



Review Highlights JIU/REP/2025/2
JIU/REP/2025/2 [Expanded report]
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REVIEW OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO PREVENT AND RESPOND TO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM ORGANIZATIONS

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Background

Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) involves the abuse of a position of vulnerability, power or trust by UN personnel for sexual purposes, including the exchange of money, goods or services for sex and acts of sexual violence. It is recognized as one of the most serious forms of misconduct in the UN system as it undermines the dignity, safety and rights of individuals, erodes trust in the Organization and can cause long-term harm to victims and affected communities. Preventing and responding to SEA is therefore fundamental to upholding the values of the UN and maintaining the credibility and effectiveness of its operations globally.

The Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) undertook this review in response to requests from its participating organizations. The review is aligned with the JIU Strategic Framework for 2020 to 2029. It is the first comprehensive, system-wide review focusing specifically on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) in the UN system.

Two JIU outputs were produced from this review: (a) a report, issued under the symbol "JIU/REP/2025/2", focusing on the main conclusions and recommendations and available in the six official languages of the United Nations; and (b) an expanded report, issued under the symbol "JIU/REP/2025/2 [Expanded report]", providing a broader analysis, detailed findings and related supporting information.



Objectives & Purpose

The review has five main objectives: to examine existing policies and regulatory frameworks related to PSEA; to look at how UN entities coordinate their efforts; to explore practices for preventing and responding to SEA; to assess how a victim-centred approach is applied; and to identify good practices and lessons learned.

The review covers all 28 JIU participating organizations, regardless of the number of SEA allegations reported at any given organization. It examines SEA committed by all personnel associated with the United Nations, including staff, consultants, volunteers, experts, uniformed personnel and personnel of implementing partners and vendors, covering the period from 2017 to 2024.



SEA allegations against UN personnel

From 2017 to 2024, United Nations system organizations publicly reported SEA allegations involving 4,148 individuals, comprising 47 per cent implementing partner personnel, 27 per cent civilian and uniformed personnel in peace operations and 26 per cent staff and affiliates. Nearly all alleged perpetrators were male. Around 43 per cent of the allegations concerned sexual exploitation, 25 per cent sexual abuse and the remainder were mixed or unclear, with about 4 per cent occurring at headquarters locations. These allegations involved 4,061 victims, 26 per cent of whom were children.

From investigations concluded between 2017 and 2024, allegations against 1,079 individuals were substantiated. These allegations affected 1,177 victims, including children, and resulting in 342 paternity claims.

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What the JIU found

1. Not all participating organizations have a robust regulatory framework in place to establish an effective accountability mechanism for addressing SEA committed by their personnel

Many lack comprehensive and consistent provisions on SEA across their policies, staff regulations and rules and codes of conduct, creating gaps, and most policies related to protection against retaliation do not extend to external individuals, leaving victims and other external parties potentially vulnerable to retaliation.

2. Unclear and incoherent language in PSEA policies diminishes the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms in several participating organizations

Policies related to PSEA vary across organizations, particularly regarding sexual relations with beneficiaries, exceptions for underage marriage and the prohibition of transactional sex. Key terms such as “sexual exploitation” and “zero tolerance” are also interpreted inconsistently, leading to differing understandings and applications. A narrow definition of victims in most policies can also limit SEA cases to beneficiaries, excluding incidents in workplace or community settings and other forms of SEA.

3. Participation in inter-agency coordination for PSEA remains uneven, and the conflation of system-wide roles hinder effectiveness

Many organizations still view SEA as occurring only in the field or in humanitarian and peace settings, leading to limited participation by headquarters-based organizations in inter-agency coordination mechanisms for PSEA. In the meantime, the system-wide mandates of the Special Coordinator on Improving the United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and the Victims’ Rights Advocate are often conflated with their perceived leadership roles in PSEA and victim assistance within UN Secretariat entities, resulting in unclear roles and responsibilities in these areas.

4. Public reporting of SEA allegations lacks coherence, transparency and completeness

Data collection and reporting are inconsistent, with some organizations not using the iReport SEA Tracker at all while others adopt different practices in reporting. Several entities selectively disclosed SEA allegations, leaving more than 100 cases unreported to the public. Other essential datasets such as the category of implementing partners and vendors are missing from the current data collection practices.

5. Leadership commitment to PSEA is evident but uneven in practice and resources

Most organizations show leadership commitment to PSEA through annual management letters, strategies and action plans. While dedicated PSEA roles and indicators have strengthened accountability at headquarters, capacity and resources remain uneven in the field, with inconsistent funding for inter-agency PSEA coordinators and PSEA activities, limiting prevention, coordination and victim support, particularly in high-risk operations.

6. Mandatory training and outreach have improved awareness of PSEA policies but insufficient for lasting behavioral change

Most organizations require PSEA training for staff and, to varying degrees, for affiliates, implementing partners and vendors. However, training is often one-time, generic and insufficient to address cultural norms or produce behavioral change. Limited context-specific outreach and resource constraints restrict interactive learning and prevention efforts, particularly in high-risk settings. Organizational cultural change is key to sustained prevention of SEA.

7. Implementing partner and vendor personnel remain weak points in PSEA awareness and compliance

While some organizations train implementing partners, few systematically verify completion and ensure their PSEA capacities, and training for vendor personnel is minimal. Confidence in these groups’ understanding and adherence to the PSEA standards of the UN is significantly lower than for staff or affiliates. Tailored outreach and monitoring for these categories remain underdeveloped, leaving critical gaps in PSEA efforts.

8. ClearCheck is an effective system-wide tool but is applied inconsistently

Practices in using ClearCheck vary significantly among participating organizations, including how the tool is institutionalized, which personnel categories are screened, and how the names are recorded and removed. Some entities do not screen all hires or fail to record individuals who resign during investigations for sexual misconduct, creating loopholes for these individuals to be potentially rehired by other UN system organizations.

9. External vetting of candidates from outside the UN system is limited

Only a limited number of organizations use external screening tools for candidates without prior UN experience, creating gaps in vetting individuals from NGOs and other sectors. As a result, persons with histories of sexual misconduct outside the UN system may be hired without detection, posing risks to organizations and communities.

10. SEA is not adequately foreseen and managed as an organizational risk in many JIU participating organizations

Many organizations do not treat SEA as a core risk within their enterprise risk management both at the organizational and field levels. This limits an organization's ability to anticipate where SEA is most likely to occur, to allocate resources proportionately and to monitor prevention and mitigation efforts systematically. As a result, SEA remains insufficiently integrated into broader risk management and oversight frameworks, leaving organizations reactive rather than proactive in addressing it.

11. Investigations and disciplinary processes lack timeliness and transparency

While some progress has been made in strengthening investigative capacities and prioritizing SEA cases, many allegations--especially in the disciplinary stage--still take years to conclude, delaying justice for victims and accountability for perpetrators. Fragmented responsibilities between organizations and Member States in handling misconduct by uniformed personnel complicate accountability. Reporting on disciplinary actions and sanctions is inconsistent, reducing transparency and trust in the system.

12. Assistance to SEA victims remains fragmented and under-resourced and lacks a system-wide approach

While most organizations recognize the importance of victim assistance, services are often fragmented and insufficiently funded, particularly in high-risk locations. While the UN protocol on assistance to SEA victims exists, it focuses mainly on immediate needs. A system-wide approach for longer-term support to victims remains unclear, funding is ad hoc, and existing mechanisms for assisting victims are not harmonized and limited in scope.

13. Engagement of governing bodies and Member States on PSEA is uneven

Although most organizations report on SEA to their governing bodies, the quality and scope of reporting vary widely. Oversight committees do not consistently address PSEA, and Member States' follow-up on criminal referrals and paternity claims remains limited.

14. The application of a victim-centred approach remains inconsistent across the UN system.

While most organizations refer to a victim-centred approach in their policies, its application is uneven. Procedures often focus on investigations and accountability of perpetrators rather than victims' needs and rights. Limited involvement of victims in the accountability processes, insufficient feedback, and uneven access to services highlight gaps that undermine trust in the UN's accountability mechanisms and prevents the UN from fully upholding the Victims' Rights Statement.



What the JIU concludes

SEA remains an inherent risk across all UN entities, regardless of context. While progress has been made in establishing policies and raising awareness, fragmented frameworks, inconsistent definitions, weak personnel screening and slow accountability processes continue to undermine efforts. To address these gaps, organizational culture change, stronger engagement with implementing partners and vendors, and consistent application of a victim-centred approach are essential. Organizations should also move away from framing SEA primarily around categories of victims and instead focus on personnel conduct, supported by a coherent and holistic sexual misconduct policy. The Inspectors stress that sustained leadership, adequate resources and the active involvement of governing bodies and Member States are essential to drive systemic change and protect the rights and dignity of those the UN serves.



Approach & Methodology

The review employed a mix of qualitative and quantitative data-collection methods from diverse sources to ensure the consistency, validity and reliability of its findings. The data and evidence were collected at various periods from 1 January 2024 to 31 March 2025, using the following tools and methods:



An extensive **desk review** and an in-depth analysis of over 2,000 documents.



One corporate **questionnaire** issued to 28 participating organizations with data annexes targeted at different organizational functions.



163 formal **interviews** with 311 officials of participating organizations and external stakeholders



Case studies in 14 UN operations including 2 online surveys, 3 field visits and 4 focus-group discussions



What the JIU recommends (formal recommendations)

The JIU makes 15 formal recommendations; two are addressed to the legislative organs/governing bodies; three to the UN General Assembly; one to the UN Secretary-General and nine to the executive heads of JIU participating organizations. These are complemented by 33 informal recommendations.

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations are called on to:

1

Review their respective policies, staff regulations and rules, and standards of conduct to ensure that they all include PSEA, are aligned and support disciplinary processes and procedures.

2

Review sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment policies to more broadly cover sexual misconduct by focusing on the prohibited conduct of personnel, affirming victims' rights, defining "zero tolerance" and incorporating good practices, such as those related to protection against retaliation and the improper use of technology.

4

Work together to comprehensively address and coordinate with regard to the prevention of and response to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (sexual misconduct) and create a new strategy that builds on the approach set out in the Secretary-General's 2017 report (A/71/818 and A/71/818/Corr.1), focusing on prevention, response and integrating a victim-centred approach.

5

Work together to establish an inter-agency working group to address the system-wide coherence and harmonization of SEA data, including what data are reported and in what context, when allegations should be entered and updated as well as the addition of data fields and functions to improve the analysis, transparency and integrity of SEA data.

8

Agree on system-wide coherence and harmonization of ClearCheck procedures, including with respect to entering subjects, name removal procedures, screening of affiliate personnel categories as well as the potential expansion of its use to include other types of misconduct.

9

Conduct an assessment of the mechanisms used for screening and vetting of personnel for substantiated sexual misconduct allegations, including identifying types of personnel to be screened and determining gaps as well as risks in not implementing the most comprehensive vetting and screening procedures.

10

Incorporate SEA into their enterprise risk management processes to identify and mitigate risks of SEA at different operational levels, including risks associated with implementing partners and vendors, to inform their PSEA action plans.

11

Assess: (a) the use of administrative leave without pay; (b) the criteria for imposing disciplinary measures in sexual misconduct cases; (c) the timeline from completion of an investigation to the imposition of disciplinary measures; and (d) the procedures in place for informing victims of measures taken.

12

Work together to explore the establishment of an inter-agency pooled funding mechanism to assist victims of SEA.

The United Nations Secretary-General is called on to:

7

Commission a report with regard to the feasibility of establishing shared and/or common services to support sustained and regular funding for inter-agency PSEA coordinators in high-risk and priority countries.

The United Nations General Assembly is called on to:

6

Request that all allegations of SEA in United Nations Secretariat entities be recorded in the iReport SEA Tracker and included in the Secretary General's annual report on special measures for PSEA.

14

Establish a mechanism to address the processes and procedures for adjudicating paternity and related support claims as a result of SEA involving personnel in peace operations, including the roles and responsibilities of the United Nations Secretariat, Member States and relevant parties when claims are made.

15

Consider endorsement of a new system-wide approach and strategy for addressing sexual misconduct that ensures a victim-centred approach, mobilizes inter-agency capabilities and capitalizes on available resources.

The legislative and/or governing bodies of United Nations system organizations are called on to:

3

Request an update from the executive heads of their respective organization with regard to progress made in reviewing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment policies as well as any change management procedures associated with the revisions.

13

Request that executive heads of United Nations system organizations produce an annual report on all disciplinary measures taken against their respective personnel for sexual misconduct, including the nature of the misconduct, whether subjects were added to the ClearCheck database of sexual misconduct records, any assistance provided to victims and the number of all relevant criminal referrals made to competent national authorities.

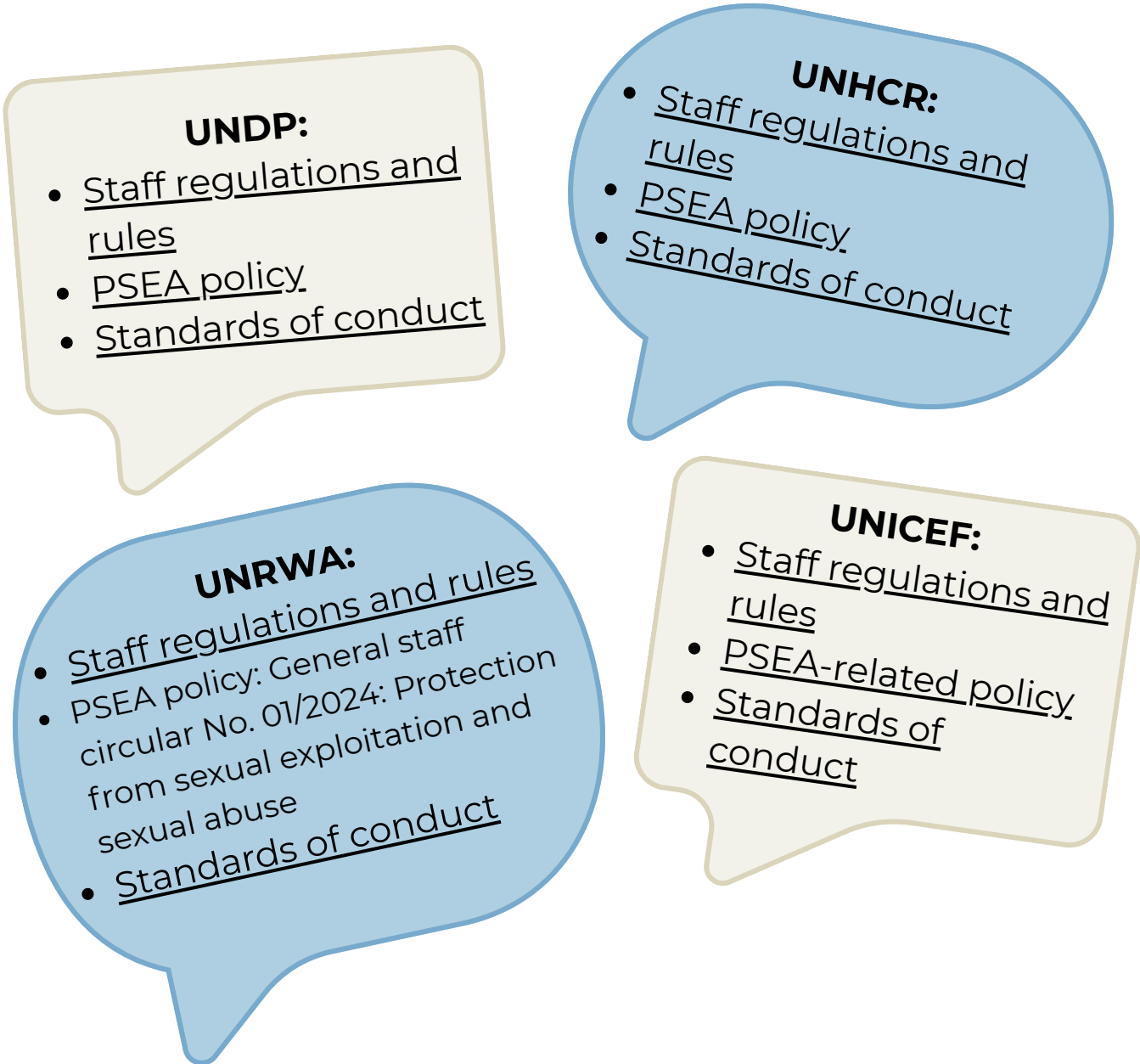
The following non-exhaustive good practices are extracted from the review to support JIU participating organizations in the implementation of the recommendations. More information and additional good practices can be found in the expanded report.



Good Practices

Policy and regulatory framework for PSEA

1. Comprehensive coverage and alignment of PSEA in the staff regulations and rules, policy and standards of conduct:



2. Holistic policy to cover sexual misconduct, moving away from defining misconduct by types of victims and focusing on conduct of personnel



- UNHCR Policy on addressing sexual misconduct



- WHO Policy on preventing and addressing sexual misconduct (also applied to UNAIDS)

3. Inclusion of cyber-related SEA risks in PSEA policies



- FAO PSEA policy



- UNICEF Policy on Safeguarding



- WHO Policy on preventing and addressing sexual misconduct (also applied to UNAIDS)

4. Inclusion of protection against retaliation in PSEA policies



- WHO Policy on preventing and addressing sexual misconduct (also applied to UNAIDS)



- FAO PSEA policy

5. Policy on the application of a victim-centred approach



- UNHCR Policy on a victim-centred approach in addressing sexual misconduct

Institutionalization of PSEA



1. Inclusion of PSEA-related indicators in corporate strategy and work plan

2. Incorporation of SEA in the corporate risk registry such as at FAO, ILO, ITC, UNDP, UNESCO and UNFPA.

Safe recruitment

1. Participation of the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme by UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR and UNOPS.

2. Recording names of personnel who are found to have a prior criminal conviction related to a sexual crime in ClearCheck by UNDP and IAEA.

Training and awareness-raising of personnel on PSEA and organizational culture change

1. Enforcing consequences for non-compliance with PSEA mandatory training whereby completion of mandatory training served as a pre-requisite to receive a staff award, within-grades salary increases, register for any formal language programme, travel on field missions, access to staff development funds, apply for vacant posts or be eligible for contract extensions.

2. Delivery of context-specific PSEA training in addition to the online mandatory training, as practiced by UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR and WHO.

3. Promotion of organizational culture change towards fostering a respectful workplace and encouraging a speak-up culture against misconduct such as UNHCR's "reflective leadership dialogues", the UNHCR "NotOnlyMe" platform, UNAIDS cultural transformation initiative, UNICEF's promotion of a values-based culture and WHO's open forums with leadership to discuss PSEA-related issues.

Working with partners

1. Incorporation of PSEA into ongoing training for partners such as UNDP training on harmonized approach to cash transfers and UNICEF onboarding training to its civil society implementing partners. Inclusion of PSEA in toolkits and guidelines such as UNOPS Guidelines for developing inclusive energy infrastructure.

2. Inclusion of PSEA clauses in partnership agreements with implementing partners and vendors. UNICEF Programme Cooperation Agreement offers the most comprehensive PSEA clauses.



2024-2025 JIU Reports and Notes

Reports:

JIU/REP/2025/1, Review of management and administration in the United Nations Environment Programme

JIU/REP/2025/1 [Expanded report],
Review of management and administration in the United Nations Environment Programme

JIU/REP/2024/4, Review of the implementation of the principle of mutual recognition within the United Nations system

JIU/REP/2024/3, Budgeting in organizations of the United Nations system Part I - Comparative analysis

JIU/REP/2024/3, Budgeting in organizations of the United Nations system - Part II Reference tables

JIU/REP/2024/2, Review of consideration of and action taken on the reports and recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit by United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2024/1, Review of management and administration in the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women)



For all reports visit: <https://www.unjiu.org/content/reports>

Notes:

JIU/NOTE/2024/2, Note to the International Telecommunication Union from the review of the quality, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of health insurance schemes in the United Nations system organizations

JIU/NOTE/2024/1, Note to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees from the review of quality, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of health insurance schemes in the United Nations system organizations



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