

Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)

16 January 2026

Key points

- Never engage in sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and report any concern or suspicion of SEA of people we serve immediately to the IGO.
- Ensure that forcibly displaced and stateless persons and other affected community members are aware of their rights, services and where / how to access them, that SEA is not tolerated, and how they can report any concerns related to SEA.
- Ensure that effective, safe, and accessible feedback and response systems are in place to report any suspicions of SEA.
- Systematically integrate protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) in information campaigns, awareness-raising, trainings and meetings with forcibly displaced and stateless persons.
- Ensure that victims of SEA have access without delay to the assistance and support that they require in line with a victim-centred approach.

1. Overview

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) represent grave breaches of the right to safety, security and dignity of forcibly displaced and stateless persons and members of host communities. UNHCR is committed to taking all necessary action to prevent, mitigate the risks of and respond to sexual misconduct and to put the protection, rights and dignity of victims at the forefront, in line with its [Policy on Addressing Sexual Misconduct](#) and its [Policy on a Victim-Centered Approach in UNHCR's response to sexual misconduct](#) (hereafter referred to as “Victim-Centred Approach Policy”).

Sexual exploitation is defined as any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another. This includes transactional sex regardless of the legal status of sex-work in the country. It also includes any situation where sex is coerced or demanded by withholding or threatening to withhold goods or services or by blackmailing.

Sexual abuse means the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force, or under unequal or coercive conditions. Any sexual activity with children constitutes sexual abuse.

All UN personnel and partners have an obligation to report whenever they have concerns or suspicions that SEA has occurred by a fellow worker, whether in the same agency or not.

PSEA policies and practices aim to prevent, reduce the risk of, and respond to SEA by UN personnel, NGO partners, and other entities and persons involved in providing humanitarian or development assistance, including government staff, vendors and contractors, and community volunteers and workers, and ensure that allegations of SEA are reported and responded to in a timely and appropriate manner, and that victims of SEA are referred to support and assistance needed in line with a victim centred approach.

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2. Relevance for emergency operations

Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment is a key principle in [UNHCR's Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response](#), and PSEA must be systematically integrated into emergency preparedness and throughout all stages of the response.

While SEA can happen anywhere and at any time, risks are particularly heightened in emergencies. UNHCR emergency operations take place in fragile environments with particularly high risks of abuse and exploitation of people affected by displacement. For example, in an emergency displacement context, there is often a breakdown of the usual protective institutions such as the family, community, government and law enforcement structures, etc. Means of livelihood are severely affected, with significant consequences on the lives of those affected. The impacts of forced displacement are often particularly severe for affected women and children. Lack of awareness by forcibly displaced persons about their rights and entitlements in an unfamiliar environment also increase risks of exploitation and abuse.

Furthermore, emergencies bring a rapid increase in the number of partners for the humanitarian response, rapid recruitments and staff turnover, high work pressures, higher-risk delivery models and challenges to ensuring effective coordination and oversight, thereby increasing the risks of all forms of misconduct, including SEA.

It is therefore critical for staff in emergency operations to be mindful of these elevated risks of SEA and take measures from the outset of the emergency response to prevent and mitigate risks

of SEA and to take immediate actions to respond if it occurs, in line with [UNHCR's Victim-Centred Approach Policy](#). PSEA must be treated as a priority in the operational strategy for the emergency response and integrated across the response. Managers have a particular responsibility to ensure that the UNHCR Code of Conduct is upheld, and to create and sustain a respectful and inclusive environment that prevents SEA and where colleagues feel safe and encouraged to speak up. Since the relationship between humanitarian personnel and those receiving assistance is inherently unequal in terms of power and authority, staff and partners must avoid any action that could suggest, imply or create the perception that engaging in sexual activity with humanitarian personnel might be expected in return for assistance or other services of any kind. PSEA Coordination structures need to be established if not already in place.

3. Main guidance

From the outset of the emergency, UNHCR and its partners must establish mechanisms that prevent and respond to SEA and mitigate risks thereof. In accordance with the [UNHCR Policy on Addressing Sexual Misconduct](#), concerns or suspicions of SEA committed by fellow workers, including UNHCR personnel, partners, contractors, suppliers, government officials, and community workers and volunteers, must be reported immediately to the Inspector General's Office (IGO). UNHCR personnel are encouraged to report suspected SEA directly to the IGO, which can be reached directly at inspector@unhcr.org, or via the IGO [online complaint form](#). Additionally, reports can also be made through the PSEA focal point of the operation,, a manager at UNHCR, or the [SpeakUp! Helpline](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only), all of whom have the duty to report it to the IGO. For more information on reporting SEA, refer to Reporting Misconduct ([here](#)). Support and assistance must be provided to victims of SEA, in line with a victim-centred approach as outlined in UNHCR's [Victim-Centred Approach Policy](#).

In an emergency context, systems and structures (such as an interagency PSEA network, or safe and accessible feedback and response systems through which SEA can be reported) may not be present and may need to be established. New staff and partners recruited for the emergency may not be adequately trained on PSEA or lack the required policies and systems for PSEA (for partners).

It is critical that all related actions, processes and procedures adopt a victim-centred approach, which is defined in [UNHCR's Victim-Centred Approach](#) Policy as "a way of engaging with victim(s) that prioritizes listening to the victim(s), avoids re-traumatization, and systematically focuses on their safety, rights, well-being, expressed needs and choices, thereby giving back as much control to victim(s) as feasible and ensuring the empathetic and sensitive delivery of services and accompaniment in a non-judgmental manner". The Policy outlines key principles that should guide all aspects of UNHCR's approach to SEA prevention, risk mitigation and response.

Steps to be taken

From the moment of arrival, and throughout their work at a duty station, senior managers and other personnel must take action to prevent and mitigate risks of SEA. If it does occur, ensure that it is reported and provide victims with support and assistance and eliminate the risk of its recurrence. The following are key steps that must be followed in an emergency response:

- **Recruitment:** Ensure that all newly recruited local staff and members of the affiliate workforce are cleared by the [UN Clear Check database](#) before they are issued a contract or letter of offer. Make sure that all staff have signed the Code of Conduct declaration and have completed the mandatory e-learning course on PSEA available on [Workday](#). Non-UN partners can make use of the [Misconduct Disclosure Scheme](#) for vetting to prevent perpetrators of sexual misconduct from moving between organisations.
- **Capacity-building and Awareness-raising:** Train and equip all personnel, partners and other stakeholders in PSEA and take specific steps to prevent it. For example, ensure that all personnel have completed mandatory PSEA training, discuss PSEA action plans in office meetings, meet with government officials to discuss prevention, organize capacity-building sessions with staff, partners, authorities, contractors, and other actors involved in the delivery of humanitarian assistance, etc. Ensure that all people involved in project activities (e.g. warehouse & distribution workers, cash assistance, enumerators, community mobilisers, incentive workers), in particular those who come into contact with affected community members, have received PSEA training, signed the Code of Conduct (see, for example, [Code of Conduct used for service providers involved in the delivery of cash assistance](#), accessible to UNHCR staff only), and understand what SEA is and how to report it. Please refer to "[Learning and Resources](#)" under the PSEA/SH Intranet page (accessible to UNHCR staff only) to access learning tools and materials for use by UNHCR personnel and partners, as well as section 5 "[Learning and Field Practices](#)" below.
- **Focal points:** Ensure a [PSEA focal point](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only) and an alternate are appointed by the Representative. For large operations, focal points and alternates may be appointed at the national level and in each office. The [PSEA Focal Point Essentials: Quick Reference Kit](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only) is available as a resource for PSEA focal points.
- **Coordination:** Ensure that an inter-agency PSEA network is in place to ensure effective coordination on PSEA amongst all partners in the response for SEA prevention, risk mitigation and response. In a refugee response, UNHCR should take the lead in establishing (where it does not exist already) and (co-)coordinating the PSEA network in close collaboration with partners, local authorities and affected communities. In IDP situations, UNHCR should jointly work with other agencies for the establishment and operationalization of a PSEA Network, and actively participate in or co-lead the Network as appropriate. See also entry on [Coordination on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse \(PSEA\)](#), [UNHCR's Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response](#), [PSEA: A Collective Responsibility](#), and for refugee responses the updated [Guidance on the Refugee Coordination Model](#).
- **Assessment and Mitigation of Risks:** In collaboration with stakeholders, including affected communities, assess and map potential risk areas by sector and discuss actions that can prevent and reduce the risks of SEA. Integrate SEA prevention, risk mitigation and response into protection analysis and multi-sectoral programming. A risk management tool to assist field operations in ensuring that possible SEA risks are adequately identified and analysed and relevant treatments are thoroughly considered is available [here](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only). Inter-agency resources for SEA risk assessment and mitigation are also available, including: IOM's [Inter-agency Risk Assessment on SEA \(IARA\) Toolkit](#), UNHCR & WFP [Toolkit on Mitigating the Risk of Abuse in the Use of Cash](#), IASC [SEA risk Mapping and Mitigation Package for Clusters](#) and [Empowered Aid – Tip sheets for SEA Risk Mitigation](#)

and other Empowered Aid [tools and resources](#).

- **Community Engagement and Awareness-raising:** Strengthen community engagement and awareness-raising. Critical activities include systematically integrating PSEA messages in information campaigns and disseminating information related to PSEA through diverse channels that are adapted to community preferences and the local context and are accessible to women, men, girls and boys of diverse backgrounds. To prevent SEA effectively, UNHCR has the responsibility to ensure that forcibly displaced and stateless persons know their rights and entitlements, including that all humanitarian assistance and services are free, that they should never be expected to provide any form of sexual favor, and that demands for such favors are strictly prohibited. UNHCR should also ensure that community members know how and where to report SEA incidents safely and confidentially when they occur, and how and where victims of SEA can access multi- sectoral support and assistance. The CDAC Network [Message Library: PSEA](#) has simple messages on PSEA that can be adapted and used in different contexts, with the intention to help actors to make a quick start on communicating with communities while further developing mechanisms for ongoing dialogue with diverse groups within each community. Other resources include the materials developed with support from the UNHCR/ICVA [PSEA Community Outreach and Communication Fund](#) (available on the deliverables database [here](#)), as well as simplified communication materials developed by WFP and IOM in partnership with Translators without Borders under the PSEA at the Frontline: Together We Say No initiative [Phase 1](#), targeting frontline workers, and its [Phase 2](#) initiative that offers tools to support communication on PSEA co-created with communities for communities.
- **Feedback and response mechanisms:** Collaborate with [Accountability to Affected People \(AAP\)](#) working group / actors on the ground to map existing feedback and response mechanisms that can safely and confidentially receive complaints related to SEA from communities and partners and design and establish feedback mechanisms to fill gaps if required. In particular, identify and support feedback channels that are preferred by communities and ensure that the design of any new mechanisms are informed by community feedback. Ensure that feedback mechanisms are sensitive to [age, gender and diversity \(AGD\)](#) and accessible to women, children, [persons with disabilities](#), [older persons](#), minority groups, and others at heightened risk. To enhance accessibility for diverse groups, it is recommended to have multiple channels and options for reporting. Due to the sensitive nature of SEA, confidentiality needs to be a primary consideration in the establishment and running of feedback mechanisms. All personnel staffing feedback mechanisms must be trained to fully understand the definition of SEA and able to identify situations where there are any suspicions or concerns related to SEA and know the procedures to immediately refer individuals to support services and to report SEA allegations to the IGO. It is also critical that feedback and response mechanisms are linked with an effective [interagency referral mechanism](#) so that a complaint made by community members through any feedback mechanism can then be promptly referred for assistance based on the victim's consent and to the appropriate entity whose personnel is implicated as the potential perpetrator.
- **Survivor / Victim Assistance:** Work with GBV and child protection actors to ensure that existing response services have been mapped and that survivors of SEA can access the multi-sectoral support that they require through existing GBV and [child protection](#) referral pathways, in line with a survivor/ victim-centred approach, [GBV Guiding Principles](#), and the

best interests principle in the case of children. Support available includes GBV case management / child protection case management / Best Interests Procedure and other psychosocial services, medical assistance (including clinical management of rape), safety services (including police, safe shelters as well as appropriate alternative care for child survivor) and legal services. Support can also include cash or in-kind assistance as well as economic empowerment interventions. Ensure collaboration with relevant coordination structures and actors, including GBV and [child protection](#), which are to take the lead in mapping services under their respective areas of responsibility and liaising with PSEA Focal Points to ensure SEA considerations and specificities are duly incorporated into their SOPs and ways of working. PSEA focal points must be trained on GBV safe disclosure (GBV coordinators / focal points to support).

- **Partner Capacity Assessment and capacity-strengthening implementation plan:** Assess PSEA capacity of prospective funded partners that are engaged in the emergency response, in accordance with the [UN Protocol on Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse involving Implementing Partners](#) (UN Protocol, April 2018) and the [Administrative Instruction on Procedures on Partnership Management](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only). All assessments are carried out using the PSEA Module on the [UNPartner Portal \(UNPP\)](#). Under the [UNHCR Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response](#) paragraph 8.17, when an emergency has been declared, the PSEA capacity assessment for new partners should be completed as soon as possible and no later than three months after signing the partnership agreement. If a UNHCR Office finds that a prospective partner lacks satisfactory PSEA capacity (with low or medium capacity), it must justify the decision to select that partner and develop, together with the partner, a capacity strengthening implementation plan (CSIP) that builds the partner's capacity appropriately, monitor its performance in the course of programme activities, and manage associated risks. The implementation of the plan must be continuously monitored, and the capacity of partners with CSIP in place are eventually re-assessed. Irrespective of their level of capacity, partners are monitored regularly for measures they take to mitigate risks of and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse. Please refer to the [Procedure](#) and the [Programme Handbook](#) (PLAN - Section 8, and GET - Sections 2 and 4), as well the relevant repository items for further details about the partners' PSEA capacity assessment process and useful resources (accessible to UNHCR staff only). In addition, the UNPP ([IP Protocol for PSEA Resources](#)) has useful resources that can be helpful for [partners](#) as well as the [UN staff](#) when conducting the assessment. An e-learning [course](#) "PSEA and partnerships in the Aid Sector" that is designed to help CSOs and NGOs understand and successfully complete the UN IP PSEA Capacity Assessment process is also available on the UNPP.
- **Reporting:** Report allegations of SEA without delay. Personnel who have concerns or suspicions that SEA is occurring have an obligation to bring such information immediately to the attention of the IGO, in accordance with the [UNHCR Policy on Addressing Sexual Misconduct](#). Staff should not investigate or attempt to ascertain SEA allegations themselves, because to do so might compromise confidentiality, put victims and witnesses at risk, disrupt due process and negatively impact the integrity of the investigation process. Personnel who report a complaint to the IGO or who cooperate in an IGO investigation are protected from any form of retaliation under [UNHCR's Administrative Instruction on Protection against Retaliation](#) (UNHCR/AI/2018/10/Rev.1) (accessible to UNHCR staff only).

Related UNHCR management system(s)

The Section on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment (PSEA/SH) leads and coordinates UNHCR's work on SEA and SH. In case you have questions or need support on PSEA and SH, please reach out to the PSEA/SH Section team at: hqpseash@unhcr.org.

Post emergency phase

While risks of SEA are particularly elevated in an emergency context, SEA can occur in any context where the UN and its partners operate and are providing aid to people in need. Therefore, measures and actions for SEA prevention, risk mitigation and response must continue in the post emergency phase.

A post-emergency phase normally provides opportunities to deepen and make more sustainable responses, and it is important that PSEA, as a cross-cutting priority, is integrated across post emergency and longer-term interventions. This may include, for example, strengthening engagement on PSEA with government authorities in contexts where humanitarian assistance to displaced persons is integrated into government services and social protection schemes, and supporting local / community-based organizations in strengthening their PSEA systems and capacity and ensuring integration of PSEA in localization efforts.

Checklist

- **Recruitment:** Ensure that all newly recruited personnel have been cleared by the [UN Clear Check database](#) and sign the Code of Conduct, receive a briefing on PSEA from the PSEA focal point, and complete the mandatory e-learning course on PSEA available on [Workday](#).
- **Capacity-building:** Ensure that all personnel, NGO and government partners, contractors, community volunteers, and other actors in the emergency response are trained on PSEA, and understand what SEA is and how to report it.
- **Community engagement and awareness-raising:** Engage with communities and raise awareness of community members on PSEA, through ways that are accessible and adapted to all groups within communities.
- **Coordination:** Ensure that an inter-agency PSEA network is in place for effective coordination on PSEA amongst all partners in the emergency response.

- **Reporting mechanisms:** Work with AAP / community-based protection colleagues to ensure that safe, accessible and contextually appropriate feedback and response mechanisms are in place for community members to report SEA. Personnel who become aware of any suspicions or concerns related to SEA must report them without delay through established reporting mechanisms of their organization.
- **Victim assistance:** Work with GBV and child protection colleagues to ensure that SEA victims can access assistance through GBV and [child protection](#) referral pathways and services.
- **SEA risk identification and mitigation:** Assess and map potential SEA risk areas by sector and discuss and implement measures to mitigate identified risks.
- **PSEA capacity of partners:** Conduct PSEA partner capacity assessment of funded partners and support them in development and implementation of capacity strengthening plans where gaps are identified.

4. Policies, Guidelines and Useful Links

[Secretary-General's Bulletin. Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#)

[UNHCR/HCP/2024/02 Policy on Addressing Sexual Misconduct](#)

[Policy on a Victim-Centred Approach in UNHCR's response to Sexual Misconduct](#)

[UN Protocol on SEA allegations involving implementing partners](#)

5. Learning and field practices

[Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Online UN PSEA course](#)

[Accessible to partners: Online UN PSEA course](#)

[Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Addressing Sexual Misconduct in Emergencies](#)

[Accessible to UNHCR staff only: UNHCR internal PSEA/SH learning package](#)

[IASC, 'Saying No to Sexual Misconduct' - training for partners](#)

[E-learning on Investigating Allegations of SEA in DisasterReady](#)

[IASC, Investigating Allegations of SEA - A Toolkit for Partners](#)

[Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Gouta Case Conference case study tool to facili...](#)

[For partners: Gouta Case Conference case study tool to facilitate peer-to-peer ...](#)

[Facilitator's Guide for Session on Values, Attitudes and Organisational Culture](#)

PSEA Community of Practice for UNHCR PSEA Focal Points and other colleagues involved in PSEA work - you can request access to the group (Sharepoint) [here](#) and to the Viva Engage community [here](#) (both accessible to UNHCR staff only).

A full list of learning resources are available on the PSEA/SH UNHCR Intranet [here](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only), including short videos for facilitating staff dialogues.

[Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Online learning course for PSEA focal points](#)

[IASC, Investigating Allegations of SEA - A Toolkit for Partners](#)

[For partners: E-learning course "PSEA and partnerships in the Aid Sector" \(acce...](#)

6. Links

[Accessible to UNHCR staff only: UNHCR, Dedicated intranet page \(covering SEA an... Accessible to UNHCR staff only: UNHCR, intranet page covering SEA and SH - reso... Tackling sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment: 2023-2025 Strateg... Accessible to UNHCR staff only: DESS Emergency Preparedness and Response Portal... Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Checklist on PSEA/SH for Representatives and se... Accessible to UNHCR staff only: PSEA/SH Checklist for Emergency Deployees Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Generic Terms of Reference for PSEA Focal Point... Accessible to UNHCR staff only: PSEA Focal Point Essentials: Quick Reference Ki... Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Generic Terms of Reference templates for PSEA i... Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Resources and Tools to support UNHCR Bureaux an... Accessible to UNHCR staff only: PSEA Community Network \(Sharepoint\) - Home Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Viva Engage PSEA Community UNHCR website: Tackling sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment IASC PSEA website IASC Six Core Principles Relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, 2019 UN website: preventing sexual exploitation and abuse Interagency PSEA Community Outreach and Communication Fund IASC Minimum Operating Standards for PSEA \(MOS-PSEA\)](#)

7. Main contacts

- Protection from SEA and SH Section, hqpseash@unhcr.org
- Inspector General's Office (IGO). At: inspector@unhcr.org; [IGO online complaint form](#). Fax: 0041 22 7397380. Telephone: 004122 739 8844.