

Evaluation of UNHCR's Approach to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Prevention, Risk Mitigation and Response



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONDUCTED BY LATTANZIO KIBS | MAY 2025

UNHCR Evaluation Office

UNHCR Evaluation Policy confirms UNHCR commitment to support accountability, learning and continual improvement through the systematic examination and analysis of organizational policies, strategies, and programmes. Evaluations are guided by the principles of impartiality, credibility and utility, and are undertaken to enhance the organization's performance in addressing the protection, assistance and solution needs of forcibly displaced and stateless people.

Evaluation Office

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Case Postale 2500

1211 Genève 2

Switzerland

unhcr.org/about-unhcr/evaluation

Published by UNHCR

Evaluation Office Copyright © 2025 UNHCR

This document is issued by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for general distribution. All rights are reserved. Reproduction is authorized, except for commercial purposes, provided UNHCR is acknowledged.

Unless expressly stated otherwise, the findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this Evaluation Report are those of the Evaluation Team, and do not necessarily represent the views of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States. The depiction and use of boundaries, geographic names and related data shown on maps and included in lists, tables, and documents in this Evaluation Report are not warranted to be error free, nor do they necessarily imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNHCR or the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Commissioned by UNHCR Evaluation Office

Evaluation Quality Assurance provided by UNHCR Evaluation Office

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

This independent evaluation assesses UNHCR's Approach to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Prevention, Risk Mitigation, and Response. The evaluation looks at the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and strategic positioning of GBV programming, with the goal of informing UNHCR's 2025 GBV Policy review and the development of the new strategic plan. Through the lens of nine case study countries, as well as data collection with regional and global stakeholders, the evaluation covers refugee, IDP, and mixed situations globally. The mixed-methods, theory-based approach involved 610 participants in interviews and group discussions, and 735 UNHCR staff globally in an online survey. GBV is defined as any harmful act perpetrated against a person's will based on socially-ascribed gender differences. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual, or mental harm, threats, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. GBV, which is a core component of UNHCR's protection mandate, is a human rights violation affecting all aspects of a person's protection and well-being.¹ Displaced persons are at high risk of GBV, which is disproportionately affecting women and girls. Between 2018 and 2022, the number of forcibly displaced and stateless women and girls living in humanitarian crises grew from 23 million to 35 million, with a dramatic increase following the onset of the Ukrainian crisis.² The number of people in need of a GBV response as represented in 26 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) contexts rose from 16 to 84 million between 2020 and 2023.³ The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated challenges, increasing social, economic, and political insecurity and strengthening the culture of impunity for perpetrators. Concurrently, the external funding environment is rapidly contracting, putting huge strains on UNHCR and other organizations.

Key findings

The evaluation findings are presented thematically around the key components of the evaluation analytical framework, including the GBV policy and guidance, the policy's nine core action areas (arranged according to programming areas, operations management cycle and enablers), and GBV cross-cutting issues.

GBV policy and guidance

The GBV Policy provides direction for programming but lacks visibility and ownership across all levels. While highly relevant in contexts governed by the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM), it is perceived to be less applicable in IDP, mixed population, mixed movement, and advocacy settings.

Programme delivery

GBV response including case management

UNHCR's support to GBV response has been most effective when integrating multisectoral services, enhancing survivor-centered care and facilitating greater access to services. UNHCR's leadership in case management is widely recognized by partners and external stakeholders and the evaluation observed improved service availability and survivor satisfaction, particularly in refugee settings. The evaluation found that community-based protection approaches help to fill gaps by leveraging local knowledge but can carry risks for community volunteers. UNHCR plays a vital role in securing justice and legal protection for GBV survivors, despite systemic barriers, and successes are evident in advocacy, capacity development, and survivor-centered approaches. Despite progress, implementation challenges such as staff burnout, turnover, and funding constraints reduce service quality and put survivors at risk. In addition, UNHCR also faces challenges with the following systems: tracking and monitoring the quality of responses, case management data, and adapting protocols to different operating contexts and population groups.

GBV risk mitigation

UNHCR demonstrates commitment to GBV risk mitigation and mainstreaming, particularly through multifunctional sector teams. However, ownership varies across contexts, influenced by operational settings, leadership communication, capacity, resource constraints, and accountability mechanisms. Effective

¹ UNHCR Strategic Directions 2022-2026

² Evidence Synthesis and Readiness Review (Phase I) of the Evaluation of UNHCR Approach to Gender-Based Violence Prevention, Risk Mitigation, and Response Final Report, 2023.

³ GBV AoR (2023) Analysis of GBV needs and response in 2023 HNOs and HRPs

mainstreaming is observed in some sectors (for example shelter, water and sanitation), enhancing protection for at-risk populations, but inconsistencies and gaps remain; particularly in relation to uneven implementation of safety audits, challenges in prioritizing risk mitigation in resource-constrained settings, and poor documentation of risk mitigation results.

GBV prevention

Despite global attention on primary prevention, UNHCR and partners have increasingly shifted towards a more limited set of awareness-raising activities in contexts where funding cuts have impacted prevention efforts. Primary prevention efforts were more effective when implemented comprehensively over time and carefully tailored to local realities. This held true even in contexts where long-term social norms and behavior change initiatives are challenging to implement. UNHCR is increasingly supporting GBV prevention through partnerships with Women-Led Organizations (WLOs); however, GBV prevention is often deprioritized in constrained funding environments, due to perceptions that it is less lifesaving than GBV response.

Operations management cycle

Assessment and monitoring

Some strong examples of data utilization to strengthen GBV programming were observed, including safety audits (where they occur), participatory assessments, and survivor satisfaction data. However, gaps in measuring broader impact persist, particularly in risk mitigation and prevention due to inconsistencies in data collection and limited availability of baseline and endline data.

Planning, prioritization and resource allocation

Globally, GBV sector funding has increased but not proportionately to the needs. UNHCR's GBV programming remains underfunded, with trends varying across regions. The analysis of UNHCR's GBV planning and expenditure data indicates that UNHCR has overall utilized its funds in line with budgetary allocations for GBV. UNHCR's commitment to GBV prioritization through resource allocation varies across operational contexts, and the data shows an overall increase in prioritization relative to other outcome areas. This is not necessarily linked to the GBV policy, with widespread perceptions within UNHCR that prioritized resourcing continues to be exercised by those who were already supportive prior to the implementation of the policy. Despite the overall positive trend in GBV prioritization, internal and external concerns about senior leadership visibility, communication, and commitment to policy implementation persist. While positive influence on resource mobilization is emerging, greater effort is needed for UNHCR to be recognized as a key GBV actor globally.

Organizational enablers

Partnerships and coordination

UNHCR is increasing its commitment to localization and engaging with WLOs, though gaps were identified, particularly related to heavy bureaucratic and administrative requirements. Diverse partnerships are maintained at the local level, but a shift towards generalist protection partners has resulted in reduced GBV expertise which has impacted service quality. Proactive steps to address coordination gaps are being taken, with strong coordination at the sub national level. However, gaps persist at the national level, emphasizing the need for strategic engagement to sustain credibility and influence in inter-agency coordination.

Staffing

The GBV workforce has increased over time, however, recent reductions in senior GBV positions have affected leadership and resource mobilization capacity. Strong results are associated with specialization, though views on generalist vs. specialist positions are divided. Irrespective, the evaluation found that excessive multi-hatting of protection staff, including those with GBV roles, negatively impacts the quality of GBV programming.

Knowledge and capacity

UNHCR is building stronger e-learning platforms for capacity-building, but staff access is uneven due to resourcing gaps. These include lack of translated materials and insufficient time for staff (particularly those multi-hatting) to engage in online courses. UNHCR's technical capacity to support protection outcomes (and GBV) is widely recognized, with partners increasingly taking on capacity-building responsibilities in resource-constrained settings. Strong examples have been observed in relation to UNHCR's focus on building government's GBV capacity and in peer-peer learning and capacity building, both within UNHCR and between partners.

Cross-cutting areas

Age, gender and diversity

The GBV policy is relevant to the lives of people UNHCR works with, particularly women and girls, and UNHCR is largely complying with minimum standards of the Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) policy. However, the evaluation identified gaps in policy content and implementation in certain areas including engagement with LGBTQI+ individuals, men and boys, and people with disabilities.

GBV advocacy

UNHCR has achieved strong progress in relation to advocacy with government actors on GBV, with tangible impacts observed. However, the strength and success of advocacy efforts vary substantially according to contextual factors on the ground. The evaluation findings suggest that across different contexts, sub-national advocacy efforts are most effective, including in highly challenging settings.

The comparative advantage of UNHCR

Rooted in its protection mandate, the greatest comparative advantage of UNHCR is its operational presence, which facilitates several strengths in access, partnership, and coordination. This operational footprint can also be a disadvantage given that UNHCR is often the one left when others are absent from or leave the field. While UNHCR has advocated for GBV prevention and response in high-level forums, it could do more to leverage its protection mandate to ensure that GBV is consistently central to discussions and participate more actively in a broader range of platforms where GBV is discussed.

Conclusions

The GBV policy provides clear direction for programming, highlighting GBV as a shared responsibility, and is highly relevant for refugees and asylum seekers, particularly women and girl GBV survivors. However, its relevance has diminished for other populations due to coordination gaps and challenges in implementing guidelines. The policy aligns with other UNHCR interventions and the AGD Policy, though prioritization varies across levels. Effective advocacy, data collection, multi-sectoral response, and coordination are observed, though gaps in single-sector response and AGD programming persist. Efficiency measures have sometimes hindered long-term goals, with staffing reductions affecting leadership and advocacy. Progress towards impact is observed in response and advocacy, though measuring outcomes remains challenging.

UNHCR's comparative advantage lies in its operational presence and protection mandate, though commitment to risk mitigation and mainstreaming varies. At global and regional levels, UNHCR's implementation of the GBV policy aligns with inter-agency approaches, showcasing strong partnerships and coordination, influencing collaboration at the country level. Despite these efforts, UNHCR is not widely recognized as a significant GBV actor among some donors at the global level. At the operations level, UNHCR and partners' GBV response programming align with survivor-centered approaches and GBV minimum standards but face resourcing constraints, affecting the quality of response and case management. Legal protection gaps persist in countries not signatories to the Refugee Convention, hindering access to justice. Internal questions about UNHCR's role in GBV prevention reflect broader concerns about its long-term prevention efforts, misconceptions about the role of prevention, and perceptions that it is non-lifesaving, negatively impacting prioritization and resourcing decisions.

Recommendations

The evaluation design, data collection, analysis and reporting were conducted in 2024, with recommendations finalized in early 2025, during a period of an escalating humanitarian funding crisis, and ongoing discussions about the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) proposal for a simplified humanitarian system,⁴ both which will significantly reshape the operating environment for GBV programming. The following recommendations have been made with these global processes in mind and offer guidance that reflects both current constraints and anticipated trends over the next one to three years. They are organized by urgency and time frames to guide effective sequencing and implementation. Anticipating significant budget constraints and a shift toward project-based funding, these recommendations prioritize **practical actions**, **systemic accountability**, and **strategic adaptation** to safeguard GBV programming and implement the GBV policy.

(1) Align planning and resource allocation with GBV needs and prioritization

Priority: ● High (2025-2026)

Rationale: The evaluation found that the delivery of GBV policy objectives has been constrained by limited accountability for mandatory policy implementation and that prioritization of GBV is often driven by individual staff advocacy rather than robust institutional mechanisms. As seniority of GBV positions is reduced, so is staff ability to occupy leadership spaces and advocate for prioritization in funding allocations. UNHCR must elevate GBV as a strategic priority at the institutional level and actively prioritize core funding to safeguard GBV prevention and response programming.

Risk of inaction: If GBV is not systematically prioritized in planning, it will remain underfunded, impacting survivors and persons at-risk of GBV, undermining the GBV policy and UNHCR's protection mandate, and creating reputational risks.

Proposed Actions:

1. **Draw from operations' risk registers and GBV policy self-assessments to establish an annual global GBV risk register** that allows for ranking of priority countries/operations requiring support.
 2. **Implement a budget red-flag mechanism to trigger early leadership action** when resources for GBV interventions are disproportionately de-prioritized compared to other Outcome areas, in alignment with situational analyses of contexts most in need.
 3. **Diversify funding streams** by developing multi-year GBV funding flagship proposals with diverse donors to advance innovative and impactful interventions while stepping up efforts to fundraise with private sector, foundations and individual giving.
-

(2) Promote sustainable GBV expertise and localization

Priority: ● High (2025-2026)

Rationale: The evaluation found that UNHCR's partnerships are diverse but that a shift towards generalist partners has sometimes led to a reduction in GBV expertise. UNHCR is increasing its commitment to localization and engaging with WLOs, though gaps were identified, particularly related to heavy bureaucratic and administrative requirements. Local WLOs deliver cost-effective, culturally relevant services but face barriers to funding. Strong GBV partnerships are essential to maintaining GBV minimum standards.

Risk of inaction: Limited GBV expertise, particularly among local partners, erodes GBV service quality and limits sustainability.

Proposed Actions:

⁴ See Egeland, J. & Msuya, J. 2024. A simplified and more efficient humanitarian system. UN OCHA.

4. During partner selection processes, **consistently implement criteria to assess the strength of GBV funded partners** to ensure that all partners have the required institutional capacities, minimum standards for programme delivery, and expertise to deliver quality GBV programming.
 5. **Maintain partnerships with WLOs**, ensuring that resources are allocated swiftly and efficiently while easing administrative and reporting burdens.
 6. **Consider a GBV localization mentoring pilot** in selected operations to support transitioning GBV partnerships with INGOs to partnerships with local WLOs.
 7. As part of contingency plans, **map local WLOs who can assume GBV coordination** in refugee settings and/or programming roles.
-

(3) Define UNHCR's comparative advantage in GBV coordination and leverage its potential to empower local action

Priority: ● High (2025-2026)

Rationale: The comparative advantage of UNHCR lies in its operational presence and knowledge, where it is deeply embedded in subnational structures and communities. The evaluation found that UNHCR's coordination is strong at the sub-national level but often weaker at the national level, emphasizing the need for strategic engagement to sustain credibility and influence in national inter-agency coordination.

Risk of inaction: Coordination gaps will reduce program coherence and limit effective service delivery.

Proposed Actions:

8. **Clarify UNHCR's comparative advantage in GBV coordination** across the diverse settings where it operates together with other actors. Prioritize those areas where UNHCR's coordination results are strongest and ensure visibility and advocacy in national coordination platforms is maintained.
 9. **Mandate co-leadership roles** for WLOs and government actors in coordination platforms where feasible.
-

(4) Ensure GBV risk mitigation is mainstreamed across all operational contexts

Priority: ● High (2025-2027)

Rationale: The evaluation found that UNHCR demonstrates commitment to GBV risk mitigation and mainstreaming, particularly through multifunctional sector teams. However, ownership varies across contexts, influenced by operational settings, leadership communication, capacity, resource constraints, and accountability mechanisms. GBV risk mitigation should be a minimum requirement in all operational contexts and a priority for UNHCR. This aligns with its core protection mandate i.e. in refugee settings and leadership role within the Protection Cluster, and other clusters it leads and co-leads in IDP contexts.

Risk of inaction: Without consistent mitigation, humanitarian assistance may inadvertently increase GBV risks and compromise safety and dignity.

Proposed Actions:

10. **Mandate GBV risk mitigation as a core responsibility** across all sectors and response phases.
 11. **Provide technical tools to support the rollout of the GBV risk mitigation indicator**, monitor uptake, and document good practices in its implementation.
-

(5) Streamline policy guidance and accountability

Priority: ● Medium (2026-2027)

Rationale: The evaluation found that while the GBV policy provides important direction, its implementation is hampered by a lack of timely and adaptable guidance, particularly in non-refugee settings. Accountability for policy implementation is weak at the senior leadership level.

Risk of inaction: Policy implementation is inconsistent due to complex guidance and weak leadership accountability. Without clear, practical tools, implementation will remain uneven, and GBV policy commitments will fail to translate into impact on the ground.

Proposed Actions:

12. **Develop concise operational guidance that can be contextualized**, prioritizing essential principles, minimum requirements, and adaptability for different types of settings. Ensure guidance is aligned to inter-agency frameworks with a focus on exit strategies and building local capacity for a gradual hand-over of responsibilities.
 13. **Enhance accountability** by integrating GBV policy implementation responsibilities and measurable targets into existing performance appraisals for senior managers and leaders.
 14. **Prioritize UNHCR participation and leadership in global strategic advocacy spaces**, including capitalizing more strongly on the spaces in which UNHCR is already fully present. In particular, ensure strengthened advocacy and engagement on protection from GBV in the Global Refugee Forum, Standing Committee, Ex Com meetings and similar spaces.
-

(6) Prioritize GBV response and case management in refugee contexts, develop clear exit strategies, and pivot towards more sustainable partnership models particularly for GBV prevention

Priority: ● Medium (2026-2027)

Rationale: The evaluation found that UNHCR's leadership in case management is widely recognized by partners and external stakeholders and the evaluation observed improved service availability and survivor satisfaction, particularly in refugee settings. UNHCR plays a vital role in securing justice and legal protection for GBV survivors, despite systemic barriers, and successes are evident in advocacy, capacity development, and survivor-centered approaches. UNHCR should prioritize lifesaving GBV services in refugee settings where it leads. This entails ensuring the continuity of services through responsible exit strategies, which involve carefully planned transition processes to maintain the integrity and availability of GBV services. Further, prevention efforts are often underfunded and reduced to awareness-raising activities, limiting their impact.

Risk of inaction: Failure to prioritize resources for essential GBV response/case management and failure to implement responsible exit strategies risks disrupting life-saving services for at-risk populations. At the same time there is a significant risk to undermine longer-term impact of GBV programming by neglecting prevention. Failure to invest in GBV prevention reinforces a reactive model that reproduces the need for GBV response and misses opportunities to reduce long-term risks and foster transformative change.

Proposed Actions:

15. Prioritize and focus program delivery by **concentrating resources on GBV programming in refugee operations while strategically transitioning out of direct service delivery where feasible** through local capacity building.
 16. Enhance program effectiveness through **investment in scalable, evidence-based primary prevention models delivered through local partnerships**. Advocate for dedicated, multi-year funding for sustainable prevention efforts.
-

(7) Invest in GBV staffing, learning and talent development

Priority: ● Medium (2026-2028)

Rationale: The evaluation found that staff burnout and turnover, and a lack of clarity on GBV roles and responsibilities, are important challenges. UNHCR should find ways to maintain GBV technical expertise that can serve operations and partners in a flexible manner. Staffing optimization should be accompanied by a strong focus on capacity building, fostering a culture of learning by establishing platforms for peer exchange, and interagency collaboration.

Risk of inaction: Staff attrition and skill dilution will undermine program quality and accountability. Lack of shared learning will isolate good practices, repeat mistakes, and stall capacity growth.

Proposed Actions:

17. **Provide clear guidance and indicators for when GBV expertise (staff) are required vis-à-vis generalist staff who can manage certain GBV tasks.** Integrate GBV expertise requirements into national and international job descriptions and performance evaluations to ensure accountability.
 18. **Strengthen platforms for peer learning opportunities and build linkages across protection areas** (e.g., GBV, CBP, Child Protection) to ensure that peer learning opportunities are integrated and avoid burdening staff.
-

(8) Streamline data/monitoring systems for reporting and planning

Priority: ● Medium (2026-2027)

Rationale: The evaluation found data systems to be fragmented and inefficient, with limited opportunities to monitor/measure progress towards results. The evaluation also found inconsistent implementation and use of safety audits to support risk mitigation activities and missed opportunities to better utilize Results Monitoring Surveys (RMS) and other assessments/data for planning, prioritization, and decision-making.

Risk of inaction: Inadequate monitoring will hinder accountability, limit adaptation, and obscure urgent needs in a context where UNHCR might shift more towards project-based and tightly earmarked funding

Proposed Actions:

19. **Strengthen the consistent implementation of safety audits, including with the integration of appropriate AGD tools**, and ensure that multifunctional teams use data to influence GBV risk mitigation strategies, and multi-year planning for programmes.
 20. **Conduct a comprehensive review and revision of the current GBV results indicators** to address gaps in measuring outcomes and impact, especially for prevention programming and in localizing the response with WLOs.
-