



# Executive Board of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

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### Ethics

## Report on the Activities of the UN-Women Ethics Function for 1 July–31 December 2023

### *Summary*

Pursuant to decision 2022/5 of the Executive Board, the Ethics Advisor submits the present report covering ethics function activities for the period 1 July through 31 December 2023. Data related to UN-Women participation in the United Nations Financial Disclosure Programme administered by the United Nations Ethics Office is for the 2023 filing cycle.

As set forth in section 5.4 of the Secretary-General's bulletin on the United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes (ST/SGB/2007/11), this report has been reviewed by members of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations at its 165th meeting on 12 March 2024.

This is the second report presented by the Ethics Advisor since the first incumbent in the role was appointed on 1 April 2023, following the creation of the ethics function in 2022.

The Executive Board may wish to take note of the present report and the management response.



## I. Introduction

1. The ethics function supports and promotes an ethical culture at UN-Women in accordance with its mandate to “cultivate and nurture a culture of ethics, integrity and accountability, and thereby enhance the trust in, and credibility of, the United Nations, both internally and externally.”<sup>1</sup> Upholding the principles of integrity, impartiality, independence, and accountability increases trust and credibility with our partners and stakeholders in support of UN-Women’s vision of achieving transformational results for gender equality and women’s empowerment. In providing services to support UN-Women personnel in achieving this vision, the ethics function assists in preventing, mitigating and managing ethical, operational and reputational risks.
2. The second report on the UN-Women ethics function describing the activities of the Ethics Advisor from 1 July through 31 December 2023 is submitted in accordance with Executive Board decision 2022/5.
3. Consistent with the principles of independence, impartiality and confidentiality and ST/SGB/2007/11, the Ethics Advisor implements its mandate across the following areas: (a) providing confidential ethics advice and guidance to personnel and management, (b) ethics training, awareness-raising, and outreach, (c) standard-setting and policy support, (d) managing UN-Women’s Financial Disclosure Programme, and (e) administering UN-Women’s Protection against Retaliation for Reporting Misconduct and Cooperating with Duly Authorized Audits or Investigations Policy. The report also includes the engagement of the Ethics Advisor with the Ethics Panel of the United Nations (EPUN) and the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations (ENMO).
4. The ethics function continues to operate with one staff member, the Ethics Advisor at the P-5 level. The Ethics Advisor serves UN-Women operations in its 83 locations, providing ethics services to approximately 3,800 UN-Women personnel, including approximately 1,350 staff members (35%).
5. Following the initial establishment period, the Ethics Advisor continued to embed the ethics function within UN-Women to support an ethical organizational culture, consistent with Executive Board decision 2023/10. During the reporting period, the focus was on two policy areas that are critical to the ethics function: (a) reviewing and revising UN-Women’s Protection against Retaliation for Reporting Misconduct and Cooperating with Duly Authorized Audits or Investigations Policy to further strengthen UN-Women’s framework for protection against retaliation and (b) collaborating with the Human Resources Division on the creation of an Outside Activities Policy and substantial revisions to the existing Outside Activities Approval Procedure.
6. The Ethics Advisor continued to collaborate with EPUN and ENMO to share best practices and promote coherent standards for ethical conduct, transparency and accountability at UN-Women, to support personnel by providing prompt and actionable advice and to engage in awareness-raising sessions on identifying, mitigating and managing conflicts of interest.
7. The independence of the ethics function is fundamental to the effective delivery of its mandate. Taking note of the standards and recommendations of the United Nations Joint Inspection Unit (JIU),<sup>2</sup> the Ethics Advisor confirms the organizational

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<sup>1</sup> Secretary-General’s bulletin on the United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes (ST/SGB/2007/11).

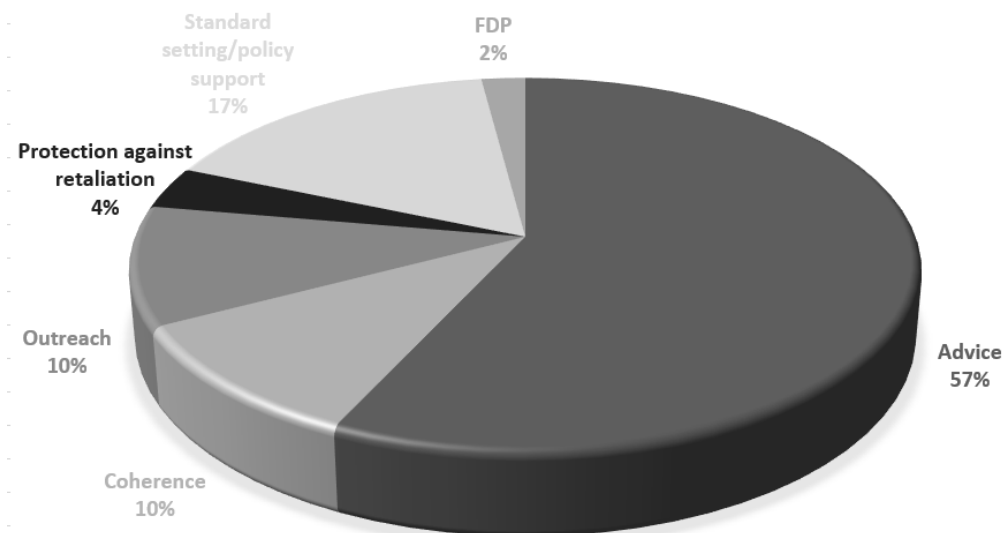
<sup>2</sup> Review of the ethics function in the United Nations system (JIU/REP/2021/5), section III.A and para. 98, quoting from JIU/REP/2018/4, para. 127, which states “Independence is most commonly defined as the freedom from conditions that threaten the ability of a person to carry out his or her responsibilities in an unbiased manner, with sufficient autonomy and in the absence of external influence.”

independence of the ethics function during the reporting period and that the function conducted its activities free from external interference. The Ethics Advisor will continue to monitor the approaches of other comparable organizations and relevant oversight recommendations to ensure that the ethics function maintains robust practices with respect to independence.

8. The ethics function’s mandate to cultivate and nurture a culture of ethics, integrity and accountability, thereby positively influencing organizational culture, requires partnerships with other functions within UN-Women and robust support from leadership. The Ethics Advisor is encouraged that during the reporting period, several offices requested training sessions or support on identified issues of concern, including personnel engagement in political activities, anti-fraud initiatives and ethics in procurement. Policy support was routinely requested, and partnerships between the ethics function and other offices on issues of mutual concern were supported. Personnel regularly sought ethics guidance to ensure that their personal and professional conduct adheres to the highest standards of ethics and integrity and remains aligned with the best interests of UN-Women. The Ethics Advisor engaged with senior management with respect to outreach initiatives and increasing the visibility of the function.

9. During the reporting period, the Ethics Advisor responded to 193 requests for services. As shown in Figure 1, requests for services fell into the following categories: ethics advice (110, 57%), protection against retaliation (7, 4%), outreach, training, and awareness raising (20, 10%), standard-setting and policy support (32, 17%), coherence (20, 10%) and financial disclosure programme (4, 2%).

**Figure 1: Requests for services by category**



## II. Activities

### A. Standard-setting and policy support

*Policies that are critical to the ethics function*

10. In its decision 2023/10, the Executive Board requested the ethics function “to continue to strengthen UN-Women’s procedures and policies on protection from retaliation and to continue to provide an annual update to the Board, within the

existing reporting mechanism;” In this regard, the Ethics Advisor reviewed and revised the Protection Against Retaliation for Reporting Misconduct and for Cooperating with Duly Authorized Audits or Investigations Policy to ensure that UN-Women has a robust and effective protection framework, consistent with best practices from United Nations system organizations, and reflective of UN-Women’s operational environment.

11. In early 2024, following extensive consultations with key stakeholders during the reporting period, UN-Women issued a revised Protection Against Retaliation Policy. Key revisions include: (a) replacing the United Nations Ethics Office with the Ethics Advisor to reflect the role of the ethics function at UN-Women; (b) shortening the review time of the policy from the standard four years to every two years to be consistent with other United Nations system entities and to ensure continuous monitoring of trends in whistle-blower protection; (c) including the Executive Director on recommendations for interim protection measures to ensure awareness at the highest level of UN-Women of protection against retaliation matters that have been referred for investigation; (d) using more inclusive language to encourage affiliate personnel to report misconduct and wrongdoing; and (e) ensuring consistency with other UN-Women policies that had been updated since the last revision to the policy.

12. In the interest of transparency and highlighting the organizational importance of protection against retaliation, the revised policy is publicly available on UN-Women’s “Accountability” tab of its website.

13. The Ethics Advisor collaborated with the Human Resources Division in the development of an Outside Activities Policy and substantial revisions to the existing Outside Activities Approval Procedure during the reporting period. The Policy and Procedure were issued in early 2024. As 61% of the requests for advice during the reporting period (and 62% during the establishment period of 1 April-30 June 2023) concerned personnel engagement in outside activities, this Policy and Procedure are critical in ensuring that UN-Women are aware of when and how they must seek prior approval for engagement in outside activities. Seeking ethics advice will be the first step in the process, which will allow possible and actual conflicts of interest to be avoided or mitigated and managed, preventing potential adverse reputational damage to UN-Women and enhancing trust and credibility in the independence and impartiality of personnel.

#### *Policy support to other divisions*

14. The ethics function is responsible for providing advice and support to other divisions in developing and updating policies and standards relating to ethics and integrity. During the reporting period, the Ethics Advisor participated in or commented on several policy matters, including providing further input into UN-Women’s Private Sector Engagement Strategy, the Consultant Contract Policy, the Policy, Procedure and Guidance glossary of terms, and the Legal Policy for Addressing Non-Compliance with United Nations Standards of Conduct.

15. As part of the Internal Audit Office’s (IAS) annual risk assessment to inform its 2024 work plan, the Ethics Advisor discussed ethical organizational risks with IAS. Inputs regarding UN-Women’s protection against retaliation framework were provided for UN-Women’s 2024 Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Action Plan and the Independent Evaluation and Audit Services’ 2023 International Anti-Corruption Day initiative.

16. The Ethics Advisor continued to contribute to the review of the Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service led by the International Civil Service Commission, in collaboration with UN-Women’s Human Resources Division and EPUN.

*Oversight bodies*

17. Information regarding the ethics function was provided to assist in the management response regarding the implementation of recommendations contained in the JIU's report on its review of the internal pre-tribunal-stage appeal mechanisms available to staff of the United Nations system organizations. Ethics input was also provided to the JIU with respect to its management and administration review of UN-Women.

18. The Ethics Advisor also met with the Advisory Committee on Oversight for the first time at its session in July 2023.

*Global Inclusion and Equity (GIE) Advisory Group*

19. In 2022, UN-Women established the GIE Advisory Group to nurture a diverse and empowered workforce and advance an inclusive UN-Women culture as set forth in its Strategic Plan (2022-2025). Noting that the Strategic Plan focuses on delivering results through an inclusive culture and leadership that exemplifies ethical, transformational, and shared leadership principles, the Ethics Advisor became a member of the GIE Advisory Group during the reporting period and participated in its meetings.

**B. Training, outreach and awareness-raising**

20. As UN-Women operates in many high-risk locations through its offices and presence in 83 locations around the world, personnel must follow coherent ethical standards to protect UN-Women's reputation and ensure programme implementation is delivered with integrity. Training, outreach and awareness-raising activities are essential to ensure that all personnel observe the highest standards of ethical conduct in performing their functions.

21. Due to budget constraints, all outreach sessions to offices away from headquarters were conducted virtually. As approximately 81% of UN-Women personnel are located in regional, country and liaison offices and only 48% of requests for advice came from these offices, the Ethics Advisor believes that financial support for in-person engagement with field personnel would help drive engagement, increase awareness and support the overall goal of ensuring an ethical organizational culture at UN-Women.

22. During the reporting period, the Ethics Advisor focused on providing tailored sessions on conflicts of interest with an emphasis on outside activities to UN-Women personnel. These included a virtual session for the Bolivia Country Office as well as an in-person session for the Human Resources Business Partners. Considering the new Private Sector Engagement Strategy, the Ethics Advisor provided three virtual sessions to the Private Sector Partnership Section, which focused on the application of ethical standards to UN-Women personnel when engaging with the private sector and the receipt of gifts and hospitality.

23. Given the small size of the ethics function at UN-Women, collaboration with the ethics functions of other United Nations system organizations on training and outreach activities is vital for broadening the reach of the function and promoting ethics awareness among UN-Women personnel. During the reporting period, the Ethics Advisor collaborated with the UNDP Ethics Office, who provided Spanish-language ethics sessions to UN-Women personnel in Guatemala and Panama. The sessions focused on public pronouncements, engagement in political activities and outside activities.

24. In collaboration with procurement, the Ethics Advisor provided input into training material and issued an "Ethical Do's and Don'ts in Procurement" fact sheet,

which was translated into Spanish and French. A “Holiday Gifts Advisory” was issued in November 2023, which reminded personnel of the restrictions on the acceptance of gifts that could compromise the independence and impartiality required of them as UN-Women personnel.

25. When joining UN-Women, all personnel are required to complete an online training course on ethics and integrity. The course was designed by UNICEF and is hosted on UNICEF’s Agora learning platform and UNDP’s Quantum platform. As of the end of 2023, approximately 78% of UN-Women staff members had completed the mandatory course. In an effort to raise the completion rate, personnel will be required to certify that they have taken the online ethics and integrity training course as part of the revised Outside Activities Approval Procedure.

26. In an effort to positively influence the “tone at the top”, during the reporting period, the Ethics Advisor provided input for briefing materials for the two new Deputy Executive Directors. In early 2024, ethics briefings were provided to the Deputy Executive Directors during their induction programme.

27. The United Nations Leadership Dialogue is an initiative of the United Nations Secretariat, where managers are asked to host a yearly conversation with their direct reports related to ethical challenges personnel face in their day-to-day work. The United Nations Ethics Office provides managers with a Leader’s Guide and a model presentation as well as the participants with a Participant’s Guide. In July 2023, the Ethics Advisor assisted the Executive Director in launching this year’s Leadership Dialogue on the topic “Personal use of social media: How is my online behaviour?” The Dialogue was well received, with participants noting that they appreciated the scenarios and the opportunity to discuss these issues within their teams.

### **C. Confidential advice and guidance**

28. Providing confidential, accurate and timely advice to UN-Women personnel is an essential component in the Ethics Advisor’s mandate to foster a culture of ethics, accountability, and transparency. The advisory role is primarily preventive and proactive, assisting personnel in making informed decisions in accordance with applicable ethical standards. In providing well-reasoned, timely, actionable, and impartial guidance to personnel and management on how to resolve possible conflicts of interest, the Ethics Advisor supports appropriate decision-making that contributes to accountable mandate delivery.

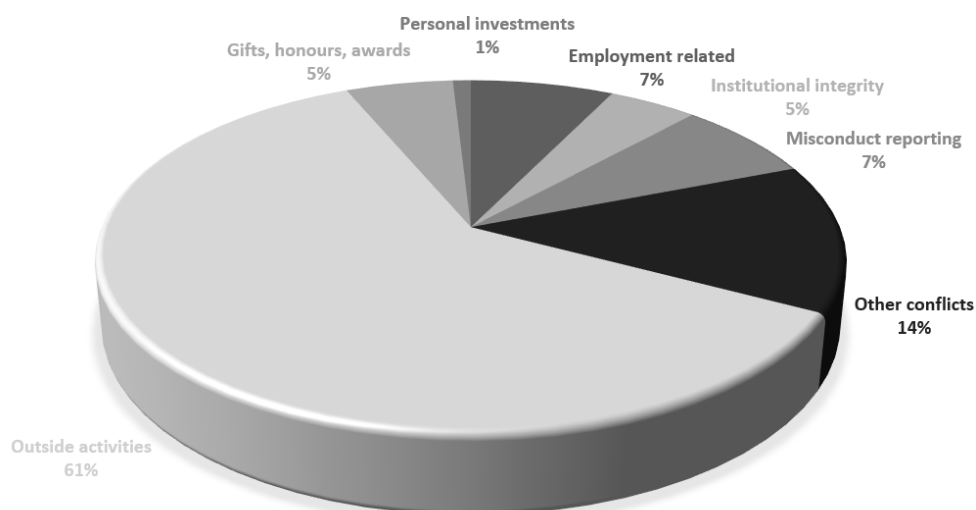
29. The provision of ethics advice has an awareness-raising component, by positioning personnel to be able to identify and resolve conflicts of interest and ethical dilemmas before they become issues of serious concern for UN-Women, such as misconduct, fraud or corruption. The function also assists in risk management, by advising against engagement or proposing mitigation measures to guard against conflict-of-interest risk.

30. The fundamental purpose of the ethics advisory function is to ensure that personnel and management are able to make decisions in the best interests of UN-Women. The Ethics Advisor is committed to providing prompt and quality advice to support appropriate decision-making. During the reporting period, the Ethics Advisor typically provided a response within two business days of receiving all pertinent and requested information.

31. During the reporting period, 110 (57%) of requests for ethics services were requests for advice. As shown in Figure 2 below, advice was provided on a range of topics including: outside activities (67, 61%), internal procedures for reporting misconduct (8, 7%), conflicts of interest (15, 14%), ethics-related employment concerns

(8, 7%), institutional integrity (5, 5%), gifts, honours and awards (6, 5%), and personal investments (1, 1%). For matters raised that did not fall within the mandate of the ethics function, personnel were directed to the appropriate offices including the United Nations Secretariat's Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), the Human Resources Division, the Office of the Ombudsman for the United Nations Funds and Programmes, the Office of Staff Legal Assistance and the joint UNDP/UNFPA/UN-Women/UNOPS Staff Council.

**Figure 2: Requests for ethics advice by category**



32. In terms of geographic spread, of the 110 requests for ethics advice received during the reporting period, 53 (48%) came from regional, country and liaison offices.

33. The largest number of advisory requests related to engagement in outside activities in a personal capacity, which includes leadership roles in non-profit organizations such as board membership, part-time outside employment such as teaching courses at a university or working for a non-profit organization, social and charitable activities, the difference between official and personal capacity, publications such as articles and blogs, and speaking engagements on topics related to UN-Women.

34. As a proactive risk prevention measure, the Ethics Advisor reviews outside activities to ensure that the proposed outside activity is not against the interests of UN-Women, does not conflict with the individual's UN-Women function, or with the core obligations of all personnel to uphold independence, impartiality and loyalty to UN-Women. Where it is recommended that the individual seek approval from the Human Resources Division through their supervisor, the Ethics Advisor includes a list of conditions that the individual requesting advice must adhere to in order to mitigate and manage any possible conflict-of-interest risk during engagement in the outside activity.

35. The ethics function at UN-Women also plays an important risk prevention role with respect to a sub-set of advice on proposed outside activities related to governments. Consistent with the core obligations of independence, impartiality and loyalty to UN-Women, the Ethics Advisor advised several UN-Women personnel not to serve in a personal capacity with governments or affiliated entities while concurrently serving at UN-Women and advised hiring managers against the engagement of consultants who were employed by governments or affiliated entities.

## **D. Financial Disclosure Programme**

36. The purpose of the United Nations Financial Disclosure Programme (UNFDP) is to identify, mitigate, and manage conflict of interest risks arising from the financial holdings, personal affiliations or outside activities of UN-Women staff members and their immediate family members. The UNFDP is administered by the United Nations Ethics Office in accordance with the Secretary-General's bulletin on Financial disclosure and declaration of interest statements (ST/SGB/2006/6). UN-Women staff members at the D-1 level and above, those whose principal duties involve procurement and investment or who have access to confidential procurement or investment information, are required to file an annual financial disclosure statement.

37. Participation in the UNFDP assists UN-Women in the identification, mitigation and management of possible or actual conflicts of interests with the goal of ensuring that UN-Women staff members observe and perform their functions consistent with the highest standards of integrity required by the Charter of the United Nations, the Staff Regulations and Rules, and relevant UN-Women guidelines and policies. The benefits of participating in the UNFDP include (a) ensuring a coherent and consistent application of United Nations ethical standards, (b) incorporating best practice from both the United Nations and the private sector, in terms of experience and technical expertise, and (c) benefiting from economies of scale, combining service quality with cost efficiency.

38. During the 2023 annual filing cycle, conducted from 1 March 2023 until 31 December 2023, 157 filers from UN-Women participated in the UNFDP. All UN-Women filers submitted their statements as required by the UNFDP.

39. Following a review of the submitted financial disclosure statements, two possible conflicts of interest were identified, both involving family relationships with immediate relatives working for the United Nations or an entity related to the United Nations. Consequently, a recommendation was issued to address the possible conflict of interest in one case while the other possible conflict was mitigated by the filer after it was detected and therefore no recommendation was required.

40. In 2023, a verification process of the declarations submitted was also conducted as part of the UNFDP, as in previous years. Four UN-Women filers were selected for the verification process. One out of the four selected filers did not provide all the required verification documents and their participation status was considered incomplete. As such, the filer has been referred for accountability measures.

## **E. Protection against retaliation**

41. The Ethics Advisor administers UN-Women's Protection against Retaliation for Reporting Misconduct and for Cooperating with Duly Authorized Audits or Investigations Policy. The policy encourages all UN-Women personnel to report misconduct and wrongdoing and fully cooperate with audits and investigations, referred to as protected activities. The ability of personnel to report and cooperate without fear of retaliation is an essential element in building an organizational culture of integrity, transparency, and accountability.

42. Pursuant to the policy, the Ethics Advisor conducts a preliminary review of a request for protection to determine whether the complainant engaged in a protected activity and whether the protected activity was a contributing factor in causing the alleged retaliation. If the Ethics Advisor determines that the complainant has not raised a prima facie case of retaliation, the complainant may request further review by the Chair of EPUN.



43. If the Ethics Advisor determines that there is a prima facie case of retaliation, the matter is referred to OIOS for investigation. OIOS is the external service provider of investigations services for UN-Women. Protective measures may be recommended by the Ethics Advisor to safeguard the complainant during the investigation. Following an independent review of the OIOS investigation report and supporting documents, the Ethics Advisor will make a final determination as to whether retaliation has occurred in accordance with the burden of proof in the policy and will make appropriate recommendations.

44. During the reporting period, the Ethics Advisor received seven inquiries under the policy. Five were requests for advice rather than requests for protection. Personnel who raised concerns not covered by the policy were referred, as appropriate, to the Office of the Ombudsman for the United Nations Funds and Programmes or the Human Resources Division or were advised to report possible misconduct to OIOS.

45. In the one request for protection, the Ethics Advisor determined that the complainant had not raised a prima facie case of retaliation.

46. The remaining matter was a prima facie case of retaliation that had been referred by the United Nations Ethics Office to OIOS for investigation in 2022 and was transferred to the Ethics Advisor. The Ethics Advisor received the investigation report from OIOS at the end of 2023 and conducted an independent review of the OIOS investigation report and supporting documents, in accordance with the policy. In early 2024, the Ethics Advisor made a final determination that retaliation had not occurred and made recommendations to the Director, Department of Management and Administration in accordance with the policy. Although the Ethics Advisor concluded that retaliation had not occurred, recommendations were made to ensure that the staff member concerned was appropriately reintegrated into their work division and that no further action was taken against them because of the staff member's engagement in a protected activity and request for protection.

### **III. The Ethics Panel of the United Nations and the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations**

47. Collaboration with other ethics functions including sharing best practices and promoting coherent standards is crucial to enhancing ethical conduct, transparency and accountability at UN-Women. In its decision 2023/10, the Executive Board requested "UN-Women to stay in continuous dialogue with the United Nations Ethics Panel and the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations in order to share best practices and promote coherent standards for ethical conduct, transparency and accountability at UN-Women;"

48. During the reporting period, the Ethics Advisor continued to actively participate in monthly meetings of EPUN. As set forth in the Secretary-General's bulletin ST/SGB/2007/11, EPUN is mandated to create a unified set of ethical standards and policies and to consult on complex ethics matters that have system-wide implications. EPUN is composed of the head of the ethics offices of the Secretariat and the separately administered organs and programmes.

49. The Panel is chaired by the Director of the United Nations Ethics Office. The Chair is additionally mandated to review upon complainant request, and in consultation with other EPUN members, no prima facie retaliation determinations issued by other member ethics offices, including UN-Women.

50. Of particular note, the Panel continued to contribute expert and technical inputs to the ongoing review by the International Civil Service Commission of the Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service. The Director of the Ethics Office,

UNDP, the Panel's designated representative, continued to participate as an independent expert for the Working Group on the review and provided inputs on behalf of the Panel for its sessions held in 2023.

51. In addition to its existing activities, EPUN took steps to further strengthen collaboration on training, awareness-raising, and outreach by establishing a standing agenda item during monthly meetings to share information on planned missions to allow for personnel of other organizations to also attend relevant sessions where appropriate. In 2023, EPUN piloted a sub-group on communications for the purpose of exchanging knowledge and sharing best practices in the areas of communication and outreach.

52. In addition to engaging with the ethics functions through EPUN, the Ethics Advisor is an active member of ENMO. ENMO includes over 100 senior ethics officials from more than 40 multilateral institutions. This includes the organizations belonging to the CEB, who have established a dedicated group within ENMO.

## **IV. Conclusion**

53. In addition to continuing to embed the ethics function at UN-Women, the Ethics Advisor focused on ensuring that two policies critical to the function were reviewed and revised during the reporting period, the Protection Against Retaliation Policy and the Outside Activities Policy. As both policies were issued in the first quarter of 2024, the focus will shift to robust outreach initiatives designed to raise awareness of ethics standards.

54. Building on experience gained during the first nine months of the ethics function at UN-Women and benefiting from knowledge-sharing and collaboration with other United Nations and multilateral ethics functions, the Ethics Advisor is committed to seeking out innovative, impactful and cost-effective approaches that can increase the effectiveness of ethics initiatives, with the goal of promoting an ethical and values-based organizational culture that supports UN-Women in achieving gender equality.

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