

Statement of Assistant Secretary-General Najla Nassif Palma, United Nations Victims' Rights Advocate

ECOSOC Operational Activities Segment 2025

Session 8: Effective accountability:

Action for the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment

**Thursday, 22 May 2025, 12:00 pm – 1:00 pm, NY time
ECOSOC Chamber**

Thank you Excellency, Mr. Ndong Mba.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues,

Good afternoon.

It is a pleasure to brief the ECOSOC for the first time.

My role as Victims' Rights Advocate is to advance the principal pillar of the Secretary-General's strategy on prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations and related personnel to place the rights and dignity of victims at the centre of our efforts.

I work with United Nations entities, Member States, civil society, national legal and human rights organizations to ensure they will have a voice, assistance and justice.

In doing so, I support the implementation of the 2030 agenda, in particular Sustainable Development Goal 5 aimed to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women and girls and Sustainable Development Goal 16 focused on promoting peace, justice and strong institutions.

The United Nations system has taken important steps to place victims at the heart of our prevention and response efforts, including the creation of my mandate, the rollout of the United Nations Protocol on the Provision of Assistance to Victims of sexual exploitation and abuse and the issuance of the Victims' Right Statement.

We have also seen that dedicated victim support specialists on the ground, who can advocate on the victims' behalf makes a real difference. In the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti and South Sudan the introduction of dedicated personnel, such as the Senior Victims' Rights Officer, has significantly improved the support available for victims and children born of SEA.

These officers perform my system-wide role at the field level, supporting victims of all UN personnel, uniformed, civilian, national staff, in peacekeeping, humanitarian and development settings, as well as their implementing partners. They mobilize resources, facilitate access to assistance, accompany victims during investigations, and where there are children born of sexual exploitation and abuse, they assist in the resolution of the paternity and child maintenance claims.

In my advocacy with Resident Coordinators, UN Country Teams and United Nations entities, I have requested the designation of more victim support functions, or at the very least the nomination of focal points to champion victims' rights.

Since 2021, we have made some progress: the number of these support functions has doubled from six to 12 across UN Country Teams. In addition to the four Senior Victims' Rights Officers already mentioned, we have now eight victims' rights focal points in Cuba, Guatemala, Ethiopia, Honduras, Liberia, Mali, Ukraine and Uruguay. These focal points appointed by Resident Coordinators support the facilitation of paternity claims of children born of sexual exploitation and abuse and act as a bridge between the Government officials and the UN.

Despite meaningful progress, significant challenges persist.

Victims have the right to timely and adequate assistance and this requires resources.

While some settings have robust systems in place, others face major gaps due to limited resources, legal and policy barriers, or capacity constraints. Lengthy investigations, and uneven access to services continue to hinder timely assistance and the provision of justice.

Due to increasing financial pressures and shrinking budgets, many UN entities and partners are struggling to sustain the delivery of critical, lifesaving support.

The Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse is designed only to fill gaps. Reliance on voluntary contributions is unsustainable. Integrated, predictable funding is essential to deliver on our promises to victims.

I am exploring ways within the Organization to address these challenges so to secure sustained resources for victim assistance improving the coordination in mobilizing these resources. However, the role of host Governments remains vital through the provision of public services and by strengthening gender-based violence and child protection systems to which victims are usually referred.

I am also working to integrate a victims' rights approach across the system. Yet realizing victims' rights to justice and remedies remains a major challenge and requires the Member State's support

I appeal to Member States to enhance accountability for acts of sexual exploitation and abuse, to align national legislation with international standards on victims' rights, to adopt a more flexible legal approach to addressing paternity and child support claims and make available interim support to these children until the legal process is concluded.

I further appeal to Member States to ensure predictable and sustainable resourcing, including dedicated and specialized victims support functions in the development sector, so that victims receive the comprehensive support they need.

Above all, we must work together to put victims' rights first.

Thank you.