Women solid performance in its governance and oversight, very much appreciated by UN-Women management who would like to express its appreciation and gratitude first to the Member States, as well as to the JIU for assessing and reporting on these strengths. However, UN-Women is cognizant that one can always bring upon improvement when it comes to the complex governance of the United Nations system Governing Bodies. UN-Women is committed to explore all areas of improvement in close consultation with member states.

In this regard, the table below provides a summary of UN-Women management's perspective on the ten formal recommendations included in the JIU Report:

Proposed actions derived from key recommendations from the JIU

Recommendation:	UN-Women comments
1. Request that the Economic and Social Council clarify the definition of new initiatives, as outlined in the General Assembly resolution 48/162, and define a process by which new initiatives will be recommended for approval, through the Council, to the General Assembly, as necessary.	**Reservation:** The UN-Women triple mandate (coordination, operational and normative) is fully covered by the UN-Women Strategic Plan, developed through extensive consultation with Member States and ultimately endorsed by the Executive Board. Although UN-Women would not object to the proposed clarification, the Strategic Plan is UN-Women's guiding document, and it is not foreseen that there will be new initiatives developed outside of this framework in the future, to ensure that UN-Women is operating within the parameters approved by the Executive Board in its Strategic Plan.
2. Develop terms of reference that fully describe **[The Boards]** governance responsibilities and adhere to the best practices in relation to the JIU benchmark and submit them for approval by the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly.	**Accepted:** Clarity and transparency on the governance responsibilities of the Executive Board is extremely important. The Executive Board Secretariat has developed an Informal Guide to the UN-Women Executive Board and holds an orientation session for new members of the Board at the beginning of each year to onboard members on their governance and oversight responsibilities. The development

	of TORs would be an important exercise in setting expectations and formalizing the roles and responsibilities of the Board. WFP's similar process can serve as a useful benchmark for this exercise.
3. Develop based on the new terms of reference of the Boards, terms of reference for Board members that are aligned with the JIU benchmark, including for specialized positions, such as Bureau members.	**Accepted:** Similar view as above.
4. As part of **[The Boards]** overall structures, consider creating appropriate committees, and corresponding terms of reference.	**Reservation:** UN-Women can see the value add of such a recommendation, however UN-Women is concerned that creating an extra layer of oversight will put additional strain on an already overloaded capacity of diplomatic missions in New York, especially the ones with limited human resources. There may also exist a risk that creating more committees could overwhelm the limited internal capacity of UN-Women in certain areas and multiply the reporting to be done by UN-Women which has already strained and limited capacity and resources for such reporting.
5. Implement the recommendations made by JIU in its 2019 report on audit and oversight committees, including strengthening the independence of an oversight committee by having a direct reporting line to the Executive Board.	**Reservation:** The ACO often times expressed that it felt its independence has never been questioned or under constraint and that it has been able to perform well under the current reporting arrangement. Committee members are required to complete an annual confirmation of independence to the Executive Director that ensures transparency, without compromising any interests UN-Women has found that the ACO being appointed by the Executive Director as an advisory board to assist her in her leadership role, is currently a very effective mechanism to ensure the effective and efficient delivery of UN-Women's mandate. Currently, the ACO's annual report is made available to the Board and presented by the Chair at its Annual Session.
6. Request **[The Boards]** secretariats collaborate on the preparation of harmonized terms of reference for all Board secretariats, aligned with the JIU benchmark and submitted to their respective Boards for approval.	**Accepted:** Terms of Reference are always an important reference tool for good governance. In harmonizing the terms of reference for all Board Secretariats, the difference in structure and size of the Executive Board Secretariats should be duly considered.
7. Assess **[The Boards]** current rules of procedure and working methods to support more engaged participation of all Board members and more efficient and effective means for discussion and decision-making.	**Accepted:** This should be discussed in the Bureau and with the working group when it is created in early 2025.
8. Direct **[The Boards]** respective organizations to ensure that the charters, frameworks, and terms of reference of independent and advisory functions and committees reflect the roles and responsibilities of the Boards, including in relation to reporting lines, access to the Board and consultations on human and financial resources, to ensure independence.	**Accepted:** This will be reflected in the document prepared by the independent offices in UNW, i.e., IEAS and Ethics.
9. Direct **[The Boards]** respective organizations to ensure that the roles and responsibilities of the Boards for risk management are appropriately reflected in the organizational policies on risk management.	**Accepted:** This recommendation has already been addressed. UN-Women's Strategic Planning Resources and Effectiveness Division (SPRED) is the division dealing with risk management and has already started engaging

	with Member States on the way forward with this recommendation.
10. Create, by the end of 2024, an ad hoc committee for each Executive Board to assess recommendations in the present review and prepare an action plan to address and implement them, including setting target dates and regular reporting on progress.	**Accepted:** This is a practical way forward that we are happy to support under the leadership of the President and Bureau.

Conclusion

As the present management responses and comments indicate, UN-Women management fully accept seven out of ten recommendations contained in the report and would be ready to act on these recommendations as requested by Member States. On the three remaining recommendations, the management expressed reservations as it considers that the recommendations are not applicable to UN-Women (recommendation 4 and 5), or because it is perceived that the recommendation does not address a situation that UN-Women would potentially find itself in (recommendation 1). The views on these recommendations are expressed without anticipating Member States's assessment on the need to implement them. UN-Women views are provided to the Executive Board as per its decision 2024/4 and in line with the double action to create a working group and to provide the working group with additional information. UN-Women management agrees with the overall spirit of the report and sees this report as an opportunity to improve, refine and define better the oversight and governance role of the UN-Women Executive Board. Management agrees with the JIU's recommendations in the key areas for improvement identified.

In addition, UN-Women has taken note of the twenty-one informal recommendations. Recognizing that this is a Member State driven process, UN-Women is committed to supporting and responding to requests by the Executive Board on the implementation of the recommendations.

UN-Women remains steadfast in its commitment to ensuring the highest standards of transparency and accountability and welcome the Executive Board's efforts to assess and improve on its governance and oversight responsibilities.