Background Note: Briefing to the Executive Board

First Regular Session 2025

Organizational culture, anti-discrimination and anti-racism: Ongoing work of UN Women to strengthen its organizational culture, improve the practice of its core values and become a more diverse and inclusive workplace

I. Introduction

This background note provides an update on the ongoing work of UN-Women to strengthen its organizational culture, improve the practice of its core values and become a more diverse and inclusive workplace. The approach combines the pursuit of organizational excellence with inclusive, ethical and shared leadership principles, to maximize impact in a manner that is consistent with the norms and standards underpinning UN-Women's mandate and that benefits from an empowered and diverse workforce.

It elaborates on the process of developing a timeline for the implementation of the entity-specific recommendations from the Joint Inspection Unit note on the review of measures and mechanisms for addressing racism and racial discrimination in United Nations system organizations: managing for achieving organizational effectiveness (JIU/NOTE/2022/1/Rev.1)

The note is submitted pursuant to Executive Board decision 2024/6 which, inter alia:

(a) Requests UN-Women to provide an update to the Executive Board at the first regular session of 2025, on how the organization is improving organizational culture and, on its actions, to prevent and respond to all forms of discrimination

(b) Requests the management of UN-Women to develop timelines for the implementation of the entity-specific recommendations from the Joint Inspection Unit note on the review of measures and mechanisms for addressing racism and racial discrimination in United Nations system organizations: managing for achieving organizational effectiveness, to be presented at the first regular session in 2025

(c) Decides to add an agenda item on addressing racism and racial discrimination for information at the first regular session 2025

II. Nurturing a diverse and empowered workforce and advancing an inclusive UN-Women culture

UN-Women strives to be an organization that delivers results through an inclusive culture and leadership that exemplifies ethical, transformational and shared leadership principles. UN-Women aspires to be an employer

of choice that values and cultivates a diverse, highly performing cadre of personnel who embody UN values. UN-Women will continue to internally provide proactive, client-oriented, and efficient services to its offices to enable a productive and collaborative global work environment.

UN-Women's work for this, inter alia, includes the following areas:

1. Enhancing the skills of its leaders and personnel to increase performance awareness and promote a culture of shared leadership and accountability to meet the needs of a complex, changing and demanding work environment.
2. Increasing diversity and tackling discrimination in the workplace through regular workforce engagement.
3. Promoting and mainstreaming disability inclusion.
4. Implementing measures to combat sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment (SH).
5. Implementing measures to promote ethical behavior, proactive conflict resolution, and the well-being of its personnel.

1. UN-Women is committed to strengthening leadership and team capacity for individual, collective and system change to enable and promote an environment of continuous learning, adaptation and reflection, shared leadership and decision-making. This will promote inclusive and participatory decision-making processes and an explicit recognition of power dynamics and unconscious bias to create an even more effective organization with a diverse and empowered workforce.

UN-Women implemented a global 360 feedback assessment survey for over 200 senior managers in 2022-23. The 360-feedback exercise was accompanied by executive coaching provided for all managers to support the development of self-directed action plans for working more effectively with others and to address issues arising from the 360-feedback survey. The 360-feedback survey with coaching is planned every two to three years as a key tool for continuous leadership development.

The conclusions from the evaluation of trends from the 360 and coaching highlighted UN-Women strengths in having a strong commitment to the mandate, and the application of gender equality and work to prevent discrimination. As part of its commitments moving forward, UN-Women is focused on managers working with their teams in addressing identified actions; improving work-life balance and well-being as a result of workloads and pressure to deliver results given capacity constraints and other challenges; and creating sufficient time and space for leadership reflection, and development of shared leadership practices and team growth.

UN-Women is also implementing tailored collective leadership and team development journeys for cohorts of managers and teams to grow their skills, mindsets, and practices to cultivate and work effectively together and to their potential as high performing, inclusive and healthy teams co-creating transformative change with partners and stakeholders for gender equality and the SDGs. These journeys are action learning based and focus on self-leadership, deep listening for creating psychological safety, collective care and well-being, accountability, and cultivating inclusive and cocreation practices for systems change. These also integrate new ways of thinking and learning from UN-Women's joint initiatives as part of UN 2.0 culture work.

2. The UN Women Empowered Workforce Survey (2022-23) shed light on various aspects of UN-Women's organizational culture, engagement, anti-racism efforts, and employee well-being. As per the survey results, the organizational culture at UN-Women was described as diverse, inclusive, and collaborative. Pride and Engagement was the highest rated category and 85% of staff indicated they are proud to tell others that they work for UN-Women. The survey also highlighted how creating inclusive work environments and understanding the factors influencing perceptions and experiences of discrimination are crucial for developing interventions and ensuring equal opportunities for all employees. Effective means of conflict resolution and fostering open and honest communication were positively correlated with fostering an inclusive workplace.

    Based on the survey outcome, organization-level efforts to tackle challenges such as improving personnel well-being and contract modalities were undertaken, with action plans created at team level to support continued engagement.

3. UN-Women is fully committed to mainstreaming disability inclusion throughout its work, in line with the Entity's corporate strategy and policy on disability inclusion, the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

UN-Women promotes its Disability Inclusion Policy and reasonable accommodation(s) procedure in monthly orientation briefings. Internal capacities for disability inclusion and intersectionality are strengthened including through webinars, guidance and disability on-line training.

Senior managers champion disability inclusion through, for example, participation in high-level meetings, public statements, and communication to all personnel. The Global Coordinator for Disability Inclusion and Intersectionality works closely with disability focal points across the Entity, constituting the Global Task Team and Community of Practice for Disability Inclusion and Intersectionality.

UN-Women has disability-inclusive planning, reporting, and evaluation guidance documents, and has introduced a disability inclusion marker. Its Disability Inclusion and Intersectionality Helpdesk and Innovation Forum help guide country-level programming.

4. UN-Women's commitment to fostering a respectful, inclusive, and empowering workplace environment is supported by a comprehensive organizational framework that includes robust policies on workplace accountability and integrity standards. A key focus is the prevention and resolution of misconduct, including harassment, sexual harassment, discrimination, and abuse of authority, collectively referred to as "prohibited conduct." The organization enforces a zero-tolerance approach, with formal mechanisms for reporting prohibited conduct to the Office for Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) and informal conflict resolution options. Policies are reviewed regularly, with an update scheduled for 2025, ensuring they reflect best practices and remain effective.

To strengthen its organizational culture, UN-Women has introduced targeted initiatives that promote ethical behavior, conflict resolution, and personnel well-being. These include interactive, scenario-based training on ethical decision-making and standards of conduct, informal resolution services such as mediation and coaching, and the establishment of a dedicated ethics function that fosters accountability. Personnel well-being is further supported through access to counseling services, stress management programs, and mindfulness tools like Headspace. These initiatives highlight UN Women's holistic approach to enhancing mental health and resilience among its workforce.

Addressing sexual exploitation, abuse (SEA), and sexual harassment (SH) is a pivotal aspect of UN Women's 2022-2025 Strategic Plan. The organization has developed survivor-centered policies and governance frameworks aligned with UN standards. These include safe reporting mechanisms, timely support for survivors, strengthened safeguards with implementing partners, and systematic risk assessments. Prevention efforts are integrated into broader organizational culture change initiatives, leveraging behavioral science to develop effective strategies. UN-Women also actively collaborates in inter-agency efforts to enhance accountability, transparency, and system-wide SEA and SH prevention.

UN-Women reports progress on these efforts annually to its Executive Board through a harmonized reporting template featuring specific metrics and indicators. This approach ensures transparency and accountability while reinforcing the organization's commitment to a safe and inclusive workplace. By embedding SEA and SH prevention into its culture and governance, UN-Women promotes an empowered workforce that thrives in a supportive environment. These efforts underscore the organization's broader mission to advance gender equality and women's empowerment through a respectful and impactful workplace culture.

5. Furthermore, the ethics function supports and promotes an ethical culture at UN-Women in accordance with its mandate to "cultivate and nurture a culture of ethics, integrity and accountability, and thereby enhance the trust in, and credibility of, the United Nations, both internally and externally." (ST/SGB/2007/11) In providing services to support all UN-Women personnel, the ethics function assists in preventing, mitigating and managing ethical, operational and reputational risks. Consistent with the principles of independence, impartiality, and confidentiality, the Ethics Advisor implements its mandate across the following areas:
   - providing confidential ethics advice and guidance to personnel and management, which is primarily preventive and proactive, assisting personnel in making informed decisions in accordance with applicable ethical standards,
   - scenario-based ethics training and outreach to raise awareness on applicable standards of conduct and conflicts of interest,
   - standard-setting and policy support,
   - managing UN-Women's Financial Disclosure Programme, and
   - administering UN-Women's Protection against Retaliation Policy.

III.   Addressing racism and racial discrimination

UN-Women's approach and initiatives in ensuring a work environment that is inclusive and free of racial and all other prejudices are aligned with the UN Secretary General's Strategic Action Plan on Addressing Racism and Promoting Dignity for All in the United Nations. It is also informed by the Joint Inspection Unit Review of Measures and Mechanisms for Addressing Racism and Racial Discrimination in United Nations system Organizations, with special attention to the recommendations on managing for organizational effectiveness (JIU/NOTE/2022/1/Rev.1).

A Global Equity and Inclusion Advisory Group has been constituted to provide insight and shape UN-Women's actions on Diversity, Equity and Shared Leadership. Co-chaired by both Deputy Executive Directors (ASGs), the Advisory Group is drawn from across UN-Women personnel from all geographies, job groups, contract types, experience, age, gender and abilities.

UN-Women has a Senior Advisor position for Diversity, Inclusion and Shared Leadership who leads the development, implementation and monitoring of diversity and inclusion activities within UN-Women. The

Advisor works in close collaboration with other UN Agencies and working groups and inter-agency networks on Diversity Equity Inclusion and Anti-Racism, working on a common approach for the UN System and supporting learning and knowledge management.

the Joint Inspection Unit Review of Measures and Mechanisms for Addressing Racism and Racial Discrimination in United Nations system Organizations, with special attention to the recommendations on managing for organizational effectiveness (JIU/NOTE/2022/1/Rev.1) proposed six recommendations for UN Women. We highlight progress on implementation for three recommendations that have been implemented and three that are in progress below.

Recommendation 1 The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should collaborate, in the framework of the CEB, to establish a common set of categories for voluntary self-identification by personnel by June 2024, for the purposes of monitoring, analyzing, evaluating and reporting on progress and success in achieving the goals of equality, equity, diversity and inclusion in addressing racism and racial discrimination.

> **Implemented:** While UN-Women does not formally collect data on race and ethnicity, it has developed a system for self-reporting option on an internal platform where employees log their personal data.

Recommendation 2 The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should direct their respective training and learning units to develop and implement a high-impact and integrated curriculum to improve awareness, learning and performance that responds to the needs of personnel of various functions, categories and levels in order to address all forms and configurations of racism and racial discrimination in the workplace.

> **In-progress:** UN-Women looks forward to the recommendations of the HLCM Inter-agency Working Group on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion with respect to best practices across the UN System on creating curriculum and integrating inclusive practices in performance management.
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> As an active member of the Interagency network on Anti-Racism, several UN-Women staff have attended Webinars on the fundamentals of anti-racism and workshops that included training on anti-racism with the UN Gender Focal Points Network.

Recommendation 3 The executive heads of United Nations system organizations who have not done so should provide sufficient resources to support the achievement of defined results for the implementation of action plans for addressing racism and racial discrimination.

> **In-progress:** The 2022 – 2025 Strategic Plan commits UN-Women to promoting inclusive and participatory decision-making processes and an explicit recognition of power dynamics and unconscious bias to create an even more effective organization with a diverse and empowered workforce. UN-Women has two positions dedicated to these efforts, namely a Senior Advisor, Diversity, Inclusion and Shared Leadership and a Senior Racial Justice Specialist.

Recommendation 4 The executive heads of United Nations system organizations, as members of the CEB, should jointly develop and provide resources to a high-level, inter-agency standing mechanism intended to unite

organizations, leverage their existing capacities and comparative added value to collaborate and work together to respond to both immediate and longer-term needs for addressing racism and racial discrimination across the United Nations system, and address the transformative changes needed to enhance the continued relevance and value of the various efforts at both the organizational and the system-wide levels.

> **In-progress:** UN-Women welcomes the pooling of interagency expertise and the visibility of existing DEI efforts across the UN System to support opportunities for collaboration on resource-intensive initiatives like training, in addition to further standardizing guidelines on some common practices.

Recommendation 5 The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should establish, by 2024, an accountability framework that sets out the expected results, outcomes and key performance indicators for addressing racism and racial discrimination, and report periodically to their legislative organs and/or governing bodies on progress made in achieving the predefined results.

> **Implemented:** UN-Women Leadership actively supports various Employee Resource Groups including the Staff Council who regularly discuss issues of discrimination and inclusion and provide feedback in dialogue with the organization. This includes support to the Global Equity and Inclusion Advisory Group at senior management level via participation and sponsorship.
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> UN-Women updates the Executive Board using the Integrated Results and Resources Framework (IRRF) on the extent to which personnel perceive UN-Women to empower, engage and nurture the workforce to strengthen an inclusive culture.

Recommendation 6 The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should strengthen the equal distribution of opportunities in human resources management for all personnel.

> **Implemented:** UN-Women is in the final stages of launching a new contractual modality to engage programme-based and project-based personnel which introduces benefits to both the individuals and to the organization through its improved and streamlined set of benefits for the individuals, and lighter administration on the organization. The modality covers both national and international functions. UN-Women extends its training opportunities, including on Diversity and Inclusion, to all personnel, regardless of contract type.

IV. The way forward

Since its inception in 2010, UN-Women's workforce has grown rapidly and between 2015 and 2024 the total workforce more than doubled. The organization utilizes various contract modalities for engaging personnel and fostering an inclusive environment with a diverse workforce is a key priority wherein all employees feel valued, respected and heard.

UN-Women is also embarking on a Pivot to Regions and Countries initiative which seeks to help UN-Women to be a credible, field-based organization, achieving impact at scale through the organization's triple mandate. The pivot recognizes that in order to achieve the above aims, the organization needs to shift its culture, to one that places its delivery at country level at the heart of its work.

A lot of the initiatives related to the Pivot and improving the organizational culture would also need robust support mechanisms. In this regard, UN-Women acknowledges the need for adequate investment in a number of areas including Human Resources, which has also been highlighted by the Executive Board decisions, the Joint Inspection Unit recommendations, as well as the Advisory Committee on Oversight. The organization has now initiated a review of the HR function to identify gaps and strengthen capacities to be able to deliver on these mandates.

In conclusion, UN-Women's commitment to promoting a safe, inclusive, and ethical organizational culture is reflected through its efforts in addressing racism and discrimination, prioritizing the well-being of personnel, and fostering accountability and leadership. These initiatives are designed to create an environment where all individuals feel valued and supported. By continuing to build on these foundations, UN-Women ensures that both the organization and its personnel can thrive and achieve their fullest potential.