

AN UNWAVERING COMMITMENT TO ADDRESSING SEXUAL MISCONDUCT THROUGH CRISIS AND ORGANIZATIONAL DOWNSIZING

2025 in Review

INTRODUCTION

The 2025 funding retrenchment reverberated across the humanitarian ecosystem, compelling UNHCR to operate with significantly reduced resources while simultaneously absorbing heightened integrity and protection risks. Widespread programme suspensions and reductions - including rollbacks in services for survivors and steep cuts to gender-based violence and child protection programming - demonstrated how budget pressures can intensify vulnerability precisely where safeguards are most needed.

Over the past year, risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) against stateless and forcibly displaced persons - in particular, women and children - have increased in pace with the contraction of humanitarian programming and assistance. At the same time, UNHCR's institutional capacity to prevent and respond to sexual misconduct has diminished, creating a challenging operational environment in which exposure is rising while protective systems are strained.

Despite these pressures, addressing sexual misconduct remains a non-negotiable organizational and operational priority for UNHCR. In the final year of its [2023–2025 Strategy and Action Plan](#), the organization continued to advance prevention and response efforts, anchored in its robust policy and accountability architecture, including the [2024 Policy on Addressing Sexual Misconduct](#) and the [2020 Policy on the Victim-Centred Approach](#).

Given the reduced capacity in the dedicated PSEA/SH team, in country operations and regional bureaux, UNHCR was required to reprioritize and adapt its approach to addressing sexual misconduct. Efforts were directed towards strengthening operational support and capacity building for the field, safeguarding access to victim assistance, and expanding partnerships with refugee-led and women-led organizations.

The combined effect of rising risk and high turnover of country-level PSEA Focal Points (35–60% across regions) underscored the need to rapidly rebuild and reinforce field capability. Sustaining victim care and a victim-centred approach remain core institutional commitments, even in the context of operational downsizing. UNHCR also maintained an active role in interagency and UN-wide engagement, seeking to enhance efficiencies and pool resources.

PARTNERING, LOCALIZING, AND ENGAGING WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE ORGANIZATIONS

The [Joint ICVA/UNHCR PSEA Community Outreach and Communications Fund](#) remained a flagship initiative for the localization of PSEA efforts, with additional support from the Office of the Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse (OSCSEA) and FCDO. This initiative enabled refugee-led and women-led groups and other community-based organizations, to develop localized PSEA materials and enhance reporting pathways, facilitated by grants of up to USD 20,000, benefiting 13 projects across 13 countries

in 2025.¹ Now in its fifth funding cycle, the Fund continues to serve as an essential resource for empowering local stakeholders—including those representing individuals with lived experience—on PSEA, fostering context-specific outreach activities, and expanding safe, tailored reporting channels that reflect diverse age, gender, and background considerations.

To date, the Fund has supported 78 community-led projects in over 40 countries, reaching over 2 million people. Its [Resource Database](#) has over 60 types of adaptable outreach and communication products in more than 50 languages, contributing to a multiplier effect across operations.

In 2025, UNHCR strengthened its institutional commitment to localization through the development and implementation of a new [Guidance on Engagement with Organizations of People with Lived Experience of Forced Displacement and/or Statelessness in relation to PSEA](#). This Guidance establishes clear standards, flexible modalities, and practical measures to ensure inclusive, accountable, and safe partnerships. It consolidates UNHCR's principles, policies, and tools into a comprehensive resource designed to support staff in integrating PSEA considerations consistently when partnering with refugee-led, women-led, community-based, and other organizations anchored in lived experience.

UNHCR has updated procedures for **Refugee-Led Innovation partnerships**. In 2025, a transitional requirement was implemented mandating that all partners selected from 2024 onward complete a PSEA assessment and, if assessed as below full capacity, to develop and implement [Capacity Strengthening Implementation Plans](#), thereby ending exemptions previously afforded to such partners. Beginning in 2026, these measures—accompanied by expanded support to refugee-led organizations through technical assistance, training, and mentoring—will be prerequisites for any new Refugee-Led Innovation agreements.

¹ Afghanistan, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Mali,

Through ongoing participation in **the Interagency Implementing Partner Protocol Working Group**, UNHCR supported the deployment of a new interactive online PSEA training program for partners, providing NGOs and CSOs with scenario-based guidance and practical instruction on navigating the Harmonized PSEA Assessment Tool within the UN Partner Portal, seeking to improve the quality and consistency of partner assessments. Concurrently, UNHCR contributed to the creation of a new INGO PSEA Capacity Assessment Template intended to expedite assessment processes and promote coherent application of global standards.

Additionally, UNHCR supported the revision of its internal **Guidance on Core Standard 8**, establishing standardized procedures for reassessing partners previously deemed ineligible, thereby enhancing accountability and predictability in partner compliance monitoring.

Across UNHCR's global partnership portfolio, **94% of 956 eligible partners** underwent PSEA capacity assessments, with 86% achieving a full PSEA capacity rating, reflecting strengthened adherence to safeguarding standards and improved operational oversight. This systematic evaluation enabled more precise risk identification and reinforced accountability measures across regions.

Collectively, these advancements highlight UNHCR's dedication to embedding localization within effective PSEA programming. They also demonstrate a strategic commitment to scaling community-driven prevention and reporting models, and to promoting leadership based on lived experience as a cornerstone of robust and sustainable accountability systems.

ENGAGEMENT WITH GOVERNMENT PARTNERS

As part of UNHCR's ongoing efforts to enhance collaboration with government partners on PSEA, the updated [Quick Guide on UNHCR's Engagement with the UNSDCF](#) now integrates

Myanmar, Nigeria, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Yemen.

PSEA, including a model PSEA clause for incorporation into the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. The Guide identifies the Cooperation Framework as a strategic platform for facilitating UN-wide engagement with government authorities concerning PSEA and encourages UNHCR Representatives to engage through the UN Country Team to advocate for its adoption.

Following the publication of this Guide, the PSEA/SH team proactively contacted the 24 country operations involved in developing new Cooperation Frameworks in 2025 to disseminate the model PSEA clause and encourage UNHCR to support its adoption. At the end of 2025, five of these operations had adopted the model PSEA clause and advocacy was ongoing in another 10 operations, reinforcing government engagement on PSEA through a coordinated UN approach.

PUTTING SURVIVORS FIRST: CHAMPIONING VICTIM-CENTRED SUPPORT

A victim-centred approach remains the cornerstone of UNHCR's efforts to address sexual misconduct, ensuring that all prevention and response efforts are guided by the needs, wellbeing, and expressed wishes of victims.

In 2025, UNHCR's **Victim Care Team**, composed of two clinical psychologists, directly supported more than 50 new situations of sexual harassment by providing psychosocial support, guidance, and accompaniment to victims. This year also saw an increase in the number of managers seeking support to address situations of sexual harassment in line with a victim-centred approach.

UNHCR's **NotOnlyMe platform** is a confidential tool for victims of sexual harassment to document what happened to them and, if they wish, to anonymously find out if the person who sexually harassed them has harassed others. Users are also able to access information on support resources available and can chat anonymously with the UNHCR Victim Care Team. Since its establishment in 2023, NotOnlyMe has seen promising use among UNHCR personnel, with 288 accounts created and over 60 incident forms

submitted for matching, 23 of which were in 2025. With 30% of incident forms submitted to the system resulting in a match this year, the tool remains a crucial space for victims to safely come forward, seek support, and access information.

“NotOnlyMe is a powerful lifeline. In moments when fear and silence feel overwhelming, it reminds [victims] they are not alone. By offering a safe, anonymous way to reach out, it can often give survivors the courage to take that critical first step toward support, resources, and ultimately --- healing.”

While the Victim Care Team has long provided guidance on a victim-centred approach across the organization, in 2025 it became more systematically involved in providing direct support to victims of SEA. This was done in coordination with the Inspector General's Office (IGO) on select cases involving specific risks and complements the vital work of PSEA focal points and existing GBV and child protection services at country level.

UNHCR collaborated with other United Nations agencies to advance the implementation of the **UN Victims Assistance Protocol** in high risk countries. In November 2025, UNHCR co-facilitated and supported Training of Trainers programs for PSEA Network members in South Sudan and Bangladesh.

EMPOWERING THROUGH LEARNING: ADVANCING CAPACITY BUILDING AND CULTIVATING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

In 2025, UNHCR intensified its efforts to restore and rebuild field capacity for PSEA amid significant downsizing and turnover across its operations. Estimates indicate that up to half of country PSEA Focal Points were impacted by staffing reductions, with many now overseeing six or seven thematic portfolios each. This carries substantial risks to the organization and the communities it serves.

To address these challenges, UNHCR launched a modular **E-learning Programme for PSEA Focal Points**, comprising seven self-paced modules and an accompanying global webinar series, aimed at delivering standardized onboarding and ongoing professional development. This initiative is designed to enhance foundational competencies, build confidence in the role, and ensure functional continuity despite persistent staff turnover; it has already reached 380 personnel.

The organization also released the multilingual **PSEA Focal Point Quick Reference Kit**, a field-friendly tool that supports newly appointed PSEA Focal Points by distilling essential responsibilities, reporting pathways, SOP requirements, and key resources in a single accessible package.

The Global PSEA/SH Team continued to provide operational support, offering targeted country and regional trainings as well as technical guidance. A regional Training of Trainers sessions on the **PSEA/SH Learning Package** took place for the Asia and the Pacific region in January 2025, and an interagency training on Victims Assistance Protocol was conducted in South Sudan in November 2025.

Despite significant financial challenges, numerous UNHCR operations — including Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Hungary, Italy, Iran, Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Poland, the Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine — rolled out the UNHCR PSEA/SH Learning Package, demonstrating a strong continued dedication to safeguarding responsibilities in the field.

The **PSEA/SH Learning Package** was revised to reflect updates on reporting procedures and government engagement. Ongoing investments in standardized learning, accessible field tools, tailored operational support, and updated training materials remain critical to ensuring the continuity of PSEA prevention and response, particularly amid reduced staffing, heightened SEA risks, and growing responsibilities transferred to local partners under the localization agenda.

SUPPORTING GLOBAL EMERGENCY RESPONSE CAPACITY

During the reporting period, UNHCR undertook substantial actions to strengthen its emergency preparedness and response capabilities related to sexual misconduct, implementing three interconnected measures aligned with the Organization's priorities and promoting an interagency coordinated approach.

The **UNHCR Emergency Handbook** now includes comprehensive guidance on **PSEA** and **interagency PSEA coordination**, outlining standards for prevention, safe reporting procedures, survivor-centred responses, and coordination frameworks applicable across refugee, IDP, and mixed settings. These enhancements promote accountability and uphold a victim-centred approach from the onset of emergencies.

To enhance surge capacity, UNHCR conducted three PSEA/SH sessions within the **Workshop on Emergency Management (WEM)**, equipping 121 deployees with essential competencies in SEA risk assessment, reporting mechanisms, and survivor support, in complementarity of the WEM e-learning module and broader organizational learning efforts.

For improved operational access to vital resources, UNHCR established a centralized '**Protection from Sexual Misconduct**' page within its **Emergency Management Portal**. This dedicated hub organizes key policies and guidelines, checklists for senior managers and deployees, focal point materials, interagency referral tools, and a variety of community-facing communication products. Notably, the portal also includes outreach content from the ICVA/UNHCR Community Outreach and Communications Fund and the "PSEA at the Frontline" initiative. The aggregation of these resources within a single platform enhances timely access to guidance and supports consistent best practices during emergency surges.

DRIVING SYSTEM-WIDE IMPACT: INTER-AGENCY LEADERSHIP AND CONTRIBUTIONS

UNHCR continued to actively engage in relevant interagency and UN-wide fora related to sexual misconduct, in particular the IASC, OSCSEA, the Office of the Victim's Rights Advocate, and the UN Executive Group to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Harassment, contributing to or (co)leading the development of various interagency policies, guidance and tools.

Under the IASC framework, UNHCR, in collaboration with IOM, continued to co-lead the workstream on **Interagency SEA Referral Procedures**. This included finalizing relevant tools, coordinating online consultations with practitioners across nine countries to inform recommendations and prioritize field support, and supporting the development and revision of country-level interagency SOPs for SEA referrals in alignment with global guidance. These efforts culminated in the launch of a comprehensive resource package in December 2025.

UNHCR led the Advisory Group to the Expert Panel on SEA Investigations, which developed the **IASC Investigators' Manual: A Victim-Centred Approach to Investigation of SEA Complaints**, published in July 2025.

In addition, UNHCR contributed to various other interagency resources, including the Secretary-General's Report on Special Measures for PSEA, advocacy messages regarding PSEA in the context of funding reductions, the PSEA at the Frontline project (phase 2), and the IASC SEA Risk Mapping and Mitigation Package for Clusters, and tools included in the Responsible Cash Programming Toolkit.

Together with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), UNHCR co-chaired the Area of Work on Victim Support under the **UN Executive Group to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Harassment**. The Area of Work delivered key milestones over the past year, including the issuance of an updated Guide for Managers on responding to situations of sexual harassment using a victim-centred approach.

Another key achievement was the establishment of an **Interagency Victim Reference Group** — comprising of personnel and former personnel from four UN agencies who have experienced sexual harassment — offering a safe and structured platform for victims to inform and advance UN-wide efforts on sexual harassment. This marks the first time victims have had a dedicated channel to contribute to the UN's work to address sexual harassment. The group has already provided valuable guidance and feedback on key initiatives, such as the Guide for Managers and the upcoming UN-wide Victims' Survey.

Since 2023, UNHCR has implemented the **Misconduct Disclosure Scheme (MDS)** to screen candidates from outside the UN system for any history of sexual misconduct. UNHCR is one of four UN entities gradually rolling out the scheme, alongside more than 300 non-governmental organizations, to help prevent known perpetrators from moving between organizations within the aid sector.

In 2025, UNHCR Moldova strengthened partners' alignment with international safeguarding standards by actively encouraging and supporting their enrolment in MDS. This effort was reinforced through comprehensive capacity-building initiatives and the dissemination of context-specific guidance outlining the technical procedures and legal requirements for MDS implementation, ensuring full compliance with Moldova's legal framework.

Throughout 2025, the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) and the OSCSEA released assessments concerning policies and practices related to PSEA within the UN framework. The UN-wide **Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) review on PSEA** recognized numerous examples of good practices already implemented by UNHCR, while also identifying areas for further development in. UNHCR remains actively involved in ongoing internal and interagency discussions to address the recommendations provided by the JIU.

The PSEA/SH section also contributed to UNHCR's reporting under the **2025 UN System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-SWAP)** on PSEA/SH related indicators.

NAVIGATING CHALLENGES: ADVANCING RISK MANAGEMENT AMIDST FUNDING CUTS AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The funding cuts and organizational changes in UNHCR have led to narrower operating margins and stretched oversight, increasing the potential for misconduct, especially sexual exploitation and abuse against the people it serves.

UNHCR has incorporated SEA into its **enterprise risk management** processes to support comprehensive risk assessment and inform both proactive and reactive PSEA measures at all levels.

To supplement these efforts, in 2025, UNHCR launched an updated **SEA Risk Management Tool** to support operations and Regional Bureaux. This resource identifies specific SEA risks, their causes and impacts, and recommends treatments, while staying aligned with key PSEA policies. Its aim is to standardize approaches across field offices, boost accountability among partners, and integrate SEA safeguards into planning and partnership management. In this context, UNHCR is also examining the possibility of a Global SEA Risk Index to help focus scarce resources on the highest-risk operations.

Finally, the PSEA/SH team contributed to development of the **Psychosocial Risk Management (PSRM) tool**, led by the Psychosocial Wellbeing Section. The PSRM includes a confidential survey-based Psychosocial Risk Index and dashboard, which are part of the annual ERM risk review and duty-of-care frameworks. This initiative bolsters managerial responsibility and supports a positive environment for PSEA/SH by addressing psychosocial challenges and mitigating barriers to reporting and trust.

2025 Annual Survey on Facts and Perceptions of UN Personnel related to the Prohibitions of SEA – Highlights

- ♀ 3,403 UNHCR personnel across 122 locations participated in the 2025 survey
- ♀ 7% knew of SEA incidents at duty station in last 12 months
- ♀ 39% of those aware of SEA did not report (+8% vs 2024)
- ♀ 16% felt they could not report SEA without fear of retaliation
- ♀ 3% stated they had experienced sexual harassment (63% of them did not report)
- ♀ 99% believe UNHCR has clear PSEA policies
- ♀ 96% know how and where to report SEA