



REVIEW OF MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION IN THE UNITED NATIONS ENTITY FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN (UN-WOMEN)

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Background

UN-Women started its activities in 2011, with unique characteristics in terms of its genesis, mandate composition and governance structure within the United Nations system. First, it was established by the General Assembly, consolidating four pre-existing bodies with gender-related mandates to form a United Nations system organization dedicated exclusively to promote and achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women. Second, while the gender agenda is an established system-wide priority, UN-Women was entrusted with a triple mandate of normative, operational and coordination work expected to address the gender-related issues comprehensively and holistically, in an integrated manner. Third, it inherited a complex multi-tiered intergovernmental governance structure, in which the Commission on the Status of Women provides normative policy guidance, while its Executive Board provides operational policy guidance in addition to the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. Gender equality is no longer a dream but a widely internationally agreed goal. UN-Women is expected to play a central active role in achieving that goal.

Over the past decade, UN-Women has undergone significant growth in terms of its financial resources and expenditure, as well as the size of its workforce, thereby "graduating" to a medium-sized organization. That evolution has been accompanied by several organizational restructuring reforms and a large-scale business transformation initiatives as UN-Women further engaged in the repositioning of the United Nations development system. In its second decade of existence, UN-Women has aspired to transform into UN-Women 2.0, in accordance with its Strategic Plan 2022–2025. In that regard, UN-Women is looking to implement one of its most important internal reforms since its establishment, namely the pivot to the field initiative, to bring the Entity closer to the women and girls whom it serves, as promoted by its Executive Director since 2021.

Objectives & Purpose

The current review provides an independent assessment of organizational arrangements and processes, regulatory frameworks and related practices concerning the management and administration of UN-Women, with a view to enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of the Entity to support the fulfilment of its mandate and mission, including its normative, operational and coordination mandates. The Inspectors examined the following areas: governance, leadership and executive management; strategic planning and change management; organizational structure and field presence; budget and finance management; human resources management; information and communications technology (ICT); other administrative services; risk management; accountability and oversight; outreach and advocacy; partnerships management; and inter-agency collaboration.

What the JIU found

1. Governance.

To ensure the strategic positioning of UN-Women in the United Nations system, it would be beneficial to improve interactions between its Executive Board and the Commission on the Status of Women to conform better to the expectations of Member States at the time of its creation. Moreover, UN-Women must reaffirm its leadership mandate and role in the gender equality architecture of the United Nations system. The potential of the Commission on the Status of Women needs to be leveraged further to strategically build wider partnerships and networks, investing in advocacy and communication and mobilizing resources. Finally, the Executive Board should take a more proactive role in the context of the operational mandate of UN-Women.

2. Executive management.

In recent years, the executive management committees have not functioned in accordance with their envisioned terms of reference, thereby not ensuring sufficient strong, transparent and accountable management. In addition, UN-Women is lacking compacts between the Executive Director and the Deputy Executive Directors, the implementation of the United Nations system leadership framework and a more systematic presence of field representatives on management committees to ensure integration of a field perspective. The lack of trust of field-based personnel in headquarters, which is often perceived as too risk averse, compliance conscious and hierarchical, could be attributed to a lack of transparency of consultative processes and insufficient internal communications. In addition, to better represent the way UN-Women management has structured the Entity to function and execute the delivery of its mandate and for the sake of clarity and accountability, the absence of a publicly disclosed organizational chart showing the actual structure should be remedied.

3. Financial framework.

The financial structure of UN-Women was inherited from its four “parent organizations” with a narrower financial base of assessed resources and a business model driven by voluntary contributions. The current ratio of regular resources (core) to other voluntary contributions (non-core) may lead to corporate functions being under-resourced in a context of expanding activities, despite the efforts of UN-Women management to use cost recovery mechanisms and generate more unearmarked contributions. Furthermore, core programmable criteria adopted by the Consultative Committee of the United Nations Development Fund for Women in 2009 still constitute the guiding principles for resource allocations within UN-Women (i.e. headquarters and field locations) which do not seem adequate in the current working environment and the upcoming implementation of the pivot to the field initiative. Lastly, the current level of assessed contributions allocated by Member States to such an important issue as gender equality and women’s rights could also be reconsidered.

4. Strategic planning and risk management.

Strategic planning and risk management have improved overall in recent years. The corporate Strategic Plan is supported by the Integrated Results and Resources Framework, composed of a development results component and an organizational effectiveness and efficiency component. UN-Women has developed a corporate risk management register and a risk appetite document; it also issued its first corporate risk management report in 2022.

5. Pivoting to the field.

The vision for pivoting UN-Women to the field has been expressed in general terms by executive managers in recent years. At present, the scenarios presented do not sufficiently elaborate on the expected substantive and economic returns that will be accrued by UN-Women and its beneficiaries. Considering those uncertainties, the pivot to the field initiative has understandably created tensions. This is an opportunity to realign and rebalance the fundamental allocation of delegated authorities, finances and human resources (including the distribution of senior positions), together with accompanying accountability mechanisms and enhanced participatory processes.

6. Management.

For several years, recommendations made by internal oversight bodies and comments from the Advisory Committee on Oversight have advised leadership and the Executive Board of the need to reinforce corporate functions. Those repeated calls for strengthening the “second line” (functions that oversee, or are specialized in, risk management, internal controls, compliance etc.) entail a significant task considering the current financial constraints imposed on many of those functions and it seems futile requesting such improvements without consideration being given to the principles currently guiding the management of resources or without additional resources.

Facing the disconnect between the expansion of activities and the stagnation of administrative capacity is a common feature of all sections within the Management and Administration Division and is acknowledged in several internal and external studies. The current situation exposes UN-Women to several risks in terms of the effectiveness and efficiency of its processes and operations, as well as in terms of compliance with policies and procedures, and its reputation.

Partnerships are acknowledged as key for UN-Women, both in terms of advocacy for the positioning of the Entity as a thought leader and in terms of resource mobilization. The guiding principles in those areas have been revisited and several corporate strategies have been published (resource mobilization and engagement with the private sector) or are being prepared (public information and communications). Such an approach must now be implemented and enforced, and its results scrutinized and evaluated in due time.

7. Human resources management.

The current capacity of the Human Resources Division is assessed as rather limited, while the size of the workforce has grown significantly and its composition has evolved towards a higher proportion of affiliate personnel. The combination of those two factors has had various consequences for UN-Women in terms of the efficiency of human resources operations, which may be aggravated in the context of implementing the pivot to the field initiative, which will require intense human resources-related activity. Moreover, UN-Women does not currently have a corporate human resources strategy with overarching principles, corporate objectives and indicators to guide the Entity.

While non-staff contracts are perceived as providing flexibility and cost-effectiveness, the review shows clear drawbacks, such as high turnover, loss of talent, tension in the workforce due to differences in benefits and entitlements, core functions held by personnel with insecure contracts, loss of institutional memory and distractions created by being on the lookout for a more secure job.

8. Oversight.

The status and role of the Advisory Committee on Oversight is an area in which UN-Women management and JIU have had divergent views. Acknowledging the work of the Committee according to its terms of reference, the Inspectors restate that it cannot be considered a fully independent external oversight body.



What the JIU recommends

The JIU makes nine formal recommendations: four are addressed to the Executive Board and five are addressed to the Executive Director.

The formal recommendations are complemented by 53 informal recommendations.

The Executive Board of UN-Women is called on to:

1 Request that the Executive Director submit, at the Board's 2025 annual session, a proposal for enhancing the interactions between the Board and the Commission on the Status of Women within the multi-tiered intergovernmental structure of UN-Women, as envisaged by the General Assembly in its resolution 64/289, allowing consideration of the work of the Entity in a more integrated manner, and transmit the proposal to the Bureau of the Commission (recommendation 1).

5 Request that the Executive Director present, at the 2025 annual session of the Board, a plan for the implementation of the pivot to the field initiative with an elaboration of the substantive and economic returns, accompanied by a realistic determination of the financial resources required to operate such a reform in a way that enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of UN-Women in pursuing its triple mandate to serve all its stakeholders and support its personnel, and report on the implementation of the initiative on an annual basis (recommendation 5).

4 Request that the Executive Director prepare a report assessing the relevance of the core programmable criteria adopted by the Consultative Committee of the United Nations Development Fund for Women in 2009, in the light of the current working environment and the upcoming implementation of the pivot to the field initiative, and submit a proposal for change, as required, for consideration by the Board at its first regular session in 2026 (recommendation 4).

6 Direct the Executive Director to prepare a comprehensive action plan aimed at strengthening the second-line functions within UN-Women, containing milestones for its implementation, including a statement of internal control, and resource requirements in the context of the integrated budget 2026–2027, and submit it for consideration by the Board at its 2025 annual session (recommendation 6).

The Executive Director of UN-Women is called on to:

2 Revise the terms of reference of the executive management committees in order to improve complementarity and synergies among them, take measures to include adequate field representation and ensure their proper functioning through regular meetings and record-keeping for the purposes of transparency and accountability in decision-making (recommendation 2).

7 Finalize a comprehensive knowledge management strategy to support an organization-wide approach to knowledge management, aligned with the mandate, goals and objectives of UN-Women, and place its implementation under the responsibility of a senior-level officer to strengthen its thought leadership in gender equality and empowerment of women (recommendation 7).

3 Issue a standard operating procedure complementing the UN-Women Cost Recovery Policy, as well as other guidance documents, to support implementation of standardized cost recovery principles and practices across the Entity, supported by specific training sessions (recommendation 3).

8 Prepare a comprehensive human resources management strategy covering all parts of UN-Women and all categories of its workforce, and report biennially on its implementation to the Executive Board, starting in 2026 (recommendation 8).

9 Introduce a regular reporting mechanism on the use of the UN-Women affiliate workforce, starting in 2026, assessing the use of such contractual modalities within the Entity in terms of flexibility, cost-effectiveness, reputational risk, institutional knowledge and the nature of the functions performed, among others (recommendation 9).



Approach & Methodology



Desk review of documentation issued by the Executive Board and the Commission on the Status of Women, as well as reports produced by the internal and external oversight bodies of UN-Women, strategic documents, internal policies, administrative instructions and other related documents.



Views of Member States gathered through:

- **Interviews** with one of the Vice-Chairs of the Commission on the Status of Women, the regional groups of the Executive Board and selected representatives of countries in which UN-Women implements projects and programmes, as well as representatives of countries contributing regular (core) or other resources to the budget of the Entity.
- **Online surveys** addressed to Member States.



Questionnaires. UN-Women management contributed to the review process by providing a corporate response to a questionnaire covering the main areas of management and administration, supplemented by relevant data. In addition, an online questionnaire gathered information and opinions from regional directors and country representatives who provided a field perspective. The United Nations Development Coordination Office provided inputs in writing.



Online survey to all staff with a 41% response rate.



Interviews with UN-Women senior managers and other resource persons, including all regional directors and 12 of the country representatives, staff representatives, former UN-Women executive managers.

Supplementary Paper

JIU issued a [Supplementary Paper](#) containing additional observations pertaining to each of the areas mandated to the Entity by the General Assembly founding resolution 64/289, namely UN-Women tripartite mandate of normative, operational and coordination.

Regarding the normative mandate:

- Responsibility for a large normative scope related to global gender sensitive and gender responsive norms.
- Primarily funded by assessed and regular resources (core).
- Support to developing and implementing the policy recommendations contained in the agreed conclusions adopted by the Commission on the Status of Women and challenge to integrating normative aspects and the agreed conclusions into the operational activities of UN-Women offices.
- Importance of civil society as historical partner.
- Updated implementing partner management process.

Regarding the operational mandate:

- The operational side of the mandate generates most other resources (non-core).
- Towards a holistic approach to programming to avoid "confetti programmes".
- Clarifying UN "gender spaces" for ensuring UN-Women's leadership role.
- Emphasizing joint programming to maximize impact.
- Exploring its role as a humanitarian actor under emergency circumstances.

Regarding the coordination mandate:

- Specific and unique coordination mandate for leading and coordinating the work of the United Nations system on gender equality and the empowerment of women.
- Limited funding available for such an important mandate.
- The coordination feature assigned to UN-Women represents one of its comparative value proposals to the UN system.
- The major achievement of the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.
- Taking responsibility for its coordination role on the ground with gender theme groups, regional coordination specialists and gender equality coordinators, among others.
- Towards a system-wide reporting of financial data with the gender marker.

[Click to access the supplementary paper](#)



2022-2023 JIU Reports

JIU/REP/2023/9, Review of the quality, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of health insurance schemes in the United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2023/8, Review of the use of non-staff personnel and related contractual modalities in the United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2023/7, Review of governance and oversight of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF and UN-Women

JIU/REP/2023/6, Review of flexible working arrangements in United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2023/5, Review of management and administration in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

JIU/REP/2023/4, Review of mental health and well-being policies and practices in United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2023/3, Review of accountability frameworks in the United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2023/2, Review of the internal pre-tribunal stage appeal mechanisms available to staff members in the United Nations system organizations

JIU/ML/2023/1, Findings, conclusions and recommendations relevant to the work of the High-level Committee on Management on mental health and well-being policies and practices in United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2023/1, Review of management and administration in the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

JIU/NOTE/2022/1/Rev.1, Review of measures and mechanisms for addressing racism and racial discrimination in United Nations system organizations: managing for achieving organizational effectiveness

JIU/REP/2022/1, Review of management and administration in the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

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