Background Note: Briefing to the Executive Board, First Regular Session 2026

Organizational culture and anti-discrimination: 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. UN Women's approach combines the pursuit of organizational excellence with inclusive, ethical, and shared leadership principles, with the aim of maximizing impact in a manner consistent with the norms and standards underpinning its mandate and supported by an empowered and diverse workforce.

The note is submitted pursuant to Executive Board decision 2025/3 which, inter alia requested UN Women to assess and report, at first regular sessions, the impact of its work on organizational culture while urging the organization to continue strengthening people management skills of all personnel in supervisory and management roles.

The note also provides information on the use of contractual modalities for affiliate personnel at UN Women as requested by the Executive Board vide decision 2025/7.

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

Notwithstanding the intensive organizational change process affecting UN Women's operations, the organization remains committed to the principles underpinning delivery of results through an inclusive culture and leadership that exemplifies ethical, transformational, and shared leadership. UN Women aspires to be an employer of choice that values and cultivates a diverse, high-performing workforce aligned with UN values. To this end, the organization continues to provide proactive, client-oriented, and efficient internal services to enable a productive and collaborative global work environment.

Key areas of focus include:

1. Enhancing leadership and personnel skills to strengthen performance awareness, shared leadership and accountability in a complex and evolving work environment;
2. Promoting accessibility and disability inclusion;
3. Advancing ethical behaviour, proactive conflict resolution, and personnel well-being; and
4. Preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment (SH).

Leadership development and career support

UN Women continues to develop and deliver leadership and team journeys for cohorts of managers and supervisors, with a focus on supporting leaders to navigate change and uncertainty with their teams. In parallel, the UN System Staff College (UNSSC) Blue Line leadership and management course remains available to all UN Women personnel.

Career clinics and career coaching have been provided as part of the Career Support Strategy supporting the Pivot implementation, as well as through UN inter-agency initiatives such as UN Career Week and monthly "Career Tips Thursday" sessions. These initiatives are designed to ensure that personnel feel valued, listened to and supported with practical tools to navigate an evolving and uncertain job landscape.

Accessibility and disability inclusion

UN Women remains fully committed to accessibility and disability inclusion, in line with its corporate strategy and policy on disability inclusion, the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. During the 2025–2026 period, UN Women is expanding policy engagement and inter-agency joint programming across regions to address linkages between disability, care systems and economic participation; strengthen access to assistive technologies across the life cycle; promote inclusive artificial intelligence; and ensure that women with disabilities shape peacebuilding and recovery processes following conflict.

These efforts focus on areas where exclusion is most acute and where inclusive design can yield lasting change. UN Women also works across the UN system to strengthen institutional accountability, including through collaboration with UNFPA to assess gender responsiveness in the implementation of UNDIS and to provide recommendations for improvement. In 2024, UN Women met or exceeded 53 per cent of UNDIS entity accountability framework indicators, compared to 20 per cent in 2019, and more than fifty-five country, multi-country and regional offices reported initiatives implemented with and for women with disabilities.

Ethics, integrity, and respectful workplaces

UN Women's commitments to fostering a respectful, inclusive, and empowering workplace are underpinned by a comprehensive organizational framework and robust policies on accountability and integrity. In 2025, the Ethics Function strengthened its organizational presence by contributing a dedicated segment to Human Resources' global monthly orientation sessions for new hires. This segment covers standards of conduct, conflicts of interest and the mandate of the Ethics Function, reinforcing a culture of integrity and accountability across the organization.

Building on these preventive measures, as part of its efforts to promote an ethical organizational culture, UN Women is now participating in the upgraded Clear Check database 2.0 system, which expands misconduct screening beyond SEA and SH to include racism, racial discrimination, and other forms of serious misconduct. This enhances preventive vetting and supports system-wide risk management across the United Nations.

In addition, confidential and informal conflict resolution services, such as mediation, coaching, and support from the Ombudsman and Respectful Workplace Facilitators, as well as formal reporting and investigative channels, remain available to personnel to address workplace concerns promptly.

Prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment

Addressing sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment remains a key organizational priority and UN Women has established victim/survivor-centred policies and governance frameworks aligned with UN-wide standards and continues to strengthen prevention, response, and support mechanisms, including through inter-agency collaboration leveraging UN Women's expertise.

Details on these actions, along with reporting on progress achieved, will be presented in an update to the Executive Board at its Annual Session, in line with Executive Board Decision 2025/10.

III. Engagement in times of change

As UN Women undergoes transformation in response to the evolving context, efforts are made to ensure such a transformation adheres to UN Women's core values and principles, and treating all personnel with dignity and respect.

The Pivot to Regions and Countries initiative seeks to strengthen UN Women's standing as a field-based organization capable of achieving impact at scale through its triple mandate. The Pivot recognizes that achieving these objectives requires a shift in organizational culture, placing country-level delivery at the centre of the organization's work.

Practices to listen to and support personnel through change.

To support the implementation of the Pivot to Regions and Countries, a Human ResourcesSupport Strategy was developed and is being implemented, in collaboration with senior management and internal stakeholders—including the UN Women Staff Council, the Human Resources Division, and the Business Transformation and Communications Units. The Support Strategy includes a range of initiatives to ensure that personnel are heard and equipped to navigate organizational change.

UN Women Dialogue Series

To address questions raised during town hall meetings, the Human Resources Division and the Staff Council organized a Dialogue Series comprising thirteen thematic webinars. Topics included G4 visa considerations, UNFCU services and financial matters, UN Joint Staff Pension Fund issues, Office of Staff Legal Assistance services, negotiation skills, caregiver support, and tailored HR support strategies for general service staff, international staff, and affiliate personnel. Sessions incorporated live question-and-answer segments and, where needed, follow-up one-on-one consultations with HR Business Partners, Staff Council representatives and a dedicated Pivot Advisor.

Career counselling and coaching

Career counselling is provided through live career lab webinars facilitated by certified executive career coaches. To date, eight sessions have been delivered for both personnel and people managers affected by organizational change. These are complemented by an on-demand library of recorded sessions and a comprehensive online portal offering career development tools, guidance on skills development and support for career transitions.

Transition measures to support managers and personnel

Wherever necessary, senior management has outlined transitional measures to support managers and hiring units in the management of cost containment and the Pivot exercise. These include measures on recruitment and contract extensions. Human resources are more directly engaged in reviews of staffing structures and decisions to ensure that utmost due consideration is given to affected personnel and in accordance with established policies and procedures.

Psychosocial support and well-being:

Recognizing that periods of change and transition can be demanding and may impact personnel well-being, UN Women continues to prioritize support for colleagues throughout these processes. The organization offers a variety of safe and confidential psychosocial and well-being resources, including individual and group

consultations as well as specialized sessions, provided in multiple languages and at flexible times to accommodate diverse needs.

IV. Performance management, job design, and workforce frameworks

UN Women has introduced strategic changes to its performance management and job description processes, recognizing their critical role in shaping and reinforcing organizational culture. These measures aim to foster accountability, inclusivity, and continuous improvement.

Recent updates to the performance management system include simplified goal setting with enhanced guidance, a streamlined midterm review process, and since January 2025, revised end-of-year assessment with a stronger focus on competencies and behaviours for both staff and managers. Comprehensive guidance on managing underperformance has been developed, including practical tools for assessment, structured feedback, conversations, and forward-looking performance improvement plans. Together, these measures promote continuous feedback, shared responsibility, and personal growth.

Job descriptions have also been strengthened as a foundational element of organizational culture and talent attraction. UN Women revised its job description template to better reflect the organization's profile and values, introducing help texts to support managers in drafting clear and inclusive descriptions. The revised template uses gender-neutral language, distinguishes required from desirable qualifications, and clearly defines roles and responsibilities to encourage diverse applicant pools and set realistic expectations. In parallel, UN Women is updating its Job Dictionary to ensure alignment with current ways of working, processes, and systems.

By strengthening both performance management and job design, UN Women is reinforcing a virtuous cycle in which clear roles, inclusive recruitment, transparent expectations, and supportive feedback mechanisms contribute to a positive and high-performing organizational culture.

V. Affiliate workforce

As of the end of 2025, 67 per cent of UN Women's workforce hold affiliate contracts, which would include modalities such as Consultant Contracts, Personal Service Agreements (PSAs), United Nations Volunteers (UNVs), Experts on Missions and Internship Agreements. Affiliate modalities are used to undertake specific task(s) for the implementation of project(s) or other activities of a business unit funded by a project(s) and required for a defined period. They may also be engaged in response to variable volume of work due to the nature of UN Women's priorities or to fill a temporary capacity gap. They may also be used when the services require specialized technical & unique skills, that are not part of UN Women's staff capability or may not be needed long-term by UN Women.

Affiliate modalities are well suited to meet operational needs of field based organizations and the contractual arrangements are reviewed periodically to offer flexibility and agile staffing options.

Consultants

As of December 2025, 28 per cent of UN Women's workforce hold consultant contracts, engaged full-time or on retainer basis.

UN Women engages Consultants to respond promptly and efficiently to organizational priorities and needs that cannot be met by its staff or may be unanticipated. Consultants provide advisory or consultative services, with the required expertise, skills or knowledge for the delivery of specific tasks. These engagements are governed

by a temporary affiliate contract established between the individual and UN Women. Consultant engagement with UN Women is governed exclusively by the terms and conditions stipulated in their contract and the Consultants Policy.

Personnel Service Agreement

In February 2025, UN Women signed the Service Level Agreement with UNDP to implement the Personnel Service Agreement (PSA) modality. Acknowledging the essential and ongoing contributions of affiliate personnel to our mission, the PSA modality standardizes entitlements and matches salary scales with those of UN staff to ensure alignment and timely updates. The PSA now allows for flexibility regarding work location and contract duration. Centralized administration brings greater consistency, fairness, and improved governance.

In September 2025, all UN Women Service Contractors (around 1100) were transitioned to the new NPSA modality established by UNDP, replacing the previous Service Contract (SC) system. In late 2025, UN Women also initiated the pilot to explore both national and international PSAs. As of December 2025, around 28 per cent of the workforce are under the PSA modality.

United Nations Volunteers

Since 2010, UN Women has been partnering with the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) with UNVs making up 6.5% of all personnel often the entry to the UN system, attracting young, motivated talent. The UNV programme contributes to gender equality through volunteerism worldwide, integrating qualified, highly motivated, and well-supported UN Volunteers into the development programme and through promoting the value and global recognition of volunteerism.

Interns/Fellows

The UN Women Internship Programme offers students and recent graduates from diverse academic backgrounds the opportunity to be part of a unique mandate; to contribute to challenging, global and highly rewarding initiatives to achieve gender equality; and to connect and learn from talented and highly qualified specialists across UN Women globally.

Similarly, Fellows are provided by academic institutions to support programmes and personal career development for a period ranging from 6 to 12 months at no cost to the organizations.

Experts on Mission

Affiliate personnel engaged as Experts on Mission within the Non-Reimbursable Loan Agreement is a modality which is used to secure the loan of a person from a government, intergovernmental organization (IGO), non-governmental organization (NGO). The loan person is provided to UN Women at no-cost and brings technical expertise to support operations and that person is given the status of Expert on Mission.

These personnel, funded by Governments or Donors to deliver essential expertise at no cost to the organization. Experts on Mission are also engaged through Stand-by Partners who swiftly deploy Humanitarian and Capacity Development experts who enhance our humanitarian efforts

UN Women recognizes that all affiliate modalities, including consultants and PSA, play vital roles in program delivery, each with unique advantages and challenges. Despite growing funding uncertainty, UN Women remains committed to offering sound policy and staffing advice to hiring managers, ensuring the appropriate use of every available personnel engagement modality.

VI. Way forward

Sustained progress in organizational culture requires adequate investment, particularly in Human Resources capacity. This need has been highlighted by Executive Board decisions, Joint Inspection Unit recommendations and oversight bodies. Reviews of the HR function have identified capacity gaps that must be addressed to meet these expectations. The 2026 Strategic Note and Budget outline measures to strengthen HR capacity and institutional readiness.

In conclusion, UN Women's commitment to promoting a safe, inclusive, and ethical organizational culture is reflected in its efforts to address discrimination and stigma, prioritize personnel well-being, advance accessibility and disability inclusion, and strengthen accountability and leadership. These initiatives aim to ensure that all personnel feel valued and supported. By building on these foundations, UN Women seeks to create the conditions for both the organization and its workforce to thrive and deliver on its mandate at scale.