

Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)

13 June 2023

Key points

- Never engage in sexual exploitation and abuse and report any suspicion of sexual exploitation or abuse of forcibly displaced and stateless persons immediately to the IGO.
- Ensure that forcibly displaced and stateless persons are aware of their rights, services and where / how to access them, that sexual exploitation 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 of forcibly displaced and stateless persons.
- Systematically integrate 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. 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 our [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.

Sexual abuse means the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force, or under unequal or coercive conditions. It includes sexual slavery, pornography, child abuse and sexual assault. 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 and whether or not within the United Nations system, and including potential misconduct by government, NGO partners and other actors involved in delivery of assistance.

PSEA policies and practices aim to reduce the risk of, prevent and respond to SEA by UN personnel, NGO partners, or other entities and persons involved in providing humanitarian or development assistance, including government staff, contractors, and community volunteers and workers, to 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.

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. SEA can happen anywhere and at any time. UNHCR emergency operations take place in fragile environments with particularly high risks of abuse and exploitation of people affected by displacement and thereby exposed to heightened protection risks. 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, and there are usually considerable practical and psychosocial implications 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, 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 respond to SEA and mitigate risks thereof, and ensure that victims of SEA are provided with support and assistance in line with [UNHCR's Victim-Centred Approach Policy](#). 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 sexual exploitation and abuse. 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 and PSEA must be treated as a priority in the operational strategy for the emergency response.

3. Main guidance

From the outset of the emergency, UNHCR and its partners must establish mechanisms that prevent and respond to sexual exploitation or abuse and mitigate risks thereof. Any act of SEA constitutes serious misconduct and allegations 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, the Representative / Head of Office, 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 complaints of 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 taskforce or 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 possess the knowledge or skills to handle SEA issues, and may lack dedicated policies and training on PSEA. In the context of cross-border and onward movements by refugees, specific measures to respond and prevent SEA may need to be supported at the regional level.

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 afore-mentioned 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 staff must take action to ensure that SEA does not take place, if it does occur, 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, in accordance with the [High Commissioner's all staff message of 5 August 2019](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only). 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 staff, partners and other stakeholders in PSEA and take specific steps to prevent it. For example, 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), etc., in particular those who come into contact with forcibly displaced persons, have received PSEA training, signed the Code of Conduct declaration (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 as well as partners, as well as the section "Learning and Resources" below.

- **Focal points:** Ensure a PSEA focal point and an alternate are appointed. For large operations, focal points and alternates may be appointed at the national level and in each office.

- **Coordination:** Establish an inter-agency PSEA network (where one does not already exist) to ensure effective coordination on PSEA amongst partners for prevention, risk mitigation and response. In a refugee response, UNHCR should take the lead in establishing and 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 if one does not exist already, 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](#), and [PSEA: A Collective Responsibility](#).

- **Assessment and Mitigation of Risks:** In collaboration with stakeholders, including affected people, 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 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).

- **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 the local context and are accessible to women, men, girls and boys of diverse backgrounds. These may include distribution of posters and leaflets, dissemination of audio-visual materials, social media, awareness-raising sessions and community meetings, focus group discussions, public address systems, mass media, dissemination at service delivery points, etc. To prevent SEA effectively, UNHCR has the responsibility to ensure that forcibly displaced 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. Likewise, information should be provided to clarify that sexual relationships between beneficiaries of assistance and humanitarian personnel are generally prohibited. UNHCR should also ensure affected people know how and where to report SEA incidents safely and confidentially when they occur, and how and where they can access multi-sectoral support and assistance.

- **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. Steps must also be taken to ensure that all personnel staffing feedback mechanisms fully understand the definition of SEA (as forcibly displaced persons may not explicitly use the terms "sexual exploitation" or "sexual abuse"), and be trained to appropriately refer individuals to support services and report SEA allegations, in line with the obligation of all aid workers to report any concerns or suspicions regarding SEA through established reporting mechanisms. (See: [Secretary-General's Bulletin: Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, 9 October 2003 \(ST/SGB/2003/13\)](#), Section 3.2(e); [IASC Six Core Principles regarding PSEA](#) (2019), Principle 5.) To enhance accessibility and uptake, collaborate with [AAP](#) working group / actors to promote multiple mechanisms rather than relying on a single channel, in order to address the diverse preferences, needs and capacities of persons within the community. Clarify complaint collection procedures and responses with partners and establish clear tasks and duties (who will do what, where, and how). It is critical to put in place an effective interagency complaints referral mechanism that permits and encourages individuals to report instances of SEA easily, confidentially, and safely, even if they do not know the organization the alleged perpetrator is affiliated with. An effective interagency complaints referral mechanism aims to ensure that a complaint can be made (by a member of the affected community or by humanitarian personnel) to any existing complaints and feedback mechanism or organization involved in the response, and that the complaint will be promptly and reliably referred for assistance based on the victim/survivor's consent and to the appropriate entity whose personnel is implicated as

the potential perpetrator.

- **Survivor / Victim Assistance:** Work with the GBV and child protection sub-sector / cluster 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 implementing 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 [UN Partner 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 establish, 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 [Procedures](#) and the [Programme Handbook](#) (PLAN – Section 9, 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.

- **Reporting:** Report allegations of SEA without delay. Personnel who have concerns or suspicions that SEA is occurring or who are aware of SEA allegations have an obligation to bring such information immediately to the attention of the IGO. IGO reporting channels may be used by forcibly displaced persons or anyone else who is aware of SEA allegations. Staff should not investigate 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 by [UNHCR's Administrative Instruction on Protection against Retaliation \(UNHCR/AI/2018/10/Rev.1\)](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only).

Learning and resources

It is mandatory for all staff to complete the updated on-line UN PSEA training module every three years. The e-learning on Workday can be accessed at this [link](#). Partners can access this e-learning in various languages after registration [here](#). A short introductory learning module on addressing sexual misconduct in emergencies, is also available [here](#).

In 2021, UNHCR launched the [internal PSEA/SH Learning Package](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only), an interactive and innovative programme that aims to develop the skills, knowledge and behaviour of all members of UNHCR personnel (staff, affiliate workforce and interns) to define, detect, prevent and respond to sexual misconduct. The package contains two face-to-face courses, as well as an adapted version for virtual delivery, which have been developed specifically for UNHCR internal use. For training partners and external audiences, the [IASC Saying No to Sexual Misconduct package](#) the [e-learning on Investigating Allegations of SEA](#) and accompanying [resource toolkit](#), and the [Gouta Case Conference](#) (a case study tool to facilitate peer-to-peer exchange among PSEA Focal Points) are also available as resources. 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, and the [Gouta Case Conference](#) (UNHCR version [here](#), version for partners [here](#)) .

UNHCR PSEA Focal Points and other colleagues involved in PSEA work participate in a community of practice forum called the PSEA Community Network. This community is a space to exchange, access resources, learn about UNHCR's commitment to PSEA, and get inspired by good practices and examples. It includes a discussion board, and a resource library where you can search by language, category (e.g., outreach materials, ToRs) and other criteria. You can request access to the group [here](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only). Additional resources are included in the sections below.

Related UNHCR management system(s)

In March 2018, the High Commissioner appointed a Senior Coordinator to lead and coordinate UNHCR's work on SEA and SH. A UNHCR Working Group on SEA and SH was also formalized in May 2018 with multifunctional representation. Currently the Working Group is comprised of representatives from the Ethics Office, the Legal Affairs Service (LAS), the Inspector General's Office (IGO), the Division of External Relations (DER), the Division of Human Resources (DHR) including the Staff Health and Wellbeing Services (SHWS), the Ombudsman's Office, the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (DESS), the Division of International Protection (DIP), the

Innovation Service, the Division of Strategic Planning and Results (DSPR) and Enterprise Risk Management.

Annexes

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

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

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

[UNHCR Risk Management Tool: Tackling Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#)

4. Links

[UNHCR, Dedicated intranet page \(covering SEA and sexual harassment - accessible...](#) [UNHCR, intranet page covering SEA and SH - resources \(accessible to UNHCR staf...](#) [Generic Terms of Reference templates for PSEA in Refugee Emergencies \(accessibl...](#) [Resources and Tools to support UNHCR Bureaux and Country Operations \(accessible...](#) [PSEA Community Network - Home \(sharepoint.com - accessible to UNHCR staff only\)](#) [UNHCR/AI/2021/06 Administrative Instruction on Implementing Partner PSEA Capaci...](#) [Visualizing our journey to tackle sexual misconduct \(accessible to UNHCR staff ...](#) [UNHCR website: Tackling sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment](#) [IASC PSEA website and resource library](#) [UN website: preventing sexual exploitation and abuse](#) [Interagency PSEA Community Outreach and Communication Fund](#) [Tackling sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment: 2023-2025 Strateg...](#)

5. Main contacts

- Office of the Senior Coordinator for Prevention of and Response to SEA / SH, hqpseash@unhcr.org
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